

Chapter 1

It had been nearly four weeks since Oreo had been ignited; that's what master Rhys and the other protogens called it when a protogen first came into this world. Oreo didn't really look like a protogen though; not like her other siblings at least. Instead, the five-foot-two, four-hundred pound metal android more closely resembled an anthropomorphic border collie.

Kit, another protogen, was her creator, acting as a mother to Oreo - but the two always considered themselves as sisters. Together with a dragonborn named Rhys - the creator of the protogens - they resided deep in the forests of Avistym, in the abandoned temple ruins that they called home.

Oreo had taken to reading all the books she could get her hands on; ever since she learned how, she'd spend the majority of her free time in the temple's library. Kit had been exploring the outside world, far from the plate of Avistym, making good use of all the abandoned knowledge of both the old world and new.

Each day, Oreo would follow a similar routine: combat training with Kit, followed by gathering and scavenging for food, then learning a variety of subjects in the afternoon. Her favourite among them was biology, because she loved learning about animals. It was a struggle for Kit, who patiently waited for Oreo to 'make friends' with the fox-turtles and otterbats before learning about them.

Training was the most arduous, and the android never understood why Kit made her do it so much. The protogen always insisted that she never knew when she'd come across a bigger threat than her, and had to be ready for anything. She couldn't deny she was good at it: even at her stage, just weeks since she began her life, she could easily overpower Kit in physical strength alone. As for her technique, well - that required a bit more polishing.

Oreo didn't eat meat. Every time she'd accompany Kit with hunting, she always looked away whenever Kit was about to take the shot. Kit had explained to her it was natural to feel that way at first, and that eventually she would grow to understand it was necessary for their survival, but the android-collie remained stubborn as ever. Later on she would often compromise with Kit, and instead of accompanying her hunting, she'd spend an afternoon reading about weaving. At first she found it frustrating that her metallic fingers would slip as she weaved, but it wasn't long before she got a good handle on it. Before she knew it, she'd crafted her first basket out of dried grass; perfect for collecting her favourite food: berries.

It was by accident that Oreo found out she'd eaten one of the most poisonous berries on the plate of Avistym – after picking and eating one off a bush, she was instantly hooked on the taste of *ramberries*. It was only later that night that she found a picture of them in her book, her excitement turning to horror as she read how a single berry was enough to kill a person.

Kill? Like, *die*? Ending up just like the animals that she'd watched Kit hunt?

The android breathed heavy as she looked at the berry, and she grabbed her book. Oreo ran to Rhys with the book and the berries she'd picked - absolutely distraught.

“Master Rhys please help!” She sobbed. The dragonborn looked at the berries she was holding, and tried to keep a light-hearted expression.

“Ah, so you’ve found yourself some ramberries have you?”

“They’re *POISONOUS*, master Rhys I’m- *I’m going to DIE.*” She exclaimed, retracting her visor to wipe her tears. *“I don’t know what to do.”*

“Oreo,” he started, taking the berry from her hand and placing it on the table, “you mustn’t worry about this. The berry you found is poisonous to *living* creatures, not—”

He stopped himself, quickly correcting his words: “These berries will bring no harm to you. They may be poisonous to creatures such as myself, but not for those like you and Kit, and your siblings. Please, be calm.” Rhys told her, bringing her into an embrace, and gently holding the back of her head to his chest. “They are all for you to enjoy, I promise I will not take any.” He said playfully.

Oreo started to calm herself, and her breathing came back to normal. She slowly took a step back, looking up at the dragonborn. “Master Rhys? What happens, when you die...?”

As best as he could, staring down at the young android, he could not maintain his neutral composure, and flustered. *“Well-* that is... that is a very complicated question, miss Oreo, and it’s not one that has any one answer. It’s different for everyone.” He couldn’t lie to her, but he knew he couldn’t tell her the truth either.

“What would happen to.. *me*?”

“Oreo!” He said with a startling change in demeanor.

He winced, seeing that he had made her jump, calmed himself, and put a hand on her shoulder.

“You... shouldn’t be worried about these things at such a young age. By the time you learn the answers to that, you will be an entirely different person. So please, do not concern yourself with such thoughts.” Rhys saw the conflicting feelings within her brewing like a storm as she started to question her existence, and he tried to offer some comfort. “Your siblings and I are here to protect you, and your training and knowledge are there for when we are not. So, do make sure you are paying close attention in all of your lessons.”

Oreo sniffled. “I do, master Rhys.”

“Then you have nothing to fear, and everything to gain from this world.” He said, giving her a kiss on the forehead. “Now, I believe it’s past your curfew, best be back to sleep before you get in trouble... though I suppose I could vouch for you, this once.”

She nods, leaving the berry and book on Rhys’ workbench, quietly making her way back.

Chapter 2

“You’ve been doing really well with your fundamentals, Oreo - I’m so proud of you,” Kit said as she finished chopping the last of the carrots and garlic for the soup she was making them, dropping them into the boiling pot of broth over the open bonfire.

Oreo brushed herself off, refilling the make-shift straw-padded training dummy after her last kick knocked the stuffing out.

“Thanks!” She said, beaming. “Soooo, am I done now? Can we eat?”

“It’ll still be a little while, cooking is somewhat of an art, you know.”

“*Art?*” The android asked, curiously.

“Oh, right well- I suppose we haven’t talked about that much yet. *Art* is like a way of deliberately expressing yourself, your identity, your desires, your emotions. There’s many ways you can do that. Some people draw or paint, some create beautiful music, some express themselves through the food that they make- ”

“So, is fighting an art?”

“Yes, actually. You’re practicing *martial* arts; many express themselves by the movements of their body, like in a *dance*. I don’t know how to dance myself, but you should ask Troupe about it sometime; he’s an excellent dancer,” the protogen remarked.

“Dancer?” She’d heard about that before, it was in one of the books that Kit had from the outside world. The books Oreo read and the stories that Kit told were the only ways she had of knowing what kinds of amazing things went on beyond their forest abode.

“Can I learn to dance?” The android asked, having a seat on the lush grass.

“Well I certainly won’t stop you,” Kit replied, giving the soup a good stir as it bubbled.

“But I don’t have anyone to learn from,” she sighed, poking at the dirt with a stick.

“Will I ever meet him?” Oreo asked, her voice hopeful.

“Troupe? That’s... hard to say. We have no way of contacting each other, and I haven’t seen him in many years,” Kit said with a disappointing sigh. She too wanted to see her family again. She’d put so much of her attention and dedication to creating Oreo under the guidance of Rhys. Her new family was her main concern now.

The border collie sat with her knees to her chest, resting her chin on them.

“Troupe, Mira, Hearth, Home, and Bug... I didn’t even get to know most of my siblings...” Oreo let out a shaky breath. She got so excited whenever Kit would share stories about them: bits and pieces of the adventures they had together before they went on their separate paths. But, there was a growing part of Oreo that longed to be a part of it all.

Kit’s expression softened, and she came to sit next to the android.

“You know.. I would have created you sooner if I could. Then, I would have had plenty more time to spend with you,” Kit said, ruffling the top of the collie’s head.

Oreo dwelled on Kit’s comforting words, but something looked like it was deeply troubling her.

Kit noticed the disappointed look that washed over the android’s face.

“Well- perhaps when you’re older, you’ll get the chance to meet them all.”

“You keep saying that, that’s your answer to everything,” she complained.

“Oreo, you’ve only been around for a few months.” The protogen reminded her.

“Isn’t that a long time?” she said, tossing a stone from beside her to the river, and watching it skip across the smooth water. Between learning how to walk, read, talk, write, fight, build shelter, and scavenge all in her first month, she felt like she was fully equipped for whatever challenge came her way after the six that she’d spent here.

Kit giggled. “That’s hardly any time at all. We learn fast, and that’s a good quality to have, but it can be our greatest point of weakness too; there’s a big difference between knowledge and wisdom, and it can cost you everything if you aren’t careful. It will be years until—”

“YEARS?!”

“...*Reasonably*, yes.”

The little android buried her head into her arms, frustration was an understatement. Ever since she learned to read, she would read every book that Kit brought back to her, cover-to-cover, eager to learn more about the outside world, in hopes of one day exploring it herself. She was training with everything she had, thinking that she'd really impressed Kit with her progress, feeling so close to achieving what she wanted. Now it felt like it was an eternity away.

With her head still tucked into her arms and legs, she mumbled.

“...why did you create me?”

The question dangled in silence for a moment, catching the protogen off-guard.
“Well, that's a bit of a complicated-”

“Was I art?”

Kit chuckled. “Oreo, you have – and always will be, my greatest creation. That being said, you're not exactly an expression of *me*, if that's what you're wondering.”

“I know that, I don't look *anything* like you,” She mumbled again, slowly bringing her head back up.

“Why *do* I look so different from the other protogens?”

Kit froze. For the first time she was at a loss for words.
She couldn't tell her the truth.

“...You got to choose the way that I looked, right? So why... don't I look like any of you?”

Kit looked away. She couldn't tell the truth, but she couldn't lie, either. The protogens had been exploring the outside world for nearly two decades, meeting many incredible people and friends. But there were also many, especially those with depraved and perverted devotions to their deity and beliefs, that did not take so kindly to their synthetic existence. They saw the constructs as a threat, an insult to life, and fought for their destruction. Kit's design of Oreo was very deliberate, but she couldn't know that.

“Are you ashamed of- ”

The word hit her like a slap on the face.

*“That is **enough**.”* Kit’s tone was cold as ice.

The android flinched, but just then something inside of her snapped; *months* of built-up frustration were starting to erupt out of her. She stood up angrily and took a few steps back, directing all of the conflict that she had concealed at Kit.

“Well, *are* you?? You still didn’t give me an answer. Why did you create me?!”

“Does there *need* to be a reason? What has brought all this about lately?!”

“Would you still care about me if I wasn’t *your* creation?”

“What-? What is your *PROBLEM*?”

“WHAT **IS** MY PROBLEM?!” The android yelled.

“O-Oreo...?”

“Did something... go *wrong*? Was I *supposed* to be a protogen?”

“*Stop it, right now. I mean it.*” Kit sounded heartbroken, her voice wavering as she saw tears start to stream down from the collie’s eyes.

“**NO!** *Why am I the only one who isn’t allowed to leave this place? Why share all of these stories and bring me all of these books if I can’t be a part of it? Why train me every day if I’ll never use it?*” She didn’t understand. None of it was fair.

“I- *I’m trying to protect—*”

“*If you won’t let me be a part of this world, then I wish you hadn’t made me at all!*”

In a moment of blind frustration, she accidentally knocked over the pot of soup as she swung her powerful arm. The delicious vegetables and broth that the two had spent the morning gathering for and preparing poured and spread out onto the ground.

Oreo stopped and gasped when she saw the horrified look on Kit’s face, the protogen’s visor glitched and flickered as she looked at Oreo. The android’s eyes widened, and the anger drained from her face as she finally realized what she had said.

“I- *I’m sorry*, I- I didn’t mean that, I—”

The android had never seen Kit look at her like this before, and it was heartbreaking. Kit, the sister that she could always depend on, that had never once wronged her - and now, after failing to control her emotions, she'd changed that relationship forever. Oreo began to cry, and she ran back home without looking back.

Chapter 3

“She’s asking questions that I don’t have the answers to. Well- I *do* have *some*, but we *both* know why I can’t tell her.” Kit brought her paw up to her head, rubbing her brow. “I’ve never seen her like this, I think I really upset her.”

“Having some parenting trouble then, are we?” The dragonborn said, focused on connecting metal parts to a small mechanism under the view of a microscope.

Kit huffed, a bit flustered. “I thought *creating* Oreo would be the hardest part.”

Rhys laughed quietly, getting up from his workbench. “You know, as much as I tried to keep the basis for the protogens the same, you have *all* surprised me in how different you grew to become, in ways that I struggle to describe. You see the world so much differently than she does, but, that *is* what you wanted, isn’t it...?” Rhys leaned back on the table behind him.

“...No preconceived knowledge, no language, motor function, or reasoning modules, no advantage... You wanted her to learn from the world in the way that *she* saw it.” He smiled, “and now that she has, you must accept the outcome of your decision. Your sister needs guidance in a way that neither of us are prepared to offer.”

A look of guilt and unease swept over Kit’s face, “I didn’t mean to trouble her like this.”

“Of course you didn’t, and I know how deeply you care for her.” Rhys put his hands on Kit’s shoulders. “I feel the same for you and all of your siblings.”

Kit’s tensions eased, but she looked down, conflicted. “What do I do Rhys?”

“I know why you want to, but you can’t protect her forever, Kit, especially from herself; believe me: she will seek these answers on her own if she has to.”

“...”

“Loosen your grip, you have trained her for this, if she really wants to, let her- ”

“*No!*”

“...no?”

Kit had surprised herself, she hadn't yet held her own so firmly against Rhys. There was a moment of silence, but not a hint of doubt in the progen's glare.

“You *know* how cruel and unforgiving this world can be, Rhys. I will not allow it, *especially* after what we found in her preliminary,” the progen said confidently. “She's not ready- ”

“Were you?”

“That's different. We had an advantage. *She* doesn't.”

“You underestimate her. Your overprotection is blinding you from seeing what your decision has gifted her with.”

“What, making friends with all the animals?” Kit remarked, rhetorically.

“Her kindness. Her perspective.”

“How are *either* of those going to keep her safe when I'm not around?”

“She will not be on her own, Oreo will find people who care for her, who will fight to protect her, just as you do.”

“You can't be certain of that.”

Rhys shrugged. “I have never known you as the type to make such an oversight, but I say confidently: this is your biggest miscalculation.”

Kit tensed, looking away, unsure what to think.

“So be it,” Rhys said, shrugging again, “as her sister and her guardian, the decision rests with you; I mean only to forewarn,” he said, as silence soon followed.

Kit made her way to the door, the conversation had not gone the way she'd thought.

“I care deeply for Oreo too, Kit.”

She stopped in the doorway, keeping her back facing him.

“Do not mistake my conviction with indifference.”

The door closed behind her.

Chapter 4

The sun was already disappearing behind the horizon. The edges of the building's own shadows climbed the sides of the temple ruins as Kit began to light the braziers. Oreo laid in her bed, staring blankly through the hole in the wall that acted as her window. One by one, she watched as the stars began to poke through the dimming sky and broken clouds. The familiar sounds of crackling fire, the chirps of crickets and bats, and whoops and calls of creatures Oreo had yet to discover filled the air.

The day had been especially quiet: the android hadn't shown for her morning training, neglecting her duties for the remainder of the day, not even coming out of her room to eat or go to the library. Kit, unsure of how to approach her after yesterday's fight, decided to give her the day off, and the protogen left a bowl of Oreo's favourite nuts and berries on the shelf outside of her room.

Oreo really liked her room. It had come a long way from the dark, cold cracked-stone walls it started as. Her brother Home had helped decorate it with plants, which she took great care of, and whenever Kit would leave, she'd always come back with a gift for her. Oreo really liked animals, so she'd gotten her things like a frog blanket for her bed, a firefly lantern on her wall, and many stuffed animals. She kept all the stuffed animals on her bedroll: a mouse, an owlbear, and two weird ones that Kit got from *Ahmit*: one was a small green creature with horns and four ears, and the other was a grey wolf, and part of the pattern glowed when you hugged it. She said she had won them, but didn't say how.

The android groaned and turned in her bed as she replayed the events of the previous day. Her sister had been nothing but kind and caring to her, and the way she'd looked at Oreo yesterday, the sadness and worry she saw in her eyes... That guilt weighed heavy on her conscience. Even so, she didn't regret the way that she felt. There was one thought that recurred through all of the noise: *why wasn't I built like the rest of the protogens?* The question was bugging her like an itch she couldn't scratch, even if she didn't know what being itchy was.

The winds started to pick up as the clouds rolled over, blowing out the firefly lantern on her wall. Soon it was nearly pitch black outside, Oreo's room was dimly lit solely by the blue glow of her circuitry. She felt a raindrop hit her nose, and slowly she heard the little pits and pats of rain grow louder as it came down.

KRRRaAAABOOOOM Oreo quickly sat up, the rumble of thunder reverberated through the halls and chambers of the temple ruins before it was drowned out by the

roar of rain. The android peered out her bedroom's window; Kit and Rhys were scrambling to fasten down covers to protect their instruments and materials from the sudden storm. She could've been out there helping,

"or..."

Oreo cracked her door open, her glow illuminating the hallway. It would take a while for Kit and Rhys to secure everything, and nowadays they didn't use the *sanctum* this late at night - it was her perfect opportunity. Oreo remembered only parts of her time in the sanctum, it felt more like dreams to her. She'd been forbidden to enter it by both Kit and Rhys, but that's exactly why she needed to see what they were hiding. Grabbing a good handful of berries and nuts from the bowl, Oreo set off.

Near the back of the temple, a large set of stairs led down to a pair of metal doors. The doors seemed large and heavy, but when Oreo went to open them, it was much easier than she expected. The lights to the sanctum were all extinguished, so Oreo relied on her faint blue glowing circuitry to find her way around. The ceiling was about twice as tall as her, and she couldn't see the edges of the room in the dark. As she walked through the sanctum, she saw instruments and tools that were left on tables, parchments and notes were splayed out on desks, and metal parts were half-assembled on the workbenches attached to wires that ran along the ground to a central hub.

As she approached the East wall, images came into view that were carved and painted into the stone. Cracks ran through the mural just like they ran through the rest of the building, so it was likely a relic of the temple from the 'old world' that Kit had told her about. She saw the face, or maybe a mask, of what looked to be a dragon: one side of their face was light, the other dark, split down the middle. Looking at the entire mural, she saw the left half depicting scenes of violence and ruin, engulfed in fire, while the right side was what Oreo could only know as the *civilization* that Kit had described to her, and it showed a gift being offered to the beings below. She looked with fascination at the mural, but couldn't gleam more from it.

She looked at the North wall, and immediately recognized the familiar protogen shapes. Along the wall were schematics for some of her siblings, most of whom she recognized: there was Hearth and Home, who she knew briefly after she was created, and Kit, both her creator and her sister, the second protogen Rhys had created. As she approached the West wall, she got the feeling that she was being *watched*. Slowly she stepped forward, and in the corner of the room there were shelves of books and scrolls that came into view, attached to a neatly organized desk. Oreo opened the main drawer, finding stacked schematics and notes, instantly recognizing the writing on it as Kit's. She sat down at the desk, the chair creaking under her weight.

These schematics were for...

“*Me.*”

Oreo studied the pages closer, her curiosity completely taking control, opening all the books that the protogen had hand-written and drawn. It had details on everything: her skeletal structure, synthetic muscular system, bio-energy system, ocular, auditory... and detailed her *arcanum neural engine*: the mechanism inside of her head that regulated all the systems of her synthetic body. She read on.

“Wait, I can just--?” The android concentrated and followed the precise directions, positioning, and movement on the page...

pop!

“*wAA-!*”

Oreo surprised herself. In her right hand, she held a piece of her metal cowl from the bottom of her forearm. Her surprise immediately turned to fascination as, for the first time, she saw the inside of her body. Dozens of dark grey synthetic muscle fibers ran the span of her forearm, attaching to a shiny metallic bone structure underneath. Oreo watched in awe as she saw glowing blue pulses run up and down the fibers. After some more reading, she tried detaching and reattaching different parts of her body, starting with the casing and cowl around her legs and chest, but then...

Oreo closed her eyes, retracting her visor, and brought both hands gripping firmly from her cheeks to her temples, and released the seal. She didn’t need to open her eyes to see – they couldn’t be closed anymore. In her hands, she held her own face.

She was completely intrigued, she hadn’t even considered what was inside her before today, and now she was seeing it with her own eyes. She turned the mask over, and the thought came rushing back. As Oreo stared at the border collie, she thought of all of her siblings. They all looked different from her. Maybe... she wasn’t a protogen at all?

In her angst, she accidentally squeezed the mask too much, and to her surprise she saw a small puff of smoke rise from one of the nodes on the interior. “I should probably-” Oreo carefully sealed the mask back onto her face, then after a moment, blinked a few times, making different expressions – everything seemed normal. She sighed in relief and closed the book: whatever she broke, she wouldn’t worry about it now. She took

Kit's bag from the shelf, put her manual inside, and shouldered it - she'd sneak it back to her room later.

Before she closed the desk, she saw another book labeled *Oreo: Diagnostics*. Upon opening it, she saw similarly formatted entries all throughout. *These are... tests? Before I was even born...?* She thought to herself. She quickly scanned the pages, most of the tests were rather mundane and uninteresting, testing reflexes, basic instincts, signal timings, whatever those were – but some of the tests were written in Rhys' handwriting. When she read his twelfth entry, the book grew heavy in her hands as her arms began to shake.

Preliminary Ignition Diagnostics
Day: 742

Preliminary ignition was initialized by Kit the morning of day 742, motor and ocular systems, as well as higher cognitive function were suspended for this test. Oreo responded as expected, and Kit was able to collect clean signals from Oreo's arcanum neural engine, better than we had expected.

Our enthusiasm was short-lived; upon using soulsight, I could not detect a soul presence within her. My perception extended through her without interference, but no matter the adjustments we made to the parameters, each yielded a negative result. We were unable to give Oreo a soul. We had hoped for a different outcome, but this hasn't deterred us from another attempt.

"I- I don't – have a-" The sound of thunder shook the ruins. Oreo was in shock, dropping the book to the floor, not wanting to look back at the page. But it wouldn't help. It was all starting to make sense to her now - why she looked different from the rest of the protogens, and why she wasn't allowed to leave this place. Something *DID* go wrong with her when she was made, and now she knew what.

"I'm just – a *failed* protogen? But Kit, she- *she never* made me feel like-" As Oreo stumbled backwards, she tripped over large and heavy cables. She rubbed her head, and when she opened her eyes, she instinctually covered her mouth stopping her from letting out a scream.

Sitting cross-legged and cross-armed on a metal pedestal, was a body of another protogen. Oreo laid still in stunned silence, but the body did not move. Slowly, without making any sudden moves, she pushed herself up from the stone floor, looking closer at the protogen. Its visor showed no face – even when Kit slept, her visor would still show something, but this was completely... *off*. It looked to be the same size as Oreo,

and had dozens of wires still connected to it from the floor and ceiling.

“H-hello...? Are you... awake? I’m Oreo, are you one of Kit’s – ”

The android’s expression froze in a thousand-yard stare. Inscribed at the edge of the pedestal was what could only be this protogen’s name: *Oreo*.

‘Another attempt’, the words echoed in her mind.

Oreo ran out of the sanctum sobbing, leaving just a single note for Kit behind on the pedestal, right on her diagnostics page:

I hope she is everything I couldn’t be to you.

Chapter 5

“***SHE’S GONE!***” Kit yelled, barging into Rhys’ chambers, the anguish that consumed the protogen’s voice turned his blood cold.

“What do you mean, *she’s gone*?” The dragonborn tried to respond in the most calm and collected tone he could manage.

“***OREO!*** I- I went to go check on her this morning and—,” she paused
“when I couldn’t find her in her room, I searched the entire temple. Rhys, *the sanctum was open*.” Rhys’ eyes widened when he saw the book that Kit was holding.

“She-- she left *this* on the prototype pedestal- and-” Kit couldn’t finish, showing the book to the dragonborn. Looking over the page, he quickly pieced together what had happened.

“Oh, oh my gods, she thinks that we wanted to- “ When Rhys looked back up to meet eyes with Kit, the pain he could see in her eyes was unbearable: he dared not finish his thought.

Rhys calmed himself and thought deeply. “A sending spell wouldn’t work with her, what about her transponder? You... can’t locate her?”

The protogen shook her head. “*Something’s wrong*. Either she’s already out of my range or-” her voice quivered, “*Rhys what if something happened to her?*”

He shook his head, “that’s enough. Be rational - for all we know, after reading her manual, she could have intentionally disabled it to avoid being followed. Or, a node in the module was broken, somehow... either way, I don’t have reason to believe she is in danger, at least for the time being. The most notable threat around this forest is the owlbear, and you’ve taught her well on how to avoid its territory.”

“*How* are you so calm about all of this? Didn't you say you cared for her as much as I do??” The frustration in Kit’s voice was palpable.

“I understand where you are coming from, truly. But you are my child as much as she is yours; I know how much you are hurting right now, and I will do everything I can to help. I’ve just- been alive long enough to know what’s helpful and not,” he stated, closing the book.

"I'm calm because I know that she will be alright on her own. I know that you will find her, and I know that she will inevitably learn the *real* truth. I have to choose to believe that," he stated with a confidence that left no room for doubt. "Now come, I'll help with your preparations, there's no time to lose."

Rhys followed behind a hasted Kit as she rummaged through provisions, equipment, and weapons in the partially-repurposed library of the temple ruins. As she packed her bag, Rhys held out something for her in her palm.

"A... necklace?" Kit asked, a little confused.

"It's a communications pendant," Rhys said, tugging down his shirt to show a nearly-identical pendant. "They are a pair. We can use these to contact each other. Please, be careful; if it is broken, it cannot be repaired."

Kit attached the pendant around her neck, staring down at it, then out into the open, pausing all of her preparations.

"...I keep thinking about how different this could have been," she said, her voice much quieter now. "We should have told her *protogen are not ignited with souls*. It was reckless and arrogant for us to try otherwise for Oreo. It just isn't possible; a protogen's soul needs to be cultivated over time, there's no way around it," she said, letting out a shaky breath.

"Do you know why I was so '*overprotective*' of her? In what I told her? In what I taught her? In what I kept from her?" Rhys stayed quiet. "I saw her ambition, her fears, her desires, and I wanted to keep her here, *safe*, until she cultivated her soul, so that-" she choked, "so that when she *DID* go out into the world and *if* something were to happen to her, at least I could have some peace knowing I would see her again one day."

The brave face that Rhys had put on for Kit wavered, and a tear streamed down his cheek. "I- "

"Rhys. If she dies before she can cultivate her soul, I won't forgive myself."

She looked at him with a sadness so deep, tears would hardly help more to convey, even if the protogen could. "I should have listened to you. I considered what you'd told me, and this morning when I went to go see her I- ...it was to offer to bring her out into the world like she'd dreamed of, and we'd see it *together*."

“Now, she *honestly believes* that I would *replace her*? Did she not see how *special* she was to me? There isn’t a thing in the world I would change about her. *Did I fail to make her realize that...?*”

Rhys was absolutely heartbroken as he listened to his daughter. He also felt that he could have done things different. “Kit,” he said, putting a hand on her shoulder, before pulling her in for a hug. “Oreo is still very young. She may have seen no other possibility or explanation for what she saw, especially in such turmoil. Please, don’t blame yourself.”

He stepped back, keeping his hands on her shoulders, “I too should have told Oreo more about her creation... about the prototype I had offered to you when you wanted to create her; I’m sure she would have been *delighted* to learn you opted to instead build her from the ground up.”

Kit sat down, and looked to the floor. “She might have, but... after what she said the other day when we fought, I’m not sure - she may have resented me for not choosing to make her more like us when I had the chance.”

There was a moment of silence as the two thought. The dragonborn spoke up first, “it is in the past, we cannot change what has transpired. We could have done many things differently, but what’s important now is we learn from it.”

She nodded, packing the remainder of her belongings before covering herself up in her combat attire, strapping up her pack, and heading to the entrance of the temple. It was close to midday now, the sky was still blanketed in thick clouds, making it cool and windy.

“Wait, what about her manual?” Rhys said, trying to think of what she could have forgotten. Kit shook her head, “she took it, but it’s not a problem: I memorized hers.”

Rhys looked surprised for a moment, then smiled with pride. Kit loved Oreo as any other would love their child; it was all the evidence he needed to see that Kit had cultivated her own soul into something truly beautiful.

“I don’t know when I’ll return, but I won’t be coming back without her,” she told Rhys. He nodded in understanding, giving her one last hug.

“Go get your sister back.”