

The dragon Arbanis ran across the hilly land, all four legs moving at speed, the night was dark and cloudless, spreading moonlight enough to see by. What had once seemed beautiful to look at this far from the bright lights of civilization, now felt exposing.

His exploration had taken a turn from being a leisurely stroll until he'd happened across something he should not have. A stain of some dark patch on stone, reflecting red in the ominous candles that burned beside it, robed, masked, bipedal figures circled it, chanting in a group. One had been at the perimeter coming from behind Arbanis.

He'd been unnerved but still greeted the figure, he held his ground despite the silence until he saw something glinting in a tightly clutching hand, the masked shape moving toward him with a definite purpose. Arbanis had then fled, running, alerting them all that he'd disrupted whatever was happening.

For all his speed he couldn't keep going indefinitely and among the cultists some were more athletically inclined than others, never losing sight of the dragon.

He scrambled up a hill only to find he'd run to a dead end, no, he'd been herded this way. A caved in wall, too high for him to climb, sat in his path as the almost identical figures moved to spread over his way out, some slowly approaching while the rest made sure there would be no easy way to run. "S-stay back! I'm warning you!" Arbanis called, but if the dragon was going to fight, they assumed he would have by now.

He reared up, shaking his front legs at them, trying to ward them away. They took initiative, seeing the chance and closed the distance, grabbing his flailing arms. "I said back! L-last warning!"

With the two grabbing him his words seemed empty and they all pushed in, an arm around his head, more hands holding him up on his hind legs. He hadn't thought it through, his balance was weaker, he couldn't struggle out.

The stronger figure was panting from the run but still that glint remained in his gasp, he stepped forward and with no means to squirm away, Arbanis could only look in concern.

His guess had been wrong, it was no knife at least, however it stung, and within moments he felt weak, falling down, body limp.

Due to whatever he'd been injected with Arbanis' head was clouded. His vision blurred, making it hard to see what was going on as the sky moved around him. Hands on his arms kept hold of him, dragging him back to where they'd been disrupted. He was too stunned to speak, stuck on the verge of consciousness throughout their journey. One of the figures returned to the stained stone, lifting something out from under it. It was a mask, matching their own. A flat, featureless plate, lacking definition or even eye holes, one which they pushed over Arbanis' head.

As they returned to their chanting, it seemed to echo and reverberate within the mask itself. Filling his head and his ears, making it harder to think or speak. A cluster of four of the

cult members gathered, their heads turning to the dragon several times before they split apart, reaching their decision.

Eventually they returned to his side, eyeless masks still seemingly looking over his sprawled out form. One threw back the hood of their cloak revealing the same mask but surrounded by an ornate headdress, the rest of her body hidden away under overlapping weaves of black bandage. "We have waited a long time for one like you. We welcome you to our family."

Behind the mask over his own eyes, Arbanis felt like he was watching a throbbing wave of dark colours, pulsing like a heartbeat yet decorated like the dark night above. Still he couldn't move, nor could he feel directly, yet the strange movement of hands manipulating his body, adjusting his numbed legs was surreal and palpable.

Out of his notice, thick rolls of the same black bandage were brought to bear, they were wrapped around his arms and legs then folded under his body. Each limb still kept free and individual as the uniform layer was built around the dragon, coating him from neck to tail then, with great care, over his head, securing the mask without obstructing the main face-plate.

Their rituals carried on through the night, well after the induced fatigue in the dragon turned into true sleep, through it all the throbbing hum of the mask never subsided. A cloak was placed over Arbanis' head and shoulders, hiding the bandage wrap. Were it not for him being the lone quadruped among a group of bipeds he would have fit in unnoticeably well.

When he was roused from slumber, half through sleeping yet still in the dark of night, his tired brain saw it as logical to follow. He didn't worry over the faces he couldn't see. Didn't care that he had no idea where they were taking him or why. The 'why' wasn't needed.

The cult had a hidden home not far from the site, a tunnel disguised among the hills which led down to a carved stone area. Dull light showed the way in, yet before the heart of the cloister was seen there was a lone door, which opened seemingly to the sound of their chanting. Arbanis moved to follow them in only to feel a touch at his shoulder. He turned, he couldn't see as such, yet he knew what was there somehow. His purpose, his duty... He climbed to the source of his certainty; a stone plinth and sat down upon it.

Shrouded figures returned, they stripped the cloak from Arbanis shoulders and then moved to his folded arms and legs, adding more bandages, wrapping them such that they were now bound.

He was quite at ease, twisting around to let them, even as they secured the rear legs to his hips and front to his chest. Instead he focused on his posture, sitting with his neck held high in a proud stance. This was what he was meant for, after all.

He didn't even flinch as solid stone was lifted up, carved pieces that slotted together, even without the mortar-like paste. Decorating over his thick tail, hiding it and showing a false,

thin and leonine one above it. His scaled haunches were covered with carved stones depicting a smoother furred kind, the carved body weighing down to hold him in place. Even fake, folded stone wings were carved as the bandage wrapped dragon was slowly covered in the appearance of a stone sphinx.

It was only when they lifted the mask from his head that he returned to himself, realising what was going on with the clarity he had before, striking him in a sudden rush.

“W-wait! Stop! What is this? What are you doing?! Let me out! Let me out!!!” He said, noticing with panic the wet mortar and knowing it would harden beyond his capacity to shake it.

“Fear not.” The officiously masked cultist said, seeming to look him in the eye. “You cannot truly be one of the family yet. You must prove yourself.” As she spoke more of her brethren swarmed Arbanis, black bandage being wrapped over his bare face, covering all but his eyes and continuing until the shape of his head was anonymised. All this while they ignored his shouts for them to stop, to ask what they were doing.

“You are not yet one of us. To become one of us, you must guard this place. When you find an intruder, when you let us know. We shall reward you and accept your kinship.” She finished, before clapping her hands. The mask was put back onto Arbanis who thrashed his neck, trying to shake it off while he could. Yet soon the suggestive throb had him in its grip, pulling him back to be calm and accept it as stone was pressed over his neck, over his head, leaving just the mask staring blankly forward toward the entrance.

Yes, this was right, this was his purpose and his trial. He needed only to prove it.