



Once upon a time life was normal...

Life had always been okay. Wu was twelve and had always been inspired. He remembered his one-room school building. It held all the grades and had a wood-burning stove in the middle. It would have been a nice building to have right now in the snow, that was if no one would notice you sleeping in it. Once upon a time...going to the theater was great, reading a book was great, everything was okay. He thought of recent changes in his life and how he didn't want to be a ninja. Being sick made his feelings unconceivably dreadful. I MUST GET BETTER, he thought. It felt like the sun stopped shining and Ninjago was under a great threat to end its survival. A bat flew into a dead tree branch. He thought, my insides are so broken, at least in the Haunted Forest my outside matches my inside.

Sensei Sage sat at the head of an intricately decorated spruce table. On his left there was enough spaces for three chairs, three chairs in those spaces, and three Senseis sat in those chairs. On his right were enough spaces for three chairs, three chairs in those spaces, and two Senseis in those chairs. Across from him was a circular window that overlooked a fig plantation. The figs were not in bloom because it was the dead of winter. Outside the Sensei's castle, Sargent Arcturus, the young Anacondrai military leader, paced back and forth. Sensei Sage announced at exactly noon, when the meeting was scheduled to begin, "I see everyone could make it. We have called this meeting to unbiasedly decide if Arcturus should gain the rank of Sensei or remain a Sensei in Training. We six must decide as we are the Senseis Arcturus knows best. We don't want a Sensei unfamiliar with him to decide his merit. But first, clan reports. My clan, the first mini-figure clan, is learning quickly, they have a lot of strife but I

believe they will work through it and soon become friends for life. I am teaching them to be more respectful. Serpentes Siena, your report."

Serpentes Siena was the patriarch of the Serpentes house, being Falco's grandfather. He was very large from eating too much, or as some might put it, "fat"; he was balding, and had a big wild beard. He was the oldest and most traditionalist of the Senseis. He bragged, "Acutely optimistic Sage. My clan is exuberantly happy to have me back after my short while in retirement, as they had many problems but rebounded quickly after my timely re-entrance. I am teaching them to be less resentful."

Siena then said what Sage was supposed to say, "Ikkan, your report."

Ikkan was the youngest of the Sesensei. He followed the latest trends in the fashion of the day in his appearance. He said, "They are doing pretty good, they seemed to learn from the mistakes of yester-time and have improved from them. I am teaching them to be more flexible. Sage."

Sage asked, "Agni, your report."

Pariksha Agni sat opposite Siena. Siena was the most protective of his pupil and Agni the least of hers, as she was the strictest of the Senseis. She had narrow almond eyes, pancake makeup face, and black hair in a tight bun. She sighed, rolled her eyes, and said, "My clan seems to have a problem with calling figurines not tough enough. Every minute for the last century they call each other wimpy, especially Lechts. I am teaching them to be nicer. Agreeous."

Agreeous came from the poorest background, despite being wealthy now. He was born with fur coats but earned silk through his job as carnival master. He presented himself as the industrious and clean business chief with his clean-shaven beard. He said, "I am teaching them to be fun-loving. My problem with my clan is excessiveness."

Liontounge Gin snickered, "You earned loads of money through bad jokes that could have gone to established entertainers and then you complain about excessiveness."

Liontounge Gin sat opposite Agreeous. She was the Master of Shadow before Krispal was born and whom randomly inherited her powers. Unlike Agreeous, who almost always agreed, people found it difficult to make her agree. Agreeous justified, "Their jokes are excessive because they don't have a purpose. I like to use jokes to explain or entertain. They think a lot things that aren't funny are funny. Despite this they still have great wisdom."

Gin said, "They are wise, unlike myself and my clan."

Agni asked, "Speaking of which, how is your clan doing?"

Gin replied, "Unprofessional, disobedient, arrogant, lazy, and hot-headed as ever. I am teaching them to be more exceptional."

Sage said, "That is it for the reports. Next, for our main objective, Arcturus. Let's break while I go outside and get him."

Blaze walked in a clearly different wood than Wu's. Blaze's was mountainous, barren, icy cold, and only featured a few dormant shrubs. He trekked with a satchel he got at the Dashaus House house he left. It had a few survival items in it, but without a bigger bag he could take

everything that would be nice to possess to survive. He thought, the odds of me finding someone here to get me to civilization are awfully slim. He saw smoke billowing in the distance. Like a horse near a barn he smiled and ran as fast as he could. His face filled with hurt when he slipped and fell on ice when he tried to stop. He saw the roof of a watchtower and he barely stopped before entering the main platform's view. He trekked for an hour to a rock overlooking the encampment. He pulled out binoculars to decide if they were friendly. It was an Indian Tribe. He recognized the warriors as being the ones who fought for Undead X. Undead X would mean trouble for Ninja. Ninja were warriors and the Undead X's tribe might have some anger with the protectors of Ninjago. Blaze decided he would rather face the icy mountains than face the Ronin Indians.

Wu wondered if he even wanted to make it to the Valley of the Martial Children. What good was it. He should just build a cabin in these haunted woods. Never see his clan again, never see Garmadon or his mother again. I'm not good at anything, why should I even pretend? He heard a horse charging at him. Maybe this was his fairy tale ending. A nice girl on a white horse, to bring him shelter, and be his savior. The rider nearly sliced his flesh in two. He expertly dodged the rider's naginata by jumping out of the horse's way. The rider didn't have a head piece. In Ninjago, this isn't surprising, only worrisome. He held his head piece under his left arm. It was a pumpkin. The headless horsefigure didn't stop as he circled around. Wu thought, can't this horse just stop? Why does he have to kick me while I'm down? Wu thought, why am I not afraid? I don't feel anything- oh, what I'd give to feel figure again. The headless horsefigure put away his naginata, or blade on a shaft, for a whip, made of a troll figure's spine. The silent horsefigure began charging at Wu. Wu got ready. When the horse was just in front of him, Wu

slid under the horse and between the four hooves. He was a good fighter, but he also knew they were better. The horsefigure jumped off his horse, who kept riding. The rider got his spine whip ready and shot it at Wu. Wu pulled out his katana from his weapon-holding piece. The whip wrapped around the blade and was caught. Wu tugged at his sword to separate the vertebrae of the spine whip. He heard the horse behind him and he did a mid-air barrel roll and managed to kick the horse over him. With the horse's momentum, the horse went flying away, but when he landed, he kept going. In the action the rider had disappeared. Wu scanned around but he was nowhere to be found. Wu sheathed his katana on his back and stepped away. He heard a cacophony behind him. He turned around to see a gray wolf tearing the pumpkin head piece to more pieces. The body dropped dead. Wu pulled out his katana and got ready to fight the wolf. The wolf jumped up, as if catching a ball. He then excitedly pranced away. He stopped, turned around, and gazed into Wu's eyes. If he could talk he would probably say, "Come on, what are you waiting for?"

Wu put away his sword and followed the wolf. The wolf led him to a small meadow that broke from the dense forest. On the edge was a big boulder with smaller boulders around it, which would make it easy to climb up to the top of the big one. They stepped over figure skeletons in old military kimonos and armor as they entered the meadow. The wolf led Wu to one of the smaller rocks. The wolf raised his front left paw, like a hunting dog. The rock asked, "Are you coming or not?"

Wu was shocked. He asked, "You can speak?"

The stone angrily spat, "Very rude. I know I am shy but that doesn't mean I can't speak. I would think the sacred protector would have better social skills."

Wu realized the wolf lacked the ability to scale the rock face and thus, he should go alone. Wu asked, "Mind if I step on you?"

The rock replied, "Who asks that to a rock? Are you crazy?"

Wu stepped on the rock and climbed to the top. He then climbed two more before getting on the big boulder. The boulder was so big it saw over most of the trees. He wished he could pause life at this moment, he felt tranquil. Wu saw the sun break through the clouds that were causing the snow. It emitted a gold aura that sliced through the black of the haunted forest. It made the dead trees less scary. It then turned orange, which contrasted with the snow, which made the snow less scary. The clouds now looked like they were made of brush strokes. He wanted this moment to last, before the sun completely set and the forest would fill with cold nighttime air. He would remember this moment, with the care of preserving an antique, until the hands of time would take him away. A happy tear ran down his face. He felt cold when it dripped onto his shin. Darkness was about to fall across the land.

Arcturus sat down in the empty chair for his interview. Sage began, "Arcturus, you currently have the entry rank into our League, Sensei To Be. With this rank, you may train as assistant Sensei with a clan, but not hold primary senseiship. To gain full membership you must earn the rank of Sensei, then you will be able to teach your own clan. Tell us initiative, what is the secret pass-phrase?"

Arcturus replied, "A Sensei never tells."

Sage asked, "What virtues do you call?"

Arcturus claimed, "Nobility and honor."

Gin said, "Oh, I'm better at those than you."

Siena said, "I see you are very honorable and a figure of Departed worship. Not many people are these days, not like when I was boy."

Arcturus said, "Yes, we must learn from the past and honor timeless heroes whose names might otherwise be lost to the ages. "

Ikkan, who sat across from Arcturus, said, "Three months ago you said we must respect our ancestors. Then last month you said we must respect ancestors who deserve our respect. I have no problem with either, but you are inconsistent. I have a hunch you reacted to a mock. A Sensei cannot be that impulsive. You are not the Master of Fire, you're a Sensei in training."

Arcturus admitted, "I accept that claim."

Agreeous said, "Well it is manly to be flexible as you learn new things."

Arcturus bowed his head in respect. Agreeous sat next to him and they shared a special connection that the other Senseis didn't understand why. Agreeous said, "A nobility call sign? Huh, I will call you greeny."

Arcturus added, "I also believe in honor."

Agreeous said, "It is honorable to respect those who are more capable than you."

Sage remarked, "Yes, doing what is honorable always goes noticed."

Agni said, "I wanted to bring up that you are a Serpentine and have great respect for the Anacondrai tribe. Balance is balance between attachment and non-attachment. You should also have a reason for your level of attachment. You don't seem to have a reason to like your tribe's figures over the other Serpentine Tribes. Tell me what that reason is?"

Sage was raised a monk. He had a short fuzzy beard and a bald head. Sage smiled and said, "You mean he is an actual figurebeing with feelings?"

Agreeous chuckled. Even the normally imposing Ikkan laughed. Ikkan said, "We think it would be best to give you more time to train."

Sage said, "You still may be the greatest warrior who has ever done battle over Ninjago. I have faith in you."

Arcturus asked, "Tell me what I can do to learn faster."

Ikkan replied, "A Sensei never tells."

The sun had left the region Wu was in. It was now getting colder and colder. He climbed down the rocks in the dimmer lighting quickly, before the sun had completely vanished. Wouldn't it be enjoyable to have flint and steel so I could start a fire? When he got to the bottom the wolf was gone. He needed a savior now more than ever. He started building a snow shelter, which was difficult in just a foot of snow. He accidentally touched a piece of paper, in the shape of a taxi carriage ticket. He felt himself being sucked into a teleportation wormhole. Specs of light shot passed him, like riding a chariot quickly through the snow. In a flash, he appeared in a new setting. There was a small cottage, with an unusually small door, surrounded by vegetable

fields. He walked to the door, shivering, and knocked. A half-stacked figure came to the door, he was an elf, like Krispal. Inside the cottage there was only one bed, as elves have increased resilience to exhaustion. The children hid behind their mother. The father, who was the one at the door asked, "What is your business, human figure?"

Wu said, "I am sorry, I got lost in the woods and would like you to take me to more human figures."

The elf led Wu down the trail to the cottage until they got to a small village. Wu read the sign, "Welcome to the Valley of the Martial Children."

The elf pointed at a dojo. Wu tried to pay the elf two copper ounces but the elf said, "I can't accept this. I have work in the fields to do tomorrow."

Wu didn't understand. He said, "I am paying you for what you did tonight."

The elf said, "I may be stupid but I know tomorrow you will come to my door asking for labor in exchange for what you already payed me. Equal trade, you already payed me by being friendly."

Wu knew that elves were some of the supposed sub-figures, but this trade didn't seem equal, after all, the elf was friendly too. Just as the Dashaus House excluded non-members as inferior, elves were excluded by human figures as a lesser-figure group, despite them being Figures of Speech. Regardless, Wu let the elf disappear down the trail. He walked to the dojo and knocked on the frame of the wax-paper door. A horse cantered behind him. He heard, "Don't bother, I just got home and everyone else is at a good friend's house."

He turned around and saw a girl on a white horse, she had a torch that filled the black with illumination and hope, a sun that would not set. Wu felt shelter at last when she dismounted and said, "I'm Misako."