

Rebirth

The Second Kiss

By Jewels - Jun 6 2011

She lay on the cool tile floor aching, panting, sweating. Her nightgown clung to her skin just as her hair clung to her face. *No. Not again... how could it happen again?* She had enjoyed it... too much, just like the other times. She had let go and lost control. She squeezed her eyes shut but it didn't block out the fire. The dark, blood red fire. It had hurt this time, excruciatingly so, but perhaps because she had tried to contain it. Well... she glanced around the bathroom for any signs of damage. Looks like she was successful at containing it. Her planning had paid off. The Refuge generated forcefield had kept the raging flame turned inward on herself. *So hot...* Jewels shakily pushed herself up to a sitting position. Her first attempt to stand didn't even make it past her knees before she collapsed again. Jewels reached out and steadied herself on the toilet. The cool porcelain was a welcome sensation under her fingers. She pulled herself closer resting a cheek on the side and closing her eyes. *Just for a minute...*

There was a sound interrupting the silence. An irregular drumbeat echoing around her... was that her heartbeat? It sounded again only louder... faster... more urgently. It was behind her, wasn't it? Reluctantly, she lifted her head towards it.

"Jewels." *Rap, rap, rap.* "Jewels, open up. Tell me what's wrong." Sylae shook her head in concern. They had been sharing the most perfect moments since she had gotten back to the Refuge. Jewels had finally dropped her inhibitions, finally allowed herself to just love... her. So much hype goes into first kisses. So much undeserved hype. It had been the second kiss that had sent Sylae thrilling. The one where Jewels had kissed back... with all the force of four months of pent up passion behind it. It had been glorious... until Jewels had suddenly shoved her away violently and ran to the bathroom locking the door behind her. Sylae had hit the floor on the other side of the bed with a hard thud.

There had been a loud noise Sylae couldn't identify for a few seconds. The silence behind the door now was all the more worrying. "Jewels!" *Rap, rap, rap, rap.* "Open the door!" Still no response... *Oh, screw this. I'll get a new door.* Sylae aimed a blast of magical force at the lock and the door swung open. Before her was the most pitiful sight she had ever seen. Jewels sat on the bathroom floor shaking, sweating, and clinging to the toilet bowl for dear life. In her eyes a look of horrified and dazed shock.

Sylae took it in quickly with a torrent of emotions raging behind her eyes. Not being used to the flood of female hormones probably didn't help any. A few emotions won out over the others as the pieces of the puzzle finally clicked into place. Jewels was disgusted with her, plain and simple. The pain of rejection ripped through Sylae's heart. Jewels was *so disgusted with her*, that it made her physically ill. The pain of inadequacy ripped through Sylae's soul. The best kiss in

the whole of Sylae's thousands of years had been Jewels' worst. The anger at the cruelty of existence ripped through her body. The thought of it was making Sylae sick, too.

Jewels started to speak in a weak raspy voice. "I... I'm so sorry, Will."

A new anger shot through Sylae. No not anger... *jealous rage*. What did Will have that she didn't have? She had his knowledge, his power, his very soul... But not his gender. *And not*, her mind added cruelly, *the undying love and affection of his wife*. It was so unfair. Sylae screamed out her rage at the poor pitiful form on the bathroom floor. "My name is Sylae! Will is DEAD!!" She turned and stormed out of the bedroom whispering to herself on the way, "and so is our marriage." She couldn't hold it all back anymore. The wracking sobs and flood of tears came unrelentingly. Sylae ran from the room, never looking back.

Jewels blinked. Hadn't someone just been there a moment ago? Will? No, Sylae. Will was dead. That's what she had said. Dead... Her husband was dead? The finality of the thought brought new pain. Sylae was hurt. She should go after her, she misunderstood. A voice from the living room. She had to get up, stop her before she left. A second attempt to stand only succeeded in Jewels falling and knocking her head against the tub. Darkness took her. Darkness kept her. Though something cold and wet ran across her forehead, though strong arms picked her up, darkness kept her.

Waffles and Strawberries

By Jewels - Jun 7 2011

The sun filtered in through a thin sheen of a curtain. It warmed her face. She would wake soon. He could sense it. He dipped a rag in ice water and wiped it across her forehead one last time.

Jewels absently watched the bits of dust that caught the sunlight above her face. Where was she? Slowly the room came into focus around her; a simple room with a bed, a dresser, a night stand, a lamp, a chair, and a mirror. Not much room for anything else. Dusty wooden furniture with dusty wooden walls; the only thing that looked dust free was a small basin filled with ice water resting not three inches from her head. A washrag hung over one side, still damp.

Jewels shot up in bed. The ice in the bowl was barely melted. Someone had refreshed it not long ago. Someone had been in this room with her... but where were they now? A creak from behind the door sent Jewels' heart thudding. Why did she feel so frightened? Surely whoever it was had no intention of harming her, or they'd have done it already.

The doorknob squeaked as it turned and the door swung open. "Wakey, wakey. Rise and shine. Time to start another beautiful day." an over-cheery voice filled the room.

Jewels let out a sigh of relief... or was it disappointment? "Good morning, Ligrev. Mind if I ask... how I got here last night?"

"Don't know, dearie. I didn't see you come in. But I got your note." Jewels was about to protest that she hadn't written any note when Ligrev wheeled in a cart full of stuff. "Waffles with fresh strawberries, a side of bacon, and milk to drink... Nice simple dress from your closet... Toiletries from your bathroom... all like you specified."

Jewels wasn't sure how to respond as she glanced over the provisions. The basin caught her eye again. "And the ice water?"

"Brought it in not twenty minutes ago. You were still sound asleep, dearie." Ligrev looked around a bit before asking, "Anything else you need from me this morning?"

"Uh, no. Thank you, Ligrev. You've done more than I could have expected."

Ligrev smiled and left the room closing the door behind her.

Waffles and strawberries... her favorite breakfast. But wait... what time was it? Crap! She was already late.

She had thrown on the dress, ran the comb through her hair a few times, grabbed the water basin and breakfast then ran out the door. He didn't like it when she was late, or at least that's the way she perceived it. She stumbled into the 13th floor control room a little winded and a little wet from water sloshing out of the basin. "I know, I know. I'm late. I'm sorry," she said between breaths.

Jewels started to set things up by unfolding a card table that had been propped against the wall. The basin and breakfast went on the table before she plopped herself down on a folding chair. She sighed loudly as she finally relaxed. "You wouldn't *believe* the night I had... well maybe you would. I mean, as far as a 'normal' night goes for me this one was pretty tame, but still... by everyone else's 'normal' standards it was pretty wild. What I can remember of it anyway."

Jewels paused for just a moment to regard the figure sitting across from her. Nioca was just a shell of the man he used to be. His body was bone thin and sickly pale. Deep circles ran under his eyes and the hollows below his cheekbones. Jewels knew she wasn't responsible for him but she had still taken it upon herself to make sure he got what he needed. "Well don't just sit there. Eat."

Satisfied with his mechanical compliance she continued. "Now as I was saying, last night," Jewels leaned forward, looked both ways for imaginary eavesdroppers, and whispered, "I kissed a girl and I liked it." Jewels' cheesy grin stretched from ear to ear for a second before turning into a frown. "And then the whole thing blew up in my face. Like literally. And as usual, I might add. I'm cursed. I have to be. There is some all-powerful deity up there that just loves watching me suffer. I mean, what other explanation could there be? ... Don't answer that."

Jewels kept talking and he kept eating. When the food was gone he just stared at her, strawberries and syrup on his chin. "Here let me get that for you." Jewels scooted closer and proceeded to do what she had done every morning she could for the last four months. She

washed the day's dust off his face, combed his graying hair, and reminded him to execute the *to_your_health* protocol in 30 minutes.

"Executing *to_your_health* in t minus 30 minutes." His raspy voice droned mechanically. Not that he needed reminding. He would automatically run the protocol at the same time every day with or without her reminder. She designed it to make sure Nioca's body would get enough food, rest, and exercise to not be rendered useless... or dead.

She still didn't know what would happen to her if his body died. She still didn't know what *had* happened to her OR to him for that matter. It was a mystery that she always held in the back of her mind.

Ten o'clock. Time to go... Jewels slipped into her parting routine. She squeezed his hands, kissed his forehead, and whispered in his ear. "I miss you, Nioca. Find a way to come back to me."

To which he always replied. "Error. Close proximity already detected."

Silent tears fell down Jewels' cheek on her way out the door. Even with all the animosity that came with it, Jewels felt empty without him.

Observation

By Jewels - Jun 8 2011

He watched her from a distance; today she walked towards the forest. It was all he ever did now, just watch. Until last night, he had only watched. Last night did not make sense. Watching made sense. Observing was rational, necessary even. But last night had been... irrational, unnecessary. He didn't know how to process it. But then, *she* was irrational. *Her* actions were unnecessary. Observing the irrational and unnecessary led to doing the irrational and unnecessary. Was he in error to do so? Logic dictated, yes. But observation also dictated that logic was often not the deciding factor in behavior. Something else always won out over logic. Emotion.

Nana was worried. In the last months while Will was gone, Jewels had spent every night refreshing in her tree rather than sleep in a bed. Nana had been ecstatic and done her best to keep her comfortable. But Jewels didn't realize just how fragile she was right now. She fought so hard to pretend like there was nothing wrong, but the fire fever was not something that just lay dormant. Jewels was getting sicker every day. She had been able to keep things in check but visiting Nana was a big part of that.

Yesterday she had not come. She planned to stay with Will and rebuild their relationship... however that would look. Jewels had been excited, scared, and confused, but it was something she decided she had to face head on. Her body had not been strong enough, though. Spending just one night away had been enough to trigger an eruption.

For now Nana did what she could to soothe her dryad. Left untreated, fire fever normally would have consumed a sick dryad within a week. They shrivel and burn the second they try to leave their trees. Jewels' fire half made her resilient to the burning symptoms but it also made them exponentially worse. She won't last forever. Something has to be done or Jewels will die, possibly taking out the whole Refuge with her.

Picking Up Where We Left Off

By Jewels - Jun 17 2011

Jewels walked over to the pools and started drawing on them just as her and Nalyd's RMMs went off. She hollered to him from her perch. "I'm going to my study. I won't be able to get that. Why don't you take it? Looks like you could use some fresh air." Then she promptly vanished from Nalyd's sight without waiting for his response.

Nalyd grumbled under his breath. "Nalyd do this, Nalyd do that... Nalyd has more important things to do." He looked down at the part Jewels had just handed him. He could have sworn that it was burnt out when she had taken it. Now it was perfect and perfectly clean, besides. It was like she had just had a new one in her pocket or something. Nalyd had to know...

"Stillborn!" He yelled despite the fact Stillborn was only five feet away.

"Yes master?"

"Nalyd has a job for you. Go find Jewels..."

"Mother?" Stillborn interrupted with guarded excitement.

Nalyd sighed, "Yes. Go find her and find out how she fixed this broken part. Don't tell her Nalyd wants to know, though. Just make it seem like you're interested."

"Yes master!" Stillborn started to stagger away.

"And don't come back until you have an answer for Nalyd!"

Freed up of his 'better' things to do, Nalyd pulled out his RMM to see what the matter was. A general alert from the Lounge popped up. Deity knew what that meant. It could just be Ligrev stepped on the button by mistake... again. Or... it could be something really dangerous. Nalyd allowed himself to eye his scythe. He might need it. His fingers twitched at the thought of holding it again. Only desperate fear for his own survival kept him from it. The rot had been long absent. Even his last use of the scythe on Stillborn had given no indication of it coming back, but that could change at any moment. Too much use would surely draw it back to its creator. Unless... it had found someone else to possess. Nalyd allowed himself a smile. It was a possibility. Not very probable... but still... possible. Maybe he didn't have to be so careful anymore.

In the end of his debating, the same survival instinct that kept him from it led Nalyd to pick up Lifesower and let the symphony of life just sing to him for a minute before shuffling off towards the Lounge.

Nobody's Home

By Jewels - Jun 18 2011

Sylae saw the silent alert from the Lounge flash. "Oh bother... I'll never get this done if I can't even get it started."

Hurriedly she assigned a bot to go make sure it wasn't a false alarm then programmed it to automatically call for more bot reinforcements as needed. Ah, the joys of delegation. *Now back to work...* Sylae smiled to herself getting back to her task.

Nalyd approached the Lounge uneasily. The life force he was sensing was incredibly strong but oddly reminiscent. He would have sworn it was Iffy if it weren't for the fact that it was obviously female. Saph, perhaps? But she had never felt so... intense.

Nalyd paused outside, his senses tingling. Suddenly he did not want to go in. "Come now," came a gruff voice from inside, "I know you're there. Don't leave me waiting; I've been waiting far too long already."

The voice did not match the life force. Nalyd's curiosity was piqued enough to cross the threshold and view the mysterious entity sitting at the bar. The face did not match the life force, either. A man Nalyd had not seen before smirked from the far end of the Lounge bar with Ligriv standing next to him. "Excuse, Nalyd, but is there any trouble here?"

"No, no trouble at all," the stranger replied. "The barkeep and I were just having a nice little chat."

"Is that right, Ligriv?" Nalyd asked. He had already noticed that Ligriv had not blinked since he had entered the room. He doubted very much that she would respond, but the stranger responded with a frown. "Nalyd does not like being lied to. So why don't we start off with your name, Miss..."

Nalyd let the assumption trail off and allowed himself his own smirk at the surprise in the stranger's eyes. "Yes, yes, Nalyd knows you are wearing a disguise; can't change the sound of your lifesong though."

The man at the counter snapped his fingers and Ligriv collapsed to unconsciousness from lack of breathing. "I tire of this game," he said, ignoring Nalyd's question. "I'm here for Iffy and Saph and you will take me to them."

"Does Nalyd look like a tour guide to you?" he snorted. "Besides, Nalyd couldn't take you to Iffy and Saph even if he wanted to. They haven't been here for months. Nalyd has no idea where they are but Nalyd knows the one place they are *not*. Calamity Refuge." He was feeling very irritated at the moment. This interruption was just one more thing on his long list of frustrations. "In fact the only person that *has* been at the refuge on a consistent basis in the last six months, is Nalyd. W-dueck is gone, Azuma is gone, Iffy and Saph are gone... Nalyd hasn't seen Ackrovan or Robsta or Vergil in forever, and rumor has it Nioca is dead. Nalyd practically runs this place all by himself. Now stop wasting Nalyd's time and get out of here." Venting felt good.

The figure regarded him thoughtfully for a few seconds. "You run this whole place by yourself?" He sounded impressed.

"Practically," Nalyd allowed his ego a little fluffing.

"You're the only one here then?"

"The only one of any importance. Why Nalyd hasn't been made an Admin yet is a mystery to him."

The man nodded at Nalyd. "Good to know..." Suddenly, a blast of energy shot out of the stranger's hand hitting Nalyd dead square in the chest. He was thrown backwards into the Lounge wall. Nalyd sat dazed for a few seconds as the woman disguised as a man walked towards him with hand raised. "...that means there will be no one here to help you."

Nix regarded her opponent for a moment. He was seeping with energy, if a bit fragile. *Such a waste*, she thought to herself. Too bad she couldn't absorb him, too. Nix readied herself for the killing blow but before she could do anything further, a bullet from the doorway ripped through her shoulder.

She whirled around to see a simple bot hovering there. A quick blast of energy dispatched the thing and a healing spell had her shoulder back to normal in no time, but when she glanced outside she counted a dozen more bots en route to her location. Mere child's play to dispatch, yes, but if Iffy and Saph weren't even here, she should focus on finding them instead of expending more energy on fruitless efforts.

Nix ran out of the lounge and slipped into the forest whispering to herself, "I will find you, my love. And once I have you, I will never let you go again."

Nalyd rubbed his aching head. One minute she had been here and the next she was gone. He was a bit disappointed that there would be no epic battle with her but perhaps she had been right... no one to help Nalyd could have meant for a challenging victory. She had left one thing behind though... On the floor in front of him were three drops of blood. Nalyd smiled to himself. What better way to find out the weaknesses of an opponent, than to study their very structure? Nalyd grabbed a napkin off the table next to him and dabbed it up. He was flying out the door just as three bots reached it looking for someone who was no longer there.

Consequences

By Jewels - Jul 25 2011

The scene was of utter chaos. Blades clashed, women screamed, and men died around every corner. The scenery burned a sickly red, outlining dilapidated buildings. Of course, one would expect the buildings to be burning in the fire plane but the flame was steadily getting cooler, darkening the shade of red to that of human blood. It fit the scene well even though the dying elementals had no blood to spill. Instead the streets were mostly covered in an ever thickening layer of black ash. The civil war was not being kind to the realm and there seemed no end would be soon forthcoming on its own.

A man ran skillfully through the alleyways. His cloak mirrored the same blood red as the scene around him. His movement caught the eye of an armored soldier who started running after him. "You there, stop!" Whether the armor was a sign of actual authority or something scavenged from a pile of ash could not be clear, but his intent was sure enough. The cloaked man did not stop but he did slow down allowing his pursuer to catch up. After zigzagging through a couple of streets they both turned the bend to a narrow dead-end alley. The cloaked man still plowed forward seemingly unaware that he was cornered. The armored man soon closed the gap and drew his sword while smiling. "I've got you now lowlife!"

When there were but three feet between the two, they reached the end of the alley, but the cloaked man didn't stop running. Instead he lifted a foot to vault himself up and off the walls. On the third wall he pushed off as to do a flip in the air over the head of his startled pursuer. His cloak rustled in the air as a wicked sword came out from under it neatly slicing off the armored man's head. Both head and body disintegrated into ash just as the cloaked man landed on the other side of him. His hood had come off and a bright blue flame shown like a beacon against the rest of the world. Vergil lifted his head, replaced both Yamato and his hood, then took off at a sprint towards the open end of the alley.

One more wasted life... when would it all stop? The people needed a leader they could unite under. Vergil was almost sorry he had killed his father and started this chain of events. He had high hopes when Jewels had shown great leadership potential and resolve. But then her absence and the rumor of her death had left the plane in shock once again. With King Sheldon and Prince Darius thinking her dead, the deal for the oil had been null and voided. The fire plane was once again dying. Some had still clung to a little hope when Kaylas had stepped up to take the throne in the absence of a qualified heir but with the Stranger in possession of his body, Vergil had to take out that leader too. The quick succession of lost rulers had thrown the government into chaos as people started taking sides on who should be the new Fire Lord. Vergil, himself, was one of the candidates. The Bluebloods were behind him 100% and with no qualified heirs his heritage was still better to some of the populace than nothing. But there were just as many who opposed him now as there had been when his father disowned him. If he were to ever rule, it would be a long ashy battle. One he didn't see the end of. Even if he did become the ruler, there was still the issue of bargaining with the water plane... he was not looking forward to that. He

had to admit to himself that Jewels had been more willing to bring about the good of their people than he had.

There was one solution that could end the war a lot sooner and bring life back to the fire plane. It chagrined him to admit it, though. Jewels wasn't dead. She was still the rightful Fire Lord. The people would acknowledge that. As much as he wished it wasn't so, Jewels was what was best for their people right now. The only question, though, was whether or not he would be willing to make it happen.

The Way it Should Be

By Jewels - Aug 1 2011

In a blink Jewels had traveled from the Geneforge forum with Nalyd and Stillborn to a surreal representation of the room from her dreams. Thirteen doors lined the walls of a circular chamber and a chandelier with 13 swirling orbs hung in the center of them all. These were the extra set of soul orbs that had been created with the Refuge restore.

While Will had been rehabilitating Jewels had been busy between helping him cope and preparing for his return. She had needed a study. A private place where she could go to be alone to work - to do whatever it took to never be a danger to Will again.

She had chosen the place that Nioca had created months before. The heart of the nexus of the Blades of Avernum and Geneforge magics only below ground. There were no doors, no cracks, no seams from the building of it because it had not been built, but rather made. It was simple enough with Nioca's full knowledge of how he had built the Sanctuary in Avernum and her own experience while in that world. But learning from both their mistakes, Jewels had taken her time. Over the course of the last four months she had made it bit by bit always with a final goal in mind. Easy enough with the Refuge computer to back up her precision with exact blueprints. It was an impenetrable fortress where she could let her guard down and be at peace.

Of course her paranoia still didn't allow her to fully relax... when had she become so paranoid anyway? She chuckled lightly as she recognized it as one of Nioca's traits. "And a well founded paranoia at that," a voice rang out through the hall. Jewels turned towards the archway without a door smiling. Jewels passed the threshold to a rather vitalized embodiment of Nioca.

"We have no reason to be paranoid. No one else can get in here. No one else even knows this place exists." Of that, Jewels was sure.

"Can never be too careful. Just watch. Some day your little fortress will be overrun."

"Ha! You wouldn't allow that to happen. You're too smart for that."

Nioca paused for a moment, looking thoughtful. "True," he quipped, "I am very smart."

"A genius," she affirmed with a big grin gaining a mirrored expression on his face. Jewels had not known how it would turn out, using the Nexus to create a doppelganger of Nioca. She had planned for every contingency but she had still not been ready for what she had gotten. He was... pleasant.

"And why shouldn't I be?" Nioca cut in reading her thoughts. "I am a figment of your imagination, after all."

Jewels frowned playfully. "Don't sell yourself short. We both know you're so much more than that. I have given you direct access to Nioca's memories, the Refuge databanks, and my own knowledge with a sane mind to process them all. That makes you the most powerful being in the whole of the Refuge."

He snorted. "Actually we both know I am merely a puppet you pull the strings of to ease the guilt you feel over the enslavement of my real body and mind." Silence fell as the full force of that guilt and regret washed over her. Almost immediately Nioca's own regret joined her. "I... I'm sorry, Jewels. I shouldn't have..."

She waved him off taking a deep clearing breath. "Don't. Don't you dare apologize for speaking the truth. I am so tired of all the lies and the pretenses. Don't ever stop telling me the truth, and don't let me get away with lying to you... Besides, it's too weird. The real Nioca would never even consider apologizing to me."

"Yes he would," he answered gently. Jewels shot him a stern look. "You told me not to lie to you... There was always a lot more going on in Nioca's mind then you give him credit for." Jewels turned away unwilling to dare to believe. "He didn't hate you Jewels. He hated what you represent. He was just too proud to tell you he regretted taking his anger out on you."

The words were everything Jewels had ever hoped to hear but she still could not trust that they were not just another part of her 'figment of imagination'. She had wished so hard for so long that Nioca didn't genuinely hate her that she couldn't discount the possibility she had planted this belief in the doppelganger's mind.

"Not believing the truth does not change the truth," Nioca interjected.

Jewels allowed herself a little smile as in their minds she and Nioca agreed to disagree. "And that is the most truthful statement there is."

"Speaking of the truth, are you ever going to tell w-dueck the truth about the..."

"Nope."

"...or Nalyd the truth about..."

"Not a chance!"

Jewels cut Nioca off before he even started his third inquiry. "Never in a million years!!" They both burst out laughing, sharing a mutual sense of lighthearted joy. This was the way she had always wished it to be between them but something always got in the way. They seamlessly slipped into their work routine communicating silently with thought; sharing plans, ideas, arguments, and frustrations without a word.

The doppelganger had been Jewels' attempt to allow Nioca a way back to her, but they weren't the same. No, they weren't even close. As much as Jewels enjoyed the harmony she and Nioca now shared, and as brilliant as Nioca now was, he lacked that one unreasonable, unpredictable quality that made Nioca who he really was. Jewels feared it was lost for good.

The current contrast between Nioca's real body and the Nioca she stood next to now was heart-breaking. If this Nioca had ever observed her care of his predecessor, he had never mentioned it, nor even allowed himself to think about it loudly enough for her to hear. Jewels suspected it might be a sensitive issue for him, or awkward at least. But these thoughts were distracting. Jewels needed to concentrate on her work. So much she needed to do...

Six hours in Jewels' frustration reached a new high as the mixture she was working on blew up in her face for the tenth time. "Arrgh! I'm never going to get this right!"

Nioca's gentle hand on her shoulder startled her. "Maybe you should call it a day. I can have the computer work on the algorithms before you try again."

Jewels was filled with comfort and gratitude. "Have I ever told you what a good friend you can be?"

"Not out loud, no, but I knew long before you first thought it."

Jewels gave him a playful shove. "So conceited," she joked.

"And proud of it," he joked back. "Now get going. W-dueck hadn't done anything to the Refuge for 15 minutes. I think he may be calling it quits, too. If you hurry you may distract him from starting again."

"Thanks, Nioca, you're the best."

"Yeah, I know... but maybe you should leave the back way. That last explosion really messed up your hair. You look terrible." Jewels' eyes slit. "No take backs," he singsonged, "I'm still the best." Jewels folded her arms and frowned. "You do not," he argued with her silent assault, "You love me and you know it. Now go. You need freshening up."

Jewels sighed. She knew she'd never win this banter war. She went to the back of the room and opened a door to a teleportation portal. Teleporting within the nexus itself was easy enough without a portal but she had made it to easily get to a number of other places both within and outside the refuge. Setting a dial, she waited for the pop and sizzle to subside before stepping through.

She came out in a small cavern, dimly lit by some glowing fungus. A root dangled above her head which she grabbed onto being slowly absorbed into it. It wasn't Nana, though. Just a regular Refuge tree that was close to the Administration Tower. A quick change of clothes was all she needed today.

She hesitated at the threshold of her room on the 29th floor. In truth she had not been back since the night of the accident instead assigning bots to restore it to its original decor. She had never checked to make sure it was done.

Having no clue what to expect, Jewels opened the door. A delicious smell wafted towards her. That of lilacs and daisies and apple cinnamon pie. Fresh flowers adorned the tables all around her. Candle flickers dotted the corners while a warm glow and crackle came from the center fireplace. Another smell made Jewels' mouth water. That of freshly baked bread and honey butter. Then was that steak sizzling on the stove? Grilled veggies, too? Jewels felt extremely guilty for working while Will had been setting all this up.

Don't be. Nioca's voice rang in her head. He wanted it to be a surprise. He instructed the bots to keep you busy but I took, the liberty of relieving them of duty and kept you busy myself.

Jewels was flabbergasted. You helped with this?? You... you want this to work? Oh, you are SO not the old Nioca.

Course not. I'm much better. Now enjoy yourself. I'll try not to eavesdrop... too much.

She was going to protest at a glimmer of mischievousness on his part in looking forward to seeing more of w-dueck's new body, but she was interrupted by a high-pitched voice.

"Jewels!!!" The now small, feminine frame of Will rushed towards her engaging in an enthusiastic embrace. "I'm so glad you're home. And just in time, too. Surprise! Are you surprised? I wanted everything to be perfect for my homecoming. I know I haven't been the most attentive spouse but I'm going to make it up to you, Jewels. I promise."

Jewels put her fingers on Will's lips to silence him. She didn't remember him being this... talkative before. "You don't have to make anything up to me. You don't owe me anything, Will." He grabbed hold of her hands with his small delicate fingers. "Oh, call me Sylae, please?"

12 hours later

Jewels hadn't known how exhausted she was until she stepped into the welcoming embrace of Nana. She held little wonder for why dryads normally spent the majority of their lives joined to their trees. As much as she wanted to stay, though, this visit was only a formality. She knew she needed Nana for stability. Last night had just been a confirmation of just how dependent she was. No more nights away... no more attempted dalliances. Maybe it was for the best...

The anguish on Sylae's face crossed her mind. She would be safer this way. Isn't that what she had been working so hard on for the past four months? A way to make sure this never happened again? Jewels resigned herself to giving up the fight. Sylae's life was more important than their relationship. It was just the way it should be. Nana comforted her as she mourned.

The Second Death

By Jewels - Aug 14 2011

Nix watched from her high perch. The creature with a thousand life forces had been stumbling through the forest for most of a day, and she had tailed him, drooling the whole way. She had thought that the little shaper's energy was impressive but this one... this one outmatched them all put together. His energy could rival that of all her kind. He obviously didn't know how to use it, though. How could such a creature exist with such great power, yet be so ignorant of what to do with it? If only she could harness it... Why she wouldn't even need to bother with Iffy's soul box anymore. It would be like spare change in comparison. Of course, it would make acquiring Iffy's power that much easier, too. No one would stand in her way ever again. Mad with the thought of it, Nix still didn't know how she could make it possible so she bade her time just watching it wander through the forests.

I think Stillborn is looking for you. The soft thought stirred Jewels from rest. She looked out with Nana's senses and sure enough, his great, green, lumbering form was going from tree to tree calling for her.

"Mother... mother... Are you my mother?" Jewels smiled inwardly as the sight of it both warmed her heart and tore it asunder at the same time. Her child was looking for her... but he looked nothing like her child. Nalyd had robbed him of his childhood, his freedom, and now his humanity for he looked less and less like a conventional humanoid every day. She feared that his mind would soon be the next to go and then Zyqxuwy save them all from the power he held.

Stillborn had made his way to her tree while she had observed. He placed his hand on the trunk while he called for her and Nana shuddered. Jewels, though, reached out to him forming her hand out of the bark that was right beneath his and laced her fingers in between his. He seemed a little startled but held on and pulled back slowly allowing Jewels enough room to emerge.

"What can I do for you?" she asked after giving him a big hug. "It's not like you to come all the way out here to find me." Stillborn hesitated as if he didn't know how to put it into words. "In fact, I don't think you've ever come out here to find me. And it's not like Nalyd to let you out of his sight... You wouldn't leave him without his direction, would you?"

"Of course not," his raspy voice was near incredulous, but it was all Jewels needed to know.

She nodded and smiled. "Why don't you and I take a walk? Might as well while you're here; Nalyd doesn't let you out all that often. Then we can talk about whatever it is we need to talk about." They retreated further into the dense forest of this new Refuge island, disappearing from Nana's sight.

Sylae sat at the main computer console of the 30th floor. She drummed her nails on the table as she considered the screen in front of her. It was her old profile; the profile of w-dueck. She had

wanted to talk to Jewels before making her decision but she had not come back to the tower... at least not for her. She had cried long and hard the night before, unused to the female body's ability to rage with emotions for hours on end. When a man, he would just shut down, close the lid of the emotion box, and go on with what needed to be done. Females, it seemed, did not have a lid to their emotions... at least this body did not. But in her hours of sobbing she had had time to think. Jewels had tried last night, tried and failed, yes, but at least she had tried. Sylae had allowed her own pain to rule her actions and she had been harsh... so harsh in the face of perceived rejection.

First thing, when Sylae woke up, she had opened up a monitor to show where Jewels was so she could go talk to her... apologize for the way she had reacted. It had shown her in a room above the lounge. Apparently sleeping in the bed where they had... or more correctly 'had not', she thought cynically... was too much for Jewels.

Soon, though, Jewels had been on the move racing towards the Admin tower. Sylae's heart had leapt. She was coming to her. She was just as sorry as Sylae about how badly the night had ended. She wanted to make it right... But, no. Instead she went straight to the 13th floor and stayed there for close to an hour.

Sylae had been disappointed and a little angry, but mostly curious. What could she possibly have to do on the 13th floor? Finally she decided to go down and talk to Jewels where she was, but when she reached the room and opened the door she had witnessed Jewels taking Nioca's pale, thin hands in hers and kissing him on the forehead. Tears ran down Sylae's cheeks as Jewels' soft, pleading words echoed through her mind again. "I miss you, Nioca. Find a way to come back to me."

Sylae retreated to the 30th floor with a new flood of thoughts and emotions to attempt to sort through. Soon after, the monitor showed Jewels leaving the tower and heading for the forest towards Nana. She was avoiding her and it hurt. It hurt worse, though, that she had come to the tower to seek out Nioca instead of her. Of all people in the whole refuge, when she should be as completely distraught over the previous night as Sylae was, Jewels had gone to see Nioca. He wasn't even a real person anymore. He was a mindless bot that just followed orders.

The memory of Jewels with Nioca burned in Sylae's mind playing over and over again. It was joined with other memories of her with Nioca. Memories of finding them together in the very room beneath her feet. Memories of her flying off after him on their wedding night and disappearing for hours. Memories of her defending him, protecting him... loving him.

The pieces started fitting together in Sylae's mind and any piece that didn't fit was either reshaped or discarded to all meet the same conclusion. Jewels was in love with Nioca; she always had been, but he had always rejected her. Even after all he had put her through; she still now pined for his return. He would not accept her love so Jewels had settled for her... or rather for Will. The nearest bloke that *would* reciprocate her feelings.

Sylae slammed her fist down on the desk, new tears running down her cheeks. It wasn't fair... *Dammit it wasn't FAIR!* What did Nioca have that she didn't have? What redeeming quality could Jewels have possibly seen and desired in such a wretchedly miserable man above what Sylae was trying to give her? So many questions that begged answers, but she was afraid of them.

Jewels did not return to the tower. Sylae supposed she could have gone after her, confronted her... fought for her... but she didn't want to fight for someone who would always be longing for another. Jewels' heart was divided. Maybe she even held a grudge against Sylae for what happened to Nioca. She didn't know but she didn't really care to find out either. Sylae was going to move on with or without Jewels.

First she created a new profile for herself and transferred all of the command protocols over to herself. Then on w-dueck's profile she recorded him as deceased and locked it down. Sylae Jiendra Corell was the new arch-admin of Calamity Refuge. Lastly, she went into Jewels' profile and changed her status from 'Married' to 'Widow'. Sylae would free Jewels from her commitment vows because with his now-broken heart, w-dueck was truly dead.

Beguilement

By Jewels - Mar 28 2012

Azuma made his way to the lounge looking forward to a good hot cup of coffee and hoping for a good six months of local gossip. What he found was an empty lounge.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" He mentally fenced with his silent companion. "Well, I can see that. ... No, I don't think its all that suspicious for no members to be here... but what about Ligrev? Ligrev is *always* here. Where could she have gotten to?" It wasn't until he walked closer to the bar that he noticed a limp hand stretched out on the floor behind it. "Who's that?"

Azuma hurried to get closer to the prone figure, fear choking back any further words. He knelt beside the feminine body and rolled it over. Ligrev's pale features were oddly still, so unlike her usual bubbly self. "Still breathing," Azuma whispered aloud. A wash of relief came over him that was not wholly for Ligrev's sake. Azuma tried waking her but it seemed she was out cold.

"Now what?" he asked his sword. "Me?! Why can't I just call someone? ... I was *not* going to just leave her here. ... I have plans. An agenda. ... Well, I know she helped me last time. ... Yeah... But... Would'you... Fine! I suppose you're right, her needs take priority." Despite his irritability Azuma managed to gently lift her and carried her up the stairs to an empty room.

Watching over her till she awoke was definitely *not* what he wanted to be doing right now but he would suffer to let the conscious of Sentience be his guide for the time being. After laying her down on the bed he made the impromptu decision to lay down next to her.

"What?" he asked indignantly to the mental protest. "You're the one who thinks I should stay here till she wakes up. I have no idea how long that will take, do you? ... I didn't think so. I don't intend to just sit here and do nothing. No harm in taking a nap. ... Mixed signals?? I'm sure Ligrev understands. I told her as much last time. ... I was *too* clear. ... Bah..." Azuma rolled his eyes and waved his hand at the next supposedly valid argument; he was done arguing for the day. Instead he flipped his hood up to cover his eyes from the sunlight still pouring in the windows and let himself relax.

As soon as Ligrev was awake and on the mend he'd be off to find Jewels. He wasn't exactly sure what he was going to tell her but he was sure he'd figure it out. A smile played on his lips as he remembered fondly the night she had opened herself to him unashamed, without restraint and how he had drank her in. He had never tasted anything so... intoxicating... and not just because she had been intoxicated at the time. Her essence was earthy bold, fiery bright, and almost too sweet; the combination being something he had never come close to experiencing before and had craved more of ever after. *His* star that shown in the Refuge sky calling him back to her.

A little mental nagging voice interrupted his delicious revelry. *So? What about him? He can't give her what I can. Once she knows, w-dueck won't be a problem.* Azuma frowned at the voice of logic again. *I guess I don't know if she'll leave him.* The fact that he knew it was logic and still didn't really care bothered him but not enough to *make* him care. He *wanted* to care about the circumstances surrounding their lives but nothing mattered more than being with her. *I... I'll share if I have to.* As chagrined as he was to hear himself think it, he knew it was true. *Or just be the best friend she's ever had. The shoulder to cry on when...,* an unmerited anger rippled through him as he finished the thought, *...when he doesn't treat her right. ... Yes, it will be 'when'. It may be years down the road but it will be 'when'.* He sighed and rolled onto his back at the last nudge. *Never had a reason to sick around for years before...*

Azuma let his mind drift as he started to nod off; thinking of the *good* 'what-if's'. Just spending time with her, laughing, smiling, holding... Her touch suddenly seemed so real. She said no words but her fingers spoke volumes... on his arm, on his face... on his lips. Before he knew what was happening, she was in his arms, wild with passion. She held nothing back, so neither did he. Sentence nagged once more, but refusing to let go of the illusion Azuma mentally waved him off. *Shh... I know. Just... let me be with her.* Sentence said nothing further, so neither did he.

Ligrev's eyes fluttered open trying to focus on the ceiling above her. Where was she? In a bed it seemed... in a bed with a man?! Her head spun with confusion. Had it all be a dream? A nightmarish dream of six months of agonizing over being left by her lover?

But here he was, still with her... in her bed... She reached out tentatively; afraid that he wasn't real, that *he* was the dream. Her fingers brushed his arm... his strong muscled arm. They danced a line up his neck to push the hood back from his face... his handsomely chiseled face. They traced the outline of his lips... his soft parted lips and his breath quickened in response.

He was here. He was real. And he had a need... a need she shared... a need she intended to satisfy to the fullest. In a moment she was on him throwing caution to the wind and Azuma responded with fervent passion. Locked into his trance with the image of Jewels, Azuma never knew the difference. But then again, neither did Ligrev.

The Zene Legacy

By Jewels - Jul 10 2012

Stillborn shifted uneasily in front of Jewels. She had gleaned enough from their conversation to know that Nalyd had sent him to get information that she did not intend to part with and apparently indicated he was not to return without it. She smiled a little at this inadvertent gift Nalyd had given her; her son's attention and company until she decided to send him away. Now that she had him, though, Jewels had no intention of giving him back. Stillborn 'wanted' to be with her now and Nalyd would have to experiment without him. "Come, son, I'm getting hungry and I bet you are, too. Let's go down to the lake for a picnic."

Nix was tired... so tired. Not from the strain of aching muscles that had kept her hidden up in the treetops of Calamity Refuge these past hours, but from the constant struggle to survive. She didn't want to hunt her kin. Deity, how she loathed what Iffy had forced her to become, but the reality was that if she did not hunt them down, they would hunt each other and then come for her. Whoever had the most power at that eventual battle would walk away with it all so if she didn't fight to gain power now, she would have no hope of surviving in the end.

A sudden ache for the 'good 'ole days' nearly unseated her from her perch. A sob escaped her lips unbidden as she mourned the loss of the fellowship she had once shared with all her kin. No one else even remembered since the corruption of the soul bond ceremonies robbed them of the precious memories, but Nix remembered it all too well.

They had been a relatively happy family in the beginning, all eight of them. For hundreds and hundreds of years they had lived together with only a few petty squabbles and disagreements to disrupt the harmony. Some kin had gotten along better than others, of course, but that's as it is in any family. Nix and Iffy had been inseparable; the first among them to discover love and the joys that come with it.

The Zene family had no concept of incest. Indeed, they saw no options among outsiders. It was just an ingrained, inherited instinct to stay pure, but they could love each other and share of themselves within their family. Que had matched with Torl and Fay with Sal, but Esur and Eva didn't like each other that way. Watching the other three couples, they became lonely and discontent. They started searching for a way to have a mate for themselves.

Esur was the first to figure it out; the first to succeed in recreating the ancient magics that had first brought them all to individuality. He had disappeared for months... or was it years? Long enough for some to fear his death, but he finally did return and he wasn't alone. He came with a child, undeniably one of them. At least in physical form she had been a child, but her mind was just as sharp and intelligent as Esur's. The mere novelty of it was enough to forget the past months of uncertainty and worry.

As the weeks passed, the child, whom Esur named Ruse, grew quickly into a beautiful young woman completely loyal, above all, to Esur. Eva had begged Esur for the knowledge to create a

soul bonded partner for herself. He had refused her at first, unwilling to share what he had learned and growing ever more suspicious of the other family. Finally, though, he relented to her nagging and agreed to hold the ceremony where he showed her how to draw another being from within herself. A miracle unto itself, it was the birth of a true soul mate and with the addition of Emar the Zene family became ten members strong.

Both couples seemed to have the perfect relationship. They understood each other so well... Many of the rest of the family began to eye their soul bonds with envy, being either blind to the corruption that lie underneath or ignoring it outright. Que and Torl decided to both perform the ceremony and each gained their own soul bonded partner: Reth for Que and Xei for Torl.

More years passed and Iffy, Fay and Sal all started discussing whether it would be a good idea for all of them to perform the ceremony but Nix saw the corruption. Nix noticed the changes. Subtle at first but then more pronounced. Once close family relationships became strained or outright hostile. Things started to go missing and lies started being told. Nix refused to go through with the ceremony. She tried to warn Iffy about the dangers but he wouldn't listen to her. She tried to dissuade Fay and Sal but they simply looked at the already bonded pairs with longing. Iffy stared with longing, too, and it broke Nix's heart to think she might lose him to a part of himself. Could anything ever be more selfish?

Some tried to count it as an accident, what happened to Fay, but Nix knew better. Que would get a crazed look in her eye whenever any of the female kindreds would spare a half glance for Reth. Both Nix and Que had caught Fay staring on more than one occasion and none more so than the day Fay's own ceremony had been scheduled to take place. No one saw how Fay fell down the stairs and she didn't live long enough to explain it, but Nix and Sal both noticed the gleeful smirk on Que's face with the family rushed in to try to help.

If *only* Iffy had listened on that night oh so long ago... The night she had begged him to run away with her... The night they had all gotten their first taste of a kindred soul. Mouthwatering as it left Fay's poor broken body... the most succulent flavor, it had pulled everyone in to a moment of empowering ecstasy that left them unable to do anything but endure the pleasure. While the paralyzing aspect eventually faded, the marked increase in power never left. It was like a drug induced high that never came back down. Nix shook her head at the realization... that's when the hunt really began.

Sal was inconsolable even though he and Fay had agreed to move on to both having soul bonded partners. When he found the same suspicions in Nix's eyes about Que's murderous intent, it sent him into a blind rage. Though Nix suspected the new thirst for more soul energy that they all now shared might have had something to do with it, too. In the confusion, Sal managed to get to her and break her neck but it didn't kill her... not really. her kindred soul left her broken body the same as it had Fay's but it was all drawn to Reth who immediately fled. Esur told the rest there, that Reth would be able to draw Que out of himself much the same way that Que had done it for him the first time. Nix had seen it that night in iffy's eyes. His thirst for power... for immortality... He wanted the security that birthing a soul bond would give him and Nix was powerless to do anything more to sway him. Two more ceremonies were still held that night for Iffy, who bore Saph, and Sal, who bore Eoli. Nix vowed she would never perform the ritual and cursed them all for their selfishness.

After that, the Zene family decided it was time for everyone to move out on their own. The difficulty in attempting to put their lives back together was compounded by the unceasing thirst for another drink of soul energy. The plotting and hunting began in earnest now. On more than one occasion kin approached Nix to help with plans to overpower and kill other kin.

Nix would never forget the day that Iffy had come to her with a plan to take out Esur and Ruse. She had argued against it but he said he was going to try whether she helped him or not. Her love for him still lingered so helping him was the only choice she would be able to live with. They were both grossly unprepared for the battle though. Esur and Ruse were much more powerful than them. They bragged about killing off Torl and Xei already, being strengthened with their absorbed soul energy. Saph had been the first to die with her soul energy returning to Iffy... and then he abandoned her. The coward! He had run for his life while Esur and Ruse turned their torturous power on her. Nix had never felt such pain before and screamed till her throat was raw while Iffy fled. Esur and Ruse just stood over her laughing. Unconsciousness came as a blessing, even though it also promised death.

It was a surprise to wake up again. What had happened in between had since remained a mystery to her but she hoped that they all still thought her dead. Nix went into hiding, donned her disguise and decided she must join the hunt. Because it was hunt or be hunted in this family until only one Zene remained, just as in the beginning only one Zene existed. The others had long forgotten, but not Nix. The day the eight became individuals was the day the man Zene had divided his soul to experience more of life with it. They thirst for each other's souls because they were all part of the same soul a thousand years past. But only one being could live in the end. Only one of the eight would continue to live their life. She understood this now and did not like it but she intended to be the one left standing.

Nix nimbly jumped down from the trees and examined a thistle bush the beast had passed. A tuft of fur clung to the thorns which Nix snatched up. She would be the last one standing one way or another... she *vowed* it.

The Things Left Unsaid

By Jewels - Jul 28 2012

The coffee was unusually fancy and Ligrev was unusually attentive. "What flavor is this?" Azuma asked.

"White chocolate peppermint mocha." Ligrev answered. Her voice was somehow even sweeter than the coffee drink which was almost making him gag. He sipped at it slowly trying to feign interest in Ligrev's prattle while trying to parry against the barrage of mental attacks from Sentience.

... I know, you're right, but how am I supposed to explain the truth to her? 'Sorry but I was only using you to pretend I was with someone I can't have?' A deafening *YES!* rung the inside of his

skull till it felt like it would split. Azuma smiled at her to hide the pain but was jabbed even harder for continuing to encourage Ligrev's hope that there would be a relationship between them. ...*Sorry. I suppose you're right again. You're always right... Why didn't you keep me out of this mess in the first place?* Sentience glowed angrily burning the edges of his mind in indignation at the suggestion.

Azuma was about to open his mouth for the unwanted task of breaking Ligrev's heart when a big burly monstrosity lumbered in carrying a limp form. Ligrev screamed and Azuma instinctively stood and drew Sentience from its scabbard.

It said nothing as it laid the bundle on a table with gentle mannerisms not common in such beasts. It then withdrew a few steps but still hovered anxiously near. Azuma signaled Ligrev to stay back and cautiously approached still wielding Sentience aloft. The creature made no hostile move as Azuma unfolded the cloak around the bundle. Jewels' unconscious face was all he saw; Ligrev completely forgotten.

"Jewels! What did you do to her!?" he demanded while taking an attack stance; his sword pointed at the beast's throat. His voice rose in pitch and urgency, "What did you do?!!"

Azuma didn't have enough emotional control to notice it's puzzlement but Sentience did. ...*Not hostile? ... No aggressive moves?* He relaxed a little but was startled anew when the thing spoke.

"Azuma, I wouldn't hurt mother.. Or you as she has requested it."

It knew his name? It called her mother? The light bulb in Sentience's mind went off faster than Azuma's. *The beast is Stillborn. What has happened to him?* Azuma shook his head to this silent question but answered with simple certainty, *Nalyd*.

They both had many questions but Jewels' stirring stilled them both.

Jewels sat up gingerly. An ache in her hip and a lump growing on her head told her she hadn't landed softly. Azuma's worried face joined that of Stillborn's in her vision. Both immediately asked her if she was alright. "I'm fine. Really. I just fainted." Remembering the reason she had fainted caused her to shudder anew and her impromptu caretakers to fret over her all the more. But she wasn't ready to tell them yet. She had to think about how she would do it first because it wouldn't take long for someone else to notice that Will's status had changed to deceased.

Why it had affected her so, she wasn't sure. Perhaps just the finality of the action after months and months of hoping to make it work. Or maybe the guilt that she hadn't attempted to contact Sylae again after that night. She was so used to being at the Refuge alone she hadn't realized how much time had gone by.

Of course, if she were honest with herself, she *had* been avoiding Sylae on purpose. Not that she wanted their relationship to end but it would be safer for Sylae if it did. And now Sylae had taken the last steps; declared Will dead and changed Jewels' status to widow while promoting herself to ArchAdmin. Everyone else would need to be told, of course. But exactly how she wasn't sure. How ever something like this would normally be told she supposed. A ceremony? That seemed normal.

Lost in thought she didn't notice that the worried faces around her had become more anxious at her distant stare. "Maybe she needs something to drink." Ligrev's shrill voice snapped her back to them.

"Or eat," Azuma offered.

"We are having a picnic," Stillborn chimed in.

Jewels forced herself to focus on the moment at hand. "Yes, yes. I was going to have something to eat by the lake. I haven't had anything all day. Ligrev, could you fix up a basket for two?"

"Three," Azuma said suddenly. When he realized he had said it a little too fast and a little too loudly he stumbled over the reasons. "I want to make sure that it does help before I leave you two alone. Don't want Stillborn to have to carry you all the way back here again."

Jewels wanted to protest, *needed* to be alone, but nodded her thanks instead. It was clear Azuma wasn't about to be swayed. Ligrev did as asked and brought out their food silently. The frown on her face as she watched them walk out the door was lost on all of them.

Azuma tried to make friendly chat during the meal noticing that Jewels often got that same disconnected look on her face. "So... Did you miss me?"

Jewels took a moment to realize he had asked a question. "Um... No. Were you gone? I mean, well, I've been so busy these past four months traveling between the ice plane and doing double duty here while Will was there..." She paused for a long moment staring at nothing but her hands. She took a deep breath before looking back up and continuing. "I just haven't had time to notice. I'm sorry."

"What about the note I had Ligrev give you?"

"I don't think I remember Ligrev giving me a note. How long ago was this?"

"About four months."

"See that's right when I left. She probably forgot about it while I was away."

Sentience sent him another thought about her forgetting on purpose. Azuma nodded more at Sentience than at Jewels and said no more on the matter. Jewels once again became lost in thought turning to look at the Administration Tower. He was sure he could see tears threatening to spill from her eyes. Finally he just came out and asked in the gentlest voice he could. "Jewels, what's wrong?"

She looked at him, her bottom lip quivering. It was obvious she didn't want to break in front of him but this was the perfect opportunity for him to show her what he was willing to be for her. He moved closer offering a supporting hand. "Please, I hate to see you like this. Maybe I can help. I just need you to let me."

Jewels shook her head to ward him off but when his hand rested reassuringly on her shoulder the tears began to fall and she leaned towards him allowing him to fold her into his comfort. Azuma reveled at his success. *A shoulder to cry on, check.* Sentience bit into his joy though by pointing out he was happy about her pain. *She was in pain already. I'm happy that I'm here to comfort her*

pain and that she's letting me, he replied indignantly. Sentience sent back the equivalent of a doubtful snort which Azuma ignored.

A few minutes passed, but not many. Not enough to feel her open up. Not enough to taste her glorious essence again. Ever watchful this whole time Stillborn finally spoke up. "Mother? You look tired. Will you rest?"

Jewels nodded and pulled away, curse the lumbering beast! The perfect moment ruined by a monstrous bastard. Sentience deemed the thought worth another snort to which Azuma thought an angry explicit at.

"You're right, I should rest. Many plans to make for tonight and I'll need all the strength I have to get through it." She looked so weary, Azuma was surprised she didn't just close her eyes and sleep here.

Curiosity found his voice, though. "Plans tonight? What's going on tonight?"

"Please... I don't think I can do it more than once." The tear filled eyes were back pleading for him to ask no more. "I'll be making an announcement about the details. Show up and you'll hear it along with everyone else."

"If that's what you want, Jewels."

"It is."

Azuma just nodded and offered to help her up. He wished she trusted him more but he wouldn't push her. There would be time to build that trust and not pushing her now would start the foundation. He stayed by the lake as he watched her walk off into the woods. One day she would trust him... one day.

Through the Window - Part I

By Jewels - Aug 5 2012

She watched her. From high out an Administrative Tower window she watched her. It had been a mere 30 minutes since the changes had been made to their profiles and now she watched her.

Sylae shuddered a little in her perch at the window. It had been easy... too easy to give over to her emotions and do something she already regretted. She wanted to talk to Jewels... she *needed* to talk to Jewels. She needed the comfort of her arms and heart wrapped around her again like they had been during the months of therapy. She needed the reassurance of her words speaking of hope and the promises of a future together. If only Jewels would make some indication that those hopes were not gone... give some sign that the last four months were not one long string of lies. Sylae had hoped one last time when she saw Jewels sitting at the lake. Did she know? Had she seen the profile change yet? Her face so sad as she looked up at the

Administration Tower... as if it would be enough of an apology. And it would have been, Jewels would have been completely forgiven with just that one look if only...

Sylae shuddered again when Jewels turned away... when she let herself be enfolded in Azuma's arms; glee disgustingly written all over his face. A surge of jealousy raged through her body. *Half hour a widow and she's already...* She didn't finish the thought but expelled her anger by throwing her RMM across the room. She didn't turn to look when the subsequent crash sent tinkling shards of glass skidding across the floor. Broken... like Jewels' promises. Shattered like Sylae's dreams. Destroyed like Sylae's last hope when Jewels turned her back to the tower and walked away again.

Mere minutes after Jewels disappeared from view the RMM beeped an alert. Picking her way through the broken glass of a photo frame, Sylae retrieved the device. It was a Refuge wide announcement sent to all members.

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Official Calamity Refuge Alert

There will be a gathering for all Refuge members
tonight at 6PM around the lake. Two important
announcements are to be made with accompanying
ceremonies and dinner. Formal wear suggested.
All Refugi are strongly recommended to attend.

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Sylae blinked back tears. 'So she noticed.' She marveled at the provisions so quickly made. An army of bots were assigned to build a platform, set up chairs, arrange decorations, hand deliver personal invitations, prepare a feast, and ready a ceremonial circle; all to be done in about five hours. The efficiency of it scared Sylae. How had Jewels done that so quickly? Unless she had it thought out and planned before hand... still to do all that with only a RMM in a matter of minutes... "Even I couldn't do it that fast." The sound of her own voice startled her. She hadn't spoken aloud for so long... deity how she wanted to talk to Jewels. *But Jewels doesn't want to talk to me.*

Sylae gave in to frustration and sent everything on her desk crashing to the floor to join the broken picture. The bookshelf next to the desk followed soon after spilling its contents on top of the computer console in the room. Sparks flew from the ruined machine soon igniting the scattered papers near by. Sylae flinched at the flame and screamed at the memory of another fire melting the skin off her face, searing her flesh to the bone... the agony of feeling herself die to satisfy the hunger of the fire as it ate her alive. A face stared back at her from the fire, a face that was the fire. When Sylae was sane enough to realize the fire had been put out by the tower's safety measures she realized something else... she hated that face.

Through the Window - Part II

By Jewels - Aug 5 2012

He watched her. From high out an Administrative Tower window he watched her. It had been a mere 30 minutes since the changes had been made to their profiles and now he watched her.

From his vantage, though, he could do more than watch. He was still a part of her, and she of him. He had felt her shock, her pain, her resolution... it did not compute. She did not compute. His conclusions about her did not compute for memory of sworn enemies and animosity were as fresh as a database request. From his vantage, though, he could look at all the information objectively. From his stores of information about her he could call up any previous assumption and mark it as true or false. He could make notations for exceptions and sort out the puzzle of her character. It helped his evaluation that he had full access to her own memories. Where action would ring *Foe*, motive would ring *Friend*. She held nothing back from him any more. He didn't think she could even if she wanted to. But she didn't, irrelevant argument to the analysis... or was it? So caught up in the big picture, she was, that day to day things were often left neglected or offended. Honest? True to herself. False when honesty would cause more harm than good. Trustworthy? True, though short sighted promises would be broken for a better whole. His final conclusion... Enemy of the Refuge? False.

Curious, he was, when she was held. His observations of her had made him aware of his lack... of his loss. Where were the desires he once held? Stored in SQL format separate from his current functioning. Where was his will to achieve those desires? This he could not find. That part of her that leaned in to achieve a modicum of comfort from any arms around her was missing from his current state. He *wanted* it back but he had no will to work towards getting it, nor did he know if it was even possible. Curious, also, that guilt caused her actions to strive for the opposite of her desires.

As she walked away from the lake, her health became the priority. Mental and physical exhaustion won out over her desire to arrange the needed ceremonies. Her ideas about them became background noise for the need to place one foot in front of the other until she reached her tree. A bonfire pit for a symbolic pyre. A meal enough for the whole Refuge with leftovers. Flower arrangements, fabric swags, musical selections. All passed through her mind without making it to conscious thought. A moment more and he was denied access to her mind. So many things that she had desired, but none of them had been implemented. He could do it for her. The will for his own desires did not exist but he found it for fulfillment of hers. He arranged it all, almost instantly, to the exact specifications of the images she briefly glimpsed. The populace was notified, the bots were deployed... it would all be done on time. He would see to it.

A Reason to Come Home

By Jewels - Aug 7 2012

Iffy leaned back in his chair, relaxing across the table from Saph. The light breeze ruffled the hair that halfway covered his eyes. *You should get that cut. It hampers your line of sight.*

No way! I like my hair just the way it is. He flicked his head to the side sending strands across his forehead. *I look cool.* Saph only snorted.

The internet café where they dined was busy with the influx of patrons hungry for lunch. The soup and sandwiches they had shared was little more than crusts on their plates by now, but they weren't in a hurry to go anywhere. Iffy took to pondering as he had for the last four months when time allowed. Thinking of what he could remember and the gaping black holes in his life where he could not.

Que, she was his sister, at least he had always considered her one. Esur had been his brother in a like manner. That one wanted him dead and the other had saved his life still left him wanting for reasons. He remembered trying to kill Esur long ago. The rivalry between them had been started by himself but he couldn't remember why. Whatever that unknown reason had been, it had cost him dearly, but he held only glimpses of it.

A smiling face of a woman he knew he loved. The same woman pleading that they go away together... leave everything else behind. Her face etched in terror as they fought a losing battle against Esur and Ruse together. He could only remember a feeling of helplessness and dread about the end of that battle. Stabbing certainty that she was lost to him, though he didn't remember seeing her die. He just knew in his heart... the woman who had loved him was dead.

Such morbid thoughts... cut it out before I come over there and give you a better reason to cry.

He sneered at her. *Oh Saph, you always know just what to say to make me feel better.* But the cutting tone was only show and they both knew it because he *did* feel better. Her commanding thoughts to 'snap out of it' were exactly what he needed. It was always a comfort to know Saph's strong personality was always there to take charge when he was indecisive or guide him when he didn't know where he should be going. But most of all Saph was someone he could depend on with his life no matter what.

Now that's more like it. They both grinned a little bit wider; an eerie sight to anyone who watched their silent communion.

The buzz in Iffy's pocket made him jump. The Refuge RMM had been silent these last four months. It didn't get any signal when not on the internet plane. Now that they were back, a message scrolled across the screen. "Hmm... I guess we've done enough relaxing today. Come on, Saph, we have to go get some formal wear."

Saph had no need to ask him what for, though she did feel like asking him why he felt the need to go back to Calamity Refuge at all. The four months it had taken to retrieve his soul box from between the planes of existence had been pleasantly peaceful without the drama that seemed

never ending at the Refuge. But then again she didn't have to ask that either. She already knew that he was grasping at something he had lost. Something he desperately wanted to have again. "Family," he said out loud confirming what she already knew. "They're all family."

Dressed for the Occasion

By Jewels - Aug 8 2012

Nana roused Jewels later than the one hour of rest as instructed. *You were not strong enough yet*, she argued. *You're still not strong enough to be facing this kind of strain but that's not why I woke you*. Jewels opened her awareness to see the surrounding forest. Stillborn paced endlessly back and forth waiting for her, but it was the bot that hovered a few feet from the tree that caught Jewels' attention. She emerged to address the bot.

Surprisingly it did a close approximation of a bow while its monotone voice spoke. "The Honored Lady Jewels DeForestal is requested to attend a celebration of the life of William Dueck tonight when the sun touches the trees."

Jewels stammered her surprise and confusion. "Uh... okay... but who? I mean I didn't..." Then it dawned on her, "Sylae... she planned Will's funeral herself?"

The robot left her question unanswered holding out a package with a card instead. "You are requested to be keynote speaker at the event which will culminate with the passing of his duties of Arch Admin to the Lady Sylae Corell."

"I can't believe she planned it all herself," she said as she took the package. Again the bot neglected to comment as it bowed a farewell, turned and left. Jewels opened the card first. It read almost exactly as the bot had stated only adding the definite time of 6PM then indicating that formal wear was suggested and a dinner would follow.

The corners of her mouth lifted in a bittersweet smile as tears filled her eyes. She had wanted to do this for Will... for Sylae. The big celebration – the gathering – the meal... she had failed to put any of it into action herself, but at least Sylae had seen the same benefit in such ceremony. The whole Refuge would mourn Will's loss, celebrate his life, and welcome Sylae to the Refuge family. It wasn't how they had originally hoped to break the news to everyone but Jewels just wasn't strong enough to be what Sylae needed. She was honored that Sylae thought her worthy to speak about Will's life. Maybe she even understood...

Jewels opened the box and to Stillborn's dismay started crying in earnest. With a shivering hand she took out a black gown made of supple satin. It looked just like the one she had imagined that afternoon. *She did understand...*

Sylae wasn't especially surprised at the knock on her door. A hand delivered invitation was on the list of preparations after all, but she *was* surprised by the fanfare of it. Sylae had never seen a bot bow before. She hadn't programmed them to do that and her jaw remained dropped as it recited a poetic invitation to the planned gathering tonight.

"The Honored lady Sylae Corell is requested to attend a celebration of the life of William Dueck tonight when the sun touches the trees." She hadn't programmed them for reciting prose either... How in the world did Jewels do that so quickly? The bot handed her a package with a card attached and continued its speech. "You will also be honored at the culmination of the event with the symbolic passing of his duties of Arch Admin to yourself. You may prepare a speech to address the Refuge as you so desire."

The bot bowed again and turned to leave but Sylae commanded it to stop. "I need you to fix the console in the southern office before you leave. Clean up the mess in there while you're at it."

The bot hovered while it processed for a moment. "Negative, maintenance is not a priority." It bowed to leave again.

"Wait a minute... I order you to make it a priority."

The bot came in a few feet before hesitating. "Error. Maintenance priority had been overridden."

Incredulous, she yelled at the bot, "By whom?! I'm the bloody Arch Admin!! I override your override. Go fix my console!"

The bot didn't hesitate again on its way out the door. "Priority to the celebration cannot be overridden."

Sylae shook with fury. "On who's damn authority?! It doesn't get any higher than myself!"

Ignoring her question the bot repeated itself as it left. "Priority to the celebration cannot be overridden."

Sylae seethed with indignation. It was Jewels... It had to be. How dare she?! What kind of corruption had she put into Sylae's Refuge to make it ignore her commands? More importantly... how did she do it? She stormed to the nearest console and started delving into the Refuge programming. If she could just find the code she could delete it. Jewels couldn't possibly have the knowledge or skill to take over HER refuge!

She searched Jewels' profile for some indication that her authority had changed. Any marker that could be used to make her commands a priority over Sylae's but there was nothing to be found. Not a letter of coding had changed that Sylae had not implemented herself. Instead she started following the celebration orders back to their roots but was left at another dead end. No one had ordered the celebration. Literally, the orders for the festivities had no user origin. They just appeared in the code. Sylae tried deleting an order only to see it reappear just seconds afterwards and have her console freeze in just moments more. It flashed a red message at her, **"ERROR: CONSOLE TEMPORARILY DISABLED"**

Sylae struck the console with her fist. "Dammit Jewels!" She had to have a Trojan installed somewhere... a back door giving her direct access to the mainframe. Sylae got up and paced the

room thinking over how she could regain her rightful control. Minutes passed with no definite answer... she'd have to go down to the database core and work from there but she wouldn't have time to do it today. The ceremonies were in just two hours and Sylae had to get ready. She had a speech to write on top of it all.

She eyed the package that the bot had left. Curiosity over what Jewels had sent won out over anger at her mutiny. She opened the box and her breath caught. It was soft pink. It was gently frilly. It was the most beautiful dress she had ever seen. Made of shimmering silk the fabric flowed with the movement of Sylae picking it up and holding it in front of herself.

Transgressions momentarily forgotten, she quickly stripped and wiggled smoothly into the new gown. It hugged all her curves in all the right ways to make them look just a little more curvy, perky, or firm as was most flattering. Made for her exact figure, it was absolutely perfect. Sylae couldn't imagine looking more beautiful. If only Jewels were here to see her in it...

Her anger was remembered once more. If only Jewels was not doing her best to avoid her... A hand delivered invitation; why hadn't Jewels delivered it herself? If only Jewels was not too busy stealing the Refuge right out from under her... Well, Sylae was not going to give up without a fight. She might not know how Jewels was controlling the Refuge, but she could still do something about it.

The Death of Pride

By Jewels - Aug 11 2012

Not enough time... Worse than not enough time... it would be accelerated the second he stepped through the portal. Worse still... it was his fault for waiting so long. Why had he been so stubborn? He could finally admit now that he needed her and so did her people. Hopefully she could be brought to see that, too. The sooner the better, for all their sakes.

An explosion sounded all too close that shook the foundation of the base. Xelgion hurried into the room as more repetitive blasts shook sparks and flames from the ceiling.

"Status report!" Vergil yelled over the din.

"The decoy didn't work, Vergil. They knew exactly where to come. Over 500 ground troops are ready to swarm us as soon as their artillery runs out. At last count, less than half of the 101st regiment are present for defense."

"Damn, they outnumber us ten to one... reinforcements?" *Mole*, was all he could think but he dare not say so out loud until he had proof.

"They've been told not to come."

"What?! On who's order?"

"Commander Shrikas."

Vergil sat up a little bit straighter at the mention of the Blueblood leader but he was still incredulous. "Why in the world... We have to defend this base at all costs! What was he thinking?"

"Maybe you should ask him yourself..." Xelgion looked to the door expectantly.

Shrikas ran towards them urgency in his eyes. "Vergil, they're coming! You must go now!" he shoved a bundle into Vergil's arms. "Take the Camirine. Keep It safe!"

Vergil stuttered in disagreement, "B-but the Camirine is never to leave the fire... I can't take it with me!"

"If it stays here it will either be destroyed or captured. At least if you take it we might have a chance."

"But surely you can hold them off..."

"NO! We *can't*!!" Vergil was taken aback at the forcefulness of his conviction. "The base falls tonight whether you and the Camirine are here or not. As soon as you leave we destroy the portal and abandon it. We cannot hold it now that its location has been compromised. Hopefully some of us will live to fight beside you and Lady Jewels when you return."

"If I can convince her to come back..."

"If she has the character to lead our people that you believe she does, she will come. She must. It is our only hope. Now go!"

"Go before I knock you out and send you through unconscious," Xelgion broke in.

"I'd like to see you try," Vergil gave him a mocking smile that failed to cover the fear in his voice. They locked hands in respect, "Goodbye my friend."

"Until the blue day dawns," Xelgion replied in reassurance.

Shouts and clangs from steel on steel were getting closer now. Vergil tipped a salute to his commander and his friend before disappearing through the portal.

Vergil groaned from his prostrate position. His blurry vision slowly came into focus on the myriad of browns and greens that surrounded him. The smell of moss and dirt and long dead leaves filled his nostrils. He tried picking himself up but every nerve protested at the movement. A lump dug into his side that hurt more so he forced himself to roll over. The lump was wrapped loosely in heavy canvas. Curiosity got the better of him as he forced his arms to unwrap the lump. Inside was an egg shaped stone perfectly smooth and blackest onyx. Vergil's mind struggled to remember what it was he held and why he held it and where he was and why he hurt so much.

Staring at the stone he thought he saw a light glowing inside. An impossible light inside this black as night stone. As he started it grew brighter and brighter. Brilliant blue light blinding him because he couldn't turn away... he didn't want to turn away. The light grew and grew drawing him in, consuming him whole, and refilling him at the same time. It knew him, it understood him, it exploded in his mind throwing him out of the light. Vergil blinked at the black stone in

his hand; the Camirine. He had never seen it out of the fire before... or glowing with an internal blue fire.

His mind was suddenly clear and the urgency of his task hit him as hard as an enemy fist. How long had he laid unconscious on the ground here? A few minutes... an hour? How long had gone by on the fire plane? A day... a week? Vergil fumbled with the canvas wrapping the Camirine back up and securing it to his belt. How many of the bluebloods were already dead? How many of his friends?

Gritting his teeth Vergil struggled to his knees. He cried out his frustration at weak and pain filled limbs. *Curse whoever calibrated that damn portal! I'll kill him if he's not already dead!* Bracing against a tree Vergil growled himself to his feet. His vision darkened in protest but he stayed his ground waiting for the dizziness to pass. When he could see again he looked around himself not recognizing the surrounding forest, dense enough to let little light through the canopy. He cursed the portal out loud. How was he supposed to find Jewels in all this? Was this even the Refuge? But he couldn't stay here and do nothing... he had to get to Jewels... somehow. He put one foot in front of the other ignoring the needles that shot up his calves with each step and the daggers that dug into his thighs with each lift and the talons that tore into his hips with each swing. *One foot in front of the other.* It was all he could do. He closed his eyes against the encroaching darkness. *One foot in front of the other... One foot in front... of...*

...the other.

"Hold still," a weary voice commanded him, but he didn't have time. He still had to put, *One foot in front of the other...* "I said hold still, Vergil. This is hard enough to do without you squirming all over the place."

That voice... he had to get to that voice. Have them bring Jewels... He redoubled his efforts hearing a crash and a muffled curse. "Hold him!" the voice said sharply. Two searing vices clamped his arms down to his sides. Vergil cried out at the shock of it. Instinct told him to fight and brought a weak blue flame to cover his skin. A satisfying howl of pain rang in his ears and the vices momentarily vanished. When they returned they no longer stung like a thousand ice crystals but they held him firm. "Stop fighting me!"

"Jewels... I have to find Jewels," a different raspy and weak voice said. It took Vergil a moment to realize it had been his own.

"Vergil, open your eyes. Look at me. I'm right here and I need you to hold still." The voice that commanded him softened its tone coaxing him to comply. At first all he saw was blurry red light... back in the fire plane? *No...* He had to get Jewels. "Vergil, flame down before we start a forest fire."

Forest... still in the forest... that was good. He felt the grip on his arms loosen to a light touch; firm but not threatening. He let himself return to corporeal form, charred ground beneath him. The glow lessened and he could start to make out a face. "Jewels," he coughed, "need to find Jewels."

"No you don't," a sweeter voice reassured. "Jewels found you. Can you see me yet? You big ice block head..." Vergil smiled at the playful insult. His eyes finally focused on her; auburn curls spilling down nearly bare shoulders, black silk draping the rest of her. Her face showed reproving concern but her eyes hid a deep weariness that echoed in all her movements.

"Jewels," he jumped right in, "you have to come with me."

"Whoa, we're not going anywhere until you can walk on your own two feet. Now I need you to lie still while I work. I've already tried regular healing spells on you and they're not enough. This is going to take something more complex."

"There's no time..." he struggled to convey his urgency but she just shook her head.

"This will take less time than me trying to drag you wherever you want me to go." She didn't understand... why didn't she understand? They had to leave now. But he had no strength left; no motivation to move now that he was with her. "Lie back," she insisted, "this will only take a few minutes."

Her hands spread out just a few inches from his body as foreign words spilled from her lips. A pulsing white glow enveloped them both and every nerve in his body tingled somewhere between pain and pleasure. Jewels gasped as her body tensed. "Deity, Vergil, what did you do to yourself? With this much damage you should be dead... You would have been dead if I hadn't... noticed your arrival."

"Stupid... portal..." he managed to reply.

Understanding crossed her face. "It really fried you good. Now try to relax and it won't hurt so much."

Vergil did his best to stop clenching his tingling muscles. He let go of his worries and let the healing take hold. Jewels spread her hands wide and an intensity started at the top of his head and the tips of his toes. There was no mercy at the already sensitive soles of his feet or the nape of his neck. "Aaahhh, ow, that... hurts... no, no... tickles, ow, ahaha, aaahhh."

"Suck it up and quit being such a baby. You're messing with my concentration."

He gritted his teeth as the sensation crept down his shoulders and up his calves, through his torso and past his knees. "Um... Jewels... That's enough, don't you think? I mean, I can heal the rest of the way on my own right?...Right? Jewels?!"

A minute later the glow finally faded and Jewels finally responded to him. She gave him an embarrassed half smile, "Sorry... needed doing."

He sat up willing her to stop with a wave of his hand. "Don't mention it... *ever*. Seriously. Don't."

Jewels nodded and helped him up from the ground. He was still a little wobbly as she led him to lean against a tree. "Be right back." She left his side to attend a hulking green mass he had mistaken for a bush before. She knelt next to it speaking softly. The lump looked up with a massive green head and held out its massive green hands, blistered and bleeding. He thought he saw her flinch as she held the hands gently, tenderly. A smaller white glow surrounded its

wounds as new skin replaced the burnt flesh. She urged it up and closer to him. "You remember Stillborn," the sentence was halfway between a statement and a question.

"What... no full body scan for him?" he joked.

"No. I could see *his* wounds. You only burnt his hands. But I didn't know what was wrong with *you*. Is it *my* fault your portal practically burst every cell in your body?"

It was only then that Vergil saw how bone weary Jewels really was. She fought to stay upright... and sane by the looks of it. He put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Hey, thanks... and, uh... my future wife thanks you, too."

He smiled as she snorted half a laugh and a spark of mischievous fire returned to her eyes. "And your future children? I fully expect you to name all of them after me."

"Well, I don't know... *My* kids? They might have preferred to never be born."

"Hmm, you're right. Give them my condolences instead." She smiled in earnest this time.

Vergil was chagrined to spoil the moment but his reason for coming could not wait any longer. His voice soft and serious, he looked her in the eye. "I need you to come with me."

"Where?"

"To the fire plane. If you don't I don't know if there will be a world for my kids to grow up in. Our people fight each other for lack of a leader. Jewels, they need you."

Jewels brows furrowed, "The... the civil war? Someone mentioned it to me a while ago. Four months? In the ice plane, I think. That's hardly enough time for the end of the world."

"Four months *HERE*, Jewels... Twelve years *there*." He watched as the difference sunk in sorry that it bought back the bleak weariness to her eyes.

Her voice was little more than a whisper, "They've been fighting... for twelve years?" Vergil only nodded. "But surely they can find someone else without me."

"They've never been without an appointed Fire Lord before. They can't agree on another ruler by themselves, and believe me we've tried. They've been killing each other over it for twelve years, Jewels." His guilt and self accusation over not doing something sooner found its way to his exhausted voice. Jewels heard it... and thought it was for her.

Her face screwed up in indignation and her voice raised in self defense, "And you think that's *MY* fault?! *How dare you!*"

Vergil had not planned on making any claim of the sort, but hearing her deny any responsibility for her people and the state of their homeland after he had been fighting for his life there for twelve years made him really angry. "YES!" he spat out. "Every single flame that has died in this flame forsaken civil war is *YOUR* fault because *YOU* are their Fire Lord and *YOU abandoned them!*"

The silence stretched out between them. A twang of guilt stung him as Jewels' eyes became dead black stones staring out at him from a lifeless shell. Her voice was cold and calculated when she finally responded. "Is this what you wanted to talk about before the wedding?"

She left the quiet comment hanging in the air and he cringed at the simple truth. He would have rathered she yell at him, scream, scratch his eyes out... anything to distract him from the fact that he could have cut this whole thing ten years short by simply telling her when he should have... Four months ago. In his own arrogance he thought he could handle it himself. In his own pride he stayed away when negotiations broke down at year five.

For twelve years he had watched his people, his comrades, his people die. It took ten of those years of death to bring him back to the same position he had been in four months ago here. He needed Jewels. So he did what he had been unable to do before this war broke him and swallowed his pride. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that, Jewels. I'm more to blame than you are. Please come with me and stop this war."

The hard lines on Jewels face softened but her eyes remained dead. "No."

"Jewels, please... people are dying as we speak." He grabbed her shoulders as if he could transfer his conviction to her through his touch. "We must go and we must go now."

"I... I can't," tears started streaming down her face. "Will... n-needs me. The Refuge needs me."

"One man can't be worth a whole world." He clamped down on her shoulders tighter. How could he get it through to her? "You have to come with me! I won't let you make this mistake. I won't!"

She started pulling away, "Ow, Vergil, let go of me! You're hurting me!"

"You're coming with me, Jewels, whether you like it or not!" He would have taken her over his shoulder and dragged her to the fire plane right then and there. He would have made her look at the dying people, their dying world... made her see reason. But massive green hands clamped down on his own, tearing the flesh off down to the bone. He was thrown back and the pain subsided.

A quick worried glance showed that his hands had no actual damage from the touch but huge hulking Stillborn stood protectively between him and his sister. "She said, no." With that he turned putting an arm around her and leading her away.

Vergil saw her turn her face into that massive shoulder and lean her forehead on him. "How can she STAND it?" he whispered aloud. He was about to get up to go after them when he spotted a SimpleBot headed in his direction. He waited and it stopped a few feet from him. "What can I do for you?"

The bot made a little bow and held out a fancy card. "The Honored Sir Vergil is requested to attend a celebration of the life of William Dueck tonight when the sun meets the trees."

"What the hell...? Celebrate his life? How conceded can Dubya get?" Vergil opened the card and scanned it quickly while the bot bowed again and turned to leave. "Hey, wait. Who's this Sylae person?"

The bot hovered, "Lady Sylae Corell will receive the duties of Arch Admin tonight."

"What?! No way Dubya's just giving up his position. Someone have him at knife point? Did he lose a leg and want to retire? What happened to him?" The bot was taking too long to answer so Vergil rephrased his question. "Where is w-dueck?"

"Will Dueck is deceased." Vergil made no further queries as the bot turned to leave again. Four months... it had been only four months here. He had seen twelve years of death on the fire plane but he hadn't thought that there could have been a death here while he was away. Vergil held no love for Dubya, but it pained him to see it tearing his sister apart. It suddenly made sense; Jewels' weariness, her dead eyes, her black dress... She had said Will needed her... to bury him. The Refuge needed her... to run the place in his stead.

But dammit, *he needed* her, too. After the funeral, he decided. He would wait until after the funeral and approach her again. Beg her to help him keep more loving husbands alive in the fire plane instead of in piles of ash on the street.

Variations on a Concern

By Jewels - Aug 16 2012

Jasmine stared as the SimpleBot hovered away from her tree. She had watched and listened as the metal box of magic had addressed Jewels not much earlier and now again as it repeated its invitation to any dryad that wished to come. She hadn't really understood any of it. Dryads did not have celebrations of life, they just lived; peacefully for the most part. Neither did they have 'key note' speakers or ceremonies to transfer power. The dryad council was automatically just made up of the oldest living trees. When one council member died, the word was sent to the next in line but little else happened. The thought that she might now actually *be* on the council caused her to shudder. They had lost so many...

Nola had gleaned from Nana that the celebration was actually to mourn the death of Jewels' chosen bonded, Will. That he had actually died many months ago and only now had Jewels given up getting him back. Jasmine was shocked by the news. How many times had Jewels walked past her without any indication? They had talked several times in the last months and Jewels had never mentioned it. In fact, she had said instead that she was helping Will on a different plane and that he would be returning soon.

Jasmine remembered the tale from before the wedding, of Jewels traveling to distant planes, intent on reuniting Will's spirit with his body after a sword had caused it to flee from life. Perhaps, though, his spirit did not wish to come back this time. Perhaps he had tired of living in a body, of having duties and responsibilities as Jasmine had observed the humans have. Or, perhaps, a spirit can return to the body only so many times before the afterlife is the only choice left. The last one made the most sense. Jasmine did not understand much of the customs of humans but that they valued corporeal life above the spiritual life was clearly evident.

So soon... Jasmine lamented, *...too soon.* Jasmine had not had the opportunity to see if Will could be the cure for Jewels, and now she never would. Back to Nioca... though from the rumors she had heard, Nioca was also dead, and by Will's hand. If it were true, there would be no hope for Jewels' recovery. Nola felt Jasmine's trepidation and inquired of Nana. She assured that Nioca was alive... but Nola also conveyed Nana's worry. There were... complications.

No matter. Jasmine would see for herself tonight when she attended the celebration. She would convince Jewels and Nana and Nioca to go through with it for the good of them all.

Nalyd sat bent over his shaping equipment oblivious of the hours he had spent here. The specimen he had collected had proven to be quite fascinating. Nalyd had cleared a table of all but light placing the dab of blood in the middle. Slowly with a trickle of energy he grew and duplicated it to a more substantial mass; enough to half fill a tea cup. With one side of his thoughts he kept the cells alive by feeding them energy in a form they could absorb. With the other side, he poked and prodded, experimented and analyzed until his curiosity was as far from being satisfied as it could get. The lifesong he read from it was so close to Iffy's that she had to be a very close relation; mother, sister... cousin at least. And the pattern was so far removed from every known species he had encountered that other than being related to each other, Nalyd could not say for sure who else, as a species, they *were* related to.

Nalyd ran an electrical current through the gooey red liquid and watched it bubble and churn. He paid special attention to the thinning bubbles and the spectrum of colors that swirled on their skin, recording it for future reference. He bombarded it with shaping energy and watched it squirm and grow as if it had a mind of its own, wanting to control the shape it became. He separated part of this new growth and surrounded it with the sickly green nimbus of attack. Direct contact did little to damage the cells, resilient as they were. Lifesower had a more satisfying effect as the disease quickly ate through the cells' outer protection. A subsequent attack had dark red stains dripping off everything within two feet including the tip of his nose.

The smile he added to his blood covered face could have featured on any horror film cover and sold out the tickets to hard core enthusiasts. Yet his specimen was missing something. He had felt the intruder's own power in her attacks of which this sample had none. Nalyd had taken a lot of hits over the years, and something strong enough to knock him senseless on the first blow was nothing to trifle with. Maybe if he gave it life... something small... An image came to Nalyd's mind as he wiped his sleeve across his face. He set to work, deep in focus, ignoring all other sights, sounds, and smells. Nalyd did not usually start with an unfamiliar pattern to work with, but he could do it if he concentrated. He knew he could.

Jewels entered the Geneforge forum alone. She was ready to ask Nalyd for a favor and bargain the information he wanted for it but the little shaper was so engrossed in his work, he wouldn't respond to her. "Nalyd, can I have just a moment? I don't mean to interrupt, but..."

Nothing. He stared instead at a large red lump on the table in front of him. It writhed and wriggled and almost whined in protest at Nalyd's conjuring. She tried a little louder. "Nalyd...", louder, "Nalyd?" He never looked up.

Jewels shrugged. If he was too busy to notice her she'd just help herself to what she had wanted; free passage without his intervention. "Stillborn, come in." Her son did as he was told and still Nalyd did not move from his spot. "Nalyd does not wish to be disturbed right now so I'd like you to come over here with me."

"Yes, mother." Jewels glanced over at Nalyd fearing his creations voice might rouse him. She held her breath as his hand came up in their direction, but he only waved it at them as if swatting an annoying mosquito. Jewels put her finger up to her lips and led him between the Geneforge healing and energy pools.

She drank deeply of both and felt slightly better than she had all day but a part of her remained dead. She wasn't quite sure if it was a result of the situation with Sylae or the news from Vergil. She didn't want to analyze it right now to find out. She had more important things to do and not much time to do it in. "Hold on," she told Stillborn.

In a moment they were both in her study and Nioca's singsong voice was chiding her, "This place won't stay a secret if you keep bringing strays home."

"Okay, *mom*," she singsonged back as she rounded the corner to the lab. His smile was a welcomed sight in the chaos that surrounded her life. Looking at him she couldn't help but feel that at least she got one thing right...

His smile softened, [Don't be so hard on yourself](#). She felt his compassion wrap her up as effectively as any ultra-huggle she could dole out.

She closed her eyes and melted into it for a moment, leaning against the door frame. [Like I said. One. Thing. Right.](#)

His comforting thought turned mischievous, [Well... we have yet to see if I will blow up in your face or not.](#)

Jewels opened her eyes and found his. "Oh, don't you dare," she commanded out loud. "You blow up, I blow up, and we both know I'll take the whole Refuge with me." Stillborn, startled by her sudden sharp comment, appeared protectively at her side in the doorway.

"Yes, maam!" Nioca gave her a smart salute, "Wouldn't dream of it. Besides..." he nodded slightly at Stillborn, "it looks like we have some work to do."

Jewels nodded back, "Indeed we do."

Sylae looked out at the gathering crowd. It wasn't a novelty for a Corellian to sit in on their own funeral as a spirit, but she doubted any of the faces she saw, Ermarian and other, expected such a thing. Corel was special in its own rights. But this was *her* Refuge. *Her* world. She would do anything to protect it just as she had been doing for the past five years.

A part of her was awed at what Jewels had accomplished in so little time. Everything looked perfect; the decorations, the provisions, the entertainment... she was honored at the level of detail put into everything. But just as equally, Sylae was dismayed that such attention to detail – exhibited primarily from the SimpleBots Jewels had ordered to create it – was very unnatural if not practically impossible. They just weren't designed to do such things without out very specific

programming. Every single arranged flower, every single folded napkin, every single cheese puff had to have had a specific direction behind it but Sylae couldn't find them. It was like they were running on pre-arranged subroutines that didn't actually exist.

Normally Sylae would be ecstatic at the prospect... it had to be her mental link, she was thinking to it and the Refuge was responding. The entire concept was utterly fascinating, but Jewels had crossed the line. Not only could Sylae not affect the subroutines she could not find, she was also blocked at every attempt to change the coding that she could see. She had tried so many times that consoles would lock up if she even started looking at the coding at all. She was left with access to only the regular maintenance which really didn't need maintaining anyway. The logs showed that regular maintenance was performed every day at the same hour with backups saved and garbage purged. The Refuge practically ran itself... it didn't need her... the people didn't need her... Jewels didn't need her.

A necessity, her logic told her. She had been gone for four months and the running of the Refuge had to go on without her by necessity. *Jealous*, she admitted to herself. Jealous of how well Jewels had done while she was gone. Jealous of the care and attention she had given to the Refuge while doing all she could to avoid Sylae. Jealous of how the Refuge had come under her leadership so efficiently, so willingly. It wasn't fair... none of it. She should be glad to have Jewels with her new skills... instead she hated her for it.

MY Refuge! she told herself again. No matter the good intentions *no one* was going to take it from her. Least of all the woman who now strode towards her causing her heart to skip a beat. *Damn her!* The black silk she wore drew Sylae's gaze towards her curves before she forcefully tore it away to look only at her face. It didn't exactly help. The corner of her mouth was drawn up shyly and her long lashed eyes alternated between the ground in front of her and searching out Sylae's own eyes. She felt her face flush and wished for a decorative fan to hide behind. How could just a glance and a smile affect her so? Especially after knowing that the oh-so-innocent looking face had already betrayed her.

As graceful as a flower floating on a pond, Jewels curtsied in an outward show of honor and respect. "Lady Sylae, you are looking very beautiful tonight."

Sylae gave a polite sideways nod in acknowledgement doing her best not to show the emotions that raged underneath. "And yourself, Lady Jewels. I couldn't imagine a dress more suited to you."

Jewels laughed a little, "I am glad you like it," her smile showing she thought the statement funny. She glanced around the clearing, "Everything looks very beautiful tonight, I couldn't imagine a more perfect setting."

Sylae's turn to chuckle, "Indeed. I can't help but smile at the grandeur of it all."

"I'm so glad you feel that way. Nothing but the best for my husband."

"Nothing but the best..." Sylae echoed though her tone of voice was a hollow imitation. Jewels had done this all for Will... the decorations, the provisions, the entertainment; it was all for *her husband*. Such a cruel reminder that Sylae would never be able to fill that role again. The twisted knife was the underlying statement that Sylae would never get Jewels' best either. Sylae

silently screamed in frustration. How could she stand there and say such a thing with that tender smile? *Damn her!*

She saw the arms starting to reach for her and froze. She couldn't escape without giving up the good natured pretense. And she couldn't drop the good natured pretense without giving up the essential element in her plan to regain control of the Refuge; surprise. She had to endure it... she had no choice. Torture from the very first touch that made her unwillingly shiver, to the pressure of her body holding her up as weak knees unwillingly trembled, to the hot breath that tickled her neck as she whispered her name. *Betrayed!* ...by Jewels and by her own body that wanted nothing more than to stay here in an eternal huggle...

Damn her!!

Jewels held Sylae's form as it clung to her, nails digging into her bare shoulders. Every tremble redoubled her guilt at what Sylae had been put through on her account. She had only meant for the hug to be a supportive gesture of good will between the new authorities. A benefit for the crowd. She was more aware now of the eyes that focused on the pair and more aware of the mistake she had made in thinking Sylae was taking all this in great stride.

"Oh Sylae," she breathed not willing to finish her thought out loud. *What have I done to you?* She would spend the rest of her life making up for it. 'Forever always on past the end', she had vowed at their wedding and she meant it. Her status may say 'widow' but she considered herself still married to the soul in this body. *Husband... holding my husband...* Jewels wanted nothing more than to stay here in an eternal huggle, but curious eyes bore into the back of her head. She pulled away reluctantly and felt Sylae loosen her grip just as reluctantly. Both had tear filled eyes that threatened to spill down their cheeks. Jewels hoped they looked like two women grieving the loss of a beloved man rather than two women grieving the loss of each other's arms. "Time to get started," she managed to choke out. Sylae only nodded and took her place on the right of the rising.

Jewels blinked away her tears and made her own way to the center of the platform. She turned to face the crowd and the hush fanned out from the center as people turned their attention to the stage. She took a few calming deep breaths. Sylae had trusted her with this eulogy. She only hoped she would be able to get through it without completely breaking down. It wouldn't do to lose control here.

Learning of the Dead

By Jewels - Aug 21 2012

Azuma kept his hood pulled low in the crowd. He was less worried about corrupting someone and more worried that someone would see the smile he couldn't keep from his face. Jewels' mood this afternoon had left him puzzled but the invitation explained a lot. W-dueck was dead and Jewels was grieving. What a perfect opportunity to be the comfort she needed, and with Dueck out of the way... much more. He could hardly wait for the fête to be over so he could offer her his sincerest condolences. A celebration of Will's life indeed – and of his graciousness in getting out of Azuma's way.

Quit smiling!, came the mental reprimand that was becoming all too familiar. *Great swords in the sky, you're practically giddy!*

You want me to be happy, don't you?

Not at the expense of others. Speaking of you're still avoiding Ligrev.

But telling her the truth will hurt her feelings.

And be infinitely better for her overall health! You should go talk to her now.

Well I can't now, I'm busy attending w-dueck's funeral.

Sentience gave him the equivalent of a huff and the cold shoulder of which Azuma was thankful for. A hush was coming over the crowd and his attention went to the platform in front of the Administration Tower.

Jewels stood in the center holding an RMM up to her mouth. "May I have your attention? It's almost time to begin. Please find a seat everyone." Her voice echoed strongly from the speakers of many strategically placed Simplebots.

Azuma made his way forward. He sat in one of the back rows as others crowded towards the front. He allowed himself to gaze at her, taking in her form and poise despite the black of mourning clothes and the invisible weight she no doubt carried. A weight he would soon offer to take from her.

The sudden jostling of someone plopping down next to him startled Azuma out of his reverie and his hood. He turned to see Iffy and Saph decked out in black tux with bowtie and a dark red evening gown. Azuma gawffed at them.

"What are you staring at with your stupid jaw dropped?" Saph demanded. "The announcement said formal wear. Where's yours?"

Azuma looked away instinctively at her hostility. "Sorry, I just... haven't seen you guys in a while is all. I... I wasn't expecting you."

"We recently got back to the internet plane," Iffy offered. "Had just enough time to go shopping for something to wear after the RMM announcement."

"What's this shindig all about anyway?" Saph said grumpily. "I didn't want to get dressed up without knowing why but Iffy made me."

"Didn't you get a hand delivered invitation?" Azuma asked hesitantly. If they didn't know about w-dueck, Azuma didn't exactly want to be the one to tell them. "The bots were out all day passing them out."

"No," Iffy shook his head, "We only got back to the Refuge about fifteen minutes ago. The bots didn't know where to find us."

"Oh, well... its, uh..." Azuma stuttered stalling for time, "kind of hard to explain. It's a... celebration... for w-dueck."

Saph huffed from her seat, "What could he have possibly done to warrant such a gala?"

Azuma audibly sighed with relief when he heard Jewels' voice again. "Shh... it's starting."

"Welcome everyone and thank you for coming. You honor Will and you honor me by being here tonight on such short notice. Here we will attempt to show tribute to a man who has greatly impacted all of our lives in one way or another. As a provider of shelter when the world was ripped out from under you..." Jewels' eyes swept the crowd lingering on the Ermarians and dryads as she came to them. "He offered you a new home asking nothing in return. For some he became your friend and confidant; taking up your causes, fighting battles beside you, sharing in your victories and hopes and joys." Jewels scanned the crowd again. This time she stopped when she saw Iffy and Azuma, looking straight at them. Azuma felt a sudden pang of guilt knowing that w-dueck would most likely not share in his hope of gaining his wife's affections and joy that his death had made it a lot easier. Sentience's satisfaction, though, spurned him to decide that he didn't care. "For me," Jewels continued, voice still strong and melodious, "he became someone to share the rest of my life with, someone to start a family with, someone to grow old with..."

Azuma was a bit surprised by how poised Jewels remained. After this afternoon he would have expected her voice to have at least wavered. Was it courage or denial or just for show? He would have to coax her grief out of her, especially if he wanted to be able to ease it for her.

As the eulogy progressed, Saph was getting increasingly frididity. "So what, who cares?" she voiced to Iffy, "Where is he anyway? If he is supposed to be the guest of honor, why isn't he here?" She spoke quietly but her voice still carried and turned many heads of people sitting near, each wearing a severe scowl.

"Quiet, Saph," Iffy chided, "We don't know what this is for yet... and something doesn't feel right to me."

"You mean *other* than Dueck not being here?"

Iffy gave her his own severe scowl that at least left her silent. "Azuma?" Iffy's voice held quiet concern, "Why is almost everyone wearing black?"

Azuma took a deep breath resigned that he would have to break it to them, but Jewels' statement within that breath rang out clearly to answer him instead. "So today we celebrate the life that

Will lived, the legacy that he left behind, and mourn what loss his death means to each of us." He watched Iffy's face drain of color. Even Saph looked chagrined and subdued, shrinking into her seat.

"How?" Iffy managed.

Azuma shrugged, "This is the first time Jewels has talked about it. I didn't know until I got the invitation."

"So... Jewels is ArchAdmin now."

It was an assumption Iffy voiced but Azuma shook his head, "Nope, she's inducting Syla as ArchAdmin next."

Iffy was incredulous, "Syla? Nioca's friend? Impossible! Neither w-dueck or Jewels would allow that!"

"But that's what the invitation said," Azuma insisted. "I figured Jewels was too distraught to do the job herself and since Syla had experience..." he left the assumption unvoiced, second guessing his conclusions. "I haven't seen her around though."

"I don't believe it," Iffy protested lowering his voice to not disturb their neighbors. "The last time Syla and Jewels were together, Syla met her on the roof of the Admin tower with an army of gunships to greet her. From what I was told... it didn't end pretty. Jewels trusts Nalyd more than she does Syla. She would never allow it. Can I see that invitation?"

"Uh, sure..." Azuma dug in his pocket for it and handed it over.

"Who's that?" Saph had found her voice again.

"Who's who?" Iffy asked looking towards the platform with her.

"That woman up on stage with Jewels... the one in pink."

Azuma looked, too. He had been so focused on Jewels he hadn't noticed her. "I don't know. Never seen her before," he admitted.

"Neither have I," Iffy echoed looking down at the invitation in his hand, "but I bet her name is Sylae Corell... the new ArchAdmin."

Azuma felt a little stupid for reading the name wrong but nobody mentioned it as Jewels continued her speech. He was starting to get anxious for the end. 'What the Refuge meant to Will, blah, blah, blah.... How much Will meant to her, blah, blah, blah... How much she would miss him, blah, blah, blah... How he died...' The congregation as a whole all sat a little straighter in their chairs at this. Everyone paid attention now.

"Most of you are familiar with magic and spells and the abilities to heal and resurrect. Some of you may wonder why Will wasn't just revived and some of you may fear the worst, so I will tell you how he died. About four months ago, there was an accident here at the refuge. It resulted in an intense explosion and Will's body was vaporized. So four months ago I started my search for a way to revive him. For all my strivings, though, I am still here telling you all that he is dead but take heart, *Will's spirit lives* and I am convinced that he is here now watching over us all and will continue to protect his Refuge and those who call it home for as long as it exists."

Azuma gave a little inward shudder. W-dueck watching over them...? He might appreciate seeing Azuma comfort Jewels in his absence, but... he didn't want him watching *everything*. Sentience gave its own shudder, *You are vile!* Azuma ignored him focusing on Jewels again.

"Though Will's body has already burned, still we light this symbolic pyre to burn in his memory." Almost like magic, the giant stacked pile of logs on the other side of the lake burst into flame. The fire made a loud *foump* as it reached twice as high into the darkening sky. The initial heat was intense even from his current distance but it soon became a soft glow and a quiet crackle in the background, meant to light the event as the sun set and night fell. "If anyone would like to say a few words about Will, feel free to do so now. There will also be a monument and thread posted where the pyre burns to be an eternal memorial in his honor. Any memories or thoughts you would like to say about Will may be left there for future generations to remember him by."

Jewels stepped back and waited. The first couple of minutes were silent of all but the fire, but soon a man stood up from the crowd. Azuma didn't recognize him but he wore the clothes of an Ermarian. He spoke on behalf of his family in gratefulness for the Refuge and to Will for creating it. Then someone Azuma recognized as a newbie stood up. With awkwardness, she expressed her gratitude that there was a place on the Internet Plane where she could go and not be harassed by spam or adware or forum bullies.

As she sat, Iffy stood up. His face was drawn and his pallor pale. When he spoke, his voice was thick with emotion. "I've been a member here for a while now. Most of you probably even consider me an oldbie. When I first showed up w-dueck opened the Refuge to me without hesitation. He didn't know who I was or what I had done and he never asked either. He just gave me a place to sleep, and food to eat, and fellowship without pretense. When I needed help he helped me, and when he needed help he trusted me enough to ask me. Even though he never really knew me and I never really knew him I've come to consider him..." Iffy's voice wavered then. He sniffled and pushed through as well as he could while holding back his sobs. "...to consider... I consider him family. And I will miss him... very much." When he sat he leaned into Saph who embraced him with a tenderness Azuma hadn't thought possible.

Azuma felt another pang of guilt. Hadn't w-dueck welcomed him just the same? Offered him just the same? Trusted him just the same? ... Shouldn't he be mourning him just the same? For the first time since returning to the Refuge, Azuma didn't get defensive when Sentience spoke up. *I'm so glad you've finally realized that.*

But Sentience... it hasn't changed how I feel. I really don't care that w-dueck is dead. No... that's not it. I'm still *glad* that w-dueck is dead. The silence in his mind stretched on the same as the silence from the rest of those gathered. *What is wrong with me?*

Nothing that hasn't been wrong with you since the day of your creation. I can only heal so much. The rest you will have to learn on your own. I'm just here to point out what you still need to learn.

For the first time that day, Azuma did mourn. Not for the loss of w-dueck, but for the fact that he didn't... couldn't mourn for the loss of w-dueck. For the shortcomings of his cursed origins, his

soul wept... if he even had a soul. He had always doubted it. *She can teach me*, he thought desperately. *I can learn from her!*

Perhaps, came the reply. *Perhaps*.

Butterfly Effect

By Jewels - Aug 24 2012

Sylae stood at the back of the platform doing her best to keep her emotion off her face. *Poised and proud*, she repeated to herself. *Poised and proud*. But the more Jewels spoke the more she felt like screaming. Her words were cruel daggers slicing away at her heart again and again. Jewels loved Will *sooooo* much but she couldn't love Sylae. Jewels missed Will *sooooo* much but she refused to spend time with Sylae. Jewels was so careful not to lie about how Will's body had died but she didn't take responsibility for it. Sylae felt more and more vindicated for her chosen course of action but she couldn't let it slip just yet. If Jewels had any forewarning she could no doubt prevent it and all would be lost to her tyranny.

... Heh, Jewels and tyranny were not two concepts that normally fit together. Truly Jewels as a tyrant was more gentle than Vergil as a regular Admin had been. Still, her control over the Refuge had to be broken. She had spoken rightly that Will's spirit would continue to protect the Refuge, even from Jewels herself.

The pyre lighting had been more difficult not to cringe at. Facing her last method of death and the monster from her nightmares as it leapt high in the sky brought on an involuntary tremble. Her hands turned to ice instinctively and she shoved them behind her back.

Sylae closed her eyes to the fire. *Poised and proud... poised and proud*. The fire was across the lake... too far away to reach her... it couldn't harm her... The mental mantra did its work. Sylae's hands stopped trembling and returned to normal and when she opened her eyes the fire she saw now held no more terror for her. Instead it backlit those gathered nicely silhouetting them in the growing darkness.

Sylae listened as people she didn't really know stood up to pay Will homage. It was nice to know that all of her work was appreciated. Sylae also listened as Iffy spoke. For the first time that day she stopped thinking about what she had lost with Jewels and started thinking about what she had lost with everyone else in the Refuge. She had planned a family with Jewels but she had forgotten the other family she had here. A tear rolled down her cheek as Iffy choked up. She would have to find a way to be considered his family once again, even if she told him the full truth.

Jewels waited for the following silence to go on for five minutes before stepping back to center stage. "Will left us with many memories. He also left us with the legacy of his Refuge and the responsibility to keep it open and safe. It was Will's wish that the job of ArchAdmin went to one

of his kin. I would like to introduce you to his choice as successor. She is a woman who I know to be equally as competent, equally as knowledgeable, and equally as capable of leading the Refuge. A woman that Will trusted explicitly with the running of the Refuge and a woman that I have come to know, love, and trust with my very life, Sylae Jiendra Corell." Jewels stepped aside sweeping an arm towards her to polite applause.

Sylae stepped to the center a little unnerved by Jewels' last statement. Had she meant it? If she had, why would she take over the Refuge and lock her out of the programming? She didn't have time to stew on it though, instead she had to give a speech she had only written a few hours ago. "Hello Refugees, I wanted to express my sincerest condolences at the loss of your ArchAdmin, Will. I, too, will miss him greatly for we were very close. I was, in fact, born of the same mother and on the same day as he. We shared our childhood together, grew up together, and grew to be over 2000 years old together."

Sylae took a moment of pause to let the crowds' assumptions sink in. Like Jewels she wanted to tell as few lies as possible while still concealing the truth. The only way to cleanly sever her relationship with Jewels was to let everyone believe that Will was dead and Sylae was someone else, but she didn't want to run into any problems with them having similar memories, personalities, or knowing something that only Will should.

"Though we haven't visited each other since he opened the Refuge we still communicated often. I could hardly believe some of the wild stories he would tell me about this place. He considered this Refuge his greatest accomplishment and the people here as his family..." She found Iffy in the crowd for this part wishing it could be true of Jewels, too, "...and any family of Will's by extension in my family also. I feel like I already know some of you from what he's told me and I look forward to getting to know you better in the days to come. Please feel free to talk to me about anything. I plan to run and protect the Refuge the way I know Will would. I will do everything in my power to provide a safe place for anyone who seeks one."

Sylae stepped back to indicate she was done and the crowd began a sincere applause of approval. While they still clapped, Jewels stepped forward again and handed her Will's staff making it official for the crowd. Sylae wanted them to know that she was just as powerful as Will so she held the staff out in front of her for a few seconds drawing power to the crystal at the top. She tapped it down on the platform twice before lifting it high over her head. A bright blue stream of energy shot out of it into the evening sky and exploded in a brilliant firework. The crowd gasped and murmured at the display then oohed and ahed when the lights of the firework came down to shower them all in twinkling glitter. Each spark that landed on a member caused that member to glow momentarily until the entire crowd shimmering as a humanoid firework.

Sylae regretted looking at Jewels' awed face when a spark came down to land on her. The glowing smile of joy almost broke her resolve. *Damn her!* She had to remind herself that Jewels' actions had brought this on and her reaction to Sylae's decision today would set the mood for tomorrow. If she submitted without question there would be no problem.

Sylae tapped her staff down again to get everyone's attention. "There is one more thing I would like to do before we eat today. I know some of you may not understand it but this is something that needs to be done." Sylae pushed some buttons on her RMM in front of them and gave her announcement. "I have just decommissioned Jewels. She is now a regular member just like you."

The voices that had just gasped in awe now gasped in surprise and anger and indignation as she had expected. Some members began voicing then objections bringing the noise to a considerable din.

Sylae regretted once again looking at Jewels' face. Replacing the earlier joy was shock and confusion and undeniable pain. Her arms wrapped around her middle as if she was trying to hold herself in but she did not argue her action.

One voice rang out louder than all the others. Vergil was on his feet, "How dare you!" He pushed his way forward as he talked. "You... you *liar*! How can you stand there and have the audacity to call us family and tell us you will run the Refuge the way Dubya would and then... do *this* to *his WIFE* in front of *EVERYONE*?!"

Sylae was a little unprepared. She had expected dissention but not with such vehemence. Other members had started making their way forwards, too, now. She noted Iffy, Saph, and Azuma with relief. They knew how unreasonable Vergil could be. They'd help keep things civil.

"I mean just look at her," Vergil raged on, "Look at what you've done to her with this public spectacle!"

She didn't want to but she couldn't help but glance again. Sylae didn't think Jewels was even aware of her brother's words with the pained far-off look on her pale face. She was trembling and looked so unsteady that a puff of wind could have blown her over. Sylae fought the urge to go hold her up but not for long.

Azuma reached the stage almost as soon as Vergil had. He ignored Sylae altogether running to Jewels' side. "Jewels. I'm here!" He wrapped his arms around her. *As if that should make it all better*, Sylae seethed. "Are you okay? What can I do?"

Jewels' attention snapped back to reality then. She held herself a little straighter despite the strain that was still evident. "Calm down," she whispered.

Meanwhile Vergil had taken a threatening stance between Sylae and Jewels. "Now I may not have had much love for Dubya. Deity knows we butted heads more than once, but the one thing I knew of him was that he trusted Jewels completely. Who the hell do you think you are taking away the position he trusted her with from almost the day she registered?"

With icy calm Sylae responded, "He trusted her because she had done nothing to break that trust."

Jewels' spoke out a little louder and a little clearer. "Everyone, please, calm down."

Vergil went on as if he hadn't heard her, "So... what?! And now she has?"

"Vergil!" Jewels' sharp reprimand finally got his attention. She articulated her next words slowly but with great command. "I need you to calm down." The color had returned to her face and her poise had returned to perfection. "Sylae is right to demote me."

Iffy and Saph had made it to the stage both alert and concerned. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Jewels made a mental decision and turned to address the crowd. She spoke into her RMM so that everyone would hear her clearly. "Please, refug, calm down and sit. This needn't be such a spectacle. I agree with Sylae. She is right to return me to a regular member status." The crowd

that had hushed to hear her words now gasped and murmured again. Jewels raised her hand for silence taking deep breaths before continuing. "I failed..." her normal poise faltered and her voice caught for the first time that evening. "I failed in my duties as Admin. I failed to protect Will from danger. I failed in my search to revive him. I failed the Refuge and I failed all of you. I accept Sylae's decision and willingly step down from leadership." The crowd was subdued with her admission. "Please, feel free to enjoy the feast. Eat, drink, and be merry!"

It took a few minutes but the refuge as a congregation got up and headed towards the food. While there were still some incredulous voices, laughter from others soon drowned them out. It was difficult to deny that Jewels had a way with the people. With her vulnerability she turned dissention to acceptance and with her confidence she turned the mood from subdued to festive. When she was satisfied that the crowd was on its way, she turned off her microphone and turned to those on the platform. "It wasn't the loss of my position that affected me. I understand why Sylae decided to do it. It was all of your intense emotions that got the better of me."

Many confused looks stared back at her. "And that means?" Iffy asked again.

"It's a long story but let's just say that I can feel when my friends are in distress. The sudden surge of emotion from all of you hit me pretty hard. I wasn't prepared for it."

"I see," Iffy responded not really looking like he saw it at all. "Will we get the long story some time, then?"

"Sure, but not tonight. I need to rest." She turned to Sylae, "Can you handle the rest of the festivities on your own? Today has been so draining. I need to visit Nana."

Sylae nodded, "Of course, Jewels, but... I need one more thing before you go." Jewels waited expectantly. "I... I need your ring."

This time the look on Jewels' face broke Sylae's heart. *Damn her to oblivion...* Everyone else held their breath unsure of how to respond. They all waited on Jewels who's expression was changing from unbelieving to horrified to enraged before ending on stubborn resolve. Her voice was barely above a whisper but it was more severe than Sylae had ever heard it, "No."

The foreboding finality in her voice should have stopped Sylae but it had to be done and there would be no better time than when there were others to help convince her that it was necessary. She tried to remain calm instead of being defensive. This called for quiet logic. "Jewels, Will made it with the power of the Refuge core itself. It's just as powerful as his staff and can bypass some of the Refuge security blocks. I need you to give it up."

"No!" She answered with quick vehemence. "You can't have my wedding ring! How could you ask me for such a thing? ...how could you?" Her voice trailed off in accusing betrayal. Then she was talking to her as if no one else was there. "It may mean *nothing* to you, the *vows* we took at our wedding but it means *everything* to me!" Jewels was shaking again fists clenched. "Forever always on past the end." She articulated the quote by punctuating each word.

Sylae couldn't help but remember the inscription she had engraved on the ring also. *Ti mala'quo en ferran ji'miermen*, - 'My devotion will last for eternity'. And now she was breaking both vows by asking for it back, but this is what Jewels had wanted. Why was she being so difficult?

"This ring is all I have left of our marriage and I will wear it until the day I meet oblivion!" She finished with a look that dared Sylae to say any different.

Sylae was taken aback that Jewels would reveal her identity after working so hard to conceal it but none of the faces around them had included Sylae in with Jewels's 'we' and 'our'. Her relief was minimal though because the line in the sand had been drawn and those on stage had taken their sides. Vergil and Azuma flanked Jewels on either side while Iffy and Saph took up a similar stance on each side of her. The heated arguing had brought back some of the gathered refugi who crowded closer to hear what was going on.

Iffy, ever the diplomat, spoke up. "But Jewels, if it has as much power as Sylae says it does, how can she trust that you won't use it to undermine her?"

"If Sylae wishes me not to use it I will comply."

"But what if there's an emergency or you disagree with how Sylae handles something? In the heat of the moment you'll be tempted to use it. You may not even think about it and use it on instinct."

"To protect someone's life, sure. Would you rather I be helpless and them dead?"

"I would rather," Sylae answered for Iffy, "that you realize it's not your responsibility anymore and instead, take responsibility for killing Will."

Jewels stared daggers at her. If looks could kill she would have been immolated.

"What?!" Iffy asked. "Explain."

"It can't be true," Azuma huffed.

"More lies!" Vergil accused.

Sylae ignored all of them. "Do you deny it?" She looked only to Jewels. "Do you deny that you were directly and solely responsible for the explosion that vaporized Will's body?" When Jewels didn't answer she screamed it at her. "Do you?!"

She thought maybe Jewels would break as the tears started rolling down her face, but it stayed as stubborn as ever as she whispered, "No."

Iffy's demeanor stiffened while Azuma remained in disbelief, but Sylae could have sworn that Vergil looked proud of his sister. Knowing Vergil, it was probably true.

"Jewels, I need the ring," Sylae insisted.

Iffy tried another tactic. "I know there's sentimental value," he offered. "Couldn't we get you a replica that isn't infused with power?"

Jewels chuckled cruelly. "That would make it easy, wouldn't it? Just switch the rings... except there's one more thing Sylae hasn't mentioned... or maybe she's forgotten. Even if I wanted to take off my ring I couldn't. It's infused to my flesh straight through to the bone."

Sylae hadn't forgotten and was ready with the solution before the others could voice their concerns. "It will be simple enough to cut off your finger and then re-grow it with a healing spell."

Vergil growled, "You want to do what?!"

"Cut off Jewels' finger. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

"That's barbaric!" Vergil exclaimed. "Absolutely not!"

Even Iffy looked doubtful at this but returned attention to Jewels. "A few minutes of pain to settle all of this. What do you think?"

"I think," she laughed again, "that it would not be enough." She lifted her hand as proof. The copper tendrils entwined up and down her finger and extended to the back of her hand. Only now did Sylae really see the delicately decorative circulate that wrapped around her wrist for what it was. At first glance it had looked like a golden bracelet but now she saw that it was an extension of the ring.

Jewels was smiling in satisfaction. "It doesn't end there." She turned her arm over to reveal a vine of copper crawling up the tender underside. Azuma had taken her arm in one hand and began to trace his finger up along the line; from the small of her wrist to the crook of her elbow to an elaborate circulate on her forearm that Sylae had also mistaken as jewelry. All the way up her arm? Well an arm could be healed just as easily as a finger. It would take longer, of course, but it used the same method.

She was ready to say so but Azuma continued instead, "May I?"

"Please," Jewels purred, "I want Sylae to know exactly what she's asking." With that she turned her back to them and allowed Azuma to lift her hair. Sylae bit her lip in jealousy. He was obviously enjoying himself way too much. The vine continued up the back of her arm and under the sleeve of her dress. This Azuma pulled gently down revealing a pattern that had grown up her shoulder, down across her shoulder blade and to the back of her neck. Jewels' hair had always hidden most of this pattern but she turned again as Azuma infuriatingly traced the tiny chain that was Jewels' necklace down to the side of her neck before finally removing his hand.

What amazed Sylae the most was the shining pendant at the nape of her neck. It lay on top of her skin, an actual pendant. It was a teardrop shaped loop of shimmering gold as thick as the band of the ring and three inches long. Sylae had seen it before, had even commented on it. Jewels had been wearing it for over a month but now that she realized it was a part of the ring, she saw it in a whole new light.

"You never said..." she whispered to Jewels.

"I didn't think it mattered." Jewels whispered back.

"Well, that settles it," Vergil said in victory. "You're not cutting off her head. Jewels keeps the ring."

Only Sylae was now more scared than ever. The ring shouldn't have done that. Be connected to Jewels, yes, but not to grow and cover the rest of her body. It must be a side effect of her connection to the Refuge... and it might be dangerous. She didn't mean to let the fear seep into her voice but it came out anyway. "Jewels, it has to come off. Will didn't say anything about that. It's not supposed to be happening and I don't know what it will eventually do to you or the Refuge. You have to let me try to get it off," she finished in desperation.

"No." Jewels repeated as resolute as ever. "Even if it had only been my finger, the answer would still be no. I will not give up the only evidence I have that my husband ever loved me."

Sylae blanched. How could Jewels question Will's love? The insult was too deep to contain. "Your husband is dead!" she spat back.

Jewels set her with an earnest glare, "Not to me!"

Sylae blinked. Not dead? Jewels didn't consider her husband dead? Sylae couldn't make it compute with the way she had been acting. If she considered her husband still alive... if she considered Sylae still her husband... it just didn't make sense. Either way, though, the ring would have to come off. For the sake of the Refuge and for the sake of Jewels, she couldn't allow it to continue growing. "There's no telling what kind of danger it might pose – to your life or the lives of everyone else." She punched in some instructions on her RMM. "I'm sorry, Jewels, it has to be done."

Sylae stepped forward only to have both Vergil and Azuma step threateningly in her way. "You're not touching her!" Azuma yelled. Jewels staggered backwards, a pained look back on her face.

Iffy and Saph stepped up taking a defensive position in front of Sylae. "Don't you understand?" Iffy tried. "The ring is dangerous! It has to be destroyed before..."

"Not touching her!" Azuma shouted again sucker punching Iffy with all he had.

Saph howled in rage lunging at Azuma but Vergil caught her with a roundhouse to the face. It was Iffy's turn to howl in rage. He punched Azuma in the gut to get him off and threw an energy ball that nearly knocked Vergil off the stage.

More blows were dealt with fists, feet and magical fire flying, but Sylae saw only Jewels as she slumped to her knees. Her hands pressed in on each side of her head as she rocked back and forth. "Stop it," she whimpered, "Please stop."

They ignored her pleas and she started mumbling to herself. "Can't... won't listen... contain it... have to... Emergency Protocol 63." Jewels struggled to her feet looking around her in confusion. "Denied? ... can't be... try again... Emergency Protocol 63... 63... denied... ac... access de... denied." Jewels finally looked up and saw those around her. The eyes that found Sylae were wide with fear. "Denied... No..." Jewels backed away from them all down the steps of the platform and off to the northwest as fast as she could, but the Simplebots were waiting for her. Two of them clamped down on her arms and turned her around to drag her back to Sylae.

"No!" she screamed as she struggled to break free. "Let me go! I can't... can't keep it... no time... 63... denied!" The four fighting finally stopped long to take in her frantic ravings.

"Let her go, Sylae!" Vergil demanded.

"What's wrong with her now?" Saph asked.

Azuma jumped off the platform and drew Sentience. With two swift motions, the Simplebots arms had been severed from the rest of their bodies and fell to the ground leaving Jewels free. He tried to help her but she pushed him away and stumbled backwards. "Jewels, what's wrong?"

She pushed him again moving past him to look at Sylae. "Give me access!" she screamed. "Emergency Protocol 63, give me access!"

"What is Emergency Protocol 63?" Iffy asked. "Jewels, you're not making sense."

"Sy, please," her voice was shrill and desperate. "It's happening again... Don't let it happen again!"

"Let *what* happen?!" Saph asked in exasperation.

But Sylae saw the fire flare in her eyes and realized what Jewels was talking about. "Get away from her!" she yelled at Azuma. Who only stared at her defiantly.

"Azuma, please," Jewels echoed, "get away." He responded to her plea reluctantly but finally backed up.

Sylae needed information, quick. "How big?"

"100 feet? More?" Sylae cringed. Too big... it would reach most of the feast from here. They couldn't run fast enough.

"Time left?"

"I don't know." Jewels whimpered. "Could be seconds..." she breathed.

Sylae cringed again punching things into her RMM. "Emergency Protocol..."

"63," Jewels finished looking hopeful.

"I... I can't find it. Where is it?" When Jewels didn't respond Sylae asked again louder, "Where?!" but when she saw the stricken look on Jewels' face she knew it was too late. In her own vindictiveness to have a public show of Jewels' submission she had doomed them all. Iffy, Saph, Vergil and Azuma looked on in confusion not realizing the danger that stood before them. Not realizing there was no escape. She saw Jewels' last strength of will snap as the face from her nightmares became living flame in front of them all.

Affected Butterfly

By Jewels - Aug 28 2012

Calm and confident... calm and confident... Jewels had the mental mantra running on automatic loop until the end of the event to remind her how everyone else needed to see her. *Calm and confident... calm and confident...* By the end of her speech, though, Nio could tell she was exhausted.

Jewels, that was beautiful. Wish I could stand up there and say a few words of my own.

Heh, you go right ahead. I'll keep the crowd waiting till you get here.

He chuckled at her mental dare, *Don't tempt me. I know it would set back a lot of our plans if any of them knew I worked tirelessly behind the scenes on them. Speaking of... He is ready.*

Jewels drew a blank for a few moments before Nio sent her a mental picture of Stillborn. *Ah, good... Yes, that's good.*

He worried again for her condition. *Jewels, you really need to rest. You didn't spend near enough time with Nana this afternoon and I can tell you are wearing thin. How can you stand being up there without a care in the world on your face when you are so torn up on the inside?*

She mentally shrugged, *I don't know. Practice, I suppose. I've been doing it since before I created you. It's all you've ever known me to do. Why would you wonder how I do it now?*

Yes, since his first breath she had been struggling with many things but never let it show to anyone but him. *Because I don't think I could do it and from what I know of the other Ni...* He froze mid-thought caught in his uncertainty. His predecessor had always been an unspoken taboo topic that he had just breeched. He must be getting tired himself.

Her reaction was gentle, though, if a little curious. *It's all right. You can talk about him with me. I don't know why you ever thought you couldn't.*

Explaining that, though, would take most of a day. He wasn't about to try now. *It's just... I don't want to add...* he stuttered trying to form an answer she would accept. *Maybe another time, when you are better rested.*

Jewels didn't argue. Iffy was just finishing his say and she had noted Sylae's expression. Nio felt her emphasize with her Chosen. The Chosen who chose to be un-chosen though Jewels didn't consider it like that. Nio felt less compassion. Sylae had wanted this... the declaration of Will's death. In doing so she had severed her relationships with everyone and had to start over. Good friendships may be hard to come by, but she gave them up willingly and Nio did not pity her the choice.

Jewels mentally started a Refuge timer to go off when five minutes was up. *That should be long enough for more comments.* Then she shifted on her feet restlessly, Nio felt the weariness of the day begging her to sit down. Fire fever or no, though, she was stubborn enough to see it through... at least until the feast began.

Why don't you just cure yourself? His question startled her and he felt her tense up. *Sorry... sorry, forget it. Not important.*

No, it's okay. It was just a bit... random.

Well... It's just that... before you created me when the... other Nioca was turned into a bot, you remembered all of the things Nana had suppressed in both your memories and his.

Yes, you are right. I do have a devious tree.

*And Nioca overheard Jasmine say that Nana thought Nioca was the *only* cure for your fire fever...* He trailed off without re-asking his original question.

Yes, but neither he nor I know what that ultimately means or what would happen to him afterwards and Nana isn't telling me either. That can only mean that I wouldn't approve of it. I doubt even she could predict what severing his link to the Refuge would do. Besides, Nioca is

not himself right now. I do not want to ask him to do anything until I know he has the ability to decide for himself... in his right mind.

Nio hesitated again. There was one question... one assumption he had always had but insecurity had kept him from bringing it up. I... I though... I mean... I always thought that you had created me to be your cure.

Jewels hesitated herself with trepidation on the subject. Nio instantly wished he hadn't mentioned it. The timer going off was a relief, but she had already decided to face it today. Hold that thought, be right back.

In her mind she pulled up the file where she recorded her introduction and set it to scroll like a teleprompter in her head. Nio was amazed at the way she utilized the Refuge to her advantage. The smoothness in her decisions and transitions made it seem like she had done it all her life. The crowd didn't clap very enthusiastically leaving her a bit disappointed but they *had* just listened to Will's eulogy. Sylae stepped forward accepting her 'new' position with a melodious voice. Jewels set the audio to record for later dictation and turned her focus on Nio again.

Her comments were gentle and straightforward. You're right... when I created you I was looking for a cure for me as much as a cure for Nioca. I... I knew the other Nioca would never agree to whatever Nana had in mind anyway and I thought maybe you might.

A deep breath to get to the heart of the matter... Then why have you never asked it of me?

He felt the fear churn under the surface of her projected calm. For much of the same reasons that I won't ask the other Nioca to. I have no idea what will happen to you. ...You might not come back out again.

I would do it anyway...

Jewels had known he would. He sensed the confirmation in her answering imagery. From the moment he first smiled at her she had known he would, but touching his mind and feeling the vibrant joy of life within him had forbidden her to ever ask. No, it's too dangerous. It might not even work considering you're more a clone of Nioca than Nioca himself.

He pushed her further making her face the whole picture. There may be no danger at all and we won't know unless we try.

I'm not willing to take that risk.

And there was the ultimate barb. It wasn't her risk to take. I have free will, Jewels. I can decide if I want to take the risk or not.

No! it was more shrill and forceful than she had ever addressed him before giving him pause. I... I can't. I just can't lose you, too. I couldn't bear it. Not now, please... not now.

He had known before he brought it up, her reason for not using him. It was in her nature... her MO to put everyone else's welfare above her own. She could not see him as the tool she had created him to be but he had to make her face this self-neglect. His thought was gentle but insistent, Then when?

Jewels didn't want to answer. She didn't want to even think about it. As long as she could still function she wouldn't take the risk. With the refuge safeties in place she didn't even see it as a need right now.

He chided her with his tone, *Jewels... when?*

Only if no other option remains. They both knew that Jewels becoming a permanent dryad was one of those options and Jewels would take it before letting him risk his life.

If you choose that option, I choose to come to your tree while Nana keeps you unawares.

We'll just have to find something else then won't we?

Plan C? he asked jokingly.

Plan C, she laughed back.

The crowd was applauding in earnest now. Sylae was done and had earned sufficient respect from the looks of it. Jewels remembered to bring her Will's staff and watched in awe at her little light show. When the spark landed on her nose, Nio felt the surge of magical power envelop her with its glow. In the moment she saw flashes of her best memories with Will. A little self-conscious, Nio couldn't help but watch them with her.

Sharing a mud bath with him, rescuing him from the VRP dungeon, being serenaded in the lounge, working on the Refuge with him, dancing at their wedding reception... In the vision he held her close as they swayed to the pan flute and drums. He twirled her around and dipped her back almost losing his balance. They both laughed on the way up. He held her hands close and kissed her fingers stroking the ring he had just placed on her hand. She could almost hear the words he whispered to her then. "Ti mala'quo en ferran ji'miermen. I made you a ring you could never take off, not to trap you here with me but to give you full permission... nay responsibility to sit me down and set me straight if I EVER give you the slightest reason to want to take it off."

What a beautifully fitting gift; to be reminded of their best moments together and a promise that Jewels yet cherished. This had been before Nio's time... before she had conceived him, per say. The moment touched a lingering longing they both shared... a longing he was sure every sentient being shared. The need to feel safe, secure, wanted and loved no matter what might happen.

Nio did his best not to ruin the moment with his observance that circumstances had still defeated Will's wedding hope and promise. Both of them had decided in their own ways and for their own reasons that the marriage would not survive these circumstances and he found it incredibly sad. That was a whole 'nother random discussion that would be best left until... a time he was not ready to think about yet.

Suddenly all of the equipment in the lab started either flashing and beeping or shutting down. He tuned back into her senses. She was listening to Sylae make an unexpected announcement. *Um... Jewels?*

Yeah?

I think we have a problem...

She was about to ask what it was when Sylae spoke up. "I have just decommissioned Jewels. She is now a regular member just like you." Jewels was surprised but not overly concerned. She took

the news with her calm and confident manner even though Nio had noted that the mantra loop had stopped.

The crowd, on the other hand, seemed to get all riled up because of it. Nio himself was becoming quite anxious as he moved from machine to machine checking errors, heeding warnings, and attempting reboots. He stepped out of the lab for a moment to escape the ringing alarms when he realized that he wasn't the only one checking errors, heeding warnings, and attempting reboots. His predecessor had the whole of the Refuge on his mind and it was in chaos. If that weren't enough, he noticed the lights of the hallway flickering wildly. ...this was not good. This was not good at all.

Jewels was feeling the effects of the chaos herself. *What's going on?*

Well, you want the bad news or the really bad news?

She pulled her arms around herself against the pain and cringed. *I don't care, just tell me what's happening!*

Right, sorry, well for starters, as far as I can tell we just got shut out of the database. All of the procedures you set up to run automatically are shutting down because you no longer have the authority needed to run them.

That shouldn't affect me, though, should it?

Most of them, no, but some of them were in place to keep your... illness in check. Emotion regulators, event handlers, surprise suppression... that sort of thing.

Okay... but why does it hurt so much?

*That would be the *other* bad news. The soul orbs are churning like crazy. The other refugees are not taking the news very well. Normally the regulators would buffer something like this but... now? I think you'll have to do it manually.*

Who?

He walked around the chandelier noting the agitated orbs. I see... Azuma, Vergil, and Wi... er, Sylae. Iffy to a lesser extent and... Nio let his thought trail off.

And who? Tell me.

Sorry, I thought you had already noticed... It's Nioca... the other Nioca. He's glitching or something. The procedures you set up for him and the rest of the Refuge have all stopped. He keeps trying to start them back up.

I... I didn't notice. I can't hear him at all... I think we've been cut off. Can you do anything for him?

I'll try. You work on the people there.

Nio focused on the machinery in front of him. First things first... shutting off these darn alarms. He set about cataloguing and disabling each warning message. Well, rather he unplugged them seeing how he no longer had access to the coding of the procedures. When it came down to it all he had left was a regular RMM and a link to the mind of Nioca. A frustrating link that never

quieted or slowed down. Nio tried giving him new orders, shouting at him, telling him to stop, but Nio wasn't sure if he even understood him.

Jewels sent him an update. **I think I have things under control over here. How are you doing?**

Not so good. Without access to the database, I can't do anything directly or see what he's doing to it if anything. I can only see what's on the surface and he's in overdrive. I can hardly understand what he's thinking. It's too fast. He won't respond to my instructions either.

Keep trying. I have to work on the crowd control here.

Nio kept at it with no luck but at least Jewels was feeling better. Not nearly as good as she should be, but better. **That was close Jewels... too close. Doctor's orders, you need to get to Nana until you're strong enough to sort this out.**

What about Nioca? She was worried maybe more by the fact she couldn't see for herself.

Still working on that, he didn't want her worrying about it though. If she knew the extent of it, she'd insist on taking care of him first, **but I'll figure something out. And you need rest before you can help me.** That she put up no argument proved that she was feeling her own weakness.

She was about to heed his advice when the gauntlet fell. After sharing Jewels' wedding memories, Sylae's final demand seemed incredibly cruel and apparently so did Jewels. Nio reeled with her swirl of emotion. Her condition wavered dangerously but he was afraid to tell her to calm down. Firstly, she had every right to be upset, and second he had just as good a chance at making it worse. So instead he stood back and waited... and waited...

He monitored things as best he could but there was little he could do from here. He thought about going to get her but the added shock to those around her would not be good if the already flickering soul orbs were any indication.

He set to pacing the hallway holding his virtually useless RMM. After being free to do almost anything, this helplessness was excruciating. It got worse the more the situation escalated until he could tell she had reached her breaking point. Then it got desperate. **Jewels, you have to get them to quit fighting now!**

She was trembling and trying so hard to keep herself together that she answered him out loud. "Can't... won't listen..."

Jewels, the fire fever is going to erupt if they don't stop!

"Contain it... have to..."

You can't hold it in, and I can only help you so much.

"Emergency Protocol 63," she spoke as if to address the Refuge expecting the forcefield she had set up to encase her where she stood, but nothing happened. Nothing except an error message scrolling across her mind that she didn't seem to notice.

The request has been denied, Jewels.

"Denied? Can't be..."

Look for yourself. It didn't work.

"Try again... Emergency Protocol 63... 63..." She glitched robotically much like Nioca did trying to communicate with a Refuge that wouldn't answer back. The value returned was the same as before. "Denied... ac... access de... denied." She read the words out loud, skipping like a scratched CD but comprehension took a little longer to set in. When it finally did, her horror hit him hard. "Denied... No..."

When she started running they both had hope she could get far enough away before she succumbed, but the mental agony from the bots that drug her back paralyzed him in despair. There wasn't enough time left. She hadn't enough strength left. He lent her his own trying to buy every second but they would die regardless.

Jewels had lost all sense of the outside world. All she knew is that she had to hold herself in. She could see nothing but the fire behind her eyes... hear nothing but its raging roar... feel nothing but the heat that steadily increased. She was a rubber band being stretched beyond its limits... a balloon filled with too much air... a volcano building pressure to strain against a rocky cap, and she was about to blow.

Her planning for naught, her efforts in vain; Emergency Protocol 63 was unreachable. Her access was denied. In big red flashing letters, her access was denied. Sylae was going to grant her access... but too late, she already knew...

It was too late.

What she had been holding in ripped her open on its way out. Too late... too late... She welcomed the intense heat that burned beyond normal fire. She welcomed the punishing pain that would never be severe enough to pay for the lives she was taking now. She welcomed the urge to scream out her anguish... there would be no one left to hear it anyway...

Her Infected, But Fly

By Jewels - Sep 4 2012

Azuma was indignant... no he was incensed. Iffy listened to his outburst with guarded calmness. "This is outrageous! W-dueck's twin sister or no – which I'm not at all sure I believe, he's never said anything about a sister before. If they were as close as she says they were, he would have mentioned her at least once... She has no right! No right I tell you!"

"I don't like it any more than you but she *does* have the right. Both w-dueck and Jewels gave it to her." In truth Iffy felt closer to how Azuma sounded but he was determined to get the whole story before making any decisions. Jewels had said she trusted Sylae, and w-dueck wouldn't have left her in control if he hadn't; which likely meant she had a good reason for taking away Jewels' adminship. Iffy intended to find out what that reason was.

Vergil was, of course, causing a scene over the insult. Azuma, on the other hand, seemed more concerned about Jewels herself. "She's gone as pale as the moon, she's so upset... I'm going up there." He pushed through the row of chairs and started sprinting as soon as he got cleared to an aisle. Iffy followed at a more dignified pace.

What's the big deal anyway? So she got fired, so what? Saph was really more irritated that she had to walk in front of all these people in her ridiculous red dress than she was that there was finally something interesting going on.

It's not that she got fired. It's how she got fired and when and by who.

So the big deal is she got fired in front of the whole Refuge by someone we barely know two minutes after she was given the authority to do so?

Pretty much. It doesn't help that we just 'buried' w-dueck either. Giving his wife the axe doesn't seem very honoring.

So what are you going to do about it? Iffy gave her an inward smile. As if she had to ask to know what was on his mind... though the direct mental stimulation was always a welcome one.

Well, for starters I'm going to make sure Vergil doesn't kill the last administrator we have left.

By the time they got to the platform, Jewels was looking a lot better. With as much dignity as she could muster, she validated Iffy's instinct to get the whole story first. "Sylae is right to demote me."

"What do you mean?" he asked, wanting more than just Jewels' calm acceptance of her demotion. She addressed the crowd to answer him. She admitted failure in the duties assigned to her and publically accepted Sylae's decision... but she didn't really answer his question. "...failed to protect Will...". That seemed to be at the heart of it though she didn't elaborate. Why both she and Sylae now considered it her responsibility to keep w-dueck safe, though, was another question entirely. It's not like it was the first time his life had been in danger. Some elemental marriage custom? Or maybe she was just too sad to do the work without him.

Once most of the crowd had dispersed, she turned to the more concerned faces of Vergil and Azuma. "It wasn't the loss of my position that affected me. I understand why Sylae decided to do it. It was all of your intense emotions that got the better of me."

"And that means?" Iffy asked again. She gave another vague explanation that left more questions

than answers... but Iffy made sure she knew he expected a better explanation. If not now in front of everyone, then over coffee in a private lounge meeting room.

He thought, for a moment, that it was over. [We came all the way up here for this? Where's the fireworks?](#)Saph complained.

And then Sylae asked Jewels for something else... something she wasn't quite so willing to give up. "I... I need your ring."

Iffy watched Jewels closely, as did the others thankfully; no need to have their emotions overwhelm her again. By the time she got to her answer it was clear Sylae wouldn't like it. [There's your fireworks...](#)

Saph gave an inner smirk and leaned back to take in the show. Jewels obviously cherished her wedding ring. He found it endearing to see her so fervent to keep it on this the day she publically said good bye to her husband. It meant she hadn't actually said good bye in her heart. The mourning process was not done, Iffy could respect that.

Sylae, on the other hand had many good points. It helped that she approached the problem with logic and calm words. Jewels seemed to be more upset by the fact that it was Sylae doing the asking, though. Being family, she must be mourning as much for w-dueck as Jewels was. It also seemed like the two had a history... perhaps from the four months Jewels tried to revive him. Sylae had known how much the ring meant to her. Or at least, Jewels thought that she should.

Iffy added to the logic of the conversation and tried to help Jewels see her reasoning without success. Sylae started getting impatient, then. Her tone was less understanding and more accusing. Her words were less logical and more hurtful. And Iffy didn't want to believe them. Jewels killed w-dueck? ...she had said she failed to protect him but... killed him?

Sylae became more adamant in the face of everyone's disbelief and Jewels admitted it. "...directly and solely responsible..." Jewels had killed Will. It changed the way Iffy saw Sylae's demand. This is how Jewels had failed the Refuge and this is what gave Sylae the right to take away her adminship. This is why Sylae thought Jewels must surrender her precious wedding ring, and now Iffy completely agreed with her. In his dealings with w-dueck, he thought he would agree, too.

Iffy tried another tactic. What about a different ring? Iffy and Saph both gaped at how the ring had extended itself over her flesh. The thought of snake like tendrils boring into his own flesh caused him to visibly shudder. Sylae trembled herself at the revelation, more in fear it seemed. The whole situation was one big mess that left Iffy feeling disconnected. He didn't *want* to pay attention anymore.

You know what I think? Saph waited patiently for his mental answer.

Iffy did know what she was thinking and it was nothing profound, but he indulged her anyway. What do you think?

I think she caused the explosion.

I know... she just admitted she did.

I think SHE WAS the explosion! Iffy had seen this thought, too, but he had considered it so unlikely that he hadn't given it any recognition. Again, though, he gave a direct thought to placate Saph.

What? That's ridiculous. What do you mean?

Just think about it for a minute. She's part fire elemental...

Yeah.

Apart from the current situation, she's been acting like she's happy most the time, right?

For the most part. So?

In the time since we got here she's had her baby stolen, genetically altered, and enslaved by Nalyd. She's been through a war, seen w-dueck die, and fought another war to bring him back and marry him only to lose him again, this time for good. Let's not forget being humiliated on her wedding night and blaming it on Nioca...

...who suffered no ill will even though she raced out of the lounge after him. She's been through a lot and usually takes the high road. What's your point if not to prove yourself wrong?

No one can be happy all the time. At some point all that bottled up emotion has to come out and... KA-BOOM!!

I think you're reaching. There's no way Jewels would 'blow up' at Will. She'd never do anything to harm him on purpose.

Who said she had a choice? She called it an accident in her eulogy.

I don't believe it. A mechanical error, maybe. But Jewels as the actual murder weapon? It's not possible...

Are you forgetting what happened when she lost her emotion? When all she had left was anger?

She tried to kill Nioca in revenge, I'll grant you that, but it doesn't prove anything. She's been perfectly pleasant since then.

Then where is he?

That gave Iffy pause. Not that he thought Jewels had done anything to him, but in this chaos it wasn't like Nioca to not be part of the action. If he hadn't been in the middle of trying to follow two conversations, Iffy'd check his RMM, but he had to focus on the here and now, though. Jewels would not be swayed with logic and things were escalating. He noted how Jewels staggered back when Azuma and Vergil surged forward. *Come on. We have to protect Sylae before they rip her apart.*

I bet you she could handle her own if she had to. She has the air of a strong minded woman to me.

Oh, and you would know...

I would. ...look at them both, she indicated Vergil and Azuma. *They both look crazy angry.*

And Jewels looks crazy sick. I expect it from Vergil... well not protecting Jewels but the anger. Azuma, though, I've never seen so... so... unreasonable. He should be able to see things from the bigger picture... if he'd listen for just a moment.

Iffy tried once again, as calmly as he could but before his sentence was done he was staggering back from a stiff uppercut to the chin. Reason fell away as pain and Saph's cry of rage filled his ears and mind. Too quickly her new pain joined his and they were one in rage. Survival mode kicked in with all else forgotten. *How dare they?* The pair fought back against this nuisance. *Insignificant, arrogant, pests...* they had no idea what real power was or the consequences of its misuse. If he had his soul box open he could squish them with a thought. Part of him reveled at that thought... Saph, she was all survival and impulse and impatience with the beings that now lashed out in their ignorant emotion. Why not just sweep them out of the way and be done with it? But a bigger part of him, the dominant part... was a man that never would... not again... not ever again against family.

Saph shoved Vergil away from her – he wasn't really fighting her anymore anyway, distracted by something else. **But... you have to. If it's your life or theirs you have to!** She wiped her bloody nose on her dress, for once glad of its color.

I don't... I won't. He hadn't even been thinking about his kin, but now that Saph mentioned them he realized it was true. He didn't want to kill any of them... not for revenge or for his own survival.

So you're just going to let them kill you? Would... would you let them kill me, too?

Iffy's soul rejected the thought. No will to kill for his own life, but for Saph... if she were in danger? Hadn't he already fought against Azuma and Vergil because they had hurt her? Out of rage for her pain? But something else was happening that needed his attention more than answering these questions. He came back to reality, back to the moment at hand... and everyone looked either concerned and confused or in complete consternation.

Jewels was screaming as SimpleBots drug her back towards them. Azuma had leapt down from the stage to help her but she shoved him away stumbling.

She pushed him again moving past him to look at Sylae. "Give me access!" she screamed. "Emergency Protocol 63, give me access!"

"What is Emergency Protocol 63?" Iffy asked. "Jewels, you're not making sense."

"Sy, please," her voice was shrill and desperate. "It's happening again... Don't let it happen again!"

"Let *what* happen?!" Saph asked in exasperation, but then she saw it. The fiery fear in Jewels' eyes. **Iffy... "Don't let IT happen again!" IT! She's going to explode!** Iffy still wasn't convinced but what if...?

"How big?" Sylae asked.

"100 feet? More?" Jewels answered.

100 foot wide fireball? Iffy, she'll wipe out the whole refuge! Vaporize everyone!

Quiet Saph! I'm trying to think. There's gotta be another explanation...

"Time left?" Sylae asked.

"Could be seconds..."

Iffy barely heard the words from Jewels. If only he had time to think it through... but he didn't.

Look at them, Iffy! Look at their fear! Emergency Protocol 63 must have been Jewels' way to stop another explosion but Sylae cut off her access when she took away her adminship. She's going to explode any second now! She's going to kill us all! Iffy you *have* to do something!

Sylae's voice was shrill. "I... I can't find it. Where is it?" When Jewels didn't respond Sylae asked again louder, "Where?!" But Jewels didn't answer. Iffy didn't think she could.

Do what? With horror he realized Saph had been right. Jewels had been the explosion and it was happening again. She was helpless to stop herself and Sylae's face confirmed it. It was already too late.

Do something!! Saph screamed in his head. There was no time left to question or hesitate. He reached inside himself and threw open his soul box. He drew out all the power into his hands, reached out with it as an extension of his limbs and clamped it down around Jewels just as she erupted in flame. A keening wail of anguish came from the center of his circle of energy shared by his own cry of pain. Her fire seared his flesh as if he actually held her in his palms.

Get rid of her! came Saph's mental command. Without questioning the consequences of it he responded by picking Jewels up and flinging her away from the people as hard as he could. He let go of his energy extension and fell to his knees gingerly holding his hands palms up. They were severely burned down to the blackened bone of his fingers, raw flesh oozing around the edges.

He barely noticed how the gathered refugees who had come to see what all the yelling was about, now screamed as they ran from the platform. He barely registered that Azuma and Vergil had only spared a moment with jaw dropped before they ran to the north where he had thrown her. He barely perceived the smoking hole high in the side of the Administration Tower where she had hit it. He had barely the conscience to care. Saph slumped down next to him. With great effort she gathered the energy he had released and put it back into his soul box closing the lid up tight. *I bet you every kin we have felt that one...*

I had to use it all... didn't know what to expect.

Not saying you shouldn't have, just want you to be prepared.

Sylae had stepped in front of him kneeling down to his level. "Wow... I... I don't know what to say. Didn't know you could do that."

"Heh," he chuckled despite the pain, "It's not something I like to advertise. The, uh, family tends to get jealous." He was grateful for the nod of understanding. Maybe w-dueck *had* told her about everyone. "Now, if I could manage just a simple healing spell..."

"Here, let me, please. It's the least I can do after you saved all of our lives. I could get your nose, too Saph. It looks like it might be broken." Saph was a little wary but still as grateful for the offer as Iffy was at the moment. With that last strain, he didn't want to have to concentrate on anything. After they nodded their assent, Sylae began a simple chant holding one hand over his and one hand in front of Saph's face. They closed their eyes against the bright white light that poured from her palms. In some ways the pain sharpened as muscle tissue knit back together and nerve endings were rebuilt but it lasted only a few minutes.

He flexed his fingers when she was done and admired the handiwork while Saph wriggled her nose. "Good as new," he commented. "Thank you."

"No, thank *you*!" Sylae insisted. "I made such a mess of things. I know I did. Everyone almost died and it was my fault." She looked close to tears glancing between the people to the south and the Tower to the north.

"Don't blame yourself. There's no way you could have predicted this."

She bit her lip and shook her head at his comfort. "Jewels had no way of predicting that she would kill Will. Still I blamed her for it, held her accountable, and expected her to take responsibility. Should I do no less for myself?"

"You didn't turn into a raging fireball of death," Saph offered, "Jewels did."

"But she wouldn't have if I hadn't taken away her adminship in public. She wouldn't have if I hadn't insisted she give me her ring tonight. She wouldn't have if I had just talked with her about it. She told me that she would make sure it never happened again, but I never asked her how she planned to do it. I took away her solution. That's my fault, not hers. I... I didn't even realize how fragile she was... she never let it show. *Damn her*." The last words were a hoarse whisper Iffy didn't think she realized she had said out loud.

Sylae wiped her eyes in embarrassment. "Stupid emotions," she mumbled. "Don't think I'll ever get a handle on them."

"Don't worry about it. Better than having none." Sylae raised her eyebrow at Saph's comment but said nothing. [What? What's that look for?](#)

[Maybe she wonders how you'd know that.](#) Iffy couldn't help but smile. When Saph sent him her mental huff, he couldn't help but chuckle.

Sylae watched the silent exchange with mild curiosity before getting up. She turned towards the Administration Tower and pulled out her RMM. She punched in some buttons and frowned before hitting it on its side several times. Then she swore several times, too.

Iffy and Saph stood up behind her, "What seems to be the problem?"

"I'm still locked out of the database, that's what the problem is. I thought... I thought maybe Jewels had done it but... removing her authority should have reset the database controls to me by default. I just don't know what's wrong with it and..." she left the statement hanging seeming unsure if she should continue.

Iffy didn't push her, just waited for her to decide. She turned back towards him giving him an earnest glance. "Iffy, I want to ask you something."

"Go right ahead."

"Actually, I want to ask you a lot of things... get to know you better. It's something Will wanted to do but never got around to finding the time for. But most of that can wait. What I want to know now is, why did you support me when things with Jewels got heated, er, I mean when we started arguing?"

"Simple enough. W-dueck trusted his leadership to you. I trusted w-dueck. What you said was logical while the other three were letting their – What did you call them? – "Stupid emotions" lead their thinking."

Sylae smiled in satisfaction. "Will trusted you, too. Because of that, I have a second question to ask you. Will you be an Administrator with me? "

Nalyd thought they'd never leave. Iffy and Saph and the new ArchAdmin walked off towards the AdminTower together. Or should he say Saph and the new ArchAdmin and the new Admin? He was thoroughly disgusted that Iffy, who had not been anywhere near the Refuge in the last four

months, now got a promotion on his first day back while Nalyd, dutiful to a fault, never straying for more than a day, had not been even considered in the least.

So what if he just happened to save the Refuge? It still was not fair and Nalyd didn't like it one bit.

Still at least they had left. Nalyd hoped he could find what he needed. He clambered up the platform stairs and crawled around on his hands and knees. There had to be some up here somewhere... AHA! Nalyd rubbed a tissue on the floor and scurried back to his Geneforge lab as fast as his little legs could carry him. He *would* get the answers to his questions . At least he was saved the trouble of making Iffy bleed himself.

Just Breathe

By Jewels - Sep 10 2012

INTRUDER ALERT! INTRUDER ALERT! UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS ON FLOOR 13. CONTAINMENT PROCEDURE FAILURE. FORCEFIELD FREQUENCY ALTERED BY UNAUTHORIZED USER. WARNING: STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY DAMAGED! DEPLOY REPAIR TEAM IMMEDIATELY. ERROR: REPAIR TEAM DEPLYMENT PROCEDURE EDITED BY UNAUTHORIZED AUTHOR. ACTION CANCELLED. INTRUDER ALERT! INTRUDER ALERT! UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS ON FLOOR 13.

The warnings and error messages in Nioca's head didn't end and it seemed every solution he attempted was also blocked. His heart rate stayed around 150bpm and his breathing was erratic from the exertion. Sweat poured down his face and soaked the back of his robes. He knew his body needed to rest but his priority was to the security of the Refuge and sorting out its chaos. He would have to do things manually.

Floor 13 was used mostly for storing deactivated SimpleBots and SimpleBot parts. When Nioca reached the floor and opened the door a wave of heat and smoke poured out over him. There was no fire but once the smoke cleared he could see one wall was charred black opposite a gaping hole to the outside.

Nioca entered the room and took stock of the intruder who lay on the floor in the middle of the blackness. If it hadn't been for the Refuge Who's Online and Status markers she would have been unrecognizable and he'd have thought her dead. Jewels lay on her side with her back against the wall. Her flesh from head to toe was covered in third degree burns.

He sat on the sooty floor next to her and monitored her status. There was little he needed to do to restrain her. The only movement she made was from her chest rising and falling in shallow breaths. But the warnings in his head were insistent that the security risk be neutralized. He created a simple forcefield between them and the door effectively sealing the threat off from the rest of the tower.

One warning ceased but hundreds remained. The cause of them all lay here barely alive. He took no time to wonder why she lay there or how she got there. He didn't have the capacity to think about bettering the current situation by healing her. Indeed the part of him that would have healed her recognized that an attempt now would likely overload his already overwhelmed state and leave them both worse off. Instead he did what he knew he could manage and waited by her side.

So peaceful, so restive... the darkness held her in a tight cocoon, but someone called her name; urgently they called her. She didn't want to wake up. She didn't want to remember... whatever it was she knew it was horrible. She wanted to stay here in the darkness where the memory stayed forgotten.

Jewels! Jewels! Wake up, Jewels! The voice would not remain silent and a groggy consciousness began to come back to her. The knowledge of the dead came back to her.

What do you want of me? Her thought was one of defeat, one of utter hopelessness, one that held no reason to do anything but what she was told to do.

Jewels, open your eyes! Please, Jewels, wake up! The voice was desperate, on the verge of panic. She knew the voice needed her.

She didn't want to open her eyes... she didn't want to see the dead, but if she was needed... she no longer had the right to refuse. The world wavered when she first opened them. Smoke rose around her and she suddenly noticed the acrid smell as it filled her nostrils. Burnt... everything was burnt... she breathed in the smell of burnt dead flesh and gagged. The movement set her face on fire anew and a moan escaped her lips.

Then he was there, his face a foot from hers. Hollow eyes plagued with too much concern stared at her. **Jewels, say something!** The voice was insistent so despite the pain she obeyed.

"Whas wong?" The words slurred from between her teeth as she tried not to move her lips. The

sound of it seemed very far away, as did the response. She focused on it trying to understand it. Refuge database codes, emergency protocols, "access denied"... it was a never ending stream of technical jargon. The voice was hoarse and hardly took a breath. It rose in pitch and volume becoming almost painful. "Stop!" she cringed as the pronounced 'p' felt like it ripped her lip apart. Mercifully he did stop. She saw relief flood his eyes as if an impossible burden had been lifted. He didn't quite smile from it but the tension that lifted as muscles relaxed set an aura of peace around him.

Wow... how did you do that? The face remained still but the voice rang clearly in her mind. For the first time she realized that they did not belong to the same person.

I... I don't know. Is... that good?

Good? It's great! I don't think his heart could have gone on like that much longer. Only... The voice hesitated and a feeling of concern washed over her. Does he look blue to you?

She focused on the face once again as it still stared at her. It was relaxed and still... too still. He had stopped more than just talking. He had stopped *everything*! "Breathe!" she winced again at the pronounced 'b' but was relieved when the air stirred against her face. It both cooled and burned against her skin. It seemed the command also restored his capacity to move as he blinked and sat back. It allowed her to see more of her surroundings. They were in a cramped room filled with things of metal glinting from the light hung above her. A large window in front of her reflected the black of night outside. Doing her best to pronounce with only her tongue she managed a question. "Where are we?"

"Administration Tower: Floor 13: SimpleBot storage."

As a protective reflex she thought her next question instead of trying to speak again. How did I get here?

I don't know... I blacked out about the same time you did. He hesitated shuddering at the memory. ...Jewels... the pain... She closed her eyes recoiling against the memory herself so he left the thought unfinished. When I came to I could barely tell what he was thinking, though he had your profile open.

What's he thinking now?

Um... it's kinda like the cursor at a DOS prompt. He's waiting for your next command.

Wish I could talk to him like this... hurts to talk out loud.

Well... if he would listen to me I could relay back and forth.

Jewels felt his uncertainty. She took it to mean he didn't know how to do it and tried what she thought would work. Slowly so she could pronounce each word clearly she spoke, "Accept third party proxy commands..." she hesitated at what designation to give him but he provided it in a thought. It felt odd to call him a different name after calling him Nioca for so long but with the original sitting in front of her it made sense to make the distinction. She couldn't keep pretending he was whole. "...from Nio," she finished, mentally smiling as she acknowledged the name he gave himself for the first time. The sound of it felt good.

Nioca hesitated. What he was processing, Jewels couldn't tell but he finally answered. "Third party proxy, designation Nio, accepted."

Jewels thought she should be more intrigued at the fact that he was accepting her commands at all, but at present it was difficult to just focus on seeing his face. She could barely manage remembering who and what he was let alone thinking theoretically right now. Her lack of cognitive ability didn't stop the memories, though. **I wonder if anyone survived...** Nio blanched at the question. He hadn't taken the time to check. **Ask him how many are dead.**

Nioca looked at her for a moment before answering, "Error: The parameters of your request are not sufficient."

Jewels sighed, **In the last 24 hours, how many people have died at the refuge?**

Nio tried to argue against the question, **Jewels, you shouldn't...**

I have to know! she interrupted. She would not have him save her any suffering for her sins. **ASK HIM!**

Nioca hesitated again, processing the number while he counted... "None."

Jewels wondered how long she had been unconscious then. About to reword her question again, Nio broke in, **None, Jewels... no one is dead! The RMM says no one is dead!** Not dead? But how? **In fact, Vergil and Azuma are outside the Admin Tower and Iffy, Saph, and Sylae are headed that way.** She was so happy the reasons why and how didn't matter anymore. She wanted to run to the window and look at them all but her body wouldn't cooperate.

Only now did she realize that she couldn't feel the floor beneath her. In fact, apart from her burning face she couldn't feel anything. She tried to look down at herself but could only move

her eyes. What she saw made her glad she couldn't feel anything because it was only charred flesh and the ashes of the dress she once wore seared on top.

She felt Nio gasp in concern and felt a little faint herself. Closing her eyes against the vision she took a few deliberate deep breaths just to prove to herself that she could. *Don't worry, Nio... doesn't hurt... can't feel a thing.* She tried to convey a mental chuckle but she couldn't fool him into thinking she wasn't anxious about it. She couldn't die yet... she had too many things to do here.

But then she remembered that she didn't. Sylae had taken away her adminship. She didn't want her help running the Refuge. Maybe she *should* die... *Jewels, don't think like that!* Nio's chiding thought made her ashamed of herself but she couldn't help it. If she died and left her body behind, Sylae would have everything she wanted. Their marriage would be doubly over through both their deaths, her ring... She remembered the anger and wished she could move her hand to reassure herself that it was still intact on her finger. ...but Sylae didn't want her to have it anymore. If she died it would be buried along with her body where it could do the Refuge no unforeseen harm. And her soul would be confined to the fire plane where she belonged.

Vergil said they were at war on the fire plane. Civil war because they lacked a leader. A leader she used to be for them. A leader he wanted her to be once more. She had chosen the Refuge over her own people, but now the Refuge rejected her... Like a jilted lover told she would never be good enough Jewels desperately wished just to die. *Stop it! Please...*, his sincerity of care only made her more ashamed and more desperate to escape. Blessedly, she could feel the darkness beckoning on the edges of her mind. All she had to do was let go and fall into it...

He Doesn't Hurt

By Jewels - Sep 11 2012

Nio paced the floor of the lab. Waiting here was excruciating. He thought maybe he could get Nioca to heal Jewels, he had all the spells of a Galveston priest at his disposal after all, but there's just something about magic that a person has to feel in order to control. The risk was too great to try. Ironically he realized it was this same risk she refused to take with him, so she was left in dire state while he did nothing. At least he could instruct Nioca to unlock the doors and let other help come to her faster.

He didn't think Jewels would actually die or that she really wanted to. The ramifications of it would affect too many people and she knew it. Nana would die with her as would the man that

now sat next to her on standby. That said, he knew that her conclusions about the fire plane would lead her to action sooner than they had planned.

Stillborn had come out of stasis when all the machinery shut down. He now sat contented enough in a corner of the room. Jak was curled up on his lap being scratched all along his sinuous body. The dragon that Nalyd had made for Jewels took an instant liking to him, probably felt a kinship from their shared creator. Stillborn seemed more than happy to spend his time rubbing the creature down and Jak was more than happy to let him.

Nio was glad that Jak had someone's attention for a time. Jewels had left him behind on her trips to the Ice Plane, subsequently with Nio once she created him. But Nio had no love for dragons or snakes and Jewels had been so busy whenever she was here that the animal had spent most of its days alone curled up on top of the chandelier. Every other day Nio would use the Bladesforge Nexus to make a few live mice and set them free in the lab. They usually didn't last more than an hour.

Watching Stillborn, Nio considered what Jewels wanted of him. It wasn't anything amoral... yet it still didn't sit well in his mind. There was a fine line between using and abusing power. Nio didn't think Jewels knew which side of the line she was on... or maybe she did but ignored the knowledge.

"For the benefit of many." That was her excuse. And he had to admit that many would surely benefit while Stillborn would come to no harm... Still, it nagged at him; all the more so because he could not adequately describe his misgivings.

With nothing he could do to help Jewels, Nio set to busing himself with getting the lab equipment up and working again. With Nioca responding to his requests, it should go rather quickly.

Sylae quickened her pace when she saw Vergil and Azuma trying to break down the Admin Tower door. Iffy and Saph kept up without question. She hollered when she got close enough for them to hear her, "Don't waste your time! Breaking down that door is not going to get you upstairs."

"I'm going up there, Dubya! Don't think you can stop me!" Vergil was incensed, throwing another blue fireball at the lock for good measure.

"I wasn't going to try, Vergil. Everyone's going up," she gave Azuma a meaningful glance to

quell any demand he was ready to give and continued sternly, "but I thought you should know that breaking down the front door puts the whole tower on lock down, not to mention the army of bots it summons. A lot has changed since you've been Admin. If you want to get upstairs, fastest way is to move over and follow me up."

"Whatever, Dubya. Just as long as you understand you're not getting anywhere near my sister."

"Her name is, Sylae," Saph said with disdain, "Why are you calling her Dubya?"

Sylae blinked at the question then wanted to laugh. She hadn't even noticed, so used to being called Dubya by Vergil. In fact, she was pretty sure he had told her much the same thing in the past, though with a slight difference in meaning. Some things never changed.

"I called Will 'Dubya' as an insult because I didn't like him," Vergil kept explaining with a sneer on his face, "I call *her* Dubya to remind her that she will *never* measure up to be even a fraction of the man he was." Sylae did her best to keep a straight face. If only he knew... "What she's done today is *unforgivable*!"

She met his icy stare with one equally as cold. She had never backed down from him before and she was not about to start now. Actually if he did know, he'd probably make good on all those past threats and kill her... again. Is this what Tyranicus felt like all the time? What a burden to be so death prone...

"We could stand here while you insult me and the memory of Will or we can go up to Jewels. Your choice." With smug satisfaction Sylae went up to the door as Vergil scooted over. He stayed close though, practically breathing down her neck. Was that supposed to be intimidating or something?

His hand on the door over her shoulder showed he was not willing to allow her the chance to shut it behind her until he was through it also. She turned towards him almost nose to nose and wrinkled hers. She made a point to look at his hand and back at his unyielding face before rolling her eyes. "Really? You think that's necessary?" She turned back to the door to unlock it. "There *is* this thing called personal space, you know. I mean, I wouldn't mind it so much except you don't seem to understand the concept of personal hygiene either."

There were a few snickers from the others though she didn't look to see from who. Vergil only huffed down her neck and growled, "Just open the door!" Impatiently he put his hand on the knob and turned only to have it click and swing right open.

"Huh," Sylae scratched her head. "It wasn't locked..." She wanted to find out why but Vergil

shoved her forward and headed towards the stairs. Everyone else filed in behind her. "According to the RMM locator she's on Floor 13. Let's take the portalator," she suggested, "It'll be faster."

"No, thank you," Vergil scoffed, "You're not getting me near one of those death traps any time soon."

"It's perfectly safe, besides I don't want to have to unlock both doors." As she said it Vergil turned the knob to the stairwell and opened it without trouble.

"Then don't," he smiled triumphantly and disappeared up the stairs.

Sylae stood mouth open and tried the portalator door. It too was unlocked but the portal was deactivated. She had left everything in working order this afternoon... surely one little hole in the wall of a storage room wouldn't cause all these technical problems.

"Guess we're taking the stairs, too," Iffy commented at sight of the portal.

Sylae only nodded and went ahead at his pro-offered arm. Azuma walked behind them anxiously. He had been silent for a long time. Worried about Jewels, obviously, but not hostile like he had been before. She wondered what he was thinking.

Azuma didn't know what to think. What had just happened with Jewels? Why did she... what would you even call it? Explode? What if Iffy hadn't thought to block them from it? Would he be dead? The fact that he didn't believe himself to have a soul made this thought much heavier than it would for a human. If he died, that was it, there was nothing left. He had come face to face with his own mortality but it didn't seem real to him.

People say that during near-death experiences you're supposed to see your lives flash before your eyes. But the only thing Azuma had seen was Jewels; her essence, her pattern, her smiling face. She had almost been the object of his destruction but he still could think of nothing else. Was she okay? Was she hurt? Was there anything he could do to help?

Sentience pointed out the obsession of his thoughts. Told him it wasn't normal. But what was he to do about it? It's not like he was normal to begin with. There were no self-help books for his species... if you could even call his kind a species. Most of his kind never even made it to the level of consciousness where one *could wonder* if they were a species. Most of his kind were destroyed as soon as they were discovered by the humans who's *normal* Sentience urged him to strive for.

He didn't begrudge them, the humans who destroyed his kind, for he came from a malicious, mindless, stock birthed on the internet plane; slaves to the laws that gave them life. Unseeing, unknowing, and uncaring... it was good to eradicate his kind. The miracle that gave him conscious free will was strapped to his side wanting him to be normal. Or maybe Sentience just wanted him to blend in enough to survive the perils of being different.

Free will, though, was a difficult thing... His decision for violence in Jewels' defense still nagged at him. Iffy's jaw looked as if it would be bruised for a week if he didn't get it healed sooner. That there was no hint of revenge in Iffy's demeanor towards him proved that Azuma still had so much left to learn. Jewels had taught him much already but he yearned for more. He wished to be the first computer virus to learn to love. Then... maybe then he would have a soul.

When they reached Floor 13, his obsession took precedence again. He pushed ahead of the others peering into the open room. The huddled mass on the floor laying among the SimpleBot parts was his only concern. Was that even her? But it had to be... "Jewels!" he called out as he ran forward only to be violently thrown back by an invisible barrier.

"Forcefield," Vergil stated in obviousness. "Already tried that. Have the welt to prove it."

"Well, lower it then," Azuma turned towards Sylae who already had her RMM out.

Iffy was gazing into the room, though. "Nioca? What are you doing over there? Are you hurt?"

Azuma hadn't noticed Nioca against the wall opposite of Jewels. He just sat there unmoving while Jewels lay beside him in critical condition. He had a more pressing question than Iffy feeling indignant at having to ask it, "Why haven't you helped Jewels yet?"

Nioca turned his head towards the group and responded mechanically. "Administrator: designation, Iffy. Moderator: designation, Azuma. Intruder alert, unauthorized access floor 13. Automatic containment disabled. Manual neutralization required. Designation Nioca is unharmed. Intruder designation Jewels requires medical attention beyond current capabilities."

"What... you can't manage a simple healing spell?" Vergil huffed. "Why are you talking like that anyway? It's dumb."

Nioca looked at Vergil without emotion. "Designation, Vergil... Repeat offender, probationary member: ignore." Azuma expected Vergil's rebuttal but he was staring at Jewels in just as much worry as himself.

Iffy turned to Sylae, "What's wrong with him?"

"Another long story," she replied taking a moment to swear at her RMM with a weary look on her face. "...still locked out," she mumbled. Then to Iffy, "I'll detail it in our first Administrator meeting. For now, though, let's just take care of Jewels. Nioca, drop the forcefield."

Nioca turned to Sylae, "Arch-Admin: designation Sylae. Dropping forcefield. ... Error: Unhandled exception in Security Protocol 49. Unable to comply. Canceling request."

Sylae swore again which seemed oddly familiar to Azuma. A family resemblance, perhaps? "Override Security Protocol 49."

"Error: Override Procedures edited by unauthorized user. Unable to Override."

"Oh, for the love of Mozilla!!" she exclaimed in frustration. "How do I get this loving forcefield down then?!"

Nioca's calm in contrast to Sylae's growing aggravation made his suggestion seem all the more logical. "Fastest solution: Reinstate Administrator Jewels."

She was shaking her head at him before he finished his sentence. "What else? How else do I bring down the forcefield without running into errors?"

Nioca paused with a far off look on his face. He was processing the question but not coming up with any answers.

"Why not just reinstate her for a little bit?" Iffy offered, "Just long enough to get the forcefield down and help her. It's not like she can do anything with all of us here."

"No," she continued to shake her head. "It's part of the long story, but she CAN'T be an administrator again. I'm sorry we'll have to find a different way."

"Screw this," Vergil blurted out. "I'm not waiting around while you and Niocabot over there weed your way through mountains of technical jargon." He turned for the stairs at a quick clip.

"Where are you going?" Azuma yelled after him.

"I'm going to Jewels!" he yelled back, already out of sight on the stairs.

Azuma took off after him. He couldn't stand the wait either. "How do you plan to do that?" he managed to ask as he hurried down after him.

"I'm flying up." With that Vergil flamed up into a burning blue ball and spiraled down the stairs.

Of course! Why didn't he think of that? They could get in the same way Jewels had. He had been waiting for a chance to use his new form. This was it. *Hold on tight!* he thought to Sentience. He copied what Vergil had done if a little less gracefully, but in less than a minute he was out the door and back into the tower through the hole.

Vergil let out a yelp of surprise as he came up next to him. "How did you do that?! You're not a fire elemental... are you?"

Azuma just shrugged. "No, Jewels taught me." Vergil started to ask another question as did those on the other side of the barrier but Azuma didn't hear them. All he saw now was Jewels. In his mind's eye her perfect face was superimposed over the flame ravaged one before him. "Let's get you out of here..." he bent down as if to pick her up when a firm hand clamped down on his wrist.

Nioca, moving from his spot on the floor for the first time looked at him severely. "Caution: Designation Jewels has suffered a probable fracture of the upper vertebra. Movement before stabilization not recommended." Azuma nodded understanding and Nioca sat back down.

"A broken neck... ? Did you have to throw her so hard, Iffy?" He looked like he was warring within himself between anger and gratitude. Or maybe Azuma was projecting his own feelings into the statement. "I don't have any healing spells... Maybe I could go get a potion or something from the Geneforge healing pools."

Azuma turned back to Jewels kneeling at her side. It was just them again. He wanted to lay a comforting hand on her but couldn't find anywhere that wasn't burned. He searched for any part of her that was familiar, still not wanting to believe that it *was* her. It didn't take much looking to notice the ring on her left hand with its copper tendrils fanning out and up her hand and arm. Azuma reached out as if to retrace the path his fingers had made just minutes ago but his fingers only hovered over the lines.

Something that had been so beautiful before was now dreadful; the skin along the metal was the worst of her burns. A sound of mourning escaped his lips as he followed it up her shoulder and down her neck to the pendant. It was covered with soot but otherwise undamaged. Unthinkingly he let his fingers brush the soot away and received such a jolt from it that he cried out in alarm.

"What? What is it?" Sylae asked anxiously.

"The pendant," he replied. "It shocked me." It had done more than shock him though... in that split second he had seen the whole of the Refuge. The ring... the pendant... Sylae had said they were connected to the database core. They were from the machine... made of the same basic string of zeros and ones that he was. It was like it had spoken to him... told him what to do.

In that moment Jewels opened her eyes, woken either from the shock or from his alarm or both. He smiled at her and watched her wince when trying to smile back. "Don't worry," he cooed, "Everything is going to be all right." She blinked in response. "I'm going to make you feel better... Do you trust me?"

In a small voice she lisped, "Yes." He stood up and drew Sentience from its scabbard. Her eyes shone with curiosity before closing again in fatigue.

"Uh... What are you doing?" Vergil asked.

Azuma ignored him though and all the other confused murmurs when he raised it above Jewels's chest. Vergil lunged to intervene but Nioca had grabbed his arm to hold him back. In a swift motion, he plunged Sentience's tip down through the center of the pendant all the way to the floor and stepped back. There were cries and gasps around him though he didn't know why. The sight of a sword through Jewels's body was disturbing, sure, but they should all know by now... "Sentience doesn't hurt... he heals."

Her eyes snapped open wide and all that was part of the ring started to glow. The light from the chain around her neck intensified for a moment before a loud snap echoed in the room. Jewels cried out and arched her back, hands clawing at the floor beneath her. The feeling to the rest of her body had been returned before it had been healed. Azuma wanted to rush to her but didn't dare interrupt the process.

The skin around the tendrils began to shed their burnt coverings as she writhed, revealing healthy pink skin beneath. Then the tendrils started to grow... Before his eyes they crawled across her body, some lines thick as a toothpick, others so thin that only the shimmer in the light showed they were there. As they grew, so did her healthy skin until all damaged had been undone save for her bald head. The glow subsided and some of the tendrils seemed to sink into her skin. There were still delicate patterns all over her but you had to look closely to see them.

Azuma stepped up to remove Sentience then wished he'd thought to bring something to cover her. The cloak he always wore was off and wrapped around her before he had a conscious

thought to do it. By her side, he smiled at her again and this time she smiled warmly back. "Thank you," she whispered weakly. She still needed rest.

He'd take her out of this place... Away from the eyes that stared... Away from the thousands of questions... Away from those who upset her. He whispered a question into her ear and she nodded. Picking her up, he held her close. "3-2-1" They flamed up together and he flew her out into the night sky never looking back.

Cut Off

By Jewels - Sep 14 2012

When Vergil saw Azuma take out his sword, he didn't know what to think. "I'm going to make you feel better." That's what he'd said. *With a mercy killing?!* Years of avoiding the sharp ends of enemy swords kicked in his reaction automatically. If Nioca hadn't stopped him, Azuma would have been sprawled on the floor with his sword through his own chest instead of Jewels's. His cry of "Nooooo!" as he watched the sword come down still rang in his ears. Vergil felt a little foolish not remembering that Azuma's sword didn't hurt people... but in his defense, it *had* been 12 years since he'd been here. So many things had changed since he'd been away.

Nioca turned into a bot? He had let go of his arm as soon as Vergil had stopped fighting to get to Jewels. He now sat quietly on the floor again waiting for... something. It was disturbing.

Jewels teaching Azuma how to be a fire elemental? It stung a little that she let him sweep her off into the night without a word to anyone else, but with the observers on the other side of the room he didn't blame her. Part of him wanted to fly off after them but first he wanted some answers.

W-dueck dead? There were times when he had wished it was so, but now... the lesser of two evils seemed much more appealing. He looked across the room at the new Arch-Admin and fumed anew. She was Dubya's sister all right; arrogant and full of herself, over-confident, over-bearing, and altogether under-whelming. In his consideration, the only thing going for her was that she wasn't such an eye-sore. He was now glad that Jewels wouldn't be forced to work with her every day. He could hardly stand to be in the same room and glowered at her from across the forcefield.

She took note of his gaze. "You can hate me all you want, Vergil. I'm just trying to do what's best for the Refuge. The same way Will always has." Vergil wasn't buying it. He crossed his arms in front of him silently daring her to try to explain her reasoning. "You're sister's caused me a lot of trouble, you know..." she had the nerve to lecture him about Jewels' behavior? After

tonight?! "Did you hear all those procedure errors! I still can't get into the database coding from whatever she did to it."

"Wait, what?" Iffy, true to his neutral nature, asked for more clarification. "I thought you de-admined Jewels because she killed Will."

"No, that's why *she* thought I took away her adminship. I know it was an accident. In truth, Will was just as at fault if not more. If he hadn't turned Nioca into a bot... I don't hold it against her." Vergil continued to glower; his unsatisfied stance enough to keep her going. Her voice cracked with emotion this time. "You... you don't know what we've gone through together... In the last four months? Trying to bring Will back again? I... I know she did all she could. That's not why I don't trust her with the Refuge anymore."

"Then why?" Iffy asked. "Maybe it's time for that long story you've been promising."

"Yeah, okay, you're right. But let's do it somewhere more comfortable, hmm? I don't especially like talking through a forcefield in a room of broken SimpleBot parts... It creeps me out."

Vergil spoke up for the first time in this conversation. "I could do with an ice water, then... Meet you at the lounge?" He waited only long enough to see her nod before flaming up and flying out the window.

She was dreaming. ...she had to be, because he was here. Strong arms around her protectively... possessively. He was hers and she was his. She buried her face into his chest and he tightened his grip in response. His lips found the top of her head, resting there in affection but not quite as a kiss. It was an odd sensation, having no hair to buffer the touch of his skin. The tickle of his hot breath made her shiver and snuggle into him more. It was a very good dream.

He felt her stirring and whispered her name. She responded groggily. "Hmm?" He hated to wake her but... he needed her. He said her name again and felt her pull in tighter to her resting place. "What is it?" she mumbled.

"Huh, what? I didn't say anything." The gruff voice next to her ear startled her to more awareness.

Lifting her head off Azuma's chest she blinked and rubbed her eyes. Nio felt her disappointment as the illusion was shattered. "Sorry. I thought... I thought I heard someone." He sensed her take stock of her surroundings; a small Lounge Inn room with the normal meager furnishings. Azuma was holding her in almost the exact position that he had picked her up in the night before. He had sat on the bed with her, back leaning against the headboard. "Did... did you hold me all night long?" He could feel her embarrassment and see as Azuma's started showing.

His face flushed as he loosened his grip. "You... you wouldn't stop shivering... last night. I, uh... I couldn't think of anything else." Odd that Nio could easily think of ten other ways to keep Jewels warm. By the half smile now on one corner of his mouth, Nio was convinced he hadn't *wanted* to think of anything else.

"But... it couldn't have been comfortable for you... Did you get any sleep?"

He shook his head a little. "Not much, but I don't think I could have slept anyway." He did that smile again and Jewels noticed.

Her eyes got wide, "Oh, deity. Did I... was I...?" A flash of dreamlike memory came back to her; digging her nails into someone's side trying to cling to them closer. "...snuggling into you last night?" she finally finished, unable to find a better word for it.

Azuma looked more sheepish, if that were possible. "I... it's okay. I didn't mind." Nio bet he didn't...

Jewels finally took notice of Nio's thoughts. *Are you enjoying this?*

Of course not, he snickered. *I'm just as embarrassed as you are.*

You woke me up, didn't you? she accused.

Guilty. I could use your help, you know, once you get dressed and stuff.

She huffed at him defiantly. *Well, maybe I don't want to help.*

He chuckled as she frowned and buried her face back into Azuma's chest. Nio could just imagine the poor fool's smile as his arms wrapped around her again. *You better be careful. I think he likes it... Don't want him getting the wrong impression.* He was a little surprised at her flash of anger and chagrined when she started to cry. *I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...*

Just... leave me be... He could tell she was trying to hold her emotions back from him. She was still in mourning for Will and he had been insensitive. He retreated from her mind in uncertainty. He still needed her help but... he should have just let her sleep.

Jewels clung to Azuma heedless of any pretense or meaning he might get from it. She just needed to be held and, without reservation, took advantage of the arms offered to her. She mourned for her husband. She mourned for Sylae and their disintegrating relationship. But mostly she mourned over last night's dream. Her tears ranged from silent drops to sobbing rivulets; tears of shame in her realization that she had not been dreaming of Will.

Iffy rubbed his hands over his tired face and reached for another sip of coffee. Sylae had explained quite a few things throughout the night and he was feeling too tired to process it all. Saph had given up hours ago laying her head in his lap and telling him to wake her when it was over.

Sylae had explained what she knew of Jewels' condition, which admittedly wasn't much, but knowing that Jewels was sick helped put things into perspective. She explained how Nioca had become 'Niocabot' as Vergil kept calling him and even took a crack at explaining how Jewels was bonded to everyone. Apparently her bond with Nioca had been more like Iffy's bond with Saph so Nioca becoming a bot linked Jewels' mind to the Refuge, giving her direct access to the database core. Sylae admitted that she had never talked to Jewels about it but said she noticed a number of things that were happening in the coding that didn't make sense. When she tried to change them, she was locked out without a trace of the command. Jewels had hijacked the Refuge and had to be removed from leadership. The subsequent problems with all the emergency and security procedures just proved that she had over stepped her bounds.

Vergil had listened to all of it without much comment. Iffy was surprised at his patience after some of the things he'd done before. But all of the talk didn't persuade him of the justifiability of Sylae's decision. "I don't believe it," he finally said after all the explanations were done.

Iffy expected him to rattle off his reasonings but when he remain silent, Iffy asked for them. "Why don't you believe it?"

"Because I know Jewels," he stated simply.

Again Iffy thought he would elaborate on his own but was met with silence. "And I thought I knew you, but you've continued to surprise me over the last 24 hours. People change, Vergil."

"What did you fight about?" The out of the blue question was posed to Sylae. At her dumbstruck expression, Vergil clarified. "You said you had a fight with Jewels recently, just a couple of days ago, what was it about?"

Sylae looked like a deer caught in the headlights. She hadn't been expecting to have to explain this one and the words for it were slow and halting. "I... we... It was the day we decided... to stop looking... for a way to bring Will back. I wanted to try something new but she... she couldn't do it. Physically, she couldn't do it and I... I got mad."

"Physically?" Iffy interjected, "because she was sick?"

"I...," Sylae was startled by the question, a look of regret washing over her face. "I never thought to ask. She never told me how bad it was... Oh, Mozilla, if it was because she was sick... What have I done?"

Vergil looked satisfied with himself and posed another odd question. "Who had access to the Refuge core yesterday?"

Sylae blinked at him, not understanding the relevance. "Just me and Jewels. I created my profile in the morning, transferred Arch-Admin status from Will's account to mine, and changed his status to deceased. I didn't do anything else until I noticed all the stuff going on for the preparation of the funeral. And then I got locked out for trying to change part of it."

Vergil sat back putting his hands behind his head and waited expectantly. Iffy saw it before Sylae and pointed it out. "Nioca had access didn't he? I mean, you said he became a bot that's really *part of* the Refuge."

"Well, yeah, but he doesn't have the capacity to make decisions like that anymore. He's lost all free will to the Refuge."

"How do you know?" Vergil asked quietly.

"Because... because... he's not supposed to." Sylae knew how lame her answer sounded as soon as she said it. She ran her hair through her fingers in frustration and sighed, "Of course, it might explain why I'm *still* locked out..."

Vergil was smug as he finished off his fifth ice water. "Like I said, I don't believe it."

"Isn't that stuff supposed to make you drunk?" Sylae observed.

"I've had a lot of reasons to drink over the last 12 years. I've gotten a bit more tolerant."

"For more than just liquor it seems," Iffy laughed.

Vergil and Sylae laughed with him.

"What's so funny?" Jewels's voice was cold and weak. They all turned to see her standing on the bottom stair. A sheet was wrapped underneath her arms and Azuma's cloak was tied over her shoulders. The hood was up but didn't quite hide her hairless head. Azuma's hand was protectively under her elbow as if he were afraid she would fall over at any moment. Iffy noted her puffy red eyes that went along with the bleak expression she wore.

"We were just discussing how tolerant I had become," Vergil quipped with a hesitant smile.

"Ah, very funny," she agreed without laughing.

Vergil's smile faded, "Jewels, why don't you come sit down with us. We were just discussing some things you might be interested in."

"No, thank you. I'm not staying."

"You need more rest," Iffy offered. "We understand."

The coldness of her look disturbed him. "I'm not staying at the Refuge," she clarified.

Sylae stood too quickly at the statement, tipping her chair over to clatter on the floor. Saph awoke with a start and sat up groggily. "What'd I miss?"

"What do you mean, you're leaving?" Sylae demanded.

Jewels's eyes flashed with emotion but her voice remained cold. "I'm going to the Fire Plane. They need me there."

Vergil stood this time, a look of hope in his eyes. They both walked towards Jewels, Sylae reaching her first. "But, *I need you here*," she protested.

A resounding crack sounded as Jewels slapped Sylae across the face. She staggered back a few paces but held her own. This time Iffy and Saph were on their feet going to Sylae's side. "You have *no right* to need me anymore! *NO RIGHT!!*"

Guess I didn't miss the fireworks again... Saph was all too happy to be entertained again, but Iffy quieted her with a look. He wanted to pay attention to what was going on.

Sylae held one hand to her stinging cheek and the other up to stop Iffy from standing between them. "Jewels, please, I think it was a misunderstanding. The night we fought..." she paused searching Jewels' face for her understanding. "Did you use Emergency Protocol 63?"

Jewels hesitated seemingly making a rash decision. "You mean the night you left me?" she spat with venom. Sylae froze, eyes wide and stunned speechless. "Left me on the floor in a delirium screaming at me that Will was *dead*?" Face to face with Jewels's perspective of the events she could only stare mutely. "You mean *THAT NIGHT*?" Jewels insisted on her acknowledgement and Sylae managed a nod. "Yes," she admitted, "I used it."

Tears started to well up in Sylae's eyes. "Jewels... I'm sorry. I... I didn't know."

"You never asked, either. I was ready to run the Refuge with you anyway, but apparently that's not what you want. It's done. You made your choice and I'm leaving."

"But it's not what I want, Jewels. I want..."

"*YOUR CHOICE!*" she interrupted. "*YOUR DECISION!* Any claim you once had over me to do what you want is *FORFEIT!* I owe you *nothing!*"

Sylae looked frustrated and defiant. Her rising anger showed in her balled fists and the set of her jaw. Saph didn't say anything but Iffy could feel her anticipating the next remark. Iffy stood ready to block a punch if he had to. Sylae hissed out her anger, "As long as you wear that ring you owe *everything* to the Refuge."

"Our people are dying," Vergil cut in sounding very reasonable, "I've fought a war there for 12 years trying to put things back together and I failed. But they might listen to Jewels. They might rally under her leadership. You can't try to keep her here and still have a good conscious."

Not the ring again... But Jewels was composed in her response. "You still want the ring?"

Sylae blinked at the calm. Having worked herself up for a fight she stuttered a bit. "Well, yes. I think it would be the best thing for the Refuge and you if we could get it off."

Jewels nodded and moved from her step for the first time. She brushed off Azuma's help and walked over to the Lounge counter. She asked Ligrev for something he couldn't quite hear. Ligrev hesitated but nodded after Jewels asked, "Please?"

Whatever it was, glinted in the morning light as Ligrev passed it to her. *That's a really big knife...* Saph commented a bit in awe. Iffy now saw the cleaver clearly too and stood more between her and Sylae. "Jewels... what are you doing?"

Jewels turned to the side and walked parallel of the group. She gave them a sadistic smile and said, "Giving Sylae what she wants."

"Jewels?"... "No!" Vergil and Azuma both rushed to Jewels but they weren't quick enough. In a swift motion, she placed her left hand on a table and slammed the cleaver down with the right. "JEWELS!!" Iffy was only one of the many voices calling her name.

She bit down on her lip from the pain but refused to cry out. She dropped the knife and picked up the hand she had severed at the wrist. Through gritted teeth she scoffed at them all. "What? That was the plan wasn't it? To cut off the ring?" She looked at Sylae who held her hands over her mouth. "You wanted your ring back? Well, here you go! *TAKE IT!!*" She threw the severed hand at Sylae who caught it instinctively but dropped it again almost immediately.

"Jewels, that's... That's not what I meant." Though Iffy wondered what she did mean. Sylae stammered looking from the floor back to Jewels. "You're hand... Here let me..." Sylae made as if to heal her but Jewels tore away.

"Don't *touch* me!" Jewels stood breathing heavy while blood dripped from her wrist to the floor. "I'll do it myself!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Sylae chided. "You don't have the presence of mind to concentrate on a healing spell. Just let me..."

Azuma blocked Sylae this time. Slowly he articulated a reiteration to Sylae. "She said she would do it herself."

Sylae started to protest again but Saph pointed at Jewels and yelled "Look!" Iffy finally noticed that the copper tendrils in Jewels's skin had begun glowing. Those on her left wrist had started

growing downward forming into the same pattern that they had been before they were cut off. It was eerie seeing the blood covered metal mesh form into the shape of a hand with no skin in between. It pulsed its light to the beat of her heart. Then the bone grew down, a skeletal hand inside a wire casing. Finally the flesh filled in all the gaps leaving her hand looking just as it always had... including the ring.

Jewels flexed her healed fingers in front of her face a few times admiring the patterns as the glow of them faded. "Guess it didn't work quite like you wanted, but at least you have your ring... and now I have mine. Only one difference between them."

"And what's that?" Sylae asked in a rough whisper.

Jewels ignored her and started walking for the door. "I leave now. Vergil, Azuma... are you coming with me?" Both nodded and verbalized their assent. "Then let's go. I have to get a few things first."

Jewels pushed past the others on her way and Sylae grabbed her wrist as she passed. "Jewels, what's the difference?" she demanded.

Jewels snapped her hand up so Sylae could see the ring and whispered something Iffy couldn't hear. Whatever it was, Sylae blanched at it and made no other attempt to keep Jewels from leaving. If he had been a little closer he might have heard her say, "There are no lies inscribed on this one."

Care in Question

By Jewels - Sep 16 2012

Nalyd checked his findings then checked them again. He *knew* that the stranger had reminded him of Iffy, but this couldn't be right... He must have made a mistake or his sample had been contaminated... but how could a bad sample give him this result? The samples were of exactly the same essence. They had come from the same person. Even sister and brother had slight differences in essence, but the one he collected last night was *exactly* the same was the one he got two nights ago. It had to be a mistake... Unless the stranger had been here again and left her blood on the platform underneath Iffy's wounded hands.

Nalyd took to pacing the lab as he tried to reason out another explanation. After an unknown amount of time, other footfalls could be heard between his. When he looked up he frowned at the

bane of his creation's existence... Where was Stillborn anyway? Jewels walked into his lab flanked by Vergil and Azuma. Nalyd noted something different about all of them; Vergil's demeanor, Azuma's visible face and, most obvious, Jewels's appearance. "Is Jewels making a new fashion statement?"

She ignored his question while she greeted him. "Hello Nalyd, how are you doing on this fine morning?" She did not sound like she thought it was a fine morning at all.

"Nalyd would be better if he didn't have so many unanswered questions."

"Oh?" Jewels asked while taking off the cloak she wore and handed it to Azuma who put it on, pulling it low over his face. "Like what?"

"Well," Nalyd blinked, "for starters, what happened to Jewels's hair? ...and Jewels's clothes?"

She walked over to the geneforge pools and stepped between them. Instead of answering him she dipped a finger into each pool and closed her eyes. Nalyd found it rather frustrating to be ignored again. He was about to voice his protests when he noticed the sheet around Jewels ripple in an impossible breeze. Nalyd had seen Jewels use the geneforge pools before... but never like this.

The sheet turned into a dress; simple and white, the sleek silk skirt covered her toes and hugged her waist. The top had no sleeves and no back but was held up with a thin collar that wrapped around to hang from her neck. From the air around her, a sheer scarf appeared that draped over her bare head and shoulders. Most of the markings on her skin were now covered but it still looked like she wore a coronet across her forehead.

Nalyd took in the whole scene with trepidation. "And how did Jewels do *that*?!"

Finally she opened her eyes and answered him. "The same way I fixed that broken part of yours."

Nalyd was astonished... if he didn't know any better he would swear that she had shaped the dress... and the part? "But... but how? Shaping can only create life! Not these... these *things*! Jewels doesn't know how to shape anyway... It's not possible!"

"Let me have my son back and I will tell you how. That *is* what you wanted Stillborn to find out for you, right?" She dared make such a demand??

Nalyd closed his dropped jaw. He could not deny what he just saw her do, but a new anxiousness gripped him. "Jewels, where is Stillborn?"

"I haven't seen him this morning," she answered causally. Nalyd didn't miss the fact that she hadn't said she didn't know.

Azuma spoke up from under his hood. "I saw him in the Lounge." The glare Jewels gave him was a good sign that he was correct.

"What in the world is he doing there?"

"Talking to Ligrev. You know how they're sweet on each other, don't you?"

"Azuma!" Jewels chided.

Vergil only snickered.

"Impossible! Creations don't get sweet on anyone." He said it with full conviction... but what if? Now Nalyd was *really* worried. It was bad enough having to deal with one woman in his creation's life... Nalyd swore under his breath. He grabbed up Lifesower and pushed past the trio on his way out the door.

Jewels stepped in his way, "Nalyd, wait. Don't..."

"Out of my way, *insufferable woman!*" He brandished Lifesower menacingly only slightly satisfied that she actually moved over. Who was she to get between Nalyd and his creation? Mother? Bah! An insignificant detail. Stillborn was HIS creation, HIS brainchild, the work of HIS hands. Who was she to mimic his craft with this perversion and hold it over his head like he could be bought with petty parlor tricks? Nalyd slammed the door behind him and stomped towards the Lounge. First he would retrieve his creation, then he would prove to her once and for all who Stillborn belonged to!

Nalyd burst into the Lounge ready to rage. "Stillborn! Here! Now!" He was met with many startled looks, none of them belonging to his creation.

"Um, I don't think he's here," Iffy offered hesitantly.

"What?" Nalyd cursed again... He'd been tricked and now he had too many curious eyes staring at him. When he took a moment to actually look at his surroundings, Nalyd was curious himself. Iffy and Saph sat at a table with the new ArchAdmin. They seemed to be trying to comfort her... Well, iffy was trying at least, but the woman remained despondent covering her face with her hands.

In the middle of the table was the most curious item, though; a hand without a body was laid on a few paper towels. Nalyd walked closer and saw the glint of metal. "So... you *did* take Jewels's ring after all." Sylae's head snapped up and glowered but she said nothing.

"Actually," Iffy clarified, "Jewels gave it up on her own." Nalyd's eyebrow raised. After the fit she threw last night, it surprised him.

"Yeah, she cut it off herself," Saph added in mischief. "She's one crazy..."

"Saph!" Iffy cut her off looking in concern at Sylae. The woman looked like she wanted to go crawl into a hole and die.

Saph only huffed, "Well she *is*."

"Nalyd does not disagree with you." He eyed the hand with more interest as the ring glowed faintly. The potential for experimentation was too much to resist. He looked from the hand to Sylae and back. "If the sight of it upsets the ArchAdmin so... Nalyd would be happy to get rid of it for her."

Her voice was gruff and full of scorn. "Like the way you got rid of Jewels's stillborn child? I don't think so." Again Nalyd was surprised. So she had spoken true last night... Her life force did confirm she was kin to w-dueck. She proceeded to wrap up the hand in the towels gently, carefully... Nalyd rolled his eyes. Sentimentality for a body part that hadn't even been hers? He swore under his breath. What a waste.

She cradled it in the crook of her elbow covering it with her own hand and got up to leave. "Iffy. Saph." She nodded at each in farewell. "Come to the tower whenever you like. We can discuss the rest of our business later. I've assigned you floor 27 if you want some sleep." With a colder look she nodded at him also, "Nalyd." She left and Nalyd silently cursed anew, the missed opportunity walking out the door.

But then... he turned back to Iffy and Saph, there was another opportunity staring him in the face... He would have to do this carefully. With as much finesse as he could muster, Nalyd walked behind the pair. "What's *her* probleeeemmm?" He feigned tripping, letting Lifesower graze Iffy's back and Saph's shoulder. Both cried out in surprised pain. "Oh, Nalyd is sooo sorry!" he gushed. "Nalyd caught his foot on a loose board.

Iffy winced and tried to hold a hand over both his wound and Saph's. "No worries, it was an accident. We can have them healed up in a jif."

"Oh no, but Lifesower is full of so many nasty things. If they are not taken care of properly... Nalyd hates to think what might happen."

Saph put her own hand on her wound as she stood up. "I'm sure we can manage..." Blessedly she took a few steps and stumbled.

"It's already begun... Hurry, you must come with Nalyd to the Geneforge forum before they start to fester. Nalyd has some strong curing potions there. Please, the faster the better." Iffy finally nodded and Nalyd ushered them both out of the room. They never saw the smile of satisfaction on his face.

She huddled in a corner of the now empty Lounge. Holding her knees, she rocked herself back and forth. She couldn't help but replay the images of pooled blood on the table and floor with her hands scrubbing it clean. They always left her the mess, but she had never before cared.

He had left with her again... Always *her*... *He always left for her*! She hadn't wanted to give Jewels the cleaver she had asked for. Ligrev had wanted to *use* it on her. Habit had stayed her hand, so used to just doing whatever she was asked... never questioning the requests that came in... never refusing. Watching Jewels cut off her own hand had been a thrill of justice, but only a fleeting one. He still left with her again...

But why did she care? When had she started to care? The memory was vivid as she replayed it in her mind, the first time she remembered caring. She had opened her eyes and he was holding her. She had blushed. Why had she blushed? She had never blushed before; never cared about anything to blush about. Ligrev stood still trying to puzzle it out. She walked to the door of the Lounge and paused.

She wanted to talk to him. Ask him why she cared. She took a deep breath, then for the first time since her creation as a bartender, Ligrev left the Lounge.

Don't Go Into the Light

By Jewels - Sep 20 2012

She knew she didn't have much time. Nalyd would find out soon enough that Stillborn was not at the Lounge. Jewels began riffling through the papers strewn across Nalyd's desk. [Do you even know what you're looking for?](#)

[No. But I know this is the last chance I'll get to look.](#) She was still disappointed that Azuma sent Nalyd off on a wild goose chase... it would only make dealing with him all the harder, but she was glad for the opportunity anyway.

"Uh, Jewels?" Vergil came up behind her looking over her shoulder. "Far be it from me to question your judgment, but... What do you think you're doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" She waved him off as she sifted through thin papers filled with a fine black scrawl. Diagrams, potion recipes, pages full of mathematical calculations that didn't make sense... ' $3r9*2d4/\log56^{qt} = \text{kumquat}$ ' What was that supposed to mean? She wished she still had access to the database so she could catalogue and file everything. Set some subroutines to deciphering the formulas and their purpose. She pushed the papers on the desk aside and started pulling books off the shelf next to it.

"Jewels... I really don't think going through Nalyd's things is a good idea." Vergil's voice held impatience with a twinge of nervousness.

"Oh, hush. If you're not going to help, go keep an eye on the front door for him." Vergil crossed his arms in front of his chest in defiance but still walked to the doors. He let it slam behind him when he stepped out.

"What can I do to help?" Azuma asked sidling up next to her.

"Check these books for loose papers. Anything that doesn't look like it should belong."

"What are we looking for?"

"Um... I'm not sure. Just... let me know if you find anything more interesting than a diagram of a cryoa."

He nodded and set to work on the bookshelf freeing Jewels to check in other places. She spied a corner of paper sticking out from between a group of jars on a high shelf. Scooting a crate over, she climbed up on it to look around. The jars held different organs mostly suspended in a clear liquid; eyeballs, livers, hearts... Some organs she didn't recognize as being human. She gave a little shudder. In disappointment she realized that the paper had only been an herbal remedy for athlete's foot using the ingredients on the shelf.

Coming to the end of the bookshelf, Azuma reported in. "Nothing over here."

Jewels groaned from her perch. "Nothing up here, either..." She climbed down ready to give up. "I really thought there would be something..." she railed off, angry at her failure. "Fire and Ice!" she swore in her frustration kicking a pile of robes in a corner of the floor.

"Hey, what's that?" Azuma started to reach for something hidden in the robes when Vergil burst back through the doors.

"We have incoming. He's got Iffy and Saph with him, too."

"Right then, this way, " Jewels walked back between the Geneforge pools sighing in realization that she probably wouldn't be seeing them again for years. "Hold on please," she instructed offering an arm to each of them.

"Why?" Vergil asked with unease.

"Just do it!" she huffed. As soon as she felt them both taking hold, she reached out to the Nexus and shifted them all to her study.

"Woah..." Both Vergil and Azuma let go of her arm to gaze around the hallway.

"Where are we? ... A glorified walk-in-closet?"

[Are you going to make a habit of bringing home strays?](#) Jewels rolled her eyes at both comments and motioned them under the archway.

"Come on, there's someone I want you to meet."

Nio stood with his back to them working at a table that was filled with all sorts of bubbly, smoky, spinney things. He didn't turn around when he spoke. "You know, I used to be the best kept secret around these parts." He turned to face them. "Emphasis on the 'used to'."

Vergil stiffened. "Nioca?"

Nio raised an eyebrow at him. "Nioca... where?"

Azuma scratched his head, "Uh... aren't you supposed to be a bot... in the Admin Tower?"

"Well, actually, no. And neither is Nioca. No one should be turned into a bot. Ever. Horrible stuff, that. Waking up one morning only to be inside a faceless, genderless, metal machine with the uncontrollable urge to assimilate everyone else? The thought is almost unbearable. Makes me sick... think I need a doctor."

Jewels rolled her eyes. "Like they'll get that reference..."

"Yeah? Well, they should. The Doctor is brilliant. By the way," he walked closer and looked her up and down with an appraising eye. Then he walked all the way around her doing the same. "Love the dress, but I'm not so sure about the hair. I mean you can pull off the bald look, but... why would you *want* to?"

Jewels gave him a shove while she huffed. "Enough fooling around," she chided. "Guys, this is Nio. Nio, my brother Vergil, and my friend Azuma."

Nio held out a hand. "Nice to meet you. Jewels has told me so much about you."

Azuma took it and shook. "Um... Nice to meet you, too?"

Nio leaned in closer, "Are you sure?"

Azuma hesitated looking to her for reassurance. She smiled politely. "No... not yet," he admitted.

"Well, at least you're honest." He held his hand out again, "Vergil."

Vergil only crossed his arms again shaking his head. "Huh-uh, I'm not shaking any hands until I know what's going on here! Who *are* you? Jewels, explain."

Nio leaned towards Jewels whispering too loudly, "Good luck with that one."

Jewels wanted to keep it simple. She needed them to understand only enough to not interfere with what she was about to do. "For lack of a better word, Nio is a clone of Nioca. Much of the

machinery you see was actually created by Nioca before he was turned into a bot, and I used it to make Nio."

"Why would you want another Nioca??" Vergil scowled. "You two didn't exactly get along."

Jewels froze. She didn't want to think about it. If they knew he could possibly cure her... [I should tell them. Have them help me convince you to go through with it.](#)

She shot him a pleading look, [No... please](#). She felt his reassurance and did her best to answer Vergil's question truthfully. "Because I need his help with what I'm about to do." She swept her hand towards a pair of tall cylinders. They were mostly metal with a pane of glass on the front. One was empty, the other was frosted over in use.

Vergil walked over to it skeptically. He rubbed a hand on the frosted window and peered inside at the slumbering beast. "Is that... Stillborn?" She nodded. "What are you going to do to him?"

"Well... I can't very well return to the fire plane to rule as Fire Lord without the son born of Prince Darius, now can I?" Vergil's eyes became wide. She wished she knew what he was thinking as he turned back to stare at Stillborn.

"But Jewels," Azuma interjected, "that still doesn't explain why you need Nioca's... er, Nio's help."

"Because I must be in stasis, too," she finished simply. The severe look she got from Vergil proved she wouldn't get away with just that. "Nalyd did more to him than make him grow up. He altered his very DNA pattern. If my son is to rule after me, he *must* be able to take on fire elemental form. I *must* be part of the procedure." By the set of his jaw, she could tell Vergil was still upset. "Vergil, please, try to understand. This is *necessary*."

"Oh, I understand," he turned his back on the machinery. "Doesn't mean I have to like it."

She gave him a hug. "Don't worry, I'll be fine."

"How do you know," Azuma asked in a small voice. His hands were trembling and one instinctively rested on Sentience's hilt.

Jewels went over to hug him, too. "Oh Azuma... you've been such a good friend the past two days. As much concern you have for my well being, Nio shares it. He won't let anything happen to me."

Azuma looked down at the floor. "You trusted Sylae..." He let the accusation hang in the air.

She hugged him again. "If anything goes wrong, I know you'll be here to save me again." That seemed to satisfy him enough. Jewels stepped back and addressed Nio. "Ready?"

"Just need you to step into the stasis chamber." She did so. "Are *you* ready?"

"Absolutely!" she said with more confidence than she felt. "See you on the other side." The chamber door shut and a pleasant smelling gas started to fill it up. Jewels started counting. "10... 9... 8... 7... ... Um, 6..." Jewels continued the countdown in her head but didn't make it to one.

Nio watched carefully as Jewels fell asleep. He would give her a few minutes to reach a deeper unconsciousness before proceeding. He turned to the other two in the room and fixed them with a serious stare. "You two are here because Jewels trusts you, just like she trusts me. I know that trust hasn't transferred to you yet, but this is very important. What I'm about to do is both science and magic. It is very delicate and I need full concentration for it. I've done it several times before on a smaller scale, but I need both of you to not interrupt me. No matter what."

"What happens if we do?" Azuma asked not taking his eyes off of Jewels in her chamber.

"A half performed spell is unpredictable. Could be nothing... but it could mean we ALL die. Point is, don't interrupt. Got it?"

"Got it," Azuma echoed.

Both of them looked to Vergil. "Got it?" he repeated.

"Yeah, whatever. I'm not staying to watch, though. I'll be out in the hall." Nio was actually glad to see him go. After spending so much time alone, having someone watch him work was unnerving. He wished Azuma would follow after him, but he was glued to his spot, staring at Jewels. *Smitten... poor fool.*

Nio took up a spot at the console between the two stasis chambers and looked at the readings. *Heartbeat: 20bpm, Breath Rate: Holding steady at 6/m, Temperature: 43 Degrees... 42... 41... 40. Optimum Temperature Reached.* "It starts," he told Azuma who took in a nervous breath and held it.

Nio flipped switches and pushed buttons; the order of them memorized in the muscles of his fingers. The machinery started to emit a low hum and the ground beneath him shook with their vibration. He opened his mouth in a quiet chant that he repeated over and over. His physical eyes closed as he opened himself up to the vision of the Nexus. Every detail came into focus; every particle of dust, every wave of sound, every sway of movement. His voice rose in pitch and speed. Every cadence more intense than the one before until the sound from it was palpable in his mind's eye. The machinery buzzed more furiously, seemingly growing in size until it enveloped him. One eye with one hand suspended above Stillborn and one eye with one hand suspended above Jewels; he dove into them both going deeper and deeper as their bodies grew to surround him. If he wasn't careful, he could get lost in here and never find his way back out.

Threads of them swayed before him. He identified the ones he needed and took ahold, pulling them out; one from Jewels, many from Stillborn. He pulled back, retreating from their cores, retreating from the machinery with the threads of their beings following behind. Then he began to knit. He wove the threads together in intricate patterns letting the natural pull of the threads guide his hands. They knew what they were supposed to be. They wanted to be whole again. The blending of Jewels's thread into Stillborn's was tricky for the timing. He had to weave it throughout before any one section solidified.

Quickly, he worked, drawing strength from the threads of Stillborn. He seemed to have an endless supply. It flowed into him filling him past capacity, then just as quickly out of him into the work of his hands... and the work of her heart. The ecstasy of it nearly drove him to distraction. The phrase, "drunk with power" flitted at the edge of his mind. Perhaps this is what it meant...

Vergil paced the hallway trying to ignore the din coming from the other room. Part of him said it was sheer madness, another classified it utter genius. If Jewels could bring Stillborn with... If she could prove she had followed through on the treaty with the Water Plane... it would go a long way with many of the people. It would bring back their hope. But still... having to conduct experiments in order to do it? Had Stillborn even been given the choice? If given the choice, would he have the capacity to make the decision himself?

How long had it been? Vergil needed a distraction. What was behind all these doors anyway? He stopped and opened the one closest to him, then swore at the shock of it falling backwards to the floor. Sylae stood there, sans clothing, hair wet and dripping. Vergil scrambled up holding a hand over his eyes. "Sorry! So sorry! *Fire and Ice!!*" But she didn't respond. He peeked through his fingers at her... She hadn't even flinched and took no notice of him at all. In her hand she held a brush and combed through her hair with it sending droplets of water down the length of her body all while staring intently at him. No... not at him; at *herself*! He noticed the frame of the

mirror at the edges of the door frame. He was looking out Sylae's eyes to what she saw... With relief Vergil took one more look, noting the sad expression on her face before hastily closing the door. "Deity, Jewels... what kind of freak show are you running here?" he mumbled to himself.

Well... if that was what Sylae was seeing... then these other doors should show... Vergil opened the one on the opposite side of the hall. He was welcomed with the scowling face of Nalyd. He held a knife and stretched it towards him. Vergil reacted on instinct, reaching to block the knife and grab Nalyd's wrist. But he passed right through and fell into the room instead. "Aaahhh!" The whole of the Geneforge Forum took shape around him. Nalyd still stood at the door, but it wasn't where a door was supposed to be. It opened up in the middle of Nalyd's shaping equipment. Vergil ran through, skirting the unsubstantial knife that was now covered in blood and slammed the door shut again. He leaned his back against it breathing hard. So who was Nalyd slicing up right now? ... With their eyes *open*?? He remembered Iffy and Saph coming towards the forum when they left. There had to be a good explanation for it, but still... Vergil shuddered.

He went back to pacing, too nervous to open another door. Near the end of the hall, though, he stopped at a door. For some reason, it stood out to him as different from the others. There were no special markings, no glowing hardware... but it just *felt* different without *actually* feeling different. Vergil hesitantly put his hand on the knob; no shock or tingling. Slowly he opened the door bracing himself for the vision behind... but it was black. Not a normal black, but a narrowing tunnel of black that seemed to go on forever. Without thinking he stepped inside. What was at the end of the tunnel? He thought he saw a light but what was it? He wanted to know... no, he desperately *needed* to know. Vergil started running towards the light. It couldn't be that far away, could it? With triumph he realized the light was getting brighter. He was getting closer! Just a little farther...

He barely registered the hiss that followed behind him, barely noticed the clacking as it came up beside him, barely felt the claws climbing up his leg until they dug into it. Vergil cried out in pain stumbling to his knees and elbows. The beast let go of his leg and slithered to the ground. It pointed its beak like mouth at Vergil's face and hissed again. "Get away from me!" Vergil took a swing at it but missed. It hissed at him again and reared to cling to the underside of his chest. Vergil cried out again though it didn't hurt. "Get off of me!" The thing circled him a few times while Vergil punched at it. When he landed a blow, the creature hissed and dug its claws in again briefly. Vergil howled but didn't dare take another swing, it had made its way to his belt. It scratched at his belt a few times before digging in with its beak. Vergil braced himself against the pressure ready to hit it again but it didn't hurt. In a moment it had jumped off of him and started crawling away. It turned to look at him and hissed one more time, a bit awkwardly from the Camirine held in its mouth.

"Hey!" Vergil yelled. "Give that back!" The snake like lizard took off and Vergil scrambled to his feet to follow it. "Come back here!" It ran towards the light at the end of the tunnel which grew brighter much more quickly as they neared it. Vergil finally burst through panting only to

see himself in the hallway again. The door slammed shut behind him. He turned to look and saw the lizard standing there protectively with the Camirine still between its teeth. Vergil dove for it but the lizard was fast. It ran towards the other end of the hall. Towards the din of the lab.

Azuma could do nothing but stare at Jewels even long after the window had frosted over to block her from view. The drone of Nio's chant was oddly comforting, testifying that everything was going as it should. A second sound intermingled with Nio's voice though.

Vergil was yelling... "Drop it you *infernal beast!*" Azuma turned in time to see Vergil burst around the corner chasing the dragon Nalyd had made for Jewels. It seemed to recognize him and crawled up and around his body until the two were face to face. It hummed at him clicking its tongue around a black gemstone held in its teeth. It was about the size and shape of a small egg and it pulsed with an inner glow. Azuma smiled at the creature but only for a moment. Vergil was infuriated past reason and launched himself at the pair. The dragon jumped down but Vergil didn't stop charging. Azuma had the wind knocked out of him as Vergil's weight slammed him into the floor. "Come back here!" he roared, pushing roughly off of Azuma's chest.

Between ragged breaths Azuma glimpsed the dragon climbing up the stasis cylinders Jewels was in with Vergil blundering after it. "Stop!" he tried to scream but it came out as a wheeze. With helpless horror, he watched Vergil chase the beast around and around. Vergil stopped running when he eyed a shelf. He ran over, grabbed a book off of it and threw it with more strength than precision. The dragon hissed though the book missed. It bounced off the chamber harmlessly but Vergil was already grabbing for another book.

"*Vergil! Stop!*" His voice was still too quiet to compete with Nio's. He staggered to his feet... he had to do something. Sentience reminded him how Vergil had reacted to it last night. Azuma drew it out and charged, sword raised. "Aaaaaarrrrrrrrr!"

Vergil was poised to throw his second book and let it fly before he finally took notice of Azuma. He blocked the sword to the side as Azuma plowed into him... but it was too late. A warning bell sounded and a cold fog spewed from a hose that had been connected to Jewels's stasis chamber. The door to the cylinder slid open automatically and the dragon disappeared inside. Nio's chanting faltered, then became a desperate screech. The air around him whipped into a frenzy. The glow around him turned from its brilliant blue to a fiery red.

"What have you done?!" Azuma screamed at Vergil who only stared mutely. His eyes were finally seeing his surroundings and the sight hit him just as hard as Azuma had.

Almost done... he was almost done. despite the energy supply from Stillborn, Nio was still starting to feel the drain of his efforts. This was the final stretch, though. He was almost done... So focused, he was, that he didn't notice the alarm ringing nor the coolant that filled the room in thick billows of white smoke. That is, not until the single thread from Jewels snapped.

His heart skipped a beat as reality filled his senses. *NO!! So Close!!* He tried to look for the thread that had broken but the fog obscured his view. Wildly he grabbed for a thread from Jewels;*any* thread. He snagged one and felt it burn under his fingers. Why did it burn? He didn't have time to think about it. He must finish quickly before the stress of it broke his concentration completely. Nio worked feverishly forcing the new thread into the last section of his creation.

With an odd sensation, Jewels's thread seemed to fight back but all of Stillborn's threads closed in around it, subdued it, and made it a part of themselves. With a final knot he finished his work and released all of the threads to return to their owners. The strain finally caught up with him. The wind stopped whipping, the platform stopped glowing, the words stopped flowing... Nio collapsed losing the battle to remain conscious.

Cold... cold... s-s-sooo cold...

Light... bright... t-t-toooo bright...

The light grew and grew drawing her in, consuming her whole, and refilling her at the same time. It knew her, it understood her, it claimed her as its own.

Awakening

By Jewels - Sep 24 2012

It was eerily quiet and much too still. "Jewels!" Azuma ran forward into the clearing smoke. He reached her stasis chamber and groped around inside. Hand finding flesh, he grabbed hold and pulled her out. She was so cold he could barely stand it but he wrapped his arms around her anyway.

"Is she okay?" Vergil asked quietly.

"I don't know." He answered while looking for signs that she was. "I can't tell. I don't think she was supposed to come out of the chamber before warming up."

"Let's get her warm then. Put her down and we'll flame up on either side of her."

"Okay..." Azuma laid her down gently as far from the cold fog as he could. He took off his cloak and wadded it up under her head like a pillow. Standing back a few paces opposite Vergil, they opened up to their elemental forms. Having a moment to calm down, Azuma decided to confront Vergil. "What was all that about anyway? What part of 'do not interrupt' translated into 'throw books at the delicate machinery' for you?"

Vergil's fire glowed brighter. It was harder to read him in this form, but his voice carried anger. "It was that stupid lizard-snake thing. It took... something from me. It's very important."

"You mean that stone it had in its mouth?"

"It's not just a stone!" Vergil snapped. "It's one of the most important artifacts in all of Fire Plane history and that... *thing* took it from me."

"What's so important about it?"

Vergil hesitated. "I... I don't know. No one really knows. Its secrets were lost hundreds of thousands of years ago. Only one text has remained intact that mentions it in my lifetime... and only the high priests have access to it. All I know is it's supposed to have its own magic."

"... Then how did YOU get it?"

"Twelve years of war. It's fallen into many hands since the castle fell. I don't even know if the text survived... Just that the Blue Bloods and I have been protecting it for the past five years. Keeping it out of enemy hands."

Azuma looked from the stasis chamber to Vergil back to Jewels. She stirred and turned, her marking glistening in the light. She sat up groaning, "Oh... my head..."

He was flamed down and at her side in a blink but his gaze was fixed on only her pendant. "Uh... Vergil? Isn't that the..."

"The Camirine!" Vergil flamed down and bent to reach for it but with disturbing quickness, Jewels grabbed his wrist and snapped her head around to stare at him. The tendrils on her body glowed brightly with the stone pulsing to her heartbeat. Vergil winced in pain pulling back on his arm. "Jewels... you're hurting me."

Then she blinked dazedly and dropped his hand. "I'm sorry... what?" She shook her head in confusion as the markings faded. "Where... Where am I? Nio? Where's Stillborn? Where's my son?!"

Vergil gave Azuma a meaningful glance while Jewels stumbled to her feet having spotted a crumpled form in front of the machinery. "Nio!" she ran to him and rolled him over while Azuma and Vergil walked up behind her. He stopped in his tracks when he saw what Nio was holding though.

"Nio, we did it," Jewels cooed. "My son!"

Nio... Nio wake up. Nio... She felt him stirring and brushed his bangs to one side. Nio, open your eyes.

Mmm?

Nio we did it... no, YOU did it. Nio, wake up so I can thank you properly.

With a momentary grogginess, the phrase seemed to stir an expectation in him and his eyes snapped open. What... what? I'm up. I'm up."

Look at him Nio. Isn't he perfect? Nio turned his head to see the young boy that huddled close to her side. Physically, they had decided for him to be 12 representing the years of the war, but mentally, besides his current innocence, he had the capacity for great wisdom and insight much beyond his years. "Say hello, Adennoe"

Nio half sat up from his bed, resting on his elbows, and regarded the boy. "Hello," he said in a shy but clear voice.

Nio looked on in wonder. "Nice to meet you, Adennoe" Tears came to Nio's eyes as the boy smiled. I was afraid I would fail for a minute there.

I had all the confidence in the world. She smiled at him as well but it only brought more tears.

I... I don't want you to leave. Must you go? The admission caught Jewels off guard.

It surprised her how much, being here with him now, she wanted to stay. His friendship had meant the world to her while her own world was in chaos. She found herself with an arm around his neck, her own tears down her face. An inner sense of duty answered his question without her thinking a word. I'll be back. I promise. We have more plans to carry out after all.

How long?

Not sure... but however long it takes, it'll seem like a lot less time to you. A few months maybe.

I could come with you... I know the heat protection spells.

I need you HERE. It'll be your responsibility to take care of Nioca while I'm gone. Keep him safe at whatever cost. Set his prime directive to his own health and safety. Tell him I said that. ...After taking care of him for so long it's hard to pass the torch to someone else.

I'll do my best, Jewels. ...And Stillborn?

Jewels turned around to see the stasis chamber where he still slept peacefully.
[ftjewels:n2h0aapo]Send him back to Nalyd... It's what he would want.[/ftjewels:n2h0aapo]

Nio lay back down on his cot still weak from the exertion. She hated to leave him while he was like this but an inner sense of urgency told her she must. People were dying every moment she

spared. Go then. Don't worry about me. I will make due and take care of the rest of them while you're away. Take care of yourself, Jewels. ...or at least let Azuma take care of you. She gave him a questioning glance. Don't tell me you haven't noticed.

Noticed what? That he's been nice.

Nio rolled his eyes at her. Here, allow me to demonstrate. With a loud voice he called out into the hallway, "Azuma."

Almost instantly he was in the doorway. "Yes? What is it?"

"I am charging you with the personal safety of Jewels while you are away."

"Nio!" Jewels protested but he ignored her.

"You must never let her out of your sight and attend her at all times."

"Nio!" she chided again. "Azuma, you most definitely do not have to do any of that. I wouldn't dream of asking..."

"Oh, but I want to!" Azuma broke in with a giant smile. "It would be my honor to be the personal bodyguard of Lady Jewels, Fire Lord of all the Plane." Jewels was left with her mouth hanging open while Azuma gave her a deep bow.

Nio was smirking on the outside and laughing on the inside. See? I told you so. Heh, heh. He'd bend over backwards for you even if it meant breaking his spine to do it.

It's not funny... It's not natural either.

Beguilement? I wouldn't rule it out. How it happened, though... Nio left the statement unfinished and addressed Azuma again instead. "Now, you must go. Quickly. Take her and give her every comfort she desires."

Jewels shot him a stabbing look, Nio! she chided one last time at his innuendo and inner laughter about it.

She put an arm around her son, brother of Stillborn, and guided him out of the room at Azuma's insistence. He looked from her to Nio to Azuma with big round eyes as deep a blue as the middle

of the sea. He had heard little of their dialogue but seemed to read the emotions floating around as easily as if they were words on a string. "You will miss him, mother?"

"Very much so. He is my best friend."

"Is he my father?"

She couldn't help but smile. In a way, he probably was, but she didn't want to confuse the boy. It wouldn't do to have him telling Prince Darius about his 'other dad'. "No dear, I'll be taking you to see your father very soon. Very soon, indeed."

Azuma couldn't believe his luck. He had been fidgeting ever since Jewels asked him and Vergil to wait in the hall while she said good bye to Nio. He waited just outside the door, anxious as the silence seemed to drag on. Vergil had said nothing more of the black stone at the nape of Jewels' neck either and it made him even more nervous.

He jumped when Nio called him inside, not knowing what to expect. But the opportunity just handed to him was more than wonderful. Now he had the best excuse to be everything Jewels needed him to be. He was so excited, that he didn't notice the folded up parchment he had been fiddling with had fallen to the floor. When they left, it was left behind.

Iffy sat up groggily with a hand to his head. "Mmm... where are we?"

"I... I don't know," Saph answered, yawning as she sat up. "I don't recognize the place."

Iffy's eyes turned towards the light that filtered in through a window. He got up to look out of it. "Ah, the Admin Tower."

"How'd we get here?"

"Last thing I remember, Nalyd said he had a cure for us at the Geneforge lab."

"Oh, yeah... his scythe thing scratched us."

"He must have brought us here to recover... or had someone else bring us here at least."

"That was nice of him. Let me check your back." He walked over and turned so she could lift up his shirt. She poked around where the cut had been. "Nothing, not even a red mark where the new skin should be. What about my shoulder?"

Iffy looked. "Same. Can't see a thing. That Nalyd, he does good work."

Saph nodded, yawning again. "But I'm still tired and so are you. Come back to bed. Administration can wait for a day."

Nalyd brought his fist down on the table in frustration. The jars and equipment there rattled the song of his rage. He just couldn't understand the results. He had taken samples from everywhere; from their tongues, from their eyes, from their livers, hearts, lungs... even from their reproductive organs. Everywhere! But the result was always the same.

Iffy was the same person as Saph who was the same person as the stranger that tried to kill him in the lounge. If it had been only Saph, he would have understood, partly... Saph was in disguise looking for Iffy and in a very bad mood about it. But with them both splayed open on his table for collecting meticulous samples, there could be no mistake this time. They were all the same person and Nalyd was at a loss wondering how that could be.

He set to pacing again, lost in thought. What he needed was a distraction from this puzzle so he could come at it again fresh later. Where was Stillborn? He started calling for his creation both verbally and with his essence. There was an answering call in his mind. Yes! There you are... Come to me! he commanded, pulling with all his mental might. Come creation! Come to me! I demand it! He could feel the response. The answering assent... no, *joy* at being reunited with its master. Only too late did Nalyd realize...

...it was not Stillborn that came running.

Who Kin You Trust

By Jewels - Oct 3 2012

Sal sat across from qUe while Reth and Eoli stood at each of their right sides. None of them wore smiles.

"You felt it?" Sal asked.

"I did," qUe answered.

"You know what this means?"

"I do."

"He trusts you?"

"He does."

"Then we need to make our move, and quickly."

"I couldn't agree more."

The pair stood and all four began walking towards the portal in the room; qUe and Reth just a step behind the others. Sal and Eoli never saw the light glint red off the tip of the daggers that plunged into their backs. Nor were they alive long enough to hear qUe's next words after the ecstasy of absorbing their life force subsided.

"Unfortunately, our move was a little different from yours. The plan is to keep Iffy safe from the likes of you, not betray the trust we worked so hard to get..."

Reth smiled and kissed qUe as they stood over the empty shells of their dead kin. "I don't know about you, but that put me in the mood for some celebrating."

qUe took his hand and pulled him out of the room. "Hmm... It's like you read my mind. I think it'll be a long, looong night of celebrating."

Nix of Kin

By Jewels - Oct 5 2012

Nix gathered her supplies, what little she needed, and set out for the Refuge once again. She held no doubt this time about where she would find Iffy. His burst of power had rippled across the whole of the multi-verse and it called to her. She hadn't realized how much power he had acquired throughout the years... he had definitely not shown her all of his power the last time they met. It was still only a fraction of her own acquired power but it made her a little nervous. His bonded partner would be just as powerful as him and the pair of them had a chance to overpower her if she wasn't careful.

Nix wasn't that worried, though. Iffy had made a huge mistake opening himself up like that. There were only four Zene left and the other two would be more nervous than she. They would *have* to team up against him if they wanted any chance to survive. Sal and qUe were gnats compared to Iffy's threat, and they likely didn't stand a chance against him either; even teamed up. But it worked so well last time to let them tire each other out before showing up and collecting the spoils.

Even if by some chance, Iffy did absorb both of their life forces, Nix still had her back up plan. All the life force of that lumbering beast at her disposal... she had to make it work. *She* would be the last remaining Zene! *She* would be the one to survive!

One Ring

By Jewels - Oct 6 2012

Sylae stood in front of the mirror longer than she had expected. The shower had done little to ease the sense of shame that Jewels's blood on her hands had stirred up in her. But here looking at herself in the mirror, she felt so... out of place. The therapy for her to accept her new identity had worked well enough but she had accepted herself at Jewels's side. She accepted herself because Jewels had accepted her.

Now she was alone... she couldn't help but think about how events might have changed if she had just gone to Jewels and asked her what was wrong. React first, ask questions later... that's the way she had always been... the way Will had always been. Always got him into trouble, too, and now she stood here. Alone. Staring at herself in a mirror. Out of place.

As she watched, she imagined another day spent looking in the mirror... or was she

remembering? She wore a white gown and smiling women rushed around her putting flowers in her hair. They preened and fussed and handed her a bouquet of white water lilies. She brought them up to her nose and could almost remember their smell. A man came in, teary eyed but smiling. She was smiling, too, as the man walked closer to stand beside her in the mirror. He looked very proud and bent to kiss her on the cheek. She was overcome by a feeling of gratitude and threw her arms around his neck as the vision faded.

Sylae once again saw only herself in the mirror, hair brush in hand, wet hair dripping down her back, and a tear streaked down her cheek. So *that's* what it was like to have a loving father. They had warned her during therapy that she might experience some memory resurfacing from the host body. She had the girl's brain after all. Would have been nice... to have a father proud of his son, or a mother at all. Maybe she wouldn't have been so quick to push Jewels away if she'd had any healthy family relationships to guide her.

Sylae left the mirror to get dressed. Feeling the depression of the day, she chose a black dress. The one she would have worn to the funeral if the pink one hadn't been delivered. She pulled her hair back securing it with a comb on each side. As if on auto pilot, she reached for the lipstick and eyeliner Jewels had given her during therapy. Without even thinking, she applied thick dark lines to her eyelids and rich auburn to her lips. Only when an alarm sounded from her RMM did she really look at what she was doing. Another memory, she realized; the memory of getting ready to go out day after day after day. The hands knew what to do and did it automatically.

Calmly, Sylae went to the RMM and shut off the alarm. It had only sounded for her because she had been the one to set it. It was an alarm announcing that Jewels had left Calamity Refuge. With trepidation she attempted to get into the code of the database. She was so relieved when she could that she blanked on what she had wanted to do with it. One thing had been confirmed at least... Jewels was the one who had locked her out.

Sylae was willing to entertain the thought that she hadn't done it on purpose. With her ring proliferating the way it had... there was no telling what side effects it might have. At least... at least now, Jewels was a safe distance from the database; where she couldn't interfere. It was for the best, wasn't it?

She put the RMM down. Satisfied that she could get in, there was nothing in the code as immediately pressing as what lay wrapped up on her desk. Jewels would be back, Sylae was sure. She couldn't stay away from her dryad tree forever. But when she did come back, Sylae would have to be ready. As much as Jewels accepted its presence in her body, the growth of the ring was parasitic. That it blocked Sylae from the database was proof of it. She HAD to find a way to get them off.

She unwrapped the bundle on her desk and stared at the wedding ring she... Will had given Jewels; still on the hand he had placed it on. Sylae shuddered feeling a little queasy from the

proximity. The first time she reached for the ring, she hesitated. A vision filled her sight. She stood opposite a man in a tux with a winning smile and eyes only for her. He held her hand in one of his and slipped a gleaming ring onto her finger. She gazed at it while her heart skipped a beat. That sense of security... of safety... of knowing she was his and he was hers no matter what... that they were one. The vision faded and Sylae thought she understood why Jewels had been so offended. It wasn't the ring but the promise... had Jewels really been fighting for that? Is that what Sylae has asked of her? And now that she had given up the ring... had she given up the promise as well? Sylae's stomach did a few more flips from the thought.

When her stomach calmed down she reached out to see if it was still connected to the hand. The second she touched the ring, though, the hand flexed. She gave a little scream leaning away from it, but settled down quick enough when it didn't move further. She poked the hand a few times to be sure. It was definitely dead but the ring...

Sylae touched it again and started when the hand balled up into a fist and rolled to the side. So the ring moved the hand when she touched it... why? Looking down, she noticed the left hand in her lap was balled up into a fist, too. She relaxed her hand and touched the ring. Jewels's hand relaxed, too, and laid flat on the table. The ring was responding to Sylae... but would it let her take it off the hand? Futilely, she tried to separate the two. The copper tendrils would not retract no matter how much she mentally coaxed them to, and no amount of physical force would break the tendrils off. In frustration she yelled at the ring out loud. "What am I supposed to do with you then?"

To her surprise, the ring glowed in pulsing white light. More tendrils grew from the ring and reached towards her. One snagged her finger and started wrapping around it. The feeling of power that surged up her arm was euphoric but her sense of danger won out. "Oh, no you don't!" Sylae wrenched her hand away throwing the hand to the floor. The tendrils writhed until it flipped the hand over to its palm. The dead fingers flexed and curled moving like a spider to crawl back towards her. Sylae screamed again from the unsettling sight. She grabbed a towel throwing it over the hand wrapping it up. The ring had a mind of its own... it wasn't safe! She had to destroy it now!

Sylae walked into the database core, Anamzas in one hand, small steel box in the other. She stood in awe for a moment. Had it always been this beautiful? The circular room shimmered in the baby blue light thrown off by the central cylindrical shaft of the core. The crystal covered walls rose five stories into the air reflecting the light to every inch of the room. Her black dress drew stark contrast to everything else.

Having unsuccessfully tried to destroy the ring in the same reactor she had made it in, Sylae had come here. The reactor just didn't seem to get the ring hot enough to melt it, but the core itself

should be able to. Not only producing the needed heat and energy for dissipation, but also being able to absorb the ring's energy once it was released. They were essentially the same energy, anyway.

Except for the Deseritian crystals... she wondered if they would be destroyed also. Seemed like such a waste but if the ring was attempting to assimilate another host on its own, the sacrifice was worth destroying the danger.

Putting her shielding into place first, Sylae turned to a console and began the process of unlocking the core. It felt good to actually be in the technical side of the Refuge again. She hadn't realized how much she had missed it until now. This was why she considered the Internet Plane her home... wasn't it? Once again she felt somewhat out of place, but it was only momentary as she got into the rhythm of the pass code.

It changed every hour being calculated anew by a formula she had invented. Twelve sets of twelve characters, the first dependant on the angle of the Internet Plane's sun relative to the tip of the tower, the rest dependant on a combination of the other calculations. The combination itself changed based on the outside temperature at the bottom of every hour. Sylae had never written down any of the steps for directly unlocking the core but had committed it to memory when she had made the Refuge. Truthfully, she had never opened it up before, nor thought that she might need to. If anything happened to her, the core could be destroyed or hacked, but no one would be able to tap into its raw power.

Intermittently, she got up and pressed the tip of Anamzas into what looked like a cup holder built into the console timing the pressure down to the second. She was keenly aware that any error would lock down the core for 24 hours. Finally, as the last set of 12 characters was calculated and entered, Sylae stood with her staff and thumped it on the floor three times. With each thump, she whispered a different spell and the blue crystal at the top glowed with orange, green, and purple light. The glow of the core echoed its change bathing the room in orange then green then purple and a quiet click was heard.

Sylae stepped to the core, opened the panel that had grown dark and carefully placed the whole steel box inside. As soon as the box crossed the threshold, arcing blue electricity connected with it and the inside walls of the core. If Sylae had not been shielded, she would have been electrocuted. Closing the panel, Sylae locked it back down. She did not intend to open it again... ever.

She returned to the console and began performing regular maintenance meant to exercise and revitalize the conduits of the inner core removing built up energy and matter. The ring was both and would dissipate along with the steel and flesh that was with it. First, a complete power up meant to stretch the conduits to their threshold limits, but really to melt down the box and ring. It was hard to imagine the room any brighter than it had been before, but she had to don the shaded

goggles lying on the console to even see the screen in front of her. Next, a super-sonic stir meant to scrape the walls of any clingy matter, but really to break apart the molecules of the box and ring. The core hummed and whined rising in pitch until the crystals on the walls shuddered so much they looked as if they might all shatter from the resonance. Last, an energy flush meant for redistributing an equal amount of energy to all the parts of the Refuge, but really to scatter the remnants of the ring and erase any programming that had caused it to malfunction. Sylae stood for this one. She began to chant, holding Anamzas high over her head. A spell of assimilation, of dissolve... a spell of undoing. After the initial *woosh* of the distribution, the room went silent... and the core went dark.

Sylae almost stumbled in her surprise. The room was pitch black except for the crystal of Anamzas though going from a room so bright to a room so dark left Sylae blind of its dim glow. "What the..." Her startled words echoed off the crystal walls. What had happened? It was like the entire core had just died. She hadn't done this type of maintenance since the new location... had she overloaded the conduits? Oh, Mozilla, she hoped not.

Too scared to move, she held her breath and counted out the seconds. Ten... Fifteen... Twenty... After 30 seconds, she was finally able to see the light of her staff and used it to turn towards the console. She pressed a few buttons in vain. The console was dead. It held no power at all. Sylae began to swear and kicked the console in frustration, "Work, you infernal thing!" As if in response a green cursor began blinking in the corner of the screen. She was too stunned to be relieved. Pressing more buttons didn't seem to do anything, though. She was about to yell at it again, when a dim green circle of light started traveling up the wall in front of her. Turning around she watched as a thin band started at the floor and traveled up to the top of the core. When it reached the top, it reappeared at the bottom to do it all over again. It started slowly but picked up speed and soon there were many bands of dim green light climbing up the core. The wave of light gave a ripple effect on the crystal walls distorting her perception of the distance between her and everything else.

As the green bands continued to climb, they grew in brightness, though darkened in color. The effect was odd as it seemed to actually stay the same color. Sylae watched in awe at her Refuge at work rebooting itself. At least that's what she thought it was doing... she had never done a reboot in the presence of the core before. When a bright red band appeared just above her head, though, Sylae began to worry again. Instead of climbing the core, it seemed to spin counter-clockwise. Sylae didn't know what to make of it until she glimpsed the wall behind the core. What looked like just a red band on the trunk of the core, was actually projecting words onto the crystal wall that seemed to spin the opposite direction of the band itself.

It was difficult to make out from where she stood so she turned around to the wall closest to her and read the words out loud. "Ran Jim ire men... that doesn't make any sense." Sylae squinted as the words seemed to grow bigger in response to her trouble. She gasped when she finally understood them... *'Ti mala'quo en ferran ji'miermen.'* They spun around her head; big, bold, accusingly blood red, the words that had been engraved on the inside of the ring. They continued

to grow in size and brightness mocking her and the promise she had made... the promise she had broken. The lights began to pulse in time with a pain that began in her chest. The words spun faster until they were just a blur of red around the room. Sylae stumbled backwards away from the words that constricted her heart. Anamzas clattered to the floor as she clutched her chest against the pain. The words seemed to follow her coming off the wall to surround her... to strangle her... to accuse, convict, and punish her all at the same time. She took two more steps away from the wall when her back hit the core. The resulting energy surge ripped through her body and drove her to her knees... the words echoed in her mind in a male's voice as loud as if they had been audible. *"Ti mala'quo en ferran ji'miermen! My devotion will last for eternity!"*

And then it was over. Sylae blinked in disbelief from her place on the floor. The database core shone brightly with baby blue light and hummed quietly as it normally did. The pain was completely gone. There was no evidence that it had ever happened aside from her and Anamzas laying on the floor. The crystal had become dislodged in the fall and sat askew in its holding place. Sylae scooted over to it and pressed it back into place. She got up from the floor and dusted herself off without need. After checking the core status on the console there didn't seem to be anything else to do. Everything was as it should be. Sylae left.

The Stone Has Her

By Jewels - Oct 8 2012

Jasmine had listened solemnly to the eulogy for Will, sat attentively as his replacement was introduced, and waited nervously when their arguments began. The dozen or so dryads that had come out to pay their respects for Jewels's sake had all skipped the banquet in favor of returning to the nourishment of their trees so Jasmine had waited alone. She hadn't known what to make of the final events, sitting dumbstruck in her chosen seat for a good twenty minutes after the last person left the platform and the last banquet attendee ran away in fright. The images replayed in her head over and over until one image stood out above the others.

When Jewels had been thrown and the magical barrier around her released, for only a split second... Jewels had blazed like the sun. Not just as bright, but expanding outward rapidly. By the time she finally gained enough sense to return to Nola, she couldn't help but feel that had Jewels not hit the tower, she would have engulfed them all.

Nola had been quite concerned, enough to confront Nana who had been codling Jewels since the wedding. Nana, though, found it so concerning that she called a meeting of all the dryads. 47... only 47 members of her race still existed. Only half of them showed up. The other half relayed through the leaves that they did not wish to ever set foot on this forsaken foreign soil. Alive they might be, but traumatized beyond being of any use.

Twenty-three including herself stood among the trees around Nana. Some had been older than her, some younger, but *ALL* agreed that their ways needed to adapt if they were to continue to survive. A vote was taken and all but five agreed that Jasmine would be head of their new counsel. Spokesperson for the dryads, per say. Part of her was honored, but part of her realized that most of them were only a little less afraid of circumstances than those who refused to leave their trees.

As Jasmine explained what she had seen to the others, Nana added some insight on Jewels's condition. The decision? ...to protect the remaining dryads by forcing a cure.

Jasmine waited with trepidation for Jewels to return to Nana. Once inside, Nana would hold her captive while Nioca was found and brought. It shouldn't be too difficult to do. According to Nana, if the new ArchAdmin could be persuaded that Nioca held the key to Jewels's healing, they need do nothing more than wait. When Nana held them both neither would be released until they agreed to complete the bonding... to complete the mating.

Jasmine shuddered anew at the thought. The trespass was so great... only utter betrayal of complete trust and love had caused the fire fever before. For only those who were completely trusted and loved and desiring to mate were ever let in to share a tree. That Jewels had been forced into the semblance of this trespass once was horrible... that Jasmine was about to help force it on her again was gut wrenching. She could only hope that Jewels would one day forgive them all. Against Nana's wishes, though, Jasmine had decided to allow Jewels the chance to choose to go through with it on her own. Jasmine knew she was reasonable and caring enough to do it... At least she hoped so.

Eventually the crunch of dead leaves and the rustle of live ones alerted her to Jewels's approach, but she did not come alone. Vergil and Azuma and a young boy carrying Jak came with. Jasmine hoped they wouldn't get in the way of what needed to be done. She emerged from Nola to meet them. "Jewels I have to talk to you."

"What about?"

"...your sickness. I saw what happened last night Jewels... I know what *could* have happened. We have to do something about it. Please for everyone's sake."

Jewels gave her an understanding smile placing a hand on her shoulder; the heat of it enough to make Jasmine flinch. "I am doing something about it."

Jasmine was so relieved! A huge weight lifted off her shoulders as she smiled and hugged her

childhood best friend. "Oh, Jewels. I knew you wouldn't let us down. Is there anything we can do to help? Anything?"

Jewels shook her head taking a step back. "Just take care of our people, Jasmine. I'm leaving for the Fire Plane."

"What? But... that's not going to help your illness. Leaving is not the solution, Jewels. What about Nana?!"

"I'll be back... some day."

This was not what Jasmine wanted to hear. It looked like they would have to force her hand after all. "But, Jewels..." Jasmine protested holding her breath as she placed a farewell hand on Nana's side. It was all the touch Nana needed to hold on, pull her in, and keep her there until the deed was done... but after a moment Jewels's hand came away.

She turned to the others and took their hands, "*TELEPORT!*". And then they were gone.

"Nana," Jasmine chided, "why didn't you hold her?"

The rustle of leaves came back but Jasmine didn't understand it. 'The stone has her,' didn't make any sense.

The Second Hand

By Jewels - Oct 15 2012

Nio rolled over on his bed. He had hoped to fall asleep again but Jewels's last instructions bothered him. Just give Stillborn back to Nalyd? The statement had seemed innocent enough, if it weren't for the lack of emotional concern she usually held for her son when in Nalyd's hands. Keeping Stillborn here away Nalyd would be ideal especially considering her long term plans of breaking his servitude to Nalyd. Who knew if this chance would ever really come again?

And then there was her last order for Nioca. There had been an undercurrent of emotion there as she entrusted his care to Nio. He had done it before... at least made sure that he followed the To Your Health protocol. That she was extra worried about leaving him this time transferred to something she wasn't telling him.

As long as he was thinking about it, he relayed the order to Nioca. *Unable to comply. Primary objective may only be changed by an Arch Admin.* Oh well, Nio didn't think Sylae would take kindly to someone changing Nioca's prime directive anyway. Easier to just keep an eye on him.

Nio looked at the time, almost an hour had passed. That meant Jewels was likely getting ready for another full day in the Fire Plane. Having a 24.3 time deviation was convenient in a way. Every hour that went by here, one day went by there. By noon tomorrow, she would have been there almost a month. It was comforting knowing that she would be getting a lot done while she was gone and returning relatively soon. How long would it take, though, to bring about the stability of her people? Months? Years? ...He had spent weeks at a time alone before when she had gone to the Ice Plane, but her return was never in question then. He could only hope it would go quickly.

Nio got up to stretch his legs, moving from his cot to pace the hall as he sometimes did when he was restless. It was so quiet in his head when she was on a different plane. Almost made it easier to think. Having made one round, a piece of paper on the floor caught his eye. He picked it up and unfolded it and unfolded it some more... and some more. The unusually thin parchment seemed to be folded an impossible number of times. When it was finally open he stared at it dumbfounded. It almost looked like the drawing of a man only so much more. Organs were drawn on in excruciating detail and an indecipherable language was written in tiny letters making notes on everything.

Nioca's past experience told him it was a diagram for shaping. Shaping a human? Could it be? He scrounged around in Nioca's memories for Stillborn's first form. The resemblance was uncanny. Apart from the drawing looking similar to what Stillborn used to look like, though, he couldn't make heads of tails of it. Nio entered his lab... his home... his prison... Well, not really. He could leave if he wanted to, but Jewels didn't want him to. So by choice he stayed hidden away. Walking up to Stillborn's stasis chamber, he rubbed away some of the frost and peered in. Why Nalyd had deviated so far to this hulking green mass was beyond him. He felt a sudden kinship with the monster within. Jewels had, in part, created them both and both were bred for other purposes. Both were essentially free to come and go as they pleased but both willingly stayed virtual prisoners at behest of their creators. He couldn't help but wonder if his desire to stay was not more by design than by his own volition.

Nio was about to let Stillborn out of stasis when the controls went suddenly dead, followed shortly by all the lights. "What the?..." He lit a magical light in his hand to see around the room with. *What's going on?* He sent the thought to Nioca expecting a report of a blackout or something but there was no reply. Nio reached out to Nioca's other senses. It took a minute to realize what he was seeing. Sunlight filtered in through a window landing a ray on one of Nioca's hands as it lay on the floor. The dust motes swirling around it suggested it had just fallen to that spot. *Nioca?* No response. *Nioca, get up. What's wrong?* Nothing except darkness as Nioca closed his eyes. Nio paid attention to the other senses. Smell? There didn't seem to be any... because

Nioca wasn't breathing. Sound? Nio could only barely make out a heartbeat ringing in Nioca's ears and it was slowing. The database was dead and Nioca was dying with it.

No! Nioca can't die... Nioca! Wake up! Breathe! Please, you have to! If Nioca died on his watch... Jewels would KILL him! Wait... No she wouldn't... She'd die with him no matter where she was. The urgency of her last commend suddenly held more significance. Nio felt helpless where he was, trying to rouse a dying Nioca with thought alone. Blessedly, the power came back on. He continued to prompt Nioca hoping that the returning power would be all he needed... but his heartbeat still stopped. *Screw this!* He was not about to stand idly by while Nioca and Jewels died.

Nio ran to the portal and turned a dial. He had never left the sanctuary of this room before, but now he had to. *Hold on, I'm coming!* He jumped through the portal and came out the 13th floor portalator. The sensation left him dizzy and trying to catch his breath on the other side. *Oh, I'm so glad that worked... I just wish I didn't feel like I wanted to hurl. How do they do this all the time?* There was another sensation, too, that he couldn't quite put his finger on. It was like... he was now empty. As soon as he could walk without falling over, Nio bolted across the hallway and knelt at his fallen twin's side. Nioca was bathed in a sickly green light glowing from all the monitors. "Heal!" Nio cast the spell bringing a bright cyan light to his hand and Nioca's body, but nothing changed. Nothing needed healing... He just... wasn't alive anymore.

No... No! "NO!" Nio drew the energy in from all around him and sent a shock into Nioca's chest. His body jumped in response but nothing else. He did it again and again as the monitors around him started flickering. A resurrection chant spilled from his lips... one he didn't even realize he knew. Electricity crackled and arched from the monitors to Nio's hands to Nioca's body; the same sickly green as the monitor glow. Nio could feel the energy flowing through him almost like it had from Stillborn to Adennoe. The power was there... great stores of power waiting for a use. He realized what it was that had made him feel empty. It was the lack of the Blades Nexus at his command. Feeling the power of the Refuge brought back a modicum of it.

Nio pulled as much as he could from the machine and channeled it into Nioca. It wasn't exactly life force energy but... life it gave. Nioca let out a loud pained gasp and drew a few strained breaths. Nio was ecstatic but he wasn't satisfied yet. He poured more and more of the energy into Nioca's frail body. Never again would a simple power outage threaten Nioca's life...

More... more... Wait, no, too much... Nioca's body wasn't built to hold so much energy. His heart raced with trying to assimilate it all. His breath quickened in exertion and his brow beaded with sweat. Nio tried to take back the overflow but the spell seemed to only go one way. Instead he let go of the enchantment and picked up Nioca's head, placing it in his lap.

If he were in the Blades Nexus he could do it... He would just have to take Nioca there. The next problem, though, was that the portalator would not take them back to the Nexus. Nio had tapped

into the sending stream but the portalator was not designed to tap into other portals. He was going to have to carry him back... and without being seen. Maybe the tunnels would get him close enough. Barring that, they'd at least keep them out of sight as they traveled. Nio hefted Nioca and walked to the portalator setting it for the lower levels.

An alarm started to beep from the monitor across the hall... "Oh, bother..." Not being able to check what it was with Nioca in his hands, Nio gently slid him through the portal while he took care of it. Nio checked the screen and saw a list of commands. Great... Sylae had sent in a bunch of orders because of the power outage. If she didn't get a report back she'd likely get suspicious, but Nioca needed attention quickly... Well, a few of these wouldn't take too long to do. Just a bit of button pressing...

Two minutes later, Nio was back at the portalator about to step through when Sylae came through instead bringing them face to face. "Oh," she exclaimed in surprise. "What are you doing over here?" Nio froze. He didn't know what to say or do. In his silence, Sylae pressed on. "Did you get the reports I sent for?"

"Uh... Affirmative. Reports are compiling and being sent to your PM box."

Sylae smiled winningly. It took all he had not to smile back. *Don't show emotion...* he reminded himself. "Good, good. And you're next to the portal, why?"

Nio tried to think fast. He really needed to get Nioca to the Nexus. "Uh... Critical maintenance needed in sector P8 due to blackout."

"Oh... well, just send a bot. I want you to do a comprehensive check of all Refuge systems."

Stay calm... just think... "Negative. Maintenance requires opposable thumbs." Nio wriggled his thumbs up in the air to make his point.

"Really, well how about I take care of it? You can get started on that check."

Nio nearly ripped his hair out. What would it take to get rid of her? He didn't have time for this! Forgoing all formalities, Nio remembered Jewels's prime directive for Nioca. That he not let anyone get in the way of his health and well being. He figured this counted. "Primary Directive demands immediate attention. Move aside, now." When Sylae did not scoot over quick enough, Nio pushed her out of the way and stepped into the portal. Quickly, to prevent himself from being followed, Nio turned around and shut down the lower level portalator. Nioca still lay on the floor in obvious distress. Nio chided himself for even taking those two minutes to run the reports Sylae wanted. Nioca was too important for that.

Nio hefted the shaking form over his shoulder and shuffled as fast as he could down tunnel 12. About half-way down, he felt the all-too familiar power of the Blades Nexus and immediately pulled the two of them into his lab.

Logical Logistics

By Jewels - Nov 25 2012

Nalyd was tired of looking for Stillborn. The other members had obviously lied to him. Vergil... Jewels... no one could be trusted. Luckily Nalyd never relied on trust, or rather always had a contingency plan. He spoke a few arcane words to reveal a magically concealed safe in the corner of the lab. He opened it and took out his interactive diagram of Stillborn. It was still in working order showing a large list of stats alongside a depiction that mimicked his creation's real time movements.

The picture showed it sleeping soundly, only... was it standing? Temperature: 40 degrees Celsius, Heart rate 13bpm... Both were much too low for normal sleeping. No. stillborn was in stasis.

A blind rage filled him at the realization. Someone else was experimenting on *Nalyd's* creation! *HOW DARE THEY?!*

The rage filled his vision and other senses until, blinking, he came back to reality. His lab was in shambles. Not that it had ever been in good repair but now fresh scorch marks smoked on the walls. His lone chair was in splinters across the room and the tomes on his bookshelf sizzled and popped underneath an acidic goo.

That's quite enough, came the Rot's thought. *We cannot finish our creation if we have no lab to make it in.*

Nalyd's limbs jerked to life as a quick creation was drawn out of his essence. "Clean up this mess," his voice commanded the shaped humanoid, though it had not been of his own will.

Now let's get back to finding our creation.

Nalyd cast about for the diagram again, finding it on the floor behind himself. The edges were singed by flame but it was otherwise intact. "Show Nalyd a map," he said and the drawing of

Stillborn disappeared to be replaced with a crude map of the Refuge. Nalyd squinted at it but could not make out any indication of where Stillborn was. "Where is Nalyd's creation?" The map seemed to phase and shift only to solidify on the same image as before. "Zoom in!" he yelled in frustration. The map hesitated for a moment then phased out to nothing.

It took the Rot's steadying to keep him from destroying the diagram on the spot. He was still too angry about the unauthorized use of his creation to think straight. *Calm yourself. The location is protected. Where might a protected location be on this isle?*

Nalyd could only think of two possibilities. "Nioca's citadel or the Administration Tower," he seethed out loud. One of them held his precious creation and he would get it back if he had to rip apart every brick to find it. And *then* whoever had experimented on Nalyd's creation would be found and killed... slowly.

Sylae stared at the console in frustration. As relieved as she was that nothing seemed to have changed from the database reboot, there were still hundreds if not thousands of errors screaming in red at her. It looked as if Jewels'd had her hand or mind in almost every single file and the database was demanding each error be handled manually. Even then other errors would often block the fixed files from being saved. Sylae didn't know where best to start and after having a dozen fixed files be rejected, she had little desire to try any more by hand.

A knock on the door distracted her for a moment. "Come in." A simple bot opened the door and hovered at the entrance. "Ah, good. You have my coffee?"

"Negative."

"Uh, why not?"

"Ligrev is not at the lounge."

"What?!" Sylae was on her feet in reflex. "Why ever not? No. Don't answer that." She began to pace as she thought out loud. "She's only programmed to stay at the Lounge." She gave an inward groan. Maybe the Refuge reboot HAD done some damage. "I don't even have a marker for her in the who's online screen. She's not an actual member." The bot hovered silently waiting for either a command or a dismissal. The most likely cause was that the blackout had destroyed Ligrev's program and the reboot had not restored it, but on the off chance... "Take a dozen bots and search the island for her. Hopefully she didn't just disintegrate. I don't want to have to create her again from scratch."

As the bot left Sylae slid down in her chair with a grunt. "Ugh, as if there weren't enough things for me to fix." The thought of having to rewrite Ligriv's code was one straw too many for her mental back. She had been glad to be back into the technical side of the Refuge but now she just felt tired. Why should she stress herself out so when she had bots that could fix the Refuge for her? With a few quick strokes Sylae assigned all of the database error fixes to Nioca. He could deal with all the screaming red errors and Sylae would retire to her bedroom. Just a little nap... until her eyelids were not so heavy.

Nioca stirred on the cot. His eyes snapped open and he struggled to sit up. *"New administrative orders: must fix database."* A firm hand on his shoulder easily pushed him back.

"Hold on. Slow down. You're in no shape to do anything but rest."

The voice sounded like his own as if he were talking to himself and somewhere in the back of his mind the statement registered as true. His physical body was burning with fever, his muscles ached in weakness, his stomach roiled with nausea from his attempt to move, his vision blurred and his mind worked slowly through a fog. Nioca was indeed in no shape to do anything but rest... and yet the new administrative orders blaring in his mind took precedent with their priority. The safety of the Refuge was his primary objective and it needed his attention. He attempted to sit up again, attempted to do his duty but the hand had not left his shoulder and the weight of it was more than he could currently lift.

As if in answer to his thought, his voice sounded again. "No. Your current health compromises the safety of the Refuge. Attempting to fix the database while not in good health has a high probability of introducing errors to the code."

The statement again rang true in his mind. He could barely see, barely move, barely think straight. Fixing the database now would go against his primary objective to keep the Refuge safe... and yet the Refuge still needed to take priority. He could not reconcile the two. *Error... error... m-must fix-f-f-fix error...* He blinked his burning eyes which caused tears to streak down the sides of his face. A gentle hand dabbed them away with a damp cloth and it finally registered that he was not alone.

"I have a solution." A solution to the error? He needed a solution. Nioca turned toward the sound of the voice and saw himself through blurred eyes. He was going to tell himself the solution. He could trust himself. "Create secondary objective; the health and safety of Nioca. Transfer primary objective with necessary access to Nio. Nio will fix the database. The primary objective will be fulfilled by Nio. Replace primary objective with secondary objective."

Processing the statement was difficult in his current condition. His clarity of mind waned. It would make sense to take care of his body first. He could not risk any mistakes while in this condition. The only way to ensure the safety of the Refuge would be to ensure his own health and safety first. And yet... something nagged at him. Finally he came up with his argument. *"Only the ArchAdmin may change the primary objective."*

Logical words came back to him from himself. Logical words that he trusted. Logical words that made sense. "You are not changing the primary objective. You are delegating responsibility of the primary objective to an able body. The secondary objective will replace your current primary objective once delegated to Nio."

Nioca could not argue with the logic. Yes... yes this would satisfy both objectives. Nioca would be able to rest and the Refuge would be fixed. *"Order accepted. Secondary objective created. Primary objective transferred to Nio. All access granted. Primary objective replaced with secondary objective."*

"Good, good. Now go to sleep. You need your rest. The Refuge will be taken care of while you sleep." Yes. Sleep was needed. Much, much sleep. His health demanded much sleep. Nioca closed his eyes and drifted off unaware of the hand still on his shoulder or when it lifted off to take leave.

Hiding in Plain Sight

By Jewels - Nov 26 2012

Nio shook his head at how easy it had been to gain full access. After making sure that Nioca's body was in an acceptable balance with his new energy stores, Nio gave him a sedative that would probably last through the night. Nioca's disorientation had been a real stroke of luck and Nio wasn't about to waste a second of it.

After a quick 'Who's Online' check to make sure he wouldn't be seen, Nio practically flew through the portal back to floor 13 and Nioca's normal post. Before any suspicions could be roused he delved into the security code and made a provision to have Nioca's marker ghost his location while he was above ground. As soon as he was in the lower levels, though, the marker would jump to the protected room of Nioca's Citadel. If anyone saw it happen, they could be led to surmise that Nioca had adjusted the portalators to take him directly to his citadel as needed. All he had to do was make sure he never had reason to be in the lower levels with anyone. Still at risk of being discovered, but it was minimal.

He wrapped the coding in several read-only modules with deceptively mundane variable names and locked the central one down completely. An alert on each layer would give Nio sufficient time to get back to safety if Sylae ever went looking for it. Feeling sufficiently hidden himself, Nio made plans to start hiding Jewels. Of course, he didn't plan on spending weeks and weeks tracking down and editing every single file that Jewels had altered in order to fix the database. Instead he was going to be as underhanded and sneaky as he could be.

First he created another type of member. Instead of a 'Regular' member, Jewels was going to be a 'Regular ' member. The space behind the name was invisible in all but pixels. He then gave her account back all the database access that an admin has, though he didn't give her any forum moderation abilities. Nio made sure to steer clear of that access since the names of forum moderators could easily be seen.

The next part was going to be a bit trickier. He needed to make sure that Sylae never noticed the odd access or altered it in any way if she did. He looked through all the available member numbers that were close to Jewels. Luckily, Will had done many puppet account purges in his day so it wasn't that difficult to find an empty spot just two numbers over. He created a dummy account in slot number 19 transferring all of Jewels' old posts over to the new account with a script. This account stayed a regular member account and by all outside appearances, WAS Jewels. The real Jewels, though, with her new account type still resided over in slot number 17. Nio did some fancy glitch producing coding so that when called up, #17 just looked like a regular old deleted account. For good measure, he changed her username to 'Information' and deleted all personal information related to the account.

He again made provisions in the security for the new account marker to ghost Jewels when she was present and forwarded all of her future posts to the new account. For all intensive purposes, the real Jewels was invisible and would just be wearing a Jewels suit from now on.

Now that Jewels' account had database access again, Nio tested all of the features that had been giving errors before and was pleased to find them all in working order again. He didn't especially want Sylae thinking she could change any of Jewels' essential protocols so he locked them down to read-only for all but Jewels' account type. Any attempt to change one would give an error reading: "File cannot be altered without introducing critical systems errors. Action cancelled." It, no doubt, would annoy Sylae to no end but without any other database errors, she didn't have much to complain about.

Nio glanced at the time. It was nearly 3 AM. That had been a really long day. He stretched and yawned and turned to the cot in the corner of the room. It would be just as comfortable as the cot in Jewels' lab... and it didn't already have someone else sleeping on it which was a plus. And it was right here... just a few steps away... Nio laid down and closed his eyes. He was asleep in less than 5 minutes dreaming of database code and hide-n-seek.

To Your Health

By Jewels - Dec 11 2012

Nioca blinked at the ceiling memorizing its contours out of habit. He could not remember the last time he had slept so soundly, or woken to such peace. The errors of the Refuge were gone; Nio had fixed them and now slept soundly somewhere. The unending urge to maintain the Refuge was also gone; he had transferred the responsibility to Nio. A small process in the back of his mind mulled over the circumstances of the transfer but it mattered little now. It was no longer his prime directive to care for the Refuge and, since all was well, there was no need to change the status quo.

His health was more important now. Rest was good for his body so he continued to blink at the ceiling in pure contentment. There was something different about him from yesterday, he could feel it. Truthfully, he couldn't remember ever feeling better. Yesterday his body had been wasting away; other than following the To Your Health protocol, he had only done the bare minimum to ensure that his body remained functional.

But now... he felt strong, invigorated and revitalized. He brought his hands up to his face to examine them. Instead of the frail, bony fingers and protruding knuckles of yesterday, his hands were filled out with healthy, firm skin. He flexed his arms experimentally and was pleased to feel strong muscle stretching his sleeves instead of the wiry limbs he'd had 24 hours ago.

Nioca tried to process how it had happened. If he was to maintain his health, he should know what event had so drastically transformed him so effectively in a single day. Was it a repeatable process? Searching through all of his memory banks though, he could not find the events of exactly what happened.

The last memory record he held was the Refuge database having a fatal error... and it had killed him. In an odd way, he knew that he was already dead before he had fallen from his chair... before he had stopped breathing. Before his heart had stopped beating, he had been dead.

And then he had been alive again. With Nio sitting beside him, he had been alive; more alive than he had ever been. So alive it was killing him again. Yes, the thought was not very logical but he could not process it more accurately. He had been *too* alive for his body to handle. The condition had corrupted his memories from then to the point where he had transferred the prime directive to Nio. He would have to query Nio when he awoke.

It was odd to be musing. He normally had routines to run or errors to fix or reports to create, but

now he had nothing that he needed to do. On second thought, he needed to use a restroom. Nioca sat up slowly. Every movement sent his mind an analysis of the things around him; the smooth brush of the blanket falling from his arm, the stir of the wind across his legs as he swung them over the edge, the coolness of the stone floor beneath his bare feet... everything was amplified. Even his own heart beat louder in his chest. He blinked a few more times realizing his vision had improved as he read a little note card propped on the table across the room. Only a few of the words were visible from the angle where he sat so Nioca stood, bracing against the rush of blood pumping harder in his veins. He crossed the room in a half-dozen steps and picked up the note. It was from Jewels addressed to Nio:

No words can express how much I appreciate all you've done for me, and all I know you will do. I'll be back as soon as I can. Take care of him, Nio. He'll need you now more than ever.

With Love, Jewels

So Jewels had instructed Nio to care for him... Yes, that was predictable given her tendencies. She had cared for his health when no one else had. Illogical, as it always had been, but predictable.

A slight buzz caught Nioca's attention, so he set the card down and turned back to view the room. He could feel something else change. The very air around him seemed charged and the hairs on his arms stood on end. The buzz turned to a low hum in his ears and every nerve bristled with anticipation.

He heard her before he saw her. She was chanting a spell; a spell of protection. Before he could see her, she was weaving the protection around him tight and strong; a spell to last weeks. Her face appeared before his vision first, lips moving in time with the spell he heard. He could feel the heat of her before her body appeared not an inch away from him. The electricity of the room crackled between the two. Her outstretched arms wrapped around to his back; the touch burning his senses without pain. Her spell complete, she whispered other words into his ear. The sensation of her breath on his neck... so overpowering, he almost didn't process what she said.

"Nio, I need you! *Teleport.*"

And They Did

By Jewels - Dec 12 2012

The world ripped through him, or he ripped through the world, or both. It wasn't necessarily painful, but it wasn't pleasant either. He had been through enough portals to be familiar with their prickling irritations but with his senses heightened, as they were, he felt them all the more. The contrasting refuge under her touch also stood out, as her body shielded him from the between world elements. Perhaps she felt the protection, too, at least instinctively, because she had tucked her nose down into his chest for the duration, the whole six seconds of it.

At journey's end they were surrounded by light; red and orange and all variations in between. The constant movement of shifting and mixing light was disorienting. She, also, had turned to light. Her skin rippled in blood red flames except for the white tendrils that snaked over her entire body; bright enough to shine through the thin sheen of orange flame that appeared to be her clothing. When she looked up at him, her eyes shown with brilliant light. Only the gemstone at her neck burned brighter.

But something was wrong... very, very wrong. She must have sensed it, too, because she asked him, "What's wrong?" He stared at her, unable to answer, because he hadn't yet identified what it was. "Are you hurt?" His prime directive activated, overriding his previous process. He checked his senses for pain but found none so he shook his head.

Another voice stole her attention, though he didn't turn towards it. "Glad you made it back so soon, but we can't stay here. They'll be on us at any moment."

"How long was I gone?" she asked.

"Only about 20 minutes, but once they figure out our general direction, it won't take much for them to guess we're here."

He heard the words... but he couldn't process them. They didn't seem to make sense, though he knew they should.

Her eyes were staring at him again and her hand pulled gently on his arm. "Come on. We have to go." She gave his arm a tug but he didn't move. She tugged again but his feet remained rooted. Concern etched into the corners of her eyes when she looked at him again. "Nio?"

Something finally clicked. That was not his designation. "Error," he heard himself say; saw the

surprise set into her features and stance. Her breath caught, her grip on his arm tightened, and her heartbeat quickened. He could feel it throb in her hand and hear it boom against her chest and see it as a vein above her clavicle quivered against the rest of her flame.

"What in oblivion is wrong with him?" The quick movement to his right and agitated voice set off an inner alarm though he could do nothing but look at her; had *only been able* to look at her since she appeared. She stepped in closer and raised her other hand protectively against the voice.

Her own voice changed in quality, barely perceptible, but it was there. Higher pitched... tighter... yet softer. "He's not Nio. He is Nioca."

She named him and his designation fell into place as if he had misplaced it. She... she... what was *her* designation? His query came back empty. No... his query did not come back at all. "Error," he said again with more urgency.

Jewels looked from Nioca to Vergil and back. She was so scared she could barely think. She could hardly guess why Nioca had been in Nio's quarters, but whatever the reason, he was here now... severed from the Refuge database and she had no idea what it was doing to him. He seemed immobilized at least.

"Deity, I have to take him back!"

"No way," Vergil snapped. "There's no time. If you could get back in *five* minutes it would be too long. You know that after this stunt they're going to have a constant guard on this house."

"Then I'll calibrate a portal to bring me back somewhere else."

"And how long is that going to take you?! One hour? Two? Best case scenario, if you do it right, we might see you again next week. We don't even have two days. The execution is tomorrow!"

"I know!" she yelled without meaning to. "I know," she repeated with a forced calm. "But Nioca needs the database at the..."

As if he had just now realized it, Nioca interrupted her with an increasingly urgent statement. "Unable to contact database. Error... *Error. Unable to contact database.* Database not found...*Error. Database not found!*"

"I know, I know," Jewels tried to soothe him. "Database connection will be reestablished soon." Thankfully, the urgency in his eyes calmed at that.

Unfortunately, Xelgion burst through the door with an even greater urgency. "They're coming! We have two minutes. We move *NOW!*"

"Follow me!" she instructed Nioca, but he wouldn't budge.

"I'm not carrying him!" Vergil scoffed.

"Leave him!" Xelgion huffed. "If he's too dumb to move, he's a liability."

"No!" Jewels' head shot up, incredulous at the very idea. She squeezed her eyes shut to concentrate. There had to be a way to get through to him... and then she felt it... felt him; his mind, reaching and open. He was searching for his connection to the database. She opened her mind towards his but he recoiled. She was not the connection he was looking for... but dammit, she was the only connection he had. She'd have to make it work. "Nioca, I am the database. Connect to me!"

He looked confused. "Error..."

"The database has moved!" she tried desperately. "It's up here," she pointed at her head. "Connect to the database, Nioca!" She threw her mind wide open, hovering as close to his awareness as he'd let her. The seconds ticked by excruciatingly slowly.

"We don't have time for this!" Vergil bellowed throwing open the door.

"Out!" Xelgion commanded.

Frustration rippled through her at his hesitation. She would carry him out herself if she had to.

"What is your designation?" he finally asked.

"Jewels!" she exclaimed a little too loudly. "Designation 'Jewels!'"

She started when his eyes glowed green momentarily then gasped as his mind descended on hers with the force of a tidal wave. He immediately started going through her knowledge as if

cataloguing it. Images flashed in front of her eyes in quick succession. **Stop!** she managed, and he did. **Your life is in danger! Run!** she thought fiercely, and he did.

He had stopped processing for a long time, only changing his actions as he was given new commands. *Turn left, turn right, slow down, stop, hide, quiet, run, jump, duck, run, run, run...* It had been a lot of running and he had positively noted his new found stamina.

Eventually they had come to a simple room at the end of a non-descript alleyway where others had waited for them. The room was small and cramped holding over a dozen flames before their arrival. It was insufficient room to be comfortably seated. Jewels had pointed him to a patch of floor against the wall and instructed him to sit and observe, so he had.

Jewels talked animatedly with the others about plans for stopping the execution to be held tomorrow. At the time, he had only gleaned from their conversations that many allies were going to be killed publically by the leading faction they called the Pure Bloods. Hundreds of them would be there to watch this crushing blow to the Blue Bloods' hope, because they held captive the proposed future heir of the fire plane, Jewels' son, Adennoe; and his father, Prince Darius.

Nioca had listened to plans that were very risky and that held little chance of success. In fact, there was a much better chance that they would all be killed in the attempt. It was difficult to filter through the emotions that came with Jewels' thoughts on the matter. She was confident in their ability but doubted herself at the same time. One moment she was overly optimistic, and the next, she saw the futility of it all. Through it all, her fierce determination won out over everything. She would not abandon them.

The conversation had then turned to himself and his part in the rescue. Their voices had hushed, but he had taken in every word that Jewels heard, spoke or thought. Xelgion had reiterated that his presence would be a liability while Jewels was adamant that he not be put in harm's way.

Vergil had whispered her a question out of the others' hearing. "Won't he be in danger anyway if you're in the thick of it? Doesn't he die when you die?"

Her flash of anger had been severe but her response had been a whispered calm. "And the reverse is also true."

Vergil seemed to accept this motivation of self-preservation. Nioca, however, saw her thoughts and her fears were more of himself being injured, in pain or tortured. If they died, she didn't want him to feel it. Still illogical... as were the rest of her roiling internal emotions.

Night came too quickly, the planning was cut short; their chance of success was minimal. They all found a square of floor to lie down on. Jewels had leaned against the wall next to him and told him to rest. She slept now, head lolling to one side.

Nioca was not tired, though. Instead of sleeping, he went through Jewels' memory banks more thoroughly. He found that much of what she knew was already stored in his own memory; he had just forgotten the paths to the information. There was some new stuff, too. Everything she had experienced since her de-adminning was new. It had only been a couple of days for him, but for her, it had been almost a month.

She had arrived with her son and sent for Darius right away. He had accepted Aden as his son, their joint heir, and agreed to help her end the civil war of her people. There had been a ceasefire at the news that she was alive. The factions had finally agreed to meet together at peace talks. Finally after 12 years of bitter fighting, it seemed the Blues and the Pures would put their differences aside to live in peace. Both sides shook hands and a treaty was signed.

But the celebration that followed had been a trap. The pure bloods were not ready to accept such a mixed species as their future heir. They had not been happy when Cinead had only bed women of other species, but were willing to suffer Jewels' half-breed rule hoping that future generations would be more and more fire. She, at least, looked like a normal fire elemental when flamed up. They could pretend. But Aden was too much for them. Too different, too foreign, too alien for them to accept as a future leader no matter the social benefits.

Jewels had blacked out during the attack. She held no memory of most of it and awoke among the remaining blue bloods and Vergil. Azuma, Darius, Aden, Jak; all gone. When she asked what happened, they told her she had fought viciously and with incredible strength. They had all come to the conclusion that the Camirine had protected her. None understood what it was capable of, but they knew it was powerful and unpredictable.

Jewels had hoped that Nio would be able to communicate with her if it happened again... guide her to rescue those captured and if not, he was formidable enough as a fighter to help in the battle. Now, though... now she did not hold out much hope. Hope was illogical anyway. More likely, they would all die.

She was dreaming. She was aware enough to know she was dreaming. She'd had this dream before and now felt detached from it as if she were watching herself have it over her own shoulder. It was a good dream, but it made her sad because she knew it was only a dream. As if in response, the dream changed; became more real. She could feel the warmth of strong arms

wrapping around her. She could hear the beat of a heart echoing in a chest under her ear. She could smell the scent of mint and musk and sweat. She was his and he was hers, completely. Such a good dream... she wished fiercely that it was real.

"But it is real." The husky voice in her ear startled her awake. The same face from her dream stared down at her now.

What are you doing?! She struggled against him but stopped at his inner confusion.

Is this not what you want? I am yours completely, programmed to do whatever you ask.

As sad as the dream had been when not real, Jewels found this so much worse. Tears of flame blurred her vision and left wavy distortions down her cheeks that she saw through Nioca's eyes. She realized that the brightness of her eyes was hurting his, so she flamed down to corporeal form. Human tears rolled down human cheeks to sizzle on the flaming floor.

She spoke aloud to emphasize her sincerity, "No. No, Nioca, this is not what I want. I do not want you to be a slave to anyone or anything. I want you to think for yourself and make your own decisions; to do what you want to do and say what you want to say. I want you to be the man you used to be before your humanity was stripped away by the Refuge, and do all those crazy, ridiculous, hard-headed, irrational, brilliant things you used to do."

She watched him frown as he processed it. She frowned wishing he didn't *have* to process it.

"I used to hate you," he stated matter-of-factly. "I used to hate all of you. You killed my family... no... not you, but one of your kind. I... I hurt you because of that." Jewels nodded in encouragement. "You want me to hate you again? ...to hurt you again? ...to kill your kind?"

She cringed at his thought process but was glad for it. If he was considering such things, she might actually be getting through to him. "No, I don't want you to hate me or my kind, but I *do* want you to have the ability to hate who you choose to hate. Does that make sense?"

"The distinction is discernible, but it is highly illogical of you to want that. It is a predictable trait you have." She watched him mull it over more, going through scenarios in his head, revisiting her memories of him and how he used to be. She could only wait and hope. "This will take some time, " he stated. "You should rest for tomorrow."

"Oh, of course." She looked at the empty square of floor beside him. "Uh... you can let go of me now."

"No." Jewels looked up at him quizzically and he stared back at her. "I don't want to." She couldn't help but smile. "Lie down and go to sleep," he instructed, and she did.

Freedom...

The word that came to his mind was freedom, and yet he knew it was not a complete fit. It was only a reminder of what freedom had felt like... before.

Thinking for himself was a lot more difficult than just following commands, and much more complex also. He remembered how stressful making his own decisions had once been. And yet he had done it for most of his life. He could do it again... if it was what she wanted. Because whether she wanted it or not, he was completely hers. It was a fact from the moment she said her designation. It swirled in his head with glowing green certainty. An absolute that resonated in the life force of every cell...

His devotion would last for eternity.

The Boy, the Man, and the Lone Flame

By Jewels - Feb 5 2013

What are you planning on doing then? Thousands of them... two of us... Just gonna fight your way through?

Shhh!

I'm a sword. I'm not making any noise.

But I can't concentrate with you blabbering in my head.

It's not like you've got something great brewing up there. I can see it all, you know.

Just... HUSH!

Azuma marched along, one flame lost in an army of others. The chaos of the attack had allowed him to slip out of the banquet hall unnoticed and fall in line with the enemy. He hadn't planned on it, but after his first defensive punch had landed on a startled blue blood, the few pure bloods around him just assumed his allegiance was with them.

For added security he had taken the effort to change his physical appearance to a more bulky, gruff flame than the one he had been parading as. Within his first hour in the fire plane, he had realized how feminine his emulated form had been. Most of the male flames almost resembled an upside down triangle with their broad shoulders. Being around them for almost a month had given him ample time to absorb their essence.

So how here he was, one face in the crowd on the wrong side of the line. They had assembled for an announcement of which Azuma was anxious to hear. He didn't know what had happened to anyone else. There were rumors of captures and boasts of kills along with curses around an unbeatable white flame but nothing definite yet. The fate of Jewels was unknown and it gnawed at him.

A highly decorated and rather grizzled flame stepped to the center platform and the thousands around him hushed. "I have great news for the cause of the pure bloods! We have captured two key heathen enemy!"

A roar of approval went up from the crowd with fists raised in victory. The speaker gave a crooked smile featuring some missing teeth and waited for the crowd to hush again. "Tomorrow we will have a public execution to watch our enemies die and our future be secured!"

Another loud cheer rose up while a knot tightened on Azuma's stomach. Who did they have? More importantly, how was he going to save them before tomorrow? Just extricating himself from the crowd would be hard enough. He had not been left alone since the attack. But disappearing back into the crowd with escaped prisoners would be near impossible here.

The speaker continued with his speech, proud and solemn. His voice rose and fell with practiced skill. The crowd listened intently cheering what they liked and booing what they didn't. "Since the day of Cinead we have worried for the future of our people. The Great Fire Deities cursed our land from his choice of alien wife. His own half-blood son turned against him and murdered him for the throne. In our foresight we had convinced Cinead to disown the wretched blue-blood welp and break the line of his leadership before it came to our ruin. The choice to support his daughter as Fire lord was not made lightly. Her green blood at least hid its ugly face while she walked among the flame. Her inexperience was an asset that would allow the council to guide the future of the plane. We had hoped to lead her choice of a pure blood husband securing him on the throne before assassinating her and allowing him to take a pure blood wife to save our future line, but we did not count on her allegiance to still hold towards her murderous brother

and his heathen brethren. War continued and aliens invaded our plane. For a span we had thought the lady dead in the onslaught. Instead she had gone into hiding as a coward to breed with another alien further diluting her spawn and promising our land to a union with water."

The crowd's heckling increased here and their displeasure at the thought was evident. The speaker's voice grew in volume and strength feeding off of the crowd. "This we would not... COULD not stand for!" The assembly echoed in a chorus of 'No's. "Tomorrow the alien spawn will die!" The assembly echoed in a chorus of 'Yes'es. "And the pure blood flame shall rule once again!"

The speaker ended his speech with both fists lifted in the air and a roar of approval deafened Azuma. His mind raced with the new information. "Alien spawn"? That could be any of the half-bloods, but in the given context... Vergil and Jewels were the only ones that came to mind. Azuma HAD to find out where they were being held.

Prince Darius tested the cell one last time. He searched for any crack, any hole, any flaw he could exploit, but the room was air tight. He was pretty sure the air they were breathing was the same air as when they had been thrown in. Normally he would be worried, but the air on the fireplane was an odd thing. With everything always burning, the environment itself had adapted to create oxygen. The floor was made of dirt, but Darius could sense the oxygen seeping up from it. He had tried to turn vapor and seep himself down but there was no give to it. The logistics didn't make sense but neither did ever-burning rock and tree. The laws of physics were just different here.

He was also pretty sure that the wine he had been given at the banquet had been laced with a drug because the whole attack had seemed to happen in a dream. If he'd had his wits, he would have evaporated right there to keep himself out of their reach. But they had been ready for him and now he was trapped.

What's worse... they had the boy. Even if Darius could escape, he couldn't leave the boy here to the atrocities of these flames. Though this group might not accept him as their leader, the fire plane might one day. Even if not, he was still much too important to leave behind.

Adennoe sat in a corner calm and complacent, never complaining of boredom or ill treatment or hunger or thirst. He himself felt like screaming for a drink of water but he doubted the luxury would be afforded him. Darius wasn't sure if the boy's lack of fear was from exceptional maturity or from lack of understanding about the situation. The boy glanced at him then, with wide eyes. The same wide eyes that had been staring at him for close to a month. They held the innocence of a child much younger than 12, yet also something else entirely ancient; something hidden just

below the surface that simmered beyond Darius' understanding. It sometimes showed in his words, though he rarely spoke.

Darius had not tried to talk to the boy since their capture, being incapacitated for the first half and obsessed with escape for the second. Now that he was resigned to staying put he decided to breach the silence. "Boy, do you fear death?"

Aden considered the man who finally spoke; tall, strong, and proud – two qualities worth emulating and a third to petition nature for. He had observed the man for these past weeks, the man that was his father. Watched his mannerisms, his actions, his facial expressions, and listened to his words; both those he spoke and those he purposefully left unspoken. Mother had told him, also, that there were things he should purposefully leave unspoken. Aden wondered if the man could tell when he left something out.

The man shifted in impatience and Aden remembered his question. He had not thought of death much, and his own not at all so he deflected the question with one of his own. "Why do you call me boy? Am I not your son? Would you prefer that I call you 'man' rather than 'father'?"

The man seemed caught off guard, unprepared to respond to a reciprocal. He stumbled a bit over his answer. "Well, of course not... I mean, yes... Yes, you are my son. I would not prefer you call me man. Forgive me. The fact that I am a father is still so new to me." Aden nodded and stayed silent being satisfied with the answer and the opportunity to observe it. "You did not answer my question, though," the man continued, rewording his previous query. "Son, do you fear death?"

"What is there to fear?" Aden reciprocated again. It gave the man pause enough to keep him from answering. Perhaps the man did not want him to know about any of the reasons he *should* be afraid of it. Aden was well versed with religions and mythologies and reasons why others feared death but there was no need to worry the man with what he already knew. "If death is anything like it is before life, I do not see it as anything to fear."

The man leaned back crossing his arms in a thoughtful position. It was obviously not the answer he expected and curiosity lit in his eye. "And what is it like before life?" he asked. "I did not know it was possible to remember such a thing."

Aden didn't hesitate this time as he did remember, at least in a way, what it was like before life. "It is blinding white light in total darkness. It is fullness in being empty. It is nowhere and yet it is everywhere. It is being nothing *while you are everything*."

The man just stared at him for a minute and Aden stared back willing to wait patiently for a reply that may not come. Eventually it did in a husky, solemn voice. "What kind of boy *are* you that you can say such things... and have me believe that it can be nothing but absolute truth?"

Answering such a question fully would require delving into much of the things mother had said to leave unspoken, but Aden was prepared with an answer anyway. "I am exactly what I was created to be. The future leader of all combined elemental planes."

The man let go a hearty laugh, done with believing him as wise. "You are very ambitious for one so young. Especially one captured by the enemy and slotted for execution on the morrow."

Aden heard the insecurity behind the comment. He heard the waver that was meant to be a confident laugh but instead came out as nervous. The laughing man sitting across from him was hiding something from himself and Aden was ready to expose it. "Are *you* afraid of death, father?"

The laughter stopped. Not in a threatening way, but perhaps in a bit of embarrassment. Aden waited again as the man thought about his answer. Eventually he did with quiet words. "I am not afraid of death in itself, but I *am* afraid to die. That is, as a leader for my people I would be afraid to leave them leaderless during such a tumultuous time."

Aden took a moment to consider before replying himself. "That is good then. Not enough fear to cause you to lose your dignity in the face of danger but fear enough to keep you fighting for life."

"And what do you know of fighting?" the man asked with a bit of a scoff.

Aden smiled, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Nothing... and everything." It was not a lie and neither an explanation but it was as much as he was willing to give. To avoid any further questions he made a show of laying down to sleep. In a few minutes he heard the man lie down also. Soon enough his father would know what he knew of fighting if that is what it came to. But not unless it was necessary.

Desirable Disagreement

By Jewels - Feb 06 2013

She could hear his heart beating and feel his breath on the top of her head. She could still smell the faint scent of mint and musk and man that clung to him and was quite content never to move again. She could not think beyond the moment and she did not want to.

"Oh, now that is just *disgusting!*" Vergil's grating voice intruded on her haven and she squeezed her eyes against the sound as if she could shut him out.

He also wrapped his arms around her and a voice whispered in her ear. [Ignore him](#). She snuggled her nose into his chest intent on just that.

"Deity, Jewels, you could at least *try* to show a little decorum and preserve a little dignity while you're here."

"Go away, Vergil! Mind your own business!" she mumbled into his chest.

Vergil grew indignant. "But it is my business! You're drooling all over my favorite cloak!"

"Your what?" Jewels finally opened her eyes and the spell of the dream was broken. She lay on the floor alone cuddling with a blood red cloak. Jewels sat bolt upright and scanned the room with one sweeping motion. "Where's Nioca?!"

"How should I know?" Vergil asked in irritation, yanking the cloak out from under her. "Maybe he went out to take a leak."

Jewels shook her head in frustration and sought him with her mind while still speaking out loud. "Nioca, where are you?"

[Hush. No need to shout. I'm fine.](#)

"Where?!" she insisted.

[I'm busting your son and Darius out of prison before you go charging into a suicide mission and get us both killed.](#)

"Like fire and ice you are! Get back here now!"

Xelgion walked up and addressed Vergil with a bemused look on his face. "Who's she talking to?"

Vergil scrunched up his face in concentration. "She's talking to Nioca... like he can hear her... and like she can hear him."

"And she's doing that... how exactly?"

Vergil shook his head. "I have no idea... she told him to connect to her as the database, remember? Do you suppose that means they can read each other's thoughts?"

Xelgion raised an eyebrow. "If it does, that could come in real handy. A direct line between any two places on the plane?"

You seem to forget that I've been to the fire plane before and survived my way out. Besides I'm almost to the castle grounds. It would be stupid to turn back now.

"Wait... how long have you been gone?"

About an hour.

Jewels hesitated and furrowed her brow in thought. "The dream... you holding me... you planted that dream in my head to keep me asleep didn't you?!"

Xelgion chuckled, "Oh, now *that's* gotta be awkward."

Vergil gagged, "Awkward? It's *disgusting!* ...Oh, I think I'm going to be sick." He retched a few times not completely for show. "She was cuddling with my cloak... *my favorite cloak!*" Vergil threw it away from himself in revulsion. "I'm never wearing that thing again!" Xelgion just chuckled all the more.

Nioca only answered her with a mental laugh. "You little manipulative bastard! *How dare you?!'*"

Yeah, it felt like something I might do. I thought you'd be pleased.

"How can I be pleased when you're about to jeopardize everything on an ego trip?! Sometimes I

just wanna..." Jewels made clawing gestures with her hands as she stumbled over words that refused to be said. "...just wanna..." She gave up in a cry of disgust. "Oh, you just make me so *angry!*"

And yet... came back his sly thought. *If truth be told... you've missed this.*

It caught Jewels's breath in her throat, the truth of it and what it meant. She *had* missed this, so much. How long had it been? Seven months? Eight? Her hands flew to her mouth and tears started to fall down her cheeks as realization set in. Nioca wasn't following commands... he wasn't a mindless bot. No, she was back to arguing with a crazy, ridiculous, hard-headed, irrational, brilliant mind.

Nioca was back.

Then Vergil was at her side, his brotherly jibes replaced with concern. "What is it? What has he done? What's wrong?"

Jewels answered him with a far off look. "Nothing. Nothing's wrong. Actually, it's something gone right. Something has finally gone right!"

"Well, then, where's Nioca? What's he doing?"

"He's going in to get Aden and Darius on his own."

"What?! Is he crazy? How could you let him do that?"

"He doesn't listen to me anymore. He's back to his old self. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Fire and Ice!" Vergil swore. "How is that even possibly a good thing? You remember the last time he was here, don't you? You know... when he tried to kill you?"

Jewels ignored his protests and squared her shoulders. "We need to move out in case he needs our help. Now." All the blue bloods that had just been watching her in bemusement now stood at attention. "Xelgion, get everyone ready. We move out in ten."

"Yes, ma'am!" He gave a smart salute and started barking orders.

Vergil left her side to tend to himself.

The hustle and bustle went on around Jewels without her really noticing. She was still in shock. *Are you really back? Really and truly back?*

I'm as real as you ever thought I was, Jewels. Everything I know about myself came from your memories.

But are you your old self again?

Deity I hope not, he laughed, or I'd be back to plotting how to kill you all. Jewels didn't share in his light heartedness. She remained serious, waiting and searching for the underlying truth. He sighed at her concern. No, I'm not exactly the same. I don't think it's possible to go through such... significant events and not be changed.

I just want you to be you again. A few more tears slid down her cheek.

I am me, Jewels. And you're you, but you're not the same person I first met either. Life changed us both.

Jewels tried to remember the person she had been when she took her first step onto Calamity Refuge Isle. The woman standing there was almost unrecognizable. *I suppose you're right. Deity, was I ever naive.*

They both laughed and Jewels savored the moment. The old Nioca had not been given to laugh with her much if at all. It gave her a twinge of uneasiness. *What? You'd rather I be crotchety and irritable with you?*

Jewels mentally shook her head while trying to shake the feeling as well. *It'll just take some getting used to, is all.*

Noting everyone else's progress she stood and brushed herself off. She was still in corporeal form from last night. The tendrils on her hands and arms still glowed as brightly as the first day she stepped onto fire plane soil. No, she was definitely not the same person she used to be.

Vergil came over holding a crossbow out to her. "Time to go. Better suit up." She nodded and flamed up, taking the bow from his hand. "So now that Nioca has gone rogue, what's the plan?"

"The plan hasn't changed. We still have to extricate Darius and Aden with as few pure bloods seeing us as possible. The only difference is we now have an advance scout that can tell us what to expect."

Or you could stay there and I'll be back with them in a few hours.

You try telling Vergil that. If you get them out, we'll be there to meet you. If you get in trouble, we'll be there to help.

Your confidence in my abilities is overwhelming.

The sarcasm made Jewels smile but it didn't reach her thoughts. My son, my son's father, and the future of two entire planes hangs in the balance. I can't just sit and wait. It's my responsibility and if the flames of this world are ever going to follow my leadership again, they need to see me doing my duty and doing it competently.

They were all at the door standing behind her... all of the blue bloods that they could find still alive, and they all looked at her expectantly. Look at them, Nioca; ready to follow me anywhere. I can't let them down... I won't.

"We go in stealth mode, people. Step lightly and don't engage an enemy you can't kill with one stroke. If you get too close, the spell might break. If you get separated, come back here immediately. We don't need any more rogue heroics. Silence starts now." With that Jewels began to chant. Stealth spells were normally simple but this was a lot of people to cover. She was glad to find Nioca chanting along with her in her head. She could feel the strength of the spell grow with his added concentration and power.

When the last word left her lips she gave a little gasp. She stood in an empty room. Someone shifted their weight and a barely perceptible shimmer rippled in the air. It was the strongest stealth spell she had ever cast. She lifted her hand and waved it back and forth. The room filled with shimmers and waves from others doing the same. They were ready. She opened the door and stepped out into the street.

Try to Live Half a Life

By Jewels - Feb 19 2013

Nioca sighed mentally. He had known that Jewels would not let him do this alone. No matter how much more logical it was to sneak into a building with only one person versus twenty, her illogical nature had foretold she would be following behind him the moment she woke. Attempting the rescue at all was a bloody suicide mission so he congratulated himself on coming to the conclusion that the illogical was the best thing to do. The decision had been a significant step in his processing. Relying on Jewels's mind as his database made it easier as her tendency to weigh emotion heavily, even when facing illogical choices, translated well into algorithm.

No, he was not the same as he used to be. Not the old Nioca... but he was making his own decisions now. Living his own life. Feeling emotions again. When he was connected to the Refuge, he had been disconnected from his feelings. Nothing had mattered but the list of duties put in front of him. Observing Jewels's emotions had been little more than a sub-process. Reconnecting to Jewels without the Refuge in the way had also reconnected him to his emotions through the fierce intensity that they rage through her and the immense value she puts on them. *That* was the real key to his humanity.

Even though fear and doubt twisted through him at the moment, knowing his mortality could be tested here, he was grateful to have them back. Grateful to be his own man again. Grateful but sad. He understood, now, what he had lost; what had been taken from him. He saw the value of it and knew how what he had now didn't measure up. Anger stirred there, too, but he didn't allow himself to dwell on it. He was on a mission and couldn't afford the emotional distraction.

Nioca was glad to find that the mental incantation had redoubled his own stealth spell. He was coming into a busier area and was sure he would need it. Jewels had an intimate knowledge of the layout of the castle grounds. It was easy to maneuver through the out buildings and less used hallways with her guiding him. There had been only one holding area designed for air elementals. They were rarely out of their own domain as far as anyone knew and even more rarely ventured in their corporeal forms. If one could even be detected, capturing it was difficult.

Darius was only half air, but they would want to keep him there to ensure that he was trapped when he went to vapor. Hopefully they would have Aden there, too, simply because he might have the ability to go vapor. It was simple enough to find the chamber but there were half a dozen flames guarding the door and more milling about in the upper hallways. While he stood calculating his best options two more came up behind him forcing Nioca to flatten himself against the wall before he was run over.

"Watch shift switch," the larger one bellowed and two of the far flames nodded and took their leave. Nioca threw himself against the wall again hoping that the brush against his shoulder would not break the spell.

Six flames stood between him and his quarry. Dispatching them would be fairly easy... once he got a weapon. But doing it silently was another matter entirely. **Wait for us**, Jewels urged. **We can kill all of them at the same time.**

If you're not discovered before you get here. These hallways are already crowded without you and your men here.

Nioca was about to break away from the stair case and make for the guards around the corner when another lone flame came slowly down the stairs. He didn't seem to be part of the regular guard as he stopped just at the corner to watch the others with interest.

Well, now was as good a time as ever. Nioca snuck up behind the flame and stabbed him in the back with his own sword. He smiled at himself as the flame slumped forward without uttering a sound. He retracted the sword and started to round the corner when a massive flamed hand clamped down on his shoulder and threw him backwards against the wall.

Nioca! Jewels's voice in his head competed with the ringing of his ears. The flame straightened to full height; a full three feet taller than himself. He refused to show fear clutching onto the cool steel of the sword still in his hand. The flame was big but he was slow and when he advanced Nioca lunged to sink the sword into his chest again. The flame didn't even try to block. He didn't even flinch either.

Desperately, Jewels started chanting an offensive spell in his mind but too late. The flame clamped his left hand over Nioca's mouth pinning him against the wall and pulled the sword out of himself with his right hand. "Should have known they'd send in reinforcements," he whispered gruffly, a sly grin on his face.

Nioca struggled against the hand. If he could just get his mouth free, he could take this one down. The flame frowned at him. "Oh, quit your squirming." He pulled back his sword and slammed it straight through Nioca's heart effectively pinning him to the wall.

The moment seemed surreal what with Jewels's mental scream and the sword sticking out of his chest and the flame smiling at him not at all surprised that he wasn't dead yet. "Relax, would you? I'm on your side." The words were barely audible; a harsh whisper in his ear. They didn't make any sense to him. He stopped struggling afraid of tearing anything else in his body. Maybe if he could hold on until Jewels got here, she could heal him before he died. She was running...

rushing... she wasn't being careful. He didn't know how many bluebloods would be able to keep up with her.

"You'd better pray to your deity that none of the flames around the corner noticed that little stunt." The flame grinned wickedly, "And before you go trying something stupid again, like throwing an ice bolt at me, I'd like to point out that you're not actually hurt."

A sub-process tickled the back of his mind making the statement ring true. Besides the tightness of the hand over his mouth, Nioca felt no pain. Realization started to dawn on him as he looked into the face of the grinning flame. "I'm going to remove my hand now. Shhhh... don't want anyone else to hear us."

Nioca nodded and the hand was taken away. "Azuma?" he ventured hesitantly.

"In the flesh... er, the flame actually."

"But... you look different."

"That's usually what happens when one takes on an elemental form."

"No. I mean you look different to Jewels..." Azuma just looked at him quizzically. "Oh, never mind." He tried moving away from the wall to find himself still pinned with the pressure of the sword. "What... what did you do to me?"

"I kept you from blowing my cover, that's what."

"But I'm stuck to the wall."

"Sentience might not hurt you but that doesn't mean he's insubstantial."

"Okay... but do you mind?" he pointed at the hilt. "I'm trying to rescue Darius and Adennoe before Jewels gets here and finds herself on the chopping block instead."

"Jewels isn't already a prisoner?"

"Nope, she's following behind me, planning to help with the escape."

An unmistakable wave of relief flashed over Azuma's face before it was replaced with a stern look of concern. With a swift jerk he removed the sword and Nioca found himself padding him

chest just to reassure himself there was no leftover hole. "You have to go back. Tell her not to come. It's too dangerous."

"You know that won't stop her. It's all I've been trying to tell her since the moment she brought me here. But she won't turn back until she sees Aden and Darius safe and sound."

"Well, then... we better hurry and have us a jail break then. I'll take the three on the left. You take the three on the right."

"Take them with what? Your sword is useless."

Azuma pulled out a wicked dagger and smiled. "I did not come unprepared. What about you?"

"Just get me close. As long as their swords aren't as useless as yours, I'll be just fine."

Azuma nodded and strutted around the corner as casually as if he were on an evening stroll. All of the guards stood at attention while the two closest stood to block his progress. "State your business," one said flatly.

"I'm here to see the prisoners," Azuma stated matter-of-factly.

"Obviously," the other guard almost sneered. "What for?"

Nioca was afraid his moment to slip behind the others might have passed when Azuma brought out his dagger to brandish in front of them. But he held it with a smile, playfully twisting the tip against his forefinger. "General wants a, uh... souvenir of sorts. Something to remember our prisoners by. Something... to help the Lady Jewels remember our prisoners by." Azuma had their attention now. All six of them were looking at him with wry grins and sly, knowing smiles.

Nioca took his chance to sneak around the room behind the other guards. It was tight at times, with only an inch between his skin and theirs. The stealth spell held but it would be shattered the moment he made his first offensive move. There was no room for error in these close quarters.

Azuma continued in his confident way, "Nothing too big, mind you. Nothing they would really miss at the execution, but a tooth... a finger... an eyeball perhaps. Something they won't be needing by nightfall."

They had all visibly relaxed and let their weapons fall to their sides. "Who would have guessed that the general was such a sentimental sort?" the first flame gauffed. An extra tall one that Nioca was assigned to kill started unlocking the door to the antechamber. When he had it open he

waved Azuma in. "Have to lock you in before we can open the inner door. Don't want the vapor to escape."

"Course not," Azuma nodded taking a step closer to the guard and patting him on the back. It swiftly turned into Azuma's dagger spilling ash out of the first guard's gut. He grunted as the others laughed before they realized he had actually been hurt.

Nioca was watching for the flash of the knife and had his first guard's head encased in ice before the sound of the dagger's impact reached his ears. Nioca had the guard's sword in his hand and buried it deep in the second guard's belly before the first body had fallen to the floor. He twisted it for good measure and ripped it out exhilarated by the ash that poured out of the wound and the blank stare the dying guard gave him. Perhaps they still had nightmares from his previous venture.

Azuma was defending himself with Sentience now, dagger held in his left hand for the opportunity to strike. Just his luck, though, the two remaining guards that weren't already engaged turned on him together. "Alien heathen!" the tall one roared. "Sound the alarm!"

Then he started thrusting with his sword while the other swept past Azuma towards the stairs. For a moment a flicker of fear crossed his mind. They'd never make it out of here if the whole army were roused. The immediacy of the blade swinging at his head demanded his attention back. One fiery fist connected with his gut leaving him winded and almost unable to block the next strike. He barely deflected it to the wall an inch above his head.

Another iota of fear stirred in him as he hesitated with his next move. There were too many things to process, too many variables to analyze. Too many calculations, too many possible outcomes... How had he done this before without being so completely overwhelmed?

He didn't have time to answer his own questions as pain exploded down his side. The guard he had sliced open had not been dead yet and the tip of his sword had cut a deep gash from hip to rib cage. It was all Nioca could do to roll away from the reach of the sword before the calculations in his mind started coming up with a higher probability of his death over his victory.

Stop thinking and just do!

The harsh whisper came into his mind along with the image of him ducking to avoid being skewered. Words started filling his mind and came streaming out of his lips while a fluid dance of movements guided his limbs to sever the sword arm of the flame that had cut him. The words were a healing spell that knit closed the slice on his side and eased the fire burning there. Back down to only one opponent, Nioca spared a moment to take in the flame's expression when his sword was blocked with solid strength and confidence. More words spilled from his lips, so quiet

he could barely hear them. He had not tried to process what they were but the sudden fear in his opponent's eyes said that each word spelled out his certain death and he knew it.

The look stayed frozen on his face even after the words stopped flowing. It took Nioca a moment to realize that he actually *was* frozen; completely frozen from head to toe as was the room in a three foot radius around him. The sight of it had caught Azuma's adversary off guard and his dagger had neatly sliced his neck open allowing the ash to pour freely.

Azuma openly stared, too. "What was that?"

"I don't know... Something Jewels taught me," he shrugged on the outside though it had sent his sub-processes spinning. That was no ordinary Ice Bolt.

"Well, remind me not to get on either of your bad sides." Azuma chuckled and stepped his way over the fallen bodies towards the cell door.

A warning went off in his head as he started processing again. "We only killed five of them... one of them got away!"

"Better hurry, then," Azuma cringed. "We'll have hundreds of them on us in a matter of minutes."

"Or about twenty on you right now." The new voice rang out against the walls, startling them both. They turned to take in Jewels's sly grin. A shimmering form to her left threw a rumpled guard down at their feet. He was quickly disintegrating to ash. "The alarm has not been raised yet and we have people stationed strategically to take out anyone headed our way, but we still do need to hurry. The missing guards are bound to be noticed sooner than later."

"Right," Azuma beamed as he unlocked the inner cell door.

Jewels took a moment to flame down and inspect the angry red groove down Nioca's side. Her touch was gentle but still painful to the tender skin. *I told you to wait for me.*

You also told me to think for myself.

Which didn't seem to work too well during the fight.

Just over-processing. I'll be able to refine my algorithms now that I have some experience to draw from.

She shot him a sorrow filled glance. Over-processing? Algorithms? Like... like you're still a bot?

He could feel the disappointment seeping into her demeanor. He lifted her until they were standing eye to eye. Like my brain works differently now, he tried to reassure her. But they are algorithms I created based on how I used to behave and on how I want to behave differently because of what I have learned since then.

And what have you learned?

He gave her half a smile and spoke the words out loud. "I have learned that when someone saves your life you should thank them. So thank you."

A big smile erased the furrows in her brow and the disappointment was replaced with hope and longing. Somewhere in his mind an algorithm finished a calculated risk. He didn't second guess it seeing the spontaneity of the act as an asset. Swift and gentle, he pulled her lips to his. For a second he reveled in her surprise and the flush of joyous desire that spread in tremors through her body. The next second he was left reeling as she tore away from him overcome with her guilt. She was angry at herself for not stopping it before it happened and embarrassed at her immediate reaction.

In her ears a gauffing Xelgion and a swearing Vergil heightened the embarrassment. The sight of Azuma staring at them with one hand holding Aden's and the other balled into a tight fist tripled the guilt. His beguilement obviously wreaking havoc on his own emotions. The look on Aden's face was simple curiosity but it didn't stop the worry for his psyche. Among all the jumbled emotions he managed a shaky thought. I'm sorry.

Don't worry about it, she thought flatly back. Now that you have some experience to draw from, I'm sure you'll be able to adjust your algorithms. The remark was cold and cutting. Not because of how she said it but because of what it meant to her. A flitting of regret quickly followed the comment but she didn't have time to dwell on it as a cloud coalesced into a man in front of them.

"I never doubted your abilities for a moment, my Lady." Darius remarked with a flourish giving her a regal bow. "I am forever in your debt for saving my life and that of our son." He took her hand in his and kissed the back of it in gentlemanly fashion.

Nioca had the distinct impression that he should be jealous but for the fact that Jewels's smile was forced. She was deeply uncomfortable with the contact but she tolerated it for Darius's sake. "Thank me later," she managed. "First we have to get everyone out of here."

She turned to the other flames still in stealth and gave her orders. "Xelgion, start making your

way back to collect our people. Tell them the mission was a success and you have one week to round up as many bluebloods as you can find. We rendezvous in the water plane."

A shimmer nodded and started heading back up the stairs. "Vergil, Azuma, you're with me. Circle up, we're going back to the Refuge."

Darius spoke up, "Um. I think I'd prefer to go straight to the water plane."

"You have a portal in your pocket?"

"No but once we do find portal, I don't see how setting it to water plane would be any more difficult than the Refuge."

Vergil snickered, "I thought you had no doubt, prince?"

One by one the group started holding hands. Aden had Azuma and Darius on either side of him. Vergil stood between Azuma and Nioca. Darius still had a hold of her right hand and Jewels let her the fingers slide between Nioca's who tightened over them in a vise grip. He knew what was coming and he knew she had never attempted more than two before. She held no trepidation over it and plunged forward without hesitation. Her certainty scared him as he channeled all his power into the words as she spoke. "Who needs a portal when I can just say TELEPORT!?"

The immediate drain on his energy was almost too much. Only with unnatural control was Jewels able to hold the six of them together for the mere six second ride. Back in the Refuge she stood for one second blinking back disbelief that she had actually attempted it let alone succeed. The next second, she collapsed. Nioca saw it coming, the blackness of unconsciousness, and managed to catch her. But underneath the blackness he caught a glimmer of something else. Something ancient and so bright it blinded him to its presence before. It rippled with intelligence and recognition of its discovery.

Who are you? he asked. The light only grew brighter as it invaded his own mind. It skipped through his memories flashing them before his eyes in quick succession. The light slowed and brought forward images of him fighting the fire elementals. Images of his hatred for them. Images of his sword slicing through them. The light began to hurt so much it drove him to his knees. He struggled to keep Jewels from hitting the floor and demanded again, **Who are you?!**

The images he had projected into Jewels's mind of her killing his family came into view. **No, that's not real. She didn't do that.** Then the images of her in full flame on the fire plane. It was the night of his capture and she was standing in front of him unarmed offering him peace and freedom and full pardon. But his sword plunged into her anyway ripping pain and sorrow across

her face. Nioca gave a mental whimper as the scene rewound and replayed over and over. His sword in his hand tearing into her time and again. **No!** He screamed at the light. **Stop!**

The light increased in intensity until white was all he could see. When it finally dimmed he whipped his head around from side to side. He was back in the fire plane. No protection spell this time, he could feel the heat of the walls and floors radiating towards him, suffocating him, cooking him alive. Voices reached his ears from the opposite side of the room and two figures started to come into focus. He knew those voices... they were familiar, so familiar. And he knew those words. He had heard them before. Just a minute before.

He was there in the past with himself and Jewels. He could hear them, really hear them... and he could feel the heat, really feel it. He was here and she was pleading with him again, begging him to see reason and the sword was in his hand. He ran towards himself as the sword was poised to strike. There was no reasoning with himself, he'd already made up his mind, he just wouldn't listen and so instead of trying words he shoved Jewels out of the way and watched as the sword ripped into his own abdomen. His past counterpart blinked a few times in confusion while he presently writhed in very real pain, a blinding white pain that consumed him whole, leeching the very life essence from his core.

He managed to open his eyes and glance towards Jewels as she lay where he shoved her. She was flamed down, whole, unharmed... and he smiled. She could be safe now. She could be safe. She was scrambling back to him, a cry of desperation on her lips. She was calling his name and stroking his hair as he looked up at his old confused self, the sword in his hand slipping to clatter on the ground.

He willed himself to understand. "Keep her safe," he croaked out. "Forget your hatred and keep Jewels safe!" He met his old eyes and despite the confusion discerned a slight nod. Breathing was getting more difficult as fluid filled his lungs. She was crying and stumbled over the words of a healing spell in between sobs but it wasn't working. His blood covered his hands as she tried to staunch the flow. He could feel his life leaving him and was content she wasn't connected to him here in the past. He would die but she would be safe.

It was hard to focus on her. He wanted to tell her one more thing. Wanted to ease her sorrow at his passing, but he couldn't get in the air for the words. Instead he lifted his hands towards her with his last bit of strength.

An algorithm had just finished a calculated risk. He wouldn't be around for any of the possible consequences this time. Slowly and gently he pulled her lips to his. For a second he reveled in the soft pressure. The next second, he was dead.

The Physics of a Creator

By Jewels - Feb 19 2013

There was white and there was nothing else. No ground, no sky, no body... There was no indication that anything had ever been different or that anything would ever change. Life was a myth. The past was a dream. Time was an illusion. Existence... was there ever any more to it than this? A moment of clarity said 'yes' but he didn't know what was happening now.

Suddenly a booming voice reverberated in the whiteness around him. "YOU HAVE BEEN JUDGED."

Judged? Judged for what? Nioca looked around himself and found that he had his body back. He was dressed in a white robe with sleeves past his fingertips. White thread embroidered the edges of the garment in runed patterns. Some he recognized as being for protection, others were marks of destruction.

As he looked up from his garment, he noticed the landscape had changed. Instead of nothing, he was now standing in a stark white forest glade. The trees were white, the grass was white, even the dirt was white. He was imagining things... he had to be. There was no way this could be a real place.

"And what is real?" a smooth, low voice asked him.

Nioca whipped his head around and discerned a man, or what he thought to be a man. His skin glowed whiter and brighter than anything around him. It was almost too difficult to look at him. He stood waiting patiently but Nioca didn't know how to answer him. He looked around himself and down at his hands rubbing his thumbs over his fingertips to feel the sensation. It felt real enough but it didn't make any sense.

"Is this the afterlife?" he asked instead. His voice was as foreign to himself as this place. It did not belong.

The man gave a jolly laugh responding with another question. "How does one know when life stops in order to claim something comes after it? Are you not alive right now? Seeing? Breathing? Thinking? Asking questions?"

Nioca considered a moment before trying once more. "Where are we? What is this place?"

"Ah..." said the man, moving to a log to sit down. "A question worthy of an answer is that." He motioned for Nioca to join him. When he sat, the man leaned in close as if divulging a secret. Nioca had to strain to hear him though there was no other sound in the glade. "We are nowhere... and we are *everywhere*."

Nioca sat up straighter feeling a little peeved. "Well, that's no answer at all!"

"Is it?" the man asked innocently. He leaned back just watching and waiting again.

Nowhere? Well, it certainly looked like no place Nioca had ever been to before. Could it be considered nowhere because it was not a place you could just *go* to? Nioca looked down at his hands again. Were they really his hands? He'd had no body at all just a few minutes ago. What if this place did not exist in corporeal form? The man nodded as if approving his thought process so he moved on.

Everywhere? How could *that* be? He was familiar enough with alternate dimensions and planes of existence to know that one could be accessed from any other if the right tools were at hand, but they all had definite coordinates, definite locations where they existed. Was it actually everywhere or just anywhere?

The man did not nod this time but he did continue speaking. "This is where the physics of a creator resides."

"The physics of a creator? You're not making any sense."

"Let me try then. Your magic, your spells, your... Blades Nexus... Have you ever thought about how such things are possible? What is it that allows spoken words and focused thought to throw ice from your fingers or knit together a seamless sanctuary that towers over everyone's heads? You cannot create something from nothing, after all."

Honestly, Nioca had spent many an hour trying to understand how magic worked. The science behind the Nexus itself had never accounted for the power that came from it. "Soo," he ventured, "you're saying that this place is where the power that makes magic possible exists?"

The man nodded. "A good enough understanding for our purposes."

"And what is our purpose?"

His voice was booming again. Nioca fought the urge to squeeze his hands over his ears. It was all he could do not to flinch. "I HAVE BROUGHT YOU HERE TO BE JUDGED."

Nioca wanted to ask why right away but instead he found himself asking a different question. "What is the verdict?"

The man smiled at him and responded in a normal voice. "You are worthy."

It was not the answer Nioca was expecting. Not that he had been expecting anything in particular, but definitely not an endorsement from this shining white man who seemed to know anything and everything there was to know about him. "Who *are* you?"

The word 'God' briefly flit across his mind and the man let out another great belly laugh. "Is that not what the people of Ermaria call you when you tap into powers they do not comprehend? No, I do not consider myself God, if there even is any one being that can claim that title. I am no different than you, really. I started my life in no more a spectacular way than you did; breathed to life from the will of one who had gone before, using the physics of a creator just as someone brought them forth before them. Forgive me, though, I ramble. My name is Varuth Camirine. I am the first of the elementals."

Realization hit Nioca from a memory he had acquired from someone else. "The stone held at Jewels's neck! It's called the Camirine!"

"Indeed. Very good. And that is where my soul finds rest. I live within the stone for times such as these when I am needed."

"*You* teleported the six of us to the Refuge! Jewels never would have attempted such a thing with the confidence she showed. It was *you*!"

"I knew she was capable, even if she did not. That woman is capable of things she doesn't dare imagine. When she lacks the confidence, I give her guidance and remove her doubts."

Nioca couldn't quite explain the sudden anger that welled up in him except to say that he knew how it felt to be manipulated. He jumped up off the log, unable to sit idly by. "So you're controlling her?!" he accused with venom. "She's a puppet on a string for *your* purposes?!"

It was even more infuriating that the man only smiled at him. "I am helping her fulfill her desires. She wishes for peace and unity among the elementals, as do I – for they are all my

children in one way or another. If you doubt that her own compassion would see this through even without my help then I will leave her immediately."

Nioca paced in front of the log, surprised to be given this offer. It did quick work of diffusing the anger he had just felt. The question remained: did he doubt that Jewels would want this? If the first elemental had offered her the choice of his help, would she not take it?

"Who is to say that I did not offer? She was also judged worthy."

Nioca squinted at him. "She does not remember such an offer."

"It was not necessary for her to."

Nioca stopped his pacing and looked squarely at the man. "Why tell me this? What can I possibly do with all this knowledge that would warrant the effort?"

"You are already a God among men, but you are capable of so much more. Believe in yourself, Nioca, as I do. Take with you the confidence of the ages and you will accomplish things no man has ever dreamed of."

Nioca wanted to ask another question but he found he had no mouth again; no body either. The whiteness around him was growing in brightness until it consumed him whole while filling him to overflowing at the same time. He couldn't remember anything beyond the white, nothing more than the light. This is all there was and this is all there ever would be. Time was an illusion. The past was a dream. Life was a myth.

Confessions of a Barkeep

By Jewels - Feb 25 2013

Clyde walked the last three Lounge patrons out the door still holding his own drink glass in his hand. They were drunk and rowdy but Clyde wasn't about to chastise them. He had lost his home along with the rest of them and knew that escape was sometimes the only way to cope. He took a sip of his drink making a face. He'd picked the strong stuff tonight.

Bernard was tall with spectacles and teetered dangerously to and fro. "Can you believe the ruckus around here lately?" he asked loudly. He swept a long arm around to indicate the Refuge that was now their home and had been for several months. "The missus won't stop going on about how much she'd rather be back at our old home. I mean, sure there was the odd band of goblins or stray demon roaming around to steer clear of, but at least there were just as many adventurers to come round for population control. It was better than watching the drama that goes on here."

"Tell me 'bout it," Verdin slurred out. He was well muscled and more sturdy on his feet but he was just as drunk if not more so. "I used to be one of those adventurers an' I made a pretty penny doin' it, too. How'm I suppose' to support and feed the three hungry faces back home when there's nothing here to do for pay? No robbers or bandits to slay and strip, no treasure to find... There's not even any herbs here that the apocra... apocrow... potion makers recognize."

Merik took a step and almost toppled over. His portly size made him top-heavy to begin with; adding alcohol did not bode well on his chances of getting home without falling. "And what am I supposed to do without a bakery to run? If I want to try to find a livelihood again, I have to convince the old ball and chain to leave behind the few friends she still has. If there was a purgatory this would be it!"

"Who's to say it isn't?" gauffed Bernard. "We're probably the overflow since everywhere else is full." The other two burst out laughing, leaning on one another when they started to lose balance.

Verdin turned back towards Clyde who had been standing quietly apart from the other three. "Hey, thankss for steppin' up and servin' the drinks when the usual barkeep was a no show. You're much easier on the ears, too. But not the eyes, sorry mate."

Clyde raised his glass towards them, "Don't mention it. It was nice to feel like I'm being of some use in this forsaken place. It's been really hard... adjusting."

All three of the others seemed to sober a little realizing he wasn't sharing in their merriment. "Listen to us all," Merik bemoaned, "complaining about our families when..." His voice trailed off not sure if he should finish the statement or not.

Bernard took a step towards him and put an unsteady but comforting hand on his shoulder. "Really sorry about Annie, man."

Clyde gave them a weak smile and tried to laugh off their sudden attention. If they kept on like this he'd never make it back to his room in one piece. "Oh don't worry about it guys. I'm making due. Just do me one favor, eh?" They all nodded at him expectantly. "Go home and make sweet love to your wives or else, Creator help me, I'm gonna go and do it for you."

The indignant cries echoed into the night. "Oh, no you won't!"

"You even batt an eyelash at my Penelope and I'll relieve you of your manhood!"

"Why stop with his manhood? I'd rip off his sleazing head!" And then the three howled with laughter again. Clyde managed a smile grateful they didn't seem to notice it was forced.

The trio started stumbling towards their assigned living quarters, still laughing. "You goin' home yet?" Verdin asked more loudly than he needed to.

"Not quite," he lifted his glass again. "Home is lonely and I got a few things to put away first."

"Well, don't be putting away too much tonight." Merik bellowed patting his belly. "We'll need some to drink tomorrow night, too."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Clyde yelled back as he turned to re-enter the empty Lounge. He listened as their boisterous banter slowly faded away and washed the mugs they had been using. He was drying the last one when the tell tale scrape of a bar stool told him he had another customer.

Clyde sighed wishing he could just go drown himself in the bottle he intended to finish off but by force of habit he turned around to address the new patron. The tattered, hooded cloak was drawn low over their face while leather gloves hid their hands. The cloth was indicative of an Ermarian peasant. "What can I get for you, brother?"

He was unprepared for the desperate eyes that peeked out of the cloak at him then or the sweetly feminine voice that trembled as she spoke. "The strongest stuff you have."

He felt a slight flush of embarrassment for addressing her incorrectly. "Excuse me, miss, I meant no disrespect." She gave him a slight smile and an acknowledging nod. He didn't recognize her but he hadn't exactly been very social since he arrived. Like any good barkeep, he didn't question the patron's choice of drink or her reason for asking for it. Not yet anyway. He grabbed a small glass and filled it up with the bottle he had been saving for himself.

When he pushed it towards her she cradled the glass in both hands and pondered it for half a minute before downing it quickly. She winced, coughed, and sputtered causing him to guess she wasn't a regular patron. He could only vaguely remember the pain of the burn of his first hard liquor drink and felt himself wince with her.

"Ohh," she finally managed to moan, "that's terrible!"

Clyde smiled sympathetically and couldn't help the laugh that escaped his lips. "Yeah, the strongest stuff usually is."

She coughed a few more times and pushed the glass back towards him. "Another, please," she squeaked.

That had his attention. He didn't try to hide his astonishment. "Another? The first one didn't have enough bite to it?"

"Please..." she repeated with an edge of despondency. He couldn't bear to refuse her beseeching eyes so he poured it and passed it back, making no snide comment when it brought on another coughing fit.

When her body finally stopped protesting her face was stained with tears and she sniffled back a runny nose. He took his dish towel and offered it to her glad when she took it without protest and dabbed at her cheeks. "Now, it's been a long time since I've been a barkeep," he started gently, "so I might be a little rusty at this... but is it really so bad that torturing yourself like this is the better option?"

She gave him a fleeting smile before tearing up anew. Her lip quivered as she tried to give him an answer. "I just... I just can't go back to that empty room. *I can't!*" She covered her face with her hands and sobbed in earnest now.

Her response bounced around inside his head, repeating itself as it stabbed him with his own situation. He was around the bar and at her side in a matter of seconds. He wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulder knowing it was not enough. "So alone..." she mumbled between her

fingers and her sobs. "They're all gone. There's no one left. I can't go back to that room alone!" Each word sliced through him, redoubling his pain.

He had to get her out of here. Had to get her some help and away from him before he collapsed in a pit of his own hopelessness. "Hey, hey, shh... you're not alone. We're all in this together." She shook her head while the rest of her trembled. "Come on, we'll find one of your friends to stay with tonight," he tried.

"My friends are all gone," she breathed. "They're all dead. All of them."

"You haven't made any new friends these last months? Surely you've met Madge or Carrie or Jen?" As she was shaking her head again he realized that all the women he knew were married with their immediate families alive and well here. Even if he took her to one of their homes, it would only be a slap in the face with what she had lost.

As if she thought this too, she set her jaw and rose to leave. "I shouldn't have come here!" she growled, though it felt like the anger was more at herself. She stumbled to the doorway and he followed just a few steps behind her. "I shouldn't have left my room." Maybe he wasn't the only one who found socializing too painful. "But I can't go back..." she grieved. She stopped at the threshold and slumped against the wall. "I can't go back to the emptiness..." Her head was back in her hands as she sobbed and his arm was back around her shoulders.

His voice was thick with emotion, "Then don't. You don't have to be alone." She looked up at him and the tears that now streaked his face. He let them fall. Let her know she wasn't alone. Not in her suffering or in this hollow place they had to call home. She straightened and leaned into him, clinging to his sleeve. He tightened his arm around her, leading her away from the Lounge and towards his own empty room. But it wouldn't be empty tonight.

The single bed didn't leave them much room for personal space but Clyde promised himself he'd be a perfect gentleman. He lay down on his side fully clothed and she lay down in front of him. He pulled the thin issued blanket over them both and rested his hand on her waist. Tonight they would not be alone and if she wanted it, they would never be alone again.

The man's breathing slowed to a deep and steady rhythm. She slipped out of his embrace and out the door, careful not to wake him. His home and company would do well enough to keep her concealed while she bided her time. No more drawing attention to herself until she was ready to make her move. She hurried into the woods to where she had left her packs and rummaged through them dividing up what she would be expected to have and what would raise some eyebrows. The latter she hid in the hollow of a tree and put it on her mental map.

By the time she was done the first lights of dawn were beginning to peek over the horizon. The man would be waking soon but she was confident he would welcome her back to his home whenever she wanted even if he woke to find her gone. She decided this would be as good as any to do a perimeter sweep. She wanted to know this island inside and out so there could be no surprises. Dagger at her hip and provision bag on her back, Nix started combing her way through the forest to memorize it.

Nioca was out cold. No methods for rousing him had worked and now Jewels paced the room while Nio administered another cold compress to his fevered forehead. Vergil was practically pulling his hair out at the delay. While everyone else had a week to prepare, they only had seven hours and four of those had already been spent reviving Jewels and failing to revive Nioca.

Nio, at least, had had the foresight to suggest sending the rest of their party on so they could be more productive. Darius, much obliged to be in his domain as soon as possible, took Aden and Xelgion through the portal already to prepare for the arrival of the rest of the bluebloods.

Azuma refused to leave, though. He stood against the back wall in silence; just clenching and unclenching his fists. He hovered close to Jewels, as always, for reasons neither of them would explain to him. How many times in the last month had he caught the two of them whispering in seclusion only to have them clam up the moment they saw him? The way Azuma looked at her... it bordered on desperation. And the way she looked at him? It was out right pity. The one time he had managed to eavesdrop, the conversation had not shed much light.

"...You *have* to fight," Jewels had said. "We can't let this go on."

"I *can't*. I've tried," Azuma argued. "Besides... I don't *want* to."

"That's *exactly* why you have to! Everyone deserves freedom, Azuma."

Vergil didn't know how not wanting to fight for the freedom of the fire plane meant Azuma *had* to or why he would say he couldn't when they had fought side-by-side in a number of skirmishes already – the conversation hadn't made much sense – but the way Azuma had taken her trembling hand then and put a comforting arm around her trembling shoulders as she shook her head 'no' just didn't sit right with Vergil. Azuma had whispered something to her that made her laugh but then she started to cry. Her repeated apologies were soon muffled by Azuma's shoulder and Vergil decided it was too much drama for him to get involved.

Now, though, Jewels hovered over Nioca with her own look of desperation. Somehow the tables had turned and something else was more important to her than the fight.

Vergil tried again to get the urgency of their big picture through to his sister, "Jewels, we don't have time to wait here. We have a matter of three hours left before we need to be in the Water Plane and Darius wants us to be there early."

"How can I leave him, Vergil? I have no idea if he'll be able to reconnect to the Refuge database or if he'll even need to. What if something goes wrong? It's my fault he's like this in the first place. He offered me his energy for the teleport and I took it. I took too much... Why did I even consider such a dangerous jump in the first place?"

Nio was up grabbing her by the shoulders to make her stop pacing. "Calm down. Everything is fine. He's just unconscious. It's his body's way of making sure he gets the rest he needs. I'll be here if there are any problems. You know I won't let anything happen to him."

They stared at each other in silence for a moment before Jewels sighed and nodded. "Okay, you're right." She stepped in to give him a tight hug. "Fire and Ice, I've missed you so much."

"It's only been a day..." he laughed.

She pulled away sternly, slugging him in the arm. "It's been almost a month and you know it!"

"Ow!" he exclaimed, rubbing it furiously. "Okay, okay. I missed you, too. Well... not the physical abuse."

Jewels's jaw dropped in indignation and she swung at him again, but Nio caught her wrist. He used her forward momentum to swing her around and wrench it to the middle of her back until she let out a cry of pain. "Proving my superiority... now *that* I missed."

Vergil, aghast at the disturbing display, jumped forward on instinct but stopped himself when peals of laughter spilled from both of them.

Azuma didn't seem to notice as quickly, though. "Let go of her!" he demanded, not noticing that Nio had already released her wrist. His balled up fist was already headed for Nio's jaw when Jewels jerked him out of the way. It connected with her nose instead.

Now it was Vergil's turn to laugh. Served her right for fooling around at a time like this. Azuma's

look of consternation and string of apologies paused and redoubled when the line of blood started trickling down her face.

Nio seemed overly calm for his part in the incident but Jewels had her hand up focusing on Azuma. "Shh, shh... No, stop apologizing. This is good." Azuma stared at her in confusion. She awkwardly nodded her head for emphasis while trying to pinch her nose to stop the blood. Her voice was nasally. "This is a good thing, Azuma." She stared at him searchingly and emphasized her next question. "How do you feel?"

Azuma blinked at her, looked down at his hands which were still clenching and unclenching, and looked back up at the injury he'd given her. "I... I feel like I need some air."

Jewels nodded and Nio went to the portal without further direction, setting it to somewhere above ground Vergil assumed. She took Azuma's elbow with her free hand and led him to the portal. "Go ahead, it's alright. Take a nice long walk to think about it."

He looked very unsure but set his jaw and stepped into the portal anyway. The second he was gone, Nio was at Jewels's side holding a hand in front of her face and whispering a healing spell. She wiggled it around experimentally and snuffled some of the blood back in. Nio handed her a cloth and she thanked him while she wiped the rest of her face.

"You think it did the trick?" she asked him.

"Hard to tell so soon, but it certainly did something," he replied.

"Yes, yes... It'll be good for him," she concluded.

"It was good for me, too, if I'm being honest," Nio said with all seriousness. "Nice to see you on the receiving end of the physical abuse for a change."

She was back with her jaw held open in indignation, but only briefly before both of them broke back into wide smiles as she swatted him with the bloody cloth. "You are *so* infuriatingly bad! I don't know why in the world I put up with you."

Nio was dodging her swats as she advanced on him. "Hey, watch it. I just washed this robe."

"No you didn't," she countered, "I did! Just two days ago, in fact."

"I thought you said it'd been a month," he teased.

"AHEM!" Vergil cleared his throat loudly, satisfied that they stopped sheepishly in their tracks. He stood tapping his toe with his arms crossed in front of him. "Does either of you want to tell me what the Ice just happened here?"

"Um..." Jewels started.

"Not really," said Nio.

"Nope."

"Can't say that we do."

"Actually I think..."

"...we kinda just..."

"...forgot you were here." Jewels finished the sentence with a shrug and pursed her lips. After a second, without turning her head, she snapped the cloth at Nio again but without looking at it he caught it and tugged it out of her hand hiding it behind his back. They both looked like they were trying not to laugh.

The back and forth between them was dizzying. "You two," he chided, "it's like you're off in your own little world; chasing each other about like you're children." Vergil took a breath noting that neither of them denied it. "...while more people, *your people* Jewels, are still dying on the street every second we delay." Satisfyingly they both sobered a bit at that.

"You're right, you're right..." Jewels admitted.

"Of course you're right," Nio echoed.

Vergil was unprepared for the endorsement and searched their faces for signs of insincerity but he found none. "And what about Azuma? What was that little exchange with Azuma all about anyway?"

"*That*," emphasized Jewels, "is not something I feel comfortable discussing with you. It's personal. Azuma has just been working through some... emotional issues."

"Emotional issues?! What? Is he starting to feel bad about all the killing he's doing? Are you? Is

that why you were crying on his shoulder?" Vergil was instantly mad at himself for letting his eavesdropping slip but he plunged on heedless of how Jewels would take it. "If something is clouding Azuma's judgment, I have a right to know. I don't want him abandoning us in the middle of a skirmish because he suddenly doesn't *want* to fight anymore."

Jewels had crossed her arms and narrowed her gaze. "You won't have to worry about it, Vergil. I've decided to leave him here this time." Even Nio's eyes shot up at this statement. The guy that seemed to know her so well had been surprised. That was reassuring. That all it took was one look from her to quell any argument he would have made tipped the scale back to unnatural, though. "How about instead of this bickering, we get back to work, eh? Wouldn't want to *delay* any further."

He was frustrated that she would throw his words back at him but she was right. Discussing Azuma was unimportant, especially he was not coming with them. "After you, then, almighty Fire Lord," he said in derision just to make sure she didn't think he was satisfied with it.

She still took a minute to give Nio a final hug. Much too long for proprieties sake. They didn't speak but he nodded at her as she pulled away. She afforded one last glance towards Nioca then turned on her heel. "Come on, I have some provisions in the store room."

Vergil followed her out.

The blinding light eventually faded to pitch black and an awareness of his surroundings slowly started to come back to him. A hard bed beneath him, a soft blanket on top of him, the sound of his own breathing... and someone else... he wasn't alone.

"Welcome back."

Nioca opened his eyes only to see his own face.

"How do you feel?"

He tried to formulate a coherent thought that would sufficiently answer the question but he couldn't. The only thing he could manage to say was, "Error."

His face frowned. "I was afraid of that. As far as I see it, you have three choices. First, you can try to function on your own, which judging by your first response, might not work very well." He

didn't argue with himself. He didn't seem to have the capacity and his face nodded seeming to understand that.

"Two, you can reconnect to the Refuge database." A tremor of fear ran through him at that statement. He couldn't articulate why, but connecting to the Refuge again was the last thing he ever wanted to do. It was all he could do, to manage a shake of the head.

His face seemed to understand and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Last option, then, you can try to connect to me as..." His face gave a sharp intake of breath as Nioca immediately reached out with his mind and descended on him, eager and desperate. After the initial shock, his face... Nio, closed his eyes and waited patiently.

Nioca sat up on the cot and leaned forward. He shuffled through every memory, organizing them as he went. Most of them were not new to him. Most of them just fell into place where they always were. It opened up his ability to connect to the rest of the memories in his head and he shared the new ones he'd had in the fire plane with Nio. The few new moments from when he was unconscious were of great interest to him and Nio did not protest or interfere when he set to studying them in detail. Hours passed and neither of them moved.

Finally Nioca opened his eyes again. "You have my face," he concluded. The statement seemed so obvious but the realization was profound. Nio only nodded unsure why it was important enough to point out. "You have my face," he said again. "I made an error and she never corrected me. She dreamt about *you*." Nio blinked at the prospect. The dream was new to him.

"The way you two move, it's like a dance. You finish each other's sentences, you anticipate each other's moves, you go from one thing to the next in flawless unison... No misunderstandings, no heated debates, no adamant disagreements... You fit together so perfectly..."

Nio passed the possibility around in his mind, silent for many minutes. "Only because there is one line I never attempt to cross," he finally vocalized. "One line that I never even consider*thinking* about attempting to cross."

He didn't verbalize the line but Nioca saw it clear enough in his mind. The difference in love between agape and eros. The difference in commitment between unconditional and passion. The difference in physicality between friend and lover. Nio saw their childish banter as possible only because it was innocent.

"Besides," Nio went on, "If it came down to just you and me, it'd be you. It's always *been* you. From the moment of my creation I've had no doubt it was you. Let's face it, I'm Jacob and you're Edward. I'm the best friend and you... you're the dream."

Nioca leaned back rubbing his face with his hands before fixing Nio with a dubious glance. "Twilight? Really? You're gonna go *there*?"

Nio sheepishly blew out a breath pinching the bridge of his nose. "Yeah... No, I know... I'm sorry. It's just Jewels, you know, she's in my head so much I start to think like her."

Nioca shared a chuckle with him. To see things from Jewels point of view after fighting not to for so long? It was a scary thing. "I still don't understand why she pulled away so quickly. The embarrassment... the guilt... If I'm the dream it makes no sense?"

Nio rolled his eyes. "It makes perfect sense. She's still trying to protect you."

"From what?"

"From herself. From making a decision that isn't wholly your own. From eventual regret for actions taken under duress. From the emotional baggage that she would bring to the relationship. From the pressure of her responsibilities. Take your pick. She's a train wreck right now and she knows it. And you just got back on the track. She doesn't want to overly influence what you do." Nio paused debating whether to add his final concern or not.

"Out with it," Nioca insisted. "Might as well."

"Well as you know from her memories, she's been working with Azuma on his 'beguilement' since they left. Figuring out why it happened and how to counter it. They finally discovered that his obsession started the night he studied her essence. He explained how he absorbed who she was and what she was and how she was and why she was. It intensified in the months that he practiced clothing himself in her essence to be a fire elemental. Eventually she became all he could see; the only thing that mattered to him. Knowing how it started was only the first step though. Releasing him from it has been much more difficult.

Now, there seems to be something similar going on with you. You've felt it and so has Jewels. To be perfectly frank, the absolute undercurrent that "your devotion will last an eternity" scares the hell out of her. I'm not too fond of it myself, because I think it might be my fault. Partly at least. The inscription was on her ring. Will had made the ring to interact with the database power core. Sylae wanted the ring back because she was afraid it gave Jewels too much power. The night the database shut down and restarted, I poured the raw core energy into your body converting it into your new life force. How exactly that constant, unchangeable fact got into your being we don't know, but the vow somehow made it into the programming. "

"And," Nioca started picking up on the conclusion, "Jewels *needs* me to be free of this before she

will accept my actions and intentions as genuine." Nio nodded his head. "What if it's not possible?"

Nio shrugged. "From what I've seen of her fight for your freedom so far, I don't think she'll give up until she's found a way to release you."

Nioca frowned at himself and his situation. Logically, he had to doubt his own desires but felt strong enough about them that he had to say it out loud to his sympathetic face. "I don't *want* to be released."

Walking in the woods didn't help Azuma's demeanor one bit. His skin crawled now that he was actually wearing skin again. After a month of doing and being everything for Jewels he just expected... what? A little more appreciation? A little requited affection? Nioca helped her for one lousy day and she's kissing him? Azuma wasn't sure what had happened, but seeing that kiss had snapped something inside of him. Sentience was even being uncharacteristically quiet about it. He had wanted to be everything she needed. Turns out she didn't need anything from him at all.

Jewels had spent the previous month trying to convince him his obsession was neither natural nor healthy. Sentience was in whole-hearted agreement with Jewels... the traitor. But knowing what was wrong and being able to overcome it were two different things. The kiss had snapped him out of his delusion that she actually wanted what he was trying to give her but where did all this anger come from? Hitting Jewels... it had actually felt... satisfying. Why would a kiss change his mind 180 degrees like that?

Sentience finally weighed in again. *Because you absorbed the essence of Jewels's enemies for the past month and manifested as one of them. They hate half-breeds, ergo they hate Jewels.*

Ergo, Azuma realized, "I hate Jewels." Part of him was relieved to have the answer but another part of him was terrified of the proof that his feelings could be manipulated so easily. His confidence about being a computer virus living a normal humanoid life dropped drastically. He was so upset, he didn't hear the footsteps coming up behind him.

The menacingly sweet female voice was low and slow and chilled him to the bone. "I'm going to kill you!"

She clamped a hand down on Azuma's shoulder and spun him around. The look on his face was a mixture of apprehension, surprise, and relief; none of which eased any of the anger Ligrev was feeling right now. "Two days! I have been wandering the woods and looking for you for Two. Whole. Days! Where in the world have you been?"

Azuma hesitated for a moment, "Uh... the fire plane?"

Ligrev's fury boiled over. "The fire plane?! The deity forsaken fire plane?!" Azuma flinched and stumbled backwards. Ligrev advanced, matching him step for step. "And I suppose *Jewels* was there with you?"

"Well..." It wasn't a denial.

"Of course she was! And I suppose you two had a *lovely* time making lots of little demon babies?!"

"No!" Azuma tried to deny this one but she wasn't about to let him off, wholly true or not.

"Liar!" she screamed. "Jewels, Jewels... it's *always* about Jewels. I hate her!"

Azuma looked at her in shock. He straightened up and stood his ground now. Ligrev took a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket and threw it at him. Azuma picked it up and flattened it out to read it. "She didn't even notice you were gone, Azuma. She never asked about you. She didn't even care!"

She saw recognition dawn on his face at the letter with the message he'd asked her to give Jewels. The letter he'd left her the first night they'd made love. Ligrev couldn't help it. As mad as she was she started to cry. "Did it mean nothing to you? Being with me? Kissing me? Taking my innocence?" Ligrev fought for control of herself as her voice cracked. "And before you left – two nights ago – that incredible night we shared... Was it nothing?" she hissed with venom.

Azuma stared at her when she finally fell silent. Her rage spent in the tirade, all she could do was stand before him and tremble. The harsh set of his jaw, the stiffening of his stance, and the roiling emotions behind his eyes told her she'd made a mistake. His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. She had made him angry. No... beyond angry. He was furious at her.

She hated how vulnerable she suddenly felt; how fragile and powerless. Tears streamed down her face but she refused to sob. When he took a step towards her she glared at him defiantly, unwilling to let him know she really wanted to run and hide.

His right hand flew up and grabbed a handful of her hair at the back of her neck. *He's going to kill me*, she thought. *I'm going to die now*. She felt oddly relieved at the notion. At least these torturous emotions would stop ripping her apart. His right hand tightened in her hair and pulled her towards him while his other clenched hand moved swiftly towards her head. She closed her eyes against the blow...

The trembling fingertips that cupped her cheek and the desperate lips that pushed roughly against hers were much more excruciating.

How dare he?! How dare he assume he had any right to ask this of her again?! ...and how dare *she* want it? How dare her body melt into him as if his desperate desire was the very air she needed to breathe? She couldn't pull away. With one hand she pounded against his chest while the other greedily pulled him in closer.

She whimpered when he finally drew back moving her head to press their foreheads together. "What did you do to me?" she managed to accuse, anger and desire mixing to color her words.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. His voice was a desperate plea; as desperate as their first night together. "Forgive me!"

"No!" she growled, glad that she at least still had command of her voice if the rest of her body was his. "I hate her and I hate you for loving her!"

"But I don't," he began and she stiffened in his arms. "No, not anymore. I hate her, too. I promise. I hate her so much... please..." His voice cracked with the emotion of his desperation. His teary eyes were so sincere she started to believe him. She felt both chagrined and vindictive at his pain and confusion that the emotions were there at all.

"What did you do to me?" she accused again. "I was a barkeep. I never left the Lounge. I never wanted to leave the Lounge. I never thought about the possibility of wanting to leave the Lounge. Deity, Azuma, *What did you do to me?!*"

He didn't tell her. Not with words. Maybe he couldn't. What he did, instead, was show her why what he did to her was worth it. Worth every tear she had cried; every lonely night; every roiling, confusing emotion... It was all worth it for this.

Tale Feathers

By Jewels - Mar 5 2013

Sylae lay in her bed staring up at the ceiling. A quick movement of her arm and three escaped pillow feathers shot up in the air to float slowly down. One landed on her nose and she smiled. *How much difference a day could make...*

The last time she had woken up, it was screaming to nightmares of giant severed hands lassoing her feet with glowing green rope and dragging her towards dagger-sharp copper tendrils. At the same time carnivorous Refuge bots lassoed her wrists in glowing red chains and pulled her towards a maze of 10 foot razor blades. They stood on end with the word *ERROR* written in dripping blood on each. Both fought over her tugging back and forth and struggle as she might, she couldn't break free. A flame flickered above and she flinched. It started growing until it was all she could see. She wished that either side of the tug-of-war would win that she might be spared the fire. *Any death but the fire!* Perhaps the fire took pity on her because even as it lit the edges of her garment it produced a ruby-tipped dagger and plunged it into her heart. When she woke in darkness the images still burned in her mind and made the illusions all the more real.

Her pre-dawn morning had begun with thoughts of fear and worry, regret and betrayal, anger and despair. Her world had fallen so far so fast that she couldn't see anything beyond the pit. They found her hiding behind the Lounge bar in a fetal position; a half empty liquor bottle in her hand. They had smiled at her, both of them. Iffy and Saph had smiled at her. Granted Saph's smile looked strained and as if she considered Sylae a child at the moment, but a smile from Saph at all was a rare thing. Iffy, though, had a genuine concern in his eyes as he pried the bottle from her cold fingers and rubbed a napkin against her tear-stained cheeks.

"Those stupid emotions again, eh?" he had quipped and, for the life of her, Sylae laughed. "I think I remember we had a date to get to know each other better. How about we have some breakfast?" he asked.

"Ligrev is missing," she had argued. Her thought process was still fuzzy but she tried to explain it to him. The Lounge didn't have any food storages. The liquor was here because it lined the back wall for decoration, but creating food was part of Ligrev's program. When someone ordered a dish Ligrev converted database energy into that food on an as needed basis. She wasn't even programmed to realize where the food came from.

Iffy had thought about it a minute before asking if he had permission to use the Refuge bots. "I made you an Admin for a reason, Iffy," she had said. "I trust you to do whatever is in your best

judgment." He had argued she didn't know him yet. "Will trusted you..." she managed. Iffy had only nodded his head choosing to leave other painful points unsaid.

Iffy summoned a bot and started giving it orders that she didn't pay attention to because she was too focused on not falling apart. The bot left shortly and Iffy came to sit with her. Saph never left his side and the two seemed to share a comfortable camaraderie that Sylae envied. While they waited Iffy wrote a little script that turned itself into a glass of what looked like water. He had passed it to her telling her to drink it. She hesitated but did as he said and was amazed to find her mind clearing and the previous day's events feeling more distant.

After about 30 minutes a string of bots came into the Lounge carrying an assortment of food and drink and things to cook with. Sylae had thought he had just sent one bot out for their breakfast. Instead it looked like he had made provisions for the whole Refuge. Boxes of produce and dairy and kegs of juice were being carted into a back room while Iffy started creating a script to turn it into a cooler. A separate closet he turned into a freezer and populated it with meats and ice cream. The pantry he filled with rice and beans and potatoes and flour and spices of every type. One bot carried in an electric stove while another brought a commercial sized oven.

Iffy had just laughed when Sylae had asked him how he had managed it all in half-an-hour. With one final announcement he let all the residents know that they should help themselves to whatever they wanted to eat and cook it themselves if Ligrev was gone.

Barely a day on the job and Iffy had already proven invaluable, but he didn't stop there. He grabbed a frying pan and some ingredients and started cooking their breakfast himself. With a smirk, he cracked the eggs one-handed and tossed the shells in the trash from ten feet away. Soundlessly Saph tossed him a spatula from behind, and without even glancing her way he effortlessly caught it out of the air. Sylae watched in awe as they continued the display completely in tune with each other and the task at hand. Iffy was flipping the contents of a pan with one hand while Saph was tossing spices to his other.

By the end, they had created a first-class breakfast with scrambled eggs, blueberry pancakes, and crispy bacon. They had also succeeded in lifting her spirits.

The day only got better from there. They had started by discussing his new administrative duties. Sylae had been avoiding the database but was compelled to let Iffy know how bad it was. Surprisingly, not a single error popped up when she opened it up. She laughed in relief as she checked on functionality and found everything in working order. It was amazing!

They followed breakfast with a full tour of the Admin Tower and tunnel system. Sylae hadn't planned on going through every tunnel but Iffy had seemed so attentive at every turn that they just kept going. Around lunch time they came up in the middle of the forest next to a stream. They foraged for berries, greens, and wild onions having a picnic as they talked about the

wooded area, how big it was, and how they could utilize it better. Back in the tunnels, Sylae learned quite a few things as they continued on. She had never traversed the whole thing before and seeing it first hand was much more telling than looking at a map of it.

By the time they were done it had been supper time and with their light lunch Sylae was famished. She invited them up to her quarters where she had some of her own food. The cramped little room that the 30th floor called a dining room was not the most comfortable place to entertain guests, though. Saph was quite vocal about her disapproval.

That set them started on a conversation about redecorating the place and what it would take. Sylae explained it would only be a bit of reprogramming, grabbed her RMM-A, and started changing the rooms around them. Iffy had been impressed as their table expanded under their dishes to seat a dozen comfortably. Saph even seemed in awe as the walls expanded to accommodate it. Sylae had beamed as she gave them a tour of the new place.

The new plush couch had boasted three plump pillows. Iffy and Saph plopped down to enjoy it. What unspoken communication went on behind their eyes was unknown to Sylae but before she knew it, Iffy had smirked and smacked Saph with a pillow. After her initial shock, Saph had been quick to hit him back at least three times harder. Sylae had protested at the abuse of her new furniture but they'd only given each other a wicked glance and hurled the third pillow at her head.

It. Was. On.

The full fledged pillow fight had lasted as long as the pillows held out. Sylae blew the feather off her nose and sat up on her elbow. Many feathers had followed her into the bedroom after she had told them good night at her door. It would take a while to clean up but at least she didn't think she'd mind.

It reminded her of the chickens she used to have on the farm when she was a little girl. Well, technically, only her host body had lived on the farm with the chickens but Sylae had made an important decision last night. Will was truly dead.

He had lived long enough with all his secrets and his sins. His miserable murderous past would stay dead and buried with him as would his heart-wrenching present. In therapy they had tried to transition her into continuing that life with a new body, but she found she didn't want to... she couldn't. It was just too much for Sylae to bear his baggage.

No, Sylae was a new person now. This was her rebirth. She would use the memories of Will to help her live her new life but she was not him... not anymore. And if she could manage it, she'd believe she never was.

It was extremely freeing, letting go of Will's past, and just as comforting to instead embrace the past of the woman whose face she now wore. She could close her eyes and see the chickens running from her little brother as she goaded him on to catch one. It had happened. It was real. Sylae clung to it as her own.

She grabbed a broom and started to sweep up while humming a tune her mother used to sing. The melody brought sweet memories flooding back. Memories she embraced and cherished. As she moved through the house to get all the stray feathers, her memories were reinforced because she had reprogrammed her quarters to closely resemble the house of her childhood.

The front door opened up to a great room with alternating brick and wood walls with high ceilings. She had skipped the fireplace opting for a more modern entertainment center but the rest of the décor was the same; rustic, earthy, and a bit old-fashioned. To the right was the kitchen and dining room; to the left, the bedroom and bath. All in all it took up much less space than her previous quarters had. The entire southern half had remained empty. It used to house her office and labs and rooms with computer screens, but she had decided that any admin work that was needed could be done on a different floor. This floor was to be purely for her.

It wasn't until Iffy and Saph left that she had decided what to do with it. She threw open the double doors and stared at the scenic view she had seen every morning growing up. She stepped onto a porch with two rocking chairs and a porch swing. Over the railing was an impossible prairie rising into rolling hills and boasting a beautiful summer sun rise sky. The smell of wildflowers and prairie grasses wafted towards her while songbirds chirruped a welcome. It was mostly illusion, of course, though the flowers and grass were real enough if completely computerized. The interspersed trees hid support beams and network cables that helped keep the illusion alive. The ceiling where the clouds rolled by were merely screens with moving images up to the semi-circle of trees that marked the edge of the building. With a wave of her hand, Sylae could choose between the background of her childhood or a view of the Refuge proper through the outer windows. Home. Now it finally felt like home.

Sylae sat down and rocked for a while forgetting the world around her and relaxing in the tranquility before her. That is, until a PM came up and smacked her on the shoulder.

Iffy lay on his bed on the 28th floor and smiled as he pulled a feather out of Saph's hair. Yesterday was one of those days that he hoped he'd remember forever. It had been a bit of a surprise to find Sylae so distraught the previous morning after watching her confront Jewels with strength and resolve. Perhaps the anger of her sister-in-law had hit a chord, or the death of her brother may have finally sunk in, or maybe she realized how close they had all come to joining

him. Whatever it was, Iffy was glad that he and Saph had been able to cheer her up by the end of the day.

It had been awe-inspiring to watch her redecorate her home. She did it so quickly and the details were incredible. Not only did the rooms change around them, but the dishes they had been eating on became reminiscent of grandma's china and their utensils changed to decorated silver in their hands. Vases with fresh flowers grew out of the middle of the table and hand painted landscape canvases distended from the recessing walls.

The look in her eye as she had done it was just as fascinating to watch. Discovery and delight bordering on joy, and definite pride as she showed them around.

Saph had been uncharacteristically moved to pleasantness. She said it was because she liked the way Sylae presented herself – when she wasn't wallowing in a pit of self-pity and alcohol, of course – poised and confident and just a bit arrogant. Not enough to annoy her but not so little as to be a saint. Iffy had joked that the description sounded a lot like Saph, except Saph was a lot more arrogant. It was the thought that had sparked the pillow fight that had left them riddled with stray feathers.

Before he could block it, she was swinging one of their bed pillows at his head again. **I'll show you arrogant!** she brooded, taking another swing. Iffy caught it this time and used his other hand to push her half off the bed. "Hey, no fair!" she protested as she clung to the pillow for balance. "Help me up, I'm falling!"

Iffy did his best to pull the pillow back up but a small object came over the side of the bed and hit him right on the bridge of the nose. He instinctively let go of the pillow sending Saph to the floor and rubbed his sore face. "Ow... what'd you do that for?" they both voiced to each other.

Saph hadn't thrown anything at him, though. The object that had hit him was a PM. It seemed to be urgent from the speed of it, too.

Hide and Seek

By Jewels - Mar 12 2013

Nalyd looked up at the open sky above him and shivered. He was incensed that the Rot had commanded he only observe yesterday *whensomeone* had *Nalyd's* creation *somewhere* doing *something* to it *Without*. Nalyd's. Permission! At least the Rot had allowed him to check on the creation's status whenever he wanted... which was about every minute. With no changes to its physiology, it would at least be salvageable once Nalyd got it back. Nalyd had kept an eye on everyone through the Who's Online feature whenever they were not within eyesight.

One seemingly beneficial side effect of having to observe; Nalyd could rule some people out. The only notable people at the Refuge were currently Sylae, Iffy, and Saph. Nalyd was pretty sure Iffy and Saph did not have the time or opportunity to confiscate Nalyd's creation. They didn't even have a place to put it until a day ago. Sylae was a possibility though Nalyd couldn't fathom what she might do with it. The three of them had been out and about together for most of the day. They returned to the tower in the evening and Nalyd wished Who's Online would tell him what floor they were on. He obsessively checked his creation's status while they moved around inside the building but there was no change.

Jewels could have taken it. She had the motive and the ability. She had access to the tower recently, too. Would she have hidden him away and left him there when Sylae took away her access? Nalyd raged within himself at the probability of it. She had left, though. How was Nalyd to find where she put it?

Something else bothered Nalyd as he watched the Who's Online screen. Nioca seemed to be frequently visiting the citadel but Nalyd never saw him on the way. He was either in the tower or in the citadel when Nalyd looked. Never in between. Nalyd did not really know the full extent of what happened to Nioca beyond the news of him becoming a mindless bot. Nalyd had never cared to find out. But Nalyd didn't trust Nioca, mindless or not; less-so now with this erratic movement and his missing creation.

Nalyd's mind raced through possible scenarios and situations all day. Late into the evening, when all the Who's Online markers stopped moving about, the Rot had commanded he sleep and rest for the next day. Nalyd had refused but after 20 excruciating minutes the Rot had managed to slip him into a pain induced coma.

Nalyd awoke with the sunrise but was paralyzed at the Rot's whim. Instead of finding his

creation, he lay on the cold ground outside the Admin Tower seething at the Rot and all of the Refuge members whether they'd been involved or not.

Finally the Rot freed him to move. Nalyd's stiff limbs stabbed with cold as he struggled to get up. *Observation is over*, the Rot told him. *Go to the tower to TALK to the leadership*. It had emphasized 'talk' while Nalyd seethed some more. He would rather rip both the tower and the citadel apart brick by brick. *Silence!* it commanded, though Nalyd had not spoken out loud. *Obey!*

Slowly Nalyd made his way to the front door and rang the bell. When no one answered, he wrote a PM to Sylae and Iffy in all caps. "TALK TO NALYD, NOW!" At least the Rot didn't censor his exclamation point.

Iffy and Saph pulled on their clothes and headed for the door. Neither was very surprised to see Sylae coming down the stairs towards them. "I was just coming to get you," she said while absently rubbing her shoulder.

"We've already been summoned," Saph announced while Iffy gingerly prodded the bridge of his nose again.

"Can we take the portalator to the ground floor?" Iffy asked. My feet are a bit sore from all the walking we did yesterday.

"That was the plan," Sylae agreed walking over to activate it.

The three of them stepped up to the front door. If Sylae knew more about what to expect, she had not shared the information. She held her staff tightly in her right hand as she swung the door open.

Nalyd paced back and forth just across the threshold wearing a path into the dirt with his feet and the end of Lifesower. At the sound of the door he jerked his head towards them and practically leapt through the opening. Everyone backed up before the tip of his reaper swept into the space where they had just been. *"Where is Nalyd's creation?!"* he screamed with crazed eyes and barely contained rage.

Sylae took an offensive position standing in front of Iffy and Saph and brandishing her staff which gathered energy as she answered. "We haven't seen Stillborn, Nalyd."

"We were together all day yesterday," Saph piped up. "We don't know where he is."

Nalyd's stance grew less menacing seeming to believe them but he was no less desperate. "Jewels hid it! You'll help Nalyd find it! NOW!"

"Wait a minute," Iffy interrupted holding up a hand and coming out from behind Sylae. "How do you know Stillborn's been hidden away? Couldn't he just be out wandering around?"

Nalyd gave him a nasty scowl as if suggesting that he might be wrong was the biggest insult Iffy could have said to him. His words were short and condescending. "Nalyd *knows* because Nalyd takes precautions." He reached into his robe and pulled out a folded paper. He stormed over to a table while he unfolded it and Iffy had to dodge his scythe again as he swept past. The paper covered the whole table and hung over the edge. In the middle was a drawing of Stillborn looking just like the last time Iffy had seen him.

"So you've got a drawing of it," Saph sneered. "So what?"

Nalyd stared daggers at her and his hips started to swing towards her but his feet stayed planted firmly in their place next to the table. He jerked around, brow furrowing in frustrated before returning his gaze to the drawing. Is it just me or is he being weirder than normal? Iffy shook his head at Saph's mental question. He agreed that Nalyd was acting oddly but he didn't want to be distracted from the more pressing problem.

The half-smile that crossed Nalyd's face seemed forced, as did his half-pleasant voice. "This," Nalyd swept a hand over the drawing, "is not a drawing. It is a real-time depiction of Nalyd's creation."

Sylae stepped closer to it and took in some of the details. "These numbers," she asked pointing at one corner, "What do they mean?"

"Body temperature, heart rate, and breaths per minute," Nalyd answered still straining.

Iffy ventured a peek at the numbers himself. "They seem awfully low."

"That's what I was thinking," Sylae looked up at him nodding.

"They are low," Nalyd confirmed. "Someone..." his face contorted as if he were in pain. "...has placed Nalyd's creation..." his voice squeaked as he forced the words out. "...in *stasis*!" He took a deep gasping breath before growling the word, "MAP!"

The drawing changed to an overhead view of Refuge and honed in on the Geneforge forum. Iffy, Saph, and Sylae watched it in wonder while Nalyd broke away from the table and started pacing again. "It is supposed to show the location of Nalyd's creation. Instead it does not move from the Geneforge forum though it is not there." Nalyd's jaw set as he paced towards the map and away again. "ZOOM!" he yelled out again. This time the map turned to inky blackness before snapping back to normal with Geneforge right in the middle. "It's location is protected," he concluded stomping back up to face the trio. He pointed a bony finger at the middle of Sylae's face. "YOU will help Nalyd find it!"

Sylae tapped her fingers along her staff in thought for a moment before looking back up at Nalyd and nodding. "Okay, we'll help you."

The relief that washed over Nalyd's face was a startling contrast to the hard accusing lines he had worn previously. The two expressions toggled back and forth until he finally ended on a worried scowl.

"Where do we start then?" Saph asked. "Where does someone hide a monster?"

Iffy pinched her and chided her to behave. This was no time to be poking the hornets' nest with barbs.

"The Admin Tower!" Nalyd offered quickly. "Many, many rooms to hide a secret protected lab."

Sylae was already shaking her head, though, as Iffy found the same problem with that. "Sylae took us on a full tour of the tower yesterday. We visited every floor and every room."

"Even the basement," Saph chimed in trying to be helpful.

Sylae voiced her thought, "If Stillborn was here we would have found him yesterday."

"There are no secret rooms in this place?" Nalyd persisted.

"Nothing that I don't know about," Sylae stated with confidence. She hesitated for a minute at his skeptical look. "Will showed me the plans. I've accounted for every square inch," she assured.

"Where else?" Iffy asked.

Nalyd was frowning and pacing once more. He didn't seem to have much patience with their

help. "Nioca's Citadel," he declared. "Nalyd has never trusted Nioca and Nioca did not trust anyone else enough *not* to have a secret place there."

Iffy started to nod at the possibility but Sylae was frowning now. "I, uh... know Will locked that down after Nioca was, um... converted. I should have been notified if it was re-opened."

"Couldn't Jewels have opened it while she was still an Admin?" Saph offered.

"Well, yeah, but I should still have gotten a notification," Sylae protested.

"Unless she didn't want you knowing she was in there," Nalyd sneered. "Besides, Nalyd has been watching. Nioca's been in there a dozen times just yesterday."

Sylae seemed really caught off guard this time. "What? Why? He wouldn't go there without a programmed reason, and *I* didn't give him one."

Iffy pulled out his RMM-A and checked the Who's Online screen. "Um... according to this, Sylae, he's there now."

She bit her bottom lip and furrowed her brow while snatching the device from his hand. "I still would have been notified..." she persisted, "It's impossible!" She shoved it back at Iffy and pursed her lips. "I'll prove it! We'll go over there right now!"

Iffy tried to work things out as they walked. "The database has been having a lot of problems. Maybe the notifications had an error."

"But not before Jewels was de-admined," Sylae argued.

"Couldn't she have shut off the notifications?" Saph asked. "Or made an exception for herself and Nioca? Will's been gone for months. You only just got here."

Sylae stopped in her tracks seeming hurt at the prospect. Iffy put a hand on her shoulder, "She had plenty of time to make plans while neither of you were here and she *does* have a pretty good reason for wanting to keep Stillborn from Nalyd."

Sylae finally started to let it sink in. "She had the motive and the means... so she set up a lab in the citadel? And... and gave Nioca access to it?"

"Nalyd thinks she set up more than that," he interjected. "Nalyd never saw Nioca outside."

"Could he have used the tunnels?" Saph wondered.

"But we were in the tunnels yesterday," Iffy pointed out, "and we never ran into him."

They came up to the citadel door. The outside hummed with the warning of a magical barrier while dust settled evenly on the handles. "It hasn't been tampered with," Sylae said. "Look, this spell was created with this staff." She brought Anamzas up to near the barrier and its stone glowed and hummed in harmony with the spell. "It hasn't been opened. It just doesn't make sense. The tunnel hatch comes out beside the citadel, not inside."

"Why don't we just ask Nioca?" Saph blurted out and the three others all turned to stare at her. "You have the authority to have him answer your questions, don't you?" she addressed Sylae.

"Any admin does," Sylae nodded.

"Then let's get our answers already!" Saph huffed. "Let's just summon him and see what happens."

Sylae nodded and smiled. "Good idea. The Who's Online screen could be glitching. We'll check his regular station to see if he is there and summon him if he isn't."

The three of them turned to walk back across the square but Nalyd hesitated at the door. He made a noise that was half a whimper and half a growl. They turned back to see him visibly trembling at the threshold. "Nioca is inside! Nalyd's creation is inside! Open the door for Nalyd so he can get his creation and *kill Nioca!!*"

Seek and Find

By Jewels - Mar 19 2013

Nio stared up at the ceiling and frowned. Nioca was sleeping on Nio's normal cot so he had laid out a blanket on the floor. The hard concrete was not especially comfortable making it impossible to sleep, himself. Instead he thought about the previous day and how perfectly uneventful it had *almost* been.

Nio had continued pretending to be Nioca and came back to check on him from time to time but he slept the whole day. Nio was encouraged as each time he came back Nioca's physical

appearance was better and better. It was a good sign that he had balanced out the infusion of core energy correctly.

Nio had originally opted to use Nioca's cot at the Admin Tower tonight while Nioca used his. Imagine his surprise when Jewels woke him up at 4am half delirious with urgent thoughts of taking Nioca to the fireplane by mistake. All the things that could have gone wrong swam in his head. What would have happened if Nioca hadn't been able to connect to Jewels? Would they both be dead now? And what if Nio had been there to help Jewels instead? Would he have been able to help her the way Nioca had?

Even though it had turned out all right, it still bothered him. Without Jewels, Nio had no purpose. He didn't know what he would do if she died and Nioca was his only link to her while she was in the fireplane. He hadn't thought about it at the time, but when Nioca died, it could have meant Jewels had taken a fatal blow. At least he knew that if he kept Nioca breathing here, somewhere Jewels would also be breathing.

Now Nio was responsible for being Nioca's database. Their exchange had ended just an hour ago. It had been enlightening to say the least and a little disturbing... well, very disturbing actually, but Nio decided not to dwell on anything that made him cringe.

It was close to 9am when a buzz came from his RMM. It was a notification that Nioca had received an order from Sylae. Apparently she wanted to see him. Nio shook Nioca awake and waited while he got his bearings. [Decision time. Sylae wants something. What do you want to do?](#)

A surge of groggy anger swept over him. [Nothing](#), Nioca grumbled rolling over on the cot.

Nio sighed and shook him again. [I don't want to pretend to be you forever. I kinda liked my solitary existence in the lab.](#)

[Just don't show up](#), Nioca suggested bitterly. [She'll get the message eventually.](#)

Nio considered it but wasn't satisfied. [If someone doesn't show up, she'll come looking for you and when she doesn't find you at the citadel, she'll start looking elsewhere. We don't want her finding this place.](#) Nioca stubbornly stayed silent. [We don't want her combing through the database code either. If she thinks you've gone rogue she won't feel safe until she's looked through every byte.](#)

[Sounds like you've talked yourself into it, then. Have fun,](#) came the dismissive thought.

Nio huffed at him and got up. "I think I liked you better as a bot," he grumbled under his breath. Nioca gave him the finger both mentally and physically. Nio shook his head. [Why are we fighting again?](#)

"Because you want me to acknowledge my previous slavemaster," came the bitter reply. The audible sound of Nioca's voice amplified the emotion he was feeling.

"Okay," Nio relented. "You're right. You shouldn't have to talk to her, but we really need to think of something that will keep her trusting what I've done to the database while leaving us both alone."

[Good luck with that](#), Nioca thought dismissively again. Nio shook his head really hoping this was just a phase.

Walking up to the portal he calibrated it to home back in on the 13th floor portalator of the Admin Tower. When he stepped out he stared into three stern faces and one almost insane one. It took all the control he had not to turn around and flee, let alone appear undaunted.

"See!" a high-pitched voice shrieked loudly. "Nalyd told you!" A long bony finger pointed at him accusingly.

"Quiet," Sylae hushed him, though the crazed look stayed on his face. He looked ready to rip Nio's eyes out but Sylae spoke to him calmly. "We'll find out what's going on." Focusing back on Nio she addressed him with a businesslike air. "Nioca, follow me."

Nio did his best to show no emotional reaction and let himself be led into the 13th floor proper. Iffy and Saph flanked him while Nalyd trailed behind. Once they were all inside, Iffy and Saph turned to close the door and stood on each side of it like sentries.

Nio was starting to get really nervous. He didn't like the way any of them were looking at him, least of all, Nalyd. It was actually the first time he had come face-to-face with the tiny foreboding shaper. His reputation for erratic behavior, though, had preceded him and Nio found it hard not to keep a wary eye on him.

Sylae walked to a table and indicated he should sit, so he did. "You're looking well, Nioca," she commented, "How do you feel?"

Nio hesitated for a moment before responding in a near monotone. "I am functioning within normal parameters."

Her eyebrow lifted slightly as she scrutinized him closely. There were probably many of a bot's normal nuances that he wasn't aware of. He was sure that him shoving her out of the way the last time he saw her did not help his guise.

"I wanted to thank you for all the work you did on the database yesterday. It's running so smoothly now." Sylae smiled at him with a look of genuine relief though he thought it odd she had never thanked Nioca for any work he had done before.

Nio was about to tell her she was welcome when Nioca butted into his thoughts. *Don't respond to that!* It seems he wasn't as disinterested as he had feigned to be, not that Nio was complaining. He knew he needed all the help he could get while under this microscope. *Don't respond to anything that isn't a question or a command*, he ordered. *Bots don't make idle chit-chat.*

Sylae's eyebrow lifted again, perhaps from a brief expression of indecision, worry, and relief that might have shown behind his eyes before he wiped his face and stared at her blankly. "I am curious," she continued, "How did you do it?"

Uh-oh... He couldn't very well tell her the truth... Nioca groaned in his mind. *Would have been easier to do it myself*, he complained.

Is it MY fault I haven't had much practice being a bot? Nio threw back.

Just repeat after me, okay? Nioca sighed.

Nio started spitting out a list of technical jargon that he only barely followed himself. "Three thousand nine hundred sixty four files required editing in a supplementary hierarchy progression based on the last edit date unless the security protocols overrode the hierarchy order in which time of day of last edit took precedence instead. All references to..."

"Enough!" Nalyd screeched pounding a fist on the table next to him. Nio tried not to flinch. "Tell Nalyd where his creation is!"

Sylae raised her hand again to silence him but he started arguing with her instead. Nio erred on the side of staying silent, too. *Nalyd is not an administrator or a mod. You don't have to answer him*, Nioca confirmed.

But Sylae will surely ask, Nio worried. *What do we tell them?*

What's all this "we" stuff? Nioca huffed. *You and Jewels were the ones who took Stillborn. She told you to give him back to Nalyd before she left, but you didn't. This is YOUR mess.*

Nio had trouble hiding his internal indignation on his external expression. Well, excuse me for being a little distracted with saving YOUR life! he shot back.

Of which I am very grateful, to be sure.

I'd be more sure if you'd just help me out here. Nio felt the wall of his stubbornness and added a bit out of desperation. Jewels would want you to help.

Like a switch, Nioca suddenly resolved that he would help in any way that he could, but he was not happy about it. THAT wasn't fair, he thought with reproach showing he knew how he had been manipulated.

Sorry, Nio thought sheepishly and he really was but the current situation seemed to demand action. It was only the truth, he justified, and Nioca knew it was so. If he had thought it a false statement, it wouldn't have worked.

They both dropped it because Sylae had convinced Nalyd to calm down and was talking to Nio again. They concentrated on mentally catching up. "...can only answer one question at a time. Let's start with where you just were, Nioca. Give me your location before I summoned you here."

Nio and Nioca worked quickly together coming to the conclusion that they had likely seen the Who's Online marker and were monitoring it closely when they summoned him. That meant they'd likely seen the immediate jump. "The citadel," Nio answered calmly.

"How did you get here from there?" she asked next confirming their suspicions.

"A reconfigured portal calibrated to intercept the 13th floor portalator."

By the surprise on Sylae's face, it certainly was not the answer she had been expecting. Nio spared a moment to wonder what she *had* been expecting but had to put it aside as she pressed for more detail. "On whose authority did you make that adjustment?" she demanded.

There's only one right answer to that, Nioca warned.

"On your authority, Arch Magus Sylae." Nio wasn't yet sure how they were going to validate that statement but luckily, Nalyd's overzealous condition boiled over at the statement giving them time to think.

"You told Nalyd it was impossible for your bot to be at the citadel!" he accused Sylae with a bony finger.

Her voice raised defensively, "Well, I certainly didn't tell him to go there!"

Nioca had stiffened in anger when Nalyd had called him Sylae's "bot". The fact that Sylae didn't correct him didn't go unnoticed, either. His anger made him reckless. He wanted to make fools of them now and his mind worked furiously on a plan to do it. Nio tried to follow along but he was having a hard enough time trying to maintain his stoic stance in the face of all the arguing.

Sylae was addressing him again, the business like demeanor tarnished with a harsh edge. "I obviously didn't give you permission directly so how did I authorize this?"

Nioca was ready with the answer that Nio voiced. "The safety of the Refuge was compromised. The prime directive validated its creation."

Sylae was frowning now, though she didn't argue the statement. Iffy, on the other hand, spoke up to refute it. "Calibrating an outside portal to breach the security of the Admin Tower is anything but safe. What if someone else finds it?"

"Error," Nio turned to him, "Portal secure in citadel sanctum."

Iffy looked doubtful, "As secure as the Admin Tower?"

"Negative," Nio said, pausing a moment knowing they would come to the wrong conclusion. "Citadel sanctum is more secure than the Admin Tower," he finished. If he could have smirked in their faces he would have.

Sylae was pinching the bridge of her nose in one hand while holding up her other to silence them again. "Please, everyone, no distractions. Let me ask the questions." She turned back to Nio with a serious tone. "What was endangering the Refuge?"

"Designation Stillborn," Nio droned feeling triumph in the pieces fitting together.

Nalyd let out a wild screech, though, leaping forward. Nio couldn't help flinching when the tip of Lifesower started coming towards him. He was sure the fear showed on his face for a brief moment. Luckily, the others had all their attention on the mad little shaper. Sylae swung her staff to catch Lifesower while Iffy and Saph grabbed Nalyd's arms.

Nio decided to mask his fear with an unsolicited response. "Designation Nalyd compromises the safety of the Refuge."

Sylae nodded her head. "I agree. Nalyd, if you don't want to be thrown into the brig indefinitely, I suggest you calm down. AND if you want your creation back, I suggest you don't interrupt again."

A flash of crazed anger went over his face before he went limp, a mask of calm returning to his features. "Nalyd is very sorry. He is passionate about his work."

"Still..." Sylae intoned, "I think to make sure, I'll hold on to *this* for a while." She yanked Lifesower from his hand eliciting a strangled whimper from him though he didn't protest further.

It was obvious that Sylae had very little patience left for this situation. "Okay, confirm if I am understanding this correctly," she addressed Nio. "You considered Stillborn a threat to the Refuge."

"Affirmative."

"So you linked a secure portal between here and the citadel."

"Affirmative."

"And," she pointed at Nalyd seeming to acknowledge some information she'd gotten from him, "put him in a stasis chamber there to neutralize the threat?"

"Affirmative."

Sylae nodded appearing satisfied and turned to Nalyd. "You want your creation back, right?"

Nalyd's eyes slit at Nio but he nodded his head.

"Okay. Go get him, Nioca."

Nio stood to leave but Nalyd wrenched an arm free from Saph and clamped his hand onto his wrist. Nio's instincts screamed at him to yank free and run but he held fast under the murderous gaze. "Nalyd would also like a promise that no one will violate Nalyd's creation again."

It was Sylae's turn to slit her eyes. She spun on Nalyd bringing his own blade dangerously close to his throat. Seeing it in reach he let go of Nio's wrist to make a grab for it but Sylae didn't let go while she leveled her gaze at him and spoke with quiet authority. "If one of your creations poses a threat to MY Refuge again, I give every member full permission to destroy it and your shaping lab!" She stepped forward forcing Nalyd's blade hand behind his and speaking inches from his face. "Does Nalyd understand?"

Nio imagined that he had nodded but as soon as his wrist was free, he made a beeline for the door and didn't look back. The pressure started getting to him as his hands began to tremble. He took the portalator down to the tunnel level and sprinted to where the BladesForge energy hummed its song to his senses. He pulled himself into the lab and collapsed onto the floor breathing deeply to steady his nerves.

Nioca was standing there read with a groggy Stillborn. "I'll take him back," he announced.

Nio looked up at his twin's grim face. Even though he really didn't want to go back out there, he wasn't going to force this on Nioca. "You sure?"

"Yeah, I need to end this."

Nio could feel his resolve and didn't bother arguing with him. "Okay, be careful."

Sylae decided she didn't want to take any more chances with Nalyd and put a magical restraint on him that would last as long as he was in the Admin Tower. He scowled at her from the opposite side of the table where she had instructed him to sit. This whole business had given her a splitting headache and she longed to have it done with.

It took Nioca less than ten minutes to re-emerge from the portal holding Stillborn's hand. Sylae found it an odd gesture knowing how the contact must irritate him. There was an actual scowl on Nioca's face from it, though if she didn't know any better, he seemed to be giving her the same look of contempt that Nalyd had been giving Nioca this whole time.

Nioca walked up to Nalyd and met his stare with an equal amount of scorn. "Here is *Jewels'* son." He emphasized the last two words gaining an indignant growl from Nalyd. It was almost as if he'd done it deliberately to spurn Nalyd.

Sylae's heart skipped a beat. She stared at Nioca openly drinking in the subtle details of his behavior.

Nalyd stood and stalked out the door. "Creation, come!" he ordered.

Nioca still held Stillborn's hand when he looked up at him, seemingly for permission. Nioca gave only the slightest of nods and let go of his hand. Reluctantly the green hulking mass lumbered towards the little shaper who had snatched Lifesower from where Sylae had leaned it against the wall. He stomped off to leave the Admin Tower and Sylae breathed a sigh of relief watching him go.

She was startled to see that Nioca now stared straight at her. Hatred was written all over his face openly daring her to say anything about it. A cold shiver of dread ran down her spine. She'd had nightmares about this day, though she hadn't believed it would ever really come. Part of her wanted to scream a warning to Iffy and Saph, take him down, lock him in a dungeon and throw away the key. Will would have done that. She was pretty sure he wouldn't have had a problem with it.

Sylae turned to the only support she had in the room. "Iffy, Saph, thank you for your help," she took a deep breath and looked Nioca right in the eye though she still talked to them. "I've got some work to finish up here, but you can go."

Iffy and Saph didn't notice the eyebrow that Nioca raised or the posture he took moving to a window, looking out it with his hands behind his back. They left her there without concern and Sylae closed her eyes wondering if she'd done the right thing when the door clicked shut behind them. No turning back now...

Putting a lid on her fears, Sylae walked up to join him in looking out at the Refuge below. "You changed your clothes while you were gone," she noted gently. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him give half a smirk.

"I've changed a lot of things recently," he responded gruffly. He definitely wasn't pretending anything anymore.

"How long?" she asked.

He didn't look at her. "Since the system reboot killed me."

He said it with such malice that she flinched. The statement brought up so many questions but

she didn't dare ask any of them. She fidgeted as the silence drew out knowing there was only one thing she should say. Only one thing she had a right to say. "I'm sorry," she said sincerely, her voice cracking with emotion.

Nioca wasn't about to let her off that easy. "For what?" he asked harshly.

"For what happened to you. For what Will did to you..."

"What YOU did to me!" Nioca spat out banging his fist on a console next to him.

She yelped a little in surprise but didn't waver. "Will is dead, Nioca."

There was a moment of silence before he turned on her. His hands gripped her shoulders painfully as he shook her. "I was *enslaved*, not oblivious!" he snarled. "You have his soul!"

She didn't protest, didn't try to get away. Instead she looked him straight in the eye though her own vision was blurry with tears. "People change, Nioca. The man I was no longer lives. The last shred of him was destroyed along with the wedding ring he gave..." Sylae's voice cracked, unable to finish the sentence. She could see the fierceness in his eyes waver. Taking a breath she continued her thought, "but he was dead the moment I asked for it back. Can you understand that?"

Nioca released her and turned back to the window. His voice was quieter but no less harsh. "Yeah, I can understand. It still doesn't absolve you, though."

"You weren't exactly innocent that night either," she shot back. "You tried to take over!"

"I was *trying* to protect the Refuge!" he snapped though his voice became quieter as he continued. "And I was drunk," he admitted with a bitter laugh. "Gods I was sooo drunk. You have no idea how torturous it was to be in Jewels' mind when she was kissing your ugly mug."

Sylae gave an indignant cry, "Ugly?!"

He gave her a sideways glance. "Well your old mug at least," Nioca chuckled and Sylae laughed with him. There was a noticeable release of tension between the two. Nioca no longer spoke with bitterness. Instead it sounded more like brokenness and regret. "I've always been trying to protect the Refuge. It was my prime directive before I became a bot."

They both fell silent for a while before Sylae spoke again. "I'm sorry. I can't undo what was done. What can I do now to help you see that I'm not the same person?"

Nioca was silent for a long time. So long that Sylae thought he might not give her an answer but he finally opened his mouth with his provision. It was not what she had expected. "Trust me." It was something Will had never done fully. He had never trusted anyone fully. Not even Jewels. Not really. "Don't undo what I've done," Nioca continued. "Just trust that everything I do is to protect us all."

Sylae considered for a moment. "Trust the footprints in the tunnels between here and the Geneforge forum?" she asked, but continued on before he answered. "Trust the man that looks like you but isn't you? Trust what you really had Stillborn in stasis for?"

Nioca lifted an eyebrow at her observations. "Not your concerns," he answered, "and nothing that would endanger the Refuge. Well... except maybe from the wrath of a certain little shaper but if it were up to me Nalyd would have been banned ages ago."

Sylae nodded staring out at the Refuge. HER Refuge. Could she afford to trust this man next to her? Could she afford not to? "Okay," she finally answered with resolve. "I will trust you, Nioca. To prove it, I'll make you an admin."

"I don't want to be an admin," he shook his head.

"Unofficially, then," she turned to smile at him. "Do you need help cleaning up the citadel?"

"Uh... No. Thanks. My shades will be able to do anything that needs doing."

Sylae nodded one last time before dismissing herself. "Have a good day, then. I'll see you around." Retreating out the door, Sylae breathed slowly a few deep, cleansing breaths to calm her skittering heart. The confrontation had left her with a deeper resolve to be true to herself... her new self.

Nioca turned back to the window and addressed a frazzled Nio. "Well, that went better than expected."

Better than expected?! he thought indignantly. She not only suspects things, now. She KNOWS them! You just confirmed them for her!

"Relax," Nioca said out loud to his reflection in the window. "She'll keep her promise."

How do you know?

"Because she's a different person now, and she feels the need to prove it; to herself and to everyone else." Nio's understanding was quick and gentle. He didn't mention it again. If anyone understood the motives of the Arch Magus, it was Nioca.

Liquid Fire

By Jewels - Mar 19 2013

Nalyd was boiling inside his skin. The Rot was keeping him subdued when what he *wanted* was to rampage. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way around? The Rot reverberated in his head *Violence does not bring about our purposes. We must finish the creation without their interference.* Nalyd was still furious, though he could see the logic.

After his creation was complete he would take his revenge on Nioca and the others. The hulking green mass lumbered along silently behind them, never saying a word. When they reached the Geneforge forum Nalyd locked it shut behind them. He ordered Stillborn to the platform and the Rot ordered Nalyd to shape.

With Lifesower firmly in hand, Nalyd began twisting and tearing; molding and making Stillborn with a new vigor. His creation's howls of agony phased him none. Nalyd wouldn't rest, wouldn't relent, wouldn't stop until his creation was done.

Clyde awoke to an empty bed. There was no trace of the woman he had shared it with the night before. Had she been a dream? An alcohol induced hallucination? He flopped his pillow over his eyes to block out the sun light. If it *had* been a dream, he wanted to go back to it.

He wasn't sure how long he laid there slipping in and out of consciousness. He never bothered to get up until he was hungry most mornings. There was no job to go to. No family to spend time with. No reason to do anything other than lay here imagining things were different.

The soft knock on his door only succeeded in irritating him. Who would be calling on him so early in the morning? Or was it afternoon already? If the regular barkeep wasn't back yet someone might be looking for one. The knock sounded again and Clyde rolled over in

frustration. "Go pour your own drink!" he hollered at the door. They only knocked again. They weren't going to leave.

With a scowl Clyde tore off the covers and stomped the four paces to the door. He ripped it open growling "What do you want?!" He instantly regretted it because *she* was there. Not a dream. Not a hallucination. She was real, standing in front of him looking unsure and ready to flee. "I'm sorry," he fumbled quickly, stabbing a hand through his hair. "When you were gone... I thought I might have imagined it." She glanced up to meet his gaze, a tiny smile on his lips.

She raised a basket in front of her looking down at it. "I... I thought you might be hungry?" Her shaking voice, barely a whisper, said it like a question as if asking permission to even look at him.

He looked at the out-held basket and took it from her. "Thank you," he whispered not knowing what else to say. "Join me?" he finally asked stepping back from the door frame. She gave a little nod and walked in. The hairs on his arms bristled where she brushed past.

He closed the door behind her and stood for a moment with his back to her. Emotions swirled inside him. Hope, fear, guilt... Was this a good idea? Was he ready for this? Was it too soon? He didn't even know what *this* was or what it might become. All he knew for sure was that a part of him screamed for someone to hold onto.

He turned and took in her nervous profile before she looked up to meet his glance, another small smile raised the corner of her mouth but it was her eyes that caught his attention. There was such a longing in them... a fierce hunger that sent chills down his spine. His expression must have shown his discomfort because the look in her eye changed to fear or was that guilt? He gave her his own timid smile and a flicker of hope shown on her features. Not only was she here and real, she knew how he felt... shared how he felt. Whatever this was or was going to be, he knew he didn't want it to end.

He took two steps around her to place the basket on the tiny table. There was only one chair which he pulled out for her. She sat wordlessly and he opened the basket. Inside were two apples, a loaf of fresh bread, and a wedge of cheese. "So Ligrev is back then?" he asked pulling the food out and setting the basket aside.

She shook her head. "I didn't see anyone there," she said. "But the pantry was full. There was an announcement that we should help ourselves."

He nodded while dividing up the food and sat on the edge of the bed while he ate his. It had been a long time since he had made small talk with anyone. He couldn't think of anything he would

want to talk about and she didn't offer anything so they ate in silence. She seemed perfectly content with the lack of conversation so he didn't worry about it.

When they were done he poured her a glass of water in the only cup he owned. She took it without qualm while he took a swig straight from the canteen like he usually did. When she set down her cup she dropped her gaze to her lap fidgeting. He wished he knew what to say to make her more comfortable as the awkward silence stretched on.

Finally she looked up at him and spoke. "I... I went back to my... my room this morning." She let the hesitant statement hang in the air and he just nodded at it not knowing what else to say. She looked back down at her fidgeting hands, her voice barely a whisper, before continuing. "I don't plan on ever going back again."

Clyde let that sink in eyeing the other bag she had dropped inside the door when she came. He realized what she was saying; what she was asking, and a strange sensation tightened in his chest. His voice had a rasp when he spoke. "You can stay as long as you want."

She let out a loud breath as if she'd been holding it and met his gaze with a genuine smile. The first one he had seen light up her face and the tightening in his chest grew. She watched him now, glancing at him to the bed and back again. She stood up and walked the two steps to sit beside him, her nearness made him shiver.

"I'm still a bit tired," she admitted. He moved to stand but her hand clamped on his arm with enough strength he winced. She immediately eased up but didn't let go. His skin still burned under her touch. For a moment her gaze was intense and hungry again. Some unspoken need simmered just under the surface and his chest began to throb with pain. It was the guilt and the fear fighting against the hope that he had. He realized he had his own need. A need to *be needed*.

"*Stay!*" she managed to voice; part question, part plead, part command. With each heartbeat he felt the pain of his constricted chest, the pain of his indecision and the memory of his family. They were gone but she was here now. Dare he move on?

She started to lie down and tugged his arm closer. He didn't fight it, didn't pull back. She wanted him here... needed him here, and he wasn't going to deny her. *Whatever she wanted*, he realized as she twined her fingers in his and pulled his arm around her. He settled in behind her pulling her close. *He would give her whatever she wanted.*

It felt like something snapped within him; a dam that had burst as the pain in his chest changed to a wave of liquid heat radiating out to every part of his body. Her breath hitched as if she could feel it, too. He didn't know how, but he could feel her hunger, feel her eagerness to be close.

She turned into him and her eyes were wild with longing and anticipation. There was a pull where her hands clung to his. Her desire for him was tangible, he could feel it. She wanted him. All of him. He rolled to his back, breathless. A glimmer of fear crossed his mind at her wild stare but it was squashed as she rolled on top of him. His senses burned with her nearness. He could feel the pull to be closer wherever they touched.

She dug her nails into his palms, drawing blood, but he barely noticed because the liquid fire in him rose up to meet her. It poured out of him through his clothes and she drank it in with an intake of breath. She was taking him. All of him. And he didn't hold anything back. He would give her whatever she wanted. He would never be alone again because he would be with her, inside her, forever... and he didn't even know her name.

The fire flow slowed as a smile of satisfaction crossed her face. There wasn't much of him left. When her lips came down to meet his he felt the last bit of himself pool there desperate to be drawn out into her. With a final breath he left himself behind to be one with her.

Nix knew the instant she had succeeded, the very moment that her little experiment proved that it was possible. She could make the essence of someone not her kin compatible with her own.

Preparing the ingredients had been the hardest part... well apart from actually finding the recipe, but black magics weren't all that rare even if shunned. A potion for draining a life into yourself didn't take too long to find.

Nix had decided that she didn't want the human as a companion. The thought of feigning weakness much longer gnawed at her. So instead, she decided to do a trial run of the spell and make sure it actually worked before she tried it on the green haired monster.

She cooked the ingredients in to the bread and waited nervously as she ate with him. During the meal, she could sense it starting to work; a catalyst that prepared their essence to join and become one. Emotion stirred the process faster so she had done her best to elicit some from him. It took only minutes from feeling the first stirring in him to knowing he was ready. She lay on her side gripping his hand to her chest and he lay down behind her, pulling her close. That was the moment his soul was ready. She could feel it spread out from his core and move freely under his skin just waiting for her to take it.

Her own essence blossomed inside her; eager, hungry, and just a bit desperate. She could have done it like this, with her back to him; taken him without sparing him another glance but there was something she felt in him that she hadn't expected... his desire to be hers. She turned into

him wanting to look in his eyes, curious to see his expression and match it to what he was feeling.

He was a human; his essence barely a drop in a bucket compared to hers, but she realized she had never wanted anything more. His essence was a drug swirling beneath her fingertips that she needed. She desperately wanted all of him and she felt him respond to that need. Yes. He was willing. He wanted to give her everything.

He rolled to his back and she rolled on top of him, drunk on their mutual desire. Their essence hummed together in harmony, pulling at each other wherever their bodies touched. One final step, she nicked the tip of her fingers on the dagger still at her belt and placed her hands in his trusting palms. When she dug her nails in, their blood mixed and the surge of life force was maddening. He pushed into it with eager fervor overwhelming her senses. She drank him in as quickly as she could, savoring every moment. Too quickly, the flow slowed. There wasn't much of him left. She didn't know why she did it, why she bent down to kiss him, except that she wanted every last drop of him.

The physical weakness was to be expected as her body lay tingling in the aftermath. He was an empty husk when she was done with him, but she didn't move from her perch for a long time. He was inside her, swirling around and mixing with her but he hadn't integrated yet. She understood, now, how he would have given her anything she had asked and a glimmer of remorse washed over her.

Anything she asked... his devotion, a family... No one had ever offered that freely to her before and a single tear ran down her nose to land on his cheek in regret. She had never considered such a thing before. A relationship with one not her kin? The idea seemed alien but now that they were joined in a way more intimate than husband and wife, it didn't seem so unthinkable.

He was fading into her, she could tell. His moments of emotion grew fewer and further between but the last thing she felt from him was contentment and a joyful relief from loneliness. He didn't want her to mourn him, just to remember that he would always be with her now. They would never be alone again.

Byte from a Bug

By Jewels - Apr 3 2013

The smell of sod and crushed leaves filled Azuma's nostrils. He lay on his side, arms protectively encircling Ligrev. His right arm was her pillow while his left arm was snug across her belly. He watched as she slept peacefully in the early morning light and his chest ached.

He didn't understand the emotions rolling around in him; he had never felt this way before. It was happiness and contentment just to be near her with trepidation at ever having to let her go. Then there was the ache that seemed to grow and grow the more he stared at her. It was a fierce need to protect her from all harm both mental and physical. He would jump in front of a sword to save her, he had no doubt. In contrast there was another feeling that blossomed from his core and continued to grow; a warmth and tenderness towards her... he couldn't even explain it. It was just *sooo*... beyond himself. The feeling itself seemed to be a physical thing that transcended his body to envelop hers and sent his nerve endings to tingling with the very rise and fall of her chest.

She kept asking me what I'd done to her, he mused to Sentience, but what has she done to me?

I would have thought it obvious... the sword responded with subdued sarcasm.

Yeah, I know what it is... I just never thought it would feel like this.

I assume it takes most people by surprise the first time.

Azuma smiled at his sword and at the woman in his arms. He bent down to kiss her forehead, drinking in the touch. "I love you," he whispered next to her skin.

Her lashes fluttered at the sound and his heart fluttered with them. He met her gaze as she stared at him, a look of wonder on her face. "You're still here," she breathed. It was almost a question like she couldn't quite believe it making tears sting the corners of his eyes at the thought of it. She shouldn't have reason to worry... it was his fault she did. He would spend a lifetime being there when she woke up to make up for it.

"I'm not going anywhere," he assured her glad for the smile it brought. Azuma pressed his forehead against hers for a moment before going in for a kiss on the lips but she turned her head to the side. He pulled back to study her mixed expression. "What's wrong Livvy?"

She looked at him quickly... questioningly from the nickname perhaps, and looked away again pursing her lips a bit. "I'm still mad at you," she stated with a pout.

He frowned. First she was happy he was still here then she was back to being mad, he didn't understand. *She's a woman, silly. You're not meant to understand. Just let her vent.* Taking romance advice from a sword... this was definitely a new low for him, but Azuma didn't see any easy fix to this.

"What can I do?" he asked her without letting up on his grip. If she told him to let her go, he didn't know if he'd be able to do it.

She chewed on her bottom lip nervously for a moment. It took all he had not to lean in towards it. "Tell me what you did to me," she finally answered in a tentative murmur.

Azuma sighed, resigned that he'd have to tell her the truth; at least as far as he understood it. "Well...", he started hesitantly, "Do you understand what you are?"

"What do you mean?" Ligrev looked at him confused. "Don't you dare try to write this off as part of being a woman!"

Azuma closed his eyes and rested his forehead on hers again. "No, that's not what I mean..." he opened his eyes meeting her questioning gaze. He couldn't bring himself to just come out and say it so he tried to help her realize it on her own again. "What is the first thing you remember? Ever. In your whole life." She broke eye contact as she thought. Her brow furrowed and she frowned. She opened her mouth to say something only to shut it again and chew on her lip. "It's okay, Livvy... Just say it. What's the first thing you remember?"

"I... I remember the Lounge," she answered with a troubled expression. "...only the Lounge; nothing before. What happened to my memories of before the Lounge?" Tears started welling up in her eyes as a frightened sound escaped her throat.

Azuma tried to comfort her with a squeeze. "Shh, Livvy. Please don't cry. You haven't lost any memories."

"Then what's wrong with me?!" she demanded, shoving his arm away. "No childhood... no parents... no life apart from serving ale and coffee and stew to any stranger that comes walking through those doors..." She started to pull away from him in aggravation. "I've never left the Lounge before, Azuma. I've never *wanted* to leave! So what's wrong with me?!"

"Nothing!" Azuma insisted reaching a hand out to her only to have it slapped away. "You were exactly as you were meant to be." She was sitting up now scooting backwards inch by inch and shaking her head at his words. He ached for the distance to be closed again so he tried a different analogy to make her understand. "Do you know what Nalyd is? What he *does*?"

She looked at him quizzically but at least she had stopped moving away. "He's a shaper, isn't he? He makes things in the Geneforge forum."

"Right," he encouraged. "Nalyd makes *living* things out of essence. He designs them for a purpose and creates them with shaping."

"So..." she blinked putting the pieces together, "I'm a... a creation? Like Stillborn?"

"Sort of," he nodded, "but not exactly. You weren't born. You were created. Not through shaping but with programming... like me," he added the last part in a whisper. It was the first time he had admitted his origin out loud to anyone and it made him feel incredibly vulnerable.

"You were programmed?" she asked with wide eyes. "To do what?"

He froze for a moment not knowing what to do before skirting the question. "*You* were programmed to be the barkeep of the Lounge by w-dueck. Its when you started existing and why you don't remember anything else."

She started biting her lip again and looked down at her fidgeting hands. "I am a computer program created to serve beer," it wasn't quite a question. More like she was asking herself whether or not she wanted to believe it. Azuma nodded at her conclusion. "But what were you created to do, Azuma?"

She looked at him with determination and in a frustrating flood of emotions it was Azuma's turn to fight back the tears. Her hands went to his face as she wiped one away. At least it had closed the distance between them. He would tell her what he was and she might hate him for it but for at least one more moment the gap between them was gone. He brought his hands up to hers and held them to his face. He kept his eyes closed, unable to look at her while he spoke. "Don't you remember, Ligrev? Remember the day you patched me up? I... I was created to destroy and I almost destroyed you." He held his breath as the silent seconds ticked by.

He was devastated when she pulled her hands away. Her fingers slipped out of his and he moved his hands up to cover his face. He felt the heat of her presence diminish as she moved further away and he stifled a cry as a physical pain constricted his chest. He didn't dare move for fear of losing control again here and now.

"I remember that day," she finally said. Her voice hovered a few feet to his right. "I remember using the first-aid kit on you and checking your wounds." She worked through it with a deliberate slowness. "I remember..." she struggled with it a bit, "I remember looking at you and seeing... and forgetting something horrible." There was an added edge to her words now. "You made me forget, didn't you? What did you make me forget? Tell me!"

Azuma cringed beneath his hands. *He* didn't want to remember what he had made her forget let alone remind her, but he wouldn't deny her now. She deserved to know. He dropped his hands from his face but he kept staring at the ground. "You saw me, Livvy... my true self. Who I was created to be. I was programmed to be malicious, to devour, to destroy. I'm a virus and I corrupted you."

He waited, not knowing what to expect, but the laughter that rang out in the early morning air was definitely not one of his top guesses. He ventured a peek when her laugh turned into a snort and the snort turned into a bray. He didn't understand why she was laughing but something about the way it lit up her face released the constriction in his chest. When she settled down enough to catch her breath she looked at him with a smile. "Well, that explains it then," she said with an air of mirth. "I'm a computer program, you're a computer virus, and you corrupted me. It makes perfect sense. No wonder I don't feel like I used to."

Azuma was a little confused by the quick mood change but tried to adjust the best he could. "There's a bit more to it than that."

Ligrev cocked her head, "Hmm?"

"I corrupted you in a moment of unguarded weakness, but then I used Sentience to restore you."

"Your sword?"

Azuma nodded. "He's not a normal sword, see? He's the embodiment of an AI program." She stared at him blankly. "Artificial Intelligence?" he offered. "He basically gave you a mind of your own, much like he did for me years ago. He allowed me to become more than my program... and now so can you."

Ligrev's brow furrowed again as she blessedly slid back into his arms. Relief flooded him and he pulled her in tight desperate with a need to be close. "So let me get this straight," she breathed as she returned the gesture of pressing her forehead up against his. "You corrupted me and used your sword – with a mind of its own – to restore me, yes?"

"That's pretty much it, yeah," he agreed.

"Then why..." she asked with a smirk on her face, "did you use your *other* sword to corrupt me again?" She pushed her body against his suggestively and he gasped with the thrill that went through him.

"Sorry... Livvy..." he huffed out between ragged breaths. "I guess it has a mind of its own, too."

She leaned into him, adding pressure with a squeeze. "Have I told you how much I love it when you call me that?" Azuma couldn't manage speaking at the moment so he just shook his head.

His body ached with each pound of his heart and the barest brush of her lips sent shivers from his head to his toes. How could the touch of one person affect him so much? *What did you do to me?* he thought, trying to convey the question with his eyes.

She didn't tell him. Not with words. Maybe she couldn't. What she did, instead, was show him why what she did to him was worth it. Worth every pain he had ever endured; every misguided night; every roiling, confusing emotion... It was all worth it for this.

A Lie to Die For

By Jewels - Apr 16 2013

If anyone noticed when their Google car pulled up to the Refuge dock, no one took any interest. qUe and Reth climbed out garbed in plain brown clothes to blend in with the Ermarians.

"See," Reth said, "I told you a Google car would be less conspicuous than a portal. It's so common place, no one's taking a second look."

"Never doubted you for a second," qUe smiled, but her expression soon changed with her thoughts. "Do you think they will believe us?"

"We've never given them a reason not to so I think we're pretty safe," Reth reassured her.

"How much time do you think we have?"

"Hard to say," he scratched his chin. "We did take a little detour... not very long, I'd say."

qUe shivered. As much as she wanted this whole thing over and done with, she was still afraid of failure. Even with the addition of Eoli and Sal's energy, they were not as strong as Iffy and Saph.

Reth put a hand on her shoulder reading her thoughts. "Don't worry, qUe. Iffy and Saph trust us. It won't be difficult to take them by surprise."

"Just like Sal and Eoli?"

"Just like Sal and Eoli."

qUe nodded. She knew he was right. A fleeting twinge of guilt flickered through her conscience but she had long learned to ignore it. The anticipation of having Iffy's essence flow through her veins tickled her senses and the ecstasy of the last infusion drove her on with the need for more. She needed Iffy; to be one with him... to own him and his. Her body trembled in the thought and Reth shivered beside her in response. "I think I might be jealous," he smirked at her, "if I didn't want the same thing just as badly."

qUe stifled a giggle. She found their mutual desire for the same man quite comical. The thirst for his power was not all that different from their thirst for each other except that they wanted to be with each other forever while to be satisfied with Iffy, he had to die.

"Come on," Reth urged. "The sooner we do this, the sooner we can start our eternity together." qUe nodded and the pair walked into the Refuge.

Sylae looked out her window from the 30th floor. The exchange with Nioca had been draining and a part of her really wanted to start digging through the Refuge code to find exactly what she was supposed to "trust" him with. ...but she knew that part was only a remnant of her soul's old life. If she was going to prove that she was really a new person, she was going to have to fight the urge. Of course, that didn't mean she shouldn't take precautions. Though she wouldn't scour the code for his past changes, she did set a logger to record all of his future ones.

She visually scanned her refuge content in the choices she had made to protect it. Two figures walked out of the forest to the southeast and headed straight for the tower. She couldn't tell who they were from here but their purposeful gait told her they were coming on business. Sylae decided to go down to meet them.

She was waiting with the door open for them when a very disheveled pair walked up. One wore a

hooded cloak up over their face, but Sylae recognized the other. Azuma had leaves in his hair and dirt smudged across his face. The protective arm he had on the hooded figure's elbow was not lost on her. It was reminiscent of the last time she had seen him. ...with his hand at Jewels' elbow.

She put on an air of concern. "Azuma, are you okay? You look like you've been in a fight."

He conscientiously ran his fingers through his hair. "Um, no ma'am. Nothing to be worried about. We've just, uh, spent the night on the forest floor is all."

He put a hand on the hooded figure's back while leading them up to towards the door but Sylae blocked the threshold. She cocked an eyebrow at Azuma. "And who is this?" she asked guardedly.

"Can we sit first?" he asked a little nervously.

Sylae frowned. She was not about to let Jewels into the Admin Tower without a good reason. She crossed her arms and stepped forward forcing the pair back. The hooded figure stumbled and reached out a hand for support. Azuma caught it without thinking and Sylae noticed the lack of any copper tendrils along the fingers. Not Jewels then? She searched Azuma's face for any signs of deception but all she saw was his concern for his companion.

"Um, sure," Sylae stepped back and led them to a little table. Azuma pulled out the chair for his guest and the hooded face lifted enough for her to spy a feminine smile directed towards him. She was getting impatient. "Okay, we're sitting. Don't leave me in suspense any further. Who is your lady friend? The last time I saw you, you left the lounge with Jewels."

The figure in the robe stiffened visibly but Azuma reached to take her hand again. "First of all," he started, "It's not what you think." She wondered how closely he knew what she was actually thinking. "Secondly, I need you to keep an open mind..." He hesitated looking to the figure who nodded at him and reached up to bring her hood down as he finished his sentence. "...because I'm going to tell you some things not even w-dueck knew."

Sylae didn't register his last statement, though, too focused on the figure. Ligrev sat there with wide brown eyes looking back and forth between Azuma and Sylae, a shy unsure smile played on her lips. As her hand left her cowl it searched for Azuma's fingers again. "Hello, Sylae," she said in a small voice.

Sylae broke into a wide smile feeling quite relieved. "Azuma, you found her! *Thank Mozilla!* I thought I was going to have to re-write her from scratch."

"You've been looking for me?" Ligrev asked.

"Of course! The Lounge can't function without its barkeep. I'll just need to take a look at your code to see why you left in the first place. I'm sure that after a little tweaking, we can have you back in working condition in no time."

"Now, wait a minute," Azuma stiffened in protest, "I don't think you understand..."

Ligrev squeezed his hand. "It's okay, Azuma. I can handle this." She turned back to Sylae with a calm determination. "I'm not going to be tending bar anymore. I... I don't want to be the barkeep."

Sylae sat back in her chair in disbelief. "You don't *want* to?" Ligrev shook her head. A string of ones and zeros was telling Sylae no. "Well, I'm sure I can fix whatever program error in your code has caused that glitch."

"No!" she yelled and Sylae stared at her in surprise. She glanced at Azuma and noted his strained expression. This was obviously not going how he had expected.

Sylae's own ire was rising. "Excuse me?" she asked in unbelief.

Ligrev was calm but firm, "I said no, ma'am. I will not be your barkeep and you will not violate me by changing one character of my programming."

Sylae sighed. Ligrev was more damaged than she had thought if the Accept Command protocol was corrupted. She'd have to scrap Ligrev and start all over again. "I was really hoping for a different outcome. Making another barkeep is going to be a pain in the command prompt." She turned to Azuma. "Thank you for bringing her to me. I'll take care of things from here."

Azuma didn't move an inch. "What do you mean?" he asked a little hoarsely.

"I know how Will put her program together," she explained with irritation, "and I know how to take it apart."

"NO!!" The intensity of Azuma's response shocked Sylae more than Ligrev's had. It must have shown on her face because he apologized just as quickly. "I'm sorry... Please, I mean no disrespect... but would you also destroy me if I didn't do what you asked?"

Sylae looked at him quizzically. Of all the odd things to ask... "Of course not, Azuma! How could you even think I'd make such a correlation? That would be totally different."

"Different than a computer program performing outside of its original purpose?" Azuma posed and Sylae was surprised at how he described Ligrev's malfunction. "No. It wouldn't be different at all." He paused as Sylae stared back at him blankly. She didn't understand what he meant and he looked frustrated. He ran his hands over his down-turned face and took a few deep breaths. "I probably should have explained things first," he started lifting his head to face her. His voice was filled with quiet conviction. "I was programmed to follow my coding, too... but I *chose* to live my own life, Sylae. Would you have me "taken apart" for that?"

Sylae took the information in with rounded eyes and stared at him mutely as she processed it. All this time... and she'd never even suspected. She had heard rumors and read reports on rogue programs before. There were hippie movements to "free the programs" all the time, and there were groups of scientists who worked diligently to perfect their "Artificial Intelligence" programs. She had just never paid it much attention before. This changed things... she had come to consider Azuma a friend while she lived as Will. That he showed his loyalty to Jewels over this new body did not change her opinion of him as a person. A person... did she really consider him a person? When she realized the answer was "yes," the rest came easily.

"I'm sorry, Azuma," she began hesitantly. "I didn't know. You never said..." She stopped herself and rephrased, "Will never said you were... an AI."

"Will didn't know," he admitted. "It's not something I like to share and... I didn't have a reason to share until now." He looked over at Ligrev who had been sitting patiently through their discourse. He reached over taking her hand and she smiled at him. "I love Livvy, Sy, and I want to start a life with her."

"About time, too," Ligrev said in mock irritation.

A pang of sadness ripped through Sylae as she took in the way the two looked at each other. She'd had that once hadn't she? Both her soul and her body cried out for the loves they had lost in their lifetimes. A husband... a wife... both flashed fresh in her memory before she clamped down on her emotions. She would not lose it over two people making googly eyes in front of her.

Azuma continued, oblivious to her pain. "I actually came here to ask if there was any available housing. Sleeping on the forest floor gets a little chilly."

"And hard," Ligrev added with a smirk.

Sylae shook her head remembering their disheveled appearance. She forced her mind into business mode before any new tears threatened. If she had to make another barkeep from scratch, she really didn't have time for house hunting... unless... She could turn this around. She put on a sympathetic expression. "Well, you can go see if there's an empty room at the Lounge or among the Ermarians but it sounds like I'm going to be busy making a new barkeep." She watched their faces fall with an inward smile. "I'm sorry. My hands are tied. That has to take priority. Iffy did a good job of trucking in new food, but it's not going to last more than a few days. I can hardly afford our hosting bill as it is. This new expense is draining my savings faster than a new spring wardrobe."

Their disappointment grew as they realized their dilemma was small potatoes to her. Time to bait the hook... "I would love to spend some time designing you two a new home. Structural coding is pretty easy and interior design is a lot of fun, but I just won't have the time. Reconstructing a barkeep's query list could take me weeks." She let that sink in and sat back. She could already see the wheels in Ligrev's newly independent mind turning, and Sylae started reeling. "Of course, if you agreed to be the barkeep again, I'd have plenty of time to create a custom built home for you. What do you say?"

Ligrev fidgeted with her fingers before looking to Azuma, but he shook his head. "This is up to you. If you want to spend time tending bar, I'll be there with you. If you decide to live in the forest, I'll be there, too. This is a major life decision and I'm not going to make it for you."

Ligrev looked down in thought. It awed Sylae how a few lines of code could become a sentient being capable of thinking on its own, but here Ligrev was pondering her own future and what she was going to do with it.

When she finally looked up, she had a slit to her eyes. "I'll be the barkeep again, but only if you agree to some things."

Negotiation? Sylae couldn't help but be impressed. "Such as?" she held a palm up in invitation.

"I can't commit to being there 24/7 anymore. I need to be able to hold regular work hours and have the authority to hire other people to cover the hours I won't be there."

"You think you'll be able to find people to work there?"

"The Ermarians are restless. They'll jump at the chance to actually do something again."

"Are you going to be able to choose competent workers, train them, and supervise them?"

"Absolutely. You won't have to worry about a thing."

Sylae sat back again. She wasn't entirely convinced that Ligrev was capable of all that, but if she had Azuma's full support and help they could probably pull it off together. It was worth taking the risk to not have to make another barkeep. "I think we have a deal then."

Ligrev smiled and shook her hand. "Now... about my custom built house..."

Uh, oh... Sylae had a sudden feeling this was going to be a bit more than four walls with a roof.

As Iffy and Saph were on their way downstairs, Sylae was on her way up. She had an armful of papers filled with notes and drawings and was intent on making sure she didn't drop any as she hurried up. She still took the time to slow down as they passed. "You look like a man on a mission," she commented as they approached.

He held up the PM in his hand and stopped on the step next to her. "Another urgent message from another frazzled visitor. You look like you have a mission of your own," he indicated her papers as she tried to gather them into some semblance of order.

"Yep. The Lounge is getting another makeover." Iffy raised a curious eyebrow and she indulged. "It's getting a penthouse for the new couple." A look of mirth crossed her eyes as she acted like she was whispering a secret to him. "Azuma and Ligrev are a *thing*, now."

His face must have shown his complete surprise because Sylae started laughing at him. "Azuma is... in a relationship with... a computer program?" He struggled to even put the thoughts together and Saph had her own thoughts about it that he tried not to dwell on.

"Why not?" Sylae shrugged. "He's a computer program, too." This time Iffy's jaw fell open. "So he says, anyway. Don't know that I'm convinced, but he doesn't like to talk about it so keep it to yourself. Consider it official Administrator business."

Iffy was still trying to wrap his mind around the first tidbit when Saph spoke up. "Is that why she disappeared?"

"Hmm... not sure. I didn't think to ask," Sylae admitted. "At any rate, she seems to be sentient now. Making her own decisions and what not. I convinced her to be the barkeep again, but she

insisted she'd need some compensation for her time." She lifted the pile of papers in her arms. "Blueprints for their new penthouse."

Iffy shook his head. "It seems awfully busy today."

"Nah, you just had a couple of slow days before. This is normal."

"Great," Saph rolled her eyes sarcastically.

"I'd hate to see a busy day then...", he voiced lifting up the PM in his hand and imagining a swarm of them around his head.

"At least this one didn't hit either of us in the face," Saph offered, uncharacteristically looking on the bright side.

Iffy pinched the bridge of his nose. It was still quite sore from Nalyd's last PM.

"Did you want another admin?" Sylae asked with a genuine offer. "This can wait an hour or two."

"No, that's all right. It's not Refuge business, just some family drama. It'd probably be better if you weren't there."

"Okay," she smiled giving his shoulder a squeeze as she started up the stairs again. "You know how to reach me. I'm here if you need me. No problem is too small."

"Thanks," he smiled back as he took a few steps down. As an afterthought he turned back with a joke. "I've got some socks that need darning. I'll be sure to bring them by."

Sylae laughed; her smile widening as she turned back. "Ooo, I'd been looking at that seamstress upgrade for the bots. That would be a perfect project for beta-testing it."

Iffy laughed as well continuing down the stairs. He could feel Saph's eyes on him as she trailed behind him. He snuck her a glance as they turned a corner. [Why are you looking at me like that?](#)

[You like her](#), she thought matter-of-factly.

[Yeah, she's nice. You like her, too.](#)

I do, she admitted, but I wasn't as happy to see her smile. Iffy could feel her smirk and rolled his eyes at her. Deny it all you want, but I know you threw in that joke just to see her smile again.

I did, he admitted. From my understanding, that's what friends do. This time, Saph rolled her eyes. He didn't dwell on what Saph may or may not read into his interactions with Sylae. The truth was that they were both in a bit of a no-man's land. They had been emotionally isolated from other people for so long that neither of them really knew how this friendship thing was supposed to work. Anything past shaking hands and sharing a conversation over a meal was pretty new.

When the pair reached the bottom floor they opened the door to a somber qUe and Reth. Iffy led them to the table while getting the feeling that they were not going to like this conversation. All the previous mirth they had just shared ebbed away at the sight of their disturbed faces.

Iffy wanted to breach the silence with tact but Saph was too impatient. "What's up?" she asked in an irritated tone.

qUe and Reth looked at each other and then back to them. Reth decided to take a page from Saph's book and came right to the point. "Sal and Eoli are dead."

Iffy's intake of breath was audible. More of his kin dead? His previous high disappeared completely as he came crashing down to his reality. Someone was hunting him. He had let his guard down for a few days given a false sense of security in his new position, but the danger was still very real.

"How do you know?" Saph asked in Iffy's silence.

"We went to visit them," qUe said in a small voice. Reth put his hand on her shoulder as her lip quivered. "We found their bodies... days past death."

Her voice cracked so Reth continued. "They both had stab sounds, though we couldn't find the weapon."

"Who?" Iffy breathed out finally.

"Why do you ask when you already know," Saph whispered harshly.

"I want to hear it from them," he snapped.

qUe looked down at her interlocked fingers. "We don't have any proof," she admitted.

"Who else could it be, but Nix?" Reth asked in anger. "We're all that's left. She's picking us off one by one!" His fist came down on the table and even qUe flinched.

"But why?!" Iffy asked in frustration. "Why does she want us all dead? What benefit does she get?"

Reth slit his eyes. "Besides our power, you mean? What other reason does she need?" he asked in exasperation.

qUe's voice was even smaller if that were possible. "She's going to come for you, Iffy. She may come for us first, but she *will* come for you."

"We already knew she would come," Saph conceded. "We've been watching for her."

"I just didn't think she'd go after everyone else first." Iffy sounded as defeated as he felt. How was he supposed to stop this woman? If he just tried to stay away from her, she'd keep killing people on her way to get to him.

Reth was already thinking along the same lines as he was. "We have to team up," he insisted. "It's the only way we have a chance to defeat her."

Iffy looked them in the eye. "I agree. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I sent you away to be hunted and killed by her."

qUe looked relieved and Reth smiled in satisfaction. "I don't know how long we have but it can't be long," he prodded. "We should expect her any day now."

"We need to prepare," qUe urged.

"We will," Iffy promised, "but first I need to take care of some Administrative business."

qUe and Reth both looked at him quizzically as he excused himself and Saph. [Are you sure you want to bring the Refuge into this? Sylae could get hurt... they could all get hurt. They could all die.](#)

Iffy stopped his retreat and faced Saph. [No. I'm not sure. In fact, I'm mostly sure that I want this](#)

fight to happen as far from here as multi-dimensionally possible. But Nix is coming here. If we leave without fighting, she could still kill them all. If she defeats us, she could still kill them all. The only way to keep Sylae and the Refuge safe is to win...

Saph looked at him with resignation reading the rest of his thought. *And you don't think we can win on our own.*

His head fell as he turned to the portalator and set it for the 30th floor. *No. I don't*, he confessed. *I think that, as a friend, Sylae would want me to ask if she will help. And I think that, as a friend, I should trust her to make her own decision. ...I do trust her.*

Saph was nodding at him. She could feel the inner turmoil he faced. *If you trust her, then why are you so afraid?*

He looked straight ahead as tears filled his eyes. *I'm afraid she'll say yes...*

Beyond the Ward

By Jewels - Apr 24 2013

Nioca took a deep breath and stepped out into the open air of the Refuge. He hadn't walked on the soil as a free man in what seemed like years. Only a little over seven months had actually passed, though. He took his time appreciating the flora and fauna as he made his way towards his citadel. An Ermarian couple he passed did a double take and he nodded in their direction. Another group pointed a finger at him and whispered to each other. Finally, one brave soul approached him.

"Sir? Master Nioca? Is that you?"

"Please, how many times have I asked, Jonas? Don't call me master."

The man looked a little flustered, though not necessarily from the chiding. "But... we'd heard you died. They said... they said your soul had been lost to the ether."

Nioca put his hands on the man's shoulders with a small smile. "It was friend. For many months there, it was, but I found my way back. "

Jonas' eyes were wide with awe. "How sir? How could you come back from the Ether?"

Nioca gave a little laugh at his enthusiasm. "A story for another time perhaps. I fear my citadel has been neglected for too long."

"Oh, yes, of course. Another time," his look was hopeful as Nioca nodded a confirmation. A number of people had gathered to watch the pair but they kept their distance as Nioca started for his home again. As soon as he was a few yards away, they converged on Jonas, peppering him with questions in hushed voices. Nioca smiled... it was nice to know he had been missed.

The ward on his front door buzzed as he approached. He had been the one to actually set it up while he was on the end of w-dueck's puppet strings. At least that meant he knew exactly how to dissolve it. For some reason he felt nervous about using his magic. He thought it might be from the disuse for so long but then again it could be all the pairs of eyes he felt locked on his back right now. He had an audience.

Nioca closed his eyes and held up his hands whispering the words of dissolve. The first time through the spell he could feel no magic stirring. He had faltered on a few words so he went through the spell again and this time there was a tingling through his veins but it wasn't enough to dissipate the ward. Without stopping he went into a third iteration. His eyes snapped open as confidence met power. His hushed voice rippled around him of its own accord, and the ward on the door crackled before floating away in the air like glitter on the wind.

Suddenly, he was all too aware of the silence around him. He almost turned around but the thought of facing the people right now was... uncomfortable at best. Instead he pulled open the citadel doors and walked inside.

Surprisingly, there was not a speck of dust to be found. Everything was perfectly in place; at least in the front room, it was. He walked through his citadel, room by room; just glancing in to verify it was all as he'd left it. He skipped over his bedroom spiraling up the stairs to check everything else. When he made it to the top, the machinery hummed just as it had when he left it still keeping the database core in balance.

When he turned to go back downstairs, there was a chill in the air and Nioca smiled. "Appear!" he commanded.

A dozen shades shimmered into view. "Masssterrr..." one of them droned.

His servants had waited for him. That was a good sign. It meant that his magical connection to

them hadn't been severed while he was away. "Good to see you here. You have been keeping things clean in my absence?"

"Yesss, Maaasssterrr."

"Good, good. Yes, very good..." Nioca's voice trailed off as he thought about his home being exactly as it had been when he left it... well almost the same. Aryll was no longer here among his shades but that was a good thing. Breaking her soul's eternal servitude to him had been the best thing he had ever done in Ermaria. The only lasting thing. Nioca snapped back to the present realizing that the shades were still waiting for him. He cleared his throat, "As you were."

"Yesss, Maassterrrr," The shades dispersed in their own directions to return to whichever duty they'd previously had and Nioca headed back downstairs.

When he finally came back to his bedroom and slid the door open, he stopped. There, laid out on his dresser and waiting for him was Avenger. The last he remembered, he had taken his enchanted sword with him to confront w-dueck the night of the 'incident'. He didn't remember bringing it back... Ah, but there was the memory from Jewels carefully placing it among his things... and telling the shades to keep things clean while he was away for an extended period of time... and turning back to survey the room wiping tears from her eyes. Nioca grabbed his sword and sheath, buckling it securely around his waist. It felt good to have the weight back at his side.

He surveyed the room much the same as Jewels had in the memory. The perfectness seemed out of place here. Shouldn't that chair be splintered and strewn across the room? Shouldn't his bed be only smoldering remains? He stepped forward and circled the space stopping in front of a blank wall. His hand reached for the smooth marble gliding over it easily. Shouldn't there be a char mark here where the magical illusion of a false wall ended?

He had not spent many nights in this room since it had been restored to this island. The remnants of his fight with Jewels, completely erased with the restoration. He barely remembered that night when she had tried to kill him though he didn't think it had been all that long ago. A pang of guilt chewed at the pit of his stomach as he remembered how he'd earned her ire. For some reason the memory of running her through on his own sword while in the Fireplane was especially bitter. He could see it from the perspective of actually doing it and as an observer, standing too far away to stop it.

There was history in this room; painful history he didn't want to forget, lest he repeat it. He worked up a smite spell and hurled it at the edge of the false wall leaving a blacked area with a chunk of marble missing. He spoke his password, and the false wall disappeared taking half of the charred area with it. He whispered it back into place and the illusionary wall came back with no marks at all while the regular wall stayed charred. He nodded in satisfaction. *This mark should always be here.*

"Nioca?" the feminine voice was full of emotion and barely choked out his name. He turned around expecting to find a war harried Jewels. Before he could speak a word, the tear stained woman had rushed to him throwing her arms around his neck and burying her face in his robes.

Nioca froze. He quite literally didn't know what to do. The woman was not Jewels.

What the Heart Wants

By Jewels - Jun 2 2013

She couldn't believe he was here, that he was standing in front of her with shock and surprise on his face. He was not lost... he was not dead. Syla hadn't meant to run to him, but the second she saw his recognition, she couldn't stop herself. It stung that he didn't immediately hug her back. Instead his arms stiffened, but his stuttering reply showed she had caught him off guard.

"Uh... Syla? How, er... Why... What are you doing here?"

She couldn't respond from the sobs in her throat and his arms finally came down to wrap around her until her body calmed. He just held her as she cried making no attempt to illicit anything else from her. When she finally felt she could breathe, she pulled herself away to look him in the eye.

His features had softened as he gave her an apologetic smile. "I missed you, too," he whispered.

She laughed at his perception of her melt down. "I missed you the day after I left. This is a bit different."

She remembered that day as if it was yesterday and she had never regretted a decision more. The pain in Nioca's eyes when she told him she was leaving had been heart-breaking but she just couldn't handle it anymore. He had asked her to be a leader, trusted her to be an Admin of the Refuge while their own world literally fell apart. After w-dueck wrested control back, she felt like such a failure. Nioca had never said as much but she had seen the disappointment in his eyes. Even if she were just projecting her own feelings, being with him just made her feel worse. The Ermarians asked her for guidance but she had no confidence to lead anymore. She just had to leave. Get out of the pressure... away from the pain... so she could forget all those she had lost.

After just one day away, she had regretted her decision. Nioca was the best of what she had not

lost, and she had thrown their relationship away. Her stubbornness had kept her from returning for almost two months, but when she finally broke and came stumbling back, he was gone.

The people were distraught with no organized leadership. Though she'd not found Nioca, she had found renewed purpose in caring for the Ermarians. She had done it to honor his memory and now, like an apparition from her dreams, he was standing here before her in flesh and blood. His soft smile continued to comfort her.

"What happened to you?" she asked. "I came back and the Ermarians told me you were dead. They kept saying something about you being 'lost in the Ether.' No one even knows what that means."

He gave her a sheepish grin as he let her go and offered her a chair. "That's a bit of a long story," he started.

She took the chair and he sat on the edge of his bed. "I have the time."

He stabbed his fingers through his hair nervously. "Well... you remember the night you left?" Her heart constricted as she nodded. She'd never forget it. "I kinda started drinking and didn't stop until the next afternoon." New tears threatened to spill onto her cheeks from another pang of guilt, but she fought to keep them in. "I got it into my mind that I should be in charge of the place once and for all."

"Oh no," she muttered.

"Yeah, and I went to w-dueck demanding it."

"You didn't!"

She couldn't believe that he was nodding. "I did."

It almost seemed like he was going to leave it at that. "Well, what happened?" she demanded.

Nioca shrugged leaning back. "He put me in charge... sort of." Syla crossed her arms, willing him to give her the full story. He took a deep breath fighting some internal emotion. "I threatened his life, Syla, so he neutralized the threat by giving me what I wanted. Control of the Refuge as a living bot. I gained all the power I had wanted but lost the free will to use it. Instead I only followed his orders."

They were both silent for a while as he let it sink in. The very idea was abhorrent, and a rage boiled up in her in response. "How dare he! Deity, Nioca, that's horrible. I'm so sorry."

She got up to give him another hug and though he was stiff and reserved again, it only lasted for a few seconds before he relaxed into her embrace and pulled her down to sit next to him. With that simple act, she felt months of pent up guilt lift off her shoulders. He didn't blame her... she was so relieved she cried again and he held her again leaning his cheek against her head.

She didn't know how long had passed when he pulled her away rubbing her shoulders. "I have to go for a while, Syla. It was good to see you. We should have dinner together soon."

"Okay," she sniffed wiping her cheeks. He got up to leave and she blurted out, "Thank you."

He turned back with a curious smile. "What for?"

"For so many things... for letting me blubber on your shoulder. For not kicking me out the moment you saw me. For forgiving me... You have every reason to hate me but you've been generous with your grace."

"I could never hate you, Syla." She smiled at his reassurance as he walked out the door.

Nalyd shaped with a fury. With Lifesower held aloft over his head, enchanting words flew out of his mouth in an echoing cacophony of rising cadence. Other sounds shared his song including pops, hisses, and crackling explosions from the decrepit machinery he was pushing past its limits, and the ever-present, agonizing screams of Stillborn.

Nalyd would break his creation once and for all, even if it killed it. The moment Stillborn fell silent, Nalyd felt a slight tremor of fear that he had actually done so, but the Rot possessing him crushed Nalyd's concern with searing pain and pushed the little shaper's body to the edge of unconsciousness in his craft. It was draining, more and more so as there was less and less working machinery to supplement his power. Nalyd's participation in what the Rot was doing with his power waned as exhaustion crept up on him, not just physical exhaustion but mental and emotional, too.

Nalyd had struggled with his creation for so long that the prospect of completing it was joyous. At the same time, knowing that the Rot was the one in control of the shaping was deflating. It was *his* creation but he was not the one creating it right now. It was a creation of his power but

not his intellect. He was a hypocrite to allow it, considering he was ready to kill Nioca for keeping it in stasis. And here he was, letting the Rot shape his creation right in front of him...

Nalyd's anger started to grow against the Rot. *Nalyd* wanted to shape his creation... *Nalyd* wanted to be in control! He expected a painful attack from it when he bolstered himself to wrench his facilities back. To his surprise it simply faded to a point of observation.

He didn't have much stamina left. There was very little time before his body would just give out beneath him, but the new adrenaline and testosterone running through his body would help him stay alert for a little longer. He threw himself into the final stages, starting by reviving his creation. Stillborn's eyes snapped open but he didn't resume his scream of pain because Nalyd was focusing on breaking its mind, not its body. He held his creation's gaze and time seemed to stand still as he projected his own consciousness into Stillborn's mind.

The world faded away and in his mind's eye he stood in darkness with Stillborn. "You are Nalyd's." he declared.

"I am not yours," Stillborn insisted.

A sword appeared in Nalyd's hand and in a flash Stillborn had one less arm. "You are Nalyd's!" he screamed.

Stillborn had reacted to the loss much like he had experienced physical pain but his face was still defiant. "I belong to another," he gritted between his teeth.

Another flash and Stillborn fell to his knees, both of his legs rendered useless. "*You will surrender to Nalyd!*" spittle flew from his lips which were now only two inches from Stillborn's grimacing face.

He looked up into the little shapers eyes, not wavering for a second. "Not. While. I. Live."

Nalyd screamed in fury and plunged the sword into Stillborn's heart. Blood bubbled up and out of his mouth as he sank back into the darkness. He stopped breathing and his eyes glassed over as Nalyd stepped back. He had killed his creation. It was over.

Nalyd retreated from Stillborn's mind back to his own body and slumped from the exhaustion. His adrenaline rush had worn off and his body crumpled beneath his slight weight. He still leaned on his scythe to stay sitting upright and glanced at his creation. It still stood in place, though its head lolled down. Nalyd could feel its heart beating. So he had not killed it completely... "Creation, come here!"

The Rot had changed its features again. Hairless, black skinned, and entirely humanoid, the creation looked up in response to Nalyd's voice with glossy black eyes. It stepped forward and stopped just inches from his feet, a living shadow towering over him.

"Lift Nalyd!" Muscled arms reached down as pitch black hands wrapped around his waist and pulled him to his feet. Nalyd repositioned himself against Lifesower so he could stand on his own. He scrutinized his creation and its demeanor. "What is your name?"

The creation took a moment before it answered, "I have no name."

This was promising... "Who is Nalyd?"

"Master."

Nalyd felt giddy. Just one more question to make sure. "Who is your mother?"

The creation seemed confused before answering, "I have no mother. I am a creation."

Joy! Such intense joy flooded Nalyd that he nearly fell over. He had done it... he had finally done it. His creation was complete! The Rot stirred within him coming back to the forefront of Nalyd's mind and pushing him aside. Nalyd was so contented that he didn't even try to fight it.

The Rot began to speak in cadence, a song Nalyd had not heard before. It sounded like a christening.

"Skin black as ebony,

Eyes dark as jet,

Heart black as obsidian,

All other life forget.

In blackness, you have been remade.

In darkness, slain by sword.

In blackness will you ever live.

In darkness, you are reborn.

No longer a son of flame and wood.

No longer a son of man.

No longer answer to Stillborn.

I name thee "black stone", Dunstan."

In one final shaping flourish, the Rot gathered itself up in Nalyd's right hand. It was a glowing darkness that writhed and oozed through the little shaper's fingers. Nalyd didn't quite understand what it was doing until it released its control on his body. It stayed there in his hand and he blinked at it as he realized its intent. Nalyd created the Rot with the sole intention of making his creation. That goal had been accomplished and the Rot's purpose was done. It was returning control to its maker, surrendering just as Stillborn had. It was up to Nalyd what he did with it now. He could reabsorb its essence as he normally did with his unneeded creations, but looking at the inky darkness that pulsed in his hand, Nalyd had a different idea.

With the last of his strength, Nalyd reduced the Rot to its very essence and then poured it into his new creation. His *ultimate* creation. Nalyd reached out to touch its arm and he imbued the last of the Rot's essence into its being. Its song intensified with the added life force and sung with beautiful potency that literally swept Nalyd off his feet and had Lifesower clattering to the ground next to him.

From the floor as consciousness fled from him, Nalyd managed one final command in a voice he hoped was loud enough for his creation to hear. "Stand guard. Protect Master!"

Nio paced in the laboratory trying to calm down. How did he miss this? How had Nioca kept it a secret from him?

[Relax. You were just preoccupied dealing with Sylae at the moment.](#)

Nio refused to answer him in his mind. He wanted a face-to-face explanation, but more importantly, he needed an extra pair of hands and someone who understood what he was looking at because the cryogenic stasis pod in front of him was failing and what was inside would not survive long on the outside.

A brain... A human brain was hooked up to a jury-rigged life support system on machinery that was only designed for short-term stasis of whole humanoids. In addition, Nio had not made any repairs to this stasis pod after the damage caused creating Aden. Nio resumed his pacing not really understanding what he was looking at. He was sorry to have to interrupt Nioca's reunion with Sylae, but he had seemed grateful to know and excused himself immediately. Whatever Nioca had started here was important to him.

When he arrived, he brushed off all of Nio's questions. "Later. I need to get this working first."

Nio crossed his arms but didn't argue. He stepped forward to help, but Nioca stopped him. "No, don't," he said gruffly. "This is too important."

"I'm competent enough to help," Nio argued. "For Mozilla's sake, Nioca, I have the same capacities as you! Just tell me what I'm looking at."

"No." The reply was resolute.

Nio tried to understand what Nioca's goal was, but he came up against a mental block. All thoughts about the brain and what he intended for it were hidden from him. Nioca was mumbling to himself and it was like a foreign language to Nio's ears. "How are you even doing that?"

Nioca looked annoyed. "I've encrypted my thought process and not given you access. Now please just let me work."

Nio was annoyed, too. Annoyed that Nioca wasn't being straight forward, annoyed that he didn't trust him to help, and annoyed that he still had no idea what all this was for. "But it's a brain! Why a brain?"

"Because I haven't had time to finish it!" he shouted, losing his temper. "All you need to know is that right now, this is the most important brain in existence, and if I don't get this machine working, it will die and I will hate myself forever."

Nio was taken aback by his urgency. Surely he could create another brain to replace this one... **I can't. It's special. If it dies, my... end goal is lost. Please try to understand.** "I can't let you work on it because if something goes wrong, I don't want to be able to blame you."

Nio nodded, finally accepting Nioca's stance on the subject, but he still wasn't satisfied. "Why can't I know what it is? What's its purpose?"

"I'm sorry, Nio. It's just better this way."

Nio pursed his lips. "Okay, fine. I'm going in the other room. Let me know if you need anything." He turned his back and was startled at the blank wall Nioca was in his mind. He couldn't read anything from him right now. Nio hadn't even realized that was possible, but with Nioca's time as a bot, who knew what other tricks he had brought with him... or what else he was hiding.

Syla had stayed in Nioca's room long after he had left, just reminiscing on the good times and toying with the future. Long enough, in fact, that she was still there when he ran in a bit out of breath. He stopped short and gave her a deer in the headlights stare as she stood up. "Oh... you're still here."

"I didn't have anywhere else I needed to be."

"Okay, well, I need to get something form the lab quick."

He walked into the room two steps but she blocked his path to the false wall. "I didn't have anywhere else I wanted to be," she admitted with a small smile.

It was cute the way he blushed. "Uh, yeah, it is a nice room, isn't it?" I've kind of missed it myself."

He tried to step around her but she was done waiting. She caught his wrists and tugged him closer to her. "I missed you so much, Nioca. I honestly didn't know how much until today."

"Syla..." he started but she didn't let him say anything further. She grabbed the sides of his face and pulled his lips to hers. He mumbled a cry of surprise and froze under her touch. She pushed in and he briefly melted into the moment before pulling away. "Syla, please, wait."

"What's wrong?" she whined teasingly. "Don't you like kissing me?"

He blushed again. "Well, yes, but that's not..."

"Don't you want to kiss me more?" His ears burned and he stared at the ground, the wall... anywhere but at her. "Well?" she asked impatiently.

"I do, but you don't understa..." She cut him off with another kiss and could sense an internal struggle in him as he broke away again, holding her face away from his. "Please, Syla, let me explain."

What could there possibly be to explain? Didn't he understand what he meant to her? Did she misunderstand what she meant to him? "Do you love me?" she asked in a small voice, frowning when he hesitated.

She could see it in his eyes that he did and yet something held him back from saying it. "I'm not the Nioca you once knew," he finally answered instead, pushing her away gently and taking a few steps back. He stared at the floor so dejectedly she couldn't understand it. Becoming a bot may have changed him permanently – she could understand that; even she wasn't the same person she was when she left – but why would he think that would be a reason for them not to be together?

"Do you love me?" she asked again insistently.

He looked at her with emotion filled eyes still warring within himself. "Yes," he managed, though if anything, his internal battle increased because of it.

She closed the gap he had made, placing her hands on his arms. "Then that's all that matters," she smiled up at him.

She was surprised to see tears spill down his cheeks. "Deity, Sylia, I wish it was. I wish so hard it was, but it's not," he choked out. "I'm not the man you love."

"Who are you to say I don't love you?" she demanded. "I don't care about the past or how you've changed. Right here, right now, exactly as you are... I love you!"

He closed his eyes shaking his head and she wiped a tear away. "You still don't understand," he whispered.

"I don't need to," she replied. "I love you, anyway."

His eyes snapped open and hopeful determination crossed his face. "I'm sorry, Sylia. Please forgive me."

"Whatever for?"

Instead of an answer, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her deeply. She thrilled at the sense of him and threw her arms around his neck to pull him in. The world disappeared. Only they were left. Her and Nioca and the love between them. Nothing else mattered.

Nothing... until another voice sounded from the doorway. "I'm sorry, too, Sylia. I should have explained earlier."

It was his voice... coming from behind him. She looked up towards it in shock. He stood there, a second Nioca with an expression oscillating between apologetic and angry.

The Nioca she held dropped his hands to his side as he stepped back and resumed his dejected stare at the floor. The one at the door glared at the back of his head.

"I tried to tell her."

"Not hard enough."

Syla stood there reeling. "There are two of you?" She stepped back in confusion. She didn't know what to make of it, how to think about it, or how to feel. Should she be happy? Should she be appalled? The one at the door stepped in reaching for her but she tore away. "Don't touch me!"

"Syla," said the other in concern, stepping forward.

"Neither of you! Just stay back until somebody explains what's going on."

They looked at each other and nodded at some unspoken understanding before turning back to her. "My name is Nio," said one. She wasn't even sure which because she had shut her eyes for a moment. He continued and she looked at him, determined to understand. "I am a creation made through the combined magics of Blades and Geneforge, and patterned after Nioca."

She turned to the other one, supposedly the real Nioca. "You did this?"

He hesitated for a moment. "He allows me to be myself, Syla. In order to function, I need a type of database now. My mind is linked to Nio's, and he provides the structure I need to think for myself instead of being enslaved by the Refuge."

Syla relaxed a little and saw them exchange another silent glance. Linked through their minds... like he had been with Aryll. That was familiar; she could handle that. Still... seeing two of him was weird and thinking about kissing Nio instead of Nioca was a little unsettling. "He said he loved me..." she said questioningly.

"I do," Nio answered quickly, before Nioca could say anything else. "I share all the memories Nioca has ever had. Every moment he has ever spent with you. Every feeling he has ever had for you... how could I do anything other than love you as he does?"

"All right, that's enough." Nioca interjected, looking uncomfortable with his counterpart's admission.

"So there really are two of you. Not just a clone, not just a creation, but another you."

Nioca pursed his lips, not happy with her conclusion but not able to refute it. "Sort of, I suppose. In a way... but I am the original. Nio is only a copy." She watched Nio's face fall out of the corner of her eye. He didn't argue or contest his lot, but rather accepted it as it was. "I thought it best you knew that," Nioca continued while glaring at Nio again, "before things went any further."

Oh yes, this was definitely the original. There was no mistaking that arrogant streak. "Only a copy," she repeated taking a step closer to Nio and inspecting his features. He gave a shy smile under her scrutiny but wouldn't meet her gaze for more than a second. She circled him before stopping between the two men and turning smartly to look Nioca in the eye. "Does that make you better than him?" she posed in a dangerously sweet voice.

Nio let out half a laugh behind her as Nioca stiffened under her gaze. "N-no..." he stuttered, "No, of course not."

"Good. I'm glad you realize that and I don't have to beat it through your thick skull, because apparently you need him which means we're all going to be spending a lot of time together." She reached up to the red faced Nioca and gave him a kiss on the cheek before turning around and doing the same to Nio who finally met her gaze and smiled genuinely. His eyes said, "Thank you."

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I think we should call it a day. We can talk about the future another time after emotions have settled and I've gotten used to this idea." She walked out the door leaving them both behind.

She really didn't have any idea what the future might look like now. Just a few minutes before she had seen it so clearly. She was with Nioca somewhere, didn't matter where, just that she was with him. Now... she wasn't so sure. Nioca needed Nio to function so he'd have to be with them. Another man that loved her and who would share every intimate moment at least in thought. Was that fair to him? Could she even think about a different arrangement? She shook her head involuntarily. Nope not yet at least. Hopefully after a night's rest she'd be better able to picture a different future with them both.

"So... what was that?"

Nio sighed, his back still to his predecessor. He had known there would be additional retribution to face. "You know exactly what that was. I didn't hide anything from you."

"I'm not talking about your feelings for her, I mean why didn't you listen to me and tell her who you were right away? You know, before things... escalated?" Nioca paused for an answer but Nio had none to give. "The first words out of your mouth should have been 'I'm a clone.'"

Nio had been used to pretending like he was Nioca. It had come as second nature to take on that roll, but as soon as he realized what Syla had wanted it had been fear that held his tongue. Nio had been afraid she wouldn't like him... would reject him outright, even as a friend.

"And that would have been her choice to make," Nioca interjected, reading his thoughts. "But now you've made it much more complicated."

"I'm sorry to have intruded on your love life," Nio spat out, suddenly bitter at Nioca's meddling. Why *shouldn't he* be free to love and be loved?

"You still don't get it do you?" Nioca's tone softened a little and Nio turned to face him. "I don't *want* a relationship with Syla." Nio was surprised and confused at the same time. "In fact," Nioca continued, "If Syla finds happiness in a relationship with you then I wish you both well." The sincerity resonating through him was reassuring. He really meant it.

"Then why did you stop us? Why so against us being together just a minute ago?"

"Because she thought you were me, idiot! And now she expects a relationship... *with me!* Your confession of your feelings? In her mind they were my confessions. And what do you think that last kiss did to her when she thought it was from me? Now she associates that feeling of desire and intimacy to being with me and likely thinks I want the same thing with her as you do." Nioca paused mentally sighing at the situation and Nio saw his point. He was right, this had complicated things.

"After months of thinking me dead, now she thinks she has a future with me," Nioca continued with regret, "and I have to tell her she doesn't. Just friends... after that kiss I have to tell her I want to be 'just friends.' Honestly, Nio, it would have been much less heart-wrenching on all of us if I'd been able to tell her I wasn't interested right off the bat."

Nio shared Nioca's regret but there was nothing he could do about it now. Instead he tried to lighten the mood with some humor. "So what I'm hearing is... I can kiss Sylva again?"

Nioca walked forward and smacked him on the back of the head with a half smile. "That's up to her, idiot. Now let's get that equipment I sent you here for. My temporary fix of the stasis chamber isn't going to hold for long."

Abominable Pest

By Jewels - Jun 23 2013

She could feel him, sense his power; he was close. With her previous success at absorbing essence, Nix was eager to find the green beast and add his life force to hers. With that she would be unbeatable!

Systematically, she had searched the Refuge from west to east and she was close enough now, she could sense it just behind these walls. The Geneforge doors were locked. She knocked but there was no answer.

She glanced around and decided that she'd just have to break in. With a small tendril of magic, she sent her mind's eye into the locking mechanism and manipulated the inner workings until it clicked. Pulling the heavy doors open a crack, she slipped in.

It was dark and smelled of charred plastic and oil. "Hello?" she ventured, but there was still no answer. Nix lifted a hand and a little ball of energy grew in it spreading light throughout the hazy entryway. It floated before her as she advanced into the main chamber. From what she could see through the foggy smoke, it was a mess. Broken machinery littered the floor and workspaces. A few even sparked as she approached.

"Hello?" she called again. "Is anyone here?" She spun slowly trying to see into the darkness. A machine popped behind her and she jumped. She really needed to calm down. It was just an empty room... except she knew it really wasn't. The beast was here.

As if in response to her thoughts, something metal clattered to the floor to her right causing a short and a momentary blinding flash before returning to darkness and silence. She moved towards the sound willing her globe of energy high, but she could see nothing but the shadows that surrounded her. "I'm not here to hurt you," she lied. "I just want to be friends."

As she shuffled forward, her foot hit something soft. Bringing the globe down, she found it was an arm. The arm of the weird little man who had met her in the lounge some weeks back. He wasn't dead, but he was unresponsive. Nix remembered the power of his essence and opened herself up to feel it again. Such a delicious sensation... She wondered if she could force feed him some of the needed ingredients and absorb him while she was at it.

She reached her hand down to move his cowl but a grating pain shot up through her arm. To her eyes, her wrist had suddenly disappeared into blackness. She yanked her arm away with a cry and the pain stopped as suddenly as it had started. She inspected her arm in the light of the globe and found it whole once more, but she could not see the source of her fright.

Whispering a word of power, four more globes appeared in the air in front of her and she sent them flying in the cardinal directions high in the air. Finally, in silhouette, she saw the beast just a yard away. It didn't look anything like the beast she had seen before but it felt the same. Such power surging through it... she reveled at how its touch caused pain. Its head finally lifted to reveal two glossy black eyes staring at her. "Hello," she said again with a smile. "Would you like something to eat?"

Azuma walked quickly with Ligrev towards the Geneforge forum. "According to Sylae, the power outage originated here."

Livvy wrung her hands while fretting. "Well, if we don't get those freezers up and running soon, we'll have to throw all that new food out."

"Don't worry. We'll get it in time," he assured her.

As they approached the forum, Ligrev wrinkled up his nose. "What is that smell?"

Azuma sniffed the air and noticed an acrid odor coming out of the cracked doors. "Smells like an experiment gone wrong to me." He pushed the doors open further letting in a little sunlight and letting out a little smoke.

They both took a few steps into the murky room and Livvy noted a glow emanating from the main chamber. "I thought the power was out."

"Maybe there's a fire," Azuma shrugged. "Nayld," he hollered, "are you in here?" No one answered but a clang and a muffled curse sounded just around the corner. "Nalyd, are you all

right?" The shriek that followed was eerily guttural and Azuma broke into a run. Amongst the broken machinery of the dimly lit Geneforge lab was an Ermarian woman struggling with a man in the darkness. They both stood over Nalyd's limp body, pained voices echoing off the walls.

Livvy let out a muffled squeak behind him as he instinctively drew Sentience and charged at the pair. "Let go of her!" he yelled over the din.

The woman's head snapped around and her crazed eyes focused on him for only a moment. "NO!" she shouted and lifted a hand that seemed to control the wind. Azuma was thrown back by some invisible force and slammed against the wall. The crack to his head felt like an explosion inside his skull and blissful darkness chased away the pain to the song of Livvy screaming his name.

She ran to him but knew there was nothing she could do. Azuma was out cold. Ligrev tried to understand what was happening; the Geneforge lab in ruins, Nalyd unconscious on the floor, the man and woman fighting, the way they both screamed in continual pain, the woman attacking Azuma when he tried to help her... it didn't make any sense.

"Stop fighting me," the woman growled at him.

"I... do not belong... to you," he answered haltingly.

She snapped around to stare at them. She knew that voice. In the opaque dimness Ligrev couldn't see him properly. If anything the smoke seemed to be thicker and blacker around the man, cloaking him in shadow. "Where is Stillborn?" she asked herself quietly, but she already knew the answer. The man was not the danger. The way he stood over Nalyd... it was the same way she was standing over Azuma now. Protectively, just like Stillborn would.

As fast as she could Ligrev bent and rummaged through Azuma's pockets until she found his RMM and sent out an alert. She didn't know how long it would take for reinforcements. She had to do something now... get the two apart since it seemed the woman wanted the opposite. But what?

Ligrev stepped forward to assess the situation glad that the pair seemed to largely ignore her. Azuma's sword glinted in the dim glow off to her right, but she was no swordsman. Even if she got a hold of it, she wouldn't know how to use it. ...still, something nagged at the back of her mind and she ran to pick it up.

Remembering how the woman reacted to a threat, Ligrev didn't charge them with it, but rather snuck forward quietly getting behind the woman. Stillborn staggered back and fell to one knee seemingly exhausted. The woman let out a cry of raw triumph as she swung around to cling to his back, pressing her body up against his. Satisfyingly, her screams of pain intensified, but then so did his and Ligrev's heart went out to him.

Forgetting the danger she rushed forward and he looked up at her with his big black eyes. He seemed to recognize her though the woman's full concentration was now on just holding on. "Protect... the... master..." The mournful sound was both a longing and a petition.

Her gaze fell to Nalyd at her feet between them and a tingle crept up her arm. With the tingle came a voice. *Use me.*

She looked down at her hand. The sword had spoken to her. It seemed silly but she responded. *I don't know how.*

She lifted her arm to brandish the weapon anyway. "Let him go or I'll run you through!" The woman finally took notice giving her a calculated glance. *Don't wait! Now!* Ligrev took the instruction without question and lunged forward, sword tip aimed at the woman's head.

She jumped aside and growled out a frustrated curse. Stillborn let out a relieved sigh and Ligrev wanted to go to him but the sword had other plans. *Lunge again! Before she gets her bearings.* Obediently Ligrev lifted her arm to take a wild swing at the woman who rolled out of the way just in time to miss the tip across her neck. *Keep going! Don't stop! Don't give her time to think about anything but getting out of the way.*

Ligrev wasn't sure how she was doing it – swinging the sword like she actually knew what she was doing – but underneath the verbal commands was a sense of guidance coming from the sword. Where to stand, when to swing, how to spin around... it was as if she had been doing it for years. It helped that the woman seemed disoriented. She stumbled away time and again holding her arms around herself while tripping over debris. Always she kept one eye on where Stillborn hovered over Nalyd.

It felt like she could keep it up indefinitely until the woman fell right in front of her and Ligrev decided against the nudge to back off a step. She lunged instead and the sword satisfyingly went straight through the woman's chest. For a moment Ligrev saw fear in her eye, and for a moment she felt justice at the pain she had caused Stillborn, but an alarm went off in her head. *Take me out! Take me out!* Ligrev was so startled that she let go, leaving the sword embedded in her chest instead. The mental connection was broken and the guidance was gone. Ligrev stumbled back to stand in front of Nalyd and Stillborn.

Too soon, the woman stood up with a curious expression. She had stopped holding her middle and her mind seemed to clear. Looking down at the sword, she took hold of it and pulled it out laughing. There was no blood.

Cursing herself for forgetting Sentience's properties in the moment, Ligrev turned to Stillborn. "Take Nalyd and run!" she whispered harshly. She turned back just in time to see the woman lift her hand the way she had done to Azuma. It was too late to run. All three of them went flying and a jarring pain was the last thing Ligrev knew.

Nalyd woke with a start. He ached all over. "Creation! Bring Nalyd to the healing pool!"

"He's not here." It took Nalyd a moment to recognize that it was Iffy's voice.

The little shaper tried to sit up, holding on to his throbbing head and spilling ingloriously out of the cot he had been in. "Where? Where is Nalyd's creation?!"

"She took him."

A rage boiled up in Nalyd as he got to his wobbly feet. "That abominable pest of a life force! Nalyd will kill her this time! No more interference. *Jewels is dead!*"

"No," Iffy corrected him, "not Jewels... Nix."

Nalyd's rage did not subside at this news and he scanned the room for his weapon. "Who in the multi-verse is Nix and where is she so Nalyd can chop off her head!!" Nalyd growled in frustration as he dragged his weary body over to the healing and energy pools. It felt like someone had hit Nalyd with a Mac truck and then backed over him again.

Iffy sighed. "Nix is one of my kin." That stopped Nalyd short. All the research he had done on Iffy and Saph and the strange visitor came flooding back to him as Iffy continued. "She's too powerful, Nalyd. You can't defeat her alone. I can't even defeat her when I have help. I should know, I just tried."

Iffy paused looking more weary than Nalyd felt at the moment. "By the time I got here; you, Azuma, Ligrev and Stillborn were all unconscious. She was stronger than I ever remember her being before and even though Saph and I kept up with her for a while it was clear we were no match. As soon as Sylae, Que, and Reth showed up the tide turned and we started beating her

back. She tripped on your scythe, cut her foot something fierce and we finally had her cornered, but she released a shockwave of energy and stunned us all. She left and took Stillborn with her. I don't know why she took him Nalyd... I'm sorry."

"Dunstan," Nalyd corrected.

"What?"

"Nalyd's creation's name is Dunstan. Stillborn is no more."

"Um, okay." Iffy seemed unsettled at Nalyd's priorities.

He had calmed down as the pools had restored his demeanor as well as his vitality. "Iffy cannot defeat Nix because he does not understand what she is."

"Sure I do. She is my kin. We used to be lovers..."

"And that makes Iffy hesitate," Nalyd shuffled over to him placing an uncharacteristically gentle hand on his shoulder. "But that is not what she is."

Iffy looked up with a questioning gaze but Nalyd only wanted to explain it one time. "Where is Saph?"

One Foot in Front of the Other

By Jewels - Aug 26 2013

The entire day had been filled with experience after experience and Nio had soaked them all in, a desert weary cacti who had never known rain. Nioca and Syla had followed his enthusiasm a step behind like proud parents enjoying his delight more than the actual activity. Nioca found it difficult to process all of his counterpart's wide range of feelings and couldn't help the overflow of some exuberance into his own demeanor. Once Syla got over the pity that Nio had never been outside the Refuge before, her mood was also overtaken with his joy.

It started with a pre-dawn picnic under a Patagonia night sky at the National Geographic photo gallery and slid into a relaxing virtual tour of the Lockport Cave on an underground boat ride.

Both Nio and Nioca got a little queasy from experiencing the ride in 4-D but it was gentle enough that they kept their breakfasts down.

Lunch was sandwiches and soup at the quaint French Meadow Bakery & Café and the afternoon was spent on the trails at Hill Country Equestrian Lodge. It had been years since Nioca had gone horseback riding but the rhythm of the gallop took his mind to a time when there were no worries, no struggles, no strife. Nio learned quickly through Nioca's experience and raced his horse in circles around the other two. Syla laughed as she fell into step with Nioca's horse.

"It's nice to see him so happy," he chuckled.

"Aren't you glad I convinced you to leave the RMM's behind?" she reached over to poke him in the arm with a wide smile. "Everyone needs a day with no distractions every now and then. And when was the last time you had a vacation?"

"Va-ca-tion?" he joked, pulling a confused face. "What is this word you speak of?" He dodged the playful fist she sent his way. "I don't even think I've taken a single day off in the last six months. This is really great, for both of us. Thanks." And it was, really great, to be out from under the cloud of the Refuge. Nio hadn't known anything else except by proxy and unless you counted the fields of war, Nioca had barely been out since he arrived.

Syla's smile was shy and distant as she watched the back of Nio get further and further ahead of them. Her next question held none of the mirth of their day and Nioca tensed at the sound of her hesitation. "What was it like? To be a bot?"

He'd known it couldn't last. The light conversation, the smiles and laughs... This wasn't just three friends hanging out. Not to Syla. Nioca had been steering the conversation away from anything serious all day knowing that once they descended into the depths of reality, there was no coming back. But he owed it to her to tell her the truth and braced himself for the fallout of whatever came next. "Logical," he admitted slowly. "My humanity was drawn away and stored on the Refuge database in some digital approximation of myself. In its place there remained only logic. Procedures, protocols, table structures, and a constant stream of digital request." He risked a glance at her face which only stared, expressionless, at the back of her steed's head. He turned away as he finished quietly. "I don't think I would have survived it if it hadn't been for Jewels."

She turned towards him with a furrowed brow. "What do you mean?"

"While I was a bot, she went out of her way to make sure I was taken care of. Made sure I ate, bathed, exercised... She wrote the protocol that kept me healthy."

"So... Jewels programmed you?"

Nioca cringed at the disgust in her voice and a wave of sympathy came from Nio who was glad that he was not the one having this conversation. "No!" he flustered. "It wasn't like that. W-dueck already had software in place to automatically program the RefugeBots as he created and fixed them. He activated it with a pre-set binding spell and the Refuge did all the work. But it wasn't designed to support human life. Jewels made modifications to make sure I was alright. She took care of me."

Syla scowled at the ground. "If she really cared about you, she would have restored you immediately."

Two algorithms within his mind battled for dominance. One demanded that he defend Jewels while the other knew such a statement would only bring the conversation spiraling down. The glowing green of his devotion won out as his voice strained to keep the semblance of calm. "She didn't know how; no one did. There weren't exactly instructions for it."

"Whatever. Maybe she took care of you as penance for everything else she's put you through," Syla huffed, clearly aggravated. And how could he blame her? The last personal interaction she'd had with Jewels was colored with the accusation that she had stolen his soul. This wasn't all that different. The venom of the rest of her thought revealed no forgiveness. "Or *maybe* she just wanted to keep you as a pet."

Nioca closed his eyes as a bright green flash filled his vision. There was no chance of resisting the compulsion. Syla had to understand... he had to make her see...

"Wooooaaahhhh!! How do you stop this thing?!" Nio galloped straight for them spooking both of their steeds and sending them skittering in opposite directions as he plowed between them. Nioca struggled to stay on his saddle as Syla turned her horse and dug her heels into its sides urging it after the rogue. Nioca blinked at the diminishing urge to continue the conversation and was startled at Nio's mirth. [You're welcome.](#)

Nioca had to smirk. The whelp wasn't done having fun and wasn't about to let something 'serious' ruin it. [We're going to have to tell her sooner or later.](#)

[I choose later.](#)

Nioca shook his head but he was glad for it. It gave him time to adjust his emotional response algorithms and put together a buffer for perceived offense. By the end of the night, Syla would know how they both felt about her. Hopefully by then they would have both found the right words to tell her.

Saph and Sylae walked side by side, both keeping an eye on the ground and the vegetation, looking for any sign that Nix had passed this way. Que and Reth walked a few feet away from them to widen the path they were searching. It was frustrating work as it seemed Nix liked to make 90 degree turns or even backtrack. It was slow going.

"Doesn't she show up on the Who's Online screen?" Saph wondered aloud.

"There are too many guests right now," Sylae explained. "With all the Ermarians and the Dryads... anyone who never registered comes up as a guest. That includes Nix and Stillborn."

"We should do something about that."

"Yeah. I'll put it on the to-do list." Sylae kept her eyes to the ground. "Saph, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Ask anything you want. Not promising an answer, though."

Sylae hesitated long enough for Saph to wonder if she'd changed her mind about asking but finally breathed it out. "Why aren't you happy?"

The question gave Saph pause. "What makes you think I'm not happy?"

"Well... it's just that you hardly ever smile or laugh. Your entire disposition gives off this vibe of discontentment."

It was Saph's turn to hesitate. It was true, she had always been surly, even with Iffy sometimes, but she had never asked herself why. They had both considered it just part of who she was. As the silence widened, Sylae interjected another observation. "I've just been trying to picture the type of relationship you have with Iffy – a someone you're always connected to who knows your every thought and accepts every fiber of your being without question or reserve. I don't know, I just can't imagine being anything but blissfully happy with that kind of relationship... with that kind of friend. I'd think, if I were you, I'd never *stop* smiling." Her last sentence was a wistfully painful whisper punctuated by the lack of her own smile.

As Saph looked within herself, she did find a longing, the source of her discontent, though she couldn't put words to it. Every inch of her ached for... *something*. It always had. And she found the same ache within Iffy. It permeated their souls, a constant of their lives even before iffy had drawn Saph out. It was stronger now that they were aware of it, even physically painful. She

must have winced because there was worry in Sylae's voice. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry. I shouldn't have..."

"No," Saph cut her off. "It's all right. I'm glad you asked." This awareness was important, she could feel it, but she didn't want to verbalize it yet until she and iffy had figured it out. So she gave Sylae a different answer, "I'm just always worried about him, I guess. Someone's been trying to kill him for so long that I can never relax, even when we're together."

Sylae nodded an understanding accepting the answer without question and they went back to focusing on the trail. Once they finally tracked Nix into the Ermarian settlement it was almost impossible to tell which tracks were hers and which were from the other Ermarians. They all groaned in the shared frustration.

"Nalyd's awake," Saph announced out of the blue.

"Good," Sylae stopped short. "Maybe he can help us find Stillborn with that map of his."

Saph pursed her lips, "Not so good. One, the Geneforge is a pile of rubble. I doubt he knows where the map is *if* it survived. And two... He's pretty pissed."

The new arch admin pinched the bridge of her nose at the added stress, "Don't tell me we have to restrain him..."

Saph paused waiting as the drama played out. "No... no it looks like Iffy has calmed him down."

Sylae sighed in relief. "Invaluable, that man. I'm so lucky to have you guys here."

It was odd, getting a compliment. A nice change of pace, Saph decided, and smiled a genuine smile. Maybe this being friendly bit wasn't going to be so bad after all.

[Hey, Saph, can you come back here for a bit?](#)

I thought you wanted me to help Sylae track Nix and the big green monster. Why don't you just relay the information to me?

She could read it in his mind. He didn't really have a good reason for bringing her back. He just missed her at his side. Still he fought to come up with something that satisfied him as sensible.

[I don't want you finding Nix without me there and this information could be important.](#)

I wasn't going to try to fight her without you.

Please? It's more important to Nalyd than finding his creation. I... I don't want to be apart for this.

Saph shook her head but let him know she was coming. Truth was she hadn't liked the idea of splitting up in the first place but Iffy had insisted that they help. *Someone* had to stay back with Nalyd, someone competent enough to subdue the mad shaper should he wake with violent tendencies. Iffy had volunteered but insisted that she stay with Sylae. IF they found Nix, Iffy wanted to know as soon as possible. But now it seemed they would not find her today unless they searched every home. "I'm going to head back to Iffy for a bit. See if I can help Nalyd find that map."

"Sure, yeah, thanks for the help." Unexpectedly Sylae turned and gave Saph a hug. She stiffened, not from aversion, but mere surprise. She returned only an awkward pat but Sylae didn't seem to expect more. "I think I'll stick around, ask a few questions, see if anyone has noticed anything out of the ordinary lately."

"We should be back soon."

Reth growled out his frustration in his mind. It was perfect, so many people against just one of their Kin. Killing Nix should have been a done deal, but still they had failed... Iffy had failed *them*. *I knew he wasn't strong enough. I knew he wouldn't be able to defeat her. He is useless to us alive.*

Yeah, but it was worth a shot. If we could have killed her together it would pretty much guarantee our success.

He is weak but we will be strong once we have all of his power. We are guaranteed to win either way.

But what of the Refugees? Won't they turn on us the second he is dead?

Once we have Iffy's power we will be strong enough to squash them like bugs. Then Nix will be ours also.

Que sneaked a sidelong glance at Saph as she walked with the authority of this place. *We should just kill her now; get her out of the way. Maybe even both of them.*

That would only make him angry, put him on the offensive. No, we have to wait until they are together and strike at the same time.

In the back?

In the back, like any good betrayal should be.

"So... you're telling me you tested our blood? Without asking us first?"

Nalyd waved off Saph's complaint. "Such a minor detail to gripe about in the face of such a discovery. Is no one listening to a word Nalyd has said? You all have the same DNA."

"I'm listening but I still don't think I understand." Iffy was still sitting on the same overturned crate that he had been on when Nalyd woke up. He stared at the floor obviously still distracted by his previous loss.

Nalyd threw his arms up in frustration. How could they not see what was right in front of them? How could he possibly make it any plainer? "Everyone has different DNA! Every. Single. Person! You..." he pointed a bony finger at Iffy then at Saph, "...and you and the one you call Nix... You. Are. Impossible! You cannot have the same DNA!"

"But we do," Saph snapped at him. "If your tests are to be believed, we do so obviously we can. What I want to know is, why is it so important?"

Nalyd began pacing the debris strewn floor. Charred dust rose from the sweep of his robe as he muttered to himself. "How can Nalyd explain it to them if they are still blind? Maybe... Maybe if..." Nalyd leapt forward startling the pair. He grabbed a charred piece of wood and swept a large circle clear of debris on the floor in front of him. He began drawing a diagram of one of his creations. "When Nalyd shapes a fyora, he starts with the most basic building blocks a fyora has. Its DNA. The DNA is a blueprint for all of the parts of the fyora. One section describes where the heart should be, how many chambers, what type of muscle cells..." Nalyd took a little time to draw the depiction of a heart on the floor. "Another section describes where the lungs should be, what density, what capacity..." There is another pause in his dialogue as he scratched out the semblance of lungs. "A different section describes the brain, where it goes, the color, the texture,

the number of neuron cells in each lobe..." His fingers worked fast to sketch the fyora brain. It took much will power to get himself to stop drawing the diagram. Instinct demanded he finish before working on anything else, but it was only meant to be an illustration.

He pulled himself up to look at the drawing and then looked Iffy and Saph in the eyes. "Nalyd has never met a creature without something like this. Even Ligrev's blood would reveal a string of ones and zeros that defined her. And every creature's blueprint is *different!*" Nalyd emphasized the last word as he raised his finger to point at each of them again. "Iffy is the brain." His finger moved. "Saph is the lungs." His finger pointed north at the Geneforge wall. "Nix is the heart."

"Nalyd believes that each of you are a smaller part of one whole, *one creature*... Iffy is not fighting his old lover. Iffy is fighting *himself*."

And it All Falls Apart

By Jewels - Oct 10 2013

Beautiful paintings, comical sketches, abstract sculptures, and creative writings lined both sides of the hallways at Deviant Art. Nio hurried from exhibit to exhibit, a wide-eyed kid in a never ending candy store told that he had no limit. It was amazing how he had lost none of his excitement from the morning. Sylva was having a hard time keeping up with his energy levels. She walked slowly down the halls next to Nioca who looked weary but contented. His eyes followed his counterparts movements and his lips smiled in response to each new discovery, though more weakly as the day wore on.

"I still can't believe this is the first time he's been out." Sylva said with a sigh. "It just seems so... unnatural."

"He was created with a purpose and that purpose was on the inside," Nioca acknowledged her concern with logic again, then added something to make her smile again, "but to be fair, he is only four months old." He gave her his own smile before asking an unrelated question. "Do you remember the last time I took you to a museum?" It'd been like this all day and she barely noticed his latest attempt to change the subject. She was willing, this time, to let *him* dictate the terms of renewing their relationship.

"How could I forget?" she laughed. "The curator kicked us out because you insisted all of their markers were wrong."

"Well they were! I know for a fact that their collection of landscapes was made by Janet Cone and the exotic weapons collection was obviously by Triest."

"You can't credit the designers for everything," Syla countered. "It wasn't their hands that held the paint brush or smithy's mould."

"Wasn't it, though?" he paused for dramatic effect. "Wasn't it?"

"I still disagree. The designers made *some* of the people in our world and orchestrated *some* of the circumstances but they couldn't possibly have been responsible for everything. Once people have their own hands, they can create their own art with them." They'd had this argument before but Nioca was insistent that the designers were responsible for it all. "What about the VAR? The designers couldn't have been responsible for them, too."

"Actually," Nioca said with a paranoid glance over his shoulder, "I believe they were." The worry on his face almost convinced her he was telling the truth, until he broke into a wide jesting grin.

She shoved him and he pushed her back but she caught his hand to keep from tipping over. She kept holding on after she regained her balance and stared at their joined hands. "Isn't it nice to be away from all the responsibilities and the distractions... just the three of us?" She cringed inwardly as he stiffened. Just like he had when he'd first seen her. His eyes did not hold the light of desire that Nio's had. If anything, he was purposefully holding her at arm's length. She knew she had no right to expect anything from him, but after their talk yesterday and last night...

...last night...

She was desperate to feel like that again. Held, forgiven, loved... complete. A piece of her hope withered away as he gently extricated his hand from hers. His voice wasn't angry or dismissive. Just... resigned. "Don't you think it's a bit awkward to have three?"

"No more awkward than it was when Aryll was around." The way the specter could observe everything had been unnerving at first, along with her devotion to Nioca, but Syla had gotten used to it. It couldn't be that different with Nio. "Why does it matter?" she challenged. "We love each other; we'll figure it out."

As soon as she said the words, she regretted it. From the panic behind his eyes and the sudden silence from Nio she could tell she had assumed too much. He turned away searching the floor tile while Nio walked further away, giving them the semblance of privacy. Every second Syla's heart constricted a little more. "Just say it," she whispered, "What's wrong?"

He was hesitant and struggling for words. "I... I can't give you what you want, Syla. I'm sorry, but... I just don't have it to give."

"I don't understand, Nioca. What can't you give me?"

He hesitated longer but she waited without comment. "A future... together."

Syla stood very still trying to take it in. He... he didn't want to be with her? Before yesterday she had feared the same but after last night... They had seemed so open. She couldn't understand it. She had to know, "Why?" She fought to keep the catch in her voice from turning into tears.

His answer was as she had feared. "I don't... feel the same way for you."

Her brow furrowed in confusion. She couldn't reconcile his answer with what she had experienced last night. "But... what about... Nio? He said he loved me *like you did*."

"He does love you," Nioca reassured.

"I do!" Nio's voice startled her. He had circled around them and now stood behind her.

"But it's like how I *used* to love you... before being a bot."

She took a step back so she could see them both but she kept talking to Nioca, *her* Nioca. "You said you have the same memories of me. That's why... that's why he loves me. So... if he loves me, why don't you?"

"I... I... Error... No words..." Nioca glitched and Syla forgot for a moment that she was upset.

Nio was beside him in a second, concern written on his face. "Cease conversation algorithms," he instructed. A sense of relief crossed Nioca's face as he fell into silence. The unspoken conversation between them calming him.

Syla saw for the first time how different Nioca was. "What's wrong with him?" she demanded.

"His mind will never be the same, Syla. He's been trying to process a happy ending for us all day and can no longer see one."

All day? He's been trying to find the words all day? "Then, you tell me," she insisted. "Forget the happy ending, why doesn't he love me anymore?"

The two men shared a meaningful look and Nioca nodded his permission. "He didn't stop loving you, but he does feel a deeper betrayal from you leaving. It's more personal for him."

She let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding. "So he *hasn't* forgiven me."

"No, that's not it. He's not holding a grudge, but..." Nio paused taking a breath, "...but while you were gone he felt loved by someone else. She's the one who brought him out of his slavery to the Refuge."

Syla took in a few uneven breaths, finally beginning to understand. "I wasn't there for him..." But someone else was. It was falling into place. His reserved reactions, his avoidance of talk of the future, even his anger at Nio for leading her on. This happened because she left him... She supposed she should thank the woman that cleaned up her mess. "Who is she?"

Nio tightened his lips, unwilling to say and Nioca sighed. Regaining his voice he looked Syla in the eyes to respond. "I wouldn't have survived without her."

Recognition of the statement he'd made earlier in the day clicked in her mind and disbelief colored her words. "Jewels? You... you and Jewels?! After all that she's done to you? All that she's put you through? All the griping and complaining and unabashed hatred you spewed about her and her kind?"

"I... I have a different perspective on 'all that she's put me through', now." Nioca was neither defensive nor apologetic. His flat tone was almost clinical. "Separated from my hatred for fire elementals, I was able to observe her and her motives. She never gave up on me. Even when I hated her. Even when I was dead to everyone else." He stood up straighter as he finished his statement. "It is logical."

Now Syla stiffened. She left him, she lost him, she thought she'd had him back... This last bit of information crumbled her emotional psyche beyond its limit and something snapped.

This wasn't Nioca. This wasn't the man she had known six months ago. It didn't matter that he had already told her he wasn't. They had both warned her he would never be the same, but to actually see it... to come face to face with the reality of the difference... her heart couldn't take it. Her previous hope was crushed. Nioca, *her* Nioca, was truly gone. But she couldn't accept it. Something within her refused to believe it in this moment. Instead she grabbed for something...

anything that would just keep the pain away. "*She* did this to you, didn't she? Jewels didn't free you at all! She just made you a slave to herself!"

Nio reached out his hand towards her but she jerked away. She didn't want his comfort. She didn't need to be comforted. What she needed was justice. "You haven't seen her motives, Sylas. She only wants what's best for Nioca. It's all she ever wanted. It's why she created me."

Her head snapped around in surprise. "Wait a minute. I thought Nioca made you..."

Nioca spoke up. "How could I have made him when I was enslaved as a bot?"

She barely heard him, though. She saw Nio in a whole new light. He wasn't here to help Nioca; he was here to keep him dependant on Jewels... and to keep him and Sylas apart. She didn't bother hiding the disgust she now felt for him.

"Please, I'm the same man I was yesterday." There was desperation in Nio's stance... "I didn't lie, Sylas, I love you." ...sincerity on his breath.

It was too little too late, though. She knew it was all a lie. He meant to keep her away from Nioca by being his replacement in her life. "You're sick! All of you!" She pointed a shaking finger at Nioca. "You, your clone, and your deity-forsaken puppet master! I'm not playing this game anymore." She turned on her heel and stalked off breaking into a run when she turned the corner. She couldn't get away from them fast enough.

I'm sorry it didn't turn out better. Nioca let go of Nio's arm now that he wasn't trying to go after Sylas anymore. *Give her some time to process things.*

Nio was aching inside to see her run away in such pain but he realized Nioca was right. Pushing her was not the answer. *Well, what do we do now? I don't want to go back to the Refuge right now.*

You were enjoying the art and I was enjoying your fresh perspective. Can we browse some more?

Sure.

They spent their time just walking the halls as paintings and sculptures passed by on either side.

They tried their hardest to think of anything but Syla and the endless art selections helped them do that. After an hour, one painting caused Nio to stop. He started at it silently as Nioca came over to join him.

Vivid reds and greens and browns were arranged in a life like depiction of a forest on fire. Frightened dryads ran in the background, either trying to fight a losing battle against the flames or mourning for their losses and their own inevitable deaths. One Dryad stood front and center with her hands covering her face. Flames curled off her green-tinted skin as her red-auburn hair danced in waves of heat. The golden band on her left hand glowed almost white.

The plaque under the painting read "*Fire Fever*."

Sylae backtracked her search through the forest looking for any clue she might have missed. The silent movement in the corner of her eye put her into an immediate defensive stance. Her heart thudded with adrenaline for a few long seconds before she recognized the woman. "Jasmine?"

"Hi Sylae," she approached cautiously, an eye on the raised staff. "I was wondering if we could talk for a few minutes."

Sylae relaxed and tried to make herself look more welcoming even though this was a distraction from her task. "Sure what about?"

Jasmine was hesitant but Sylae recognized her disposition. She was a woman deciding which path to take and which consequences to live with. Resolve set into her jaw as she spoke. "I know why Jewels is sick."

By the end of their conversation Sylae was reeling and headed to the Lounge for a drink. As if the situation with Nix were not enough, now she had to face some demons from her own past. She walked behind the bar to grab her chosen drug and sat herself down in the middle of the room to work on it.

She supposed it was too much to ask for a mere ten minutes alone. She should have hid in a private room, but then again the looks on Iffy and Saph's faces said the information they had was important. She set the barely touched bottle aside and gestured for them to sit.

Iffy eyed the bottle with supposed understanding but he didn't know the half of it. "Coffee?" he suggested.

"Black, please," she nodded as they pulled out their chairs.

"More coffee dear?" Sylae shooed away Ligrev's offer and watched her limp back to Azuma who seemed not to notice anyone else in the room. Both of them still bore the visible wounds of their recent battle with Nix but in between cringing, their faces were alight with the joy of just being with each other. She was happy for them but the reminder of her own relationship status wouldn't let her share in their joy for long. Sylae returned her attention to Iffy and Saph who sat across from her and tried to get her mind back into the conversation. "So you're all part of the same creature. So what? I don't see what changes because of it."

"It changes everything," Saph sighed without offering anything further. They had been trying to explain it to her for over an hour only they weren't really saying much. Their explanation was vague and their answers to her questions lacked detail.

"How?" Sylae sighed back. "Nix is still trying to kill you and I'm still not going to let her. That means killing her first, doesn't it? I don't think she'd go away on her own."

The pair exchanged the millionth unspoken glance between themselves and her earlier vexation of her relationship status deepened. They had each other to lean on even though they were being hunted. The threat didn't seem nearly as wearing on them as it should. Despite it all Iffy gave a calm reply. "If we kill Nix, we're killing part of me."

"That hasn't seemed to hinder your kin from killing each other before," Sylae argued again. "In this very refuge, even. I'm sure you remember. That didn't hurt you. It helped you. Absorbing these 'other parts of you' made you more powerful."

"Is that all it did, though?" Saph asked in their cryptic non-answer way.

"Well, I don't know. Is it?" Sylae snapped back. She was getting tired of the runaround and the reminder that she was not in the loop. They knew what each other needed, knew what each other thought... It was hard to see past the bond they shared – an intimacy Sylae had never known and never would.

A new realization brought on a pang of physical pain; *Jewels* had known - and still knew - that kind of intimacy, but it had not been with her or with Will. No... *Jewels* was bonded to Nioca. Not only through her little soul-binding mishap but, according to Jasmine, also through the bonding practices of the dryads.

"Dryads bond for life." That's what Jasmine had said and then she revealed that Jewels' fire fever had been caused by the bonding being incomplete. "It is a very intimate thing." She had said. "We do not like to talk about it." And her cheeks, indeed, had grown rosy beneath the green tint of her skin. "We had hoped that she could complete the bonding with her chosen..."

"Chosen?" Sylae had asked.

"The one she called Will." Sylae must have had a blank stare on her face because the Dryad continued to explain. "She hadn't wanted to bond with Nioca. It was not her choice - or his really. That is why they did not complete the bonding ...why she is sick. Instead she chose Will and we had hoped that he could finish what Nioca had started."

For a moment, Sylae had the sinking feeling that Jasmine knew she held Will's soul. Surely Nana knew the truth. Would she have shared it? "Would that have worked? Would it mean she'd no longer be sick?"

"We don't know... It's never been tried before to our knowledge. It doesn't matter, though. There wasn't enough time. Her chosen is dead and she is on the verge of killing us all with her sickness. That is why I came to you."

"Me? What can I do?"

"We must for..." Her voice cracked with emotion but she got it out. "...must force a cure."

This answer did not calm Sylae's fears. What did 'forcing a cure' mean exactly? "Force Nioca and Jewels to complete the dryad bonding?" She'd asked hopefully.

"Yes," Jasmine choked out. "Even though it goes against the most sacred of our ways we must or we will all be destroyed. She cannot hold the fever back forever."

It was yet another problem, but a problem for another day at least. Today Sylae was just trying to keep her new admin alive. She pinched the bridge of her nose and gave it another try. "So you don't want to kill Nix. Okay, I can work with that, but first I need to know why. *Exactly* why."

Iffy and Saph exchanged another silent glance and it was all Sylae could do not to throw her hands in the air in frustration. They were holding something back. Something that explained why this was so critical. They weren't willing to share and yet it seemed they expected her to understand it anyway. What? Did they want her to guess?! She looked at Iffy and he looked at

her. The doubt in his eyes was palpable. Perhaps they didn't trust her yet. Perhaps they still saw her as the woman nursing an empty bottle on the bar room floor.

As the silence wore on, Sylae finally snapped. "It's obvious you're not going to tell me and it's obvious I'm not going to understand until you do, now if you'll excuse me I have a murderer running around loose in my Refuge doing Mozilla knows what who I can apparently no longer kill in defense and THIS is a waste of both our times." Sylae got up too quickly sending her chair clattering to the floor. She didn't stop to pick it up on her way out the door. Neither did she look back when Iffy called her name.

She wasn't going to sit idly by. This was *HER* Refuge. First things first, they had to be able to find Nix. Maybe she could run some algorithms through Who's Online to differentiate Nix from the Ermarians. Surely some piece of her machinery could detect the power she had.

Behind the calm faces that sat at the lounge table watching Sylae walk away, a heated discussion raged back and forth, and had for the whole hour.

She's right, you know. This was a huge waste of time. Why don't we just tell her?

Because I haven't made a decision about it yet.

Yeah, well, you know what I think of any decision that doesn't include being rid of Nix once and for all.

Iffy nodded. Just like you know how I feel about murdering a part of myself

It's not murder! It's self defense!

They would have continued their mental argument if it hadn't been for Que and Reth running into the lounge. "Iffy, Saph, come quick. I think we've found where Nix has been hiding."

"I'm not ready to fight her, though." Iffy protested.

"Well, she's not there right now," Que replied, "but I thought we might be able to find some clues about what she's planning and why she kidnapped that creation."

"Oh, okay. That would probably be a good thing to know." Iffy looked at Saph and she gave him a nod.

"And then we can watch the place to see if she comes back," Reth offered. "When she does come back we'll be ready for her."

The four kin left the lounge and headed into the woods to the west.

Sylae stopped short at the tree in front of the Admin Tower. Jewels had used that tree for quick changes from time to time and the memory brought back another wave of emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. She thought about the bottle she'd left back at the lounge and how drowning out her emotions felt. She realized that, like Jasmine, she was a woman deciding which path to take and which consequences to live with. The set of her jaw hardened. Abruptly she turned around, back towards the lounge, but not for a drink. She was intent on apologizing for her outburst. She wasn't going to waste another minute being a victim of the past or the emotions that raged through her.

Ligrev told her they had just left and after a quick scan she spotted them a hundred yards away meeting up with Que and Reth. The four started down a narrow path where they could only walk single file. Iffy took the lead followed by Que, Saph, and Reth. As they disappeared from sight, Sylae hurried after them.

"IFFY! LOOK OUT!" Both Iffy and Saph turned towards the desperate warning in time to register the red glint of Que and Reth's ruby-tipped daggers, but too late. Where Que hesitated in the face of her betrayal, Reth did not. In one swift motion he had slit Saph's throat, a wicked grin on his face in anticipation of the oncoming rush. Saph clasped her hands over the wound in vain. If the blood loss didn't kill her, the Spirit-killer soon would. She could not scream in pain but the wailing coming from Iffy was just as satisfying to Reth. He had been immobilized by her suffering for the moment but it would not last for long. As Saph fell to the ground and choked on her last breath he urged Que. "Hurry up and kill him! Kill him now!" Victory and ecstasy was but one nick away. Again, Que lifted her knife to strike Iffy down but the blade flew out of her hand and behind them both – towards the one who had tried to alert them, but too late.

Reth spun in aggravation, surprised to see the new Refuge admin only a few yards away and closing fast. So caught up in the kill, he had been careless and misjudged the threat. Now there was no time to think, she was almost on him and her fingers deftly snatched Que's dagger out of the sky. He opened wide his power and threw it at her full force. It hit her hard and she cried out but it wasn't enough... too late to stop her momentum. The blade plunged deep into his chest and he toppled backwards with Que's screams ringing in his ears and mind. Sylae fell on top of him -

fury in her wounded face - and twisted the blade. He did not know which hurt worse, the tearing of his muscles by the blade or the tearing of his soul by its enchantment. For one agonizingly long moment he was alone. Utterly alone. Cut off from Que, cut off from his body, cut off from the world. He was already dead and could do nothing about the burning darkness that was coming to consume him.

Sylae stared into the blank eyes of Reth, feeling satisfied yet still empty. She had avenged Saph but could not save her. There was no coming back from this. She looked up and took in the other three. Saph's lifeless form was crumpled just an arm's length from her in a growing pool of her own blood. Iffy was on his knees staring at her and Que sat in a fetal position rocking back and forth. Her horrified eyes never left Reth.

Slowly Sylae got up keeping a watchful eye on the traitor. She cringed in pain with every movement. Reth's blast had burned her pretty badly. Not bad enough that she couldn't still defend herself but her exposed skin felt like she'd rubbed habanero juice on it. That probably wasn't a good thing. "Iffy," she said softly. "Are you all right?" It was a silly thing to ask. She knew he wasn't. She really just wanted some indication that he was capable of responding to her. He didn't answer her though. He was still in shock.

Que began to mumble to herself as she rocked faster. "Alone... alone... so alone..."

"I should kill you right now for this betrayal," Sylae spat at her. Que glared at her sharply but soon returned her gaze to her fallen mate. Sylae decided it wasn't her place to decide Que's fate.

Slowly she walked around the carnage, never turning her back to Que. She stopped next to Iffy and gently placed her hand on his shoulder while whispering his name. "Iffy..." With a sudden quickness he grabbed her hand, squeezing like a vice. It hurt, especially with the burns, but it seemed to give him strength so she let him hold on. His eyes never left Saph but his grip was a type of acknowledgement at least. Sylae squatted next to him and put her other hand on top of his. What could she say? There was nothing that would make this better. No words, no actions, nothing. "I'm so sorry..."

...Darkness, lost, alone, so alone...

It was all Iffy could think. It was the last thing Saph had thought. He was locked into it, willing her soul to come back to him. Like a foot in the door of the enchantment he wished desperately

for her to escape but she did not come back. She had already been consumed. He would be consumed with her. He was losing his will to be of this world, losing his desire to stay alive. The enchantment started to draw him in instead. No longer his foot in the door, but his whole leg. Not just his leg, but his waist. Sinking deeper into the darkness that burned like acid. Only his hand on the doorknob... all he had to do was let go and he could follow Saph. Be with her, even in oblivion. He could almost see her. Almost hear her thoughts. She whispered his name, asked if he was all right. His grip loosened on the door as it sucked him in, devouring him, soon the pain would end.

But something touched him. Something held onto his shoulder. Something on the other side of the door. Iffy looked and it was the light. He couldn't leave yet, couldn't enter the darkness just yet. He had too much to do, too much to finish. The light reminded him of it. He tried to regain his grip on the doorknob but it disintegrated into ashes. He had nothing left to hold on to.

A soft voice, "Iffy..." The voice of the light soothed him, calmed him, claimed him. Desperately Iffy grabbed at his shoulder where the light held on. He could not let go, could not leave yet. The darkness roiled around him, pulled at him, sunk its claws into him but the darkness could not stay where the light was shining. It banished the darkness with its breath. The door closed, the enchantment faded. His vision returned though he would have rather been blind. Saph's lifeless body, haloed in shining crimson, still lay in front of him where he watched her fall. At his right, the light moved, enfolded his hand, came closer. There was nothing it could do to make this better. "I'm so sorry." The light sounded a lot like Sylae. Iffy turned towards the voice and stared into her battered and concerned face.

"Why?" he asked. She bit her lip in response. Sylae didn't know what to say. She didn't know the answer. Iffy hadn't expected her to. The question wasn't for her. He turned his head, this time towards Que and asked again with a shout. "WHY?"

Que jerked her head at the jarring question but only muttered a non-answer. "...so alone..."

"*WHY?!*" he demanded finally letting go of Sylae's hand to grab Que by the shoulders and give her a violent shake. "We trusted you!! We were your friends! Why would you do this?!" Que squeaked in fear and he shoved her to the ground. His voice cracked from emotion as he asked her again. "Why?"

They were all silent for a long time while Que looked at him sideways. "Do you really not know?" she finally asked. "Can't you feel it? Don't you thirst for it? Doesn't just the thought of it just drive you mad?"

Iffy *could* feel it. He had always felt it; a discontentment that was a constant companion. It had diminished to nothing but a minor annoyance since his time at the Refuge began, though, and he had not really been aware of its existence until Nalyd had explained his relationship to his kin

better. It was a hunger to be a whole soul. A need to be reunited with every part of himself and be in control of all his power.

As he thought about it, the soul energy of Saph and Reth rose before their eyes, Reth's returning to Que and Saph's to Iffy. For a second he clung on to the hope that Saph was not gone forever, that her soul had survived even a soul killing. Too soon, though, he realized that what had come back to him was only power. The power he had parted with to create and sustain her had returned to him but it was empty of any part of her life. No, she was really gone.

With a tiny bit of vindictive satisfaction he watched Que make the same revelation about Reth but it wasn't enough. Not enough to just be avenged. Not enough to quench the rage that now boiled up inside of him. He turned to look at Que as she shivered and rocked. Traitor, betrayer, he disowned her kinship in his heart.

"You hunger for my soul Que?" his voice was taunting, cruel. "You want my power for yourself?!" She cringed and he smiled. Iffy threw his soul box wide open so that she could feel every single joule he had. Her eyes went wide in astonishment and desire. Oh yes, she wanted it. Even through her fear of him she openly wanted it and he was not going to deny her anymore. "Here, have it!"

He threw his power at her and surrounded her with it. Her expressions ranged from hope to fear to confusion as he let it swirl around her like a tornado. She stood up within the eye looking desperately from the wall of energy to him and to the top where the only opening of escape still existed. Deftly he tightened the spiral until she had no room left to move. At this point she tried to open her own soul energy to defend herself but she was a mere child to his power. She tried to fly out the top but he closed it off. Not until he knew she understood the terror of her own end did he really give it to her. Iffy poured her power into her body filling up every orifice, every cavity, every single vein but he didn't stop when she was full. He had much more power to give. *"Take it! TAKE IT ALL!!"* he screamed at her as her threshold was passed. Blood oozed out of pores, eyes popped out of their sockets, she became a glittering explosion of pieces torn apart from the inside out.

Iffy claimed the soul energy that Que had harbored and reveled in the ecstasy it brought. Payment for her trespasses. Recompense for the life she had conspired to end. But it still wasn't enough. Not enough to quell the pain of Saph's loss... never enough. The now crimson tornado of his power pulsed in his frustration sending a shockwave of his rage out for miles. And then he felt her. The pinpoint of Nix's power was hiding to the northwest. Hiding because her soul was struggling with another. She was weak. He would end it all. He would be whole.

Iffy turned and found himself face to face with terror-filled eyes. Tears streaked down Sylae's cheeks and her mouth was open in a silent scream... no, not silent... he just hadn't heard her

above the tornado that raged beside him or the high that raged in his head. She was screaming his name.

In a second he snapped back to reality. The tornado and its deafening disappeared as he closed his energy back into his soul box. Who he was came back to him and knowing Sylae had witnessed him reveling in revenge almost felt worse than Saph's loss. Maybe it had been the fear in her eyes. Maybe it was the way she backed away from him now. She had seen him lose control and they both knew how dangerous that could be.

"Sylae, I... I'm sorry..." he stuttered out.

The words seemed to restore her faith in him as she rushed to his side. "No, Iffy, you have nothing to be sorry about. She got what she deserved. *I'm* sorry I wasn't able to stop this. I'm *so* sorry. If I'd have been here just a few seconds earlier..."

"No, don't... Don't blame yourself. I should have known, been more vigilant. I should have protected her better."

"Iffy, you can't blame yourself for this either."

"Can't I?" he asked bitterly. "Que and Reth were both kin. They were both part of me... are a more permanent part of me, now. Nix and I are all that's left..."

Neither of them said anything for a long time but Sylae was thoughtful, finally voicing a question. "Is that such a bad thing?" It was at the very heart of his unspoken fears. "Don't you want to be a whole being? It almost seems like you were all made with the desire to become one again. That hunger Que was talking about?"

Iffy nodded without reply. It was exactly what he was afraid of. That he had... that they all had been meant to kill each other off. Only the last soul standing would get to live and that with the knowledge that they had killed for the privilege.

The silence stretched on again and both of them shed a few more tears. "What can I do?" Sylae asked with a sniffle.

His gaze lowered to rest on Saph's body. "I think I need to be alone for a little bit. Let me bury her, mourn her. We have a while before Nix will strike again."

"How do you know?"

"I just know. We have a day at least."

"Okay, if you're sure."

Iffy gave her a nod. He needed this. A chance to say goodbye.

Sylae turned to leave but before she got more than a few steps away he caught her hand and pulled her into a tight embrace. "You may not realize it, but you saved my life in more ways than one. Thank you."

She squeezed him back and left with new tears in her eyes. As he watched her go he wondered if she would ever be able to forgive him.

Piecing it Together, Yes

By Jewels - Nov 9 2013

The greens and browns and reds of the burning forest swam in their minds. Each saw both their own perspective and the other's causing the branches to sway and the flames to leap and the carnage to all but surround them. Nio closed his eyes to rub them for a moment and the illusion of reality was washed away and the depiction appeared as it really was. From their vantage, sitting on the floor against the wall, the burning dryad seemed much taller and somehow more sorrowful, as if it only meant she had further to fall. [Do you really expect a response tonight?](#) he asked as they shifted their gaze to the message board under the Fire Fever painting.

Nioca had written a question for the artist and submitted it over three hours ago but there was still no response. It read simply, *Is there a cure for the Fire Fever?* Of course they knew there was and that one of them was supposed to provide it but none of them, Jewels included, knew the exact details of it. Nana was keeping them all in the dark.

[I don't know what to expect,](#) he responded. [but I know that this is the best lead we've ever had about Jewels' sickness. If there's any chance that we can find out more about it and how to cure her I'm willing to wait.](#)

[All night?](#)

Nioca huffed at the absurdity. *All week*, he snorted. *All month if I have to. You don't have to stay if you're bored. The Internet Plane is a big place. Go explore.*

And leave you here by yourself? That's not even the tiniest bit of a good idea. Jewels would never forgive me.

I'm perfectly capable on my own. Nio gave him a raised eyebrow and Nioca sighed, *Yeah, you're right. I'd be a useless bucket of bolts without you, but a bot can dream can't he?* Nio shook his head in bemusement. He could already tell it was going to be a long night... or week... or month.

When a new response popped up on the screen neither of them realized it for a few moments but by the third time their eyes rolled over the new text, they started to understand it. Nioca jumped up to get closer and read it out loud. *There are many reasons for the Fire Fever, yes, yes. But only one cause and cure.* It sounded suspiciously similar to what Jasmine had told him the night of Jewels' wedding. Right before she'd told him that *HE* was the cure.

Neither Jasmine or this artist really said what the cure was, though, which only made Nioca more frustrated. He frowned thinking some choice words he'd like to send back to the author about wasting his time when Nio spoke, "Here, let me," and typed in a less agitated – but still urgent – response. *We must know more. Please help us, our friend is dying.*

After waiting ten minutes with no indication it had been read, they both sank back down to the floor. *You'd think they'd have the decency to stick around for two minutes.*

They'll be back. After another twenty minutes even Nio started to doubt. *It's really late. Maybe we should come back tomorrow. I think there's a hotel down the block. We could check in and get some sleep.*

I suppose... They both stood and stretched for a moment to get the blood flowing to their limbs again.

A man walked up to them sporting a spiked Mohawk dyed green and a two-inch bullring in his nose. He looked very bored when he asked them, "You the guys that want to know about the Fire Fever?"

Nio wasn't sure what to make of the man. "Uh, yes. Are you the artist?"

"Pfft. As if. I don't do that sissy stuff. Not enough blood and guts." They glanced again at the depiction of dying dryads and mentally raised their eyebrows at each other.

The man scratched the inside of his nose vacantly and wiped his fingers on his pants before continuing. "But the artist told me to give you this." He held out a sealed envelope with a grimy hand which Nioca took with two fingers feeling a sudden urge to sanitize the entire thing.

"Um, thank you," Nio managed.

"Later," he saluted mockingly then strode off down the corridor.

Nioca slid a finger under the lip to open it and read it silently. *If you wish to know more, you must visit me at my cabin. Please use the portal.*

"Portal?" Nio asked, "What portal?" Without warning, in a gut wrenching twist, the letter itself turned inside out and sucked them into the tear in reality it had just created. The trip left the two coughing and sputtering on their knees.

When they were finally able to stand and take stock of their surroundings all they could see was a thick deciduous forest on all sides. Fall colors bathed the small clearing in a patchwork of reds and oranges and greens, set off by the burnt orange light of dawn. At least they thought it was dawn by the way the birds were singing the world awake.

[We must be in another dimension. It was the middle of the night on the internet plane.](#) Nio nodded his head and thought it extra lucky that he had not left Nioca's side when given the chance. If he'd have teleported here without his database... who knows what might have happened.

A bit leery of the abrupt change, they approached the 'cabin', if you could call it a cabin. It looked more like a glorified tree house grown directly from an impossibly enormous tree. Its base must have been over ten feet in diameter. Its front door was a giant knot and smaller knots dotted the sides for windows. The roots at the base folded over on themselves to make a stairway to the door and branches grew out on either side for railings. A canopy of leaves hung over top like an awning. Either the tree itself really wanted to be a house or someone caused it to grow like this because there was no sign of saw mark or nail hole to create it.

Nio reached out a hand to rap on the door and snatched it back with a startled yelp when it was opened almost immediately. An old woman regarded them with wary curiosity. She had dark brown skin with deep wrinkles that resembled the bark on her house. A bird's nest of twigs covered her head for hair and the clothing she wore could easily be mistaken for moss. She didn't

look like a dryad but she was definitely not human. Nio had the sudden thought that if she were to stand still for a moment, she would blend in with the rest of the woods and disappear. Only her bright green eyes broke the illusion as they darted about – alive as humming birds.

"Um, hello. My name is Nio and this is Nioca. We'd like to ask about the painting."

"Yes, yes, so they come. So they visit Aggie." Her voice was raspy and deep reminding Nioca of the sound of winter branches scraping against each other. "Come in, come in, mustn't lurk." She waved her hands at them beckoning them into the surprisingly large hollow. Even the furniture seemed to have grown right out of the tree. A table of roots, a chair of branches, a bed of leafy greens. "Come and sit, yes, both should sit and visit Aggie for a spell." She pointed at two chairs at the far side of the room then prodded them with gentle shoves until they had made themselves comfortable. "Tea?" she asked, shuffling over to what seemed to be the kitchen.

"No thank you," Nioca replied. "We really don't mean to take up too much of your time. If we could just ask you a few questions we'll be on our way."

"Oh, but I insist. You must have tea. One of the few pleasures of having company. It's just not proper to visit without sharing tea."

Nioca rolled his eyes inwardly but Nio saw the need to placate the woman. "Well, if you're sure it's no trouble, we'd love to share tea with you."

The woman came back beaming holding out two steaming cups made of stone. "Not often that Aggie gets to have tea with company. Drink, drink," she urged. Both men took a sip and were pleasantly surprised at the sweet taste. "You like it, yes?" The first few drops seemed to punctuate their existing thirst. As quickly as the heat of the drink would allow, they finished off their first cup and allowed Aggie to pour them a second. "Yes, yes. The portal leaves you parched, yes? Zaps away your precious moisture, it does. Visitors always enjoy some tea."

Nioca was growing impatient and a little light headed in the warmth of the room as he set down his cup. "Can we talk about the painting now? It's really important."

"So you said, yes? Your friend is dying, you said. Your friend is a dryad with the Fire Fever?"

"Half-dryad," Nioca corrected.

"Which makes the illness worse, we've been told," Nio added.

"Oh dear. Oh dear, dear. A halfling with the fever? Dangerous indeed. How long ago did the symptoms begin?"

Nio blinked at her question. He was finding it hard to concentrate as the smell of dirt and decaying plant matter filled his nose. Nioca batted a hand to clear the smokiness in front of him. "Um... how long?" he repeated and the two managed to count it up. "About seven months now? Give or take a few weeks."

Aggie frowned and shook her head from side to side. The motion seemed to make the whole tree sway with her. "Seven months; that is a long time to be confined to one's tree when one is accustomed to making friends with humans."

"She hasn't been confined," Nio confessed. "She's only spent her nights with her tree."

Aggie's jaw dropped at the news. "Seven months of the Fire Fever without confinement?! Impossible!! She'd have shriveled to ash within the first hour."

Nioca found it difficult to say exactly what he wanted to. "She doesn't burn up when she's on fire." He wasn't explaining it right. Aggie looked at him with a puzzled face but he couldn't explain it any better and Nio was no help as he yawned at his side.

"So I see." Aggie finally said though she still looked doubtful. "Your friend still lives you say, yes, but you are too tired to help her right now. You look exhausted from your journey. Rest, yes? You must rest. Sleep and we will talk more when you wake." Neither of them had the strength to protest. They barely had the strength to make it to the bed of soft lamb's ear. A fog clouded their minds as they drifted off to Aggie's raspy voice. "Yes, yes. Close your eyes. Aggie has much to learn, you must sleep." Her last words were like a command and though he knew something wasn't right, the last resisting process finally shut down in Nioca's mind.

She is with him. She is smiling. Bare feet crunch in the early autumn leaves though her flowing skirt is too long to catch more than a glimpse of them under her. Her long burnt auburn hair trails behind her as she skips and runs among the trees while he chases her. "Can't catch me." Her voice is full of laughter and his voice joins in the amusing song just glad to see her so care free.

He doesn't want her to get away but as he reaches for her she suddenly stops in front of him. He is going too fast. He runs into her and they both tumble down the steep hill she had stopped for.

Her laughter turns to cries of pain and sorrow. At the bottom of the hill, the forest around them is on fire. SHE is on fire. She holds her face in her hands covering her shame. He reaches out to help but she jerks away.

"It's your fault." She is so sad.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push you."

"It's your fault." She repeated through her fingers. "Dead, dead, all dead. It's your fault."

Now he was confused. "I don't understand. Who's dead?"

"Murderer. It's YOUR fault." She screamed and writhed in pain. The fire consumed her in front of him and he grasped desperately at her ashes. This wasn't supposed to happen. She couldn't burn up. She was supposed to get better. All that was left of her was her voice as it whispered in his ear. "Murderer..."

Nioca was the first to come back to the awareness of a metallic taste in his mouth. He must have bitten his tongue... or was it from something else? He listened to Aggie's raspy voice mumbling over him as Nio slept on. "Murderer, murderer. It's your fault." A part of him was relieved to realize they hadn't been Jewels' words in his dream but the words of a crazy old tree lady that liked to drug her guests when they ask her for help. He thought about attacking her but realized they had no idea where they were or how to get back. They needed the hag to get them home.

The woman must have seen him stir because she spoke louder and accusingly over him.

"Murderer! You did it! It's your fault!" Slowly Nioca sat up and mentally prodded Nio awake as well. If she became violent, he may need his help. If not to subdue her, than to keep him from going too far.

"What are you talking about? Did what?"

"Did what, he asks. Did what to his poor dying friend. Dying because of him and he asks what he did. The murderer doesn't even realize what he's done."

"I'm not a murderer," Nioca snapped. "I'm trying to help her!" Nio sat up rubbing his eyes amid the heated discussion.

"Oh hear that? He wants to help her."

"We do," Nio added adamantly. "Please you must help us."

"The twins that aren't twins demand my help? First they kill her than they order Aggie to save her? They assume much, yes."

"We didn't kill her," Nio insisted. "She isn't dead!"

"Not yet, perhaps, but soon, yes, very soon. And no you did not kill her, twin born of magic." She pointed her gnarled finger at Nio before swiveling it to point at Nioca. "But he did, *twin born of tree!*" The accusation seemed even harsher and more despised than that of murderer.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Nioca sneered. "I was born to two humans in the Ermarian plane, not that you'd know where that is."

For a moment her demeanor softened as she considered his words. "Ermarian? The world that was and will and is no more?"

"You've heard of it? You know it was destroyed?"

"Aggie is no recluse, yes, yes. I hear much about the worlds. Lost many brothers and sisters there. You claim, then, to be orphan, but Aggie knows. You are born of tree. I can smell it."

Nioca's mind was spinning. It was difficult to process all of the inconsistencies that this woman was spewing. Perhaps she sensed that moment of him being overwhelmed or perhaps he was just still groggy from whatever sleeping draught she had given him but with speed that did not compute, she grabbed his wrist with one firm hand and drew her sharp nail across his forearm with the other. Before he could react to anything, he was left staring at the gash in his arm. It was oozing something green. It took his mind a few minutes to process that what he was seeing was his own blood.

"You are born of tree!" she hissed. Nioca couldn't understand it and just stared mutely at his arm. He struggled to remember the last time he had seen himself bleed because he knew this hadn't always been the case. Fighting Jewels came to mind, as did fighting the stranger. That time he had bled a rainbow but only for all the healing potions he had taken. No he hadn't had an open wound since becoming a bot. Could that have caused this?

Nio started bandaging his arm with a torn piece of cloth and gave his counterpart a mental shrug. Nioca finally looked up to stare into the unnaturally bright green eyes that knew so much but spoke such nonsense. Her voice was a whisper, almost apologetic. "It's your fault, twin who is not twin and born of tree. You killed your friend when you were intimate with her."

Whoa, whoa, wait a minute." Nioca protested. "I have not been intimate with..."

"Liar!" she cut him off. "You *have* been intimate with her. You are human born of tree! There is no other way. That is proof. "

"We've barely kissed and that was after she got sick."

"Not intimate as humans, foolish man. *Intimate as dryads are*. You were in her tree."

The phrase 'born of tree' finally began to make sense. "I have green blood because I was in her tree? Nana did this to me?"

"So he admits it!" Aggie cried jumping in excitement. "The orphan twin that is not finally admits it is his fault. At last he admits he has killed her."

"I admit to nothing!" he shouted back. "Besides, I can't see how being in her tree has anything to do with..."

"It has everything to do with it! Foolish human, so ignorant of our ways. There is only one reason for the Fire Fever to come, yes. You have been intimate with her, sharing in her every essence, but you refused her your gift in return."

"What gift? She never asked for a gift."

Aggie ignored his question. "She now burns for your un-given gift. Burns with unnatural, unquenchable thirst. Burns for what you would not freely give though you took all she had."

"What gift?!"

"He thinks Aggie is a fool to believe that he does not know." She wagged a finger at him menacingly. "Why go in her tree at all if not to share your gifts? No, no, the only way you would have been let in is if you promised your gift, yes, and the only way for her to get the Fire Fever, yes, is for YOU to refuse once inside! Was very difficult, yes, to keep your gift. Always takes the mightiest force of will to keep the gift once inside. No, it was deliberate! The cruelest of lies, to break friend's heart and life, twin who is murderer!"

Nioca rubbed his temples trying to sort out her ramblings. Suggestions from Nio's understanding helped. It seemed Aggie thought he had *wanted* to go into Jewels' tree. "I wasn't in her tree by

choice," he tried to explain. "My soul was already trapped in her body. When her tree brought her in, I was absorbed, too."

That made Aggie pause. Her face turned from sneer to puzzlement. "What? What's this? Only your soul, you say?" Both Nio and Nioca nodded. "Your body did not enter?" She asked again.

"It couldn't. It was destroyed with my home planet. Only my soul survived."

Aggie started pacing in the small hollow mumbling under her breath. "Perhaps Aggie was wrong. Perhaps is not his fault, yes. Perhaps she was doomed from the start. He cannot give what he does not have? No, no, a soul alone cannot share the gift." Finally she stopped her dizzying movement and started into Nioca's eyes. "You do not wish your friend harm?" He shook his head vigorously. "You really want to help her and see her well again?" He nodded just as enthused. "Good, good. The cure remains the same. You must go to her. Offer your gift. If she accepts it, she will be saved."

"But I still don't know what the gift is! Jewels doesn't even know what she needs from me. Nana won't tell her."

Aggie paused again looking surprised and stroked her wrinkled chin. "Jewels? This is your dying friend whose tree is Nana? The Halfling who fights in the land of fire for a birthright she does not want?"

"Yeah, what other dryad Halfling do you think could not burn up when on fire?" Nioca asked mockingly, while behind his words he wondered how much she did know if she knew that Jewels was in the Fire Plane right now, let alone who she was in the first place.

Aggie was too busy fretting to be offended by it, though. She paced back and forth in her tree hollow and muttered to herself. "This is unexpected. It is worse than we thought, yes. Lady Jewels of the fire must not die. Would be disaster on us, disaster!" She turned to stare at him with a mix of loathing and urgency "You bring dire tidings, twin born of tree. That the lady is dying... *Worse*, that the lady is bonded with... *human*. You must give her your gift! You must!"

Nioca stood to face her in frustration. "I would be more than happy to give her this 'gift' if you would just tell me what it is!"

Aggie's jaw set as she stared him down. For some reason she was reluctant to say and her final answer was just as cryptic as her others. "She must bloom, foolish human. Gift her with your life. Seed to seed, that the forest may live and grow. Or her body will succumb to the flames and so many after her, also. Now go, yes, yes. Aggie tires of the twin's face staring with no understanding. Perhaps the twin born of magic will understand it, yes."

Nioca wasn't about to leave with just that answer but it seemed he didn't have a choice. The gut wrenching portal appeared before them from a slip of paper Aggie had been holding. It sucked them back through it. Aching and shaking, they wound up back at Deviant Art in front of the Fire Fever painting. Nioca saw the dryad in the center in a new light now. It was Jewels wearing a wedding ring but mourning for the husband she no longer had. Gift her with his life? Did that mean he had to die to save her? It would explain why Nana was so secretive about it. He didn't think she'd be willing to accept that from him. He had no doubt in his mind of his willingness but with the glowing processes of devotion clouding his judgment would she consider it a gift freely given?

Just What They Don't Need, of It it What They Do?

By Jewels - Nov 26 2013

Hours... Nalyd had spent countless hours searching for the diagram of his creation. Well... to be more specific, he had paced for hours – twiddling Lifesower from hand to hand – while the lesser creations he had made sifted through the rubble left in the building. Numerous times Nalyd had walked out the Geneforge doors intent on finding Dunstan without the diagram but the need to survive turned him back each time. Twice he had faced this kidnapping vixen and twice she had bested him. If he stumbled into Nix when he was on his own... What good would it do to find his creation if Nalyd did not live past it? No, as much as his fury demanded immediate action, Nalyd had to be cunning. He would find his diagram, gather reinforcements for the fight and lead them to his quarry.

His creations continued to pick up broken machinery and sort what was left between salvageable or not. The keep pile was pitifully small and Nalyd kicked it in anger breaking another piece. The creation assigned to the sort made a disgruntled snort as it moved the newly broken piece to the other heaping pile.

A breeze fluttered the hem of Nalyd's cloak but it was not from the gaping hole that was now the north wall. It came from behind him and he spun to look at the source. The tipped and emptied healing and energy pools were glowing as the air spun debris in a lazy circle between them. Nalyd brandished Lifesower in front of himself as a form solidified in the spot. His grip tightened as he made out the shades of army fatigues and the outline of short cropped hair. Soon it coalesced into a recognizable person and Nalyd swore under his breath. Just what he didn't need...

It was supposed to be a vacation; a little break from the stresses of war and parlay. She only had one week to spare which meant a mere seven hours at the Refuge. Jewels had planned to spend it with Nio and Nioca. It was ridiculous how much she missed having their every thought roll around in her head. She had found her duties incredibly lonely without them. Seven hours of camaraderie was just what she needed to lift her spirits, but when she arrived there was no one here to connect to. Not just gone from the Refuge – she'd still be connected to them over any distance – but gone from the entire Internet plane. The loneliness of being dimensional planes apart persisted. Her only relief came in being granted access back into the Refuge database. The familiar flood of information and processing power made her feel less empty though it was a cheap substitute for a living mind.

With no sign of where they went and no indication when they would be back, Jewels decided she might as well spend some time with her son. She reached out her mind to the encircling Blades Nexus. She'd missed this, too, but it was probably more about the way she'd spent the majority of her time with Nio in the Nexus. It reminded her of him. She pulled herself up to the Geneforge forum and was greeted by Nalyd scowling in a ruin of a forum. Jewels swore under her breath. Just what she didn't need...

Nalyd expected her to be surprised. Nalyd expected her to be worried. Instead Jewels just looked worn. After a visual sweep of the forum her scowling gaze landed on him and she sighed wearily. "What happened here?"

Nalyd was not in the mood for elaborate conversation so he decided to keep it simple. "A battle." She scanned the room again, eyes resting on each creation in turn. "Where is my son?"

He cringed at her use of the word for his creation but wasn't going to waste time arguing about it. "Taken... by Nix." Let Jewels draw her own conclusions about that. Her eyes narrowed to a dangerously determined slant. Good. Maybe Nalyd would not have to look for his creation anymore. Maybe Jewels could do the finding for him.

"Do you know where to?"

"Not yet, but Nalyd's diagram will show the way."

"And where is that?"

Nalyd raised his arms and Lifesower with them to indicate the room they were in. One more pair

of hands searching was sure to speed the process. His smile was semi-sweet. "Jewels could help Nalyd look for it if she likes."

She took two steps forward before turning in a slow circle. "Is there anything in this room you'd like to keep?" Nalyd shrugged. It was mostly useless junk now. Nothing his creations had found was worth much to him. She took in his indifference and gave him a nod. With a calm command that he hadn't seen in her before, she gave him an order as if a general to a soldier. "Then stand behind me."

Nalyd was about to protest when he felt a rise of crackling energy in the air. Jewels was gathering power – *a lot* of power – for something big. He did not waste any time in ordering his creations to him and standing beside the spilled healing and energy pools with them.

Seven hours... seven measly hours to spend with the people she cared about and instead she was back to fighting for them. An anger rose up in her, hot and indignant. Sitting down for a meal, catching up, that's what she should be doing right now. Laughing, smiling, sharing a hug... was it too much to ask for? She had been fighting for months in the Fire Plane and the mentality of war strategy settled over her shoulders like a cloak that fit all too well. There was no energy pool to draw from, but Jewels' raw emotion would be quite enough for what she was about to do.

Tapping into the database forum specs and calculating power, Jewels opened her mind to the Nexus again. Every sense heightened, she could see every particle in the room. Scuff marks on the floor indicated a struggle. There was a hair here, a drop of blood there, and foot prints heavy from the strain of carrying a body away. She read the story of the battle from the remains as clearly as if she had watched it first hand and filed it away in the database for background processing. She held every spec in the grasp of the Nexus lifting them off the ground and identifying them. In mere seconds she was satisfied with her search and converted it all into raw energy. All save a single sheet of paper that fluttered to the now empty floor. "Your diagram," she intoned.

Nalyd let out a sound that she could only describe as a yip of joy and scrambled towards the fallen paper. Jewels planned to follow but she had one thing left to do. The converted raw energy in the air swirled in volatile patterns as she gathered it to her. Behind her the healing and energy pools lifted off the ground and set themselves right. The power in the air gelled and flowed to fill them before she sat them back down. Jewels exhaled with a shudder as she let go of the Nexus' power. The forum was still a ruin but one part had been restored at least. She took a moment to place a hand at each and restore herself, admiring her handiwork. The jolt of energy that she absorbed was strong, maybe too strong... she should adjust that.

Nalyd's keening wail left the pools forgotten and sent a shiver down her spine. Turning sharply she took in his look of horror as he examined the diagram. "What? What is it?" she called as she ran to the mad little shaper and looked over his shaking shoulder. The depiction looked nothing like Stillborn as she had left him. Instead of a hulking green monster, the humanoid in the drawing was black as pitch from head to toenail, but that was not the disturbing part. He was lying down still as stone. No heartbeat... no breaths... She was too late. Her son was dead.

There had been a battle while she was away and it had cost her son's life. Guilt wracked her mind as the 'what if's flooded in. What if she'd been here sooner? What if she'd insisted on taking him with her? What if she'd never left at all? It was almost too much to bear. A warning went off in the back of her mind. She'd been fairly stable health-wise but it was a fragile stability. The old Refuge algorithms were working double time to tame her emotions. There was an auspicious calmness that tickled the edges of her perception, something she would normally cling to when under stress but instead she shoved it away. She did not want to be calm about the death of her son. She wanted to rage and mourn and take revenge. She was too distraught to notice that Nalyd's expression had changed as he studied the diagram more carefully.

There! There it was again! Nalyd barely dared to hope. His creation's pulse was at zero beats per minute, its breathing was zero breaths per minute, but not every stat on the diagram lacked movement. There was a steady spike in the brain wave activity which meant that the black stone still clung to life even in its current state.

Nalyd looked up with elation but Jewels' gaze was distant and filled with pain. She looked ready to break, in fact, which would not be good for Nalyd's survival considering how close she was standing. "Look, brain activity! Nalyd's creation is not dead!" She looked but did not seem to understand. Though it pained Nalyd to validate her convictions, he used stronger words. "Jewels' son still lives!"

That got her attention. "Not... not dead?" Nalyd shook his head as she seemed to come back to her senses. "He's alive?" she asked again searching for validation.

Nalyd nodded but was urgent. "For now, but Nalyd must be quick. He does not know how long it will... he will last like this."

Jewels shook herself and returned to the military commander of a few minutes ago. "Where is he, then?" Nalyd called up the map and they both watched as it zeroed in on the location. Jewels took one look and was off. Nalyd had to run to keep up with her.

He didn't know how she'd done it but by the time they were there, bots secured the perimeter of the lonely Ermarian house. Jewels blasted the door open without checking if it were locked and rushed in. His creation lay on a simple bed too still for life. Nalyd pushed past her to examine the body. "Can you save him?" she asked, back to her annoying 'worried mother' self.

"Nalyd doesn't know," he checked the diagram to confirm his next statement, "but there is still brain activity which means there is still hope."

"Quickly, let's get him back to the Geneforge lab," she suggested but Nalyd frowned.

"What lab? The Geneforge forum doesn't have any equipment left. Nalyd needs someplace with equipment. "

The look in Jewels' eyes was mischievously confident as her commanding voice surfaced again. "You leave that to me. Just tell me what you need."

Nalyd started rattling off shaping equipment as they hurried back to the forum, bots carrying the body. Jewels asked a few clarifying questions but otherwise did not protest or interrupt or say anything was unreasonable to request. In the back of his mind he was working out which creations he could make to help keep the body alive. Something to breathe, something to pump the blood... Nalyd could make temporary creations for that but he hoped Jewels would be able to procure his requested equipment soon. Those kinds of creations would not be able to last for long.

Back at the forum there were already half a dozen RefugeBots stationed at the doors and outside the north wall – standing guard, Nalyd supposed. Inside, Jewels ordered everyone behind the newly restored healing and energy pools. "Nalyd does not see why we must stand here. Time is wasting."

"Oh, Hush. I can do more than make things disappear. I thought you *wanted* to know how I got that replacement part." Jewels paused to look him in the eye. So different was her demeanor, Nalyd did not recognize her. "Now be quiet. This is going to take all my concentration."

A ripple of excitement ran through Nalyd as it finally dawned on him. Jewels was not going to buy what he requested... she was going to make it. He waited eagerly looking over her shoulder at the empty Geneforge. As before, the crackle of power raised the hairs on the back of his neck and sent shivers down his spine. The tingle of power grew first to needle pricks and then to stabs of energy. Jewels hands reached out to draw on the power of the pools, heat radiated off her skin and Nalyd shrank back against the wall. The copper lines on her hands and face started to glow red hot as Jewels rose a few feet off the ground.

Nalyd watched in amazement as pieces of machinery popped into being right before his eyes. It was almost as if she were shaping, not *real* shaping – the mastery of life – but almost shaping. Jewels had this ability all along? And Nalyd had been shaping with barely serviceable equipment?! But not anymore... never again! Nalyd now had a proper lab.

But... he sniffed the air... not if it burnt down before he even started using it. Nalyd strained to see which machine the smoke was coming from when Jewels' clothes burst into flame. The copper lines on her body must have been too hot. Nalyd couldn't even get close enough to try to put it out. Soon it seemed her entire body was engulfed, which wasn't really a new thing for Jewels, except she wasn't in her elemental form. The fire licked harmlessly against her human skin and she didn't even seem to notice. So intent on the task, she didn't flinch or waver when the last of her burning clothes fell away to reveal all her glowing lines of power. They were so bright, it hurt to look at her though Nalyd's fascination could not allow him to look away. She fixed the wall, she created supplies, every piece of equipment he had mentioned was now here in front of him... even some pieces he had not asked for. Such power... Nalyd was momentarily envious.

The sudden contrast of the darkness left him groping for something solid. Temporarily blinded he blinked away the spots in his eyes and barely made out the outline of Jewels swaying, though the thump as she fell to the ground was clear enough. Nalyd shuffled towards her and prodded her with a finger but she did not respond. Great... just what he didn't need. Someone *else* to take care of. Though... the idea started to cross his mind... Nalyd *could* do some experimenting while she was out.

The idea was almost as quickly snuffed out when one of the bots holding his creation swept past him and lifted Jewels' limp form. It laid her down on one of the new beds, covered her up and stood sentry at her side. The other bot did the same with his creation. Perhaps Jewels was not quite unconscious... best not to tempt fate.

She woke to the steady beep that was her son's heartbeat among the other clinical sounds that surrounded her. There was a metal scrape of a bot to her left... through the database's eye she saw it still following the instructions she had given it before she blacked out. Protecting her from any stray idea that may have come to Nalyd. She had dropped the secrecy and unabashedly flouted her ability with the Nexus in front of him, but that did not mean she trusted him.

There was a long breath and the rustle of cloth to her right. Concerned eyes stared into hers when she opened them and she smiled. Vergil smiled, too. "We got a little worried when you were a couple days late. Nalyd told me what happened. How do you feel?"

Jewels stretched her limbs and wiggled her toes. The movement made her a little woozy. She had never used Bladescraft to create so much in so short a time before. The drain had been incredible but she seemed to find hidden stores of energy within herself and in the very fabric of the world. Everything had looked... white. Not the white of paint in its lack of color but the white of light in the brightness of all colors. Apart from her sluggishness, though, she felt all right. "All in one piece, I think. How is Stillborn?"

Vergil turned to look towards the still form on the other bed. "Nalyd had him on life support when I got here. That was three hours ago." His eyes met hers and the significance of the time was not lost on her. "There's been no change since then."

Jewels pinched the bridge of her nose. "Five days late at least... we have to get back, don't we?" Vergil only nodded. She sat up slowly, shivering when the thin sheet fell away from her bare skin. She grabbed it to herself and sat for a minute as the room slowed its spinning. She started to prepare to make herself some clothes with the Nexus but just the thought of opening herself up made her nauseous. She was too weak to even try.

Vergil's concern increased the longer she sat. "Do you need help? What can I do?" It was odd, to be so vulnerable in front of him after the previous months of showing him and the others in her charge nothing but her strength. Or rather, nothing but the Camarine's strength as she had recognized it. At this point, it was the only thing holding her together and she knew it. She had over taxed it with her latest stunt... at least that was her theory for the weakness she felt now.

Vergil still looked at her with concern and she gave him a nod. "You could help me stand up for starters." It took a bit of awkward maneuvering but she was eventually on her feet with the sheet wrapped around her toga style. "Just give me a few minutes to say goodbye." Vergil nodded and she shuffled over to stand next to her son. He looked so different... again... but she supposed she liked it better than the green. He looked more a man and less a beast at least.

Nalyd had propped himself on a chair sitting cross-legged. He brooded as he stared at her son. "Is he any better?" she asked.

His response was no surprise. "Unchanged. Nalyd has examined his creation thoroughly and can find no physical reason for this condition."

Jewels sighed, squeezed his shoulder and put on a reassuring smile. "I know you'll take care of him."

Nalyd raised his eyebrows at her. "Who is this person and what have they done with the real Jewels?"

She laughed at his skepticism. "Mind, I didn't say *good* care. All I know is no one looks out for my son like you." Nalyd's mouth continued to frown but his eyes contained a smile.

Vergil walked up behind her. "We really need to go. You'll recover faster in the Fire Plane."

"Yeah, I know." So much for her vacation... she'd slept through most of it. Twelve hours here and there was still no sign of Nio or Nioca. Where could they be? At least she was able to help her son before he was beyond help. That hope would keep her going in the next few months. She bent down to kiss his forehead before stepping back. "I'm ready."

Vergil took her hand and whispered the words of transport. The world grew fuzzy as did her connection to it. Suddenly she was empty again, separated from the database and so alone in her thoughts. Her despair rose but an auspicious calmness tickled the edges of her perception. She clung to it with what little strength she had left. She was not completely alone.

Burying the Past

By Jewels - Jan 11 2014

Nix stumbled from tree to tree holding her abdomen. Finally absorbing the beast's energy had been overwhelming. It was like it had a thousand lives. And unlike the barkeep – who was more than willing to let his life force become a part of hers – the beast's will fought hers continuously. She wasn't sure what time it was as the hours blurred together in the battle to control its energy. As tired as she was, though, so was the beast. She could feel its resolve weakening as she bombarded it with the futility of its efforts. Its body was already dead; it was just delaying the inevitable. Still it held itself together, as apart from her as it could. She would win eventually, but the battle was not over.

The sounds of approaching feet brought her back to the present. The beast separated itself a little more at her lack of concentration but remaining hidden was a top priority in this vulnerable state. She stayed out of sight, though her cloaking spell was more than sufficient to keep her invisible, and watched as a game changing scene unfolded in front of her. Four of her kin entered the clearing. Only one was left when the dust settled. Nix trembled in awe of Iffy's vengeance on qUe. She felt his power surging through the air, so close a rival to her own... Her decision to take the beast was justified if she wanted to survive such a fury as his. When it was all over and Iffy had asked the ArchAdmin for privacy he had turned to her then, stared right at her through her magical concealment.

In that moment, she thought it was over. He had found her. She was weakened. He was going to kill her now. But Iffy made no move against her. Silent and broken, he only acknowledged her presence before turning his back on her. Too scared to move she only watched as Iffy burned Reth's body to dust and knelt to cradle Saph in his arms. He cried for hours, just holding her lifeless body. Nix found herself wondering if she'd ever cared for anyone enough to cry for them like that. Then she wondered if anyone had ever cared for her enough to cry for her like that. Both times the closest she could think of was Iffy. She had loved him at one time and she thought he had loved her but maybe he was right to look for something more in a soul bond if the love for one could leave such despair when ripped away. Then again, such weakness was something to be avoided at all costs.

Nix regained enough presence of mind to move and left him to his mourning. What she had really learned tonight was that it was critical she conquer the new power within her if she wanted to survive their next encounter. And if she wanted Iffy to be vulnerable, she needed to do it quickly.

Sylae stared at the screen in front of her. Hours of tracking algorithms, bot sweeps, and good old fashioned detective work had yielded nothing but a splitting headache and a doubt that Nix was even within the refuge anymore. Still, she was not about to give up. Iffy was counting on her.

Thought of Iffy brought back the too recent memory of Saph's death and his reaction to it. In truth, part of her obsession to work through the night had been a purposeful avoidance of thinking about it. She couldn't imagine what he was going through – lesser things could break a man – but she had to have faith in him... that he could pull through. She would help him pull through if he'd let her. But to move on, he had to survive; and to survive, Nix had to die. Sylae would find Nix and help Iffy rid the multiverse of her once and for all.

She was about to send the bots on yet another sweep of the outer forests when a contingent moved off on their own. "What the...?" With a few key strokes she recalled them but her command was sent back overridden and ignored. A swath of sailor worthy expletives crossed her lips as her ire rose. What had Nioca done to her database now? She pulled up the Who's Online list to find him and give him a piece of her mind surprised to see him missing from the list entirely. The answer to her problem still glared back at her, though, eliciting another more colorful string of oaths. Jewels was in attendance and apparently hacked back into the database with permissions that superseded her own. When Nioca returned she'd have more than a piece of her mind to give him.

The locator showed Jewels moving across the grounds at a quick pace, set to intercept the bots which were converging on a corner of the Ermanian settlements. Nalyd followed swiftly behind

her. There was only one thing Sylae could think of that would have those two working together. They had found Dunstan... for the third time in as many minutes, Sylae's mouth filled the air with maledictions enough to singe the eyebrows off a cat at thirty yards away. The fool-hearted pair were rushing right in, oblivious to the danger that they might have also found Nix.

It seemed Sylae could not move fast enough as she ran, unprepared, towards a potential battle to the death. Still she surged forward, spurred on by the hope that she might possibly be able to spare Iffy the weight of more Refugi deaths at his kin's hands. She was not willing to raise a general alarm – and rouse Iffy from his mourning – until she knew the danger was sure.

Sylae slowed her pace as she reached the house, now guarded by a ring of *her* bots. There was no sign of Nix or a struggle, lifting a huge weight from her mind. The door to the shack hung open on only one hinge and Jewels's commanding voice carried clearly on the wind. "You leave that to me. Just tell me what you need."

The pair exited the house, bots carrying the limp body of Jewels' son behind them. Sylae barely recognized Jewels in her military fatigues and short cropped hair. More than that, though, the expression on her face – hard and unflinching – was so void of emotion, Sylae found it hard to believe it was the same woman.

All of the guarding bots also moved off back towards the Geneforge forum as Sylae hung back to examine the inside of the house. There was not much to see; a chair, a table, a bed... that's pretty much all there was in any Ermarian house. After a little searching, Sylae did notice a bag against the wall behind the chair. Rummaging through it she found some food and a change of clothes but nothing that would point to where Nix was now. Sylae would come back later to see if she could pick up on Nix's trail, but for now she left it behind and turned to follow after Jewels and Nalyd.

Bot sentries surrounded the building but did not react to Sylae's approach. When she stepped inside, two more bots stood at the opening to the Geneforge lab which glowed in an unearthly light and crackled with enormous power. They held out their arms as she stepped up to the threshold. *Caution: It is not safe to proceed*, they droned at her. She was about to protest when the hair on her arms stood on end and a huge machine appeared out of thin air on the other side of the door. Perhaps it *would* be better to wait.

From her vantage at the doorway, Sylae could see the entire room filling with medical and shaping equipment of all types. Enough to be the envy of any hospital or Geneforge shaper. Further back a bright light hovered above the ground with two bots, Jewels's son, and Nalyd crouching behind it.

Sylae's gaze returned to the light, though it was too bright for her eyes. It seemed to demand her attention and pulled at her mind. With an intake of breath, the power in the room grabbed at her

consciousness holding it captive. Time slowed down in a moment of clarity, and the form beneath the light came into Sylae's focus. Swirling tendrils pulsed along feminine curves while rays of wavy energy radiated from Jewels' head like flowing hair. There was only light where her eyes should be and they stared at Sylae, shining brightness into the furthest corners of her soul. Nothing was secret. Nothing was hidden. A wave of intense emotion crashed over her with such force, it knocked her physically backwards. A burning passion that Sylae had come to expect from all of Jewels' motives swirled through her carrying other emotions with it. There was love, there was sorrow, there was hope and despair. Surprisingly, the strongest among them Sylae could only name as faith. Jewels' faith in her? It rippled with vivid sureness through her being.

It must have taken her a few minutes to regain her bearings as her mind tried to process what had just happened. Long enough for one of the bots in the room to sweep past her and leave with the others. When she finally looked up, Nalyd hovered over Dunstan on one hospital bed while the last bot stood next to Jewels in another.

Sylae picked herself up and dusted off before heading towards Nalyd. His hands and feet flew as he examined Dunstan and started hooking him up to various wires and gadgets. She stayed back so she wouldn't get in the little shaper's way. "So you found him," she stated more than asked.

"Nalyd's creation is dead." The blunt statement hung in the air while he ran to a nearby shelf and grabbed at newly created medical instruments.

"Oh..." Sylae followed a few feet behind unsure of what else to say. Another death... her pain was more for Iffy's sake than Nalyd's or Jewels'. She was about to give her condolences but he seemed not to be grieving.

Instead he examined the instruments in front of him for their perceived usefulness and tossed them aside if they had none. As if in answer to her bemused silence he added a word to his last sentence. "Almost."

Sylae stepped in closer to watch him work, glad that there was hope. "Oh?"

He glanced at her for the barest of moments, annoyed at her presence but not protesting. He had started gathering the 'good' pile in his arms. "Nalyd's diagram shows brainwaves still, though the rest of the body is dead. It is puzzling."

"Can I help?" She reached for the pile of approved instruments only to have him slap her hand away.

For the first time since she had entered, he gave her his full attention. "No, Nalyd would prefer

the Arch Magus did not touch anything." And then he was back to gathering his pile and taking it over to dump it on the bed between Dunstan's legs.

Sylae felt a little slighted but remembered that Nalyd was used to working alone. He probably preferred it that way. "Okay, sorry to bother you." She hadn't meant to sound so dejected but the lack of sleep did not lend to her paying attention to tone of voice.

It was enough to make Nalyd pinch his nose and sigh. "If Sylae would like to be helpful, she could make sure Jewels is still breathing. That bot will not let me come within three feet of her to check."

That the bot stood guard was testament enough for Sylae that Jewels lived. She dared to press Nalyd a moment more, wondering if he had any insight into what Jewels had just done. "That was some display of power, eh?" She gestured at the once void room now filled with pristine machinery. "You must be in heaven."

Nalyd merely huffed. "It was dangerously stupid. The woman has no regard for her own survival." He paused long enough to afford Jewels a mixed glance ranging somewhere between awe, disgust, and envy. The corner of his mouth rose in the slightest of smiles. "But, yes... if Nalyd could just revive his creation, Nalyd would be in heaven."

Sylae smiled to herself and left him to his work. She approached the bot with the stiff backed gait of authority, though she doubted it mattered. It at least made her feel like she was in control. "What is your purpose?" she asked it.

]To protect Lady Jewels from any and all harm.

Sylae glanced back at Nalyd not surprised that Jewels considered him potentially harmful given their history. "May I approach her?"

The bot paused as if calculating. *You are worthy*, it finally droned as it moved back a few feet to make room. The phrase struck Sylae as odd, though she didn't think it significant.

Looking down, Sylae's heart tugged at what she actually saw. No more the vivacious woman who had won her heart with a smile, not even the commanding authority she had been just minutes earlier. What lay before her now was small and vulnerable and fragile. Jewels was thin... much too thin; sickly thin. With only a sheet to cover her, Sylae could easily see the pointed bones of her shoulders and collarbone. With her eyes closed the sunken sockets and dark rings around them stood out in stark contrast to the paleness of the rest of her face. No wonder Nalyd had wondered if she were still alive, Sylae was starting to question it herself.

Slipping a hand under the sheet, Sylae brought out Jewels' limp arm and felt for a pulse. She blew out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. It was weak, but it was there. She felt slightly relieved and held onto her hand, not sure what else to do. As frustrating as the last few days had been, Sylae still cared about Jewels and hated seeing her like this. She swiped at a tear, helpless, and found herself studying Jewels' arm. The copper lines that had been new and vivid when she had left now looked ages old and tarnished. The ring... what should have been their wedding ring... was overly thick and looked like it cut painfully into Jewels' flesh, though there was hardly any flesh left on her bony fingers.

Was this *her* fault? Sylae couldn't escape the feeling of guilt though it had been Jewels' choice to leave. They had both overreacted... on a few occasions... *Stupid emotions...*

Sylae tucked Jewels' hand back up under the sheet then tried to straighten it up over her shoulder for warmth... she should find another blanket or something. The lump below the nape of Jewels' neck drew Sylae's gaze when her hands brushed it. It began a slight pulsing glow beneath the sheet. Curiosity got the better of her as she pulled it back down to stare at the stone set in the copper loop. Had that been there before? Sylae did not remember it and worried it was yet another manifestation from the ring. Yet it did not look like it belonged. The copper that surrounded it had worn but the stone shone with an ever increasing brilliance that made Sylae's eyes hurt. She reached her hands up to rub them, blinking away the light, then slammed them shut and let out a startled cry when the world disappeared in whiteness.

Sylae stood among foggy drifts and an albino everglade whipping her head back and forth in confusion. Where was she? In the distance, a woman sat on a fallen log with her back to Sylae. She approached with caution, clearing her throat when she was a few feet away.

The woman stood slowly, both long auburn hair and gauzy white gown rippled with the movement of her turn. Shy eyes peeked up at her with a tentative smile. "Hello, Sylae."

"Jewels?" she said surprised and stumbled for more words to cover it. "You, ah... you look good." Jewels' cheeks flooded with color at her words. Pink cheeks, pale eyes... she was the epitome of health here... wherever here was.

"Where are we and what are we doing here?" she decided to ask.

"It's a bit complicated. Simplest explanation is that it's another dimension accessible through the Camirine – that's the stone I wear at my neck. *I'm* here to recover. I come here almost every night while my body sleeps. It sustains me like sleeping in my tree would but I never remember I was here while I'm awake. And it seems you are here to visit me."

"You look... like the old you." Sylae blurted out noting she really did. Here she wore no copper tendrils and no bones could be seen protruding under her skin.

"That's because it is who I am at my core. What you see is only a projection of my soul. Our physical bodies are still back at the refuge. But you..." Jewels hesitated and started circling Sylae and looked her up and down while frowning.

"What? What's the matter."

"Well, nothing..." Jewels fidgeted with her hands, staring at them when she finished her sentence. "I guess I was just... expecting Will."

Sylae felt a surge of indignant anger rush up to color her face. "Why? Did you *want* me to be Will?"

"No!" Jewels denied, "Yes...?" she hesitated. "I don't know," she whispered while absently rolling a ring around on her finger. Jewels caught her watching and stuffed her hands behind her back throwing Sylae such a look of lost hope it was impossible to hold on to her anger. "I'm just surprised is all," she finally continued. "Guess I shouldn't be, though. You aren't Will anymore, not at your very core. But that's a good thing, right? It's what we were working for. You are completely, 100% Sylae."

She had said it with a smile, but the tone of her voice sounded like she was still trying to convince herself. "And you're okay with that?" Sylae ventured.

Jewels looked down at her hands again, fiddling with her ring. "I miss Will," she admitted. "I think I always will. I have some really good memories of him that I'll always cherish." Sylae nodded in understanding as a mischievous smile crept onto Jewels' lips. "Like him wearing a pink frilly skirt on our wedding night." Both of them laughed a little at the memory. "Should have guessed then," she added between giggles. "He looked better in it than I would have."

With a thoughtful smile Jewels slipped the ring off of her finger and studied it. The look on her face was one of a woman making a decision that she would have to live with the consequences for. With a nod meant for herself she slipped it on the ring finger of her right hand instead of her left. She looked up with hopeful eyes. "It'd be nice to have a sister, though, if you'd have me. Much too much testosterone running round this place, if you ask me."

Sylae smiled. I'd be nice to have a sister. "Aye, I could do that. But do you think we'll remember this?"

"You? Possibly. Me? Probably not. But emotions are different from other memories. I'm sure some sense of the peace I feel over our relationship will carry over to my waking self."

"I hope so," Sylae nodded and dipped her head. "It's been a rough couple of days. It'd be nice know something had finally turned out right"

Jewels stepped forward in an offer of a hug and Sylae accepted it without qualms. She closed her eyes just enjoying the comfort when Jewels whispered in her ear. "I will always love you."

Sylae squeezed her harder as she believed it. "I love you," she whispered back.

A startled voice cleared his throat next to her head. "Now, now, we've barely met. Don't you think it's a bit too soon to be tossing around the 'L' word?"

Sylae's eyes snapped open to find herself back in the Geneforge lab, her arms wrapped around an anxious Vergil. Quickly she extricated herself and mumbled an apology. "Sorry. I, uh... I haven't slept much lately. Think I might have been sleeping on my feet there for a minute."

"A minute?" Vergil asked teasingly. "You've been here for hours." He laughed at her expression of dismay while feigning mock offense. "Why do you look so sick all of a sudden? I wasn't that bad of a cuddler was I?" Sylae took another step back, about to try to explain actions she had no memory of performing. But Vergil held up a hand, "Don't worry, you haven't been hugging me the whole time. I just got here a few minutes ago actually, but Nalyd over there says you've just been standing here next to her bed since Jewels collapsed.

"I... I was worried," she finally managed. "About Jewels," she added hastily so there'd be no confusion. "I... think I should go lie down for a while." Vergil raised an amused eyebrow at her. "Because I'm tired," she added again. Without any relief to the awkwardness Sylae excused herself and walked out of the Geneforge forum. Her only consolation was that she had indeed remembered her 'dream'.

Swing, stomp, lift, turn. Swing, stomp, lift, turn.

It was all he could think about, all he had thought about for countless hours through the night and following day.

Swing, stomp, lift, turn. Swing, stomp, lift, turn.

It was all he dared think about because if he stopped and thought about what he was actually doing – the swinging of the shovel, stomping the spade to drive it deeper, lifting the crumbs of earth he'd caught, and turning both body and arms to let it fall into the slowly disappearing pit behind him – if he thought about that or why he was doing it the tears might start again. And with them the sobs that would shudder through his body and rip at his already raw lungs.

Swing, stomp, lift, turn.

Much safer not to think about the why.

Swing, stomp, lift, turn.

The sun had long dropped behind the horizon by the time the last crumbs were returned to the hole where they'd come from, though they didn't quite fit anymore. The rounded mound, illuminated by a shining moon, was small, slight. Just the size it should be. Just the size she used to be. And suddenly seeing the small mound of dirt was more than he could handle. He couldn't stay here. Couldn't be by her... her grave.

Dropping the shovel, Iffy turned his back on the clearing and left the forest.

Sylae kicked the console in frustration. Eight hours... she'd lost eight hours in what had seemed to be only 30 minutes with Jewels. Precious time she could have been looking for Nix. Precious time that was wasted, though the blank screen in front of her taunted her with the inkling that it would have been fruitless anyway. Either Nix was not here or she had something much better than a stealth spell in her repertoire. She kicked out again being rewarded with only a painfully stubbed toe. Kinda fit the theme for the night.

It was after 10 PM and the soft bed on the 30th floor beckoned to her. Diety, even the corner of floor behind her looked good to her heavy eyes. For the thousandth time, Sylae glanced at the Who's Online screen, eyes drawn to the wooded clearing to the southwest. She had been relieved to find Iffy unmoved when she first got back. She had not been unavailable when he'd needed her. Sadness crept in soon after. It took a long time to dig a grave by hand... He was still there now. A full day since... She didn't want to even finish the thought.

She wondered if she should go and help him. He had to be exhausted by now. Maybe he had fallen asleep on the ground. Had he even eaten? She had almost talked herself into going to him when his marker finally moved away. He must be done. She could meet him in the lobby,

maybe. Offer him some coffee and a late bite to eat. Only he didn't move towards the Admin Tower. Instead his marker moved slowly east coming to rest by the pond. To wash up, perhaps? Maybe she could meet him there.

Mind made up, Sylae headed upstairs to gather a few things before going out.

She'd done it. She'd *finally* done it! Though the beast within her had never surrendered, she finally wrenched control of its power away. Even now its voice continued to diminish as she pushed it further and further from her waking thought.

The sleepless night on the forest floor followed by the restless day of struggle and hiding had left her needing a comb and a good hot bath. Neither of which would be readily available while she stayed here. But the light of the sun had faded behind the horizon hours back and few people ever stayed up this late. Maybe she could risk leaving the sanctuary of the forest for a little personal time.

Out of habit, she stayed to the shadows, though the light of the moon did not reach far into the trees anyway. On the outskirts of the refuge proper she skirted the tree line until the pond came into view. She cursed under her breath when she realized someone was already there splashing in the shallows. Who would be up at this time of night? And washing in the pond instead of a warmed tub at their house? Recognition slowly started to dawn on her as she stared. The figure's face lifted for a moment and shown clearly in the moonlight once he'd scrubbed it off.

A shiver of excitement and fear rippled through her. Was she ready for this? Was she really ready? The last step in her thousands year struggle stood just feet from her. The last obstacle to being completely free... Iffy was alone and tired and emotionally spent, when would she ever find a better time to strike him down? Straightening with purpose and resolve, Nix smoothed out a few wrinkles in her clothes and dropped her cloak spell, determined to meet him head on. She would not stab him in the back like a coward. She would face him fairly... well as fairly as it could be with her new stores of power, but she would still give him a fighting chance.

He felt her before he heard her and he heard her before he saw her. She did not try to hide from him but by the look on her face he could tell she meant to end this tonight. All the better... Iffy did not think he could bear the empty night ahead anyway.

He sat on a rock by the bank to wait for her, eyes fixed on the smooth surface that reflected the

moon. She finally stopped about five feet away and he granted her his gaze. "I knew you would come," he began, noting the twigs in her hair and the lines etched in her face. "You don't look so good."

"Let's say my dinner didn't quite agree with me tonight." She cracked a crooked smile and Iffy offered a chuckle. He could feel the new power roiling within her, having the same resonance as Dunstan once had.

Nalyd would be despondent at his lost creation but somehow the measure of it seemed miniscule at the moment. "You didn't bite off more than you can chew did you?" He was surprised at the lightness of his own voice, as if the last 24 hours had not happened and he was having a simple friendly conversation.

Nix seemed not to notice and returned a threatening response. "Don't worry I can keep it down *and use it* if I want."

He ignored her tone, choosing instead to keep their last moments together as civil as possible. "Still, you shouldn't have tried to absorb something not kin. Especially not something *Nalyd* created." He gave her a teasing smile though he was sure it didn't reach his eyes.

She finally reciprocated his tone with a dainty smile of her own. "A girl has to protect herself. Couldn't come into a fight with us being so evenly matched."

Iffy shook his head. So that's all she had wanted... all she cared about. Power enough to defeat him. If only she knew... she wouldn't have needed it anyway. His face fell with his mood and he absently ripped at a blade of grass as he spoke. "We're the last two, Nix, there's no one left."

Surprise registered in her voice though he didn't look at her. "You're sure? Sal and Eoli?"

"Killed by qUe and Reth." His voice was a whisper. He didn't want it to be true. "I read it in her soul. They stabbed them in the back." He screwed his eyes shut to block out the thought but it only helped him to see the scene replayed in his mind.

Disgust poured from her lips. "The cowards... at least I have the decency to face my foes." She must have seen the pain rippled across his face. And somewhere in that power hungry heart of hers some decency must have remained because her next statement was soft and sincere and only made his heart break anew. "I'm sorry about Saph... she didn't deserve to die that way and... I know what she meant to you."

He was silent for a while, willing himself not to weep anymore. He'd already taken a whole day

to weep and mourn and think of a lifetime of regrets. "Too much," he finally admitted. "I was greedy and selfish to create her. I just wanted what everyone else had..." Iffy looked up at Nix, finding her eyes with his. "...without realizing I'd already had it."

Nix furrowed her eyebrows at his admission, but instead of accepting it as sincerity she smirked at him. "If I didn't know any better, Iffy, I'd think you were trying to rekindle the old fire."

He looked back down, concentrating on the grass more fully. A half hearted chuckle passed his lips. "No, no. I think we are far past that." Iffy took a deep breath and stared out at the lake hoping he could make her understand. "...but I can still admit my mistakes." When Nix didn't respond he went on. "I lost a part of me today... a part of my soul, but I've also learned Saph wasn't the only part of my soul that I'm missing." He looked up at her again and his eyes found recognition in her own.

"So you've finally remembered?" she rasped, throat suddenly dry.

"Not quite, but the knowledge I've gained has left little doubt. We were all part of the same being at one time, someone who divided themselves much like Que did to create Reth or how I did to create Saph. We were all parts of the same person..." Taking a page from Nalyd's explanation Iffy offered his analogy. "I am the brain... you are the heart."

He had hoped that it would mean something more to her, but apparently she had come to her own conclusions about it quite a while ago. "So you know, then, that there can be only one in the end."

He tried to downplay her excitement and overturn her conviction. "Not necessarily. We have lived apart for thousands of years. We could stay like this." He stood up and faced her, though he made no move to get closer. He found her gaze and held it with as much sincerity as he could muster before continuing. "I would pledge to you, Nix, not to hunt you. You would not have to fear someone coming after you in the night."

There was a mixture of emotions behind her eyes. Some that were hopeful and some that stole all hope away. Her face finally ended on a scowl as she stared him down. "Who said I ever feared being hunted?" As if prickled anew at the very insinuation she stabbed a finger in his direction and spat out venomous words of accusation and hatred. "No, I have not been afraid since the day you abandoned me. That was the last day that I feared death, never since. Except for the fear that I would be unable to defeat you in my revenge."

So that was it. There was no hope of reconciliation. He had not expected there to be. It would not have changed his decision if he had known. Iffy was ready to die. He thumped back down on the rock hoping that she could hear his whisper. "I don't even remember... I'm sorry."

She stayed on her feet and moved into a defensive stance. "Defend yourself!" she demanded.

Iffy did not move other than to hang his head lower. "I will not fight you."

"Don't be ridiculous," she huffed as if offended. "I didn't absorb that abomination for the fun of it. I intend to use it to finally end this, now *defend yourself!*"

Slowly, ever so slowly Iffy reached into his robe and pulled something onto his lap. By Nix's sharp intake of breath, he knew that she could see the ruby tipped dagger well enough in the moonlight to recognize it. He laid it on his lap as non-threateningly as he could. "It's the dagger that killed Saph," he told her in a hollowness that echoed his current state. New tears filled his eyes at the memory. "I am tired, Nix. Tired of fighting, tired of worrying, tired of running away. I will not fight you but you're right about one thing." He looked up at her as he slowly stood. "This ends today, one way or another." Gently, reverently, he held the dagger out to her hilt first. "It's your choice, Nix, whether to use it or not."

There was confusion on her face, unbelief and a flicker of sorrow. She still didn't trust him enough to come any closer. Using her magic Nix pulled the dagger into her palms. "You really want it to end like this?"

Iffy returned to a lightness that was not deeper than his words. "Well I'd rather you chose to just leave and never come back, but if you have to kill me to be content..." he indicated the dagger with a nod of his head.

In the distance Iffy heard Sylae frantically calling his name and a new wave of emotion filled him. Guilt over leaving, fear for Sylae's safety... a longing for a friendship that would never reach its full potential. These, though, he kept to himself as he looked into Nix's face. "What you choose, do quickly. I'm afraid Sylae will not be as willing to let the choice be yours."

He watched the desperation creep into her face. Perhaps she would have chosen to just leave if given more time, but pushed into it, her instinct told her to fight and her hand tightened on the hilt. With a deft throw the dagger flew through the air at him. Instinctively his mind raced seemingly slowing down time to allow him to react but he stood his ground, unflinching, counting out the milliseconds as it inched closer. Waves of pain rocked his body when it finally struck his chest. He could hear someone screaming behind him and turned towards the sound. Iffy found Sylae's eyes in the dark as she ran towards them. Her expression of horror broke his heart but he'd made up his mind. This was the way it had to be no matter the consequences. With the last of his strength Iffy sent out a tendril of his power towards her brushing her cheek as a farewell and whispering in her ear, "I'm so sorry, forgive me..." Darkness clouded his vision as

he felt the pull on his soul. His body fell forward without him, an empty shell. Nix laughed in triumph as darkness won the day. Iffy was no more.

Everybody Dies

By Jewels - Jan 15 2014

The world had stopped and only a shining darkness swam now before her eyes. She ran on anyway, forward towards danger... towards death. She couldn't meet it fast enough.

She had watched him offer up the knife, seen the red glint of it in the light of the full moon, and realized with horror what he had chosen to do. He had given up. He had given in. He hadn't even tried to avoid her throw. If anything he'd stepped into it, aligning his heart with the lethal tip. Iffy had wanted this.

Sylae stumbled as she reached him, Anamzas fell to the ground along with her basket of sandwiches, rejected and strewn in the mud. Their sustenance no longer needed, she cursed the time she had wasted making them. If she had come to him sooner... if she hadn't left him alone in his despair for a whole day... if only she'd kept watch she might have been able to prevent this. Iffy might not be dead.

Blank eyes stared up at her when she rolled him over onto her lap. "Oh, Iffy..." her voice caught as the sobs started. With trembling hands, she pushed his eyelids closed. With bitter sorrow she removed the dagger from his chest and flung it into the pond. What was she supposed to do now?

Iffy had been her support – her rock in the last few days. How was she supposed to face tomorrow without him? The despair that washed over her was almost bittersweet. So this is what he'd felt like all day. At least she could share this one last thing with him. Sylae held him and cried because there was nothing else she *could* do.

The world had stopped and only a shining darkness swam now before her eyes. It was over. It was done. She'd never have to worry again and the multi-verse was now her playground.

Nix reveled in the sensation of her full power. More than twice what she was before, all discomfort of the beast's struggle faded away to nothingness. Only one thing marred this perfect moment, and it wailed ten paces to her right.

With the flick of a thought, the mouth on Sylae's face slammed shut abruptly cutting off the sound of her mourning cries. Nix smiled at the silence but it only lasted a moment before the insufferable woman started to grunt and squeal through her lips. "Oh would you just shut up already?" Nix made a sweeping motion with her hand that sent out a smack of energy enough to lift Sylae from her place and send her flying. After the initial thud of her landing, there was another blissful respite of silence. "That's better."

Nix got up and stretched both her limbs and her capabilities. Expanding her mind, she took in the whole of the Refuge and the forests beyond, sensing them all in intimate detail. She counted the birds, numbered the trees. If a leaf fell, she knew about it. She could go further if she wanted, beyond the perimeter, maybe hundreds of miles if she tried.

As an experiment Nix reached down with her power and surrounded the whole isle. The ground shook violently as she started lifting the land out of the ocean. It moved at her whim and dropped back into the sea with a shudder. She could hear the multitude of startled cries as the earthquake broke glassware and woke sleeping Ermarians. She could sense them all, the pests of the island, cowering at the whims of a god... cowering at *her* whims.

She laughed at her victory, reveled in her achievement, and basked in thoughts of her future. She could do whatever she pleased now and there was no one left to challenge her.

She barely even noticed the ice bolt that fizzled upon impact with the back of her neck. It was little more than a cool breeze on a warm night. The following Firebolt, though, did manage to singe the hem of her pants and invaded her enjoyment with the bite of smoke.

Nix turned with an annoyed look at the mortal who dared to stand against her. Blood dripped from Sylae's nose as she stared at Nix with murderous fury, glowing staff in hand. The image was quite comical considering how little threat she actually posed and Nix laughed again. Perhaps it would be diverting to engage for a few minutes.

Nix released the hold on Sylae's jaw so she could speak then offered her encouraging words. "It looks like you have something to say to me, little mouse."

The low growl that rose from Sylae's throat was inhuman and was quickly followed with a rapid succession of offensive spells. Nix threw up a shield that was more than sufficient to deflect them all and just stood back to watch with a smug smile. The glint in Sylae's eyes went from vindictive assurance to enduring determination to wavering hope to classic despair. Breaking Sylae's spirit was more than satisfying.

Spell after spell, Sylae was tiring fast and getting nowhere with the effort. Iffy's murderer smiled smugly on the opposite side of an impenetrable wall of energy and Sylae's hope was fast waning to nothing. She couldn't even take revenge... What was the use of it all? It was hopeless... nothing could harm her. In frustration she screamed out her vilest profanities which seemed to have more of an effect on Nix than anything else had.

A wall of force rushed up to meet her where she brandished Anamzas in defense. The impact splintered the staff to kindle and sent her through the air again. In a stunned daze she made out Nix's admonishment. "Why must you be so noisy?"

She'd landed only a foot from Iffy. In seeing him her resolve to die fighting fizzled out. Why waste the effort? Instead she crawled to his body and resumed the only action that gave any comfort; crying with him in her arms. "Just go away, Nix," she whispered in defeat. "Just leave us be."

"Why do you mourn for him?" The question was abrupt and condescending. Did the woman really not understand the pain of loss?

Sylae clung to him tighter, drawing strength from his presence despite it all. "Leave, Nix!" she shouted. "You got what you wanted, so go back to the pit you drug yourself out of!" It was what Iffy had wanted, too, she realized with a sob. He had been unwilling to kill Nix in the end, even before Saph was gone. Unwilling to be the murderer his kin spurned him towards. Her forehead dipped to rest on his, anger spent. "Let us grieve in peace," she whispered hoarsely.

Nix made no move to leave, though she did shift her weight from foot to foot pensively. "But, why do you even care about him?" she asked, agitation coloring her voice.

Sylae squinted her eyes in disdain. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"Which is why I'm asking," her ire rising to abashment. "He was not your mated. I cannot fathom why you would put such a value on him."

"It's called friendship!" Sylae sneered though felt a sudden modicum of pity for the woman who was so far removed from the reality of relationships that she had to ask. Her voice softened as her eyes found his pale face "He was my friend. Someone I could trust, someone I could laugh with." She allowed herself a small smile at the memories. A smile, a joke, a pillow fight... "He was better than a friend," she finished and kissed the top of his chilled head.

Sylae couldn't tell what kind of impact, if any, her words had had on Nix. The woman stood in silent thought that prickled at Sylae's sense of justice. She was a murderer. She shouldn't be here,

allowed to witness the remnant of an authentic relationship. The experience was too good for her. Sylae had failed to destroy Nix, but maybe she could do something else.

Reaching into a fold of her dress, Sylae retrieved her RMM-A and set it on the ground hidden behind Iffy. There Nix was, on the Who's Online screen, uncloaked. With a few strokes Sylae registered her and went to an administrative page. "For the final time, Nix, leave now and never come back." Holding her breath, Sylae ducked in close to Iffy as her final key strokes brought the Ban Hammer swinging down into the glade.

With a resounding thud and a startled cry, it struck Nix square in the chest. Satisfyingly, Nix's body flew through the air at a trajectory that would land her somewhere in the ocean beyond the Refuge's borders. Hope was crushed not a second later when her flight path ended amid peals of laughter. "Oh good show, good show. I was wondering if you had anything left."

Sylae scowled as Nix floated back down to stand exactly where she had been, not a bruise to be seen, or a hair out of place. "Now then," she continued as if instructing a child. "I have made a decision. I claim this island as my own. I'm not leaving..." It was a matter-of-fact when Nix pinned her with a steely glare, "you are."

She was past being intimidated. Nix had made it personal and Sylae wasn't about to give her the satisfaction of her surrender. "No," was her only reply. Any more would have been wasted words.

"Are you sure?" Nix asked, feigning mock surprise at her refusal. "Last chance to leave on your own." Sylae just set her jaw and stared Nix down. "No? Okay, suit yourself." Her eyes gained a dangerous gleam as a wave of force clamped down on Sylae's limbs so she could not move. "Then you'll just have to die along with every other sentient being on this rock." Nix's wicked smile fed off of Sylae's horror. "Don't look so sad, little mouse. Everybody dies. It's the cycle of life. In the grand scheme of things, this island is a grain of sand on an infinite beach. You won't be missed."

Sylae could see it in her face; she was going to do it. She was going to kill them all. The power surrounding her tightened its grip, constricting her lungs. A glow of energy grew around Nix, concealing her in bright yellow light. She was a sun expanding to consume the whole Refuge.

For a moment Sylae regretted being so hasty, for giving Nix a reason to want them all dead. Iffy wouldn't have wanted it to end this way... she had failed to honor his sacrifice, if that's what it was. Tears she could not cry stung at her eyes. There could be nothing worse than failing Iffy. Soon she would be dead; they all would. Sylae almost welcomed it. At least there would be an end to the pain and an end to these stupid emotions.

But Not Today

By Jewels - Jan 16 2014

The light had been so bright that its absence left Sylae blind to all else. The grip of power on her released just as abruptly, leaving her sucking in ragged breaths. That she was breathing at all was surprising. What was Nix doing? Toying with her? Teasing her? Torturing her? Sylae tightened her grip on Iffy's robes. Even in death he still gave her strength.

A ball of light appeared in Nix's direction casting a soft glow on the silhouette there. The light floated forward and shone on a smiling face. Sylae had never seen anything more cruel.

Three thousand, five hundred, eighty-six; the number of years since he'd made his choice. It had not turned out how he'd planned. He had gained much but what he'd lost was unthinkable. Had it been worth it? The ache in his soul screamed no, but it had brought him here. To this place, with these people... and to her. Perhaps... just perhaps that will have been worth it all.

He stood with a sheepish grin on his face as she blinked at the sudden darkness and gulped in deep breaths of air. She couldn't see him with only the light of the moon. Venturing to help her understand he created a glowing orb to hover next to him. He'd chosen to keep the face she knew – the face she trusted – in the hope that it would gain him acceptance.

Confusion and distrust met the recognition on her face as she looked from him to the body in her arms and back. "Oh sorry, let me..." With a wave of his hand the corpse dissipated into dust. Far from the relief he had hoped the action would give her, though, she instead grabbed at the dust in panic as if holding on had been the only thing keeping her grounded. Quickly he closed the gap between them and knelt to offer a comforting hand but she recoiled, her confusion still apparent. "Sylae," he whispered soothingly, hopefully, "It's okay. No one's going to hurt you."

She wanted to believe it, he could see it in her eyes, but it was too painful to hope. "Iffy?" she finally asked, her voice rasping with raw emotions.

He didn't want to lie to her but how could he explain it? He *was* Iffy. He had *always been* Iffy, but he had always been them all. "Yes," he spoke carefully, sitting back on the bank to give her some space. "Iffy's soul, *my* soul, is now in this body."

Gratefully her demeanor softened a bit, but she still wasn't ready to trust. "H-how?" she finally stammered out. "I saw the dagger... The spirit-killer..." her gaze flickered to the lake where she'd thrown it.

"You didn't imagine it," he confirmed. "It was a ruby tipped dagger, and I'm sorry to have scared you with it. You weren't meant to witness any of that."

"Then how?!" she demanded not willing to relax until it made sense.

He smiled again, a crooked abashment. "The enchantment on the dagger was broken before it was ever offered to Nix."

He followed her movements as the seconds ticked by. Her bottom jaw moved to the left pushing her lip up into a thoughtful but reserved pout. Her hands tightened and released the folds of her skirt while she rubbed the fabric between forefingers and thumbs. Her eyes flit about his face, searching for truth. He was so focused on trying to look sincere that her startling leap to hug him nearly knocked him over. He let out a shallow laugh with what breath he could manage to suck in under the pressure of her arms. "Whoa, careful. Squeeze me too hard and I might pop."

She pulled back and let go making him sorry he had said anything. Her cheeks were flushed and she stared at the ground. "Sorry, I... I'm just really glad that you're not dead. You know... these stupid emotions." Her hand waved palm up in the air as she shrugged before returning to her lap clasped tightly to the other. She looked at him then with concern, "You're all right, though, aren't you? I mean you kinda just died and moved to a new body. I know... I mean, I'd suppose that that kind of thing could be traumatic... have side effects?"

He nodded. He needed to tell her the rest. Taking a deep breath he looked her in the eye. "Nix is not dead," he started, sorry for the worried pain now crossing her face. "Her soul is in here with me, she's... a part of me. She always was even when we were apart. Iffy the analytical, I was the brain. Nix the passionate, she was the heart. qUe and her quirky humor, she's in here too. It's just that now we're together, like we were always supposed to be."

Sylae's brow furrowed. "But you're in control? Will we have to worry about Nix trying to wrench it back? What about when you're sleeping?"

He held up a hand to stop her from continuing and pinched the bridge of his nose. Would she accept this part? Could she reconcile it with all the pain she'd been through? All the pain *he'd* put her through? "Sylae, I'm not separate anymore. You won't have to worry about that. But I'm not going to pretend with you. I *am* Nix. I always was." His confidence wavered as her face fell but he pushed on, determined that she understand. "Just like I was always Iffy. The choices Nix

made? They were my choices. The murders Nix committed, they were my murders. I'm not going to hide from it. I did some terrible things while my soul was split apart and the consequences of that, Sylae... " his voice caught as he finally let himself think about it. He never would have cried while he was just Iffy but add Nix's passion and emotion bloomed in his chest enough to strangle his heart. "I lost almost half my soul to spirit killers," he finally managed. He gave homage to lost sections of his soul by name. "Eva, Emair, Sal, Eoli, Reth, Saph..." he faltered on the last name and had to pause as he struggled for breath. "The emptiness is a void where they all should be. I'll never get those parts of me back. If I'd known the madness that splitting my soul would cause it..."

When he didn't finish his thought, Sylae pressed him for it. "If you'd known, what? What would you have done?"

He took small slow breaths, blowing them out to calm his sorrow. "If the *only* thing I'd known was that the parts of my soul would be driven mad by the separation, I wouldn't have done it," he admitted but searched for her eyes before continuing. "But if I'd known *everything*; all that would have happened, the places I'd end up at, the people I'd meet..." He reached for her hand grateful that she didn't pull away. "...the friends I would make..." He gave her hand a squeeze. "I'd do it again. For the privilege of being welcomed to the Refuge and meeting you again... I'd give up half my soul for that."

Sylae went back to worrying her bottom lip as he went back to worrying in general. He let go of her hand and watched her eyes follow his back to his lap. "I don't expect you to trust me. Not after all I've done. But I chose this face for a reason, Sylae. I could have worn any of them on the outside or even given myself a whole new look, but I chose to look like Iffy because I want to keep living as Iffy – a member of the Refuge, and a friend to you – if you'll have me."

He couldn't tell by her face what she had decided, just that the decision was made. With a calm and determined look she ordered him towards the Admin Tower then put him on lockdown in Iffy's room until the morning. "Let me sleep on it," she had said, though he knew her mind was already made up. "I'll come and get you in the morning."

Better than being kicked out by the Ban Hammer again, he supposed. Nix would have never admitted it, but that had really hurt. All he could do now was hope... hope that Sylae could accept him... all of him.

White Waltz

By Jewels - Feb 4 2014

Sylae had trouble sleeping. She tossed and turned while her mind endlessly replayed the events of the night. One minute she was relieved Iffy was alive, ready to welcome his combined self with open arms. The next, she hated him – for everything he'd put her and the other Refugees through, and for everything he'd put the Iffy she'd come to care deeply about through. How could she ignore all Nix had done? Or qUe and Reth? Or Esur and Ruse? All had brought conflict and pain inside her sanctuary. Could she forgive that? The scheming, the murder, the betrayal – Iffy was the only one... the only part that had been reasonable. Could she trust that? Was it enough that Iffy, *her Iffy*, was in there somewhere?

When she finally did fall asleep, Sylae dreamt of white. *White marble columns adorned a gleaming white ballroom where dozens of dancers in white suits or gowns twirled gracefully to classical music. All stared at each other from behind elegant masks – some simple, some fancy, but all void of color.*

When a similarly garbed man walked up to her and held out his hand in invitation, Sylae noticed her own attire was fit to join the masquerade. Her sparkling white skirt fit snugly down to mid-thigh where the fabric changed to a sheer silk that flowed outward in abundant translucent folds. Her bodice had no covering for her arms or shoulders but hugged her chest angling up to an attached pearl choker. The delicate mask surrounding her eyes was made of the same lace as her elbow length, but fingerless, gloves.

All this, Sylae noted in a heartbeat, omnipresent in the room. In the next heartbeat, she took the stranger's hand. They danced tirelessly among the others weaving around and about in an intricate pattern Sylae's feet instinctively knew. They never said a word to each other, yet they held an intimate conversation through their glances and their smiles and the pressure of their fingertips – hand in hand and on waist or shoulder or back. Sometimes firm and demanding, other times light as a feather asking permission to continue the waltz.

They danced for hours, days, weeks... Sylae couldn't tell. Nor did she care, lost in the moment of ambrosia. She could remember nothing but the dance and the smile of the man that seemed now an extension she'd always had. The perception made it all the more startling when, after a turn, she wound up in the arms of a woman. In a strong and confident grip, Sylae was whisked away with a tight partnered spin. After enough turns that she'd lost count, the woman slowed to a minuet and smiled as they continued the dance together.

"You look radiant tonight," the voice was unmistakably Jewels. In a blink, Sylae recognized her masked face as well. How had she forgotten Jewels? Before she could respond, Jewels released one hand to spin her out, arms stretched taunt. Dizzily she twirled back in past the traditional stance, so that Jewels was behind her, catching her in a tight embrace. They swayed to the music as dancers parted and Sylae's previous partner came into view. The quiet encouragement that brushed her ear held an emotion Sylae could not place, "Don't let that one get away."

Once more Jewels spun her outward, fingers releasing mid-turn, before she disappeared from sight in the sea of flowing white. The man caught her effortlessly and spiraled away with her. For a moment Sylae thought she glanced Jewels with a different partner before settling into step as if the exchange had never happened. They danced for hours more, or days, or weeks.

Sunlight warmed her face as the memories and visions of the dream danced away from consciousness as gracefully as another masquerade couple in the ballroom. Though the clock insisted she'd slept only a few hours, Sylae woke feeling more refreshed than she had in months. Maybe it was the fact that there was no imminent threat to her life or the Refuge at the moment. Or perhaps, after months of worrying about her rehabilitation and relationship with Jewels, she finally felt at peace with it all. Only one thing was amiss in her world, and he slept a few floors below her.

At least she felt ready to face him. Sylae didn't know what she was going to say yet. The safety of her Refugees had to be her primary concern. After getting dressed she automatically reached for the place where her staff usually rested. Hand coming away empty, she felt a twinge of loss. That was going to be difficult to replace.

The walk down the stairs was too short and Sylae blew out a breath to steady herself before releasing the lockdown and knocking on the door. She entered after a moment of silence, "Hello?" He did not answer her.

Sylae did not hurry as she searched the suite. Dirty dishes were left on the table in the dining room, half-empty cups adorned the coffee table in the living room, and stacks of papers were piled haphazardly on the desk of the study. A number of stray feathers still littered the floor, a trail she eventually followed into the only room left to check, the bedroom. The feathers were more abundant here, strewn across the floor and bed which touted rumpled sheets and scattered pillows, but no Iffy. It didn't really surprise her to not find him. She knew better than to think she could keep him captive; not if he didn't want to be here. It was actually relieving that the choice had been made for her. Iffy... or whoever he was now, had decided to leave on his own.

And yet she ached. She'd probably never see him again. Iffy was gone as surely as if he had died. The lump in her throat surprised her, more from the fact that the physicality of crying was preceding her new normal emotional breakdown. Sylae smiled as the tears started to fall. She wasn't crying because of out of whack hormones, but because she would genuinely miss Iffy. She didn't need a breakdown to mourn the loss of his friendship.

She did not hurry to leave. She would pay her respects here. Besides, she had nothing else to do today, except maybe find herself another Admin. Maybe Azuma would be willing. *Deity help her* if she had to turn to Nalyd... but that could wait for another day. Instead Sylae walked to the window looking out at her Refuge and let the tears flow, a cleansing release.

Knock, knock, knock. She turned towards the sound of his knuckle on the door frame, eyes puffy and cheeks tear-stained. He wasn't sure what hurt worse, that she was crying for him or that he currently had no right to offer her comfort and she would not accept it if he tried. She swiped them away quickly, a mix of emotions flickering in her eyes. Embarrassment, surprise, and... was that hope? Or was he projecting?

He looked down to give her a moment to compose herself. "I, uh... I'm sorry," he stammered, not sure exactly what to apologize for. "I know you wanted me to stay here, but I had some business I'd hoped to finish before I was discovered."

Her voice was calm and neutral when she spoke drawing his gaze back to her face. "And what business might you have in my Refuge?"

"Well, restoring the lifeforce of Nylad's creation for one. Nix never fully broke his consciousness since he was so devoted to his master. Returning it and his energy was fairly simple. "

Her brows raised in consideration. "How did Nylad take it?"

"He slept through it, actually. Though I'm sure he woke to a happy surprise."

"Trying to make amends for your past sins?"

He chuckled, "Perhaps, though the list is very long." With a crooked smile he left the doorway and walked towards her revealing the object he'd been keeping from her sight. The *real* business he'd had outside these walls. He saw the recognition on her face light it up in awe and disbelief, but her pride kept her still. Her eyes focused on the stone of Anamzas, noting the flash of light it gave off as he tapped the newly made staff on the floor. When she looked back to him there was still distrust there. Did she think he meant to keep it for himself? By rights, he should keep it for all the trouble he'd gone through to restore it. But making amends for his past sins... it would be worth it if she would accept it as such.

He lifted it and held it horizontally in front of him running a hand along its length. "It wasn't easy, remaking the staff of an Arch Magus. I'm not sure I did it right."

"There is no right or wrong way to make a magical staff," she said. "There are only successful and unsuccessful attempts."

"Well then," he chuckled again, glad to see her smile, "I hope that my efforts have not been in vain."

"What did you do exactly?"

He was hoping she would ask. "You really want to know?" She nodded, he smiled. "First, I travelled to the heart of the sacred forest to negotiate with the First Mother for a branch of the Eldest Elden Tree." He paused to gage her reaction which seemed curious but not nearly as impressed as such a feat warranted. "I will not tell you what I had to trade for it."

"Then I will not ask."

"From the lowest point on the Earthen plane, I gathered the clay of purity to cure and protect the wood. Once the staff was shaped and polished, I took it to the Fire Plane to be baked in the lava springs of Farren Heights. Then I went to the water plane to let it soak in the ancient pools of Wizbo Tome and picked up a pint of their Everoil while I was at it. Prince Darius sends his regards. Next, I braved the Whistling Teeth of the Airy Mountains where the wind never slows enough for a man to catch a breath. Braced between two spires, the staff dried in ten minutes flat, which was good because I wouldn't have lasted much longer without oxygen. Lastly, I took it to the Ice Plane and etched it with the runes of Oldenall in the crystal caves of Soul Point. I inlaid them with crushed Deseritian crystals and sealed them with the Everoil."

He looked from the staff to Sylae and back. He knew that it held power. Topped with the stone of her previous staff, its song overpowered that of Nylad's scythe. As powerful as any relic he'd ever held and with the motions of a servant he knelt to one knee, lowered his head, and offered it up to her with open palms. Her intake of breath was audible though she still hesitated. He waited, daring to hope he could win her over. When the weight finally lifted from his hands, a much greater weight lifted, unseen, from his shoulders and he ventured a look up at her. She held it reverently, enthralled by the tiny details that she traced with one thumb. An experimental word spoken sent her yelping backwards a few steps while a powerful ice bolt ripped through a pillow across the room, scattering more feathers.

She laughed and he laughed with her. "I think it's safe to say you were successful. I've never felt anything so powerful before." He nodded knowing that was what he'd intended and stood still keeping a respectable distance. Her brow furrowed at a thought while she examined it closer. "That sounds like an awful lot of work for just one night. These runes... they're so detailed. Can you stop time too?"

"Not exactly," he chuckled, "but I know how to manipulate the Plane time difference a little and you may have slept longer than you think you did." He hadn't meant to say it. Not yet. She was only on the edge of considering to trust and he hadn't explained it yet.

In an instant her face went from open and hopeful to cold and forbidding. She produced a RMM-A which she checked for the date and set her fierce gaze back on him. "Ten days?! I was asleep for ten days?!"

She shook with fury at his perceived offense and he cringed as the light of his gift grew to a bright intensity. "GET OUT! Get out of my Refuge and take your bribery with you!!" She threw the staff at his feet where it clattered and lost its glow. Instinctively he knelt to inspect it. No damage. He'd made it well. But his attempt to gain acceptance seemed now damaged beyond repair. She continued to berate him from her vantage. "I will not stand for any of your trickery! I will NOT be manipulated!"

He hung his head in contrition. How could he respond to such anger without igniting it even more? Would it matter to her that the long sleep had been a favor from Jewels? Or if he apologized again? No, they were words, just words... words could be lies. So many of his past words had been lies there would be no reason to believe him now. How could he show her his sincerity if action were not enough?

He had waited too long. She was yelling at him again, telling him to leave. He didn't want to leave. The Refuge and the friends he'd made here as Iffy were the best things he'd found in his long lifetime. Could he really just give them up? Sylae wasn't giving him a choice and something inside him broke as he realized he was about to lose them all.

She was so angry. It was all she could do not to pick up his stupid staff and beat him over the head with it. That stupid beautiful staff that he'd tried to buy her trust with while betraying her at the same time. She'd never be able to trust him. Not half a day here and he'd put her into an induced coma for ten whole days! How could she even consider letting him stay? What would stop him from putting her into a permanent one? Nothing! Absolutely nothing! She would be forever at the mercy of his whims if she let him stay. While she might have been fine with that if he were Iffy, knowing that a goodly part of him was really Nix screamed warnings to her logic.

Feeding her anger was the fact that he'd made her hope again. Why couldn't he have stayed away? She had been making her peace with Iffy's loss and he'd shown up again talking the good talk pulling her in with his "efforts" to make amends while not even realizing that he had been violating her at the same time. She hated him with cold intensity. Iffy would never have manipulated her like that. This man, whoever he was, would never be *her* Iffy. And now he was forcing her hand to punish whatever remnant of her friend still existed along with the rest of him. The thought was excruciating and now all he could do was stare at his stupid staff. "Don't just sit there, you wretch. Get up and get out of my Refuge." She wanted to shake him, punch him, kick him. Couldn't he understand how painful his presence was? " LEAVE already! *Just leave!!*"

"Okay," he breathed. She almost didn't hear it. He must have thought she hadn't because he repeated himself louder as he rocked back on his heels, "Okay, I'll go." His voice was so broken she had to fight the urge to pity him. He stood keeping his eyes down, on his hands or the staff he'd left lie on the floor. He wouldn't meet her gaze but neither did he hide his face or the pain it reflected. Tears waited in the corners of his eyes, ready to fall the second he blinked. He dabbed at them, staring at the wetness on his hand, and seemed at a loss to know what to do about it.

Sylae shoved away the guilt that rose up in her and buried it with her anger. *Good*, she thought fiercely. 'Let him cry. *He deserved to feel the consequences of his actions. She would not feel sorry for this being who thought he could do whatever he pleased and get whatever he wanted. "Don't forget your staff," she snarled kicking it towards him.*

He shook his head. "I made it for you. Keep it."

Sylae breathed through clenched teeth. "I *don't want* it."

"You need a staff."

"I'll make my own!"

He finally looked at her confused by her refusal. "That would be silly. This one is already here, made of the finest resources and oldest magics. Why waste your time on something less powerful?"

Would she have to spell it out for him? "I CAN'T keep it! I can't!"

"I don't understand..."

"It would hurt too much!" she screamed, cutting him off. "It'll remind me of Iffy and how you took him away from me! Every day, constantly, without end... I *can't* survive like that. I just can't!"

"Sylae, I'm right here. I AM Iffy. You're the one making me leave."

"You are NOT Iffy. No, you stole him from me. Iffy was trustworthy. He never used his power against the Refuge or against me. You couldn't even go one night without abusing your power. How can I trust that? How can I sleep at night knowing that, at your whim, I might never wake up again?"

"But I wouldn't..."

"You already did!"

"I know... I shouldn't have. I'm sorry. What if I promise never to do it again?"

"I don't know if you mean it."

"What if you could?"

She shook her head at him, "I can't!"

"But, what if you *could*?" He asked adamantly. "What if you could know for sure that I mean what I say? Would you let me stay?"

"I don't see how..."

"Would you let me stay?!"

Sylae stopped trying to reason with him and just thought about the question. She pinched the bridge of her nose, "It's more than that. You crossed what, six different planes to make that staff? It's... you're unpredictable."

"You mean spontaneous?"

"I mean *dangerous*! To myself and every other Refugee here. We are all at the mercy of your whims if I let you stay. I have a responsibility to the people here, to keep them safe. It's not just me and what I want. I have to think of everybody."

"I would never harm them, Sylae. I would never harm *you*. In fact I would do everything in my power to protect everyone on this island. Just as Iffy always did. You know I can do it."

"It's a nice sentiment... it really is, but it goes back to I don't know if you mean it. Maybe you mean it today, but what if you change your mind tomorrow?"

"I won't change my mind. What if I could prove it to you? Please let me prove it to you?"

Sylae was exhausted. She didn't want to fight him anymore. She didn't want to look at this man with Iffy's face and feel so torn because she knew it wasn't really Iffy. Sylae sat down on the edge of the bed. What he proposed seemed impossible. "How?"

He came in closer and knelt to be eye to eye with her. "Just let me show you. I won't do it without your permission."

"Do what?"

"Let you see inside my mind. May I share my thoughts with you?"

Sylae sat up a little straighter on the bed. See inside his mind? Read his thoughts? Could he really do that for her? Iffy and Saph had shared a mind link, but could this being really create one at will? And would it be enough? Only one way to find out. She looked him in the eye and saw hope, genuine hope. She could only imagine that he saw the same hope in her eyes as she nodded her head.

He sat down next to her and extended his hands palms up, "I need your hands to make the connection." Sylae hesitated, second guessing her decision for a moment. She looked into his familiar face and felt a twinge of longing. She missed Iffy; she would do this for him. Focusing on his eyes she put her hands in his.

It started as a trickle, a flow of rapid words into her mind. *Please, please, please don't send me away. Please, Sylae, please believe in me.* Following the words came a stream of emotions she recognized as anguish and desperation with a sliver of hope. Louder than the other words, echoed a direct thought. *"Get Ready."*

"Ready for what?" she thought back, but instead of an answer she was assaulted with an overload of information. The images were blinding though she wasn't seeing them with her eyes, the sounds were deafening though she wasn't hearing them with her ears, and the tumult of emotions were so intense she felt physically spun under murky waves with jarring stops when one would slam into her.

Startled she pulled away but his hands clamped down on hers. *Don't let go!* The thought reverberated in her mind above the cacophony of other senses. Her instinct was to fight it, to escape the noise, but she remembered Iffy pulling her up from the deepest pit. She was drowning in the flood of emotion, unable to breathe, but she clung on to Iffy's memory riding it out.

Just when she thought she could not stand another moment the ataxia stopped and he let her go.

She blinked, disoriented by the contrasting silence. "Was that it?" she wondered, a little disappointed.

That was it. he answered. ... Only his mouth hadn't moved. She hadn't heard him with her ears but with her mind. She could feel his laughter at her surprise. His eyes sparkled while his smile emphasized the wrinkles at their corners.

She looked at him wide eyed. *Can you hear me now?* She thought experimentally and he nodded.

Clear as day. She could feel his elation at her wonder and his contrition for her subsequent embarrassment. She could also sense a dozen different thoughts going on in the back of his mind. Hope he could convince her of his sincerity, worry that he would fail, honor in sharing this moment with her, shame in his past. The main underlying theme was his wish to stay at the Refuge and continue his life where Iffy had left off. A budding friendship with her and the other Refugees he'd come to consider friends. *What do you want to know?* he asked. *Anything . I am an open book. I will hide nothing from you.*

Sylae was a little nervous. She didn't know what to ask or what she needed to know to be sure she could trust him. So she started with something simple. *Who are you?*

The reply she got was anything but simple, though. Images and thoughts and feelings flashed through her mind in quick succession. He adjusted the flow to be just less than overwhelming. For millennia he had existed as a being with no body, only consciousness and action through harnessing energy with what she understood as spells. He was worshiped as a god by many but he was so lonely. A lonely god living above and outside of the other worlds. He found it unbearable. And Sylae almost cried out at the intensity of it flowing through her.

He gave her respite, lingering on it no more and moved on to his decision to split up his soul into eight separate parts and give them corporeal form. Sylae recognized qUe, Iffy, and Nix though she seemed to know all the others just as well through the mind link. His thoughts lingered on Iffy's face as the other seven parts either dissipated into vapor or were absorbed back into him. *I was always all of them though the effects of dividing my soul were different on each part.*

They didn't know they had been you. she stated as she realized it.

Only Nix remembered and only after the first death. Sylae nodded satisfied that she understood. He was more than Ify, though Iffy was a part of him. She still didn't know if she could trust him though. Knowing how powerful he actually was made her nervous. *I'd never hurt you,* he broke in, thought intense with truth and longing. Iffy was the only part of his soul that had branched out in all those years and interacted with people that weren't kin. So set in their lonely ways, they

hadn't even tried. *I will protect you and the Refuge from the multiverse.* It was hard to argue with him because it was obvious he believed he would.

But Sylae remembered a side of him that was malicious and unforgiving. A part of him that had threatened to kill her and everyone else on Refuge Isle, and a part that would have had no remorse after doing so. Her thoughts pained him and her reminder dampened his enthusiasm but she had to be sure. *Why were you so desperate to kill your kin as Nix?*

His mood darkened as memories of the murders played in the background. *Splitting my soul had... unforeseen and unintended consequences. All of my kin felt... well... I think the best way to explain it is to let you feel it, too. It won't be pleasant. Are you okay with that?*

If it helps me understand, she agreed. Even though she was expecting it a moan escaped her lips at the sudden depravation Sylae felt. There was a tightening in her chest that left her breathless. She could only get in half a breath and it didn't satisfy her need for oxygen. Her stomach cramped and she was so hungry she was sure she would never be able to eat enough for the pain to abate. And something else... a craving she couldn't explain for a substance she couldn't define.

He was sympathetic to her distress. *This was the initial sensation.*

How could they endure it?

They didn't know what it was like to be whole. They thought this was normal until Fay died. When they absorbed her soul they all felt the difference, but they only craved more deeply. Even then only Nix remembered the beginning. So how do you feel?

Terrible, she admitted.

He nodded, 'Now imagine that you know you can alleviate the hunger and never experience it again if - and only if - you kill me... Would you do it?

Sylae was immediately offended by the idea. *No! Of course not!* But even as she said it, she wondered. She didn't want to stay like this for another minute... if faced with days or months or years...

My kin endured for thousands of years. Sylae shuddered at the thought. *They knew no other way but Nix remembered what it felt like to be whole, though she thought it was about the power.*

Blessedly he released her from the cravings and Sylae sucked in big breaths to enjoy the ability again. She thought she understood Nix's actions better, but was still not willing to excuse them.

I don't expect you to, but please believe me, it is not going to happen again.

Sylae considered him. He believed his statement. It was no lie but there *was something wrong...* He was trying to hide it from her and she felt his fear rise at her awareness of it. Out with it! *she demanded.* I will not play games with you. Either you are completely honest with me or you're not.

He looked away and fiddled with his hands. *I WILL tell you. I didn't mean to keep anything from you, but I swear, I didn't know. I wouldn't have asked if I had. I will endure without, I swear!*

Enough riddles, what didn't you know?

Remember I told you I'm missing half my soul?

Because of the spirit killers, yeah.

I did not realize the ache I still had... not until I linked your soul to mine for this conversation. The relief you just felt... I felt something similar but more intense the moment we connected.

Sylae stood and took a guarded step backwards. Warning bells went off in her head. *Release me. Release me now!*

The same thread of thought that she had first heard from him started whispering again. *Please, please, please, don't send me away. Please, Sylae, please believe in me.* Physically he closed his eyes and put his face in his hands. *I will, I promise I will...*

Now!

...but only if you're done. Only if you are fully satisfied that you know everything you need to make your decision. I will endure with only half a soul but... I will not be able to make this temporary connection again. Please be sure, be absolutely sure that you have asked all you need to.

Sylae calmed a little at his reassurance. She realized he was protecting her from himself. He could not be tempted with making it permanent if he never did it again. Instead she asked herself if there really was anything else she needed to know. From somewhere in her subconscious the voice of her father echoed in her mind from the first time she'd brought a young man home. The premise of his question to the boy seemed to fit. *What are your intentions for the future?*

He hesitated. He hadn't thought much past gaining Sylae's acceptance. What did he want? To be a Refugee, to be part of the community, ... *I want to be Iffy again.*

Sylae broke in before he could continue. *You are not Iffy.*

But I have...

And you should not pretend to be. she cut him off. If there was anything that she had learned from rehabilitation, it was that you could not pretend to be something you were not. She felt his curiosity at her train of thought and froze. She hadn't realized... 'no secrets' went both ways... he would know... he couldn't know...

"No!" she yelled out loud. "Release me!"

He felt her panic rise and hoped it was not too late. He concentrated on the link and braced himself to sever it but try as he might, the link held. "I can't," he whispered trying to remain calm.

"Now!" she demanded growing more agitated.

"I can't," he repeated more strongly, "I need you to be relaxed for it to release." He groped for an analogy that would help her understand. "It's... it's like a Chinese finger trap. The harder you pull, the tighter the bond holds." Sylae grasped her head in her hands in a vain attempt to keep her thoughts her own. "Try to imagine them behind a closed door," he offered. "Just long enough to calm yourself. When you're not fighting the connection it will come away smoothly."

She cursed her emotions mentally which only really gave them more ground. The door appeared but it swayed and bulged in the effort. She was not practiced enough in telepathy to control it and cried out as it buckled. Physically she sunk to the floor as mentally the flood of her secret came pouring out, garbled and chaotic, but there for him to see it all.

Flashes of images, snippets of conversations, and waves of emotions engulfed him. There were so many so fast that he could not make sense of them at first but then short bursts started coming into focus. It was a slide show of memory but they were out of place because they were w-dueck's memories. How could Sylae have w-dueck's memories? They started with moments of him with Iffy but soon moved to him with Jewels. He was across from her saying, 'I do', as happy as a man can be when they think life could not be better. Sylae whimpered audibly,

though, as the thought changed to w-dueck across from Jewels burning, one moment with passion and the next in an excruciating eruption of fire fever.

The moment seemed to pause as he realized what he had just witnessed; w-dueck's death from w-dueck's perspective. If Sylae had her brother's memories, it was little wonder she had been so hard on Jewels at the funeral. It was horrific enough to have someone you love die, but to experience it...

The moment was over before he could reflect more and he was back in the chaos of Sylae's thoughts. It didn't make sense but he was sure he was still seeing w-dueck's memories from after his death looking at Jewels' face, smiling but pained. Her voice had a forced cheeriness to it. *"They had to give you a new body."* New body? Wait... w-dueck wasn't dead? *"You should look..."* His vision followed the point of her finger to a full length mirror a few steps away.

"Don't look..." Sylae pleaded. He didn't know if she had been talking to him or to herself. Either way, both were powerless to stop the scene from moving forward. W-dueck stood up and crossed the floor only to meet Sylae staring back at him in the mirror. It finally clicked. Sylae *was* w-dueck.

She rocked in a fetal position with her back to him. Her secret out, her memories spent, she felt raw and vulnerable in his presence. He wouldn't put her through any more. She was no longer fighting the link so all it took was a nudge to release her. He had to bite back the moan for the emptiness it left in its wake. He was only half a man and every shallow breath reminded him that he needed more. Shoving his own pain aside, though, he would endure... somehow he would find a way to endure in depravity. Instead he focused on Sylae; her pain and her needs. He grabbed a blanket from the bed and laid it across her shoulders then backed away. "I'm so sorry. I never meant..." he trailed off not knowing how to finish it.

He'd never meant to hurt her, but to say so would admit that he'd already broken his promise and prove that she had been right all along. Despite his best intentions he was a danger to her. He had failed... it would be safer for her if he was not here. The temptation to end his pain at her expense would only grow. With a shaky breath he stood to his feet. "I... I'll go now." As an afterthought he added, "I won't tell anyone." She didn't answer him and he had nothing else to say so he turned to walk away.

"I'm such a hypocrite," her voice echoed in the bedroom right before he passed the doorway. He turned back to see that she had swiveled to face him, tears on her cheeks. She wiped them away angrily. "Stupid emotions."

The phrase now held more meaning than it had before. It was something she'd had to adjust to. "You have to protect this place, even from me. That doesn't make you a hypocrite, Sylae."

"But I am," she insisted, laughing bitterly. "I wanted the same thing you did. To pick up right where I had left off."

"Nothing wrong with that," he teased.

She rolled her eyes at him. "I expected it even, and the frustration when it didn't work almost tore me apart. I had to accept my new self and my new future." He nodded as her eyes found his and she reiterated. "You are not Iffy. You should not pretend to be..."

He thought he understood her better now and nodded again, sad that she was right. He could not pretend to be Iffy. Sylae stood picked up the staff as if her own and walked toward him. "...but that doesn't mean that *you* cannot be part of the Refuge family." His mind raced as she extended her right hand towards him. "Hi, I'm Sylae. What's your name?"

She was accepting him. She was going to let him stay! He felt an elation that almost matched the moment they had connected. He grasped her hand in his and shook it with fervor. "Zene," he said with an unstoppable smile. "My name is Zene."

A Day to Remember

By Jewels - Feb 05 2014

Today was a day to remember.

It had been an uneventful week spent enjoying the company of his Livvy in a practically empty Lounge. Azuma had healed fully from their attack but Livvy still walked with a limp. He tried to keep her off her feet as much as possible. The last ten days he'd been on edge wondering what had happened with Nix but there had been no RMM alerts to respond to. He hadn't seen another core Refugee in all that time and he was starting to wonder if he should go looking for them when someone he recognized walked in. "Nio!" he waved. "Or is it Nioca? It's been ages! What can I get you?"

"A bottle of your best spirits, Azuma, and two glasses please," he said with a cheery return wave.

"Meeting someone are we?" Azuma asked, being answered with a nod. "A gentleman or lady friend?" He raised his eyebrow at the question but Azuma explained. "What is 'best' for celebrating with a comrade, is not the same as what is 'best' for courting a young maiden."

That elicited a chuckle from his casually robed patron. "I would have dressed better if it were a date. I'm celebrating with Nio today."

Azuma smiled and reached behind him for a bottle of home brewed Cherry-Eye Whiskey. It was Livvy's best in his opinion, though she liked the Plum Syrah better. "What's the occasion?"

"Been working on a big project for a while. He helps by getting me stuff I need, but I won't let him know what it is. Been a real bear about it so I thought I owed him a day out. Plus I finished it last night. I'm pretty happy about that."

Azuma shook his head as he passed the bottle. "You'll need more than just a drink to say thanks. I'll have Livvy whip up some supper."

"You read my mind."

Nioca sat and busied himself with opening the bottle while Azuma walked into the back room where his love sat knitting. The knots of yarn strewn across her elevated feet almost resembled a scarf and she scowled at it as he approached. "You'd think that as a computer program, I'd be better at simple repetitive tasks."

"But it's lovely, Livvy," he cooed.

She rolled her eyes at him. "And you're a lousy liar."

He smiled and kissed her on the forehead. "Got some customers. Nio and Nioca are looking for celebration eats."

"Oooh... cake?"

"I was thinking more like steak and potatoes."

"And then cake?"

"Sure," he laughed, "then they can have cake."

When he rounded the corner again, he was surprised to have not one but three more customers. Nio waved then seated himself across from Nioca while Azuma greeted the other two. "Nalyd! Long time no see. What brings you in here?"

The little shaper plopped himself down on a barstool with a big grin. "Nalyd and Dunstan are celebrating!" The cobalt figure next to him also smiled and took a seat. Azuma didn't think Jewels' son had ever looked so contented.

"Celebrating what?" he asked, glad to be a part of the festivities.

"Oh, lots of things," Nalyd began. "Dunstan's recovery for one. Nalyd's creation has had no further ill effects from the kidnapping."

"I'm glad to hear it," Azuma said with sincerity. "Been so long since anyone's been in here, I was beginning to worry that no one had survived."

Nalyd laughed, an oddity from the little man who usually wore a scowl. "Nalyd is also enjoying his new lab equipment. Azuma should come and see it sometime. The experiments Nalyd has conducted on dust motes alone could leave him ranting for days. Did Azuma know that dust has its own life force? Dust is mostly dead skin cells sloughed off our bodies and they carry residual energy for days, even weeks afterwards."

Azuma wasn't about to tell Nalyd he had no interest what-so-ever in dust motes but to keep himself from drowning in the man's enthusiasm he changed the subject. "And what would you like to celebrate your discoveries and good fortune with? Food, drink, chocolate shakes?"

Dunstan spoke up for the first time. "All of the above." As an afterthought he added, "Please."

Nalyd nodded at his creation. "Good creations have good manners. Yes, Nalyd would enjoy them all. Whatever Azuma has, please."

Livvy had come out to the front, limping on her cane. She smiled at the guests before turning to the stove. "I'll have something for you real soon, fellas. Why don't you get them some brandy while they wait?"

Azuma nodded and retrieved the requested spirit. Nalyd accepted it and started drinking straight out of the bottle before Azuma could get him a glass. After a few swigs he passed it to Dunstan who took an experimental sip before chugging half the bottle. "Save some for Nalyd!" the little shaper tried to pull the bottle away in a comical display of brawn vs. brain. Brawn seemed to be winning.

The next two patrons to walk through the door made Azuma feel a bit nostalgic. So many together at one time? It was a Refuge miracle. He tipped an invisible hat towards the Arch

Magus in greeting. "Sylae! So glad you could join us. It's almost starting to feel like old times today." She curtsied and smiled walking in to stand at the counter. "You look happy," he quipped. "Are you celebrating also?"

"Indeed," she nodded. "I have good news for everyone." All eyes on her, she turned to acknowledge the group. "The threat of Nix has been neutralized." A cheer went up from the few as those with glasses raised them in salute.

"I thought it was too quiet for her to be here causing trouble," Azuma offered, but he had a nagging question as he looked at the man who had followed her in. Azuma did not recognize him though the man looked at him with a warm, friendly smile. "But where are Saph and Iffy... and who is this?"

Nalyd hopped off his barstool to examine the man up close. He squinted at him with a discerning smile on his face. "Iffy and Saph are right here," he stated with certainty. "And so is Nix. The kin have become one."

"What?" Livvy asked in confusion, giving voice to what Azuma was thinking also.

Sylae spoke up. "Nalyd's right. Iffy, Saph, Nix and all his other kin were all part of the same person; all part of the same soul. Everyone, I'd like you to meet Zene. He's asked to stay and be part of the Refuge."

He gave a shy wave, looking worriedly from face to face. Azuma wasn't sure what to make of it all. He was missing a bit of information for it to make sense, but if Iffy was inside there somewhere, and Sylae was willing to let him stay, Azuma wasn't going to mention any reason not to. He stuck out his hand and offered Zene a firm handshake with his welcome. "Well, Zene, if you're anything like Iffy, which I suspect you probably are, I'd be more than happy to welcome you as one of our own."

A chorus of echoing replies came from the others as they stood and shook his hand also. Livvy even walked around to give him a hug, bringing tears of relief to Zene's eyes. "Thank you, all of you. I know Nix gave you all a hard time but her passion is now tempered by Iffy's perspective. My murderous days are behind me, I promise." The room rang with laughter as forgiveness won the day.

Azuma reached for four wine glasses and a bottle of Marsala. He poured them each half full offering one each to Sylae and Zene and taking the other two for him and Livvy. "Cheers!" he raised his glass happy to be where he was in this moment. He had much to celebrate himself. Someone to love, somewhere to call home, and a group of friends he'd even go as far as to call family. "To the Refuge!" he offered.

"To success," Nalyd chimed in finally grabbing the brandy away from Dunstan to lift it above his head.

"To possibilities," Nio and Nioca sang out in tandem.

"To second chances," Zene added looking at Sylae and smiling.

"To new beginnings," Sylae said taking Zene's hand and giving it a squeeze.

"To happy endings," Livvy squeezed his arm as she lifted her glass high.

They all shared a drink, and a second, some good food, chocolate milkshakes, and red velvet cake, along with a few hours of laughing and crying and reminiscing. It was a happy ending for everyone... almost. There were still a few people missing from their happy little family and each of them felt the ache of it. Some more than others, but all felt the void. They were still incomplete.

Passing the Flame

By Jewels - Feb 10 2014

"How is she?"

"The same, though she'd never let you see it."

Vergil shared a worried glance at Jewels with King Darius. Her fire glowed brightly from across the room where she put the finishing touches on a special celebration dinner for her son. Vergil had suggested a small get-together with immediate family and 'Uncle' Xelgion hoping that she would not feel the need to expend extra energy today. But it was Aden's birthday and Jewels was stubborn. She was not about to let them see how weak she really was. He did not know how she kept it up, but day after day she appeared before her people in full healthy flame. A mirage to keep their confidence in her. Vergil knew the truth, though. When Jewels slept her fire was so dim he feared a puff of breath would put her out. Everyone else here knew she was sick, too, though not *how* sick. Even Vergil did not have the heart to tell them.

Darius busied himself with setting the table while Vergil walked over to her. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

She looked up with a smile. "Um... you could set out the ice water and pour everyone a glass. *One* glass, Vergil," she squinted at him knowingly. "*Everyone* gets just *one* glass."

"Okay, okay," he put up his hands in surrender, "I know you have a problem. I'll only pour *you* one glass." His compliance was rewarded with a punch in the arm. At least her spirit had never dimmed. She was as vexing as ever. Still he worried. "You look good today," he commented. "Very bright." He dropped his voice so only she could hear its gentle concern, "Don't feel like you need to waste more of your energy on pretenses."

She eyed him like she usually did when he mentioned her illness, mainly irritated. Her voice held a forced cheeriness, "I'm perfectly fine, Vergil." He knew his sister well enough to detect the fear behind the bravado and when she met his eyes she could not hold it long before she turned away.

"You're not and we all know it. Why pretend with us and drain your energy faster?"

She gave him a half smile as she pushed past him to put the food on the table. "Who ever said I was using my own energy?"

He wanted to argue the point more, convince her it would be best, but the man of the hour strode into the room and took her full attention away. Aden was turning 22 today. It had been ten years to the day since they had stepped onto the Fire Plane with him and Vergil could hardly believe the young man he had grown up to be.

The spitting image of his father in corporeal form, Darius beamed at him in pride and Vergil found it difficult not to do the same. Aden had proved to be an adept fighter but an even better negotiator. There wasn't a single flame he had not won the heart or respect of when allowed to speak to them. He had been the one to pacify the pure bloods and convince them that fighting against each other was hurting their cause more than it was helping them. Many a flame just sat in awe of his verbal prowess, but other pure bloods were won over by his bright white flame. He burned hotter than any of them, raising the temperature around him by a minimum ten degrees and even the general himself respected that.

Aden avoided his elemental form when among family, though, preferring his corporeal body especially when his father visited. It made Darius more comfortable to be here, he was sure. Another subtle tactic that made him seem much too wise for his age.

"My birthday boy!" Jewels rushed to hug him and they shared a moment of genuine affection. When Aden pulled away he took his mother's face in his hands and scrutinized it with knowing concern but he said nothing and just kissed her on the forehead instead.

Xelgion sauntered into the room behind him cradling three more bottles of ice water. "For crying out loud, quit cuddling. He's not a boy anymore, Jewels, he's a *man*. Time to treat him like a man!" He raised his bottles as if the movement were declaration enough to end any argument.

"That's *Lady* Jewels to you, Lieutenant," she snapped with a playful twinkle in her eye.

"Don't you mean Lieutenant Colonel, *My Lady*?" he quipped.

"Not if you keep up this insubordination, I don't," she joked and laughed when his face fell in mock concern. "Besides, you do realize that only you and Vergil are going to get drunk off that stuff, don't you?"

Xelgion cleared his throat, "Yes, well, is it my fault that you other three are immune to its glorious effects?"

"Jewels has ordered only one glass each," Vergil broke in confiscating the bottles and hiding them away. "Yours is already poured at your place."

"One glass?" he blustered looking from face to face for support he did not find, "One... ? But that's... You can't expect... Fire and Ice! Now *I* feel like a kid."

Everyone laughed including Jewels while she chided him for swearing. "Watch your language, this is a happy celebration. I suggest we all sit down and eat before dinner gets cold."

"We're in the Fire Plane, Mom," Aden quipped. "The food never gets cold." He said it so seriously that Vergil snorted. They all had another round of laughing before settling in to passing the plates and enjoying the meal.

Aden looked from face to face around the table through bright eyes. Those eyes were technically only ten years old although his body was grown to a man. The knowledge behind his eyes, though, surpassed all the combined years of those he looked at. He could see the world for what it was; infinite energy infinitely changing. Pliable to the mind that knew how to bend it and eager to be shaped. Energy was life in its own right, able to form conscious thought when left unmoved for too long. Stagnant energy was the birthplace of many a god. Bored with the wait, it begins to bend itself.

It took very little bending to convince the energy of the Fire Plane to grant him access to the

hearts and minds of its people. He allowed no secret to be kept from him while offering others only what they needed which made his job of calming unruly Flames much easier than he made it look.

Each of the four faces across from him thought they kept something from him. His father had not yet told him that it was his destiny to rule all the peoples of fire, air, and water. He thought him too young to be ready to accept such responsibility. The expectation that he would court and wed an elemental of Earth was also heavy in the King's mind. Many were the schemes that he planned to assure Aden had the 'opportunity' to do just that. Aden saw no reason not to follow through on his father's wishes. One heir to rule them all? He did not frown upon such ambition.

Vergil, his mother's half brother, held more secrets and regrets behind his weary eyes than any one man should be allowed to carry. He blamed himself for the war and for every flame that had died in it. Truly, he had been a critical catalyst in these devastating events. Aden, though, had seen into the hearts of innumerable pure bloods and knew that they had just been waiting for an excuse to claim power. The war would have started with or without his uncle's devious acts. It was Vergil's belief in being at fault that drove him, though. His need to pay restitution for past sins kept him loyal to both Jewels and Aden. One day Aden would tell him it was not his fault... perhaps the day that Vergil is honest enough to admit he still wants to be Fire Lord.

'Uncle' Xelgion, like Vergil, was full of secrets. None more potent than the fact that he had followed the order from Shrikas to sabotage the portal the day Vergil took the Camirine to the Refuge. He had not questioned his leaders commands, but he had regretted following them every day thereafter. Expressing his joy that Jewels had found him and healed him in time had not been difficult. It was his fear that Vergil would kill him if he ever found out. Aden saw no need to inform him.

Lastly, his mother, ever adoring, would truthfully answer any question he ever asked of her. She knew, better than the others, what he could handle. But there were many things that she did not volunteer from the pain that they caused her and he did not venture to deepen any wound by asking about it. They both knew it was the Camirine that sustained her and her appearance of health. She believed she would have died long ago without it. He knew she was right. Today she held a new secret; a new pain that worried her over his future. He had seen it when he looked into her eyes. His sorrow over it gripped him but he hadn't dampened her smile by telling her he knew. She would tell them all soon enough. Yes... too soon. Now.

Her chair scraped against the floor as she rose with a clink of her glass. "I would like to propose a toast to my son Aden and the wonderful young man he has become. May you bring peace and prosperity wherever you go."

"Here, here!" the others raised their glasses and gave a cheer.

She walked around the table to him and he stood taking her offered hand. This was it. He couldn't remember ever being more frightened. Not even when slotted for execution by the enemy. "I have a gift for you, Aden," she said with a genuine smile. Her confidence was a stark contrast to his trepidation, but her strength – that of her spirit – kept him from trembling.

"You don't need to give me anything, Mom," he tried. If he could delay the gift, he could delay his sorrow.

But she would not be dissuaded. It was time. "You, my son, have met and exceeded every hope I ever had in you." Another cheer went up from those around the table. "No longer a boy, but a man, I give you... your destiny." With steady fingers and a glow in her eye that did not belong to her she plucked the Camirine from her neck and placed it in his hand keeping her fingers lightly resting on it. "Be the leader they need."

The others had gone rigid around the table. Darius was excited, Xelgion was worried and Vergil was terrified for his sister. The stone felt heavy in his hand, more than the physical weight, it carried the mantle of leading the Fire Plane and its people... without his mother. He looked into her eyes and couldn't keep back the tears. In her heart she knew she would not now survive the night. "I don't want to do this without you," he managed.

She smiled and leaned towards him. Her final farewell. "I will always be with you, as long as you carry me in your heart." She closed his hand over the stone and took a step back.

Almost immediately her fire dimmed to barely more than embers. A gasp passed her lips as she stumbled with the sudden weakness. Vergil was beside her in an instant steadying her as he lowered her to the floor. "Fire and Ice, she's fading to ashes! Quick, give it back to her!"

Aden knew it wouldn't work. Jewels knew it wouldn't work. But Vergil was so desperate that Aden did not hesitate to hold the stone to the nape of her neck where it had rested since the day he was born. There was no change. It would not stay. Jewels' weak voice came out in a rasp. "No, Vergil, the Camirine has chosen its bearer." She pushed Aden's hand back towards himself. She stared at him adamant with her words. "The stone has chosen you." He nodded. She looked back to Vergil. "Keep him safe," she whispered. Her hand brushed her brother's cheek before she went limp in his arms.

Vergil held her tight, trying to keep her warm. "Don't you dare, Jewels, don't you dare give up on me. All those battles with impossible odds that we came out of unscathed... don't you give up on me now!"

Xelgion had moved around to stand behind Vergil. "I don't think she has the strength to keep fighting."

Aden rocked back on his feet, distancing himself from it all. He opened his hand to look at the stone one more time. It was his destiny but he still had to claim it. It represented so much to him, but nothing more than the constant that was his mother. There was a tickle in his senses as he realized it was reaching out to him. With a glance at his mother, Aden accepted her gift and placed it next his skin above his heart. The stone sunk into his body, becoming a part of him. He would carry her in his heart forever.

Fear fell away. Confidence was bolstered by the guidance of the ages. Like a key the stone opened his eyes to see how to use what he already knew. Aden stood and used the energy that swirled in everything around him to rip a wormhole into being. He looked at his startled uncle and offered his advice. "Take her to the Refuge. Take her to Nana."

Reunion

By Jewels - Feb 26 2014

So tired... So weak... soo... thirsty...

Nana had been holding on to life by a thread for too long... the days blended into each other stretching on and on... or were they passing by too quickly... she could not tell. Had she lost awareness for only minutes or had it been days? She asked the same question of herself each time the world came back from the fuzzy void of stupor.

All she did know was that she was dying, her life force was ebbing away. Jewels had been getting weaker faster now that she resided in the Fire Plane. Her sickness had sucked the vitality from them both until all that was left of Nana was mostly brittle branches and crackled bark. All of her leaves had fallen months ago leaving her naked among her gloriously clothed kin.

Some expressed their sympathy while others shunned her, but that was nothing new. They had done the same when in Ermaria and her half-breed dryad was gone to other worlds. Back then she had shriveled from the decades of separation but with a healthy dryad her core had stayed strong. Now layer after layer had dried out twisting her branches and leaving gaping ridges on her trunk. She was almost numb to the world. Her kin said Jewels must be dead, but Nana knew it wasn't true... not yet... but soon... ..

...

Pound, pound, pound...

The reverberation brought her attention back to the waking world. Someone was hitting their fist against her trunk and a desperate voice was calling her name.

"Nana! Nana, you have to take her in!"

Take her in? But Jewels is in the Fire Plane. Through the fog of decay Nana tried to understand her senses. She focused her mind on the outside world pushing through the layers of dried bark to see who was speaking but it was so dense that she could barely make out a humanoid outline, let alone a face.

Pound, pound, pound...

"Nana, *please!*" The voice was familiar but the words seemed foreign. Was that Vergil? Saying please?

With a rush of xylem she realized that if Vergil was here, Jewels must be too. There seemed to be a huddled mass at her base, but Nana couldn't feel her. She couldn't feel anything that didn't shake her. Neither could she find a branch or a root strong enough to reach out and absorb her. Normally she would have shaken her branches in frustration but they were all so stiff that only a few creaked in protest. Blind, numb, and paralyzed to muteness... her momentary hope slipped away as quickly as it had come.

Vergil must have noticed a creak because he started talking like she was listening. "Jewels is really sick, Nana. I don't think she can make it another day on the outside. You have to take her in!"

She wanted to – Nana ached to be one with her dryad again – but her withered bark was now a prison stopping anything from going out or coming in. She didn't have the strength...

The ground shook with the pounding of running feet as a new hopeful voice entered the clearing. "Jewels!!" The feet stopped just short of her root system. She did not need to see to know who feared to tread closer. Nioca had come. His voice fell to grave concern, verifying Vergil's assessment of her health. "What's happened to her, Vergil?"

"It's been ten years," he began as if the time alone was the answer. "She passed the Camirine on

to Aden. As soon as she let it go, its strength left her. I brought her here thinking that Nana could help... but she won't take her." Nana felt the same desperation held by Vergil's next words, "Why won't she take her?"

"Let me try," there was no hesitation as Nioca walked under the canopy of her branches. If she'd had the strength, Nana would have already snared his ankle with a root and taken in the cure to her dryad's plight. Nioca had caused this pain with his first violation of her sanctuary, and she would see him fix it by force no matter the consequences or what Jewels had to say about it. Even if she never forgave her for it, Nana would see her dryad full of life once again.

He came to her base and picked up her dryad, light as air, as Nana mentally screamed for dead limbs to return to life. They would not listen to her. He came so close leaning his head towards her jagged trunk... so close. Nioca's raspy whisper against her bark surprised her. "I'm here, Nana. I'm ready."

...

It took her a few moments to believe it. He wasn't going to fight? *He was willing?* Nana felt her bitterness fall away. Her dryad's bonded was willing! That alone was half the battle. Jewels would be the other half... if she could just bring them in! But her limbs refused to move. Her anger in the solution being within reach yet still unattainable bolstered her strength. If she concentrated all growth on one spot... It had to work! It had to!

"NO! Wait!" Nio ran into the clearing huffing and puffing from exertion. Nioca had tried to slow him down with a daze spell he hadn't seen coming. Nio cursed how his counterpart had mastered the art of mental secrecy. Even now, his mind was a blank wall, as if Nio didn't know what he was trying to do. "You can't!"

Nioca faced him and Nio took in Jewels' grave appearance with a gasp. He could hardly believe it was her. Too pale, too thin, too deathly still... Though he wasn't sharing his mind, Nioca still felt free to read Nio's and nodded with a single thought. *If she dies, I die.*

Nio reached them and pulled Nioca's arm hard enough to force him a step away from the tree. *And vise versa!* he admonished. *The old woman said you have to give her your life. But you can't give your life to save her; she'll die anyway from the soul bonding!*

Nioca's face contorted as he ripped his arm away. *"I HAVE TO TRY!! "* He lifted his block overwhelming Nio with exactly what was going on in his chaotic head. It was a paradox in

blinding green. He had to help Jewels, there was no question. Both his devotion to her and his primary directive to his own health demanded it. Her death was imminent without intervention, but his calculations had devised several possibilities from the unknown variables that would mean they might both live. That possibility, no matter how slight, was still greater than the definite consequences of inaction. He calmed a little as he looked at her face. There was no question. It was a fact. *I have to try.*

So tired... so weak... soo... noisy...

"Wanna keep it down? I'm trying to sleep." Her mumbled words echoed lonely in her ears while the noise in her head grew louder. *Jewels!! Jewels!! You're awake! Are you okay? How do you feel?* The onslaught of mixed excitement and worry over her almost drown out Vergil's lone verbal reply.

"Um... I don't think we could be quieter unless we stopped breathing."

"Not you," she waved a limp hand in his general direction. "These two lug nuts are shouting inside my head." One deeper layer of the mental chaos quickly dropped away while she smiled at the newest rush of thoughts through her mind. *Sorry! Sorry, Jewels! So sorry. Didn't mean to wake you.* She teased them that they were still doing it which brought a new but gentler round of apologies.

Jewels was warm in Nioca's arms and she finally opened her eyes to look up at his worried but smiling face. *Hey*, she greeted him and smiled back. *Hey. I missed you both so much! It was so lonely there without you... and too quiet. We missed you too, Jewels*, Nio answered then smirked. *But I missed you more.*

That started off a new round of arguing she shook her head at. They both looked at her from time to time and she stole glances of herself through their eyes. Jewels frowned and asked aloud, "Do I really look that bad?" They stopped bickering but returned with no answers.

"You almost went out in the Fire Plane," Vergil offered in the silent clearing.

But she didn't feel that terrible. In fact, she felt their mental activity was actually helping her strength. *I think I can stand*, she thought giving Nioca a mental direction to put her down. He did so gently, but kept his attention on her balance. Like a couple of doting parents, Nio and Nioca hovered at her elbows ready to catch her if she even thought about falling. After a few wobbly steps she finally straightened up.

No sooner had she found her feet, though, than Sylae came jogging into the clearing and almost knocked her over with a warm hug. "Jewels! You're back!" She held her at arm's length before regarding her with a frown, "You look terrible."

Jewels laughed despite herself. "Thanks, you look just as beautiful as ever. Even when you're frowning." She pulled her back in for another hug. "*Fire and Ice*, I missed you. Ten years is too long."

Sylae pulled back searching Jewels' face, "Was it enough? Have things stabilized?"

"Aden has turned into a fine and capable flame of a man. He has everything under control," Jewels said confidently, feeling every bit sure it was the truth.

Sylae's blank gaze came back with her question, "Aden?"

"Sylae never met Aden," Vergil interjected as he stepped towards the pair.

Jewels had forgotten. It seemed like it had been ages ago. "I'll explain later, over coffee."

Sylae nodded and released her giving Vergil a calculated look. In a move that probably surprised Jewels more than it did her brother, Sylae threw her arms around him. Jewels fought not to laugh as Vergil smiled and returned the embrace. "Another hug? And while you're awake?"

She let go giving Jewels an embarrassed glance, "Just thanks for bringing her back in one piece."

Jewels raised her eyebrow teasingly. "*Another* hug?"

Sylae shook her head, "I'll explain later, over coffee."

"Did somebody say coffee?" the overly cheery voice of Ligrev wafted into the clearing as she passed the outer ring of trees with Azuma following quickly behind. Both came forward with open arms and shining smiles to hug her together. "Whoa, what's this all about?" she asked as the warm reception lifted her spirits even more.

"We just missed you, is all," Azuma replied as they both stepped back.

She squinted at him in concern but he laughed at her. "Don't worry I'm over that now. Been spending too much time with Livvy." The way he said her name as he looked into Ligrev's face

warmed Jewels' soul. His beguilement was truly gone... or at least had found a better fascination. "She's been rubbing off on me," the cheer in his voice testifying the statement's truth.

"In a good way," Ligeve beamed at him. "He's the favorite barkeep now I think." He smiled back at her pulling her to his side. There was something about the way he held her... tender yet protective with his hand resting above her stomach. Was it bulging? Ligeve's eyes dropped from his face to his hand placing her own on top before looking back at Jewels' questioning face. She gave her an understanding nod in silent reply as Jewels took it in. A lot could happen in six months.

"You sure have a lot of visitors," Vergil commented while stepping closer to her. Years on the battlefield and at negotiating tables together allowed her to recognize his stance as protective. His voice was pleasant but his wary eyes were fixated on a man Jewels had never seen before. "Who is this?"

She hadn't noticed the man come into the clearing but he stood comfortably next to Sylae who made a quick introduction. "Oh, Jewels, Vergil, this is Zene." The way he nodded at her in greeting sparked immediate recognition. "He's..." Sylae tried to continue but Jewels cut her off.

"Actually, we've already met."

"You have?" Sylae looked back and forth between the two, her eyes asking for more than just the 'Yes.' the question required.

Jewels cocked her head as her eyes swept over his new appearance. "He was wearing Iffy's face last time, but I recognize the demeanor." She extended open arms to the man who claimed Iffy's soul. Where the Iffy she knew would have hesitated with a short polite hug, this man had no qualms in giving her a bear of a squeeze that lifted her feet briefly from the ground. He put her down smiling an impish grin as he returned to Sylae's side.

Both Vergil and Sylae stared at her with curious eyes. "He came to the Fire Plane very adamant he find the hottest location we had to offer."

"The lava springs of Farren Heights?" Vergil asked and she nodded along with Zene. "When was this and where was I?"

"It's been a long time," Jewels scrunched her nose as she tried to remember. "But shortly after my 'vacation' I believe." She regarded Vergil with his hands on his hips unsatisfied with this bit of information she had not shared with him. "He just popped up out of nowhere. The guards didn't even notice him."

"And you didn't think to alert them?" Vergil asked in admonition.

"Why would I call the guards when Iffy comes to visit me?" she huffed defensively. "He didn't stay very long. He was there five minutes tops. Very busy. I saw his to-do list." Jewels sought out Sylae's attentive eyes. "I couldn't believe all the trouble he was going through to fix your staff. Is that it?" Jewels pointed at the intricately carved piece of wood she now leaned on. Sylae nodded and brought it forward for her to admire. She ran her fingers over the runes almost remembering a time when she had known what they meant. The power behind them stirred at her touch. "Wow," she addressed Zene. "Nice handy work, sir. Glad I bought you that time by keeping Sylae asleep."

The Arch Admin looked up in surprise. "Wait... that was you?" Jewels nodded innocently while Sylae took a jaded step back, her eyes silently accusing, *'How could you?'*

"Don't look at me like that," Jewels crossed her arms in defiance. "You were physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted." Sylae could not deny it as Jewels pointed a finger at her, "and you deserved a nice vacation." Sylae's scowl softened though she did not smile. "Besides," Jewels continued with a smirk, "I didn't keep you one moment longer than you wanted to stay."

Sylae ignored her last comment and turned instead to Zene. "Why didn't you tell me it was Jewels?"

"Would you have believed me?" he asked, palms up.

By Sylae's sullen expression she admitted her answer before voicing it aloud. "No, I suppose not." This made Zene laugh which in turn made Sylae smile which had everyone else smiling as they watched the exchange.

Jewels looked around the clearing at the people who had come out to see her. She didn't want to sound like she was complaining, far from it, but she was so curious. "What is everyone even doing here?" They all looked at her like the answer was obvious.

"We already told you," Ligrev smiled.

Nio spoke up behind her. "We missed you."

She had not left on the best of terms with any of them, save perhaps Nio and even he had not wanted her to leave. Had they really missed her enough in six months to keep watch for her? "But how did you know I was even here?"

Nioca stepped up to her side. "I've had an RMM set to alert me the moment you step foot in the Refuge since the day I learned I missed your last visit."

Sylae stepped forward sheepishly, "And I've had my RMM-A set to alert me of any activity Nioca has with the database so... I followed him."

"Sylae and Zene were meeting at the lounge when it went off," Azuma added. "You should have seen her dance out of there."

"She left so fast she forgot her staff," Ligrev laughed.

Zene lifted a finger for recognition. "Which I graciously went back to get," he added.

"In fact," Sylae continued, "I'm surprised Nalyd hasn't come yet. We ran into him on the way and his eyes really lit up when we told him you were here."

"Speak of the devil..." Vergil muttered under his breath as the shuffling of leaves came from the west.

The little shaper scurried into the clearing with an entourage of a half-dozen creations following behind him. Her heart skipped a beat as the last one through the trees was a humanoid shadow, standing alive and well. Nalyd shoved past Nio and Nioca carelessly swinging his scythe around to back them away. "Out of Nalyd's way, out of Nalyd's way!" he bellowed. "Good, it is true! Jewels is finally back. Nalyd has a few things he needs to properly carry out his next experiments."

Without giving the shaper any warning Jewels threw her arms around Nalyd and spun him with his scythe in a circle that had everyone else ducking. "Thank you, thank you, for taking such good care of him!" she exclaimed.

Nalyd pushed her back when she had set him down and brushed off his cloak. "Ahem, yes, well, Jewels can show her gratitude by helping Nalyd out with his list of critically needed equipment." He lifted a thick but narrow scroll in his left hand letting it roll open to sweep the forest floor.

She wanted to give Nalyd her attention but could not wait a second more as she pushed past him towards her son. "Oh, Stillborn! You're okay!" She threw her arms around the shadow but had to bite her lip to keep from screaming in his ear. She remembered the pain of his touch and how she had previously endured it, but ten years removed from the actual sensation was a shock to her still weak body. The strength she had previously found in the company of so many loved ones

was sucked away in an instant. She let go sooner than she wanted to and staggered back grateful for the four hands that steadied her without any verbal or mental backlash for her impulsive action.

She still managed to smile at her son but his new face was so hard to read. He stood passively, his huge inky eyes only blinked in her direction. He did not smile... did he not recognize her? Or worse, did he think she had abandoned him? "Stillborn? It's me, Jewels. It's your mother."

Still he remained silent and unmoved. From behind her Nalyd gave a satisfied grunt and gave her son a quiet command, "Answer her."

The shadow man's voice was a raspy whisper hiding behind her ear. It sounded as though he were standing just out of her range of sight though he clearly stood right in front of her. "I am a creation. I have no mother. I have been given the name of Dunstan."

A part of her wilted as her face fell. So Nalyd had finally broken him... This had been Nalyd's intent all along... His insistent voice grated her senses while he tugged at the back of her skirts nearly pulling her over. "Excuse Nalyd, but this is most urgent."

Jewels turned and lowered her eyes to her son's keeper as he wagged the end of his list back and forth in front of her. He was completely oblivious to her emotional pain. He held no shred of guilt, no regret... He had taken her son and with his twisted sense of right and wrong... Jewels returned her gaze to her son before finishing the thought – her living son. How could she be mad when Nalyd had done as she had asked and kept him safe? In his own twisted way, he had remained true. But the toll to her heart... Jewels could barely stand it.

Nio and Nioca were overly wary of her waning state and pulled her a step away from the eager shaper. Her knees finally buckled as they caught her and draped her arms around their necks to hold her upright. Vergil stepped in front of her protectively again and snarled at Nalyd. "Can't you see Jewels is sick?"

He sneered waving his scythe uncomfortably close, "Bah! That is not news. Jewels was sick when she was here last time. It did not stop her from giving Nalyd his modest laboratory furnishings."

"Modest?! It's more extravagant than any lab I've ever had!" Nioca exclaimed, the edge of his bubbling indignation barely perceptible. Jewels had a sudden fear that she was surely slipping away if she could not even feel his anger but he sent her back a strong reassuring statement. *You are not going anywhere. He hides the chaos of his mind from you,* Nio admitted being rewarded with Nioca's scowl.

She could see it now that she knew it was there – a wall guarding his thoughts from her. *Why?* Her query went unanswered though as a bout of dizziness washed over her. She was so tired... Nalyd still peered at her beseechingly from around Vergil. "Sorry, Nalyd, not today. When I'm feeling better, I promise."

He scowled at her, "And when will that be?"

Jewels didn't have an answer so Nioca replied for her, "Never, if Nana won't take her in."

Jewels finally turned her face towards her tree. She had not wanted to see what her decisions had done to Nana. She did not want to face the consequences of putting her fire lineage ahead of her dryad half. But there was no avoiding it any longer. The stark sight broke her heart. Finding her footing, she released the men's necks and stepped forward. Her fingers reached out to caress the jagged bark and brittle branches. "Am I really that sick?"

"Well, you *are* pale as a sheet and thin as a stick," Ligrev commented with gentle bluntness.

Sylae stepped near, "Is there anything we can do?"

Jewels pressed her palm against Nana's trunk. "I... I don't know. I can't hear her at all." Was Nana even still alive in there? A creak somewhere overhead was her only answer, but it was enough to know there was still hope.

"She's dying, Jewels." The feminine voice came from her right and all eyes turned to stare at Jasmine standing in the glade. She walked forward hands clamped tightly in front of her. "You both are," she whispered as she neared.

"Tell me something I don't know," Jewels said with a sarcastic tone as she regarded her childhood best friend. Healthy green skin, short leafy dress, bright brown eyes... just like she should be. Just like Jewels would never be.

"She withered so fast after you left. Lost her leaves and stood in shame silently waiting. Waiting for you to come back. Nona hasn't been able to hear her for a month." Her words cut deeply, and Jewels didn't know if it was on purpose or not. Jasmine did not sneer in disdain, but neither did she smile in encouragement. She just seemed resigned to accept what was happening, or maybe having witnessed Nana's decline had left her in apathy.

"But I'm here now. She'll get better once we're reunited, right? All I have to do is get inside, right?"

"It may be too late," she said with little emotion. "If Nana had the strength to take you in, she would have done it already. But even if you do reunite, it won't cure your sickness. You will be trapped inside and it will eventually consume you both." Jasmine's eyes flitted among the other people there. With frustration, Jewels could not read what Nioca thought when the dryad's eyes landed on him but she was too tired to care for long.

Strength ebbing, she leaned against her tree and lowered herself with half closed eyes. *Too late...* Jasmine has said it was already too late. The silence under her fingertips only confirmed it as true. Nana could not reach her. A hopelessness descended over Jewels and took her focus with it. Sounds were far away, filtered through a deepening haze. Nio and Nioca called to her in urgency. They knelt beside her shaking her gently but her eyelids slipped closed and refused to open again. Only through Nio's eyes did she see what followed.

Vergil stepped towards Jasmine, desperation in his voice, "There must be something we can do."

Jasmine dropped her head to the forest floor before looking up at each of them in turn. "Gift her with life that she may live and grow."

The words stirred recognition in Nio and Nioca as Jasmine's eyes lingered on the pair. They had heard the phrase before. Nioca's mind was a blank slate but Nio showed her an old woman admonishing Nioca to do the same thing. Nio had hope that she could be cured but there was a fear behind it.

Focus! Nioca interrupted. *One thing at a time. We have to get Jewels into Nana.* "Gift her with life!" he repeated aloud to the others, more a command than a request. He stood and brought his hand up to Nana's gnarled trunk. He closed his eyes drawing power from his life force and directed it into Nana. Nio did the same and they were answered with a series of creaks from the stiff branches above.

"I think it's working!" Nio said excitedly. A low groaning tickled her fingertips as hand after hand from her friends touched Nana's trunk. Life flowed under her and around her and through her as she opened her eyes. Jewels could feel it pulsing beneath her fingers, a ring of power encircling her tree... but was it enough? "I still can't hear Nana. I don't know if it's enough."

"Master wishes Jewels to be well?" The breath of her son's voice caught behind her ear as she jerked instinctively to look over her shoulder. Only Nana was behind her until she turned around to face her beloved sanctuary.

A gruff voice impatiently answered her son. "Of course! Nylad needs his equipment!"

The shadow stepped forward with an outstretched hand. Nana shuddered under his touch with a scream that brought Jasmine's hands to her ears. But a pale glow of energy encompassed his hand. Jewels could feel her own strength building with his offer. She fought to stand, leaning uncooperative limbs against her tree. In Nio's gaze Nyad fidgeted with his staff and scowled at his creation. Energy wasted in his mind, she was sure, but he looked at the list once more before dropping it and shuffling to put a green glowing hand against Nana's trunk.

Jewels wasn't sure what felt better. The strength her friends poured into Nana or the fact that she had friends willing to offer her their strength. Jasmine kept her distance but also kept watch. "Look," she called and pointed above their heads, "*it is working.*"

All turned their faces skyward where a single branch had sprouted the bud of a leaf. As they watched, it grew and unfurled looking full and healthy. She could hear Nana's whispers as it rustled against the wind. All Jewels had to do was touch the leaf.

She straightened her legs as their stability returned, and held herself up without assistance. "That's enough. I can reach her now," Jewels didn't want anyone to expend more energy than they needed to. Hands lifted as her friends each took a step back. She met each of their eyes with gratefulness.

She stopped at her brother glad that his face mirrored her hope. "I think I'll be all right, Vergil. You can go back to the Fire Plane now. Thank you for bringing me this far."

The offer was tempting, she could see it in the way his fingers drummed against his leg, but he was reluctant to leave. "I can stay until everything is all sorted out. I'm sure Aden is taking care of things perfectly without me."

With more poise than she felt, Jewels crossed the gap between them and put a hand on his shoulder. "Go. Come back in a week and you'll probably find us still standing here. Go take care of my boy and our people."

"You're really okay?"

She nodded though she knew it wasn't completely true. She just didn't want him to worry any more. He had done too much worrying over her in the past ten years. "Thank you for everything," Jewels hugged him before looking him in the eye. "Now go before I have Sylae kick you out."

He gave the Arch Admin a slight smirk. "I'd like to see her try."

"Don't tempt me," she joked back.

Vergil gave her one last salute before activating the return teleportation disk on his belt. When he had gone Jewels turned and thanked everyone else in turn. Nalyd mumbled his expectations that Jewels would return the favor as soon as she was able before disappearing with his creations behind the shadow of her son. Sylae and Zene reassured her that they were more than happy to help if she needed them again before returning to the Admin Tower. Nio and Nioca accepted her thanks without a word and Jewels leaned her head against her tree voicing both desire and fear. "Even if it's the last thing we do, Nana, let's be together."

"I'm coming with you."

He didn't need to see her face to know the set of her jaw had changed in stubbornness. "No. You're not." She had worked it out from Nio's memory. She understood Nio's fear in its meaning and wasn't about to let him take the risk. "Nana can sustain me. I'll remain in her and you can live."

But he didn't think he could. The chaos in his mind was almost overwhelming. He couldn't sleep at night. He could barely eat. She was all he could see. Nio thought he held back secrets with his mental partition, which was true, but more than that he protected his twin from the processes that were now a constant whining din. Even now at her refusal, which he had predicted and fully expected, it still tore him further apart. His robotic mind was wearing down. It was only a matter of time before he broke, whatever that would look like in this human body.

Still he managed to keep most of the desperation from his urgent voice. "It was hard enough living without you for the past six months. I'm not going to let you cut yourself off from me forever."

"Well I'm not going to let you die to try and save me!" Jewels turned away, eyes shining with unspilled tears. She didn't want to live apart from him either but in her mind she would lose him either way. "My way," she whispered hoarsely, "we both live... "

"But for how long?" Nioca grabbed her shoulders and forced her to face him. "How long before the fever overtakes you and Nana and me with it? Accept my gift and I will live on IN you."

Jewels looked like she might actually consider it until Nio, who had been wringing his hands a

few feet away, spoke his fear. "You can't know that, Nioca. It might kill you, which means it will kill you both.

"What are you talking about?" Jasmine had seemed to melt into the folds of her tree when everyone else left but she was back, hovering five feet apart from them with her face painted in confusion. "Who told you someone had to die?"

Nioca turned to regard the dryad. At one point she had tried to trick him into being Jewels' cure. Back when he wouldn't have chosen to do so on his own. Now she looked at him with reserved hope and he realized she was on his side. "Aggie," he voiced hoping that the name held some meaning for her. "She told us that for Jewels to be cured, she had to accept my gift of life."

"No way!" Jewels reared back pulling her shoulder away from his hands. "Not gonna happen. I refuse any such gift."

Jasmine stared at them in abashment; her cheeks took on a pinkish hue reminiscent of an awakening rose. "The gift of life, yes, but... I think you misunderstand." All of them looked at her expectantly as her blush only increased. "It is... a delicate matter," she tried before hesitantly walking up to Jewels and whispering in her ear. Jewels' eyes grew wide with the words, heat rushing to her own cheeks. Nioca couldn't help but overhear and stared at the ground with closed eyes as this new information changed every algorithm he had running.

Oh... Nio tried hard to contain a laugh but it still came out as a snort. All three of the others glared at him as he made a mental apology and offered them what privacy he could with physical distance. Jasmine also retreated, melting back into her tree.

Jewels and Nioca stood mere inches apart, close enough to feel the stirring of each other's breaths on their blushing cheeks as their faces stared at the forest floor. They were both silent for a few minutes well aware that while they saw no one else, a multitude of eyes and ears were still on them. They would never be truly alone. Someone would always be watching. Even when discussing such... 'a delicate matter', as Jasmine had put it.

Pushing thoughts of the others aside, Nioca finally looked up and lifted her chin with a gentle touch until he could see her shining eyes. She finally let him see how scared she really was. Afraid to face the loneliness of being separated from him for the rest of her life. But even more terrified of allowing them to be together. "Jewels, I'm not going anywhere. I'm willing. Let me be your cure."

Drop the block, Her consciousness hovered next to his just on the other side of his wall. He hesitated but her resolve hardened as she stared him down. *There will be NO discussion unless you drop the block.*

Nioca sighed, letting her into his chaos and she gasped. It was so loud she threw her hands over her ears by instinct to try to keep out the din. He felt her ache at realizing his discomfort. *How long has it been like this?* He just shook his head.

She focused on his devotion subroutine which had become quite prominent since she arrived. She saw the blinding green fact that permeated his being and studied it. It was not a surprise to him when she voiced her decision. "I can't let you. Not while you aren't in complete control of yourself."

But he had known what her main argument would be. He focused on her soul binding, bringing forth her memories of tying her soul to all of her friends and the times when it had interfered with her actions. "What makes my devotion any different than yours?"

Jewels shook her head. "I chose my bonds. Yours were forced on you."

Somewhere in his mind, a process began to loop at the paradox. He had been forced into these bonds, yes, but she was forcing him to strain against them. She wouldn't let him make his own choice because she considered the choice already not his. Nioca threw his hands in the air, finding increasing anger in her unceasing interdiction. "Do you really think that little of my character, Jewels? Do you really think that I would condemn you to an eternity imprisoned in your tree if I could choose for myself?" His forcefulness caught her off guard and she sputtered without words. "Answer me!" he demanded backing her up against her tree, "Am I really that vile in your mind?!"

He saw the spark of defiance light in her eye as her surprise gave way to honesty. "Well, I sure as *Ice* don't think you'd agree to father a forest of dryad children with me!" She stomped her foot for emphasis as her nostrils flared.

Nioca saw his mistake in riling her seconds before she did. That's when the fire started. Nana was little more than kindling with her dried out branches and the heat from Jewels' touch sent flames licking up her trunk. "No!" Jewels screamed torn between helping Nana and getting as far away from her as she could. In mere seconds the crackle among her limbs roared in their ears.

Nioca had to yell to be heard above the noise, "Get in your tree! I'll put out the fire!" He readied an ice bolt and covered the most vital parts of Nana's trunk first.

She turned to fix a steely gaze on him and yelled back, "Promise you won't follow me in."

He could feel the Fire Fever gaining ground in her body ready to overtake her and the Refuge with it. "Jewels we're both about to die one way or another along with the rest of the forest if you

don't get in your tree!" He isolated the area of new growth, covering surrounding branches with layers of ice. The fire was quickly spreading to unprotected areas, though. He feared he would have to encase the whole tree.

Stubborn to the last and wasting time as she fought to hold herself together Jewels insisted, "*Promise me!*"

"NO!" Nioca put his hands down and let the fire grow. He had made his choice, *his own choice*, or the closest he would ever come to again. "This is how it's going to be, Jewels. Either we all die or you and I get in that tree together and make a million seedlings! Choose now, *life or death*, Jewels. Because there is NO middle ground. It's either a whole lot of life or a whole lot of death." He could see her resolve breaking as she witnessed Nana's limbs crack and break in the flame.

He was the only thing holding her back. She just wouldn't force it on him. "Forget what I would do if I were wholly me," he pleaded, "and just do what *you* would normally do, Jewels. *Save us!* Save us all like you always do! And then, for once, *for once in your self-righteous life*, Jewels, Let. Me. Save. You!" Nioca emphasized each word, letting it reverberate through every algorithm in his mind. It was a plea, it was a need, it was his purpose. His voice fell to a whisper her ears could not hear but her mind could not shut out. "And if that's not something I would do without this *curse* program running in my soul, then I don't deserve to have ever known you."

There were tears sizzling on her lashes as she reached for the sprouted leaf. It began to shrivel the moment Jewels touched it but Nana managed to take her in anyway.

Nioca resumed coating her branches with ice to put out the flames. There was very little bark left visible when he was done but he worried how much damage the fire had actually done. He'd left open the point where Jewels had entered and stared at it for a moment as the chaos in his head calmed down.

He had made his decision; he loved her with or without the subroutine. He had no doubt what he would do if it did not exist. The choice was wholly his. "I'm ready."

Nioca reached up to grab a hold of the same branch, though the new leaf crumpled to ash under his touch. He waited, but nothing happened. Had the branch been too badly damaged? Frantically he found a spot of bark that was clear of both ice and char and leaned against it. Still nothing happened. "Jewels let me in!" he called fearing the silence that followed. "Nana, don't let her shut me out!" he shouted but there was no reply. "*Jewels!!*"

Enduring Vigil

By Jewels - Feb 27 2014

She watched him from a distance; today he walked towards the forest. It was all she ever did now, just watch. She'd watched them both over the last six months, he – always numb and distracted, the other – sympathetic yet full of wonder. The first time they walked the grounds together, the Ermarians mobbed them asking questions and staring in disbelief. He had waved while the other called her name. But Syla had walked away that day, unable to bear their presence. They did not try to reach out to her after that.

They seemed to come around more and more often, walking through the Ermarian settlement; listening to the people's desires for better homes and the opportunity to work their trades, helping that happen, or sometimes just playing with the children. She caught the other staring at her often... or was it he caught her staring? He would always smile. She would always turn away.

Today they had worked on tilling a garden for old Widow Hearthrem with the rest of the men while she helped the women prepare and serve a lunch. One moment they had been kneeling in the dirt, steady at their task. The next they were on their feet, trowel and spade forgotten as they hurried across the yard.

She wasn't sure what made her follow. Perhaps it was her curiosity about their urgency, or maybe it was *his* expression. He looked... scared. She kept out of sight as she crept up behind him. The moment she saw *her*, though, she froze. Out of habit, a stealth spell spilled from her lips hiding her in her indecision. Her instinct was to leave, quickly, and never look back but something else kept her rooted like the trees she stood among.

It was him. She couldn't look away. The way he smiled, the way he frowned, even the way his pitch rose when he yelled. He had completely transformed... into the man she remembered him always being and it stirred something in her.

Time slipped by until only Nioca was left huddled at the base of the tree. It broke Syla's heart.

Time slipped by as Nioca huddled at the base of her tree. It broke Jewels' heart, even more so than the pain Nana was going through. Life was returning to her branches now that Jewels was with her, but limbs Nana had thought long dead now screamed out their torment from the burn of the fire as the ice melted away. It was only her tree's current distress that allowed Jewels to keep

Nioca out. Nana had not the strength to fight her, but even Jewels' resolve was shaken with each plea he breathed against her.

A feminine form slid out from behind the trees walking towards Nioca. Sylas's face oscillated between pinched determination and a mask of indifference. She slowed as she neared, calling his name, "Nioca?" He didn't respond. She knelt beside him placing a hand on his shoulder, "Nioca, I'm here."

A part of her resented this woman from his past, though Jewels had relinquished any claim to his future. Could she be what Jewels could not? Would she be what he needed? He deserved to have someone comfort him... after Jewels had left him alone.

Sylas turned his face towards her. "What can I do? How can I help?" Again he remained silent, catatonic in his blank stare. Her worry for him deepened but if anyone could help Nioca, Sylas could. Nio would also help, she was sure. And as soon as the woman took him away from the clearing, Jewels would be free to start her own lonely existence.

But instead of trying to leave with him, Sylas stood and stared at her tree. Her voice held a bitter rancor while her eyes flared with finally voicing her resentment, perhaps for the first time ever. "I've blamed you for his condition. I believed you enslaved him and I've *hated* you for it." Jewels did not fault her. She blamed herself at times. Perhaps her care for him was in penance for a deeply held guilt.

Sylas took a deep breath as she visibly calmed herself. Her pinched face relaxed with her next statement. "After what I've seen today, though... you've changed my mind." Jewels perked up. Sylas had not held any approval for her since Ermaria had been destroyed. That she would give it to her now was... confounding. The softening of her voice was even more surprising. "I wanted to tell you how grateful I am that you are not willing to let Nioca do something that he is forced into. I want what is best for Nioca and now I believe you do to."

It lifted Jewels' spirit to hear the commendation. She was sure this praise was not given lightly. More so she felt confident that Sylas would indeed help Nioca through what was to come. *He won't be alone*. Her heart smiled with the conviction.

Sylas struggled with what she was going to say next. "Which is why..." Her mouth opened and closed a few times as if she hadn't made up her mind to speak. It was a glance at Nioca that made the decision, "...you *have* to let him in."

It gave Jewels pause. She couldn't have heard her right. Sylas *wanted* her to exploit him? She continued as if in direct reply, "I am the *last* person who would want you to take advantage of Nioca." That was more like it... "But you can't *force* him to live like this!" Sylas was adamant as

her voice caught and her eyes blurred with tears. "I've watched him while you've been gone, Jewels. I've seen his robotic actions. His personality disappeared. He's been only slightly more than a bot. But the moment you got here..." Syla smiled as the movement caused her tears to streak down her cheeks. She wrung her hands in the folds of her skirt looking off at the memory. "...when he held you and you opened your eyes... Jewels, he was *human again!*"

For the first time since Syla arrived, Nioca acknowledged she was there by lifting his face to her. A silent conversation passed between them while Jewels felt the weight of her words. Syla continued, bolstered by Nioca's response. "You're so against forcing him to be with you, you're not seeing that you're *forcing* him to be *alone*." It was true. She wasn't giving him a choice. He had said that he wouldn't condemn her to eternity trapped in her tree... but she was condemning him to eternity on the outside.

"Maybe he wouldn't have chosen this on his own, maybe..." Syla looked at him with obvious regret and longing but for only a moment, "...maybe he would have chosen something else. But he's *different* now and he's *not* going back. He's not going to be happy without you." Nioca had been listening as raptly as Jewels had, perhaps just as surprised and stood to give Syla a hug. It was a bittersweet moment she didn't feel privileged enough to watch. It was an unspoken understanding, a thank you, and a goodbye. Syla took his hand and placed it on her trunk. "Let him in Jewels. I can't bear to watch him be miserable for the rest of his life."

Jewels could feel the warmth of his touch and the rapid pulse of his heartbeat. His voice was raw with emotion. "My choices are the only humanity I have left. Let me make this one for both our sakes." Nana's encouragement was behind her, Syla's approval was before her, but Jewels had accepted her fate ten years ago... made her peace with this self condemnation... did she even *want* to be cured?

The seconds that ticked by seemed like hours as Syla waited for a response. Was Jewels even able to respond? She almost hadn't made it into the tree herself, but the bark had been changing, slowly filling out and regaining some semblance of life as the ice melted to water and was quickly sucked into the thirsty limbs. Stiff branches had become less rigid, less fragile. Surely Jewels' reunion with her tree was restoring its ability to bring in Nioca as well.

Too long had passed... had she not been convincing enough? If Jewels would allow him to endure as only half a man, *she* did not deserve to have ever known *him*! And Syla was about to say so when a smile lit across Nioca's face.

"I can hear her!" his unabashed exuberance was a rare sight that tugged at her heart. His fingers sunk into the bark as Syla took a step back. Such a mix of emotions swirled in her head, she

didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He turned to her, the man she had loved for so many years, with a joy in his eyes that he had not looked at her with before. It was bittersweet to know he was so happy to be with someone else. "Jewels says to thank you for showing her how wrong she was."

Syla couldn't help but laugh and gave the tree a crooked smile. "Any time, Jewels, any time." Nioca extended his free arm and she allowed herself to step into his embrace. "I thank you, too," he whispered.

"You're welcome," she answered back as he let her go. "Just... be happy." He nodded at her and she stepped away with a silent sigh. She was letting him go too... in more ways than one.

It did not take long for him to disappear from sight and the clearing seemed suddenly too empty without him. Syla didn't know if she should stay or go. In her indecision she let her mind wander to the moment that had started all this. She had been here before, waiting for Nioca to emerge from this very tree. Waiting for a miracle to bring him back to life – back to *her*. But her miracle had come with a price, and now she was paying it. It seemed fitting that she be here at the zenith to finish what she herself had started.

He felt like he was intruding, just to watch her stand there, but the new silence in Nio's head left him feeling abandoned and alone. It was too much to bear at the moment. He needed something... or someone to distract him from the worry. He walked up behind Syla and cleared his throat. "I would also like to thank you," he started, not daring to look up from his feet. "You couldn't see inside his mind, but he was breaking... glitching. I don't know how long he would have lasted."

He came up to Jewels' tree standing parallel to Syla though three feet away. He could feel her eyes on him as she widened the gap another two feet. Her voice was stiff and unwelcoming. "My feelings for you have not changed."

Had he expected that they would? Perhaps, but it was always a constant hope. "My feelings for you haven't changed either," he whispered, so quiet in his own ears he doubted she had heard him.

The stillness between them stretched on with her stealing glances now and again. Finally she looked at him sideways and broke the silence. "So... do you think it worked?"

"I don't know," he answered a little too quickly. He looked Jewels' tree up and down. "Doesn't really look like anything has happened. Maybe it takes some time."

"Maybe," she sighed. "Took a whole day last time."

Nio finally ventured a glance in her direction, eyebrow raised, but all she offered was a weary roll of the eyes as she sat down to get comfortable. Nio sat, too, having nothing else to do. He would be company for her if she wanted it though it seemed she did not.

After an hour, he had changed his posture to lay down, head on a rock to save the strain on his neck while watching. Syla had backed herself against the nearest tree for support and currently had her eyes closed. A ripple ran through the canopy that caught Nio's attention. He had felt no wind to cause it. Syla's eyes popped open at the sound of wood scraping against wood and Nio voiced the obvious, "I think Nana's branches are moving."

Syla looked up just as another ripple confirmed his statement. They both stood brushing leaves and dirt from their clothes. "Is she trying to talk to us, do you think?"

Nio only shrugged at her question. He had never learned the language of the trees. This did not seem like something Nana had done before though, the stirring started at her core and rippled in waves outwards to the tips of her branches. The movements got bigger as the sounds got louder, creaks and cracks threatened to rain down broken branches as even her trunk began to shake.

Syla danced backwards to avoid one that broke free. "Is this supposed to happen?" she raised her voice in concern to compete with the rising din.

"I don't know," he called back, hoping it was but fighting the growing rock in the pit of his stomach. As he jumped to avoid another broken branch, his fear grew that it was not.

Syla yelped as she narrowly dodged a hefty bough and started when she found herself only inches from Nio. He stared at her, frozen to his spot, holding the same fear that shown behind her eyes. The sudden silence was just as startling and they both turned their heads to take in Nana's perfect stillness. A moment passed, then two... "Was that it?" she asked.

It wasn't. The hairs on the back of Nio's neck prickled as a high pitched whine rose in volume until it rang in his ears louder than his own thoughts. With a booming *fwoomp*, an explosion of force sent them flying backwards. On instinct, he threw his arms around her and rolled to cushion her fall. Their impact with the ground knocked the wind out of him and left him gasping for breath.

Syla roughly shoved off of him with an agonized cry on her lips. "*NO!!*" An intense heat washed over his body where hers used to lay. It took him a moment to realize that it was from the inferno that now raged where Jewels' tree had once been. The entire canopy was engulfed in bright red and orange flames roaring out in seeming rage. The surrounding trees shivered and shied away from the unbearable heat, the creaking of their limbs like wounded shrieks.

"Get up!" Syla screamed at him, tugging at his arm. "We have to do something!"

Nio shook his head to clear away the shock of horror. Do something... yes! They had to put the fire out! "Quickly," he shouted as they stood, "hit it with as many ice bolts as you can!"

She nodded at him and took up an offensive stance a few feet away. Between the two of them they sent off a dozen balls of ice in the first ten seconds. The fire continued to rage as they continued their assault with no sign that it was having any effect. "It's *not working!*" Syla cried in despair. Nio shot one at the nearest branch and watched as the ice coated it for mere seconds before melting and evaporating to sizzling steam. If he didn't know any better, he'd say that the fire was burning from the inside out.

But who was to say that he did know better? He had never seen a manifestation of the Fire Fever while Jewels was in her tree before... maybe she had just been too sick... maybe they had been too late... or maybe...

Nio took a closer look, stepping as close as he dared. The flames did not move how he would expect them to. They didn't reach up towards the sky while they consumed their fuel. In fact... "I... I don't think it's actually burning."

"What?!" Syla stared at him like he had gone insane, but he was sure of it now.

"No, really, look!" He pointed above the canopy where the sun shone over a clear blue sky. "Smell, the air," he insisted. "No smoke."

She blinked in her confusion. "No smoke?"

Using a different strategy, Nio cast a heat protection spell around them both and stepped up closer to the tree. He beckoned Syla to follow him, who was reluctant but found her courage to join him. Close enough to touch them, Nio could make out thousands of individual flames flickering at the ends of flaming branches. He pointed them out to Syla whose sudden intake of breath joined the awe in her eyes to testify to her wonder. The branches start filling out, getting longer, and reaching higher into the heavens. The leaves unfurled and grew broader, radiating a bright healthy glow. Nana stood tall and proud in the center of her clearing dancing before his

eyes while her kin cowered in fear. It was majestic to witness, a tree of the Fire Plane, out of place in this world but no less regal.

The light and heat retreated as Nana flamed down. She had been transformed from gnarled deadwood to vibrant life in the space of only a few minutes. Nio had seen no brighter green in a leaf or smoother brown on a branch. Now a good two feet taller than all her neighbors, Nana was just as majestic in her corporeal form. "I think..." he finally spoke into the silence, "they're going to be just fine."

Syla nodded her head looking up in appreciation. "I think you're right."

"Come on," he beckoned her with a wave of his hand. "Let's leave these two be. I'll buy you a cup of coffee at the lounge."

Syla shook her head at him but offered a crooked smile, "Only if you let me buy you a stiff drink."

Nio laughed with her. It felt good. "Deal!" He offered her an arm and though she hesitated, she still took it with a smile and allowed him to escort her away from the charred ground. He was pretty sure they would have a rapt audience eager to hear the news of Nana's recovery and he was eager to share it with them.

Behind the Eyes

By Jewels - Feb 28 2014

She left the sanctuary before he did and stood demurely, eyes toward the setting sun in the west. From this vantage Nioca took in her transformation. Restored was the health and beauty that she had entered the Refuge with that very first day. Long brown waves swept down past her middle back and her smooth skin held a healthy pallor that was flushed with a growing pinkish hue. The once rusted copper tendrils on her skin were now delicate strands of spider silk, barely visible until movement made them glisten in the light. Nana had clothed her in a flowing gown of pale green chiffon that shimmered in the slight evening breeze. Hands clasped tightly in front of her, the only things that marred her image were the lack of a smile on her face and the pain behind her eyes. And it was his fault.

From the moment he entered her tree, Jewels had refused to complete the bonding unless Nana first try to release his mind from the subroutine that bound him in devotion. He had agreed to the attempt, but only after making his own demand. Nana was to keep his thoughts and emotions from Jewels unless he directed them specifically at her. Jewels must accept his decision without knowing if it was one he made gladly. He had thought it best, to safeguard against any argument she might brook against his possible qualms. But now, looking at her, he questioned himself.

With arduous tenacity Nana did finally unravel the spell of his fealty and Nioca did indeed have qualms but he had never doubted what his final answer would be. Getting her to accept that answer, though – to accept his freely given gift – had almost been more difficult than convincing her to let him into her sanctuary in the first place.

But he held no regret and told her as much. It was an honor to be part of the healing of the Ermarian dryads. Not to mention a debt repaid for all the times she had given of herself for him, never expecting any return. Still she had kept her heart reserved when she reluctantly accepted his decision. She loved him beyond reason and did not hide it from him but she doubted him and his sincerity. And *that* aggrieved him more deeply than if she would have taken her cure *without* giving him the choice.

In the first moment of rejection, he had let a glimpse of his pain slip through to her before walling it and the cause away behind the block Nana had promised. She had immediately counted it as confirmation to her doubts, twisting the knife, but he had remained impassive in her eyes. His wretched past still haunted him in the form of her distrust, but that was a burden he would not force her to carry.

Nioca enjoyed his last few moments in communion with Nana. They had grown a bond and

mutual understanding that transcended both words and thoughts. She had returned the favor of being Jewels' cure by being his in a way. With a few structured foundations, she had given him a database within his own mind so he could be self-sufficient. He need not fear traveling to other planes alone anymore. It was one more step in regaining his humanity and he would always be grateful.

Nana's appreciation for him was also pervasive. She would proudly bear his seed on her limbs until they matured enough to fly away in the breeze. The thought brought an embarrassed inadequacy to mind that she assured him was unfounded. The image of Jewels also left him feeling inadequate but Nana nudged him to courage. *Go. Tell her what she needs to know. Only then can you both fully heal.* He smiled in his heart giving her a final thanks before slipping out behind Jewels.

There was a moment of jumbled chaos when he slipped out behind her. She felt both wonder and pain from him, gratefulness and cynicism before he shut her out completely. She was glad in a way that he had regained his missed privacy, but it left her almost as lonely as the Fire Plane had been.

She turned to face him, determined that she would be gracious in the face of his isolation. If he wished to stay separated, she would not deny him. Nana was not making it easy, though. She had taken some liberties in his appearance, discarding his normal robes for fetching formal attire a few shades darker than her own dress. Proper attire for a dryad bonding ceremony she noted. He glanced down at it with her, clearing his throat when she thought it a bit snug. He ran his fingers through his slightly mussed hair as she admired it then stood up straight with his hands clasped behind his back. Was he... taller? He lifted an eyebrow in Nana's direction, though his green eyes did not share any hint of what was going on behind them.

It felt awkward to know he saw every shred of her mind laid bare while he kept himself an empty slate. Best to move forward, she decided. The sun would not give them light for much longer. "Thank you," she started. "I could never expect anything more of you." And she didn't, in truth. He was back on the path to regaining his old self and she was willing to send him on his way without complaint. "I don't plan to stay at the Refuge full time," she continued in his silence. She noted how his jaw tightened and plunged on with the rest of her offer. One last gift to show her appreciation for what he'd done for her today. "And when I am here, it will usually be to visit Nana so you won't have to worry about me being in your head all the time."

She gave him a reassuring smile but he frowned in return dropping his head to study the forest floor. "That's not much of a reward," he finally mumbled in disappointment, and she was at a loss with how to answer him.

Compensation? What more did he want? His eyes snapped up at her angrily, offended that she would consider him anything but justified in the suggestion. In her mind nothing would be too high a price to show her gratitude. "Anything!" she blurted out, 'Anything at all! Just tell me what you want and it will be yours."

Nioca's eyes sparked at the offer as he closed the gap between them. They shown with anticipation but his lip quivered as he took her by the shoulders and stared her down. Rough emotion pleaded in her ears. "I *want* you to stop *doubting* me!"

A flood of pain spilled over his wall as Nioca lowered the block between their minds. She had hurt him by not believing in him and automatically thinking he had ulterior motives for helping her. She had not trusted him or his character and never even considered it possible that he might actually love her.

With tears in his eyes he took her face in his hands and pressed his lips to hers. His love – his honest-to-goodness, genuine and freely given love washed over her in tidal waves enough to smother her and she thrilled under his touch. There was no algorithm calculating behind it, only the emotion of his desires. How could she have doubted this man?

"I never want to be apart from you again," he whispered when he pulled back, and she smiled at *this* gift of his life. It paled his previous gift to inconsequential by comparison. He gave her a crooked smile and took half a step back. "I, uh, had a little conversation with Nana when you stepped out," she raised her eyebrow at the thought he was keeping hidden though he did not suppress his anticipation for revealing it slowly. "She told me that dryads bond for life." Jewels only nodded. "And technically... I should have given you something else a long time ago." He paused as he reached a hand out to Nana and let it sink into the bark as he continued. "I know it's ten and a half years late... but I'm hoping you'll still accept it."

When he retracted his hand, it held a delicate ring of living vine and Jewels gasped, tears stinging her eyes. He took her hand and slipped it up her left ring finger, snug against the ring that was a remnant of her marriage to Will. "I'm sorry I wasn't a better husband in the beginning," he whispered as they watched his ring intertwine itself with the one she already wore.

She smiled and held up her hand between them. "It's all right," she laughed, "I wasn't exactly the most faithful wife."

"But you never gave up on me," he admonished with tenderness. "I will never forget that." With a smirk and a sweep of his arms he lifted her up and kissed her again as he held her. "Come on, wife," he joked. "The sun sets and it's time to get you home." Images of the citadel ran through his mind as he turned to carry her out of the forest. Past curious Ermarians that walked the path,

past their friends clustered at the door of the lounge to gawk, and past the threshold of the tower that would be their first home.

"First?" he teased, "Don't you want to live here forever?"

"Doesn't matter where we live," she answered. "When I'm with you, I'm home."

The lounge was full of Refugees and Ermarians alike, all hanging on every word out of Nio's mouth. First in his retelling of the restoration of Jewels' tree and then with the play by play of Nioca's past due proposal. There had been cheers and tears and a few 'bout time's around the room as Livvy made her rounds filling coffee cups and wine glasses.

All had crowded around the door to wave as they walked past and Livvy was no exception. Love was a wonderful thing and she was glad they had found it together.

Nalyd pushed past the others with an eager look in his eye. "Is Jewels better yet? Nalyd still has his list with him."

But Livvy pulled him back. "For goodness sakes, give them a day. She's not going anywhere."

Nalyd scowled at her but relented. "Okay but only one day. Nalyd needs his Thermo Ossilamagnatron!" Livvy shook her head at the strange little man. His priorities were too different for her to try to understand him.

One by one, her patrons returned to their seats happily chatting away about the day's events... all except for one. Nio frowned down at his hands as they twisted in the folds of his robe. "What's wrong, dearie?" she asked, startling him.

He stared at her with worried eyes. "I, uh... I think I need to get drunk... *quickly*. This is not going to be pretty..."

Livvy worried her bottom lip, he had already shared a whole bottle of rum with Sylva. She didn't want him to drink too much today. Any more and he'd be slurring his way into a stupor. "Whatever for, Nio? What's not going to be pretty?"

She didn't like the look he gave her. "*Hello*, mind linked to Jewels here! I see what she sees, remember? And really soon she's gonna be seeing... a whole lot of Nioca."

"Oh my..." Livvy felt the flush of heat climb up her cheeks. "That is quite a pickle."

A feminine laugh rang out as Sylae walked up to drape her arm around him. "Oh, come on. It can't be that bad. I mean, it's no different than looking in the mirror, right?"

Azuma shared in the laughter but Nio shot daggers at Sylae. "Easy for *you* to say. You've never been on the receiving end."

Sylae smiled wickedly as she raised her voice, "Hey Jewels, Nio requests you turn OFF the lights!"

Nio threw up his hands in disgust. "*STILL not a com link!!*" he yelled, to which Sylae only laughed harder but Zene pulled her away to their own table.

Hearing his distress Sylae came over with a sympathetic look in her eye. "What you *need* is a vacation!" she announced over loudly. "What do you say, you and me go spend a few days in the Water Plane? I hear King Darius has a special resort just for visiting Refugees."

The look on Nio's face was a hopeful disbelief. "*That* is a great idea. But... you really want to go with me?"

The Ermarian woman leaned in closer and attempted a whisper that everyone at the bar still heard. "Why wouldn't I want to spend a couple days *alone* at a resort with someone who loves me?" She smiled at him mischievously as Livvy held back a giggle.

"Yes, you should go. You both deserve a nice long vacation. Stay a whole week... or two!" Quickly she grabbed a bottle of her best plum wine and shoved it in their direction. "Take this with you, to help you relax."

"Okay," Nio smiled crookedly, still a little dazed at what was being offered. And then he cringed before jumping up off the bar stool. "But we have to go NOW!" He held the wine bottle in one hand and grabbed Sylae's hand in the other. "Come on, Sylae! I have a portal under the Geneforge forum!"

She stumbled a little as he tugged at her, "But I haven't packed, yet..."

"No time to pack!" he cringed again, "I'll buy you new clothes when we get there. Come on!"

The pair disappeared out the door to peals of laughter as Azuma wrapped his arm around her middle from behind. "Love is in the air tonight," he whispered in her ear.

"As it should be," she whispered back and brought his hand up to her lips for a kiss. "As it should be."

The sun filtered in through the high, curtain-less window. Jewels smiled and snuggled deeper into the crook of Nioca's arm. She wanted for nothing. She had everything she would ever need. Nothing could make this better.

He stirred next to her brushing the hair from her face and planted a kiss on her forehead. *Something might*, he thought, but he kept the rest of his mind hidden. Only the same feelings of anticipation as the night before were readily apparent.

What is it? she prodded but he was not going to make it that easy.

A surprise, was all he would say.

After readying herself for the morning, she allowed him to lead her out of the citadel and down into the maintenance tunnels. *To avoid Nalyd*, he explained taking her close enough to the BladesForge Nexus to pull them into her sanctuary. He sat her down on a cot, smiling from ear to ear and instructed her to stay put while he got things ready. Five minutes and no little bit of noise later his voice echoed around the corner. "Close your eyes, now. No peeking."

There was no way around it. He could tell if she was squinting so she closed her eyes tight against all light in the room. She heard him walk carefully towards her and felt his excitement grow. Whatever it was, Nioca placed a great deal of value on it. He bent down placing a warm bundle in her arms and knelt in front of her. Jewels' heart skipped a beat as the bundle squirmed. *Open your eyes!*

She didn't have to look to know what she would see but she still had no idea why. The infant seemed no more than a few months old but stared at her with wide eyes. She looked back at Nioca searching his face for answers. "I don't understand. Why do you have a baby here?"

Nioca smiled and spoke soothing words aloud. "This is your son."

She looked back down at the baby still not understanding. Her fingers began to tremble with the notion. "What do you mean?"

He placed his warm hands over hers as he explained with both thought and word. "There is a reason, Jewels, why Nalyd's creation did not acknowledge you yesterday. A reason why Nalyd was able to tame it to his own ends. Nalyd's creation is not your son. Not anymore." He looked down at the bundle and stroked its cheek with a finger. "This is."

He let her see it, the process he had used to accomplish such a feat. Cloning stillborn's brain while he was still in stasis and separating out his soul from all the other lifeforces that Nalyd had given him. "This is completely the essence of your son." Jewels looked at the baby with a new awe. It reached a tiny hand up and placed it on her cheek while deep blue eyes stared into hers. Nioca continued, "The only problem I ran into was that you weren't here when I needed to give him a body. I used Nalyd's original blueprint to get all the correct body parts in but I couldn't make him an elemental. I had to use threads from myself instead."

He was a miracle, that's what he was. Both the baby and Nioca were miracles that graced this plane. "So... he's human?" she wondered.

"Genetically, yes, but he has your son's soul." The child squawked happily in her arms as if to agree. "I think he still has memories of you. He recognizes you."

She couldn't stop looking at him and felt her heart jump when he smiled at her. Happy tears blurred her vision as she held the bundle tighter. "My son?" she could hardly believe it.

"Your son," Nioca reassured.

But Jewels shook her head. It wasn't right. Not quite... "No, Nioca. He's *our* son." The swell of pride that washed over him brought new tears to her eyes. "He's part me, he's part you... *He's absolutely perfect.*"

What's in a World?

By Jewels - Mar 6 2014

All she did was glance. That was all it took. Because he noted her glance and the desire behind it. He took pleasure in her thought and the corner of his mouth lifted in half smile, half smirk. His own eyes darted to her lips as she felt his desire come through their mental link. He wanted what she wanted and both knew it without a doubt. She looked into his eyes as he took a tentative step towards her. His adrenaline rose with his choice to act and her response to it. Not a conscious response but a physical one from her body's anticipation for what would happen next. Her emotions warred with her common sense which both warred with the betrayal of her body's response. He made no further move noting her indecision but mentally affirmed his rising desire.

"For crying out loud, would you two cut it out!? I'm right here, you know!" Nio's frustrated plea was met with embarrassed giggles and half-hearted apologies.

"Would you rather we took it to another room?" Jewels teased, while simultaneously reassuring him mentally that it was *only* teasing. She had no intention to torture him on purpose.

"All I'm asking for is a little restraint," Nio blew out a breath to calm himself. He should have guessed that two weeks in the Water Plane was not going to be long enough. He should have stayed longer. It was little over half a day to this pair. What he *needed* to do was send *them* to the Water Plane for a week... or a month... better yet, a year.

A whimper wafted down the hall and Nioca shot him an accusing look. "Restraint from us?! What about you and your bellowing? You've woken the baby." Nio shook his head. Only half a day alone and still they had managed to procreate within that time. They were crazy!

Jewels mentally admonished both of them to take it down a notch while she literally skipped to the other room. Motherhood – true motherhood – had lifted her heart greatly. And Nio supposed that finally knowing the secret behind Nioca's stasis brain was rather refreshing. To keep Stillborn's soul and build him a new body...? The concept was meritorious while the successful implementation was nothing short of a miracle.

Jewels returned cooing to the bundle in her arms. She had chosen a new name for him to signify his new start in life. "William Dylan Galton," she had announced just hours earlier. "To honor the three men who helped me bring him into the world."

"What did Will do?!" Nioca had huffed, irritated that his part had only relegated him to the last name. But Jewels had chuckled in the face of his jealousy. "He took me to a spa," she laughed

with a smile at the memory, "and bought me *clean* underpants. Don't think I could have gone through with it without his support."

Jewels looked up at Nio now, radiating joy and true contentment. With a pang he realized this was the first time he had ever seen her this way and Nioca shared his sentiment. Both of them stared at her to drink in this moment and commit it to memory forever. She blushed at their attention, "Now, now, don't let me distract you. Both of you get back to work. This place isn't going to clean itself."

Nio huffed his displeasure. Technically, he could have cleaned up and remodeled *and* made all the things Jewels had in mind to furnish the citadel already if he just used the Nexus. But Nioca had forbidden it and physically punched him in the arm for bringing it up. Jewels was little less than a day separated from the weakness of death's door and he refused to let any of them tap into that life draining flow of power for fear that her current vitality might cause her to overdo it. He didn't want her even thinking about using the Nexus, which meant Nio couldn't think about it either. So instead he stood here with a duster moving around particles of dirt and dead skin cells that would eventually find their way settled back down onto some other surface. It wasn't like the lab had a window he could shoo them out of. Nio let out a long bored sigh.

Nioca was about to punch him again when the portal in the corner crackled to life. Chores forgotten, the three gathered to stand in front of it and wait. Nio smiled slightly at the way Nioca instinctively placed himself in front of Jewels, as if he would have to protect her from whatever came through. There were only a handful of people who knew the coordinates of this portal and all were highly trusted.

Nio's calm was quickly turned to fear when the sight of a stranger bursting through was bolstered by Jewels' shock. It left him wielding his feather duster like a sword in the man's direction for the moments before Jewels broke into a smile and pushed past them to throw her free arm around the man's neck. "Aden!" she exclaimed as Nio blinked in growing recognition. The man closed his eyes with a smile as he wrapped his mother in a gentle embrace. Nio could hardly take in the changes from the twelve year old boy he had last seen. Had that really been just six months ago?

The portal crackled again as Vergil pushed through with a cringe. He muttered to himself while testing that his limbs and fingers still worked. "Oh, I hate portals, I hate portals, I really, really hate portals..."

"That's too bad," Nio said in mocking sympathy, "because Nioca won't let us use the Nexus to leave and I haven't convinced Jewels that a back door is necessary, yet." The scowl on Vergil's face was priceless. Having someone else to pick on made him feel better.

Jewels freed herself from Aden's grip to meet her brother in the same way. Vergil's worried brow smoothed out as he took a step back to look her up and down. A weight visibly lifted from his

demeanor at what he saw. Nio couldn't imagine the anxiousness he must have borne over her when he returned to the Fire Plane a day ago.

Jewels noted his relief as well as she stepped back from the pair. With a spark of mischievousness she lifted the bundle in her arms higher. "Aden, come say hello to your brother."

"What?!" Vergil's incensed cry echoed in the marble room as his gaze flickered from Nio to Nioca to the baby and back to Jewels. "We haven't been gone *that* long!"

Her eyes sparkled with laughter at his predictable outburst. "Oh hush," she admonished, "Nioca just created a new body for Stillborn's soul so Nalyd could keep his creation without any more fuss."

His relief was back though his eyes remained wary as he looked at the child. Without warning, Jewels pushed the baby into Vergil's arms. He sputtered in surprise, trying to refuse, but she let go and pulled back with a knowing smile as he fumbled to cradle the tiny bundle. When he held him securely, Jewels whispered to the wide-eyed child. "William, you remember Uncle Vergil."

Vergil's eyebrow shot up while his voice dropped an octave, "You named him *William*?"

"You have a problem with that?" she shot back with a fiery spark, daring him to make his opinion known.

"Oh, no. Not at all," he backpedaled with a hint of sarcasm. "William is a very fine name." He took a closer look at the child who smiled and lifted tiny fingers towards his face. Vergil's expression softened as he got used to the idea. "A very find name, indeed."

Jewels smiled with smug satisfaction. She had known her brother was really a softie all along. "So why are you here?" she asked him.

"I, uh, ...we wanted to make sure you were okay," Vergil answered a bit too quickly before whispering a little too loudly to cover his rushed reply with humor. "You know how this one worries." He jerked his thumb towards Aden who only smiled and shook his head. "You look great, by the way." Nio saw the deflection but deigned not to rush the man into his real reason for coming.

"I feel great," Jewels gushed. "Nioca and I were able to complete the dryad bonding."

He gave her a curious expression. "So, what does that mean?"

"Well, for one," she started, "I'm not sick anymore."

Nioca walked up behind her and put his arm around her waist. "Two, we're kinda officially an old married couple now." Jewels flashed him her new ring with a smile.

Vergil scowled with a look like he had just eaten something foul. "Ugh... and I thought Dubya was bad... Why do you hate me, Jewels? Xelgion is single, I'd be all right with that." Jewels raised a fist to punch him but he took a step back wagging a finger at her. "Ah ah ah, holding a baby here."

Nio walked over with a smirk and whispered sideways, "Which leads us to number three, there's gonna be a couple thousand more of these running around."

Vergil's indignation was hilarious. "*WHAT?!*"

"Dryad *seedlings*," Jewels clarified in a huff taking out her pent up aggravation on the top of Nio's ear as she dragged him a few painful steps away from her brother. "Not babies," she reassured, "They're completely different. Self-sufficient."

Nio rubbed his throbbing ear with a shrug. "They're all going to be half human and quarter fire elemental. I don't think we can count on knowing *what* they're going to be like." Vergil's quailing was worth the cuff on the back of the head he received from Nioca but he decided it in his own best interest to cede to their mental admonition to shut up.

Jewels pinched the bridge of her nose as she blew out a breath. She needed to change the subject and looked towards Aden. "You've been awfully quiet," she commented. He remained quiet as he stared at her intently; his face held a smile but there was something indecipherable behind his eyes. "What is it?" she asked, suddenly worried. "What's wrong?"

Gently, he pulled her towards him and wrapped her up in a big hug. "You've been sick since the day I was born," he breathed into her hair, eyes moist with emotion. "I never thought I'd have the opportunity to see you well." Jewels reached around to soothe her son as Nio felt a deeper kinship with the man he had woven together with the threads of his mother and brother. It was something they shared in their brief lives.

In that moment Nio felt a rush of overwhelming longing for this life that he was a critical part of making. He had questioned his motives before, in agreeing to help Jewels in this way, but he held no regrets. Even though it was hard to stand in the background without any claim to kinship in this man's life, still Nio held no regrets.

Somber but happy moments ticked past before Aden released Jewels to wipe his moist eyes on his sleeve. He had grown into a man in such a short amount of time... but that had been their intent. That Aden be ready to be the man that Fire and Water and Air would need him to be. He *was* that man, completely competent and ready for an incredible destiny Nio could only guess at. Mother and son shared reassuring smiles before he turned his unreadable gaze towards Nio.

Nio took a self-conscious step backwards realizing his pride in this man was indecent, but Aden had other plans. In three steps, he had closed the gap to give Nio a hug that rivaled any he had ever received. It left him dazed and speechless from more than the difficulty to bring in a full breath of air. He attempted to hold back his tears knowing his greatest accomplishment stood before him now. Again, Aden had different plans as his next words made it impossible to stop the flow. "You will always be a father to me." Jewels' mental affirmation did nothing to help stem his watery eyes which he swiped at once Aden let go.

Finally, he turned towards Nioca who felt uneasy with Aden's presence. Or rather it was he felt uneasy with his own presence, like he was an outsider among them. Mother, brother, uncle... creator revered as father. Nioca was the only one with no ties to the man save one act of heroism that helped rescue him from execution which was ten years in the man's past.

"You," Aden pointed an accusing finger at him while he walked closer. His tone of voice did not alleviate Nioca's uneasiness as he unconsciously backed away. Aden planted his feet right in front of him with his finger still pointing. "You tried to kill my mother before I was born." The statement held an acidic edge to it.

"Aden!" Jewels scolded in offense but backed off when he sent her a commanding stare. She recognized it as an order from her Fire Lord and clamped her mouth down mid protest. She didn't know what he was doing and didn't approve, but Nioca did not cower at the challenge.

"Yes," he replied simply.

"You killed hundreds of flames in cold blood over your rage against our people." The statement was said as a fact that Nioca did not deny.

"I did." He gave no excuse or reasoning, just accepted his guilt with bowed head.

"*You* caused my mother's sickness!"

Nioca cringed at the venom barely managing a nod in acceptance. He did not know what to expect from this new ruler of the Fire Elementals. Would he reject his mother's union and

demand his life? Did he know of Jewels' soul bonding to him? He would beg for imprisonment instead for her sake even as Jewels mentally railed against his line of thought.

Both were so intent on arguing with each other that neither saw the grin that streaked across Aden's face as he voiced his next 'grievance' in a much softer tone, "You brought my mother back to life from death." Nioca's head snapped up at the words too stunned by the turnaround to respond. Aden continued with a nod towards the infant in Vergil's arms. "You freed my brother from an eternity in torturous slavery." He dropped his pointing finger to hold Nioca by the shoulders and leaned in closer. "*You*, are my mother's reason for joy, and I thank you!"

Nioca was still speechless though he had found his smile. Jewels had passed on her forgiving spirit to her son. Perhaps there was hope for the elemental races after all.

Aden brought him in for a crushing hug as Vergil groaned where he stood. "Come on, all this sissy mushy crap is making me gag. Can we please go get a drink? I could use a nice stiff glass of ice water. Gonna need one after using that death trap to get out of here." The comical picture of him bouncing William in his arms as he complained was too much for the others as they burst out laughing at him.

Vergil scowled as he turned towards the portal to recalibrate it. "Well, I'm sure that *William* would *love* to share an ice water with me, wouldn't you William? Yes you would." His intentional baby talk did nothing to alleviate their aching sides. "Let's leave these mamby, pamby tree-huggers to laugh all by their lonesome, hm?" and he jumped into the ring of crackling power with his eyes slammed shut.

Once Nio had regained his breath he found it appropriate to ask the obvious question. "Did you two just let *Vergil* walk through a portal *he* calibrated with *your* baby?" That stopped both of them cold with dread as they jumped through the portal after him calling his name. Nio was left with Aden as both fought to retame the new laughter that now split their sides.

Aden smiled at the group that had gathered in the Calamity Refuge Lounge. It held a long string of lineages that tied one to another in ways they didn't even see. Fire, ice, water, air; these elements pumped strength through their blood co-mingled with the endurance of dryad, the perseverance of human, and the mysteries of AI, shadow, and god. They were mothers, brothers, fathers, sons; creators and creations. Husbands. Wives. Hearts. Souls. The ties that bound them together were cast like an invisible net; nurturing, protecting, and uniting them all. So different from each other yet all part of the same. They were a family and Aden was proud to be counted among them.

Around the room he let his eyes wander as he breathed in this moment of time. Sylae held William aloft, cooing and rubbing her nose against his bringing laughter from the child and delight to those who watched. She had been close to tears when Jewels told her his name, overwhelmed with the honor of the legacy. "It's *perfect*," she had managed with a tight throat.

Nylad had been less impressed with his namesake. "Dylan? What kind of a rubbish name is that?" He had demanded immediate compensation for the violation of his creation in the form of every single item on his waiting equipment list. But Nioca had been ready to shut him down demanding he compensate Jewels first for the violation of her son to make his creation. The two were at a standoff, ready to take each other out if necessary, but Jewels had only laughed at them, deflating them both. She reassured Nalyd that she intended to keep her promise but asked he wait until after Aden's visit. Nalyd slunk to the southeast corner booth where he now feigning either distaste or indifference to the child as he fidgeted impatiently for Jewels to be ready. The longer he sat, though, the more he inwardly smiled at the child. Jewels had not once tried to engage Nalyd's creation with sappy affection or whines of 'mother'. If it would keep her from pestering Nalyd... perhaps the violation could be overlooked.

Zene sat to Sylae's left, tickling the child's toes. He was an enigma to Aden and even now sensed his gaze, returning it with a nod. Aden could feel both the man's power and his pain though his actual thoughts remained a mystery. From what he could glean from the others, Aden saw him as the remnant of a god gone to war on his own soul. He could sense that there was damage the eyes could not see that left him crippled and limping on in existence. Yet Zene's face did not show it, here among these mortals who welcomed him as an esteemed member of their group. Perhaps that was why he was content to stay.

Vergil sat on Sylae's other side engrossed with his new found nephew. In between toe tickles and nose rubs, he entertained William with tiny bursts of flame and silly faces hardly allowing the child a spare moment to catch his breath. Aden shook his head with a smile. He had never figured his uncle as a baby person, and really Vergil hadn't thought he was either, but any ice that had once encased his heart against the idea had melted the first few moments William had been in his arms. He would make a good father one day... deity knew he had been there for Aden as he grew up. Convincing Vergil of that, though, would be a challenge even for *his* renowned persuasion skills.

His notice moved on to Azuma and his Livvy behind the bar. As consumed in their love for each other as any other love struck pair he had met in the Fire Plane, Aden reveled in their humanity. Both looked at the child in anticipation of their own, at moments willing time to move faster, while also sharing fleeting fears of uncertainty and inadequacy in the face of this new responsibility. The spark of life held so many forms; Aden wondered how many people dabbled in the process of creation without even realizing the potential ripple effect that might come from their efforts. Azuma often marveled at how w-dueck had made the lives in his arms possible simply by deciding one day to program a barkeep. He was grateful despite it not being Will's

intent and wished he could have thanked the man. Aden had to smile ...Perhaps one day he would.

Further from the others sat Jasmine and Syla. The two women chatted with each other about anything except what was most heavy on their minds. For Jasmine, it was a matter of her people that she must broach with Jewels. The display during her bonding had been a horrifically traumatic event for many of them. Even those who had not spoken since their arrival to this soil had ventured to the council meet with their protest. They were terrified that Nana would again spontaneously combust and take the rest of them with her. How could they live in such daily fear while Nana herself stood majestic and proud in mockery reminding them of the flames that brought her life but would surely devour each and every one of them to ash?

Had it been just Nana and Jewels with their single instance of turning to flame, Jasmine may have been able to placate them with the assurances that it was an isolated incident that would never happen again. But seed to seed, even now Nana's limbs budded with the promise of thousands of offspring. It would soon no longer be just one tree to worry about. Could Jasmine promise that none of these might be more prone to turn to flame? She could not. They wanted Nana to leave, before her blooms opened and before any chance of more fire dryads taking root. Jasmine was incredibly uncomfortable with the decision her kin had voted on almost unanimously, but as their chosen Elder and, ultimately, their protector, it was her duty to see it fulfilled. Aden did not envy her the conversation.

Syla, on the other hand, could not think much past the two weeks she had spent in the Water Plane with Nio. The first night had been a wild, passionate abandon brought on by too much wine and not enough sense. The subsequent morning, then, became an awkward festering regret... at least on her part. First for the ill-conceived choices she had made the night before and then for the visibly crushed spirit she'd left him with before breakfast. He was a good man, just like Nioca in almost every way, except for the fact that he wasn't. Syla stole glances of both of them knowing that the *real* Nioca was lost to her forever. She was happy for him, truly happy, but she couldn't bring herself to replace him with a facsimile in her heart.

Guilt had made her stay at the Water Plane, though Nio had insisted he would not be offended if she left. Still she had gotten a separate room and spent the days going for walks, basking lakeside, and counting the stars with him. It had not been unpleasant; he did his best to keep the conversation light and positive. She really enjoyed reminiscing with him about things Nioca had done throughout his life. Especially fun, was learning the embarrassing things he had never deigned to tell her himself. She had laughed and laughed in Nio's company, then cried and cried upon returning to her room alone for the constant reminder of what she would never have again. It was a torture that was almost worth the pain.

Returning to the Refuge had so far kept her mind occupied with caring for the Ermarians and their needs. It has also given her an open bar to dull her memories with. If she hadn't already

been here when all of them arrived, she would not have come in, but she'd decided not to leave. Whether it was pretenses or pride or something else, she was not sure, but Sylas was done with going out of her way to avoid them. Aden thought it a bit of all three.

Aden let out a sigh that creased Jewels' brow. His mother had kept a worried eye on him all day. She fretted over why he was really here and struggled to be patient in his silence. Nioca and Nio also waited attempting to hide their own impatience from her with only moderate success. The truth was, he didn't want to broach the subject. He needed something – something big – something he could not get on his own. Aden knew, without doubt, that his mother and her friends here could help him, but it was not without risk. Every single spark of life here could be snuffed out before the night was done, lost in the ether of the void. His mother, his brother, his uncle, his creator... all lost. That was the risk, but still he must. Beneath his heart pulsed a certainty that transcended time and thought and life itself. He must! *It was time.*

"What's wrong?" Jewels' voice rang with worry in his ear. She brushed away a tear he didn't realize he had shed and was unable to answer her. For once in his life, Aden was speechless, caught between his responsibilities to his people and the family that surrounded him now. He could not look into her eye.

Vergil was at her side in a moment, reassuring her. "Nothing, Jewels. Nothing is wrong."

"Well, it sure doesn't look like nothing!" his mother slipped an arm around his back and he remembered that she had carried this responsibility too. She would understand its weight once he told her.

Aden forced his lips to move as he turned around. "I need your help." He found the eyes of each patron present reading their immediate reactions without surprise. His mother already had no doubt that she would do anything he asked and it closed his throat with the confidence she held in him.

"What is it? How can we help?" they all looked expectantly at him but he was once again unable to speak.

He managed a glance at Vergil who gave an understanding nod. "The weeks since you left, Jewels, negotiations have gotten more intense. The core pure bloods, those who refuse to swear fealty to the leadership of a half breed have agreed to a compromise."

Jewels listened with rapt attention. "Well that's good, isn't it? What do they want?"

"They want to live on a different plane, apart from all other races and half breeds so they can remain pure as their convictions demand."

Jewels was nodding as Vergil spoke. Aden could see the wheels of practiced leadership turning behind her eyes. "Makes sense," she ceded, "I see no reason why they shouldn't be allowed their independence if they move to a different plane."

"Not just any plane," Vergil cautioned as Aden took a half step forward.

He took a cleansing breath before dealing the critical card. "They want Ermaria." Unsurprisingly his statement was met with furrowed brows and confused murmurs.

"They *do* understand it was destroyed, don't they?" Sylae asked with derision. The obvious flaw in their demand only confused her more.

Aden paused to pick up his coffee cup for a sip before starting his answer. Guilt gnawed at his stomach for bringing this responsibility to them, but he must. *They* must! If there was such a thing as destiny, this was it. His words flowed from his lips much practiced with years of negotiating the most hostile of flames. "They do. They don't care. The Pure Bloods had been sending spies to Ermaria for centuries. In their minds it is the perfect place... the *only* place where they will be at peace. Nice pre-industrial planet with a hot molten core... and Bladescraft for the creation of their new home within it." Aden let that sink in while he chose his next words based on the qualms that were in the fore front of their minds. "They don't want to live on the surface, neither are they demanding it be barren. They only want to live in the center of the planet with the ability to make it their home."

Jewels pinched the bridge of her nose and blew out a ragged breath, it was one of her endearing tells that she was really frustrated but didn't want to scream at anyone. "Okay, yeah, so Ermaria would have been a perfect place for them, but – It. Was. *Destroyed*. Not there anymore! What do they expect us to do about that?"

Aden let the question hang in the air unanswered. Nioca had already guessed it and put his arms protectively around Jewels. He did not share this guess with Jewels or the growing apprehension he now felt over it. He stared at Aden, a silent plea not to ask it of her because both of them knew Jewels would not refuse her son no matter the risk to her life. Aden hated the risk just as much, but his responsibilities were to an entire people – the future of *many* peoples relied on this critical decision. Hopefully Nioca would one day understand that and forgive him.

Aden readied himself to show them all what was required. He put down his coffee and cleared his throat making a show of cupping his empty hands together in front of him. The Camirine beat out a rhythm next to his heart as he drew on the free-floating energy in the air. It only took seconds before he released his hands revealing a miniature globe that he left floating in the air. "They understand what designers are," he droned to his rapt audience. "They understand what

designers do," he let the globe rise and spin while it pulsed the same rhythm as the Camirine. "They understand that *you* are designers."

Nalyd had risen to his feet as he eyed the globe hungrily, while Azuma and Ligrev had backed away. "I cannot do this alone. I need those of you from Ermaria and those who know how to design," indicating everyone except these three. Azuma's anxiety visibly lifted as he held his Livvy's shoulders, but Nalyd's face frowned. Aden caught the ball out of the air and handed it to the little shaper who snatched it eagerly. While some became very quiet at the idea, their minds racing with the possibilities, Jewels' voice was incredulous.

"A planet? They want us to create a *whole planet*?!" Aden and Vergil nodded at her as she threw her arms in the air. "That's impossible! It takes life force to perform Bladescraft; we would need millions... *billions* or it would kill us if we tried!"

And there it was, a very possible risk and his fear spoken aloud for them all to weigh. He dropped his gaze to the floor. "Yes, it would," he admitted, "If we tried to make it with our own strength." Aden looked into their eyes each in turn as he continued. "But there is another energy available for us to use. It *is* possible to rebuild Ermaria." Just his statement, said as fact, built their confidences but Aden didn't want them to go in ill-informed. "The risk is still very real, it is easy to pour too much of oneself into a creation, but if we are careful we can make this world and live to tell the tale."

Aden intended to let them think about it. He meant to let them come to their decision on their own. But a deep rumbling voice poured from his lips. "*IT IS TIME.*" The voice resonated within each of their minds though it meant something more to those who had spent time in the white world before. These staggered under a flood of forgotten memories of the plane where the physics of a creator resided. Each was overcome with the same remnants of ancient knowledge that now guided him.

Jewels looked up at him, understanding finally dawning in her eyes. "It is time," she repeated and held out her left hand to him. She did not flinch when he pulled out a dagger and sliced it across her outstretched palm. He did the same to his right hand and intertwined his fingers with hers. They were the first link in the circle. Aden looked at the others expectantly.

"It is time," Nioca spoke to Nio who nodded his understanding by proxy. He took the dagger from Aden and sliced his right hand and Nio's left. "The world that was and is not and will be again," he commented as he pressed his wounded hand against Nio's. "Aggie knew."

Zene was the next to take the dagger, though he held it hesitantly. "The circle must be completed," he explained to Sylae, "but it will join us all so we can work as one."

Sylae nodded in understanding handing William to Ligrev behind the bar, but still Zene hesitated. She sympathized with his struggle knowing his pain. "It's okay. You can do this," she responded, dragging her own palm across the blade. "It is time." Zene nodded cutting his hand to hold hers.

Around the circle the knife passed as Vergil wordlessly closed the gap between Aden and Sylae. But Jasmine stared at it with uncertainty. "I want to help, but I don't know what to do," she confessed.

"Join the circle and we will guide you with the rest," Aden assured. Her green dryad blood soon comingled with Zene's and Sylae's as both women committed to the cause. Sylae also took the other hand of Nio to join them with the larger group.

Nine now in total, there was only one link left to be made as Jewels and Nioca cut each other's palms. Suddenly a shrill voice cut across the room. "No! Jewels must not do this! Jewels promised Nalyd!" he waved his list around frantically. "Jewels might not come back alive! She must keep her promise first!"

She squinted down at the mad little shaper, forming a dangerous idea. "How about I show Nalyd how to make his own equipment instead?" Nalyd's eyes grew at the offer. "Think about it," she cooed. "You could make whatever you want, whenever you want."

Sylae cleared her throat from across the circle. "Do you really think that's a good idea, Jewels?"

"Of course it's not a good idea," she shot back, "but I'm not going to play magical vending machine all my life. Besides, you really want him left here if we don't come back?"

Sylae pursed her lips. "Good point."

Nalyd fidgeted, torn between survival and the hunger to have this power for himself. "Well? What is Nalyd's decision?" Jewels pushed. As answer he laid down his scythe and snatched away the dagger. After two deft slices and tossing the blade away, he clamped down on their hands with an iron grip.

The circle was complete. *It was time.*

The light had no source, it just *was*, erasing all the eye could see. Through the fog of a dream the

world fell away. Filled to overflowing emptiness the deafening bright consumed them. They were everything, everywhere while being nothing at all. And they were one.

Jumbled thoughts flowed freely, one to another.

Where are we?

What is this place?

I've been here before.

We are nowhere

We are everywhere.

We are.

One voice rose above the others that only a few recognized, yet all knew it was the soul of the Camirine that spoke. *Do not worry about the mundane. You are here for a purpose.*

What do we do?

How do we do it?

Around you is the energy of pure imagination. Every thought ever thought by every being that has ever existed is around you now, ready and waiting to become more than just an idea. Take a hold of it and shape it in your image.

Aden appeared almost immediately followed by Jewels, Nioca, Sylae and Zene. The others struggled momentarily while those who understood came alongside them to help them take form. One by one the circle reformed in the likeness of each soul present, but fingers, they had none. Instead they were fused together, a crown of paper dolls connected by the hand.

Nioca blinked a few times at the soul on his left. Tall and slender with an angled yet smooth face... Nylad grinned down at his striped leggings that disappeared under a thigh high skirt. *Nalyd has always wanted long legs*, he quipped.

It's your true soul, Nalyd, Jewels noted with a smirk. *I had no idea your soul was so... stylish.*

He blushed but frowned in a pout. *Why did Jewels ever doubt?*

She did not answer as her attention was pulled to the other side where Sylae stared to her left. *...Iffy?* her questioning thought quivered as she visibly trembled.

Zene looked himself up and down through both his own eyes and the eyes of everyone else. *I'm sorry. I did not try to look like this.*

No one chooses, Aden disclosed, *The soul exists of its own right and takes on its true form here.*

Sylae shook her head. *Don't apologize. You tried to tell me the very first day. I'm sorry. For not letting you be who you are. Can... can I call you Iffy again?*

He smiled. *I'd like that.*

The Camirine began to speak again, a permeating rumble that signified the true beginning of their task. *You have come to bring together the world and plane that was Ermaria. You will use the imagination of countless millions to create it now just as it first came into being of its own accord. Do not create with your mind. This undertaking is too big for that. It would rip your sanity apart with all the detail needed. It must be created from the heart for the heart is an open door. You must all work together as a vessel for the energy to flow through.*

Just as your soul knows what its form should be so does Ermaria know. The world that once was and is not will be again with your guidance. Pour yourselves into it, your passion, your desires, your fears, your loves. Be honest with yourself and the world will make itself. But do not hold on or you will lose yourself within the creation, scattered as ash in the wind. All must heed this warning. The circle is complete. You are one. To break the circle is to lose everything and everyone.

Sober minds quieted in the face of no second chances. Either they would all succeed or they all would vanish from the worlds. They had to trust each other and be diligent not to let the others down. Though the sense of passing time did not exist here, the Camirine gave one final thunderous command. *IT IS TIME.*

It is hard to describe the heart when it is a conduit for something that is beyond natural grasp. Captivated is a good word - trapped in a second of eternity by one's own desire to remain. It was a trickle, a stream, a river, a flood; power flying as fast as they dared open themselves up to. It was a breath always exhaling because the lungs were always full. They endured continuous and simultaneous, death and resurrection as the flow that left desolate also brought replete vitality.

They poured themselves into it; their passions, their desires, their fears, their loves... their losses. Jasmine had lost all but a remnant of her people, Sylar had lost her home. Nioca had lost everything he had ever fought to protect while Nio had lost the opportunity to ever see it with his own eyes. These were also their hopes, that they would regain what was lost.

Aden, Vergil, and Jewels yearned for a future of peace for their people, knowing that this world would mark a new era. Lives would be saved, convictions honored, futures secured for all. These were the moments that left a legacy for countless generations to look up to and follow after. They held nothing back from the power that claimed their quiddity as its mortar.

Nylad, Sylar, and Iffy were just honored to be a part of the process; each in their own ways. Millennia removed from his days of moulding idea to reality, Iffy stretched his capabilities focusing on the universe where Ermaria would spin. Sun, moon, stars... an infinite sea would blanket the heavens around this one land. Sylar looked on to the surface itself. Mountain, ocean, desert... an infinite variety would pepper the landscapes across both earth and sea. Nylad spun unknown joy in the presence of the power itself. There was no limit to what he could shape. Animal, vegetable, mineral... an infinite cauldron of life would call Ermaria their home.

The universe took shape in their hearts forcing them to expand as it grew to fill the entire plane. It stretched them beyond any arbitrary limits they previously held as truth. Perception gave way to limitless reality until their identity was all but lost within it. *It is done.* The voice was but a raspy whisper that scratched at the edge of their awareness.

It was time to let go. They could not remember how.

All around the circle, hearts continued to pour. The energy that flowed through them eroded away at their beings taking them, scattering them into infinity. Names were lost, forgotten on the wind. There was no purpose beyond Ermaria.

What's in a World

By Jewels - Mar 8 2014

"What do you think is happening?" Livvy asked him as she stroked the baby in her arms under his chin.

Azuma had no idea. The ring of Refugees in their lounge had not moved a muscle since Nalyd completed the circuit. That had been nearly three hours ago. They stood with eyes closed and only the slightest rising from their chests testified that they were more than just statues. "Not sure," he answered just to fill the silence. "How long do you think it takes to rebuild a world?"

Livvy shrugged and leaned against him with a yawn. "Too long if you ask me. I think I need a nap."

"Looks like you're not the only one," Azuma nodded at the child whose eyes blinked slower and slower. "You two go ahead. I'll keep an eye on everyone down here." They had closed the Lounge to visitors both for safety reasons and to keep from facing questions they did not have any answers to. Only one patron remained besides those in the circle.

Livvy stole a glance at the shadow in the corner before nodding. Nylad's creation had not moved since his master joined the circle either. It unnerved Livvy, and Azuma wasn't too keen on it either. Now that he had been separated from Stillborn's soul, there was something more... alien about him. But as long as he didn't cause any trouble, Azuma was more than happy to let him stand there.

After a few minutes, Azuma peeked up the stairs to make sure Livvy was not standing on the landing and pulled a box out from the dry storage. In it were roughly fifty dowels, each three feet long and one inch thick. Over half of them had been carved with a spiral of tiny daisies, Livvy's favorite flower, and he pulled out one of the smooth ones to start working the design into the wood. He'd been stealing an hour or two wherever he could to keep it a secret from Livvy. Eventually they would be the bars for the crib he was making for their child. He hoped she liked it.

Time slipped by in the silent room and wooden shavings soon littered the floor. Just when Azuma was starting to think the room a little stuffy, a gentle breeze blew across his neck and made the shavings at his feet dance. The draft felt good... but where did it come from? Azuma looked around the room. There were no open windows, no open doors, Dunstan still stood stoically in his vigil... was Livvy awake upstairs? He checked the bottom of the stairs but could feel nothing wafting down them.

Still the shavings danced in swirls and intermittent gusts around his feet. Azuma followed them around with his eyes until he noticed a napkin lazily rotating inside the circle of Refugees. Sleeves and skirts rustled from a wind with no outside source. He wished he knew what it meant. The only thing worse than the waiting was the wondering.

Azuma walked the perimeter watching the napkin as it neared the center. Tighter and tighter it rotated until the wind held it like a spinning top. There was something about it that drew Azuma in; he wanted to see it up close... *needed* to touch it. Ducking underneath a pair of hands he hesitated momentarily before snatching up the napkin to inspect it. Nothing but a normal napkin.

But something else now swam around his feet. Tiny shimmering particles made swirling patterns all around him. Their movement was fluid catching sheens of light like ribbons of glitter. Every movement he made sent them tumbling in dancing spirals. Looking to the floor he traced the ribbons back to the statuesque Refugees. Golden motes were flowing down their bodies to their feet before joining the rest in the circle. Subtly the graceful powder began to glow with an inner light, or perhaps they always had been glowing and their combined light was easier to see as more and more poured out around him.

His friends seemed pale in comparison. Stepping closer to Sylae, he noted that her pallor *was* incredibly pale, unnaturally so. Taking a closer look he saw sunken cheekbones and a too sharp jawline that had not been there this morning. Even as he watched, her eyes seemed to draw back into her skull while her skin became more taunt. With a shudder of fear he realized she was wasting away. All of them were. The grains that spilled from their bodies were taking with them the very spark of life.

He didn't know what to do. Was this even supposed to happen? Even if it was, he couldn't just sit by and watch them all wither away to nothing. Azuma reached out to grab Sylae's shoulders and gave them a shake. "Sylae, wake up!"

At the sound of his voice the breeze around him picked up speed and strength, but Sylae did not stir. Azuma tried to separate her hand from Vergil's but he could not even pry away one finger. Her hair started whipping around her face as the wind gusted at him angrily. Again he shook her shoulders, raising his voice to try to get through to her. "Sylae, please! You have to stop this." Still she did not move.

The wind ripped at his hooded cloak, snapping it in fierce protest of his interference. He braced himself against the rising gale and squinted at the blasts. The life poured from her faster as her shoulders shrunk to bones under his fingers. "It's killing you!" he screamed then staggered back in shock when her eyes finally popped open. Foggy white orbs stared at him without sight or emotion or reason. A sharp glance at each of the others revealed the same lifeless eyes

unconcerned with the tempest that tore at their clothing and threatened to drain their bodies to empty shells.

For a fleeting moment Azuma feared for his own life, standing in the midst of this enchantment he didn't understand. All thought of himself fled from him, though, at the voice that called his name. "Azuma, what's going on?" His Livvy braced herself against the banister on the stairs. One hand clung to the wood for stability in the wind while the other palm was pressed under her bulging belly.

It was not a conscious decision to move to her side, nor did he remember his steps on the way, but the new fear that gripped him pushed him to action. "I don't know," he yelled above the din, "but we have to go." As if to punctuate his statement, a crackle of energy boomed within the circle. "Come on!"

He started to pull her towards the door but she did not move her feet. "But what about them?" she pointed at the stoic Refugees whose faces were lit with the light of their lives combined to a spinning cyclone in front of them. "What's happening?"

"They're dying," he tried to explain, impatient that her life was also in danger while they stood here. "I tried to stop it, but I can't. It's too late, Livvy, we have to leave!"

He tugged on her hand again bringing her down the last few steps but a sudden cry snapped her head back toward the stairs and she yanked herself free. "The baby! We can't leave the baby!"

Azuma opened his mouth to protest but she glared daggers at him as she clung to her own belly. He knew he would not convince her. Abandoning the child upstairs was as unthinkable to her as abandoning their own. "Okay," he conceded, "I will go get William, but *you* have to leave now, understood?" She nodded with grateful eyes as he nudged her towards the door.

He turned back to the stairs, raising an arm against the ever growing wind. The center of the circle was a writhing tornado that had started knocking over chairs and rattling the bottles behind the bar. Intermittent gusts pushed him back as he gripped the railing. Upstairs the wind only whistled across the hall allowing him to move quickly to the room where William squalled. The child went silent the moment Azuma picked him up. He tucked the baby tightly into the crook of his right arm and hurried back down the stairs.

A crash and a scream nearly cost his balance as he whipped his head up wide-eyed. The storm had overturned a table in Livvy's path. As he descended the stairs to help her, a chair lifted with a blast coming straight for him. Azuma ducked with plenty of time, but the chair hurtled on towards the bar, smashing against the wall behind it with a thunderous crash. Already broken bottles fell to the ground where they splintered even more.

Mercilessly, the gale picked up shimmering shards of glass and flung them around the room; a wall of blades that sang out with their passing zings. He let out a gasp as one sliced at his left arm, turning to see the wound. Before he had time to look another nicked his turned ear and imbedded itself in the wall beside him. Once second sooner and it would have taken off his nose.

Livvy's cry of pain brought him back to his senses as he covered his face with his free arm to rush towards her, terror for her safety driving him. "Livvy!!" She crouched on the floor whimpering as he pushed William into her arms and threw his around her, back to the wind to shield them from the shrapnel.

He couldn't hold back his startled cry when a shard stabbed him under the shoulder blade nor the sharp groan of pain when another ripped into his side. "We can't stay here!" Livvy admonished tugging at his sleeve.

He nodded trying to think despite the chaos. "Get behind the table," he bellowed while struggling to get it up on its side. The wind tried to tear it from his hands but he clamped down on the legs to keep it on the ground. It gave them a few seconds of respite but another crackling boom told him they were still in grave danger. If they could just make it to the door... and as far away from his dying friends as possible... The catch in his throat stripped him raw. There was nothing he could do for them. All was surely lost.

As he moved the table backwards inch by inch, only in his subconscious did he notice that the shadow in the corner was gone.

It was beautiful – intoxicatingly exquisite – just to be here in the ebb and flow of this power he had never known the likes of. He would be content to stay here forever, and indeed, intended just that as he delighted in the majesty of existing within it and around it and as part of it. There was angelic joy and indulgent revelry in the ambrosia. Had there ever been anything else? Surely not. This was all that had ever been and all that ever would.

The dissonance that invaded his luxury reverberated through him and tore at his tranquility. It separated him from the ether through the vibration of his essence against the current of everything else. The sensation was torturous as it ripped the joy from his being and his being from the revelry. Every nerve burned with the loss as he screamed out his rage against the estrangement.

Senses he had forgotten came back to him. He could taste the decay of a rotting tooth on his tongue. He could smell the pungent aroma of alcohol burning his nose. He could hear his

howling voice ringing in his ears. He could see a bright swirling mass in front of him. He could feel the floor beneath his feet and the wind whipping his robe around his ankles *and* he could feel his creation's hands singing their song on his shoulders.

Nalyd closed his mouth as his mind cleared and his creation's voice rasped above the din of the raging storm. *"Master is in danger."*

As he snapped his head back and forth, his mind worked overtime to try to understand what was happening. By the look of the skeletal faces with pupil-less eyes staring out of them, it was not good. With difficulty he tried to remember what they had been doing... remaking the Ermarian plane. Yes, that was it. But it had been dangerous... that was what the new Fire Lord had said. Nalyd had no intention of dying with the rest of those around him but tug as he might, his hands remained fused to those of Jewels and Nioca.

"Creation!" he barked out his command, "Separate Nalyd and Jewels' hands!" His shadow moved a step to the left placing a hand on each of their wrists and pulled. Pain shot up his arm until he feared his hand would be ripped clean off and still his fingers would not budge.

Jewels let out her own blood-curdling scream while the fog over her eyes swirled away to reveal the hazel of her pupils underneath. *"Stop it!"* she managed between cries of pain. *"You're breaking my wrist!"*

Nalyd voiced his own command for his creation to let go and tugged on Jewels' arm as she blinked in her confusion. *Let go of Nalyd's hand!*

She focused on him for a moment before giving her own arm a tug. *I can't! It's stuck.*

But another thought was forming in Nalyd's mind. "Creation, wake Nioca! Bring them all back from the ether!"

One by one around the circle voices rang out in protest as eyes cleared to awareness. Still the tempest raged around them while the cyclone of pulsating life throbbed between them. Aden was the last to be awoken and Nalyd growled at him while his dazed gaze was still taking in his surroundings. *Nalyd demands you stop this at once!*

As recognition came back to his gaunt features Aden nodded. *We must let go,* he thought to everyone. There was a chorus of dissent as those around the circle tried.

We can't!

I can't move my fingers!

They're fused together!

I can't even pry off a single one!

There was a crackling as the energy in the air fought with the direction of its flow. *You are one*, The familiar voice of the Camirine droned. *You must let go as one. Close your eyes, they deceive you. It is not your hands that are connected, but your souls.*

As the stone spoke a tendril of the power broke away from the center. Spinning sideways it reached out to touch Aden's heart. His essence was returning to him, Nalyd realized. So where was Nalyd's life blood? Closing his physical eyes left him dizzy. The room was spinning around him... or he was spinning in the room. In snatches he could see himself – his body – standing as a shell among others. He focused on his face, boring against the rotation that held him captive. The effort was exhausting but Nalyd would not give up.

Sylae struggled to release herself but it was useless. She was held tight by whatever bond this ritual had connected them with. Her glimmer of hope in seeing most all the others break away towards their bodies quickly faded when she could not even seem to start. The cyclone in the center reduced itself in to a tight winding and crackling cylinder as her Refugees reclaimed their life essence. Only three were left, she realized, for there were only two other voices still in her head. Jasmine and Iffy.

Aden's voice rang out as he turned to her and stated the obvious. "Let go."

"I'm not holding on to anything!" she opened her eyes and snarled at him.

"No," Aden's gaze moved to her left. "The lonely god must let go."

Sylae turned her head slowly taking in Iffy's constricted face. It was back to the form he had chosen for Zene but Sylae had no doubt about the man inside now. Though he held much of his thoughts back from both of them, he visibly trembled from his efforts as he stared at the column of light. *You can do it, Iffy*, she encouraged. *Just let go.*

He closed his eyes and seemed to cling to her even more as a single tendril slipped out from the

center towards Jasmine. She could sense the dryad return to herself and breathed a sigh of relief. One down one to go. She whispered gently into his mind. *Release me.*

Instead of letting her go, though, he allowed himself to release everything of himself that he had been holding back. She gasped as she suddenly found herself immersed in a cascade of loves and hopes and dreams of possibilities that were beyond her comprehension. It brought with it a rush of adrenaline and endorphins causing her breaths to come in short gulps. *What... what are you doing?*

Stay. His request was so tiny she barely caught it among everything else he had poured into her.

What?

He turned his gaunt face to look her in the eye pleadingly. *Stay with me.* When she did not immediately respond he plunged on. *I can break the circle now. I can protect us from the enchantment.*

In his mind she saw the bubble of power that would encase just the two of them. *But what about everyone else?* He didn't need to respond directly as she saw the images of the explosion that would follow and the desolation that would be left where her Refuge had once stood.

His thoughts spun through her head in an excited rush. *I will give you a new Refuge, Sylae. With new members. However you like it. They can have anyone's face, anyone's personality, anyone's memories. Anything you want. I can give you anything! I am a god, Sylae; you will never want for anything ever again!*

There wasn't even a moment's hesitation to her confused reply. *No! How can you even ask such a thing? Iffy, let me go.*

Just as quickly she was drowning in a waterfall of fears and pains and overwhelming loneliness. *I can't... I can't, Sylae. I can't do it again. Please, you don't know what it's like. Never taking in a full breath. Never feeling warmth. Half-numb, half-starved... half-dead! Don't ask it of me. Please!*

Time seemed to stop as the tears ran down his face. His pain was all too real to her. It cut to the bone and shattered her heart. He didn't really know what he was asking. All here would cease to exist as they understood existence if he didn't let go. Was he really asking her for permission to kill them all? Didn't he realize that allowing that would effectively kill her too? If not physically, then emotionally. Hot tears ran down her own cheeks as her thoughts took on an icy edge. *It is your choice to make, Iffy. Life or whatever comes after death for all of us. You are the god, after all. You decide.*

His brows creased in anguish at her disapproval though she didn't know what he had expected from her. He snapped his head back towards the crackling energy and slammed his emotions shut. She would not ask it of him. Not again. But in spite of his indecision, Sylae waited confidently because he was Iffy and there was only one choice Iffy would ever make in the end.

In his wretchedness he screamed out his suffering as two spirals of life split apart and filled them each. Sylae felt her strength returning to her body. When the last motes of light skittered back to their owners, the tornado between them burst outwards sending all ten flying in opposite directions. Sylae landed with a hard thud on an overturned table. The ringing in her ears was deceptive to the sudden silence in the lounge though her dazed mind didn't really register either.

She was swimming and the water was two inches deeper than her head. Images wavered and voices were garbled as her limbs floated lifeless at her sides. Someone came close, someone spoke into to her ear, someone picked her up. Warmth started radiating out from her middle as the world glowed in a healing light and slowly came back into focus.

Iffy's face smiled down at her tentatively. Iffy's real face. "Hey," he said in greeting when she finally focused on his eyes.

"Hey," she responded sleepily. "Did we make it?"

"Yeah. Yeah we did," he laughed then hesitated and looked away. "Sylae... I'm sorry. When we were connected I shouldn't have... I mean... I had no right..." his eyes were moist when he glanced back at her. "I... I don't know what came over me."

"Don't worry about it," she reassured. "It's over now."

He nodded and set her down on her feet but she caught a hold of his hands and leaned in. "Are you going to be okay?"

Iffy only half smiled with a quiver to his chin. He hesitated before answering. "The optimist would say half-dead is still half-alive, eh? The ache of it will lessen over time, or at least my perception of the ache will be dulled. I will endure." His answer made her frown but he lifted her chin with a finger and gave her a genuine smile. "A half-life endured with you is still more desirable than a whole life enjoyed without you."

Sylae blushed as she pulled away feeling suddenly self-conscious with their proximity. She looked around the room to distract from her awkwardness and nodded approvingly as her Refugees helped one another up healed each other's wounds. She did a mental roll call and realized that Nalyd had already left with his creation. To rest or to start more of his experiments,

she was not sure. She could only imagine the problems she was going to have with him down the road now... but if he had not been part of their circle today... none of them would have found their way back. She was sure she would regret it one day but for now she would just be grateful.

Jewels and Nioca stood with Azuma and Ligrev near the entrance. Ligrev passed over William as Jewels exclaimed her gratitude that the pair of them had kept him safe. They all walked gingerly over the debris towards the center of the room. Was it wrong of her to feel the same relief in the child's safety or this desire to claim kinship? Maybe Jewels would allow the child to call her Auntie Sylae... She smiled at the idea.

Nio, Sylae, and Jasmine also walked towards the middle of the room where Aden and Vergil already stood. Sylae pushed a broken chair out of her way before looking up at her barkeeps. "Sorry about the mess, but I think we did it."

"How can we know?" Jasmine spoke up as she rubbed left hand on her right arm. She seemed anxious to know for sure if Ermaria was really back.

"Why don't we go there?" Iffy spoke up. "I can take us."

A ring of murmurs went up around the group. Most were in favor of the idea. Aden declined though. "I know what we will find. With the time difference in my plane, I must not wait to let the Pure Bloods know that they do indeed have a place that they can call home. There will be many preparations to make, the sooner the better. I can't thank you all enough for what you have done for my people today. You risked much and you gave all. I am honored just to have known you." He gave everyone an elegant bow before turning to his uncle. "Vergil, you should stay. Bring me back a report of the planet after you have enjoyed some well deserved time off. But I must take my leave." He gave Vergil a salute who bowed to him in return then activated a transport device on his belt. He disappeared in a shimmering haze.

Azuma and Ligrev also declined. "Too much excitement for one day," she announced. "Besides, someone has to stay behind and clean up this mess."

"Don't you dare lift a finger young lady," Jewels scolded.

"I meant this one," Ligrev laughed pulling Azuma to her side.

The rest of them joined in the laughter for a moment before Iffy turned to the rest of them. "Everyone else is going?" Many nodding heads answered him. "All right, then, here we go."

The sound of children laughing filled Nioca's ears as he came into awareness of his surroundings. Could they really have remade Ermaria? Could this really be it? He took a deep breath taking in a myriad of odors both pleasant and pungent but it all screamed one word to his inner being. *Home*.

They had arrived in a field not far from a village and stared in amazement. The moment hit Nioca hard as he suddenly felt the world spin around him. Vergil and Syla were at either elbow helping him sit down on the ground while Jewels hovered nearby holding William.

Nio, however, was used to the wonder that spun in his head because he felt it on a daily basis. He walked through the fields towards the village, hands out to let the tall grasses tickle his palms. Jasmine had run off in the direction of the forest while Sylae and Iffy also started towards the village together.

Closing his eyes, Nioca allowed himself to experience the exploration of this world through Nio's senses. It was all so familiar... the hills and the forests in the distance, the open market right in the middle of the square... the town well with the cracked bucket and frayed rope... the hitching post outside the Inn with its north post recently replaced by new wood... it was crazy how much this place reminded him of...

"Nioca!!" the joyful feminine squeal snapped Nio's head around with a start.

Nioca's heart beat out a frantic tempo as both he and Nio voiced their disbelieving recognition of the woman. "Sarah?" It *was*! It was his sister! This was not just Ermaria where they... it was his home village... He struggled to his feet unable to keep still despite the dizziness. With a few staggering steps Nioca took it all in, barely registering those who followed close behind. The buildings were all there, all in the right place. It was his home village... *before* it was attacked by the Fire Elementals.

Nio was in just as much shock and awe, venturing closer to the woman who stood hanging one last bit of clothes on the line outside the house where his memories said he used to live. The door burst open giving him a start as the familiar faces of both his brothers stepped out. Nio could not help but voice their names in wonderment, "Teveren! Ghuery!" The trio of siblings wasted no time in rushing him with wide grins and open arms.

Sarah was the fastest to throw her arms around Nio's neck while the brothers shared a bear hug that encompassed both him and their sister. Nio froze, not knowing what to do and Nioca froze with him. He could see them now of his own accord just forty yards away. His family... *Could it really be real?*

So many memories that weren't really his own swirled in Nio's head, but this was the first actual hug he had received from them. The joy in the sensation was overwhelming and left him dumbfounded. Just as quickly, though, it was squelched with a pang of guilt. They weren't really his family. It was the whole 'mistaken identity' thing all over again. Nio mentally pleaded for guidance from his twin, or was it permission? Nioca watched the joy in his family's reunion with Nio with a pang of jealousy but he couldn't make his feet move any closer. How could he intrude on this? Again he felt an outsider among family even though he had every right to claim them this time. Or did he? His family had died... so were these really his sister and brothers or were they to his kin as Nio was to him – made in the likeness and memory of loved ones they held dear?

Did it matter?

Syla grew impatient and walked past with a raised hand. "Hey..." she started to get their attention but Nioca caught her elbow and pulled her back turning away from the scene.

"No, leave them be." His voice was gruff with emotion as he held her by shoulders.

"But your family doesn't understand who he is..." she protested.

"They are as much his family as they are mine," he countered. "Maybe more so with how I've changed. I have wonderful memories of being with them and the comfort of knowing that they really happened to me. But Nio only has the memories." Nioca allowed himself to look over his shoulder as his siblings peppered Nio with questions he could not form answers for. "Allow him this, Syla. Let him make his own memories with them." He looked up into Jewels' smiling face and the baby he would raise with her... Nioca had another family to make new memories with and he could be content with that.

She stepped back with her hands on her hips. "Okay, who are you and what have you done with the *real* Nioca?" she asked with a wary smile.

"What is real, Syla?" he deflected, then waved a hand towards those that crowded Nio. "Are they real? Is this world real? None of it existed just hours ago, but now it does. When did this become real? A part of me wonders if it wasn't always here just lost beyond our abilities to perceive it. But if anything here *is* real, it is the love Nio feels for them right now. *That* is the only 'real' that matters, I think." Syla blinked at him and stepped back putting up no other argument as she fell into thoughtful quiet.

Nio was being pulled by them towards the house and Nioca admonished him to stop fighting it. *Enjoy it brother. Enjoy our family.*

There was an overwhelming sense of gratitude that came pouring from his heart, but Nio was not about to enjoy anything without Nioca. He finally found his voice. "Wait, come with me. We're missing someone." He pulled them towards the field. Nioca dare not turn around for fear he would completely break down.

Recognition was in Sarah's voice, "Syla! So good to see you! Who else is here with you?"

"Probably best to see for yourself," Syla said forcing him to turn.

Nioca looked up with moist eyes as his family gasped and Nio grinned from ear to ear. "Two of you?!" Sarah exclaimed. "How can this be?" But she did not wait for an answer before throwing her arms around his neck as she had Nio's.

Nioca sank into her embrace wrapping his arms around her. "I've missed you."

Teveren and Ghuery finally got over their shock and joined in with another bear hug. They continued to grill both of them with question after question not giving them time enough to answer any of them fully. Just like that his family had accepted both of them and everyone was soon invited into their home to sup with them.

Nioca marveled at how quickly those he counted as family had increased. He hoped the momentum would never end.

The Last Dance

By Jewels - Mar 10 2014

The next week was one of welcomed chaos. Syla and Nioca oversaw the transferring of any desiring Ermarian back to their home to reunite with families they had once thought lost. As far as they could tell, those who were alive on Ermaria were all souls whose lives had ended prematurely on the Plane and not necessarily because their world imploded. It made for some rather happy reunions.

With Nio's help and crystal soul Jasmine organized the transplant of all the dryads back to Ermaria who wished to go. When only two stayed behind and the rest insisted that Nana remain at the Refuge, Jasmine confessed her people's fears of the way Nana burst into flame. Jewels' tree did not mind the solitude, though. For far too many years she had been the object of open scorn

and ridicule. A quiet forest would be much better than the whispers she had endured for centuries already.

Then Vergil had assisted Aden as they set up the center of the planet to be occupied by the Pure Bloods as their new home. They were transported directly into the flames so they never had to see the surface or the peoples that lived on it. Aden left assured that they were truly content.

Back at the Refuge, Iffy and Sylae planned a huge festival to celebrate. They invited everyone to participate bringing in vendors, entertainers and acrobats as well as a variety of musical groups from Ermaria and the elemental planes. Azuma and Ligrev fretted and fussed over what to serve at the feast. Nothing was too extravagant.

Jewels had been tasked with the job of coordinating all communications and had been jumping from plane to plane with messages and letters and announcements all week. She had just delivered one last confirmation to Iffy regarding the flame jugglers. The celebration officially started in one hour CalRef time and her last task was to let everyone in Ermaria know it was time.

She found Nio and Nioca sitting at the command post they had set up for the organization of everyone's return. They both got up to greet her as she neared and she threw an arm around each. "Okay, boys," she said as she stepped back. "Everything is done and the party is about to begin. Time to go home."

At the word 'home' both of them felt slightly uneasy. Nioca turned to Nio who stared at the ground. "Best to tell her now and get it out of the way."

She tried not to be nervous as she attempted to read Nio's feelings. "Tell me what?"

"I... I'm not going home," he sputtered out looking up at her falling face. He plunged on quickly trying to explain. "I mean, I'm coming to the festival, wouldn't miss it, but I'm not going to stay. I've decided to live here... on Ermaria."

She struggled with a mix of selfish emotions. She'd just spent ten years apart from one of her best friends and she did not like the idea of saying goodbye to him again. Her mind was forming a whole list of arguments why he should come back with them but she didn't have the heart to voice any. Nio silently looked them over acknowledging each but still set them aside for his own reasoning. "My purpose in life was to see you cured and you are. Now that Nioca can handle himself you don't really need me anymore."

"It's time to let him live his own life, Jewels," Nioca added gently.

She could see the sense of it, see the benefits and the overall appropriateness. "I know," she finally admitted pulling Nio in for a warmer hug hissing in his ear. "Fire and Ice, am I going to miss you though."

"I'm going to miss you, too," he whispered back.

Syla walked over to join them with a hesitant smile on her face. "Don't worry, Jewels. I'll keep an eye on him for you." She met Jewels' eyes before stepping up to Nio's side and taking his hand in hers. "I think I have something good to work with here."

Nio's expression mirrored Jewels' surprise as he stared down at their joined hands. Confusion, hope, and caution swirled around in his heart. From what Jewels had gleaned of their interactions while she was away, Syla had not looked favorably on Nio's affections but now her gaze held a shy hopefulness. Nio found his voice though it was thick from his tightened throat. "You... you're okay that I'm not really Nioca?"

She smiled at him and then at Nioca. "Somebody taught me that the only 'real' that matters," she paused to touch a finger to his chest as she looked up into his eyes. "...is the real love we feel in here."

A single happy tear ran down Nio's cheek as he pulled Syla into his tight embrace. Jewels' hands tried to hide her embarrassed smile from being privy to the emotions and desires building in him now. She looked sideways at Nioca whose cheeks had also flushed with the awkwardness. *Was it this uncomfortable for him*, she wondered.

Nio spun around in indignation. "It was worse!" he yelped startling Syla. "You two were so much worse! Feeding off of each other with your indecent thoughts... Don't you dare complain!"

"I didn't say anything," Jewels backpedaled trying not to laugh and failing miserably as the four of them shared a cheerful chuckle.

When they had caught their breaths, Nioca slid his arm around Jewels' waist and addressed his brother. "We'll come back to visit." Jewels nodded her hearty agreement.

Nio smiled and mirrored his brother's stance with an arm around Syla's waist. "We'd be offended if you didn't." Syla vigorously nodded her approval.

The four of them set out to gather all the other festival attendees before returning to the Refuge.

Vergil walked around the carnival in high spirits. Quite a few vendors from various planes had agreed to come and offer their wares including a number of brewers. He's spent the last few hours sampling the best wines and beers and hard liquors that the multi-verse had to offer. Top that off with free unlimited ice water and he was in relaxation heaven.

A lively musical number had drawn him towards the center of the festival where a stage and canopied dance floor had been set up. Dozens of dancers swirled and jigged in the center while a ring of onlookers clapped and stomped their feet on the outskirts. Vergil joined those around the outside with a smile clapping along to the beat.

With a mischievous grin, a dancing dryad maiden twirled towards the crowd and grabbed the arm of a surprised gentleman to his left. He put up only a half-hearted protest as she tugged him into the dance before giving in and sweeping her away across the floor with a grin. Vergil laughed and clapped even harder. Not half a minute later a pretty flame he recognized from last year's new recruits ran up to him and pulled him out onto the dance floor, too. After only a slight objection he allowed himself to get caught up in the moment and let his feet tap their way around the dance floor with the flame smiling in his arms.

The dancers switched partners from time to time bringing him first a sultry woman with long blond hair and a wicked smile and then a plump, over-enthusiastic Ermarian who drug him across the dance floor with a deep chortle and an iron grip. She took the lead spinning him dizzily before mercifully releasing him with a twirl.

Vergil stumbled into another laughing pair of arms that held him more gently. "Having fun?" Sylae's mirthful green eyes came into focus as she danced the final measures of the song with him. Her sleek black hair was pulled back into a high ponytail that swayed with her movements.

He took a moment – hands on knees – to catch his breath when it ended, taking in her short skirt and long stocking covered legs. Vergil had always found her rather attractive, but there was something even more appealing about her today. Perhaps it was the fact that she was actually smiling at him.

"Absolutely," he shot her a winning smile as another, slower song started playing. "Having more fun by the minute." He extended his hand in invitation for another dance. "Care to join me?"

She seemed surprised by the offer but put her hand in his allowing him to lead her around in a smooth two step. She smiled and laughed as he wound them both around the other dancers on the floor. Maybe it was the ice water talking, but Vergil felt a connection between them he hadn't sensed before.

He pulled her in close with a mischievous smile and spun them both in a tight spiral towards a more secluded corner of the dance floor. Inhibitions thrown to the wind, he proposed a different kind of fun. "How about you and me ditch this dance floor for one with a little more privacy?"

She faltered in her steps, green eyes growing to quarter sized orbs, but he kept her upright in his arms still floating to the music. "What?!" The surprise in her voice did not phase him.

Boasting a more impish grin, Vergil lowered his voice and leaned in closer. "You know. You. Me. Nobody else around. We could..." he paused making a show of looking both ways before whispering in her ear, "...*dance*." He took her around in two more tight circles before pulling back to meet her deer-in-the-headlight stare with one of desirable longing.

She did not fight his secure hold on her waist but she did seem much more uncomfortable with it. "I... I don't think that would be a good idea, Vergil."

Not a good idea? Perhaps, but he'd still try to convince her otherwise. He gave her a hurt pout as their feet moved in step. "Why not?"

She wouldn't look him in the eye when she answered. "I... I just don't think about you like that." Was she blushing or just being coy?

"Maybe not yet," He loosened his grip momentarily with a thoughtful pose then brought her back in tight with a wicked grin. "But you could start. Come on, just one kiss. Might change your mind."

He found her intake of breath inviting even though her words and arms were trying to push him away. "You don't want to do that."

Vergil pulled her around in more dizzying turns so she had to cling to him for balance. "Sure I do," he whispered when he slowed again.

She shook her head with a grimace. "No. You really don't."

Vergil chuckled a little. "All this concern over my desires," he teased keeping her in the dance so she couldn't pull away. "But no courage to tell me about yours?" One final set of spins and he stopped to dip her backwards. "Yes, I really do." Vergil leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. They were sweet as honey and cold as ice lighting a fire in his chest.

"*Fire and Ice!*" The sound of his sister swearing above the music startled him upright. He

struggled not to drop Sylae as he brought her back to a stand. Jewels stormed her way over to them and shoved him hard. He had to let go of his dance partner to keep his balance. "What in the multi-verse do you think you are doing?!" she hissed.

The other dancers ignored them as he rubbed his shoulder with an indignant cry. "What? Can't I kiss a beautiful woman?" Sylae looked down and blushed though he wasn't sure if it was from the embarrassment or for the compliment.

If anything the spark of anger in Jewels' eye grew as she turned to her sister by marriage. "I'm sorry, Sylae, I really am, but that was just... *disgusting*."

Sylae's cheeks continued to grow a few shades deeper pink. Instead of standing up to Jewels' berating she sounded apologetic. "I tried to dissuade him, but he wouldn't listen to me."

His resentment started building. "Wait... Why is it disgusting if I kiss someone? I've seen you kiss um-teen different guys but when *I kiss someone* it's disgusting?!"

Jewels pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. Years of watching her do the same thing on the Fire Plane deflated his anger towards her. She looked him in the eye pleadingly. "Vergil, just... *trust* me. You don't want anything more than a friendship with Sylae. You... You couldn't *handle* it." Though the thought was insulting he realized she was trying to protect him, he could read it in her eyes. From what, he couldn't fathom, but he *did* trust her. She softened her voice as her hand soothed the arm she had pushed. "Pick any other girl, and I'll be fine with it, I promise."

Sylae looked up regaining a measure of her regal stature. She held no ill-will in her voice, just made her statement factually. "Really, Vergil, it wasn't gonna happen anyway."

Yeah, maybe. Let her believe that anyway. He squared his shoulders as he faced them both with indifference. "Fine, whatever, was just looking to have some fun anyway." He tipped an imaginary hat sarcastically in their direction. "Good evening, ladies. Enjoy the rest of your night." Vergil turned and walked away from the dance floor without anymore fuss. He shook his head to himself. Would he ever understand women?

"So what was that all about?"

"What?"

"MY brother is OFF LIMITS!"

"Hey, *he* started it."

"Well, I didn't hear you screaming bloody murder to stop it!"

Sylae couldn't help herself as she burst out laughing at Jewels' tirade. It was heartwarming to hear Jewels join in with a snort when she couldn't hold back her own mirth. "Promise me we never speak of this ever again," she managed between breaths.

"No argument from me," Jewels answered with a smile wrapping her arms around Sylae in a hug. "Come on," she let go and tugged on her sleeve. "You can make it up to me with a dance." Another quick paced number was playing and Jewels took her hands to pull her into the flow of the other dancers. The pair settled into an easy partnership anticipating each other's moves and sliding effortlessly through the crowd. They hopped to a second song and glided to a third.

"Remember the last time we danced?" Jewels asked out of the blue and Sylae wrinkled her nose.

"Wasn't it at our wedding?"

Jewels shook her head with a smile. "After that." In the face of Sylae's confusion she gave her a hint. "I believe I called you 'radiant' all decked out in shimmering white."

A spark of recognition registered in her mind as the events of the masquerade dream came flooding back. "Were you really there? Was that really you?"

As an answer Jewels released one hand to spin her out, arms stretched taunt. Dizzily she twirled back in past the traditional stance, so that Jewels was behind her, catching her in a tight embrace. Sylae smiled as they swayed to the music. "But I wasn't the only one there with you."

Sylae was about to ask who Jewels meant when the dancers around them parted enough for her to have a clear vision of a man in a white suit. Sylae's breath caught when he smiled at her with a bow. "I've seen the way he looks at you," Jewels whispered in her ear, "and I see the way you're looking at him right now." The quiet encouragement that brushed her ear held an emotion Sylae could not place, "Don't let that one get away."

Once more Jewels spun her outward, fingers releasing mid-turn, before she disappeared from sight in the sea of other dancers. Iffy caught her effortlessly and spiraled away with her. "You

danced with me in my dreams?" she asked thought she already knew the answer. Before he answered she plucked at his white sleeve. "Did Jewels put you up to this?"

Iffy chuckled as he led the dance. "That woman is very concerned for your happiness. It is almost indecent."

"Jealous?" she teased.

"Maybe I am," he teased back. "You looked very comfortable dancing in her arms. Had a lot of people staring."

She smiled up at him with a quiet response, "I am happy to be here in *your* arms." The words, though true, did not feel quite genuine. If she was honest with herself – really honest – she had to admit that spending time with Iffy was... draining. It left her more hollow each time she saw him.

He must have sensed her distress because he loosened his grip and slowed his pace. "What's wrong?"

She couldn't meet his eyes, not yet. She shook her head before resting it against his shoulder as they swayed. She had been thinking about it all week. About what was wrong. And about what she could possibly do about it. Without looking up she posed a question to him. "Why me? Why did you choose me?"

"What do you mean?" he asked in confusion.

She continued on not daring to look at him. "You must have known I would say no. Surely you knew I would not agree to watching my Refuge and all its members destroyed."

"Ah," he voiced his understanding and she asked him again needing to make it very clear.

"So why choose me? Why not keep the dryad's soul with you instead? She would have been easier to convince to stay or easier to force with no promise or emotional attachment to command you honor her wishes. You could have made a new Refuge with new members with anyone's face and anyone's personality and anyone's memories, even mine. So why did you choose me when you knew that I would never agree?"

He was quiet for a long time just weaving her back and forth among the other dancers. When he finally spoke he seemed surprised by his own answer. "It was so hard, Sylae, even thinking about

going back to... this. And I think I knew what it was going to take. I *needed you* to tell me no. I knew I could endure it for *you*."

And there it was, the root of her unease. Iffy was in pain. Every second of every day he chose to remain in anguish. She did not doubt that he could take her soul – force it from her – or anyone else for that matter, but he restrained himself and suffered... *for her sake*. Sylae looked up into his eyes seeking an answer from their depths. "Why? Why do you endure for me?" The way he looked at her... was this what Jewels had seen? There was such a deep heartache and a fathomless longing that she was suddenly afraid to hear him answer. She rushed on with an idea, "You don't have to live like this. You could find someone else to share a soul with."

If anything, he seemed more pained at her suggestion. "Is... is that what you want, Sylae?"

She frowned growing angry at his deflection. "Why do you care what I want? You're in pain. If you can find someone to ease it you should! Isn't that what you want?"

Iffy sighed and closed his eyes as he turned them for a few strides. His voice rumbled in his chest when he finally spoke. "More than anything, I want to be whole again." He opened his eyes searching hers out, "but I do not want to be eternally joined to someone *I do not love*."

The assumption hung heavily in the air as Sylae tried to swallow the lump that had risen in her throat. She managed a nod of understanding. "I would not want that either."

Iffy blew out a breath, resignation setting in. "So I will endure. Here among my friends it will not be so hard, I think."

Again she nodded resting her head back on his shoulder. She had another idea. A crazy idea, but maybe, really, it wasn't. "Maybe you will find someone to love, here among your friends."

Iffy chuckled, "One who loves me enough to put up with me for the rest of eternity?" His voice turned thoughtful though it didn't hold much hope, "Maybe."

Sylae looked up at him, eyes shining as she pulled him to a stop. "Maybe you already have." She watched his eyes grow wide with hope as she continued. "You must have known there was only one reason I'd say no. Surely you knew the only reason I would deny myself an eternity with you is to protect my Refuge."

It took him a few moments before he could bring himself to respond. His voice caught with an excited edge. "Are you sure? Are you *absolutely sure*?"

"Yes," she breathed. "I want to be with you." Acknowledging the reality of it to herself she let herself say the words, "I love you."

Iffy pulled her in close with his damp eyes closed and smiled with emerging joy. She thrilled at the words that brushed her ear. "I love you too, Sylae."

She closed her own eyes to just take in the feel of his body against hers. With smooth and sure feet, he regained the dance sweeping her across the floor in graceful loops. He seemed to spin her faster and faster as the rest of the world fell away. It was just the two of them, hand in hand, with their foreheads pressed together. Sylae started to feel a trickle of his thoughts again, just as desperate as the first time, but hungry for something different. She made no attempt to hide her own desire from him which encouraged him more. As he pressed his lips to hers, an explosion of thoughts and feelings and hormones washed over her. She was drowning in him but she did not want to resurface again. She let him fill her to overflowing holding nothing of herself back.

When the waves finally subsided it was eerily quiet. The music had stopped and no voices rang out in merriment around them. They both opened their eyes and noticed that everyone present was silently staring at them. Chairs were knocked over and the canopy was ripped off. "Sorry," Iffy muttered. "I think I may have caused a windstorm in my... enthusiasm."

Sylae blushed as the ring of onlookers started clapping with hoots and hollers. Somewhere in the crowd she caught sight of Jewels who beamed with a knowing smile before disappearing behind the others again.

More clapping and hoots and hollers welcomed them as they strode down the aisle hand in hand. Though the festival was a day over, the celebrations continued with a more intimate group of friends and family. It had not taken much to convert the dance floor into a wedding chapel and Azuma was glad to do it for Sylae and Iffy.

They had asked him to preside over their wedding, an honor in itself, but even more a testament that this was where he belonged. His Livvy sidled up next to him with a contented smile and he led her down to follow the couple to the reception.

They got in line behind others waiting to congratulate the newlyweds and Azuma took in the smiling faces on every side. Even Nalyd seemed not to scowl today. When it was their turn, Azuma doled out two mega-ultra-huggles good enough to rival any of Jewels'.

"It was perfect!" Livvy exclaimed to them. "Absolutely beautiful!"

Azuma nodded his agreement. "I only wish w-dueck could have been here to see it. I think he would have been very proud of his sister and new brother."

Sylae blushed glancing at Iffy for a moment before turning back, her expression difficult to read. "I want to tell you something," she said catching his hand and pulling him back towards the stage. "In fact I want to tell everyone something." She let him go to give a loud clap and raised her voice. "Attention everybody, attention. I have an announcement to make." She stood up on the platform in front of everyone wavering between calm confidence and ready-to-hurl.

"I haven't been completely honest with you," she started as those around her fell silent. Sylae fidgeted with the front of her skirt while she sought out certain people in the audience. Jewels gave her an encouraging nod while Iffy just smiled. "I am not Will's sister," she confessed.

There were a few murmurs of confusion around the crowd while others nodded their heads unsurprised. Azuma was among those confused but seeing the confidence Iffy and Jewels looked at her with, he was willing to let her explain herself.

"And," Sylae emphasized, "Will is not dead. Not really."

Azuma's heart started pounding. How many hours had he mourned for their lost leader? But not dead? "Where is he?" he found himself asking with a wavering voice.

Sylae looked at him with a sympathetic gaze. "Standing right in front of you." Her green eyes danced with the admission as Azuma tried to wrap his head around what she was saying. "I am Will," she continued, "or at least I was Will. I have his soul but not his body. Jewels did not fail to save me."

Azuma's head spun with the information. W-dueck was here... he'd been here all along... the exchanges between Sylae and Jewels took on a whole new dynamic. The funeral... the ring... the way they had danced together last night...

Another wavering voice startled him from his own thoughts. "Wait a minute..." Vergil bellowed with a stutter, "you mean... I kissed..."

Jewels made a sputtering sound trying to hold in her laughter while Sylae raised her hands palms up from the stage. "I tried to warn you."

Vergil started to look a little green as he held his stomach "Oh... ugh..." he dry heaved a few times. "I think I'm gonna be sick..." Laughter rang out around him as he turned flame filled eyes towards the stage. "Dubya, I'm gonna kill you!"

"Not on my watch," Iffy stated calmly as he pulled out his RMM-A. Before anyone had time to ask him what he was doing, the ban hammer came swooping down out of nowhere taking both Vergil and the canopy over the edge of the perimeter. More laughter filled in as shock made way for reprieve.

There was a new round of congratulations as those who had known expressed their relief that it was no longer a secret and those who had not known expressed their relief that Will's soul had survived. Azuma was among the latter though he didn't offer an immediate hug when it was his turn. Instead he looked her up and down, Sylae doing an impromptu spin for him. "Well, yer better on the eyes at least," he huffed playfully.

"Hey," she punched him in the arm with a laugh.

Then Azuma did bring her in for a hug. "I've been meaning to tell you something." Sylae pulled back and looked at him expectantly. "Thank you," he turned his gaze towards his Livvy and the belly that she now held out of habit. "You made my family possible and I will always be grateful. You will always be family to me."

She smiled back at him, eyes moist, "You're welcome, Azuma. I am honored to be a part of your family." She hesitated with a quiet request. "May... may I call the baby my grandchild?"

Azuma laughed and gave her a wink. "Only if I can call you, Pa." She gave an indignant squawk and tried to punch him again but he dodged and swung her around for another hug instead.

She couldn't help it. She stood here bawling on the happiest day of her life while everyone else was smiling and laughing and dancing again. *They're happy tears*, Iffy soothed bringing over a tissue.

They're making my mascara run, is what they're doing, she pouted as she snatched it and dabbed at her eyes again. *Gonna stain my dress before the night is done.*

He pulled her in to kiss the top of her head, his unbridled love washing over her. She couldn't

believe that there was any better experience than what she felt right now. She didn't deserve to be this blessed. The thought brought on more water works. *Oh*, she cringed, *Stupid emotions!!*

Iffy's finger lifted her chin as his eyes stared into hers. *No, Sylae. They are beautiful emotions!*

She smiled at his reassurances though they did not dry her eyes. She felt an overwhelming sense of security in the hands that now held her face. Her heart skipped a beat willing the moment to never end.

Calamity Refuge had finally lived up to its name.

THE END