

The Fates' Duel

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Chapter 1: Arrival

Location: Wave World – A planet in the Angel Constellation, home of the Mystic League.

For nearly two decades, the Mystic League has been the most premiere school of powered beings in the Great Wide Universe. Its students are respected, and are considered like warrior monks in their abilities to keep the peace through a show of incredible, overwhelming magical powers, and magically empowered physical might.

Its students were all able to lift several metric tons in sheer weight after their first year, and hundreds of metric tons by graduation's end.

I could accomplish over a thousand metric tons. I could bench press a bulk freighter.

To look at me, a tiny six foot fem, despite my rippling body and sexy demeanor, I nonetheless had several magical enhancements which allowed me to do battle with battle mechs bare handed.

But that was a mere sample of the magical enhancements a student of the League

accomplished. They became sorceresses and sorcerers, tapping into the very lifeforce of the universe to enhance their magical and psychic powers a thousand fold, using techniques handed down to us and taught to us by a young dragon maiden.

As we neared the end of our training, our powers grow so immensely powerful that we are able to destroy whole planets if we were able to find a way to exist in space.

And all this because of an ancient race that nearly annihilated us an age ago.

Wave World, however, was a remarkable world, home to the School of Sorcery Arts and Combat, a school that was only about a decade old. Presently, several thousand students resided in this now sprawling edifice placed upon one of the premier island refuges upon Wave World; its facilities pristine and beautiful, with white and green marble, and the feeling of tangible spirit magic all around it. The school resembled the capitol city of many a society during their subsequent Golden Age, built on one of the Ocean Planet's largest islands, it sprawled over step-style mountains, which rose eventually to the Pinnacle Tower at the center of the school. Inside the tower was a Great Library, the centralized depository for all things arcane. A gift to us from the Emperor Himself.

Perhaps, truly, this was a Golden Age... for a place such as this to exist.

It was such a beautiful school, and from my position atop the Pinnacle tower, beneath the great crystal sphere that served as the school's power tap into the arcane, I was able to look over everything sprawled out beneath me, and right out over the vast glittering oceans.

My name is Rae, Rae Iksaki.

I am the eldest member of this school, now having passed on far enough in my skills here to where I was now the teacher with students of my own. I was also the first to ever have graduated from the school, ahead of schedule even, and with honors. My name was the first one on the rolls, the first to do practically everything with my potential having been released so thoroughly. I was nearing immortality, and the magical power of the undying.

I'd heard that they were even considering making a statue of me in the great hall. I hope to squash that idea as soon as I find who started it. I don't need to be immortalized like that...

But I had become the pride of the school, the person that they all looked up to – males, females, and young and old – with me being the favored pupil of our headmistress, the feathered Dragoness Menikomenqolui, I had gained her direct attention, direction and teachings. Perhaps that is how I had advanced so far. She who is our teacher, mother, headmistress, and the founder of this school...

And now I stood, my long head fur waving in the breezes, watching the yellow sun set from my usual perch atop the Pinnacle Tower, basking in both the sun's light and the light of the Massive Anchor Stone; caught in its mechanical workings, and empowering the entire world as a source of magic. The tower had once been the only standing edifice on this island, and was where the headmistress had stationed her home. She has since moved her home to the nearby Radiance Island, inside a golden pyramid, leaving this tower as the principle school building. But way up here, a mile up into the sky, atop the flat top platform surrounded by the Spell Anchor spires about the tower, one could get the most beautiful of views.

I leaned over the railing while the Anchor Stone continued to glitter above me; the thing a ball of arcane might and the power source for this world, glittered and shone above my head like a massive ball of electrified water, projecting a single beam straight up into space. Somewhere

high up past the cloud cover, the top of that energy spire erupted into a perpetual star burst. But down here... a golden sun, now changing into orange as it set, melted into a green sea while the Anchor stone took over as the source of light for the school

It made my heart leap every time that I saw it. When I was younger, a sight such as this was as rare as a good night sleep.

I hugged myself in remembrance of my childhood, in remembrance of less happy times.

My home world was a place of devastation, corruption, and crumbling cities sinking rapidly into the dust and despoiled by death at every turn. When I was ten, my home town, which was little more than a small block of homes in a city surrounded by boarded up windows and guarded walls, was ravaged – its goods pillaged, its men murdered for sport and its women raped repeatedly.

Like my mother...

Why do such memories always find me when I'm alone? I heard myself think, gripping the short wall surrounding the courtyard here atop the tower with my clawed fingers. That day, I was rescued from that hell and brought here, to where I was taken in, treated like a daughter, taught how to grow strong and powerful, confident and beautiful. Powerful enough that in only a few years, I was able to return and save my home world.

I'd nearly lost my sanity in the process. My mother, my beautiful mother, whom I was sure had been dead by then, was instead still alive. Barely. She'd been ravaged and beaten only the Creator knew how many times in the years I'd been safe and at study, but I revenged her, and found... remarkably... that I had a sister now.

Father... did not live more than a month after I took my sister with me to this school, to be safe, to where she could grow up and be strong without the same influences that I had had in my youth. When I took her here, she was still barely more than a baby and, thank The Maker; she did not have a life like I had. She had been blessed with nurturing teachers who treated her like a daughter, she had a loving mother/sister in me, and a heart filled with happiness.

The last time I visited my home, I found that my father had been buried in a grave directly beside my mother, with the tree that had been planted over her grave having grown immense and strong. A testament that my home world had been given another chance. That was years ago, and I haven't been back since. The empire, however, has gone to great lengths of protecting the world and instilling law and order at last.

This was good, I decided, actually managing a smile at the hard thought as I redirected my attention back to the beauty of the setting sun.

But still... I may never go back. Too many bad memories...

I hugged myself, hunching my shoulders as I tried to warm myself from the chill of so many bad memories, some of which I barely even remembered. There was so much about that whole affair that I didn't remember. Perhaps it was that I didn't want to remember.

A soft wind, full of warmth and life blue against my back, picking up my floppy ears and hair, while dragging at the trailing edges of my fur, flushing the short hair all over my body in one direction with the wind's breath while my tail wrapped around my thick legs. I was a six foot tall female weighing at just over a quarter of a ton; with my birth race resembling canines... dogs and wolves, the noblest of creatures, the most loyal...

But years of intense physical and magical study – just over a decade – has changed this once lithe and tiny body that I'd been born with, into an intensely massive and muscular form presently unrivaled by any known competitor. I always chuckled at the thought that I weighed as much as I did, and even more so at the thought that I was proud that I was this heavy. It is a lot of muscle...

But for a female to weigh five hundred and thirty two pounds, one would think that I was heinously overweight. Many have entertained that thought until they saw me. That quarter ton of weight on such a small pound is due almost entirely in sheer muscle mass. Incredibly dense, having developed into tighter, firmer chords that were the tensile strength of composite alloy chords and with most of my body fat helping to support the well rounded and firm bosom attached to my chest.

I hugged myself a little tighter, feeling the weight of such a bosom heft up higher against my chest with my thick arms, smiling happily and pleasingly that I have developed into such a virile female. I took pleasure in showing off this body, though not nearly as much as some of my friends did, but I enjoyed wearing clothing that made me appear more sexual.

Such is the effects of training at this "school."

I have been trained since the age of ten in the arts of sorcery and combat, mingling the mystic arts and the body into a unified whole. At the age of ten, after only a few mere months of learning at this school, my body had grown large and had already begun to 'develop' prematurely, to the point where I had become a fully breeding female at the age of twelve. Likewise, even then, I had possessed the height and physical bearing of being able to lift several times my own body weight.

And then I'd also amassed immense power in the forms of several magical schools of thought.

As a sorceress, I was linked into several 'Sources of Power,' as they were called, each linked directly to my Center, and my Center absorbing tremendous levels of *Femininity*, *Strength*, and *Spirit*. I was already stronger than an entire army of foot soldiers at the age of fourteen when I went to visit my home world again after joining the school, to see my family and perhaps help them, I possessed more than enough power to exact my revenge on much of the evils of that world.

Including the damnable creature that had stole my mother from me...

I shook my head, clearing it of those thoughts as I turned sharply and strode for the portal elevator leading down, feeling the wind brush against my body before I stepped onto the glowing circular platform and it immediately began to descend.

And now... I'd grown several hundred times more powerful since then, with my strengths all growing exponentially, and the newest of my Sources adhering to my center quite rapidly. I've tapped into other '*sources*' of power, each one making me stronger, faster, wiser, each one slowing my aging process, keeping me beautiful, virile and young. Till one day most recently... I simply stopped aging.

The doctors and medical specialists called it "Clinical Immortality." My headmistress simply called it immortality.

I still don't know how I should think of that, but now I was being called "The Immortal Rae Iksaki."

I hugged myself again as I continued to descend at that last thought.

It was sort of an accident achieving that feat. I'd grown so powerful, my healing factor so fast, my magical prowess so massive, that all of these forces sustained me, revitalized me, even from the affects of age. I was twenty-one now, and I still possessed the body of an eighteen year old. Firm and rounded in body with very few sharp angles making up my form, with full and rounded breasts and a pleasant, young face locked in an ageless beauty. The only thing that seemed to age in me was the light of my eyes. I'd been called immature and young until one has chanced to look into my eyes and seen the maturity that exists there.

I blushed slightly then as I looked down at my body, at the massive expanse of my bust that was nearly too large for the clothing I wore, and a few scant centimeters of cloth were all that needed to fall to reveal the fullness of my femininity to any who chanced to look. Part of my charm was that that never happened.

But though all the more-than-obvious feminine physique that I possessed, I felt the sheer, raw, unrequited *power* sliding through my form as if my energy was on the verge of breaking from my flesh. At sometimes I burned with the warmth of it, and it was an effort to keep my emotions in check or else the sheer act of my anger would burn holes in the floor.

I sighed, as the elevator brought me down within the tower, my whole body swelling briefly as the lift brought me down to the main courtyard hundreds of stories below, to where I exited and moved off toward the main courtyard. Every movement that I took was exacting, every step quiet and demure, graceful and beautiful and without sound.

They had given me the title of "goddess," because I'd grown so powerful, a title I'd achieved five years ago when I was sixteen. *And now they call me "Immortal,"* I thought.

Pausing on the steps of the Grand Stair leading up to the central tower, a hand coming to rest on the railing to one side of me, I flexed my arm, watching as its forearm flared, its bicep near tripled impossibly in size, and I could feel the tangible source of my powers sliding through the length of my arm, and without even trying, sparks of energy danced about the length of my arm, sparkling this way and that, lighting my fur with a golden color briefly before I released the flex and let the energy pass back into my center.

And that wasn't even a full flex! I smiled, opening my fingers slowly. *Why have I been blessed with such power?* I wondered then, and continued in my steps.

I didn't like the fact that they called me a goddess, but I certainly seemed as such, sometimes even in my own eyes. *But an Immortal?*

I finally banished my darker feelings and lifted my head, my circular hat bobbing briefly atop my head as I stepped lithely forward, gracefully, while the younger students, and even some of the faculty, moved purposefully out of my way, bowing their heads and greeting me warmly. I smiled happily back at them as I strode forward, waving to friends as I passed off into the central courtyard.

I'd reached the center of the courtyard when I slowed and then stopped, feeling something... strange... unique in the air.

Something unfamiliar.

I lifted my hand to feel the air with my four fingers, blinking for a moment as I felt the unfamiliar magic in the air. Something that was tangible already with no visible effect as of yet. I began looking around for the source, but it was either so vague or powerful in its area of effect that it had no discernable center.

"Hey Rae! Oh Rae!" I heard someone calling my name suddenly, and lifting my head and turning, I saw with a smile rising upon my lips again as my friend Equis rapidly approaching me.

A Casid, a race of catlike creatures resembling lions, Equis was one of the very few senior students, those that had graduated. She stood tall and proud, full of feminine power, greater than my own in that regard, and stood head and shoulders above me. Her physical abilities, again, outweighed my own – but only by a little – but it was my Taoist methods and combat abilities that earned me the respect that I had even above her in other people's eyes.

Equis, however, unlike myself was not as easily embarrassed about her body, even in comparison with my at times flaunting garb. She however exhibited her boisterously feminine form as much as she could, and even with the requirement for all members of the Mystic League, those taught by this school, to be clothed, Equis was always borderline in disobeying that rule. Even now, she was dressed in a simple white body cloth that was nearly transparent. As such, especially in this light, it did little more than place her entire naked body into shadow.

And with the breeze blowing the cloth about her, all one had to do was stand off to her side to see all that they wanted. In this way she was such a tease to the young male members of the League who hid behind trees and bushes in the off chance to see her.

The public bath was always a grand display of her body to both men and women, and I always had to chuckle as she washed with us.

I wasn't much better than her after all... especially since my miniskirt in my wrap around body suit was so short you could see my panties, and the front of my bodysuit did little more than to cover my teats. But when you gain a body like the two of us have developed, you tend to flaunt it... and often.

"Hi Equis!" I smiled happily in greeting as she stopped up short and the two of us hugged one another in greeting.

"Hey yourself, kid." Equis grinned, patting me on the back while showing off her elongated incisors that were reminiscent of her meat-eating feline heritage. "They did it, Rae!" She said then as she fell into stride beside me. "The Headmistress got the tournament to be here! Members from all the other two leagues are coming here! Tonight!"

"Tonight?" I echoed, and absentmindedly began walking off in any old direction, biting the hooking claw of one of my nails. "The Demon League and the Power League here? That means..."

"Yup! Makahn is coming!" Equis said, startling me first with the exclamation, and twice with a solid slap on my rump. Then a third surprise when she gave my rump a firm squeeze.

"Hey!" I exclaimed, rubbing my bare bottom where the back of my panties didn't cover, but then I waxed rhapsodic. "Makahn... coming here. Equis, I'm... I'm not ready to see him again."

Equis chuckled and landed a hand upon my muscled shoulder. "The most powerful being in the Great Wide Universe, and she's scared of a little relationship with... with... *with one hunk of a male!* Mph... that wolf has got some serious meat on him. Stop playing hard to get! Just invite him to your rooms and let nature take its course.

"Otherwise..." she nudged me with her very wide and capable hip. "Someone might take him from you." She giggled.

And then I rounded on her, my fur all suddenly standing on end as I burned with my power, my eyes shining a burning white as an electrical charge snapped and crackled across my bodice.

"Don't you *dare touch him!!*" I practically screamed.

And then I saw the frightened look in her eyes as she took a step a way from me and I hurriedly suppressed the anger. A great example as to why I needed to keep it in check.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” I apologized quickly. “I’m so sorry Eqis. I don’t know what came over me.”

Eqis took several calming breaths, but managed to smile. “It’s alright kid... it just goes to prove that there’s something there. Otherwise you wouldn’t be trying to protect him from other predators like me. He’s a male, you’re a female... and you both have affection for one another... it’s a good start. That... and he is one of the few men in this universe who might actually be able to please you... or me for that matter.”

I managed to laugh in spite of that. There was a rather unfortunate side effect to both the male and female sides of any of the leagues. Our bodies grew exceptionally strong in every regard. And I do mean *every* regard. I could press a rod of steel flat with the pocket between my thighs if I were sufficiently aroused, and bend it in knots. Likewise, this had a similar effect on the males, making them longer... thicker...

I gave off a soft sigh, and spread my hands over my muscled thighs, trying to hide the effects of my rising sensuality between them at the thought of Makahn finally kneeling between my thighs.

Then I suddenly got a light punch on the arm, and I turned to Eqis again, keeping my hands folded over my crotch.

“Now come on, or we’ll miss the arrivals. They’ll be Gateing in soon, and the Headmistress wishes all senior students to attend. That means you kid.”

Again I laughed, my momentary rage having waned completely as I stepped into pace with my friend and fellow upperclassman as she led the way down the Grand Stair toward the main Courtyard between all the towers and the dormitories.

“Does Fatima know?” I asked.

Fatima was my little sister that I’d rescued from the death and destruction from our home world. Shortly after I’d been taken up to join this school, she had been born amidst the sewers, grime and depravity. But despite all that, she still managed to hold a soul of innocence, joy and happiness. She was the flower growing in the wake of destruction. As such, she had taken up the more graceful arts than I had, but nonetheless possesses a very well developed and powerful bodice just like her big sister.

She may even someday surpass me... I considered with affection for my sister.

“Of course she knows.” Eqis responded to my inquiry. “She was probably listening to the Headmistress’s door with a glass pressed against her ear. She’s been waiting in the courtyard ever since, pushing everyone away from her spot so that she can get a good view of the proceedings.”

“And perhaps a good spot for the feast as well.” I laughed.

She was a growing girl, and had quite a good appetite. She ate more than her figure would allow for at times, and even as such she never gained a pound unless it was in raw muscle. As fate would have it, my sister was following well in my footsteps, and after me and then Equis in strength and overall power, she was the third most powerful being in the known universe.

Sure enough, Fatima was ensconced, immovable, in a place of perfect view on one of the many benches in the courtyard, the only one occupying it at present, with already a great throng of other members of the League all around the perimeter of the courtyard. She was apparently so adamant about retaining her seat that no one dared sit beside her now.

Headmistress Menikomenqolui was already resting on her dais of cushions, her great multi-colored wings folded against her back while she stabbed bits of fruit from a bowl in one claw and chewed them off. When she saw us, she beckoned us to take our place with the other faculty and upperclassmen.

“I am very glad that you are here Rae, Equis.” She greeted, directing us to take our seats on the long benches about her dais. “This wouldn’t have been complete without the two of you.”

“I am sorry we are late, headmistress. I wanted to see the sun set today, and Equis was kind enough to come find me.”

The young dragoness smiled regardless.

“I understand fully, child. Now let us be patient for a short while. Our guests should be arriving soon.”

The courtyard was broken only by short muttering before a low hum suddenly entered into the din, and the resulting silence was far, far greater than the noise had been. I sat nervously, my thighs together, my hands folded over my muscled lap, wondering who’d be coming through the Gateway first. Would it be the Imperials? The Demons.... or... or the Powered League?

They’d definitely send Makahn, I thought, biting my lower lip while my shoulders hunched, pressing my buxom breasts against one another and pressing them up over my biceps. Great Maker, it’s been months since I’ve seen him.

And at that moment, I didn’t know how I should’ve felt.

But then the Gate’s pillars began to shine a brilliant white, and bolts of electricity crackled to and fro between them, to the point where the static charge created a screen of brilliant light from the top of the pillars to the floor.

This dimensional gate was one of the few pieces of technology that resided here, but was necessary. Capable of mass transit over immense distances of hundreds of light years, for some of our guests who couldn’t arrive under their own magical power, technology was the only means available.

In the next moment, however, shadows appeared inside it and a procession came through. I exhaled a sigh as I saw four Imperial rangers stride through, followed by four psychic guardians, and finally the Emperor himself!

It's not the Powered League, I thought, biting my lower lip as my apprehension rose.

But then I felt my jaw drop open as the Holy One himself strode onto the tiled work of the courtyard, and at once, whoever was sitting, was now standing, including Menikomenqolui herself.

“You grace us with your presence, my lord.” She greets as four more rangers exit through the gate, before with a snap it and its brilliance simply cease their emanations and all grows dark save the torches, magical lighting rings and the moonlight.

“I would not have missed this experience in an age, my lady Dragoness.” He said inclining his head, to which in response, all but his guard and psychic aides all bowed deeply at the waist. Their duty was to protect the emperor, and therefore must be constantly on the alert.

The eight rangers took up varying positions all about the courtyard – two remaining by him at all times – while the Emperor took a place of prominence at the head table, and as soon as he was seated, all others did as well. And just in time too, for a reddened light was beginning to glow on the ground at the center of the courtyard signified the next arrivals.

A great reddened ball of blood red light formed above the tiled ground of the courtyard, before all of a sudden, the red light solidified into a sinuous line that began to rapidly etch across the ground, being joined by other lines as it broke off hundreds of times over, creating a *vast* spell circle, and an incredibly complex and difficult one I saw. Again calming my heart, I knew already who was approaching.

The Demons.

They were not truly evil creatures, once having been a section of the Mystic League that Fatima, Eqs and myself were all apart of, but they were dismissed, with great reluctance, because of their constant studying of the dark arts.

I may have been powerful, I may have in me the spirit of an immortal now due to my power, but an inter-planetary teleportation circle was something still too complex for me to absorb. And in the Demon league... there was only one person capable of such a thing.

Gehnohn.



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All of a sudden, the lines all flared brilliantly, and in a column of fire exploded straight up into the heavens between the Gateway's pillars, in a brief churning of flames, the first and foremost member of the Demons stepped through... a *massive* creature, towering over all around save for the Headmistress herself, of like height to even Eqs. To his sides came out the other members of the Demon League while his gossamer wings folded against the back of his head and upper back where they were attached. He was not as muscularly imposing as some of the members here, like Eqs, but he radiated power, both Sorceries and Demonic.

An air of superior presence to all, even the Emperor, radiated about him, and an effect similar to an even horizon of a black hole lined a very faint edge about his whole form. At his backside, five tails hung as he walked lithely and powerfully out into the open.

The other members of the Demon League stepped out behind him, a good dozen of his fellows, both male and female, and all of them, save Gehnohn himself, wearing as little clothing as was possible. Most of them wearing little more than pasties here and there.

These were Mystic Leaguers who had delved in the dark arts, which was why many of them had lost their tails while gaining horns and demon-like strength along with their demon-like natural abilities. And on top of that, they all were unbelievably powerful mystics.

As the last member of the Demons stepped through, the blazing pillar suddenly lost its strength and was snuffed out, its summoning glyph evaporating into a dark gray mist of free floating ash that was soon blown away.

Gehnohn walked forward and bowed deeply to his old headmistress, his massive, gossamer wings spreading open briefly and roiling about him like a black thundercloud to act like a cloak before returning again to their old configuration; fluttering briefly as they settled.

“Well met, ‘old one.” He smiled softly, while his fellow Demons lined up behind him, some looking in disdain at those around him.

I remembered Gehnohn.

He was in the same first class with me... but that was before he grew his wings and developed his extra tails. Before his demonification. When his form started to change like that, he couldn't hide his extracurricular activities any longer, and he, and his 'Hell Fire Club' were all dismissed from the Mystic League for practicing the forbidden arts. Gehnohn left with nary a twinge of anger. It was as if he had expected it all along. Now he was the master of his own league, his own school, his own planet...

Planet Hades. A demon class planet of noxious airs, barely tolerable gravity, and very little life. Despite that, his Hanging Gardens in their Palace of Shadows was bright and beautiful and grandiose in its design and beauty. I never really could understand a man who delved into such darkness, but still took pleasure in such things.

In spite of their differences, my mentor was laughing as she answered Gehnohn's greeting. "And you too 'stripling warrior.'" I chuckled at his old nickname, and he turned to me, smiling warmly as he placed a hand briefly on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze in passing greeting and in remembrance of our shared childhood. "If you'll be seated, then our final arrivals may gate in."

"Ah of course, how insensitive of me." He said; bowing again to his old headmistress, and then the Emperor, and gesturing off to his side, his near militant crew of Demons took their seats to one side of the courtyard in opposition to the Mystic League.

And then the Gateway was igniting again, and this time I felt myself beginning to shake, and tremble, and... jump! I turned suddenly toward Equis as she laid a steadying hand on my knee to keep it from shaking. She and I exchanged a smile, but that smile faded from my face as the gateway opened fully, and the final procession entered the courtyard.

This time there was a theme of celebration as the newest arrivals entered. The Imperial sanctioned League, the Powered League, positively bounded in. Trained as athletes and jocks on a high-gravity world – five G's if I remembered correctly – were as light as feathers in our low one-point-two G gravity well. Twelve fighters, one right after the other, and as each entered, my clawed fingers dug deeper and deeper into my knees to practically drawing blood.

Then, finally, my wait was over, and the one who I'd expected to come stepped through the gateway. Not even halfway through the gate, and already he'd found me, his eyes searching me out, and all at once a smile that read of so many emotions, with his face showing so many more, focused upon me.

Makahn had come...

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I felt my heart and my breathing suddenly stop, my breasts perspiring as I felt my body grow incensed in the familiar way he had helped me achieve so long ago. A simple glance, a simple touch or the sound of his voice drove me into such deep desires.

Is that not what one seeks for in a mate?
My inner voice asked me.

He was a majestic wolf form, great and beautiful, and where I was powerful magically, he was raw physical might and power; that muscle system capable of lifting thousands of times his own body weight.

My panties grew a little moist all of a sudden, and I focused very hard not to think of him that way. But still, my first and foremost thought was to have him kneel between my thighs and enter me, a thought so strong that I heard someone clear their throat, and looking in that direction, I saw one of the Emperor's Psionics grin and wink at me.

My thoughts were usually so well guarded. That meant that indeed those Psionics were very well worth their reputation of being intensely talented Psionics if they were able to read my surface thoughts, in a crowd and at that distance like that. That or perhaps it was because I was so extremely... distracted.

“Hail! Hail, great mother, and thank you for having us!” he greeted at last as the Gateway snapped shut behind him, but his greeting was not to me, but toward the host of this semblance. “We are honored by your invitation!”

The other Power Leaguers clapped and cheered, which, as contagious as their usual fervor was, brought applause from the rest of the gathered assemblage.

“And you are most welcome. It is always good to have a little fun, gaiety and celebration, so if all will be seated, then the feast shall...”



Just then the headmistress stopped, pausing in her words, giving us a bare moment to wonder why before every member of the Mystic and Demon League, as well as the Psychics, all sensed it.

It was the same feeling of strange magics, to which earlier I had dismissed, but ever so suddenly it had flared to a point where it couldn't be ignored. Again my fingers lifted, feeling the air, and I felt something tangible, like rubbing a bit of liquid soap between my fingers. But this time I witnessed it, a sparkling of blues, greens, blacks and purples.

It was so smooth, so pure...

And then all of a sudden, there was a crackling snap, like a lightning bolt the hundredth size of its greater counterpart, and all turned to a place that the Gateway was now standing. A certain distance beyond it, another snap occurred, and then another, and more, crossing this way and that way, before the lightning bolts of blue-green energy suddenly began to rapidly coalesce into a will-o-wisp of sorts, a ball of crackling energy of incredibly pure, unrefined magical power.

There was murmuring as the ball steadily grew larger, trembling with power as it grew larger and larger. Then in a burst of light it exploded open, creating a vertical pool of what looked like water, before the pool formed into a whirlpool ringed in blue flames, and with a great breath of wind, the swirling vortex blew outward suddenly before calming to a gentle breeze. Then from the inside a figure formed with a snap of pseudo motion; walking through a tunnel while people standing about the vortex backed away from the entrance. Even Makahn and the Powered League backed away.

Like walking from a tunnel, the figure stepped into existence. A tall, massive and cloaked figure stepped barefoot onto the cool cobblestones, and lifting a hand in a dismissive gesture, the portal collapsed in on itself, squeezing smaller and smaller till I could've sworn it created a one-dimensional bead of light before winking out of existence.

This creature, bearing the power and presence of a male, stepped forward to stand between the pillars of the Gateway, his arms folded into the long sleeves of his robe. A great, silvery, wide-brimmed hat topped his head; and all of his features were hidden behind masks and scarves.

I slowly rose to my feet, noticing all at once the Taoist formations and geometrical emblems on his garb, and the pair of stubby wings bracing over his shoulders. There was a light armor here and there, and who knew what else beneath all those robes.

But what part of this creature that was unclothed – his feet – ended in hooked claws on feet with five toes! *Five?! And white fur?*

“Greetings.” he said simply. “I am Lord Sage, Armsmaster and High Master of my order and my people. I have come a great and immeasurable distance to find and challenge the Goddess Figure known as Rae Iksaki...”

Chapter 2: Displays of Power

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Lord Sage is (c) Daniel "Pendragon" © <http://vcl.ctrl-c.liu.se/vcl/Artists/Daniel-V>

I slowly rose to my feet, while the silence all around me grew so heavy it could've drowned out the din of a Millennial Fair.

I stood watching this creature, for that is all it could be described as. It looked like a demon of the highest order – surpassing even Gehnohn in appearance – with deep emerald green eyes caught inside a face of mutilated plates of green chitin so dark it was almost black behind all those face wrappings. It was like a mummified scarab beetle. I half expected that bulbous pack against its back to open up and spread wings.

It was definitely shaped that way... as if it were a wing sheathe.

A pair of blow tubes served as its mouth, either of which poked out between an open layer of the wrappings, and a pair of black

opal-like gems of varying sizes were set here and there.

It looked *almost* artificial. Almost. In what of its bare flesh that I could see I saw the throbbing beat of veins and arteries pumping black blood in between the thick and heavy plates of armor.

A heavy cloak wrapped about its shoulders, with its wide circular hat atop its head in the traditional Bekkano style that even I sometimes wore. But aside from the premature demonic appearance of a giant bug, there the dark side ended, giving way to priestly attire, and a warrior's demeanor.

It apparently noticed me watching, and turned to look at me with a grinding of servos and taut tendons, with the pair of blow tubes exhaling sharply in a breath of gasses. *That stuff... is armor?! I heard myself think. Living armor? Is that even possible? The closest thing is the undead armor used by necromancers!*

“Are you she?” it asked, shifting its stance to face me, and I saw its solid green eyes flare brightly for a moment behind what was undoubtedly a pair of contact eye visors directly over the wearer’s eyes.

Great maker it’s huge...

“I am.” I responded, lifting my chin, pushing out my chest while I began summoning power into me in case he might try something. “But who are you?”

It was then that the creature threw its cloak to rest over one shoulder, and I got a brief view of a bio-mechanical armor system, complete with servos, feeder tubes, and powerful metal plates before the armor immediately fragmented along preset grooves that fit so well that they were nigh invisible before this. The plates broke open upon hundreds upon hundreds of individual pieces. The affect was like the creature had suddenly grown in size, but then there was a ripple and all the pieces folded into one another before liquefying into thousands of sinuous streamers, and layer by layer of that armor peeled away – heavy plating, light plating, vitals and joints plating, endoskeleton, muscle system – absorbing into red jewels set in wrists and chest, and the Creator knew where else, revealing the creature beneath it all.

I gasped, holding my breath at the sight of the being beneath all that armor. Several others about me raised to their feet at the sight of... him – definitely a *him* – even Equis rose to my side, holding onto my arm at such a... an *exotic* creature.

Feline, eight feet in height, muscled like no Power Leaguer had ever achieved. Fur as white as newly fallen snow, reflecting twinges of varying colors of blue, with a delicate stripe system radiating all over him from head to toe. Deeply compacted, angular and overlapping stripes bordered his outsides like a badge of honor.

“Screw the Casid.” Equis said beside me. “Look at him! Even the Casid of legend have never hoped to look like that!”

The Casid were what Equis was. A feline sporting manes and yellowish to brownish fur, with darker tufts of fur forming at forearms, forelegs and tail tip.

The feeling of unfamiliar magics was incredible around him. So large, so powerful... so exotic. It was a sensual experience just to look at him.

He possessed eyes the same color as the eyes of the armor that had possessed him, but unlike normal eyes, those eyes of his *glowed* a solid color; absent of iris or pupil. And then he was undoing his scarves from about his face and neck, and removing the pan hat atop his head, and when I was finally able to see his face, I felt my heart pause inside my cavernous chest, and my breasts give a heave.

He was so handsome...

His face was as exotic as the rest of him, with the stripe system of his body continuing up along his face and angling about his glowing eyes in a beautiful mesh. High tapering, hooded ears, and a long mane hanging from the back of his head gathered into a pony tail at its very end with a leather thong.

“I am glad that my search is finally over,” he said again holding his hat with both of his five-fingered clawed hands, and began walking innocently forward. There was no malice that I saw in his actions, his demeanor was kind and benevolent, but others did not notice his movements in the same way that I did, which was met with immediate resistance.

The first came in the form of an Imperial Ranger, brandishing her Class-Six battle sword, a thing longer than she was tall with its hilt, and possessing the greatest of technological accomplishments the Empire has come to know. A technological wonder that bordered upon magical with its highly advanced sciences bred into the blade. Its edge held a mono-filament edge, an edge so sharp that if one were to press their fingers together as tightly as possible, the space in between them would hold over five hundred of such filaments. The edge had the capability of a vibro weapon, with gyro stabilizers in the hilt to make it neigh weightless, a nanite repair matrix to fix a multi-composite blade made of a form of steel normally reserved for dreadnaught battleship armor. And that was only the tip of what that sword had in it. Those who were even able to wield such a devastating weapon, with their Sword Tech Skills, still instilled fear in even the Leagues.

Especially since one of the first requirements of the wielders of such a sword was ten thousand battle victories. They were veterans of the highest order.

“Hold!” she cried, and planted her helmet atop her head while holding the long and heavy sword with only one arm, her battle armor enhancing her strength enough to where the sword was weightless in her hand. “You are in the presence of the Emperor! Name your planet of origin and pay respects to his holiness!”

“My home world has many names. Earth, Terra, Gaia...” He answered, and shifted his feet, lifting a hand to a pair of straps on his chest and torso harness that held his cloak and shoulder blades over one arm. “And I am sorry to say but I bend no knee to anyone I have not sworn fealty to.”

“SACRILIDGE!” she screamed. “All in this universe are under His rule. I said... BOW!” she cried, and the Emperor himself rose to his feet.

“Captain...” he said in a warning tone, but the sword-wielding ranger didn’t hear.

“I said BOW!” she repeated, and when the stranger didn’t move to do so, in a shrill battle cry, she surged forward, her sword lighting and humming with technological might, crackling with lightning sparks.

Rapid feet carried her immediately forward then in a dash as quickly as an assassin, her feet landing on only her toes as she raced forward; those toes barely even touching the earth as she lowered her sword to strike.

The stranger simply shifted his feet again, his stance maneuvering into one of defense, and as she neared, he jerked down on the straps and a pair of swords jerked upward from his back and flared apart for easy reach. His clawed hand lanced upward and pulled one of the swords free in the same motion as he struck. There was a titanic clang like a hammer against an anvil, a flash of white and brilliant blue, and the Ranger stood stunned for a moment as her weapon went spiraling away to land point down into the cobblestones. But then the stranger simply lanced his foot upward in a perfect extension, catching the captain under the chin with enough force to knock her upward and backward, dislodging her helmet from off her head as she tumbled backward. As the stranger hooked his leg back in, the motion turned the captain so that she landed face first before he chambered his leg back in and slid forward into his defensive stance again, holding his sword in an unorthodox way.

Both hands cupped the pommel of braided black silk over ivory and held taut with gold, the single-edged, curving sword perhaps the size of the one the ranger had just held. Usually, a warrior had their leading hand as balance and their trailing hand as power and movement. He however had them reversed, and with the blade pointed up now.

But now there was complete and total silence as all stared at this scene.

No one could believe it! Not even I! An Imperial Ranger had been *disarmed*. Those who have never lost a fight in all their years of service. But no greater disbelief remained than that of the ranger who was regaining her composure, her eyes lifting to the one known as Lord Sage as he relaxed his position and resheathed the black-bladed sword with its single glittering edge. It was then that I noticed the golden dragon woven beneath the black-braided pommel. He stared down at her only briefly, one of his hooded ears twitching forward as if he were looking at her with it.

“Seek not glory... seek only honor. Glory leads to pride, and pride goeth before the fall.”

He then turned toward me again and continued on his approach.

The next to arrive was Pleeyo, Equis's young student, physically as strong, but greater talented than her master, she simply stepped right up and brought both hands upward into a double-clasped fist and brought them down again.

She was never one for subtlety.

But a flash of blue-green light erupted briefly, and her fists rebounded upon a dome-shaped section of energy which shimmered briefly with a static charge before fading into invisibility again.

“Please.” He said, looking to her as she recovered quickly from having such a blow made so ineffectual, as well as her surprise, and she began then to hammer at whatever shield he was using.

Aura magics, I thought, at least recognizing this particular magic. *But it’s energy source is so alien. But nonetheless he’s actually using Aura magics.* The Mystic League had done away with them because of how ineffectual they were, but his defense was so incredibly solid, that even Pleeयो’s unbelievable and sometimes uncontrolled power was being completely deflected! And on top of that, the harder she hit, the greater that shield’s defenses were!

He’s using her own power against her! I thought with amazement, and immediately tried to see how he was doing it.

How?! I thought, lifting a hand to pick at my teeth with one claw as I used my ‘Assessing’ power to read his magics.

“Don’t!” he said as her strikes grew more and more powerful, and she was screaming as she tried to break his shell. As each attack landed, the shield grew larger and more solid, till I could actually see its shell surrounding him like a bubble, and after that, it started to grow darker with each blow.

“No!” “Stop!” “*Please!*” he cried after each blow, and after she was suddenly pushed away by the barrier growing so large, he cried one last time. “**Enough!**” and his words reverberated with an echoing sound that must’ve carried for miles.

My Combat Magic Trigger activated from whatever it was he’d just done to set it off, and instantaneously my mind and body sped up several fold, making it seem that all those around me had just slowed down. But even after that, what happened next was so fast that I nearly missed some of it.

What all that were not blessed with my powers of perception saw was Lord Sage snapping his hand out and back so fast that it was little more than a stunning blur of motion. The simple touch to her midriff pushed her up off the ground about a foot, she gasping as if all the wind had been knocked out of her. There she floated up and down as if in slow motion for a full three seconds before some force of inertia was suddenly transferred into her from a delayed reaction, and a flash of an exploding disk with the sound of a plasma cannon discharging erupted from between her massive breasts, the force of which snapped her body backward into a tail spin. She was thrown head over heels for hundreds of yards to finally smash back-first into one of the many columns surrounding the courtyard. The impact was enough to topple the thing, and she collapsed with the heavy stones into a pile at the corner of the courtyard.

What I saw, however, was a heavily muscled arm snapping outward, breaching all of Pleeयो’s carefully constructed defenses – physical and magical – straight through the cleavage of her breasts and thick muscle packs to clap powerfully against her sternum, with a palm held perfectly to conform to the space between her swollen mammaries and slam right into her solar plexus. His hand, five fingers instead of our four, clawed with thick hooking claws slapped against her

sternum in little more than a tapping motion, but somehow was strong enough to snap her straight from off the ground and up into the air. In a split second, I saw multiple swirling black and gray segmented rings appear about his arm and slide one right after the other into her sternum as he retracted his hand.

This whole motion took perhaps a tenth of a second.

Time slowed as I felt some powerful magics at hand. Force was redirected, enhanced, re-enhanced over and over into a point the size of a square inch between Pleeyo's chest and sternum, before it exploded like a reactor and slapped its full force into her. The result leaving her in a tumbled mess, dazed, scrapped and bruised, and now laying in a pile of rubble.

Few have ever done something like that to her and no one ever as simply or as effectively as that.

“Enough!” he repeated in a voice missing the echoing tone to it from before as he turned to me and jabbed a clawed finger at me. “I did not come here to do battle. I came here to *challenge* the mightiest warrior of this universe into hand to hand combat. A *competition*. But so help me if any more of you continue to show me such dishonor, I shall not be responsible for my actions!”

His breathing was precise and controlled, and I saw a fire behind his glowing eyes that nearly turned the green red as he took control of a temperament inside him and controlled it. And then he addressed me again.

“You, my lady, are reputed to be the most powerful creature in this universe. At least the *known* most powerful warrior. I have searched for others, but your repute is greater than all others I have met and defeated. And so I challenge you and you alone.”

‘Met and defeated?’ I thought. *And now he’s come here?*

This time it was my turn to step forward, my hands folding serenely before my heavily muscled thighs, my legs moving lithely, but rippling with my contained power as I squared off no more than a couple meters before him.

“And so you have said.” I responded. “Why do you wish to challenge me?”

“I seek to better myself.” He said simply. “To be quickened, to heighten myself, and eventually obtain for myself the powers of the Dragons.”

I heard a shallow gasp from behind me, and a quick glance over my shoulder showed my headmistress in stunned shock at his words for some reason. But then Sage was continuing.

“To obtain that level of power, I seek to challenge those who have a portion of that power, learn from battling them on how they use their power and control it myself. Simply by battling you I gain the experience that I need in my search for wisdom. I have already come far in this regard, and I’ve already determined you possess what I seek.”

“And what would we get in return from this... should I prove to be the victor?” I asked quietly, bowing my head to him to look at him discernibly from beneath a flock of my head fur.

“Being that I have challenged, you may choose where to meet me for it should you accept. Should I loose... I shall devote myself to instructing the students here in the powers and magics that my studies have offered me. Some to which I have seen that this school has shown lax training within.”

“Lax?” Menikomenqolui said, suddenly. “My methods are lax?”

“And others in which you have no knowledge of.” Sage continued, turning to her and smiling, and there were whole novels of unspoken communication between the two of them which finally led to my headmistress looking away from his gaze.

“Should I win,” he continued. “Then I shall stay as long as I desire, absorbing what knowledge that I can, and in the meantime, imparting my knowledge to all those who wish of it. I shall give you time to think over my challenge, and whether or not to accept it. Speak to who you will, but the challenge ring will be without armor, and without weapons. A ring of honor. Should you however, choose to draw a weapon, then so shall I. Should you don armor, then so shall I. Should you try to kill me, all bets are off, and I *will* kill you.”

I noted that he didn't add the word *'try'* to his side of killing things.

“And what if I choose not to accept your challenge?” I asked.

“Then I shall enter the tournament you are holding here and earn the right to challenge you directly.”

I nodded. “I shall consider your challenge then. In the meantime, you may rest here while we conduct our tournament. You are free to enter regardless.”

“Rae,” Menikomenqolui said quietly as the tension suddenly released and people began talking excitedly among one another, many surging in close, but keeping a distance from the stranger inside his draping garb and wrappings. “Are you sure you want to do this. I sense a power in him that you are undoubtedly unfamiliar with.”

I smiled, regaining my usual happy demeanor.

“Of course. I see it as a challenge, and he doesn't seem to be of an evil nature.”

We both turned to the shadowed figure as he looked to everyone gathered about him, actually sharing a nod with Gehnohn that was full of respect on both sides.

“What is there to be afraid of?” I asked and stepped closer to the headmistress, out of the ear shot of everyone else.

She hung her head on its long neck and shook it lightly.

“Rae, you are like a daughter to me, but despite your incredible power, there are beings and creatures out there outside your scope of comprehension. Creation is far, far, far more vast than you’d give it credit for. I... I don’t like what he said about ‘Gaining the Powers of Dragons.’ It rings with something nearly forgotten among my kind that I don’t quite like.”

“What does it mean?”

My headmistress was silent for quite some time before answering.

“It was a... an experiment, in a far off place you’ve never heard of before now. A planet called Earth. Few dragons even remember the world it was done upon. I’ve heard of it only as legend, and in stories from when I was a hatchling. It was an experiment similar to the same one that has created the Leagues and the Rangers, but where here we are using natural means, even natural magic means, to enhance the bodies of the students, there, we were hybridizing creatures, through unnatural means.

“Shape shifters.

“They were imbued with a concoction made with the silvery dust from the moon around their world, and as such their strength grows and wanes depending upon the moon phases. You must beware of him underneath the light of the moon, Rae, especially the full moon. The more moons, the more powerful he becomes even should they be in the new moon phases.”

I looked up, and grimaced at the three moons floating overhead. The fourth moon wasn’t even visible as of yet.

“The last legend we had of them was nearly thirty thousand years ago! I cannot imagine how far they must have come in all that time. The fact that he is here, over such an impossible distance under his own power...” she let her statement trail off. It must’ve taken tremendous power, and if Gehnohn was any example...

“Be careful Rae.” She finished then, kissing me on the forehead.

“I will... mother.” I smiled, and then turned to bring our guest to his new quarters.

Dressed again in his robes, the great creature followed me silently, his some eight feet dwarfing my diminutive six foot stature. He was remarkably quiet as he followed me, so quiet to the point where I had to constantly look behind me for him to see if he was still following me. Even his presence was being masked, and my attempts to read his power kept leading me to power levels of mundanes.

Barely more than twenty in power level. But to overpower Pleeeyo's defenses would require a power level in the hundreds of thousands! Perhaps millions.

How is he hiding his power levels like that? Magic? Psionics?

"Here is your room." I said as we came to one of the rooms reserved for the upper echelon students. "I'm sorry we cannot provide anything larger, but..."

"It is quite satisfactory." He interrupted in all politeness, lifting a hand to stop me before removing his hat. "This is a school after all, and I'm sure even a room like this would've been shared by two or more students normally. I appreciate the sacrifice of offering me lodgings. I will make the necessary adjustments."

He passed by me into the small chamber, looking about him at a small ten by ten meter room. My own home, located a decent ways away from the school, was a hundred times the size of this place. Currently it was empty except for two small beds and a pair of desks.

"Are you sure this is to your liking?" I asked, pausing at the doorway, watching then as he removed his robe to reveal only his torso harness and a metallic, upside down egg shaped thing attached to his back.

"Quite. But if you could tell me where I may deposit these beds and desks... I will not require them."

I blinked at him as he continued to remove his torso harness and that backpack looking thing, to which my eyes focused on the reddened gem attached to his chest.

"I... I will find some place we can stow them." I paused, my curiosity getting the better of me. "What... what is that thing in your chest?"

He turned to face me a little more, smiling warmly, with the crystal in his chest glittering brightly for a moment. "That is what is called a Soul Gem. I possess two others on the backs of my wrists." He held up one of his hands to show a like sized and colored gem just behind his hand on that massively muscled forearm. "They are... growths... gained after achieving some rather difficult personal successes.

"In layman's terms, they are power foci, and in the case of my Heart Stone here," he rubbed the gem in his chest. "It also helps to reinforce my skeletal system to help support my elaborate muscle system over my bones."

I nodded, and looking down briefly, I found myself staring at his groin and at the bare hips, upper thighs and sides of his rear appearing out of the large gaping holes in his pants. And also on the way that long, thick tail fell out over the backside of those pants.

"I-I am curious... what kind of creature are you? I've never seen anything like you before."

He laughed, starting to stack the beds up against the wall beside the door.

“I am sure you probably never will again, either. The terminology for my race is Lycanthrope, though that is more attributed to the Wolf tribe of my species. More specifically, I am a were-cat.” With that last bit he flexed his hand, and several long and thick claws slid out of his bulbous finger tips to then hook toward the palms, and when he grinned, it was to show off several long and piercing teeth.

“Now you. What are you?”

“Well,” I began, hugging myself. “I am an Aphkian, of the dog tribe.” He nodded, a soft smile crossing his blackened lips again as he continued to move the furniture by the door. “I... well... I am the senior student here.” I felt a blush rising up upon my cheeks beneath my fur, and I lifted a hand to cover one burning cheek as my eyes again fell to his tail, and the thick, tight muscles framing it.

“By most senior, I assume the most skilled as well? Your reputation proceeded you even as far out as the fringe worlds in this universe. They called you ‘goddess,’ ‘immortal,’ and ‘the most powerful fighter in the universe.’ Quite the titles to aspire to.

“Your power seems to be well over one million, my lady; several million perhaps. I have not yet met your equal.”

Again, I simply blinked at him and he chuckled.

“That is as grand a compliment I think I can manage under the circumstances. I am indeed truly sorry for harming your friend like that. My temperament is quite short in the face of illogical actions.”

This time it was my turn to laugh, and hugging myself, hefting my bosom up higher atop my chest, I opened my eyes in time to see the darkened centers of his suddenly shift from my chest to my face. I managed to blush at that.

“Pleeyo is overzealous at times, but she means well to protect this place. Many saw you as an intruder.”

“And so I am.” he smiled again, taking a step closer to me, and lifting a hand, held the point of my chin. “I look forward to fighting you.” he finished, with a nod. “I thank you for the rooms, but I am afraid that I must retire.

“Good night.”

I had no choice but to leave, and he made sure I was clear of the doorway before shutting it quietly behind him. Immediately, I felt an odd power rising in the air around me, and I stared at the door as a reddened spot appeared at about head level on me, before the dot became a sinuous line, the line becoming a glyph, and the glyph being joined by others. A vertical strip of them,

made up with circles, slashes and dots, before an oval joined them all. Then the light faded, and it was as if it were nothing but paint on the door.

“How strange,” came a voice, and I turned quickly to see Headmistress Menikomenqolui standing there before me. “He is using the Glyph Magic of a Spell Weaver.”

Her massive form stepped up beside me, and lifting a clawed hand, she passed her hand over the glyph. “Chinese calligraphy, a very simple glyph, but infused with just the right level of spirit magic to make it an incredibly powerful barrier.

“Apparently our guest does not like visitors at his door late at night.”

She turned to look at me, her great body cloth that was opened on the sides, emblazoned by chips of jade and emerald, bordered in real gold thread, waved briefly about her in her movements and the wind while her wings folded at her back.

“What is your impression of him, child?” she spoke, her own eyes, a softly glowing midnight blue, blinking at me as if looking straight through me.

“He is an enigma.” I answered. “I... tried to read his power levels, but it’s barely over twenty, despite that he does things that require the hundreds of thousands. How is he doing this?”

Menikomenqolui paused, dipping her head.

“There are dragons, I meet occasionally, that state that they know where his home world resides. Perhaps they are the ones who enacted the experiment that wrought his species out, perhaps they are the dragons from his home world, but they tell of magics developed there that are completely apart from that wielded by dragons or demons.

“Glyph magic, Chi magic different that the type the Power League uses, Temporal magics... forms which are incredibly, incredibly rare in this universe, all seem to find their way to that planet. The humans there are incredibly powerful and proliferate. Where here they are vagabonds and few and far in between, there, there are billions of the creatures.

“And above all, the beings from that world... we dragons, even the most powerful of us... fear.”

She lifted her eyes and stared at me in all truthfulness.

“I am going to tell you the truth behind the legend, Rae, and I want you to remember and mark well of this in your dealings with this were-cat. We dragons did not leave or abandon their world, we were forced out. You are a sorceress; they have created mages and arch mages, grades above you in magic power. They have created dragon slayers, *Dragon Slayers!*” She cried, and reaching forward and grabbing both of my muscled arms shook me briefly.

Now I knew why she feared him. The world from where he had come from had *created* the legacy of beings that had learned the weaknesses of dragons and slaughtered them. There were

occasions, extremely rare, where the all-knowing motherly demeanor of my headmistress disappeared in favor of a form of naiveté.

“Headmistress, I do not believe he is here to kill you. I... I don’t think sheer murder is in him. All that I’ve seen so far is a creature of honor.”

She stared at me, and then looking to either side of her, slowly righted herself and regained her composure.

“I am sorry for that, Rae.” She said and massaged one of her temples. “But for you, I suggest considering deeply before you accept his challenge. So far, he has shown knowledge of three magics, one of which I’ve never seen before, and his aura magics are being used in a most unorthodox way. Then there’s this.” She gestured toward the glyph before running her hand along it again.

“Spell weavers are a form of mage like I told you. Their powers are slow in developing, but they use glyph magic, mathematics, and scientific theory to enhance their magical powers, so that they don’t have to work against the laws of nature as much, and there is a less of a degree of paradox working against them. Another trait is that they create magical effects on the fly. All they have is magical theory, and use those theories to create their own magic. No preset spell formulae, they simply... do.”

My headmistress turned and I followed with her, the cool night air growing heavy with a mixture of anticipation and excitement from all those in the school tonight.

“He can mask his power levels, so we can’t tell how strong he is.” I said into the silence. “He uses completely unorthodox methods, and comes from a world in which dragons have actually been driven out of.”

“Not completely.” Menikomenqolui stated. “Another secret. “Earth, his home world, was the sight of the first and only dragon war. Dragons against dragons, with humans and our ‘creations’ in the middle.”

“What side were your ancestors on?” I asked quietly, and my headmistress, stopping to look over our guests being organized to their own rooms, folded her hands together.

“The loosing side.”

I slowly awoke to the sound of the crashing waves on my sea side home, a place of residence that I’d built within three days using only my bare hands. And I do mean only my bare hands. Every nail was pounded in by my own fingers. Every board cut through martial arts, every steel girder bent to specifications over my head or over my knee. It was rather simple. I could’ve done it in a day, but I wanted to take my time and do it right.

Rising groggily out of bed, my coverings falling off my naked body as I felt the cool moist air on my bodice, I stretched majestically, as gracefully as it was powerfully, and yawned. Sitting back, with my arms behind my back to hold me up, I shrugged my shoulders against the morning cold, even despite the fur covering every square inch of my bodice – my breasts wouldn't lose their fur till after I had a cub and started lactating – so I only marginally felt the chill.

I loved it here, on this world, living by the sea in a home the size of a spacious resort.

“Shutters open.” I said with a contented sigh to the house computer, still groaning with sleepiness, and the blinds all along the edges of my massive room slowly slid open, folding against one another to reveal the semi-circular bay windows overlooking my porch.

The house computer I admittedly had some difficulty with. I had to ask some of the more technically minded members of the league help me install it, those studying Technomancy. I learned a lot over those three days from them. I could at least operate my own computer...

Sliding out of my great bed, large enough for three of me – or one of me and that one, other, extra special person to romp around in – I stepped lithely over to my porch, opening up the sliding door to step out to see the barest strip of dawn rising along the sea coast.

I leaned over my railing, my breasts resting over my thick arms and the railing as I bent over there, still naked, my ears and tail waving lithely in the air, while I greeted the dawn here like I had every day since coming here.

There was no greater sight than to see the dawn rising against the vast expanse of a blue-green ocean.

There were overcast skies today with a red tint to them. It meant that a storm was coming. It meant that there was a storm coming on any planet if the clouds were a different hue than what they normally were.

It definitely looked as if it were going to rain too.

But nonetheless, I breathed in long and deep from the salty sea air, feeling my skin prickle with goose bumps beneath my fur before I retreated back into my rooms and dressed in a shapely two-piece bathing suit that concealed very little and had a pretty little blue draw string in the front, white thigh socks and a shirt large enough to actually be loose about me and the good expanse of my endowments.

Then drinking a quick glass of juice, I set myself out my porch door, descended the hundred or so stone steps – again carved out by hand – and set myself into my usual sprint around the perimeter of the island. It was only a few hundred miles around, but it was a good morning work out for the first hour or so. A good strong sprint all the way around.

I worked at blanking my mind out of all distractions, which seemed harder today for some reason. I kept thinking back to my headmistress's distress the night before, and of our new

visitor in the form of Lord Sage combined with Makahn's arrival here. *Did he know that I have a crush on him?* I had to pause and ask myself which 'him' I meant. Sage or Makahn...

At last I reined myself in as I returned to the school, my legs thrumming with power, I slowed as I neared the main courtyard, and breathing in long, controlled gasps as a bead of perspiration ran down between my breasts.

My normally soft and beautifully well kept fur was matted down here and there, and was quite moist from sweat and the moist mist in the air. I'd have to take a good long bath after all this.

But then when I straightened after doing my warm-down stretches, I stopped, catching sight of the frost-furred and black-striped Lord Sage walking into the middle of the courtyard where the pillar broken the night before was being repaired. I was amazed at how graceful he was... at how graceful a male could be as he stopped, and bowing his head, lifted his arms to his sides, and slowly brought his hands together before him till the fingertips were just *barely* touching.

Five fingers, five toes... how odd. I thought, my lithe steps bringing me up onto the cobblestones from the field leading from the shore. I could see him wearing thick and baggy pants even as a light sprinkle of rain began to add to the mist on its way down from the heavens, and as I neared, it seemed as if he were muttering under his breath.

And then suddenly, so suddenly that I leapt back a few paces, several rings of reddened light exploded outward from him like ripples in a pool, floating into the air before they set themselves into the ground like the glyph had on his door from last night like they were nothing more than paint. Between the rings, a space of narrow breadth, dozens of glyphs simultaneously etched themselves into the ground. Then the rings flared, and I saw the air above the ring shimmer and then flow downward, with the occasional energy streamer sliding downward with the air.

Then Sage, uncoiled, seeming to struggle with his movements to the point of loosing some of his gracefulness now as he walked forward, circling the center point once, then set himself into a combat stance and then moved forward around in the same exact path again.

I looked down at the rings, recognizing the design of a magic circle but once again the glyphs were unrecognizable, feeling the powers within it and sensed the down flow of magic increasing gravity several hundred fold. *Hundreds of gravities!* I thought right up front?! *He was training underneath gravity levels that would liquefy a lesser being! Even the average Power Leaguers would have troubles at this gravity level.*

My mouth hung open as he his movements grew more forceful now while he continued to move in circles, changing directions now and again to repeat the actions he'd just done in mirror direction. Every full circle in each direction he shifted his stance, shifted his very way of fighting, beginning with the straight forward, moving forward into complexity.

There was a growing crowd arriving now at the sight of our new guest in the throes of vigorous training, and getting more vigorous. Unorthodox movements, changes in motion that surely

should've landed him on his rear or even dislocated something, were stabilized at the last moment and recovered.

"It's like Crumpled Dancing." Came a low rumble beside me, and I turned to see Gehnohn watching with interest along side me. "How very odd this stranger is."

Gehnohn turned his head to me, his great wings attached to it shifting heavily against his back.

"And all that under such a high gravity level." I responded. And the rain water... it may only be lightly falling here, but they must be striking hundreds of times harder when they fall through that field."

"Like a needle prick on every square inch of his body." He leaned close to me then and nudged me with his arm. "You've taken worse."

I laughed at that, and he even managed a little laughter under his breath before we returned our attentions back to Sage. He had now moved into a routine of incredibly rapid movements, every strike moving dozens of times per second and his movements became even more erratic and acrobatic now.

"His form... it's so massive!" I heard someone gasp from nearby. "And I haven't even been watching the whole thing! He's already shifted forms..." a brief pause as the speaker counted. "Sixteen times!"

Rain began to fall heavier now; and looking up at the falling droplets, my eyes then lowered to the figure of Sage. He definitely seemed to be laboring in there, but he was forcing himself to move.

Another ring snapped outward from him as he regained the center again, and the same force of gravity increased all over again before he set to his movements.

There was no grace now as he moved, and every step, every motion no matter how subtle, sparkled and shook with power in the form of a emerald green lightning that fizzled and sparked over his body.

Battle cries could now be heard as he snapped forward and about now, and then in a flash, he had moved from one side of his magically created ring to the other. I blinked, following his movements between the two sides.

But there had been no magic there! I thought in wonder. *Teleportation, if that's what he'd just done, would've created a brief explosion of magical power no matter who was doing it or how it was done. There was nothing here.*

Is he actually that fast? I asked myself.

Combos and power moves were being accomplished now, and there were gasps and cries of awe at some of the movements he was doing. He accomplished more of those rapid moves of speed that seemed as if he were teleporting, and now that I was following him, I saw that he was dashing very quickly somehow from side to side, the only motion to mark his passing being a repeat rippling shadow of darkness and smoke.

And he was also powering up now.

“Ah... now we shall see what lies under the mask.” A new voice said, and I turned suddenly in surprise as Makahn stepped in beside me.

Lifting a hand he placed it warmly upon my shoulder, giving it a squeeze in hello before we again looked to Lord Sage.

A fourth ring of crimson shot outward to join its fellows, increasing the gravity around him again, and this time he leapt up into the air, hovering there amidst all the punishment from such high gravity and all the hammer blows from the rain. Then in an explosion of power that made the psychics in the crowd groan with dizziness, and made my eyes screw up briefly from the sudden massive increase in power, I focused again, and read his now unmasked powers.

“Nine hundred thousand!” I breathed in disbelief. He was the first I’ve met in a long time who actually possessed such a level.

“And still climbing!” said someone new.

This time it was Noxi; The Mystic League’s resident scholar and technomancer. Not only did she help me install my house computer, but she also was smart enough to program a holo recorder.

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Of all of us, she had decided to focus more upon her mind than her body, and though this long-eared rabbit-like fem had a body several times stronger and much larger than any other member of her race, she had intelligence and knowledge in her head both magical and mundane.

A scientist true to heart.

And she had her bio-wave visor scanner on.

“Nine hundred thousand, nine-fifty, nine-eighty... Great maker! It’s still going!”

This angelic creature in her simple, form-fitting clothing was rarely wrong about anything, and to see her gasping in awe at the power levels rising confirmed the numbers I was sensing.



“It’s still rising! Exponentially it seems. How... how is he doing that?! Ah! He’s just breeched the one million mark!”

There was murmuring in the crowds now, both in astonishment and in fear at what this creature was capable of, and now explosions were happening inside the invisible chamber formed by the magic circle as he exerted more and more of his power into his routine. Blasts of blue-green roiling energy were being shot one after the other from his hands and even his feet, the balls ricocheting against the dome created by his magic circles to come back at him, changed minutely by the dome so that it no longer matched his signature and would hurt him if it hit him. He bounced these balls back, maintaining this with an ever growing number till at last he was focusing upon just defending himself against so many attackers. It was then that we all got such a view of his fighting style.

I’ve never seen a form so vast! He shifts forms in mid movement! I heard myself think

And then there was another explosion as two of the balls struck each other and exploded into a ball of flame in which Sage had to duck out of the way of.

Then Sage’s power began to climb rapidly, and I heard screams from the psychics, and Noxi’s wave form visor exploded against her face before a pillar of blazing energy erupted into the sky, carrying him with it.

“**HA-SA!**” he cried, and far up in the sky, the energy wave subsided before exploding outward into a cross surrounded by a magic circle of their own, and there was a collective sigh of wonder at this display like a night of fireworks.

And then he fell, hundreds of feet, before landing with a lunge on his hands and feet with force strong enough to shatter the ground about him.

“What was your last measurement, Noxi?” I asked amidst the stunned crowd as Lord Sage held his side briefly before weakly sinking to one knee. Apparently, whatever that was, it was incredibly tiring. I noticed, however, that the reddened gems in his chest and wrists were shining brightly and glittering like reddened fire opal.

“My last reading was one-million-point-two before my visor broke.” She looked down at the remains while a black mask surrounded her eyes. “Rae... I know you’ve been rated at two million the last time we checked... but this thing was rated at least that before its scanners would be overloaded.

“I believe we’ve finally shown you someone who can match you in strength and in power.”

I remained behind as everyone else dispersed. The only other person who remained in the courtyard was Makahn, and he was taking on the skulking demeanor of someone who didn't like *'his girl'* fraternizing with another male.

After rubbing his head down with a towel, Sage tilted his head back and let the soft rain patter against his face. After the bruising he'd taken from the rain earlier, I could imagine that the difference in strikes was quite refreshing.

"That... was a marvelous display, Lord Sage." I managed to say at last as I approached.

"You honor me, Lady Iksaki." he said, not looking at me but rather continued to feel the rain pattering against his face, rolling his head from side to side till his head fur began to grow matted.

I came to stand before him, and with the fluff of his fur being wetted down so thoroughly, I found myself discovering another oddity of this creature.

Six nipples?!

That was strangely... appealing. I had four after all, but my secondaries were more artfully covered beneath fur and my primaries. One of the advantages of a larger bosom.

At last he opened his eyes and turned to me, and I almost gasped at the fire in his eyes, a raging thing so great that wisps of green light wafted from his eyes as if it were green mist from off of a green fire.

"I am sure you have done no less before." He assured me, his high hooded ears turning rearward now, pointing in Makahn's direction. A wisp of a smile crossed his face then.

It was as if he were looking at him at that moment.

"And that is your morning routine?" I asked and he nodded.

"Works wonders for the heart." He smiled and then gestured off to one side. "If you could show me where the commissary is, I'd like to purchase some breakfast for this empty belly. I haven't eaten in a couple days."

I blinked and then covered my cheeks as I blushed. *Silly Rae... of course he eats!* A voice in my head chortled. *What sort of creature do you think he is?*

"Th-this way, Lord Sage. And you needn't pay for it. All foodstuffs are provided for the visitors, students and faculty of this school."

I don't know why I was blushing... didn't know why I was so flustered, but he was bringing out a cold sweat underneath all my fur despite the rain, to where I felt a bead of it trickle down

between my breasts. Swallowing, I lead the way, absentmindedly swinging my hips a little more than I should've, with Sage following me a few paces behind me. All was going well until...

“Stop!”

We both stopped and turned, and saw Makahn marching his way across the cobblestones with intent and purpose in his eyes and also in his stride.

“I don't think I like that, stranger. You simply following Rae here all over the place. Especially the following part.”

Sage turned, head and shoulders above Makahn and leveled that cool emerald gaze of his on him.

“And why not? She is free to choose as she pleases here. After all, you and I are both guests here.”

“Makahn, I can take care of myself!” I said in an annoyed tone, folding my meaty arms beneath my breasts, but he completely ignored me and simply stepped up to the much larger Sage and jabbed him in the chest with a finger.

“We don't know who you are, ore even *what* you are, you pop in out of nowhere, uninvited, and challenge my belo... -er- friend,” Makahn swallowed heavily at that last bit. “And you think you aren't going to escape angst from it?!”

“I know I am going to be looked upon with disdain.” Sage answered, completely levelheaded and emotionless, doing nothing more to show his annoyance with Makahn other than wiping off the spot on his bare chest with the back of an oddly made five-fingered hand.

But I couldn't help but notice that Makahn had begun to call me... his ‘beloved?’

“*Look*, stranger... I don't care who, or *what* you are, if you don't leave her alone, I'll...”

“You'll do what?” Sage said and turned fully to face Makahn, Sage's eyes burning more noticeably now. “I do not take kindly to idle threats.” He paused. “But you seem sure to challenge my right to follow a lovely lady.” He lifted a hand then and rubbed his lower lip with the back of one clawed finger.

“So I'll tell you what. If you can prove that you're stronger than me, I shall abide by your wishes. But if you cannot manage to beat me, you will kindly step away.”

Makahn grinned, punching a fist into his other hand to crack his knuckles while grinning ferally. “Accepted. So what shall we test ourselves with? Bench press, dead lift, or just try to beat the living crap out of each other?!”

“Gravity tolerance.” Sage said instead, and the fire in his eyes glittered.

“Sage.” I urged. “You *really* don’t want to challenge Makahn to gravity tolerance. He *trains* under intense gravity.”

“So I’ve heard.” He glanced at me and then back at Makahn. “Are you ready?”

Makahn folded his sizeable arms over his barrel of a chest. “Whenever you are.”

Sage stood opposite Makahn and then took three steps back, and with the same effect as before, he summoned a ring of dazzling red that rippled outward one right after the next, and reformed his gravity well magic circle. I felt each ripple of the deep red rings pass through me, and I gasped at the feel of the exotic magics. It was a more refined source of magic, more pure than what I was familiar with. It had a certain resonance that tickled me from the inside.

With the circles on the ground, I then felt the force of gravity begin to increase several times over, with the two males facing off with one another; I stood idly by watching it. And then I realized something else: I was *inside* the gravity well!!

“Eight gravities.” Sage said at a certain point. “I am impressed; most people from where I come from would’ve been transformed into liquid sludge by now from the force. You are indeed strong.”

Makahn snickered at that, but just then another red ring exploded outward and attached to the outer most ring, and the rise in gravity levels began to rise exponentially.

“Twenty five... Fifty... Seventy five... One hundred.” Sage counted off as each gravity level passed by. I felt a little downward drag, but I didn’t know how much Makahn was feeling it... let alone Sage. Sage at least had just been training in this level.

I looked up at the rain, and saw that it was falling against an invisible dome. A thankful thing that Sage had thought of that. I didn’t feel like getting pelted with rain drops that fell one hundred times harder than normal.

And then another ring of crimson red snapped outward, passing through us all, and as it slapped into place, the gravity level suddenly doubled. Every three seconds another ring would snap outward and as it landed, gravity would double.

“One-twenty-five... One-fifty... One-seventy-five... Two hundred.” Sage counted off at each increment of twenty five.

“Two-hundred... Two-twenty-five... The air was growing heavy, but I could see signs of strain in Makahn. He was incredibly strong; he could withstand tremendous levels of gravity, which was how his muscle system got so strong in the first place.

“You must weigh over eight hundred pounds.” Sage said at last. “Your knee, for example, a thing that perhaps weighs about five pounds normally for one as large as yourself, presently weighs about one thousand two-hundred and twenty-five pounds underneath this current gravity

level. It must be horribly difficult to keep up. Are you sure you don't want to stop this little fracas?"

"No!" Makahn gritted through his teeth, and Sage shook his head.

"Very well"

Sage's red rings were thicker now, as they snapped outward one right after the other, and with each ring that snapped outward and slammed to the ground, the weight on us all grew steadily heavier. Even *my* legs were shaking with the strain. Sage himself was breathing incredibly heavy and through his mouth, his stance had reset to hold himself erect, but what I kept staring at was Makahn's knees.

Just like Sage had intoned, Makahn had made for bending his knees to support his weight, but that joint was surrounded by the least amount of muscle for keeping the legs upright. Only a few tendons not nearly as strong as his calves or his quads surrounded that bundle of bone and sinew. And with each ring that snapped outward, one right after the other, Makahn slid further and further downward.

"Three hundred gravities." Sage intoned, and waited there for Makahn to regain his balance. And then the rings that erupted from the noble lycanthrope grew thinner and thinner as Sage gauged the maximum his opponent could tolerate. As for Sage, he barely showed the strange other than having to breathe harder.

Makahn sagged; he lowered onto his hands and the tips of his toes, gritting his teeth, trying hard not to sink. But inch by inch those knees slowly did lower toward the ground, and with one final forceful slam of a red ring, Makahn was slammed straight to the ground.

"Three-hundred twenty-two gravities." Sage said at last, and then lifted his hand to dispel the force pressing down on us.

The rings gently lifted away again, slowly returning gravity back to normal, and looking to Sage, I could see that even he was trembling with the strain, and glad that it was being removed. And then he lowered his gaze to Makahn, who looked back up at him with a look that set an ache in my heart for him.

It was the look of defeat. I'd never thought to see such a look on his face.

"You have lost." Sage stated, simply. "Good day." And then bowing turned his back and started moving off in the direction we'd been going in a slow walk.

Then Makahn looked to me with that same hurt look. "H-how did you remain standing? *You! How?!*" There was a mixture of differing emotions upon my face, and I knew not whether I should comfort him or look smug about showing that I was able to beat him at his own game, just like Sage had just done. But eventually I just bit my lip before turning slowly away from him.

The last thing I heard from him as I rejoined Sage to lead the way, was Makahn's baleful cry of defeat, and the power of an impact tremor beneath my feet as he punched the ground.

I sat back watching as Sage chose one of everything from the buffet bar of high energy foods, filling three trays up, balancing one in either hand and another on his head as he moved as gracefully as a dancer forward, walking mainly on his toes to politely ask if he could sit amongst some first years.

The girls giggled, the boys sat in awe at this giant, exotic-looking creature and as he arrayed his metal trays before him, smiling at the young ones around him and laughed like a big brother.

He's very good with children, I heard myself think before I took my own tray and sat down beside him; he sampling all the food there was here.

"That's quite an appetite." I commented amidst more giggles from the girls.

He turned to me, both eyes and mouth smiling. "My training has made me hyper metabolic." He responded after kindly swallowing. "Plus, I'm unfamiliar with the delicacies of your world. Now would be as good a time to find out what I liked."

"Try some of this Mr. Sage!" one young teen boy gestured, and Sage more than willingly tried one of the sweets.

I sat in awe of this great white creature, at how gentle he was, and how he brought out the best in so many different people. He undoubtedly outweighed me. A titan of a cat standing taller than even Makahn, and with the insurmountable strength to beat him at his own game.

Just then, underneath the table, our knees bumped against one another, and for a split second, there was an electric shock, an exchange of energies, an ever so brief sharing of powers. In that instant the world ceased, time stopped, and Sage and I both turned to face one another.

I stared into those lucid green eyes of his, feeling my heart flutter, feeling something awaken inside me, and I felt desirous to be closer to him, and I moved forward, staring at those eyes, my lips puckering...

"Hey! Mr. Sage!" someone called, and just then our knees lost their contact with one another and the moment ended. I blinked and then turned away from him, holding my hands over my panty front, trying to keep the sensuality rising up in me from displaying itself through the white triangular patch of my bathing suit bottom.

Sage in turn addressed the young girl, and even magically summoned a charm for her to place around her neck. He finished his meal, and getting up, after stacking his trays and all their

utensils together, stretched grandly. In a fifteen foot ceiling, his fingers were brushing against the fine marble panels surrounding the floodlights there.

“Very good food,” He stated, stretching even larger to show off the feathered layers of his ribs to everyone, and this time, it was the adult females who noticed his form then, and I heard more than one sigh at that while he innocently displayed a set of eight tightly packed abdominals and four lats. I was alarmed that I was one of the females who sighed at the sight of this. “But I must now meditate for a time.”

“Good day.” He said at last, and reaching down, took my hand and kissed it.

And with that he swept out of the cafeteria, much to many eyes on his back, and I had to reach up to cover the burning in my cheeks.

The hallway leading to the bath house late in the evening was now crowded. For some, it was a nightly event to bathe and relax from a day of hard work or training. My home had its own bath house, but I find that I miss the experience of the public bath here at the school with its camaraderie, and if I found myself here late in the day, I bathed with the others.

The women’s corridor, catering to all those who had aged to at least nineteen years and were allowed to use the bath house, was filled with the near physically perfect women of the Mystic League. Most were presently in their underwear, as they moved down the corridor from the locker room to the bathing pool and its natural mineral spring water. Most. Some, like Equis, who took every opportunity she could get to be naked, wore only a towel around her shoulders. Her elaborately feminine form of full and rounded flanks, shoulders, bottom and thighs and bosom, strode with feline grace beside me as we joked about things and commented on the arrival of the enigmatic Sage.

“He is cute.” Equis said with a grin, and the fact that her teats were poking out of her fur told of how cute she thought he was.

I nodded to that comment. He was strong, tall, and had an energy level that near equaled mine. Whether it was above or below mine, I couldn’t tell. He masked his true power very well.

“Menikomenqolui believes that he comes from a world called ‘*Earth*’” I said quietly. “Have you ever heard of it?”

Equis shook her head. “Maybe Noxi knows.”

I made a point to ask her later about that when we all began to file into the bath house itself, away from the prying eyes of all the men here, some one hundred and twenty fully – and in some cases, super – endowed and virile females began to disrobe.

Many males would believe the female's side of a bathhouse is a place of sustained erotic pleasure. Nothing could be further from the truth. But it was a place of sensuality, where a female could once again be totally naked, to feel the cool air on her skin in a place where those around her didn't mind that she was. The Bathhouse also served as a piece of the training here. It was the Headmistress's desire to make us proud of our bodies, and in our pride wish to develop it more, to become more beautiful, or handsome with the males. It was also a place to make friends and to converse with one another.

And this was the time in which the bath house was to be used only by the females of the League.

'Meant to be.'

I myself was amidst the process of lifting my undershirt up over my head when a voice, a male's voice, entered into the hearing of every last one hundred and twenty three females currently in the house.

"Before any of you go any further, I should perhaps inform you that you are not alone."

We all froze and looked in the direction of the voice, and for a short time there was no one there. Then the mist hovering over the waters began to gather, solidifying into a smoky form it seemed, before the form smoothed. And as if materializing out of nowhere, a figure appeared half submerged in the water amidst several of the rocks and reeds. His white fur and black stripes cast a perfect camouflage in the mists, making him appear nearly invisible. But then the piercing green eyes opened, and the mists seemed to part slightly like he had just suddenly taken form from them, and we were all granted a view of him reclined back in the limpid waters, with one thick arm rolled against the edge of the pool with his hand resting atop one of the half submerged rocks there, and his other hand holding a long pipe by the bowl. The pipe's end was positioned just within his lips, he idly sucking on the end of the thing and allowing wisps of the white smoke to waft up into his face.

"What are you doing here?!" Pleeyo demanded, still hurt from the night before after having been so thoroughly subdued, and so quickly, by Sage the night before.

"My apologies." He said in earnest, staring at the naked Pleeyo, who, like her mentor Eqis, chose to freely display her naked bodice as often as possible. "I was led to believe that this was the male's half of the bathing house. I also came at this time after they were to have done their time so that I might be more alone with my thoughts and free for meditation.

Image © DocWolph 2002



“I began to become suspicious when I found there were no halves to this auspicious domicile.”

“Who led you to believe that?” Eqis said, stepping forward to place a hand on the younger and slightly smaller Pleeeyo to calm the young Casid’s fiery temper.

In answer to that, Sage merely pulled out his pipe from his teeth, and pointed its mouth piece toward none other than Fatima. My own sister!

She giggled, striking a sensual and lovely pose, displaying off her young sexuality. Legally, she was now able to mate, and it was growing tiresome trying to protect her from simply throwing her virginity away at the drop of a hat. I knew it was her overwhelming desire to at last have a male naked against her body, to feel her loins aflame in her desire to feel her femininity awakened by the appropriate male. She so intensely desired to be called an adult instead of just a young adult, or even worse, a cub.

Among one of the youngest members here, just *barely* old enough to be here, she still had a curvaceous body instead of the rock hard angular feminine forms practically everyone else had.

“Oh, you mean *this* is the women’s side in here?” she said with a giggle and a wink toward sage. “I thought we were going to the other side.” obvious not even bothering to hide the fact she had duped sage in here. “I didn’t even know there *were no* sides here. It must’ve slipped my mind...”

“It slipped something.” Someone muttered, and there was a low murmur of chuckling laughter everywhere and more than one pair of eyes rolled at her comments.

“Fatima... honey.” Eqis said while rubbing her forehead as a slightly annoyed vein throbbed against her forehead. “There are no different sides. This is a *public* bath, remember?”

“Oh yeah!” she giggled, and opening her skimpy robe that came only to her mid thigh she revealed her bodice in a poise that amply framed her femininity both between thighs and between her rounded biceps, she dropped her robe and immediately descended forward and waded into the bath, straight toward Sage. “An honest mistake.” She giggled, and knelt right before the Lycanthrope and began to innocently cleanse the sweat and grime from her body.

Image © DocWolph 2002



“At least she didn’t go straight up and sit on his jock.” Equis whispered into my ear, and I descended into a fit of giggles as she proceeded forward down the marble steps into the deeper water of the pool where even she couldn’t touch the bottom.

Sage favored Fatima with a raised eyebrow as she continued to bathe before him, turning this way and that way so that he could get more than an ample view of everything that she was. And then Sage turned his head to look at me while her back was turned to him, and I responded by covering the look of embarrassment on my face with one hand.

But then the others around me simply chuckled at Fatima’s attempts against our visitor, as she was making sure that her already ample bosom was visible floating atop the water now, and they simply continued to disrobe. Begrudgingly even Pleeyo entered the bath, and then in spite of myself, I too disrobed and slid into the mineral-rich waters along with everyone else, not even trying to hide my nude bodice.

I was proud of it after all. My dragoness teacher’s teachings had instilled that much in me. But I found, that with one hundred and twenty three remarkably build females, I found Sage’s eyes focusing upon me.

I noticed this once, when looking up once I’d stepped down onto the marble flooring of the pool, I found Sage, now the focus of the attentions several of the females from young adult to the mature, my sister included, with even Equis pressing right up against him and fingering his chest, watching me.

A half smile was centered on his face as he drew from his pipe again, and opening his mouth to simply let the smoke out, he breathed in deeply through his angled nostrils.

And again, in spite of myself, I waded straight over to him and sat on one of the many submerged benches there before beginning to wash the sweat and grime out of my fur.

“For one who seems so intent on being healthy, Lord Sage,” I commented. “I am surprised that you smoke.”

Right now, he had two of the young maidens, apart from my sister, half pawing and half massaging him while he took another draw from his pipe and inhaled it in the same way. I got a whiff of something sweet in the air. It wasn’t acrid like Tabac, nor was it the foul smell of spice herb or other like toxins, this was a mixture of things.

“Have you ever sat in an empty room, alone with your thoughts, while an incense stick burns in its holder at the center of the room?” he asked, and several of us nodded. “The concoction in this bowl isn’t a toxin, but rather a collection of herbs to promote respiration.

“It’s a veritable quagmire of some rather common plants on my world, mixed with various different substances like sugar and maple syrup, all of it specially treated and formed into bars that once cured is as thick as leather. The whole mess of it is something I’ve called Mélange.

It's very slow burning, even once shredded and set alight like it is now, and even a small amount burns for a long, long time."

He took another puff of it and instead of inhaling it, blew it toward us, and the worst it did was make me light headed, but I took in a very deep breath of it, and felt my lungs swell a little more beyond their original capacity. Once in the blood, it actually cleared my head.

When I looked to him again, he gave me a wink and took another draw on the pipe for himself.

"Multiple schools of magic, an advanced form of martial arts, and now alchemist." I heard Equis mention. "Any other tricks you got in here?" and she ruffled his mane of fur, planting her sizeable breasts over either of his shoulders as she stood behind him.

"Artificer." he added with a small smile, and then inclining his head in a more serious note. "...and healer."

Lifting a hand, a soft, luscious bluish-green glow suffused the tip of his finger, and lowering it into the waters, a flash like lightning striking the water flooded throughout the entire pool. I felt it wash through me; lighting me with the same glow briefly before it traveled further outward to each and every last woman in the pool. The waters shone then as if lighted from underneath.

It was as if the effects of the waters were enhanced ten fold, and I just wanted to melt into it.

"I trained myself as a jack of all trades," he continued while we all marveled at the feeling in the water... like bathing in blue silk. "There were many who looked up to me, who I had to protect." He took Equis's face by the chin and he smiled at her as she experienced the soothing feel of the changed pool. "Now if you'll excuse me ladies," he said, and releasing Equis turned his back to us and climbed out of the pool.

All eyes turned to him as water sloughed off his heavily muscled back, and it was then – for the first time, that anyone saw the elaborate starburst of flesh seeming to form a crease between what looked like ritually scarred flesh all across his back. The network of lines all surrounded a green gem at the peak of his back, much like the ones on his chest, wrists and neck.

Once he'd climbed out of the water, he cot on all fours and shivered his whole body powerfully, shaking the water off his body before he rose up again, and blandly lifting a hand as he wiped his face off with the other, a large white towel floated from its rack over to him.

"My apologies to have to leave all of you so soon ladies," he grinned, showing off all those sharp teeth, before a black sludge exploded from his back to surround him from neck to foot in black bodysuit. "But I do have some renovating that needs to be done."

He bowed low, with a small smile to us and then turned to exit the chamber, leaving us to enjoy to spirit energies now saturated through the waters.

Now dressed in clean white cotton underwear and a cool white robe that was cut high along my sides, with my fur now lotioned and conditioned to a soft consistency and a shiny gloss, I strode purposefully forward across the near-deserted campus grounds of the school.

All of the younger students were in their dormitories by moon rise, and even the upperclassmen had retired for the evening. It allowed the professors and graduates like me free reign of the grounds.

My graceful steps brought me ever toward to the base of the Pinnacle Tower, to where a garden resided specifically for meditation at its base. I didn't really get into the mantra sort of meditation thing, but what I did like was all the fragrances, the bird song and the forested feel of the place.

A vast contrast to what I'd grown up with once upon a time ago.

Instead of cold, wasted urban landscape, it was cool jungle and forest, wrought with dozens of different species of insects, birds, and small animals, with a myriad of plant life from all over the known universe to reside here.

It was beauty instead of the cruel ugliness of cruelty and sadness.

The gateway stood wide open, without a single doorway to bar anyone from entering or exiting. Moving straight down the path to my favorite spot, hearing some young lovers engrossed within some bushes a short ways away. Ignoring them with a subtle grin on my face, I found my place of meditation, a spot beneath a great sweeping tree that formed curtains around a marble bench situated before a reflecting pool.

However when I arrived, I found that there was already someone there.

The green lights of his body jewels gave away his presence almost immediately, before the rest of his form seemed faded into being from out of the darkness. How someone with such brilliantly white fur can hide in shadows like that was beyond me, and he seemed to do it without thinking. Especially with those green gems of his giving him away. It was as if he took form from out of the shadows itself, with his black stripes seeming to clasp hard onto the shadow and remain the same color.

The effect was like holes in space about his body, punctuated by the softly glowing green gems against his wrists, back and chest.

He was like a being of shadow, and unless you were *just* close enough to him, he didn't exist. He stood in a pair of baggy pants with his priestly aprons hanging to his fore and rear like loincloths. His long, thick tail hanging from underneath the aprons, swayed lazily from side to side. Other than that, he was bare furred, allowing me to see that broad, compacted siege tank-like form that nearly made even Makahn look scrawny.

At eight feet tall, this gentle giant was a sight to behold. Especially now.

He stood, feet shoulder width apart while he lifted a hand, one thick finger outstretched while he twittered and chirped through his black lips and over his teeth in an almost ghostly song. I wondered for a moment what he was doing before from out of nowhere a flutter of wings signified the arrival of one of the avian creatures of the garden.

I gasped at the sight of a Moon Singer, an incredibly rare bird that shone a brilliant silver and chitinous blue along its back from its armor under the light of the full moons. Today was the perfect night to see such a creature, with all four moons up and shining their fullest, this brilliant bird glowed with an aura of its beauty and power.

Normally they were so shy, and yet Sage had just charmed this bird from its roost to perch on his great hand.

And once the bird had found its perch on his thick fingers, he lifted his other hand to stroke the beautiful plumage on its head and chest, to which it fluffed itself up happily to the touches.

I sat down on my bench to watch him as he chirped and cooed with the bird, to which the bird responded with its wonderingly beautiful moon song.

How can he be so massive and powerful, yet so graceful and gentle? I wondered watching that bird sing her song only for him. In only two days, he's displayed skills and capabilities that excel those possessed by even the greatest of us who specialize in those specific fields. Makahn with strength was so far a prime example of that. The Imperial Ranger, bested in a single stroke with the sword, was another. And now here he is cooing and sharing songs with a most recluse of birds...

“What do you call this bird?” Sage asked suddenly, and I jerked my head up to look back up to him as he half turned to me to place me in his wide peripheral vision.

“Wha?” I stammered. “Uh... It's called a... A Moon Singer.”

“Very aptly named.” He said quietly. “It resembles a Ghost Dancer or a Phoenix from my world. The coloring is different, but plumage is the same.” He turned more to me, and now I was able to see his brilliant green eyes shining a duller collar than his gems were capable of, the pair glowing like orbs of light inside the deep sockets of his face. “Though I admit I've never seen one of their kind with carapace imbedded in their heads and backs.”

I sat there, my hands folding into my lap as I watched this beautiful, exotic, powerful creature as he caressed the breast of the bird, stroking the soft plumage as the ghostly song of the bird cooed softly into the night air.

He stepped over to me, and then idly settled down on the bench beside me, continuing to cradle the bird atop the backs of his knuckles, and in spite of myself, I reached out and caressed the breast of the bird as well.

“It seems as if you’ve found a friend, Lord Sage.” I commented. “Though, I am quite surprised that you found one in this creature. They are usually quite shy. Often times, we only get glimpses of them.” I looked at him, seeing him smiling innocently at the bird as it took a moment to preen its feathers with its hooked beak.

“Sage,” I prompted, and he turned his head to face me. “Why is it that this bird came to you?”

“I heard her singing and called out to her.”

“And she came? Just like that?”

His smile twitched a little wider. “It took some doing. She was very cautious. Creatures like this can sense predators, and she saw a creature like me, a cat, who normally eat birds, but who showed no animosity to her. It took time, but I think her curiosity of me overcame her fear, and when I finally showed that I wasn’t something to fear... she came.”

There was silence between the two of us, either of us watching this beautiful creature in stead of looking at one another.

“Why did you come here Sage” I asked suddenly. “Why did you travel so far just to challenge me?”

Sage was silent for a time, and I thought for a moment as if he hadn’t heard me as he pulled a fruit of some sort from out of the satchel hanging at his side and offered it to the bird.

“My world holds the belief that power comes through perseverance and challenges. ‘That which does not kill you makes you stronger,’ as the saying goes. Growth comes from meeting challenges and surviving them; and the greater the challenge, the greater gains.

“Especially if one fails to accomplish the task. Some of my world’s greatest achievements – the light bulb, flight, and others – were all accomplished after an inordinately long series of failures.

“I traveled far and wide, because you were the single person in this universe who the denizens all said was the most powerful fighter there was. So here I came.

“Granted, Rae, I do not expect to succeed, I do not suppose for an instant that I will beat you hands down, as a matter of fact, I truly wouldn’t mind it if I lost. But for me to grow and succeed further down my path, I must challenge the champion of this universe. Perhaps, if I’m lucky, I will grow enough to get my next Soul Gem...”

With this he slid a pair of fingers over the green gem in the hollow of his chest just over his sternum.

“Which one’s next?” I asked, looking at the gem now.

“Who knows? I have two left to gain.”

“And then what?” I blinked, suddenly interested.

“I... evolve.” He stated simply, and for the first time he turned to look at me fully. “In the beginning we are little more than spirits, but we gain the elements to us and become insects. But the Insect must grow, and grow it does, and becomes an animal. That animal grows as well and becomes a man. Further does he grown till he becomes a man beast, and finally a dragon. And looking back along the length of time he had traveled, over so many lives, he thought, and recorded his life, and left it for those who are to follow.

“For me, it would mean I’d become a Dra’Con, a sub species of the lycanthrope who currently reside as the over-clan among us; the head of all clans. A Were Dragon.”

He remained quiet for a time before rising to his feet again. I am sorry, my lady Rae, but it grows late. I shall speak with you in the morning. Good eve...”

He bowed low and then turned, lifted a hand to let the Moon Singer hop onto a tree branch before he walked away. It was no surprise to me, that after a moment or two of fidgeting, the Moon Singer leapt off her branch and soared briefly through the sky to perch on Sage’s shoulder.

Chapter 3: The Soul of a Warrior

Fight One: Lord Sage versus Imperial Ranger Leski

My muscles tensed as I came instantly awake, my mind jump-starting quickly to where it took me only a few seconds to realize where I was as I laid in my great wide bed, my blankets jumbled up about my legs and waist during sleep.

I laid there for awhile, reveling in the feel of the wind blowing in from my opened windows from off of the cool ocean breezes to waft across my naked bodice, and for a time I simply let my eyes close briefly, and I gave out a contented sigh as I was bathed by the wind.

I'd overslept, I knew as I rose from my bed and hunched over myself, feeling the weight of my breasts – fully matured now, and still quite firm and now heavy – hanging from my chest. I pause there for a moment before slipping out from bed, virile and naked, and moved over the few steps to the chair beside my bed and pulled on a white silken robe. My usual morning workout routine was far past time to begin, but it was also my off day anyways. Heavy work out every other day, and a loosening up on the off day between them.

Perhaps I'll just rest today, I considered, keying in the program for my tea from my replicator, and recovering a hot mug of it and holding it in both hands as I walked out onto the deck beside my bedroom window.

I stood quietly, drinking my tea and watching the morning sunrise, simply breathing quietly despite that my mind was racing.

Lord Sage has come to challenge me. Perhaps I should be taking that challenge more seriously. Perhaps I should be training as hard as I can to meet his challenge. Perhaps...

Finishing off my drink, I set myself to a task, and taking a refreshing shower, I dressed in some warm, loose-fitting clothes, and made my way out of my home to jog up to the school.

I need to learn more about this warrior, I thought, *before I make a decision as to whether or not to meet him. I need to find out if he truly is the challenge I've been looking for, for all this time, or if he's nothing but a bag of hot air.*

It was a pleasure to be able to run all this distance and not be tired, to run all the way up the beach with the water washing over my bare feet all the way, before I turned sharply at the school's water dock and hurried up the hundred or so steps to the top.

There I stretched my muscles, tensing them as far as they could go to work out the kinks and improve their mobility, and hopping quickly from one foot to the other, I settled myself once again into a gentle stride that rocked my hips with each step. Gracefully taking each step one foot directly in front of the other, I gaily headed toward my destination. Waving to some of the passer-bys, I wound my way straight to the senior students ward, and to the door in which Sage's glyph magic was now glowing a soft red in the morning light.

Straightening my clothes briefly, I lifted a hand and rapped smartly on the door, and waited.

I had to only wait a few seconds before something happened, and I stepped back as the glyph on his door suddenly glowed brightly, and the scrawls and etches their began to jumble, separate and reform. Then right before my eyes, an image of a male humanoid, devoid of any body or head hair and having rounded ears, pushed outward from the glyph but still attached to the door and opened its eyes, glowing a soft yellowish green as he nodded to me. It was dressed in little more than a bodysuit.

“Greetings.” The image said in a perfectly formal voice, yet full of interest as to who was at his door. “You must be the maiden Rae Iksaki. My master has left instructions to allow you to enter. He has been expecting you for several hours.”

I blinked at the image for a moment.

“Won’t you come in?” he asked, seeing my pause and I recovered.

“Yes... yes please. May I see Sage?”

“Certainly.” He bowed and faded back into the door. The door then unlocked and swung open, and I blinked at what lay beyond.

I stepped hesitatingly into Sage’s room, which the last time I’d been here, was barely large enough for a pair of upperclassmen to live in. But what I stepped into was a massive parlor, with a high-vaulted ceiling, a grass mat and benches standing before pegs in the wall to hold coats.

More of those great glyphs hung on rice paper from the walls, before leading down a short hallway.

“I am afraid that I haven’t learned the customs of your world yet,” came a voice, and I turned rapidly to see that man who was in the door standing there looking at me. “So allow me to introduce you to ours.

“My name is Daedalus,” he bowed at the waist. “But you may call me Dallas. I am the keeper of the house, and the house computer system. Lord Sage is in the inner sanctum, but before you enter, we’d ask for you to remove any foot wear you may be wearing, or scrape off the dirt from the outside off your feet onto the mat. Is there also any article of your clothing that I may hold for you while you are here?”

I looked down at my clothing that I was wearing. Other than a loose belly shirt and a pair of sweat pants, I wasn’t wearing anything else. Noting the mat I was standing on and my shoeless feet, I quickly scraped off the dirt from off the pads of my bare feet.

“No... that will be ok.”

He bowed again. "Then please, make yourself at home." He faded into nothingness even as he straightened again.

Taking a quick look around me, I then stepped briefly out the door I'd just entered to look at the next room beside Sage's just as a pair of students came out of their dorm, and then retreated back into Sage's modified home here. Where the students had just exited was well within the bounds of where Sage's walls now extended to even inside this humble greeting room. I looked again outside then back in to be sure I wasn't going mad before closing the door behind me and wiped my bare feet again before venturing further.

Down a short hall, I entered into a central chamber, to which several doors were radiating off of.

This chamber was tiered, lowering two steps to a series of four suspension bridges that led over a circular pool with a raised island in the center. In the pool was golden, red and amber fish swimming within crystal clear water with reeds growing out of it. The center island was lush with ferns and trees the like of which I've never seen the like of, with a domed ceiling that mimicked a natural blue sky; through which white fluffy clouds floated by.

Birds and the occasional little furry animal skittered or flitted here and there among the trees, with their chirping and chattering coming from within the small wood. Sitting on a pole, with her head beneath a wing, was a Moon Singer, perhaps the same from last night, breathing quite soundlessly as it did.

I looked around me, seeing simple architecture here, with great arches supporting the domed chamber, and leading up to the artificial sky at its top as I stepped around the island on the ledge I was now standing on. The most complex form of this chamber was the webbing of wires that were strung everywhere, carrying colored beads amongst the criss-crossing strings and wire.

There were nine doors leading off of this main room each recessed slightly within the curved walls. I passed four of them before coming to a set of double doors that had been thrown open, with what laid beyond thrown in virtual darkness. The only exception was a large spot of glow at what seemed to lay a dozen or so meters beyond.

I moved forward, stepping quietly, and precisely, moving silently as I approached that spot of light, seeing more and more come into view before me. A figure kneeling on a cloth mat, a pair of candles, and a pair of incense sticks slowly burning. Before the figure was a bronzed design held aloft by another webbing of wires, absent of beads, but now showing several geometrical designs; hexagons, squares, circles, triangles, squares...

I stopped behind the figure, now seeing that it was Sage, his poise set with his back ramrod straight, hands braced on his lips, his eyes closed with his sword unsheathed and on a stand before him.

He didn't even seem to breathe, almost statuesque in appearance, even the minute tremors of blood pumping through the body didn't seem to move him. His head was bowed, and at first he didn't seem to even notice that I had entered.

But then inexplicably he bowed low, and when he rose, he pressed the palms of both hands together, pressing them to his face and I saw some beads hanging from one wrist. He then reached forward, sheathed his sword, leaving it on the stand, bowed again and then in one fluid move rose to his feet.

“I am sorry for the delay, maiden Iksaki, but I must complete my prayer once begun before I may do other things.”

I looked at him, not helping but smile as he stood there in white robes with a black shirt beneath it, a black sash about his waist and tied at his back at just above his tail. His long hair was slicked backward and brought into a single tail that was held with green ribbon at its very end at the small of his back.

His forearms were done up with black leather thongs. He gestured with one clawed hand out of the chamber and I stepped in that direction.

“I was hoping that you might be able to show me around more of this school, maiden Iksaki...”

“Please,” I interrupted quickly just outside this chamber, turning to him as he closed the double doors behind him. “My name is Rae. Formal titles make me uncomfortable.”

He merely smiled and nodded. “Rae, I was hoping that I might see more of this wonderful school of yours. I’ve rarely seen its like.”

“Even on your ‘World of Wonders,’ as some of the others here have taken to calling whatever world you are from.” He laughed openly then and led the way back to the entrance over the island and through the well kept tropical garden there, to where I became the ever so brief attention of a tiny bird with a long straw-like beak whose wings hummed as they beat blurringly against the air. It hovered above me, darting here and there briefly before zooming off.

“Even there.” He said, and reached out to stroke a golden-feathered breast of an unarmored replica of the Moon Singer but done in reds and gold for plumage. “Schools of the martial arts there are built to teach a mass of students to become the best in the world in their own way quickly. The time to gain tenure is all that is required to make them masters. At that point, the top students are taken under the wings of specific masters who share the same Chi, Ki or Chakra as the student, and they share knowledge’s.

“This school does nearly precisely that, save that it attempts to accelerate their students to levels of power and synergy only dreamed of by the mass of students on my world, and rarely shared by my world’s martial masters.

“Just one of you would be able to rule my home world if not for its may... unique... protectors.”

“Are you one of those protectors?”

“Only if others consider me as such. But I’ve helped save the world on more than one occasion.”

We were now at his entry hall, to where I stopped and looked about me again.

“Sage? How did you do all this? And in so little time. This place looks as if it’s always been here. Great Maker, it looks better than my place!”

Sage again smiled in his usual characteristic way, and gestured to a pair of etched pillars that were glowing a dull red to either side of the doorway.

“Part of my science and magic. The mages on my world have *long* ago discovered how to distort time and space. This place has become a distortion of the latter, a simple change in the mathematics of how reality is perceived here to alter the dimensions of a pocket of space. The ritual was draining, but easily done.

“Then, all I had to do was let Daedalus, my house computer, to whom I assume you’ve already met, establish an SPU core unit here, and allow him to take care of fabricating the rest of my house here.

“So this is all an illusion.”

Sage uttered a short laugh as he reached out and opened the door for me, to which I left his chambers and he closed that door behind us as he followed after me.

“No, it is all very real... as are its defenses.” He said simply, and I heard the sound of several locks simultaneously latching into place behind him despite that the door didn’t really change in any way. “Dallas is rather protective of me. He was my very first creation, and he looks after me even when I do not do so myself.”

I rubbed my arm from behind my back with one hand, shrugging my shoulders as he and I fell into step.

“Sounds familiar... I need to get me one of those.”

Sage chuckled, and the two of us fell in next to one another and simply walked on in silence, not really moving in any particular direction but forward. I was about to ask him where he wanted to go first when the familiar sound of combat came to our ears, and both of us turned to see a practice ring set up in the main courtyard. The emperor himself, dressed in light armor with his body length techno sword in hand, stood arrayed by his normal entourage while his rangers practiced before him.

I knew the emperor himself to have been a ranger, the best that there was for generations, but the most promising of his new soldiers was... *oh, what was her name? Leski!*

With Sage standing beside me, I looked out over the great practice ring, of several of the rangers fighting one another in swordplay. One of the young Emperor’s requirements was for his

rangers to fight one another, to not only to keep their edge, but to also learn each other's habits. This later was for both to allow for greater team cooperation when they *did* have to fight in groups, the other... was should the matter ever arise that forced them to hunt one of their own.

As had happened to the Emperor's own lieutenant before he rose to replace his sire as the Holy All-Father of the Empire.

He was overlooking his rangers, apparently taking his turn away from the fighting, a canteen of water gripped in one hand as he directed his rangers as a stalwart commander should.

I looked up at Sage to see what he thought of the Empire's most talented soldiers, but saw him staring in concentration off into the distance, and following his gaze, I found him staring at none other than Leski herself!

Image © DocWolph



She was outside her armor, in little more than a one-piece bodysuit that I thought complimented her very well. She swung a two-handed techno sword that stood as tall as she was and was easily equal to her weight if not more without the aide of servos or power armor.

What was drawing Sage's attention, however, was what the target dummies she was training against looked like, and I immediately drew a gasp as I noticed that they were – to the last detail – looked exactly like Sage.

I looked back to Sage, seeing a determined look on his placid face, burning mainly from his eyes before he stepped forward

right across the training grounds. The emperor followed his path without moving, and even waved away one of his aides who came up to him to warn him of the impending battle that was about to happen. The other combatants stopped fighting as they saw him, and stood and watched him steadily close the distance between him and Captain Leski.

Currently a captain, who knew how long it would take for her to reach colonel? She'd advanced through the ranks nearly as quickly as the emperor himself had.

Sage pulled off his robe, stuffing its loose ends into his waistband, but did not draw a sword. I didn't even see him *with* a sword. He'd left the one he'd used against Leski during their first encounter in that prayer room of his quarters.

Turning, not wanting to miss anything, I hurried along the edge of the practice ring just as Sage took a battle stance in a blank space amongst the dummies the young captain was fighting against.

She turned, pirouetted, turned, arched her back almost impossibly and lunged for one of the dummies. She flipped her blade and attacked another dummy behind her, and then turned, and seeing Sage, seemingly thinking that he was another dummy, screamed a blood curdling battle cry, arching the massive blade up over her head and brought it back down at Sage.

It was here in which he reacted, and I felt my jaw drop as his hand lanced outward. In one movement he knocked the blade against its flattened side, changing its trajectory so that it passed within mere inches of hitting him, and then snapped the same forward, clenched it into a fist and snapped forward right into her face.

I'd watched the whole movement as if in slow motion, my combat senses allowing me to see, hear and feel beyond that of normal space, but once his fist connected with her face, time sped up and then accelerated past normal, and she was knocked straight to the ground.

She recovered quickly in shock, still grasping her sword with one hand as she rose, her gaze immediately lifting to Sage, and her shock immediately changed to rage as she realized what had just happened.

"Coward." Sage said, and her face went back to one of shock, and deepened as Sage promptly turned his back on her to approach one of the dummies. "A machine is nothing in comparison to a being of flesh and blood." And he reached out, touched the machine, and it immediately began to disintegrate as if it were being aged thousands of years a second; the thing disintegrating into red dust. "Besides, the combat data you all use to train is grossly inadequate."

Leski growled like a real animal and surged to her feet, brandishing her sword.

"AHR!! NO ONE CALLS ME A **COWARD!!!** FACE ME YOU SPINLESS DOG!"

Sage paused, and slowly turned, looking first to the emperor with but a glance, and then to her.

"A coward, prideful and ignorant all in one seamless whole of a wolf bitch, if I ever saw one." He said, loud enough so that all the rangers, most of who were female themselves, could all hear. "I am feline, and if I lack a spine, at least I am standing here while you attack dummies that can barely fight back."

I bit my lower lip, knowing full well that even a Mystic Leaguer would not willingly face a Ranger with their swords drawn. Even *I* would think twice about it.

“Ok then... a *coward* am I?!” She lifted her sword so that it stood straight up and down, tightening her grip. “Then fight me! And we shall see who the better swordsman is! Or are you afraid?”

Sage’s face split into a grin that showed off all his sharp teeth, his brow clenching mutating into something animalistic, manic even, practically a feral snarl.

“A challenge.” He stated matter-of-factly. “I accept. But first...”

And then he changed, shrinking, nearly half his size as the feline features lessened, his great hooded ears becoming rounded at the sides of his head instead of the top, and his luxurious white fur disappeared in favor of a pinkish flesh. He’d lost an immense amount of strength, but his body was chiseled, looking more like the Emperor’s in size and strength, with packed muscle and very little body fat.

His long white hair he quickly drew upward with a leather thong into a topknot, which was now absent of all his exotic stripes. But remarkably, his eyes continued to glow a burning green.

I blinked at this new ability as he shrugged against his now loose-fitting black shirt before pulling it off and tossing it aside.

“Equal size, equal strength, equal footing. I will not have you fighting me in my hybrid form, lest you claim that my overbearing size and strength and greater dexterity in that form bested you. Nor would I have any other believed that you were defeated for that same reason.” Leski snarled as he talked how she was already defeated. “Now second...”

He held out his hand, and wisps and streamers of his own flesh coiled out of the bare flesh of his hand, wrapping around themselves, creating a core, a haft, and then criss crossing to form a grip. Sage then coiled his long fingers about the two-handed haft, and with a quarter turn of his wrist, a black blade with a glittering edge extended at least two meters from the haft, the blade arching slightly before several more wisps coiled outward to form the dull side of the blade. It was an elegant weapon, bearing a curving dragon etched within the blade itself, which was long and narrow, with only a single edge, while Leski’s had a broad triangular blade, and loaded with loads of technological might and power.

Sage lowered the blade, not quite resting its wedged tip on the ground, but simply stood there for her.

“A weapon – a bio blade made of my own body – to stand on equal footing to your Techno-blade there. Now, whenever you are ready, captain.”

I watched what I could of Sage’s face change again, wiping away all emotion as his eyes pierced Leski. Sage held himself in a stance that was unorthodox, incredibly loose, yet as coiled as a viper.

Leski set herself as well, and stared at Sage while his gaze then shifted to look straight at the ground, seeming as if he were watching her with his ear, not even bothering to look at her. The silence between the two was intense. Even the wind ceased to blow.

“A standoff.” Someone whispered at my side, and I turned to see the emperor himself, using his sword like a walking staff. “Be very quiet Lady Iksaki.” He barely voiced it, barely audible to even my ears, but he nonetheless remained by my side.

The standoff lasted for what felt like an eternity before Leski screamed, and surged forward, Sage snapped his blade upward and parried, not moving his footing in the slightest. Leski rebounded, her blade coming back around to which Sage blocked again, swinging his blade and twisting it within his fingers, while sparks and black motes from the blades contacting one another erupted in a shower about their feet.

Sage was still taller than his opponent, slightly more stocky, but Leski was showing her speed, even with a blade as heavy as the one she was wielding.

But then I noticed that Sage had closed his eyes, defending by sheer feeling!

Strike was met per strike, Sage merely standing there, unmoving, defending one handed with his long sword. But as I watched, I saw his deflections growing more bold as he learned how Leski fought, and now as he blocked, his sword clanged twice against hers, till eventually he kept his sword in contact with hers no matter how she moved it.

And she was getting angrier.

Her attacks became punctuated with growls and snarls, and then Sage went to slashing at her face with the tip of his sword, making a cut thinner than a paper cut, but nonetheless drew blood.

With a scream only a female could produce, she reared backward, and actuated something in her hilt. The sword snapped open and its core began to spark and snap with electricity, the blade humming powerfully before she attacked with all her might.

Sage opened his eyes; the pair shining forward, like lights piercing through the dark of night, and he actually shifted his feet at last as he grounded his sword point down to take the strike of the blade. A static charge erupted along the length of Sage’s blade as he gritted his teeth. When he looked up at Leski, it was with a grim face, his jaw setting as he stared at her determined features.

“I will defeat you!” she snarled at him, and withdrew, her sword transforming again as she attacked over and over again, her form shifting in speed and power, with her body seeming to glow as she called forth her inner powers to wield the blade.

Sage’s eyes were now remained open, and his feet were now moving as he tried to keep a certain point of himself facing to Leski, predominately his sword arm I saw. Then he had to shift himself again, and his other hand came to bear on the hilt of the sword, and he wielded it two-

handed now as his body shifted completely; turning one hundred and eighty degrees around to bare his other side to her.

The strikes were now erupting with blue light along with the sparks, and when the blades clashed, the two fighters trying to gain the upper hand, both blades electrified with some inner power. Blue-green for Sage, white-orange for Leski.

I found it difficult to follow the strikes, often times I lost count at how many times the blades clashed in succession before Sage and Leski broke away from one another simultaneously – almost as if it were an unspoken agreement – both setting themselves into guard.

They were both panting heavily, blind determination in both their faces.

The pause lasted only a few seconds before they were at one another again, their blades clashing immediately as they struggled against a swordsman's lock. Bodies were pressed dangerously close, their swords locked between them amidst a jumble of arms, and both of them trying to psyche one another out simply by staring each other down.

“I... Will... Defeat YOU!” Leski Screamed again, and she activated yet another tech skill from her sword, and I felt my jaw drop as she disengaged a central lock on her sword, and with an amazing form of dexterity her blade was split into two, and with her now freed arm, she struck at Sage.

I heard Sage swear openly before he shifted his own grip, and actually used the clashing two swords of his and hers to block the new one she was now wielding, dodging quickly but not before the blade slashed across his muscled shoulder, to where a moment ago his heart had been.

Sage's form then un-crumpled from his position, and he shoved the collected swords upward, forcing Leski to recover before he reached forward, grabbed her by the back of the head and head butted her. In the moment of stunned defense as Leski tried to recover, Sage brought his weapon before him, holding it with both hands before him, before the two-meter blade slid downward into the haft to erupt on the other side now, the ejecting motion followed by a quick twist from Sage to separate the weapon.

He now had two weapons as the new ones forged themselves like the last one had been, only with half the blade.

The new blades Sage flipped around and held the back of its blade against the backs of his arm into yet another guard stance that was entirely different form than from the others I've already seen him use, reared itself.

“You tried to kill me...” Sage stated simply, his voice utter calm. “You have shown yourself to be dishonorable as well.”

“Shut up!” Leski screamed at him, snarling as she brandished both her swords now before her. “I will defeat you!” and with another battle cry she scampered forward, her feet snapping up and down, one right before the other and the two combatants were at it again.

It was a flurry of blades, impossibly fast, and I wondered how on earth they managed to move as fast as that with a weapon in their hands, let alone one in either hand. For a moment I wondered who would win, debated how this would end, and then the stakes were upped once again as they began to incorporate their blindingly fast sword strikes with hicks and punches, using both the sharp and blunt edges of their weapons against one another simultaneously.

Leski attacked with another sword tech, swinging both her blades downward onto Sage, the power of which drove him backward several feet to which she leapt on him again only to have her face met with a quick strike from Sage’s foot as he lanced its heel upward. As he re-chambered his leg he struck with the off hand of his twin blades, kicked again to her solar plexus, before he crumpled downward to avoid one of her strikes, only to be kneed in the face.

He leapt upward, his sword cutting open her body suit from navel to collar, baring her white underbelly fur, and now having to face the indignity of having her body revealed even in such a minute way, fueled her anger all the more.

Leski achieved yet another Sword Tech, and waving her weapons, tracing odd lines, she created a glyph of sorts. As it activated, she leapt through it, her diminutive body suddenly growing larger, stronger faster, and muscle mass increasing remarkably to where she strained what remained of her body suit before she released a fusillade of strikes on him, in which all he could do was block them.

He spun and tripped her, and as he rose she flipped back upward and tripped him, to which he rolled out of the way and for the third time, the two guarded against one another, locked with all their swords together.

“Defeat you!!” she cried, tears in her eyes now in her determination and anger, her eyes glowing red with her seething power before she lunged forward, the sheer force of her strike pulling her along the ground and straight up to Sage, the tip of her sword bearing straight for him.

But he merely spun, and rapped her on the back of her head with his sword hilt, and slashed with both weapons to cut open the back of her bodysuit, again, without breaking her flesh.

I glanced a look beside me, to where the Emperor was looking on with concern now; his fingers tightening on his own sword, but a warrior’s creed forbid him, even an emperor, to interfere with a duel.

Leski looked rapidly left and then right, trying to find her opponent, and then spun around to face him again as he crossed his blades before him, standing tall and straight, without even taking a guard now. For the first time he faced Leski, not with his sides, or even his back, but full on faced her.

She snarled at him, and for a moment I wondered what the pause was before I felt the hair on my head begin to stand on end. Then I saw Sage's arms sparkling with green lightning, his once black blades rapidly shining brightly, brighter than the sun, shafts of pure light instead of darkness, and when he drew himself up, he held both his blades – one up, the other down – right beside his body.

The two warriors panted briefly, and then attacked. There was a flash from both of them, and for the barest second they disappeared from reality, and then reappeared elsewhere with Sage Attacking and Leski defending. They disappeared again only to show the opposite happening, and once I realized that they were moving too fast to perceive normally, I slowed down my perceptions – dramatically – and watched their still rapid fight happening in slow motion.

The speed of the strikes were like the clamoring of a machine, with their swords striking one another so quickly it was a twitter, a tinkling of metal. Special attacks, trained maneuvers and Sword Techniques were being sent at one another at blinding speeds, creating flashes of lightning and fire that burst in one place even as they near simultaneously defended against one another in another place.

And then they arrived at the center of the ring, both locked, with weapons, feet and arms a jumble between them yet again, their swords sparking off one another while their bodies strained to hold the other at bay.

I swallowed hard, hoping that there would not be a death here today.

And then Sage broke the lock of swords, flipping completely backward to arch his foot upward underneath her chin, sending her reeling backward, to which she turned into a summersault, and she flipped away.

“Defeat you...” she said, not having her usual determination in her voice.

“No,” Sage said simply. “You won’t.”

She screamed outward one final time, crying out so much agony I had to wince against the pain it projected.

“A Master Blow!” the emperor breathed. “Leski, no...”

But the emperor's words came to late, and screaming with all her might, the resulting fusillade against Sage eviscerated his flesh as he tried to block, and for a moment, I thought him done for.

But in a split second, in the breath of time to take a coin toss, in which on one side of the coin was the death of Sage, the other was the death of Leski, I felt all of reality stop, poise and then become rewritten, and inexplicably, unbelievably, that coin landed on its edge.

Sage's blades came up; the force of another Master Blow, caught both of hers, and the resulting force of the connection caused her blades to shatter right within her hands.

“Dragon Repeater!” Sage cried out, and his body became incorporeal, and as he moved, several after images also moved almost in succession with one another, with sword blades, feet, hands, and I watched as Leski was caught within an attack that Sage desperately tried not to pierce her flesh too deeply.

Flecks of fur were sent flying along with scraps of her body suit and streaks of crimson blood. She was buffeted among the kicks, strikes and punches, and I could see bloody molts appear in her skin, could hear crunching bones even as they were cracked from the blows. Then at last, all the blows ended in one final strike from Sage’s foot striking her squarely in the gut, knocking her back several yards to come rolling to a stop at the center of the ring.

Sage’s forward movement carried him with her, and twisting his body, he seemed to trip, but was merely skipping with his feet, and he leapt upward in the air, sailing across the way with her, and I gasped as he brought both blades downward.

Someone screamed amongst the watchers.

When we dared to look again, Sage, himself bruised and battered, stood over Leski. Her first sight was to look directly into the points of Sage’s swords, which quivered with his every effort to keep them from falling. She simply lay there, naked; herself battered, bruised, and near completely shaved from Sage’s attack.

And then I felt reality flicker again, returning to normal, and Sage straightened abruptly, so quickly and so surprisingly that he flailed briefly before recovering his balance.

He lowered his arms, his swords hanging limply in his hands, his knuckles white from the strain of holding them back.

He and Leski looked to one another, staring at one another.

“You loose,” Was all that Sage said before quietly turning away...

Sage’s body healed right before my eyes as he returned to his normal furred form, his swords re-sheathing themselves, *somehow* back inside himself. Like he was absorbing them. Gathering up his shirt, he pulled it back on over his head, and then paused, looking at his hand, while behind him, the other rangers, the psychics and the healers tended to Leski.

I strode over to Sage, wanting answers.

He greeted me with a wry smile. I simply looked up at him, watching as one particularly nasty wound on his arm sealed itself up rapidly, the fur growing back and even the blood being sucked back into his body. I momentarily forgot my questions as I watched that.

“You’re the impossible.” I said, folding my arms beneath my breasts and staring up at him.

“Who told you?” he asked tiredly, and with my look of shock, he merely laughed and reached forward to clap a hand to my shoulder.

“A little fairy told me.” I said, fuming a little at his evading answers. “Sage! You’ve just beaten an Imperial Ranger! At her own Game! First Makahn, then her, am I next?!”

Sage’s expression changed immediately, and with a soft exhale, he hung his head and shook it before answering.

“Fate has dealt me a very strange card, Rae Iksaki.” He responded, still not looking at me. “To some he had given them lives of honor and glory, to others he has dealt them hands of mediocrity and still others pain and suffering.

“Different roles as different as the different faces in a deck of cards.

“To me, he has dealt the Joker. I am the spirit of chaos and order in the same vessel, Rae. A spirit of Paradox. Seers and soothsayers, oracles and prophets, no matter how unerringly their sayings may be, are all for naught should I enter the picture. I am a wild card, for good or for evil my presence throws an invariable wrinkle in reality. For every occurrence in life, there are always at least two outcomes. Heads and tails, light and dark, yin and yang, chaos and order...”

“Like a coin toss.” I said, not being able to hide the amazement in my voice.

“Precisely. Flip a coin, Rae, and most believe that it can only land heads, or tails. But given certain circumstances, those that are only available in that one instance of time, a coin can eventually... land on its edge.”

“That fight had two outcomes, one which ended with me dying, and the other that ended with her dying. Neither outcome was acceptable, nor intended when I started this fight. For ever so brief moments in time, I can exert my will over reality through my training in temporal magics, force the coin toss before it’s time and change its outcome. When the toss is thrown, it takes an inordinately massive amount of will to control how the coin will land.

“During this whole time, space and time is warped for the entire length of the toss, and for someone like you, I am sure that you must’ve felt the effect.”

“Yes... what was that?!” I asked, now surging forward so that my bosom was actually pressing against his chest.

“Paradox.”

I stared at him, looking left and right briefly, looking for someone to explain all this to me in better detail, wondering if it were even possible, when Leski, now on a stretcher with a blanket over her to hide her naked body was ferried by.

“Wait, stop.” She said weakly, and they stopped beside us.

Sage left me, and turned toward her to which I stood quietly by.

“You spared my life.” She stated. “Why? Especially when I didn’t mean to spare yours?”

Sage reached down and squeezed her shoulder before kneeling beside her so that their faces could meet, and that characteristic smile was on his face again.

“I kill only when I have a reason to, and only as a last resort. In that moment, I had both of those reasons, but this fight went beyond what I’d indented. I chose not to kill you.”

She was quiet, and turned her head to look up at the sky.

“Strange,” she said dreamily. “I’ve been in situations where it would be either me or my enemy that would die. I knew it was me or you, and I resigned myself to either outcome. Strange, this outcome was unexpected. I did not foresee it. Didn’t think to foresee it. I’d almost killed in cold blood...”

Her eyes flickered with tears that would not fall. Instead she simply closed them tightly.

“Thank you, for sparing my life... Lord Sage. You’ve shown me that I need to think in more degrees than just black and white...”

As if that ended the conversation, Leski’s bearers lifted her again and carried her off.

“I want her sedated and in a regeneration tank immediately!” the Emperor said as he took the spot she’d just been in. “Spare no expense. Have my personal doctor warped in if necessary!”

And then he turned to us as Sage rose to his feet. The emperor looked at Sage for a good long while, and ever so slowly, a wry smile crossed the emperor’s face, before just as slowly, the emperor himself bowed at the waist. Then shouldering his sword, he moved off to follow the wounded captain.

“Ah nuts.” I heard Sage say softly as he watched the procession move away, and sliding sideways, he began to walk off in another direction.

“What’s wrong?” I asked catching up to him.

“I believe I’ve just had the hand in creating another wild card...” He said, and I blinked at him. “You heard what Leski said just now.” He stated against my silence, pausing in his movement to watch the procession disappear into the school’s hospital. “About how she would consider her choices more than just black and white?” Leski has participated in a moment of paradox. She has been changed by it to the point where her mindset has been brought to realize that there are more options available than just the obvious ones.”

He continued staring at the point they'd all left in.

"I pray that she does not become a wild card."

"Why's that?" I asked. "One would think it a gift to be able to control fate like that."

"It is. But it is also a curse. And a lonely one. Your very presence effects all those around you to change the flow of fate like a boulder shoved in a river to stem its movement and redirect it. Past, present and future stem on your shoulders and you bear it like a yoke. You watch friends and loved ones die as you try to manipulate fate for the greater good, and if Fate doesn't get what he wants, then he changes the game to punish you sometimes. You are forced to change fate over and over again, even when you try not to.

"Like now.

"It is a fate I would not wish on anyone..."

I sat with Sage in the commissary while he ate his usual several plates full of food. Though this time it looked as if he were eating more than his usual share.

"That's a rather healthy appetite." I commented, trying to hide a smile behind my hand.

"Changing fate takes a lot out of you." he said, now completely healed from all the scrapes, bumps and cuts he'd received with his most recent sword fight with Leski. "Normally I don't eat like this..."

This meant with his hands. He was digging in here, dipping in there, and guzzling juice from a pitcher.

"That and I expended a lot of energy. She is a very talented swordswoman."

"She should be." I returned, eating lightly from my own plate. "One of the requirements of an Imperial Ranger is ten-thousand battle victories."

Sage paused, his mouth full while he thought about that for a second and then slowly nodded before swallowing. "Yes I can see where the experience comes from. I hope she's ok."

"She should." I smiled, my eyes smiling in their own way too. "Our healing magic combined with our medical technology has been able to heal even the worst of accidents we leaguers experience here.

"Severed limbs, holes blown through us, even recent deaths are mended."

“These are indeed impressive facilities.” He commented, pausing briefly to pound a fist to his chest as he held back a belch for my convenience.

I was about to respond before a new voice chimed in.

“Then our facilities are to your liking... Lord Sage?”

I turned to the newcomer and immediately rose to my feet at the presence of the headmistress nearby, her form towering over all of us so much that her head was brushing against a near twenty-foot ceiling.

Image by Psudodrake © by DocWolph

“They are impressive, Headmistress.” Sage responded, favoring her with respect enough to at least swallow his food before talking to her, but he did not rise at first, taking his time to finally rise to his feet. “What you have here is admirable.”

“But not the best you’ve ever seen...” she finished for him.

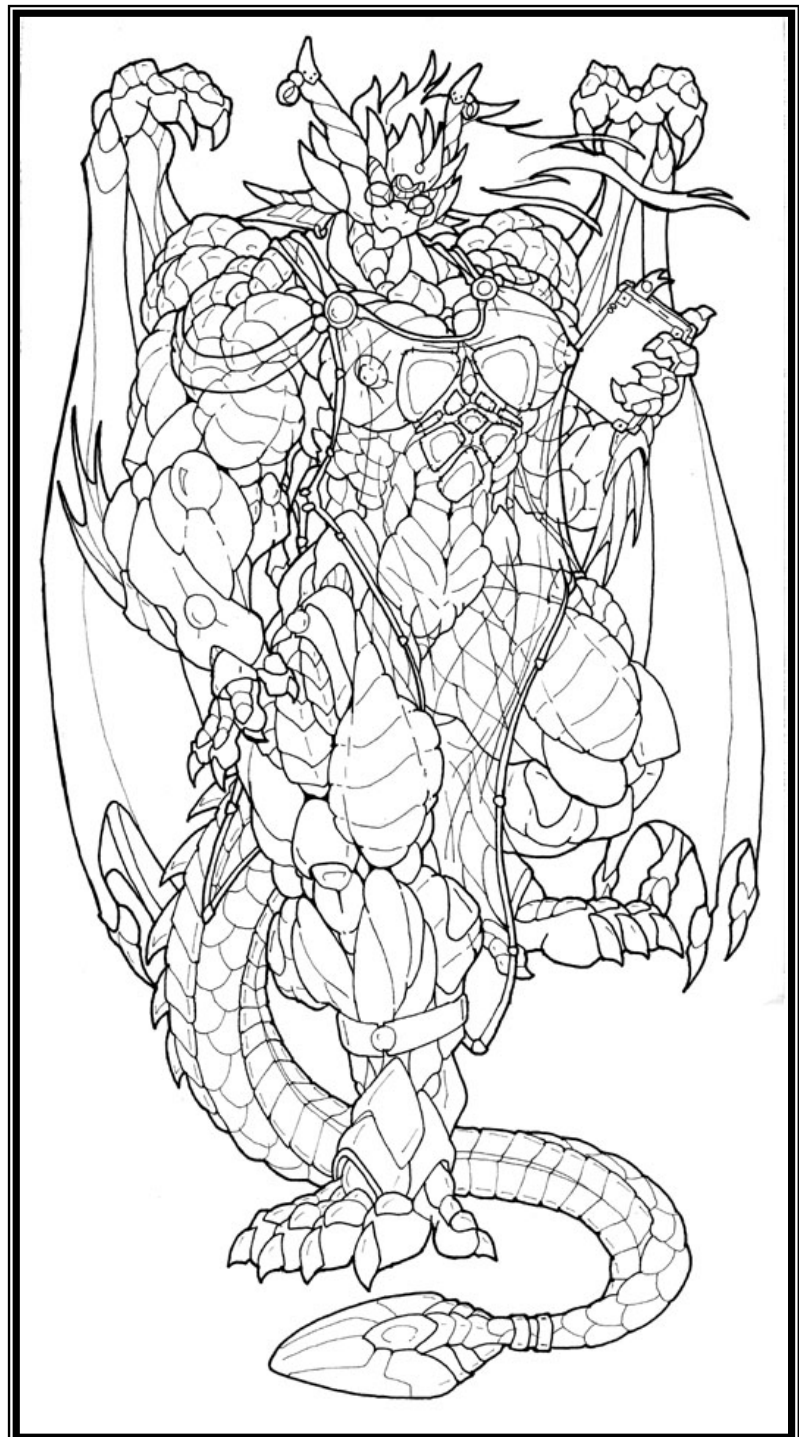
“Truthfully, no, it is not my lady. Your facilities I’d have to rate somewhere around fifth or so most impressive in my experience.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’ll consider that as a compliment.

“It is.” He attested.

“And how many of those numbers one through four are on you home world?”

“Two.” He said with a small smile. “Number one is the Shangri-La Valley Monastery, with number three being The Atlantis Academy. Number three is actually located on a nearby planet, a massive mountain complex that serves as the seat of



draconic power there called Olympus Mons on Mars. Number four is the training grounds for the Continuum Knights on the Elemental Plane of Nature.”

“So we talk about impressiveness, but what about what is taught.”

Sage crossed his thick arms, fingering his chin for a moment while pursing his lips, then looking up at Headmistress Meni...

“Second... after Shangri-La.”

That made her smile.

“Please do not mistake me as a murderer and a vagrant, my lady dragoness,” he said, bowing at last, going so far as to incline his head. “I wish not to kill, maim, destroy, or upset your order of things. I came to challenge your champion, and thereby improve myself. And perhaps, if you’ll have me, allow me to become a student here. If anything,” He reached down and picked up his tray of food. “You *do* however provide the finest cuisine I’ve ever had at a school.”

He looked at my teacher bashfully, smiling at a secret joke, and my headmistress closed her eyes, rubbing at her temples with her clawed fingers. But then her black lips slowly turned up into a smile, and then a grin, moving onto a chuckle till eventually she was hugging herself to where she began to laugh heartily out loud.

I stared up at her, never having seen her laugh like that.

“Please, sit with us and have a meal, Headmistress.” Sage prompted, sitting back down and pulling himself up to the large table again before setting himself for his voracious eating again. “I would like to speak with a dragoness in this section of space, see how the universe at large is like...”

“Despite how much I’d like to exchange stories, Lord Sage,” she responded, actually favoring him with his title instead of using it as a snide remark. “But I’ve got a school to run.

“Good afternoon Rae, Sage.” She inclined her head and then walked off, and I numbly sat down across from Sage again.

“I don’t believe it.” I said with awe in my voice. “She laughed.”

Sage and I exited the commissary after lunch, a high carb diet of just what any body needs. The best thing to have a nice hearty meal full of carbs, and then go and burn it all exercising and training till dinnertime.

As always, I was amazed at Sage’s ability to pack away food.

I patted my heavily muscled belly that was laden with fur, feeling the course of my energies sliding along my veins and arteries just below it, and the as of yet unused power of feminine might nestled between my ribcage and the bowl of my hips in the form of my womb. I paused, spreading my fingers against my belly.

Having become so in tune with my personal energies, I knew of every little nuance or shift in those energies inside me. My body was already gearing up for motherhood... which meant that it would be seeking a mate soon. Whether my heart or my head wished it or not. Such is the magic of undergoing a heat. It insured a legacy of progeny.

“Is the meal not settling, Rae?” came Sage’s calming voice suddenly as he noticed my actions, and I looked up at him while he played with a toothpick in his mouth.

“Oh,” I started and then looked away, and then shifted my arms to hug myself beneath my bosom. “Just reminiscing.”

“You’re blushing.” Sage pointed out, still walking as silently as a ghost beside me. It was always like he was a shadow whenever he was nearby. Practically zero residual presence on the universe.

“I am?” I asked, pushing a hand against my cheek facing him and turning my head away. Sage chuckled.

It was then that he stopped, and surprised, I stopped beside him as he looked to a large gathering of people who were filing up before a white cloth-covered table, and a large sensor off to one side. Sage crossed his arms as one of the members of the Demon League strode up from the line of onlookers, answered several questions, and then struck the large sensor to display a strength rating.

At this, Sage nodded curtly, and then strode right up to the end of the line, leaving me standing there while he took his place with the others; his long tail waving almost irritably back and forth in a half circle at the furthest sway of his tail.

I bit my lip and strode up to him, realizing that I’d forgotten to tell him that today was the day the competitors would be signing up for the tournament. When I arrived next to him, he turned his head, peaceably serene, to look at me, his cool green eyes – pure and absent of iris or pupil – staring at me as one of his ears turned forward.

“I-I am *so* sorry Lord Sage.” I admitted. “I honestly forgot what today was.”

His other ear turned forward, and he continued to stare at me.

“Your eyes tell me that you are not lying.” He said, and then returned to his original stance. “But there were others I had asked to tell me when the day for signing up was, including your Headmistress, I find it improbable that all of them have forgotten to tell me...”

“You shouldn’t blame them,” I said, advancing with him in line as it moved forward. “They only mean to protect me.”

“You are the universe’s most renowned martial artist and sorceress. Dragons in this universe fear you. I see it in your own headmistress’s eyes when she looks on you. An odd mixture there when combined with her doting love.

“Why do you need to be protected?”

The line continued to advance, person by person, as they answered a barrage of questions as to who they were, what martial art they practiced, and then a test of their greatest strength by hitting a large sensor beside the tables. Sage cared nothing from what information they gave to the inquisitors, but took note of how hard they hit the sensor, and how they hit it; by either their feet or their hands or through some other method.

I paid particular attention to Makahn as he attacked the sensor, executing a perfect punch that lifted it up slightly off its moorings, swinging his entire body into the effect. Easily, the most impressive strike so far, even more forceful than Gehnohn’s!

After his strike, he strutted like a fool, flexed his muscles, and when he came by us, he smiled longing at me, touched my cheek as he passed, which I shrugged against, but then he thrust his shoulder forcibly into Sage’s.

“Beat that! If you can...” I heard him growl as he went to join the Power Leaguers amidst an exhibition of their powers.

Sage paid it no attention to him or his fellows. He seemed determined.

My friend Illia Romov, a fem physically more powerful than even I, second most powerful warrior in the Universe, did only slightly better than Makahn had. Though I was sure she had pulled her punch. She didn’t put nearly *any* of her vast powers into that strike.

One after the next, everyone who was going to enter the tournament signed in, and when Lord Sage finally stepped up before the three inquisitors, silence prevailed everywhere. Everyone wanted to hear who he was at last.

“Name.” the first inquisitor asked.

“Sage Preypacer.” He answered swiftly, his long tail swinging lazily at his backside.



“Any titles of note?”

“Lord... Aspect of the Sage, Inner Circle of Sages, Frost clan of the Lycanthropes. Grandmaster of martial arts. Armsmaster.”

“Race?”

“Lycanthrope, Tribe of the Kahn, Frost Clan.”

I listened to his answers, as he snapped them off as soon as he was asked them. He was a Lord for a reason, and here I thought it was just for show.

“Home world?”

“Earth. Also known as Tera or Gaia. Located in the Milky Way Galaxy.”

I felt my eyes beetle, and heard some murmuring around me, hearing that definitely no one knew of that galaxy. I turned to Noxi, only to see that she was avidly writing all this down for later in a datapad.

I missed most of what was said not even noting most of the questions like how old he was, his obvious gender, and so on and so forth. And then it came time for him to test his strength with the sensor, to which all chattering and hushed conversation ceased. Everyone wanted to see this.

By this time, practically every last member of the school – student and faculty alike – were arrayed around us, and even the headmistress had arrived to overlook the proceedings.

Sage went right up to the sensor, and settled himself with his right side to the sensor, bracing his legs in a wide stance that arrayed his loose-fitting, stylish trousers about his legs as he swung his hands forward. His rearward hand took a guard position, while the tips of his fingers settled a hair’s breadth away from the sensor. He shot one meaningful glare toward Makahn, and then he seemed to spasm to all those around us. The motion of simply closing his hand into the sensor was all that most were able to see.

But again... like when he had challenged Pleeyo earlier and most recently with Leski, time snapped and began to slow as my battle senses went of inexplicably, slowing time to view his movements in slow motion.

Every muscle he had went into producing forward motion. He lifted on his toes, bent his knees, swiveled his hips and waist, leaned forward, rotated his shoulder and extended his elbow, even as those dark rings he’d used earlier erupted about his biceps, rotated rapidly and then slammed one right after the other down his fist. A static charge soon followed all of that, and when he struck, it was done all with only his forward-most knuckle on his fist.

His fist struck, and all that energy was released... spiritual, kinetic, physical, heat and sonics, all erupted into a tiny space on the sensor only a scant square inch.

There was another snap in my perception, and the eruption of energy exploded outward in its titanic force. There was the immediate scream of the sheering of metal as all the moorings and pistons on the sensor exploded, and the sensor was sent plowing through the concrete as it rolled, bounced, and then rebounded hundreds of feet up into the air.

It landed in a crackling explosion of electricity perhaps a quarter mile away.

Sage stood slowly upward, keeping his back toward us, his heels remaining off the ground as he waited for the chaos of the distant explosion to sway. Then gracefully, he turned, his long striped hair dancing before his face in the wind as his bright green eyes pierced their way through the shadows projected by his hair.

There was muttering from the three inquisitors as they tried to rate him at his present task, crunching numbers, arguing amongst themselves. Figures such as the sensor's maximum yield, plus the strength of the moorings, plus the resistance of the ground and what it'd take to catapult such a heavy object up into the air as high as that. Most of the argument came from the last few seconds of Sage's after strike, whereas they couldn't decide on the resistance of the courtyard's stonework, the weight of the sensor as metal pieces tore off, or exactly how high the thing was ejected into the air. Or even how far away it fell...

At last they simply shrugged at one another and the leader of the three announced to the crowd the final statistic.

“Strength level... Incalculable.”

Sage was shunned for an afternoon after his feat today. The faculty kept discussing how on earth that feat was even possible, and they spoke constantly of methodology, technique and energy. Some argued that it was completely possible; others used it as an example to the younger students that it was possible to grow so much in power.

I leaned against one of the pillars, folding my arms beneath my breasts while watching Sage as he now went through a different routine than the power he'd exemplified the other day. This one was more of a dance, done slowly, full of purpose and grace.

There were others watching him... they were taking notes. As was I. I noticed that some of the more subtle movements ended up as a single finger moving forward as if to touch something, followed by what would've been a fusillade of punches kicks and even a head but or two.

Turning my head, I even saw Makahn brooding off in a corner, but nonetheless studying his future opponent.

And then I heard a thunderous boom that shook me from my repose, and lifting my gaze, I felt a smile tug at my features as I saw a large gathering surrounding one of the upraised tiers of the main courtyard, where a massive rock of raw ore resided.

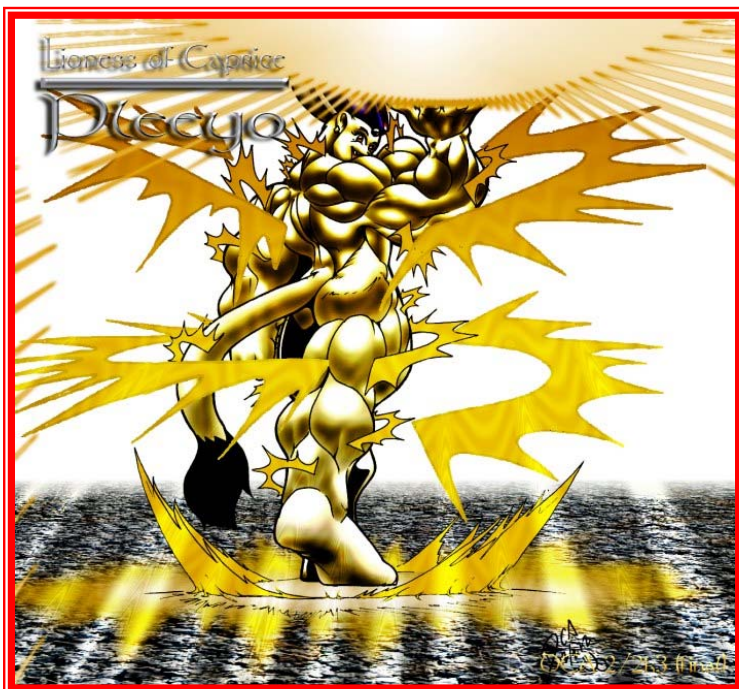
Stepping off toward the hubbub, I joined a smattering of others on my way to the rock to see who was going at it now, and wasn't surprised that it was Pleeयो this time.

The rock of ore, chained and tethered to seven mounts, floated just above the stonework of the tier, surrounded by towering pillars on all sides, with benches aplenty. This stone was a creation of the Headmistress. Headmistress Meni had used it as an ultimate test of one's prowess. To break the stone and obtain the prize inside would give whoever obtained the gem untold power.

So far, only Equis, Gehnohn, Illia and myself have ever breeched the stone and obtained its core. A simple little gem, aquamarine in color, and large enough to rest in the palm of your hand. None of us really ever obtained any real power from the gem, we simply held it, looked at it, and wondered why its supposed vast power wasn't transferring into us at that time.

And then we realized it. We *were* the power, and whatever may have been in this tiny little gem was nothing in comparison to it. We became the power. So each in turn, all four of us had returned the gem to its place, and this massive rock reformed itself right around it as if nothing had happened. But for each of us, we'd always done the task in privacy.

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But Pleeयो took great pleasure in showing off her power. More than was necessary and often dangerous at times.

Right now she was definitely showing off, and she was gathering her energies in a brilliant display to attack the rock.

Equis, her mentor, stood nearby, her face already showing her displeasure at her student's most recent and quite blatant disregard for the rules, but was not going to interrupt in this moment of glory. Her poise, even within her sheer bodycloth that hung freely and unbound over her virile bodice, Equis was holding her breath for her student

to rise to the next level.

There were already cheers of encouragement.

Pleeyo continued to power up, more and more power, to the point where the wind itself swirled around her, and the marble cobblestones on the ground rattled to shake up some of the dust from in between their cracks. And then I felt another presence, and I turned quickly to see Sage arrive, with Makahn once again lurking right behind him.

As per their bet, Makahn did not interfere with Sage's presence near me, but that did not stop him from being a stalker all the time. I didn't want it to bother me, especially since I found it flattering that he wanted to protect me.

But I was nonetheless annoyed, at least a little, that he'd become so territorial lately.

Sage, however, folded his arms over his bare chest, his shirt still dangling about his waist with the sleeves in the waistband while he watched Pleeyo strut and preen in an obvious display of her power.

Egis's student, Pleeyo was more careless in displaying her obvious power, and less careful about covering her bodice in the obvious and blatant challenging of the schools dress code. Even as the throes of energy that were the color of a yellow star charged about her, her power levels rapidly growing far beyond most reactors, they flowed over a practically naked bodice, with only the occasional bangle or bracelet, and three like-shaped pasties over areola and crotch.

And now, with her power levels at peak, she channeled all her power, focused it, and with a mighty scream, twisted herself forward and launched her fist into the massive boulder. An eruption like a roll of thunder echoed throughout the whole of the school grounds, and the blast of her energies, already powerful enough to shatter some planets, broke through the ultra dense rock that was nearly dark matter in composition. The blow shattered it this way and that, breaking open a massive chunk that crumbled away, exploded and showered the onlookers with rock and debris, and blew several of the chain anchors away.

Sage didn't even move as a load of rock was spattered against him.

When the dust cleared, there was a massive cavity blown open, and for the barest of seconds, there was a glint of a shiny stone inside. The barest rounded portion of a blue crystal that winked at all the onlookers. But then the explosion slowed and then stopped, and all the fragments, even the dust, all vibrated minutely before they all surged back toward the rock, pelting Pleeyo constantly as the massive boulder reformed, and even its anchor chains rose up and reattached themselves right where they were before.

Pleeyo was crestfallen and beat at the rock repeatedly, but as she expended her energy, her successive blows did less and less damage to the massive stone, till at last she simply collapsed to her knees, and hammered her last blow at the ground.

"DAMN IT!" she screamed, wanting the power that the boulder possessed within itself but again denied her.

Only then did Sage move forward, examining the boulder, and, once Pleeyo noticed, much to her chagrin.

“You.” her voice dripped icily. “What are you doing here?”

Sage stopped, and turned benignly toward Pleeyo, one of his high hooded ears rotating forward to focus on Pleeyo.

“Observing.” He answered simply.

“What? My failure?!” she cried, and instead surged to her feet.

He shook his head.

“Your success.”

She looked incredulously at him, and then gave off a bark of laughter. “What success?” she demanded then, planting her hands on her broad and rounded hips. “I didn’t retrieve the gem.”

“And you consider that a failure?” Sage asked, and turned to look at the stone in further detail, his long fingers running over its craggy surface. “On my home world, in ancient past, one of the great successes was to create the light bulb. The man who tried creating it failed so many times, that he became known as the man who discovered over a thousand ways of how *not* to invent the light bulb, till he finally succeeded. Each failure, however, offered him a learning experience, as he now knew what not to do to achieve his goal.

“Should you look at this enigma, and see your failure to reach the goal as rather a success in the process of achieving it instead, then you have grown better in skill and in ability. But waste this opportunity to learn and you are more fool than you look.”

He slowly turned his head back to her, focusing her with those coolly glowing green eyes of his.

Pleeyo was taken aback momentarily, but when she recovered, she jutted her body forward in defiance of learning *anything* from Sage. “OH?! And I suppose you can do better than that?!”

Sage didn’t answer at first, and Pleeyo stood with her back ramrod straight again, folding her arms beneath her breasts to display the massive mammaries over her meaty arms with a smug smile on her face.

And then Sage answered.

“There are two ways in which to overcome a thing, whether it’s an obstacle or an opponent. The first is to do what you did... and try to be stronger than its strength. I your supposed ‘failure,’ you should learn that in order to accomplish this feat you must grow more powerful than you are now, and train yourself harder to grow greater in power.

“The second method, however, is to be stronger than its weakness.” He retracted his hand, paused briefly, and jabbed his fore finger and index finger together at a spot on the boulder and held it there and then turned to Pleeyo again. “This is much more difficult, being that a weakness is usually a small point, difficult to pinpoint or reach, and is not to be mistaken for vulnerability.

“Once the weak point is found, you must strike it in such a way that it takes away from the obstacle’s strength, rendering it lessened, useless... or defeated...”

And with that, he withdrew his fingers, and there was a minute snap of light where he’d touched the boulder. That minute snap of light then spread through the entire surface of the black boulder as Sage’s hands folded one into the other just before him as the light descended and spread into and through the rock.

To everyone’s startled eyes, they watched as the massive boulder of material nearly as solid as dark matter crumbled into granules no larger than bits of sand and dust, breaking away, causing the chain anchors to drop straight to the ground. Sage merely continued to stare at Pleeyo as she watched dumbstruck as the entire boulder rapidly disintegrated, revealing a beautiful blue gemstone hovering at the center of where the boulder had once been.

Then calmly shifting his weight sideways, Sage moved forward, and lifting his hand, seized the stone from where it floated. The stone glittered and shone, and Sage stood there, gazing at it with a look of wonder playing on his face. Then a telltale beam of light, no thicker than a thread extended from his chest jewel to the stone, and from the stone to his jewel, and the look on his face grew distant for a moment. Everyone watched in wonder as he and the stone remained connected, but the beam lasted for only a few seconds before it was broken, and blinking, Sage’s eyes lifted for a moment, he shook his head to clear it, and then looked back to the stone. His lips pressed together then, and he looked to Pleeyo, and lifting his hand, dropped the stone.

It remained in midair where he’d dropped it, and as he stepped away from the debris of its old home, it quickly began to rise, folding about the stone like a cocoon, and by the time he’d stepped by Pleeyo again, the massive boulder had once again reformed, complete with all its anchors.

“B-but... why didn’t you take it?! It was yours!” Pleeyo demanded, echoing the thoughts of everyone else here... including me. Perhaps he had the same reason I did. He simply did not need it.

“It is not mine” he answered calmly. “The blue gem is for a female. It is incompatible with my own green gems.” He said, and simply stood there, staring at something. When I followed his gaze, I found him looking rather darkly right at our headmistress.

“But untold power lies with whoever can claim the jewel. Why didn’t you simply take it?!” she demanded again, still not understanding what Sage had just told her about it not being compatible with him.

To her exasperated question, Sage turned to her and poked her sharply on her naked chest with a finger which made her wince with the pain of it. “You! You must free it as quickly as possible. You or one of these other maidens here.

“It has told me that it has chosen one of you, one of the females here,” he said raising his voice. “Though it would not tell me who. One of you must free it, and free it as quickly as you can before its light dies. But do not confuse the truth of the matter.” He said now, rounding on Pleeoyo again and jabbing her in the chest again. “It is not *you* who claims *it*, but it is *it* that claims *you!*”

He then turned and rounded on mistress Menikomen.

She took a step back from him as he walked up to her, and staring at her, finally lifted a hand and beckoned her closer to him. When she did so, cautiously lowering her head toward him, in a move so quick that even I didn’t see it, he balled up his fist and struck her in the side of her armored head. Several of the armored plates there cracked and she was driven straight to the ground with the force of the blow.

There were cries of protest, one voice of which was my own as he struck our teacher, but then Sage was snarling at her.

“Damn you, you self righteous *bitch!*” he growled, his eyes bleeding from dark green to searing blood red as he stared at her. “Your own *seed*... locked away in a lifeless, dark place, with several meters worth of cold stone surround it and the warmth of the rest of the world.

“Your... own... *seed!*”

“I... I didn’t know it would be like this.” Menikomenqolui was crying, sobbing even. “There were few who met with the challenge, and when they came to hold it in their hands, they chose not to accept her gift.”

All were watching, and strangely none were interfering. I however took the presence of mind to at least go and comfort my headmistress, try to support her tremendous bodice. Then I looked at Sage, seeing a terrible power welling inside him, feeling the darkness, enormous power, mighty power... a terrible... terrible darkness rising with his anger. When he growled, it was like a terror straight from the abyss growling. It was a sound that made the hackles on the back of my neck rise on end and my body to shiver terribly, and for a moment I felt like a little girl at the sounds of warfare outside my hometown combined with a childhood fear of the dark.

Sage then knelt before us, fixing his reddened gaze with Menikomen’s.

“It had only to say that it was betrayed, it had only to say that it was terrified, lost or alone for me to kill you now.” He growled; quiet enough so that only she and I could hear. “I have the power of dragon slayers, my dear dragoness. It would’ve been a simple prospect to do so.” But then the dark red glare in his eyes faded, and the terrible darkness receded... with difficulty I saw. “But...” he continued, but in a louder voice so that others could hear. “It still calls you mother,

and speaks about you with a tremendous love. But it is lonely, and a little afraid. Like a child is when it suddenly realizes that the hand it was holding onto is no longer there.

“I give you but only one chance, Mistress... commune with your seed... daily... do not miss a single day. Feed it light and love in that dark prison it’s in. Do not let its light turn to hate. And damn your draconic instincts to leave your young to fend for themselves.”

With that, he rose to his feet, still looking down at Menikomenqolui, mentally forcing himself to uncoil his hands from their fists, his jaw set tightly before he turned back for his quarters. On his way, as he passed a column of stone that was ten times his width, and a hundred times his height, his fist hammered outward, striking the pillar and thoroughly shattering it from its base to its peak.

Those that were gathered watched him leave, and when he was out of sight, all eyes turned to their headmistress, who at the moment, did nothing more than stare at the stone in which *‘her seed’* lie within and cry.

Menikomenqolui surged to her feet, and grappled with the stone, sobbing as she pressed herself against it, whispering incoherently, her claws scraping at the stone as she hammered at it with her fist, her damaged plates at the side of her face slowly mending themselves.

“M-mistress...” a voice asked, and I recognized my sister, who’d been watching everything since Pleeyo’s attempt at reaching the stone approach her innocently from behind. “Wh-what did he mean by all that?”

Our headmistress didn’t answer at first, but continued to paw at the rock. It was a long time before she finally answered.

“He reminded me of a failure of mine. One I intend to rectify!” She turned, still hugging the massive boulder in which *‘her seed,’* as Sage had put it, resided within.

“Next week, I am opening advanced studies.” She announced. “All applicants who have yet to graduate are encouraged to enter.” She looked at Pleeyo who was nearby, and then to Fatima, to whom she lowered a clawed hand and cradled her chin within her fingers. “Especially if you are female. Please.”

There were tears in her eyes as she turned away to coddle that massive boulder.

“Now please leave me, all of you.” she said, and then said no more.

We all exchanged looks with one another, wondering what had just happened, but obeying her command, we dispersed.

“What... what does she mean sister?” Fatima asked coming up next to me.

Still a young woman, she lacked the feminine prowess, or even the full body musculature of a more advanced student, but already her powers were nearly as formidable as mine. Once, she alone had bested a great evil in this universe when she was much younger than she is now. But her success was met with a taint inside her that rapidly began turning her into a bestial horror.

Menikomen had sealed her experience away using her vast psychic powers, and the gentle Fatima was returned. But her experience still left whatever that was inside her unlocked.

Now, looking down into her inquisitive face, a small smile crossed my face as I saw how much she tried to mimic her older sister, and I lifted a hand to ruffle her beautifully preened hair.

“I know about as much about all this as you do.” I admitted. “Dragon Magic and Dragon Lore are some of the sciences that Menikomen has deemed not to teach us. Whether it’s all about their secrets or that we’re not ready to learn, but all of this is steeped deep within that magic and lore.”

Fatima quickly slid her hair back into place with the claws on her hand, using them like a comb while she continued to walk quietly for a time with me engrossed in thought.

“Sage seems to know what’s going on.” She said at last

“I know... and that’s precisely where I am going.” I laughed, but there was a little menace in that laugh at the thought of what Sage had just done toward our headmistress. “I want answers, and the Creator help him if I don’t get them.”

I walked straight up to the simple looking doorway that served as Sage’s quarters here, and in mid stride, lifted a hand to hammer heavily on his door. But just before I was about to break his door down, the image of Daedalus pushed outward from the door and opened his eyes.

“Yes, Miss Iksaki. Lord Sage has been expecting you. Please enter.”

I blinked at this, and watched as Sage’s illusionary servant faded back into the door, and it swung obligatorily open for me to enter.

Stepping inside, loosing a lot of my fury to curiosity, I heard the door close quietly behind me.

“He is waiting for you in the meditation chamber.” Came Dallas’s voice, and I turned to see him standing close by. “Just go straight ahead.”

I nodded and then moved in that direction, down the short hall and into the small garden of his.

With evening coming in, the moon singer he’d befriended the night before was here, preening her feathers on her stand, just starting to wake up. I paused to regard this mystical creature

briefly, before I again moved forward through his island garden surrounded by fish and shrouded by a web of wire and beads, but then the moon singer chose that moment to sing, and I stopped, listening to the beautiful song unlike any other bird in the cosmos.

What anger was left inside me vanished.

It took great self-control to continue on in my mission, passing over the bridge leading off the island, and moving right through the opened double doors into the small temple beyond.

Sage was there, before his altar of oils and incenses, with several swords on their stands arrayed at the back of said altar; his form perfectly motionless as he meditated. For a moment, I actually debated whether or not to disturb him when I heard his voice echo through the high vaulted chamber.

“Please, Rae... sit.” He prompted, throwing a gesture over his shoulder to indicate the large circular rice mat behind him, and the cloth mat across it from his own.

I moved into the hallowed recesses of his temple, and in one fluid motion, bent my knees, knelt, and then settled back upon my heels and waited for him to acknowledge me again.

At last he lifted his hands from his lap, pressed his palms together and the edges of his thumbs against his nose and bowed once. Then rising again, he lifted himself on the thumb and fore finger of either hand and turned toward me using only his hands, and when he again knelt, he bowed to me in greeting.

“I must apologize for my actions recently. I should have held back my distaste.”

I blinked at him for a moment, and then shook my head to clear it of the incense in the air.

“Sage, I have never seen my headmistress act like that. Like she was cooing over a long lost child. What is that stone to her... and to you?”

I could practically hear the gears in Sage’s head work as he weighed his words carefully before answering.

“Dragons are the eldest living species in all of creation.” He said in preamble. “Like humans, the youngest of all species, they are found everywhere, practically in equal numbers. But being as old as they are, Dragons, especially truly powerful ones, have discovered a way of... magical asexual reproduction, regardless as to whether they be male, female, both or neither. For those that are neither, it is their only way of reproduction.

“Through intensely powerful draconic magic, and over an immensely long time taking decades, if not centuries or millennium, they weld a portion of their vast horde into a Dragon Orb, and then process the dragon orb into what they call a Dragon Seed.

“The Dragon Seed is an extension of the dragon that created it, developing its own powers, its own consciousness and personality.” He looked to me then. “Much like a child.”

“You mean that that...that *crystal* is actually a child?!”

“Locked away in a prison of stone, and sealed away from the light of creation for over a decade.”

I thought about that, and then gasped as I realized what had made Sage so phenomenally upset with Menikomenqolui. “Great Maker...” I breathed, covering my mouth with both hands as I gasped wide-eyed.

Sage closed his eyes and bowed his head.

“I had nearly lost my temper today, Rae. Such a thing to do, to take your child, throw them in a prison where the first ten years of its life is enshrouded in darkness, with nearly no contact with one’s ‘parent,’ nearly drove me to rampage.”

He shook his head.

“My temper is a dark and evil thing to see, Rae. All creatures in creation are given the equal possibility to be either a great good or a great evil. But being Fate’s Wild Card has a terrible price to it, being that I have two sides of me, two faces of a single coin, where one side is a thing of goodly light, and the other side is a face of consummate evil.

“You saw a piece of my darker half’s face today.”

I nodded, remembering the red-eyed terror that affronted my headmistress.

“Sage... why did you not leave the gem out of its prison?” I asked suddenly, and again Sage fell silent, weighing his words.

“The prison, though a prison, is still the thing that sustains the seed. To remove it from the rock without a host in which to take it would mean to kill it. Its power would slowly wane, and then... it’d die.”

“Then why did you not take it?!” I demanded, echoing Pleeyo’s earlier demand.

“Why didn’t you?” he countered, and I fell immediately silent. “Of all the people in the school you were among it’s first choices for a host. But you rejected the power it offered. It told me that you wanted your power to have been gained all on your own.

“It respected that, but it is, however getting very lonely.”

“But there are other reasons why I could not take it. The first being that it is too far into its feminine power for it to be used by a male. That... and there is also the fact that I already have a seed in me.”

I blinked, and slowly becoming aware of his words, I lifted my gaze to him as he did the same to me, and I met his dark green eyes as they pierced straight through the dark atmosphere in the temple to look at me.

He then looked down and practically cradled the large green gem in his chest, fingering it with his thumb.

“This one is different, however. It is my own seed that I planted inside myself. By studying draconic magic, I grew powerful enough till one day it formed, and began to grow.

“Mine has matured greatly since then,” to which he then showed me the gem in his navel, and the other two at the backs of his hands. “I require only two more of the foci before the seed matures and changes me from the inside out into a dragon.”

“The seed transforms a creature it is planted within into a dragon?”

Sage nodded.

“Whatever young maiden finally accepts the Seed’s power, will become Menikomenqolui literal child.

“When I first came here, I mentioned that this school lacks teaching qualities in certain fields. Draconic lore and magic are among them. For a creature such as ourselves to steep too deeply into the power of the most ancient of ancients in this reality, means that we become one of them.

“*He who becomes obsessed with a thing becomes the thing.*” He quoted from something somewhere.

“Then... then I should go and release it! *I’ll* free it and... and be its host.”

Again Sage shook his head. “You cannot. You have refused the power of the seed. It cannot give itself to you no matter how much you or it wants the bond now.

“It’s only hope is for some young maiden to break it free of its prison, and without thinking about the consequences, only accepting, to take the seed into herself.”

He grew silent yet again.

“It asked me if I were sending it home to its mommy now. It asked me if I were its father. I had to say no.”

“I... I can see why you were so angry.” I admitted. “And why our mistress decided not to retaliate.”

He lowered his head and shook it. “Nonetheless, I shouldn’t have acted the way I did.”

“Everyone loses their temper... I’ll talk to them. I’m sure they’ll understand.”

He nodded, and just then, there was a rattling of china, and Daedalus, the mildly transparent servant of Sage, entered and deposited a tray in the middle of the mat between us, and began setting up tea for two.

“If you are so inclined, Rae, would you care to join me for tea while you are here? I would enjoy the company.”

I looked down to where Daedalus had finished pouring hot water into the small hand bowl before me and was now preparing packets of tealeaves for Sage, waiting for my answer.

“I would be delighted.” I smiled, and Daedalus poured me some water for tea.

Chapter 4: The Heart of a Warrior

The next morning found the Island Sanctuary of the Mystic League's school under a layer of fog that was thickest around the knees and ankles. There was an electric air everywhere; and occasionally though the fog one could see a fighter limbering up for the competition, working on Katta and such.

My steps were purposeful, and my soft sweats hugged close to my body while I drew its hood up over my head, my lop ears poking out of the holes in to hood to hang over the sides of my head.

I climbed the levels of the courtyard, past where a mass of stands were being constructed that could aptly hold the thousand strong competitors, visitors, and students of the school for the tournament.

But I didn't care for all that now; I walked right past it, and climbed a series of steps that gently let up to a higher platform of the courtyard, the one where the massive floating rock resided.

As I climbed, with the sun now rising high enough to cook off some of this fog, I saw a massive shadow slide out of the mists next to the great oblong one that was the boulder anchored to all its chains. Headmistress Meniko sat with her legs folded beneath her, and her tail wrapping about her feet. Her clawed hands were held in her lap as she stared up at the boulder, seemingly lost in meditation.

As I approached, I pressed myself against one of the large remaining pillars, one of them having been destroyed by Sage the night before and was still being reconstructed by repair bots.

We loose more columns from some fighter loosing their temper that way, I thought with a smile, and watched my mother-headmistress communing with her 'seed.' I could only surmise that that was what she was doing with her pressed up against the rock like that.

But while I stood there, there was a brief disturbance, and the mists unfolded as they were cooked off by the rising sun, and Sage was there. Normally one would see a shadow at the least at his approach, but not with him. It was like the mists simply spit him out, or merged together to form him.

I knew he must've been standing there for quite some time, for it was as if he'd always been there. Nothing more than a shadow, with his frost-white and obsidian-black creased pelt, having just been one with the mists.

And then he stepped forward and genially lowered that clawed hand of his onto Meniko's armored shoulder, his claws extending briefly to catch a better grip of her shoulder.

"I am so sorry," he said without preamble. "I said some things yesternight..."

Meniko shook her head, her head fins spreading minutely. “No. No do not apologize. I’ve done the unspeakable, and to my own child no less.” She waved her four-fingered taloned hand to ward off his apology. “I deserved worse than to be simply stuck across the face like you did.

“You are a chivalrous being, Lord Sage. I should be thanking you for the... ‘gentleness’ in which you used to awaken me to my sin. Damn, and just when I’d thought I’d nearly shaken off my mother’s habits, I go and do something like her.”

I pressed harder against the pillar and retreated some more. I wanted to hear this, but apparently Meniko’s brief lapse in revealing something about her past was extremely brief.

“Have you been here all night, mistress?”

“Yes. Communing... via astral space.” She smiled. “Teaching her to create a world for herself inside her prison. I gave her some light...”

“That... was a very motherly thing to do, mistress Meniko.” Sage said quietly.

Meniko then shifted, and rose to her full height, an awesome sight, especially since she towered nearly more than twice Sage’s height, even with his great stature. Great mammaries that had yet to feel the blessing of motherhood, and a body that was fully armored and decorated with colorful interlocking swirls across what one could see of her hide.

This was merely one of a plethora of forms she utilized. She only used this when she felt threatened, and she’d been using it for quite some time. Ever since Sage had appeared. Her most spectacular form was a massive glittering dragon with feathers that was over a mile long...

She walked forward and pressed her clawed hand against the stone, a last farewell before she turned to go down the steps. I immediately turned away and pressed my back against the pillar to avoid detection, stopping my breathing and slowing my body’s functions to avoid detection.

Sage stepped with her, and the two began to converse, the two apparently over their objections over one another. Even Meniko’s armored form softened... a little. They were several steps below when Sage suddenly stopped, bidding farewell to Meniko and then turned; disappearing into the mists like he’d arrived, his form seeming to evaporate to merge with it.

I didn’t feel any magical change in the world around him, didn’t feel the power around me alter, he simply no longer was. I stepped away from the pillar, looking to where he’d just been, when his voice suddenly came to my ears.

“Some people do not like eavesdroppers, Miss Iksaki.” And I whirled around to see him leaning against the pillar I’d just been hiding behind, with one of his arms lifted up over his head against it.

He was smiling jokingly at me, but nonetheless I couldn’t hide the gasp that escaped me in surprise.

Such stealth, I considered, and swallowed a breath before quickly recovering. “How did you know I was there?”

His ears twitched forward, and his smile tugged a little deeper at one corner of his mouth.

“My blind fighting techniques were taught to me by a creature that’s spent his entire life without the use of his eyes. I was able to sneak up on you using skills that have been honed through over fifteen thousand years of various masters on my world. Also, my breed has exceptional powers of hearing and smell.

“I heard your heart beat, smelt your pheromones despite that you’ve just showered... you’re using a new shampoo conditioner for your fur... that and I watched you arrive.” He grinned then, showing me his canines that nearly overlapped the row of teeth across from them.

Uncoiling from his leisure position, he then gestured forward for me to join him, bowing slightly like a gentleman.

“Tell me of your world Sage.” I said as he and I fell in along one another. “I want to know what kind of a place would make a creature like you necessary.”

Sage planted his fingers in his pockets, leaving his thumbs to hook on the outside, and was silent for a time, gathering his thoughts.

“Earth... is a precious jewel amidst a mire of the foulest smelling muck one could ever think to know. The good keeps getting better, and the bad keeps getting worse.

“It is a world of a very precarious balance. Light and dark, good and evil, magic and technology, chaos and order... Yin and Yang. Because Earth is the focus of so many different kinds of invasions – extraterrestrial and extra-dimensional – it has many, many guardians. Too many to list, and some who choose not to be listed.”

“And you are one of those guardians?” I asked.

“Only by accident.

“My clan of Lycanthropes is a myriad of different breeds. Cat, wolf, avian... My first task among them was to be a healer. So I learned everything about life that I could, to the point where I am considered to be among my world’s most potent healers and physicians. That inevitably led me toward martial arts, and my desire to heal transformed into a desire to also protect. By sheer accident I rose through the ranks of my Clan, till at last I found myself in its governing body, and of the two other members of the Inner Circle to which I was apart of, I was the only one chosen to be raised to the final level.

“Which is what brings me here.”

“Why?” I asked dumbly, the sun rising ever higher to continually cook off more of the mists.

“The governing body of my Clan is called the Circle of Sages. Five outer circle members, three inner circle members, and one center. The Center, is always, and is invariably a Dra’Con... a were-dragon, and so to be raised from the Inner Circle to the center requires that certain... sacrifices be made.”

“Like what?”

“My identity.” At that he lowered his head and caressed the gem imbedded in his chest.

“My master brought me aside, and after trying my heart to see if I were worthy, I was force-fed training in dragon lore and dragon magic till this seed in me suddenly grew. It’s appearance was rather... painful, but it has strengthened me unlike nothing before. Sometimes I can feel it growing inside me, but in order to kick start it, I need to train and learn. The fastest way that I can learn is to defeat powerful opponents, especially those from different worlds. You posed a remarkable opportunity Rae, and I hope you don’t mind me having to use you for this.”

I stared at him, only half absorbing what he was saying, but I finally shook my head. “Why am I such an opportunity.”

“You are in perfect opposition to me. Cat versus Wolf, Male versus female, two powers of magical and martial arts completely alien from one another... there is a certain synergy there that my seed would feast off of. It would grow an exceptional amount if I were to defeat you, but even more so if, in the heat of battle, should I give it my all, that you Rae, defeat me.”

He looked at me, smiling that smile of his, a smile that I couldn’t help but warm up to, and in spite of myself, I found myself walking closer to his side. “Opposites attract, huh?” I mused, and then chuckled. “Can’t get much more opposite than the two of us.”

There was a moment or two of silence as we both contemplated that, and I thought, perhaps, that’s why Sage sought to challenge me.

The visitors and the students of the School were gathering now, filing in from the dormitories and the guest houses on all sides to take their seats in the stands even as the last of the mists wisped this way and that across the cobbles.

It’d be several hours yet before the competition would begin yet, and they were hoping to get good seats before anything would happen.

It was an awesome sight to see so many powered beings in one place.

In the pavilion set to one side of the fighting ring, the Emperor himself, who’d been selected to judge the competition, was even now taking his place in a throne that was transported here for him.

The box also held the headmistress, and several other dignitaries, along with the Emperor's guards and rangers positioned all about the box. Looking up to the box, I suddenly noticed that Sage had stopped; his form so able to move and stop moving with nary a sound. His eyes were focused on someone inside the box, and he turned to me long enough to excuse himself before he strode up to it.

Not being able to help my curiosity, I followed soon after, hurrying forward after him around the slightly raised arena floor the size of some sports fields – a hundred yards or more long and across – and strode right up to the top of the box.

“Ah, Lord Sage, *and* Rae Iksaki as well.” The emperor greeted, rising to his feet with his simple robes settling about him as he rose.

Sage inclined his head, still not bowing but showing enough respect to acknowledge the emperor's station. I on the other hand bowed right at the waist.

“Thank you for the greeting.” Sage said, but if you don't mind, I was hoping to speak with your escort...”

It was then that a figure rose from a slightly lowered ornate chair beside the throne, and a remarkably beautiful female Aphkian rose to stand beside the Emperor. I did a double take when I realized that it was Captain Leski.

I was stunned that such a person as Leski could pretty herself up like that. She was beautiful!

Her bodice was held firmly inside a bright white gown that rose to the peak of her neck, but was cut on the back low underneath her tail, which swished genially as she came to stand beside the Emperor.

I noted that one of her thigh socks appearing through a cut in one side of her gown and her bicep long white gloves were hiding bandages from her and Sage's fight yesterday.

“Yes, Lord Sage.” She greeted, and Sage bowed to her right at the waist.

Apparently his respect is greater for warriors than it is for emperors. *If only he could've fought the emperor himself, then he'd show the proper respect*, I mused with a half smile on my face.

“I know how important a Swordmaster's sword is,” he said as he approached, lifting his hands, to which they began to shine with a soft blue glow. “I am truly sorry for breaking it.”

Leski was quite surprised at this, but blinked quickly to recover her poise.

“It is quite all right, Lord Sage,” she said with a wry smile. “I am sure another can be forged for me... in another ten years or so... but in the mean time, I can get by with something less.”

“But that would be unacceptable,” Sage continued, and all of a sudden I felt a massive magical power surge, and a shattering of space occurred to open a hole in it, and through the hole, matter collected steadily to create a shadowy shape, before the finer motes appeared to shape into a magnificent blade that was nearly a total replica of the one Leski had used against Sage the night before. “So I made this for you.”

Leski was beyond surprise, as was the Emperor, and several people around us scoffed. *Surely he didn't just forge that out of thin air!* I heard myself think. Leski nonetheless reached forward and slid her hand across the blade's flat edge, her bare fingers peaking out of the ends of her gloves.

“It... It feels so warm! And soft, like felt, but its as hard as any steel I've ever felt. It's... it's like it has a heartbeat!”

“Because it does.” Sage said simply, and again everyone stared at him before he continued. “It took some doing trying to connive someone to allow me access to the archives. I had to have my house computer hack the rest of the way in, to which I am sorry for, your highness,” he addressed to the Emperor. “By the way, I have information to where your mainframe network security is vulnerable.

“It took some doing getting the schematics for this blade.”

“B-but those schematics are closely guarded royal secrets!” the Emperor exclaimed, almost dropping his drink.

“As they were, they were deeply imbedded within your central R & D mainframe. But whoever developed your network securities has left themselves a backdoor into every possible section on the network. Once the first door was decrypted in a low security region, where my house computer could spend his sweet old time doing it, all other doors opened up with little effort.”

At that moment the emperor did drop his drink. “Have my Chief of Information detained till my return on suspicion of treason and schedule a board of inquiry.” The Emperor stated with a calm air, but one could tell he was furious, and his aides went immediately into action, a couple hurrying off to carry out the physical portion of his orders.

“The Empire owes you a debt of thanks.” He said to Sage.

“I wouldn't be too hasty in judging your Information Officer. Any good Information or Technology Specialist always knows to build themselves a back door, cause they know that the people using the system occasionally make mistakes, and in those times, that said back door is the only way they can fix the problem.

“They should be made aware, however, that all backdoors should be guarded as if they were ultra-high security areas. A simple mistake, one that was thankfully caught before any irreparable damage could be made.”

The Emperor nodded at that but did not cancel his order just yet, but Sage nonetheless placed the blade into Leski's hands.

"It's lighter than my last one, but only just..."

"That would be the difference in the metals. The metallurgical super-composite that you used in your blades took far too long to process and reprocess. The metal I used instead is a metal that is actually grown... hence the reason why it has a heartbeat and," he raised a finger as if in warning. "A conscience."

She blinked at it.

"But, its metal is self repairing, and harder than the material you used before."

Leski wielded the blade like she normally would, and looked it up and down its entire length.

"It's several centimeters longer," she opened her hand at the pommel. "And there are some extra mechanisms in the pommel. What are they for?" she asked looking to Sage."

"Try them and see." He smiled, his eyes mimicking his humor.

Leski tried the first mechanism, and the pommel snapped forward as the blade snapped open, revealing a new handgrip as several mechanisms unfolded and even grew out of nowhere, revealing a sturdy beam emitter between the blades.

"Your standard multi-weapon array." Sage said simply, with a hand guard built specifically for your fingers.

"Again, I must apologize, but I was forced to scan you in order to get the fittings right."

"How did you fit all those mechanisms in there?" the Emperor stated, with grand interest in the weapon.

"A combination between something we Terans call Phase Technology, and my own private science of Bio-engineering."

Leski re-collapsed the blade. "I-I am overwhelmed, Lord Sage." She said quietly, still looking at such a gift.

"One final warning," Sage said. "Do not try to tamper with it. Trying to pry it open to work out its secrets or to force access into its core would be a big no-no.

"As I said, it is self-repairing, and stronger than the alloys that you were using in your own blades. Any attempt to break the balance of its internal workings would cause its reactor to go critical and detonate.

“Normal wear and tear will keep this from happening, and only heavy industrial equipment will be able to chip away at its defenses. Even then, it is quite durable.”

“Reactor?” Leski blinked and stared at him.

“Bio-ethereal energy. It is matter in a state of continuous flux between matter and raw uncontrolled energy. To give you an example, a simple insect suddenly transformed into energy would create a twelve mega-ton nuclear reaction. The cell in this is several hundred times larger and would create a quantum and subspace explosion if it were to detonate.”

Again, everyone stared at him, some of them slack-jawed. Leski just stared at the blade.

“I cannot say my gratitude, Lord Sage.” Leski admitted.

“It is yours. Nothing else needs be said, captain.” Sage bowed again. “Now if you’ll all excuse me, I will need to prepare for my first match...”

The fighters were all gathered practically shoulder to shoulder, a good dozen individuals, those who have rated high enough to compete. Lowering my gaze to the list of fighters, I read off the names of the individuals who’d be competing:

Mystic League

Illia Romov
Riikoa
Pleeyo

Powered League

Queen Chiuzo Kemono
King Makahn
Queen Qama

Demon League

Lord Gehnohn
Ghennal
Jasa’Kese

Unlimited League

Lord Sage Preypacer
Maka “Leopard”
Royal Dragoon Alkenphel

An amazing Line of talent, I considered.

Twelve individuals, three from each major league, with three others found ‘elsewhere.’ That was the Unlimited League. The ‘other’ clique.

By now everyone knew of Lord Sage, and even with standing in line with everyone, they were keeping their distance from this creature that stood nearly taller than everyone in the line. The only other individual, in whom the other fighters were showing that much respect to, was Gehnohn.

The tall, powerfully built female calling herself “Leopard” was another mystery. She walked in on the day of the tryouts, signed up, and more than amply proved her capabilities to everyone. Like Sage, she literally *destroyed* the sensor they all struck at. It’d taken them a bit to replace it for Sage, and he goes and destroys that one too.

Pity.

The final member on the list – Dragoon Alkenphel – was the Emperor’s champion. Another super soldier program, the Dragoon was selected from the most powerful of the Emperor’s holy knights, given the chance to volunteer, and then Modified on numerous and plentiful levels. Genetic, cybernetic, bio-engineered enhancements, gene-splicing... the list went on and on. The final result was a three meter tall creature that hummed with bio-mechanical enhancements, shaped like a miniature dragon, and glittering with an odd mix of chrome and chitin body armor. Headmistress Meniko sneered ever so briefly at him when he was introduced, but voiced no opinion in the presence of the Emperor.

But I knew that in her opinion, if it wasn’t born a dragon, it isn’t a dragon. Hence perhaps the reason why the Emperor used the term ‘Dragoon’ to describe him.

My eyes lifted again as I looked at the twelve hopefuls who wished to challenge me. All to my right was the Emperor, Leski, his aides, and behind us all, only due to her size, and resting comfortably on a large bed, was Meniko.

The fighters, as directed, came one at a time to a pair of the Imperial Priests, who held a bag between them filled with numbered balls. The fighter drew a ball, showed the number to everyone, and they were recorded on the chart showing how the fights would progress.

Once all had chosen their fight rankings, everything was ordered up like this:

Fight One: Ghennal –Vs- Royal Dragoon Alkenphel

Fight Two: Queen Chiuzo Kemono –VS- King Makahn

Fight Three: Illia Romov –VS- Lord Sage Preypacer

Fight Four: Pleeyo –VS- Queen Qama

Fight Five: Lord Gehnohn –VS- Jasa’Kese

Fight Six: Maka “Leopard” –VS- Riikoa

“Quite the Dossier.” Leski said from my side, clutching the haft and hand guard of her new sword as the final listings were made.

I nodded, seeing them all arrayed before me, knowing that whoever won all of these challengers would ultimately fight me.

“It is.” I nodded, picking Lord Sage out of them all as he stood there, head bowed, fingers pressed against one another, in an obvious display of meditation.

So calm, so poised and noble, blank of all bad emotion. All the others were primping and preening in some way or another, showing their superiority in some way or another. Even Gehnohn, who stood there unmoving with an air of superiority, arms folded against his chest and his chin lifted ever so slightly. I know he didn’t mean to do it, but it was an instinctive action that came with having grown so powerful like him.

I wondered just then if I ever did that...

Makahn was the one who was displaying himself the most, playing to the crowds, showing off his muscles, and just literally dripping with testosterone. I giggled at him, not knowing quite why I was attracted to him like I was, but he nonetheless made me laugh.

“Why are you laughing?” Leski asked, leaning over to speak into my ear.

“Makahn.” I answered quickly, covering my mouth with one hand.

“Oh.” She responded quickly, and the two of us laughed quietly together till a loudspeaker called out over the arena.

“Ladies and Gentle-creatures!” one of the priests called out through his microphone. “We have assembled here before you our universe’s greatest warriors, from all across the cosmos. Champions for you to take and call your own.

“From the four corners of the Cosmos do they come to fight for you, with the ultimate winner gaining the chance to fight Rae Iksaki, the recognized champion of this Arena per the decree of the Emperor, being that she has been recognized above all others to be the chieftess of strength and power.

“So sit back, and please... curtail all gambling while within the home of the Mystic League and everyone will come out as a winner.

“First up, shall be Ghennal of the Demon League versus the Royal Dragoon: Lord Alkenphel!”

The fighters who weren't fighting went to one edge opposite our royal stand across the combat arena to sit in a smaller stand to watch the first contestants. A Bio-mechanical monster of ultra-high technology stepped up onto the platform... positively dwarfing the much smaller Demon Ghennal.

Image © 2003 by DocWolph

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the Emperor watching all of this with interest as he sat back with his wine, one arm curling before his mouth as he focused on his 'champion' for this tournament.

Alkenphel was, from what I'd learned while the first fight was being prepared, a creation of the Emperor's late father. Jaikard, the present Emperor, amply did not like artificially enhanced warriors like Alkenphel, calling it a "false strength."



The only reason why he hadn't squashed the program when he heard of it was the fact that one of his proudest warriors had volunteered for the process and training to become a Dragoon. Jaikard, while we awaited the fight to start, explained in brief the process necessary to create a Dragoon.

"Firstly, they spend an entire *year* in a gene-splicing vat," he began. "Undergoing a truly monstrous transformation into a super hybrid, all the while his mind is being trained and processed via hypnosis.

"The subject is then removed from the vat, and undergoes retraining to get used to their new body. Just as the subject does get used to their new body, they are altered again with bio-genetic enhancements.

"Again they go through retraining before a final transformation comes in 'golemizing' the subject, transforming them into a cybered-up creature of heavy armor and technological enhancements. This is then enhanced by holy and magical implements, but even so, more than eighty percent of their body is displaced or replaced.

"The only point of that whole thing I demanded they change was the nutrient architecture of chemical enhancements to be changed from artificial drugs to natural enzymes and hormones. Something that actually defied their original architecture and enhanced the design, I am proud to

say.” He finished then, proud that his philosophy of natural strengths was once again proved all the better.

This was Alkenphel’s testing grounds, to see how he would fair amongst the universe’s most potent warriors.

I honestly did not expect him to get too far myself.

At last Ghennal and Alkenphel squared up before one another, and the priest referee came in between them, point at first one of them to see if they were ready, and then to the other. Ghennal, however, scantily clad in only a simple waistband and loincloth to cover himself, began making gestures toward Alkenphel. Squeezing his hands noticeably, a throat slitting gesture with one finger, pointing at Alkenphel and then pointing at the mat.

He then squared himself up, grinning maliciously and glowing with demonic power, readying himself to fight, finally nodding to the priest that he was ready.

The priest dropped his hand, and cheering went into a cacophony of an uproar, and Ghennal immediately began to charge his power.

Alkenphel simply stood there, completely still, watching this display.

Ghennal’s power levels were already creating a tremor in the air and ground, one that I could feel in my bones and under my feet, at last coming to a climax and surrounding him in a pillar of red-black fire.

“You’re going down machine thing!” he called out, and began laughing in a way that would make the hairs on the back of anyone’s neck stand on end.

But then I blinked, and Alkenphel had moved, his body having lunged forward, being carried forth on a pillar of flame from a plethora of booster-jets and afterburners attached to his back, one of his massive armored hands curling into a fist even as it was brought down on Ghennal’s body. The force of the titanic blow shattered the air with the strike of a thunderbolt, a flash of red, black, and white energy crackling like a massive sphere with the strike, slamming Ghennal straight to the floor... his aura of dark flame dissipating moments after crumpling to the great mat.

There was silence in the crowds for a moment as everyone tried to process this information, but Jaikard was already sitting bolt upright with surprise. As was Leski and myself. And then the tumult broke loose again as everyone cheered the victor, and the massive war machine, his flight pack folding up once again at his back, bent forward and pressing his hands together and pushing his clasped hands to his face, knelt and bowed to his emperor, before another pair of hands and arms detached from his chest and splayed off to his sides.

“This is most unprecedented, ladies and gentle-creatures!” The announcer said into the loudspeakers. “Our first challenger, an unknown, and the pride of the Empire, defeats his opponent by a swift knock-out, it’s Royal Dragoon: Lord Alkenphel!!”

The cheers rose again to a new tumult.

“For my emperor!” Alkenphel called out before moving to take his place amongst the warriors, while healers came in with a stretcher to pick up Ghennal from the mat.

“Leski.” Jaikard said suddenly, and the fair captain immediately rose despite her frill and white gown. “Yes sir!”

“Leski.” He said again, softly now as he took her hand. “Please sit. You are very becoming of an officer, but that is not your function right now.” Abashed, Leski sat, remembering herself.

“Yes, my emperor?” she said pleasingly this time.

“What do you think of our new Dragoon?” he asked, and I heard Meniko sniff as if smelling something foul behind me. I giggled under my breath.

“I... read his specifications, my Emperor. In case I needed to ever work with him. He was built with an impressive contingent of abilities and weapons that places him as an enormous threat level for conventional warfare, and right now he has just defeated a mid-level member of the Demon League.

“I will not hide my contempt for the Demons, my Emperor, but if he can act so as to easily defeat an opponent such as that, then I would not hesitate to accept him on my team.”

The Emperor nodded, and then lifted a hand and snapped his fingers. One of his psychic aides approached and leaned close. “Send word to Research and Development: they have my go ahead to search for new possibilities for eight more members for the Dragoon project, but are not, I repeat *NOT* to go ahead in creating more Dragoons. Nor are they to confront these individuals. Only a list.

“I want to see how Alkenphel does.”

“Understood, my Emperor.” The aide whispered softly and then retreated, going to her partner and the two of them immediately starting up a psychic communiqué to speak to their counterparts still at the Imperial home world to relay the emperor’s wishes.

“Psychic waves... proven to be faster than a subspace message.” The Emperor winked as I looked at the pair of psychics holding hands behind him.

Dragoon Alkenphel was already leaving the ring, and the unconscious Ghennal being hauled off.

The next two contestants then entered the ring.

I sat up a little straighter in my seat as I watched Makahn take his position, opposite of a death-dealing Hare by the name of Chiuzo Kemono. Both were from the Powered League, both were impeccably strong.

Again, two competitors squared off with one another, the announcer explaining the simple rules. Knock your opponent out, make them cry mercy or tap out, or throw them from the ring. There would be no killing under any circumstances. Anyone who caused a death, accidental or otherwise, would immediately be disqualified, and a hearing held after the tournament to discern if it was done intentionally or not. Though with this bunch, even with the Demons, there probably would be none of that.

Kemono and Makahn bowed to one another and then set themselves against one another in combat once the priest referee had begun the fight. The two rapidly closed to melee and began to pummel one another, with Kemono rapidly gaining the advantage. Her martial arts were quicker, and Makahn was immediately on the defensive so much so that he was quickly pushed backward till he stopped at the fighting mat's edge, now in danger of being thrown off.

I gritted my teeth, taking in a sharp intake of breath, hoping that Makahn wasn't eliminated so quickly or easily. Makahn set himself, getting a beating as he tried deflecting blows. But then he forced himself forward, and began to retaliate, every five of Kemono's strikes being met with one his, till the time between each of his strikes grew shorter and shorter as he learned Kemono's style and adapted. Till at last he was matching her blow for blow.

The fight came back to the center of the ring, and evolved into an aerial combat of flips, kicks and summersaults.

Then, for a short while, it looked as if Makahn was getting the upper hand, till Kemono deflected one of his blows and hammered into him, ending the last blow with a double fisted strike upside his head.

The crowd gasped as Makahn went down to the mat, and the referee was there immediately, beginning to count Makahn out. I ground my fingers into the arm rest of my chair, watching him lay there, my stomach working in knots, with Kemono bouncing from one foot to the other nearby with a smirk on her face. But then Makahn twitched, and slowly lifted himself, coiling over his own body as he lifted his head up to Kemono, his eyes narrowing darkly as he looked at her.

Kemono screamed and launched herself at Makahn, but with the speed of a striking serpent that he'd held back up until now, Makahn thrust his whole body upward and toward her, his mouth opening to bite her directly about the throat and clamp down hard. He shook her fiercely from side to side and then bent himself up and over, flinging her body up and over his head to thrust her to the mat. Kemono had absolutely no time to react as Makahn then came down immediately and thrust his elbow into her face.

The mat actually caved in beneath her head as she was driven into it.

An almost sinister laugh escaped Makahn's throat while he rose to stand over her, the ref checking her for life signs, and then surged in to raise Makahn's hand above his head to declare him the victor.

"Ooo... Brutal." Jaikard mused. "I'm glad he's on our side. I must admit that was a very unorthodox throw he just used there. And quite bloody..."

"T-that's how he fights." I said, watching my loved one prance off the canvas as a repair bot scuttled in after the meds removed Kemono from the mat so that the robot could repair the damage.

I was watching Makahn as he moved right up to Lord Sage while he sat in mute meditation. "Hey! You're in my seat, outlander!" Makahn stated aloud for all to hear.

Sage did not move.

"I said MOVE!" He yelled, getting in very close to Sage's face, but Sage did little more than to open his eyes, and stare that pupilless stare of his directly into Makahn's face; looking rather annoyed at that moment. Other than that, Sage did not move.

"Fine! Stay there for all I care!" And Makahn stormed off to go sit as far away from Sage as he could.

Sage's eyes simply closed again, and his face became placid as quickly as his annoyance had risen. And then, with the mat repaired, the priest referee moved out onto the mat again.

"Fight three ready! Next up... Illia Romov versus Lord Sage!"

Fight Two: Lord Sage versus Illia Romov

Lord Sage uncurled from his position and walked quietly forward. Illia bounded from her seat and vaulted onto the mat, taking her position while blowing kisses to everyone. She was giggling and laughing, waving to everyone and the cheers they gave her, but a good deal of the eyes were currently on Sage. To someone who could overcome Pleeeyo – twice – at her own game, was someone who demanded respect. He'd shattered her defenses and laid her down with a single strike. He'd been one of six individuals to break the shell around Meniko's Seed. He'd beaten Makahn at his own game of gravity training. On top of it all, he'd bested one of the most talented swordmasters in existence. Now, everyone hushed as he took his place, a placid expression on his face as he stared at the bouncing Illia.

"Yay!" one could hear her from her place on the mat, and Sage simply stood there, waiting patiently for her to take her place.

“Our third bout for the day,” The priest referee began. “Will be Illia Romov of the Mystic League, and Lord Sage of the Unlimited League. This promises to be a battle to remember. Watch tight folks, you’re about to get an eye full!”

And the ref pointed toward Illia, who stopped her bouncing and took her position, bowing quickly like the massive ball of energy that she was. The ref then pointed to Sage and he returned her bow, making sure to keep his gaze on her the whole time.

“He’s a dedicated warrior.” I heard Leski say beside me. “He never takes his eyes off his opponent. How do you think Illia will fare?”

“She’ll smother him to death with hugs.” I said with a wry smile, Sage righting himself before limbering himself up by cracking his neck first in one direction and then the next.

The referee stood between the two, his hand between them, looking first to one and then the next as they took up their own fighting stances. Sage uncoiled from his rigid position, positively loose and fluid now as he turned his side to her. I noticed then, that Sage chooses a different side to face to his opponents every time he fights, and I said as such to Leski.

“A versatile fighter.” She said after a brief nod. “It makes him unpredictable; his form varies depending upon the fight. I’ve known only one person to ever do that.”

“Who?” I asked, in earnest.

“Her Great Grandmother, Colonel Leski, and a member of the Death Machines.” Jaikard supplied. “Her fighting style depends upon the moment not how she trained herself in life. Always said that habit breeds in error, and error in a battle means death.”

I nodded, turning my attention back to the fight, just as the referee lowered his hand and got *The Hell* out of the way! The past two battles were enough for him to know not to get between any of these hyper endowed fighters.

Immediately Sage rose up onto the balls of his feet, his tail working for balance, and he skipped forward closing the distance some. Illia bounded forward as if she’d expected that, grabbed Sage by the head and flipped him up over her body like a rag doll and slammed him right into the mat, grinding his head into it before pulling him back up and repeating the process. She then quickly pulled him into the massive expanse of her chest and began hugging him, her powerful arms closing in around his spine as he cried out with the pain of it all.

“Oh you’re just so cuddly and warm, I want to just hug and hug and hug you all day!” Illia called, and there was some laughter in the crowds.

It looked as if all the hype about Lord Sage was premature. And if he couldn’t defeat Illia, what hope did he have with me? In spite of myself I smirked at Sage.

But Sage gritted his teeth, snarling at Illia as she nuzzled him, and his arms bent at the elbows, and his clawed hands dug into her sides, pinching the nerve bundles there while breaking the skin, and Illia's grip relaxed as she cried out with a sharp yelp of pain. Sage's leg rose and put a bracer between he and she so that she couldn't pull him into her powerful bear-hug again. Sage's hands then moved to the undersides of her arms, to where a pair of massive triceps was, and he repeated the process there, pinching off another pair of nerve bundle with his clawed fingers and forcing her arms to open all the way to release him. The moment he was free, his body twisted and his free dangling foot came in from no where and struck her square in the temple, launching her straight to the mat.

Sage fell down with her, landing with his knee jamming into her solar plexus, a move that on a much weaker opponent would've crushed their lungs. Then pinning the much larger female down like this, he began whaling on her face with one knuckle outstretched beyond the rest of his fingers to rap her on key points about her skull. Temple, temple, nasal ridge, eye socket, temple... and then Illia's hand lifted and caught his hand, her fingers squeezing them.

"Ow! That hurts!" she said in her usual happy tone, lifting the index finger of her spare hand and wagging it at him as a no-no. "I'm going to have to spank you now."

Illia rolled forward, thrusting her arm outward while still holding his fist locked within her fingers. She then pulled him back as she rose, and her fist came soaring straight for his face, but he rolled out of the punch, and likewise rolled his hand out of her fist, but Illia recovered faster. Catching Sage by the throat, she lifted him up and slammed him onto the mat before falling back on him. Then holding his head within one massive arm and tit, with the rest of her body laying on his back, several tons worth, she began to spank that tight behind of his.

Sage endured only a few seconds of this indignity, the crowd laughing at him, before his own thick arm swung upward, hooked its way up over her head, before he swung his hand rapidly forward into her throat. Illia lowered her chin enough to soften the blow, but it still bruised her windpipe, and she was sent into a series of choking fits as she rolled off Sage.

Ample enough time for him to get to his feet.

The crowd was cheering and hollering now, and I was sitting on the edge of my seat along with Leski and Jaikard, my hands gripping the edges of my chair again like I'd done when Makahn was fighting. Sage walked around Illia even as she was getting up, and knotting a hand into the collar of her shirt, jerked her up suddenly up over his head, and on the way down, he caught the stubby end of her tail, and with both hands drove her face-first like a javelin straight into the mat, knocking a hole in the mat the size of her head. The entire crowd did a collective wince, and shortly thereafter some began to boo and hiss Sage. But then the hissing turned into cheers again as Illia braced her body, and with two great jerks freed her head from the solid concrete and wood beneath the mat, straightened herself, and with a happy smile, grabbed Sage by the head again.

She repeated her first move to him, slamming his body repeatedly into the mat before Sage reacted, his hands lifting to send a double knuckle-punch to the nerve endings in her forearm to

release her grip on him, but when she opened her hand in a wince, she simply pivoted, grabbed him instead by the tail, slammed him into the mat a couple more times, and then threw him away like a used rag doll.

Sage landed on the far corner of the mat, bounced, and then struck one of the massive pillars of stone surrounding the mat. The resulting force shattered the pillar, and its full weight cascaded down on him.

The whole crowd, including those of us in the box, all rose from our seats and surged in the direction where Sage had stuck.

“Ring out? Is it a Ring out?” Leski said immediately. And in answer to the question, the ref was there, already counting Sage out.

“One... Two... three...”

Illia took this as a win, and began jumping up and down, playing to the love in the crowd, love to which she seemed to feed off of. Perhaps that was her power that she kept speaking of... and to, as if it was another person inside her.

“Four... Five... Six...”

“Yay! I’m the greatest!” she cried, giving the victory sign.

“Seven...” and then the Ref stopped as several chunks of marble slate and concrete tumbled out of the way, and a clawed hand lifted to push off one of the larger slabs as a body rose.

I covered my hands with my mouth as Sage arose, battered for sure as his two hands pushed away two separate massive slabs of stone that were trapping him. And then his eyes opened, and the emerald green immediately changed into bloody red.

I bit my lip, already having seen that look in Sage’s eyes before as he showed his anger the other day to Meniko, having struck her so hard that it knocked her straight to the ground. He was breathing heavily, panting it seemed, and right before my eyes I saw all his wounds healing, bruises fading, cuts sealing themselves, and a misshapen bash against his face realigning itself.

And then a black haze arose about his body, and even as he finished healing, Sage began to grow. Muscle piled on top of muscle, his back spreading while his chest flared and pushed outward, his arms and legs lengthened and doubled in thickness – all in muscle – as his neck lengthened and pushed his head forward.

His black sleeveless shirt tore about him, while his usually baggy pants slid up his legs and tightened like a second skin. His face pushed forward into a snarling muzzle, his black lips curling backward to show lengthening teeth that all overlapped one another, all hooking inward. His brow furrowed forward then as he leaned forward to his feet and one hand against the mat before leaping upward.

Illia took notice then that people were not cheering, and in fact, they were all looking up. Her moment of confusion was masked only by a comical look of surprise as a massive; thundering lunge in the mat forced a wide-eyed expression from her as Sage landed behind her, a leap nearly the entire length of the mat. A jump that was nearly one hundred yards long. But even that might, may only be a small hop to this... this *beast* he's become.

Sage righted himself, and for the first time we got a size comparison of this altered form and Illia, and where Illia had once towered over him, Sage now stood head, neck, chest and shoulders above Illia atop his elongated feet and widely spread toes.

Illia turned fully around and stepped back with a gasp at this sight, Sage snarling at her growling as he grinned and drew his lower jaw from one side to the other so that his teeth clicked while they ground against one another.

Illia then half turned to get further away before Sage's much longer arm lashed out and grabbed her by the head like she had done twice already to him. But instead of slamming her into the mat, his long claws dug into the flesh surrounding her skull as he held her entire body aloft off the ground at arms-length, Illia trying desperately to strike a nerve bundle to release his grip like he'd done with her but to no avail.

There was a gasp as Sage's hand tensed, tightly about her head, and several segmented rings appeared about his bicep in several different colors, the rings turning in opposition to one another like gears before the three ring stopped and snapped backward into one multi-colored ring. The ring then began to spin blindingly fast, shining a brilliant white there for a moment. Sage then clenched his hand more, and there was an audible crack from Illia's skull that made people wince – including me – before that ring shot down the length of his arm and stuck Illia in the face.

The sound was like a poorly made gong that rung like a dropped cooking pan for making cookies, and Illia's whole body spasmed with the blow. The ring withdrew, paused and then slammed into her face again with the same clamorous sound. There were screams as a splatter of blood erupted from underneath Sage's palm, and the ring drew back again. Again the ring slammed into Illia's face, and again, and again, each blow coming faster and faster till one final blow it withdrew, spun faster and faster till it turned ultra violet, and then when it slammed into her face, even Sage's titanic grip couldn't hold onto the bloodied flesh.

Illia was sent sprawling backward, bouncing against the mat once, and then twice before skidding to a halt. She tried to get up, but Sage was already moving, leaping at the nearest pillar, and then righting himself there, leaped at another, and then another, and from a height of several stories up, fell down on top of her, driving his elbow into her back.

Illia was driven straight into the mat with an impact creator denting the mat around her before Sage lifted his elbow and hit her in the back of the head once more and then twice more again. He flipped up and skipped back, standing there on those long feet; his chest heaving with the sound of a bellows.

“Stay down Illia. Please stay down.” I whispered.

But Illia would not stay down. One of her arms lifted to plant itself against the mat, and then the other as she slowly righted herself, rivulets of blood falling from gouges in her eviscerated face, from her nose and mouth.

“Oh... I don’t feel so good now. You hurt me big kitty. I’m going to have to punish you now.”

But punishment was not something Sage was about to allow. He stepped up to her, and clenched his thick hand about her neck, cutting off blood and air both while paralyzing all of her voluntary nerve impulses. Her body hung like a limp noodle.

Sage began taking a deep breath, and I felt something... felt it deep within my navel, my heart expecting and dreading what was approaching, and the world around us darkened as if a partial eclipse had decided to happen just then.

It chilled me.

Sage’s brilliant white fur turned into shadow, while his obsidian stripes turned bright white. A dark power began to well up inside Sage, an ancient darkness, and ancient shadowy power usually reserved for ancient evils like Greater Demons. Not even Gehnohn has yet to reproduce the feeling of releasing such a power. Sage continued to take a deep breath, his body swelling as his eyes shone red with this dark power.

Then his mouth opened, and he screamed at her.

“SkreeeeeeeeEEeeeeEEEEeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEe.....e.....e.....” the first part rapidly rising beyond even our acute hearing, and then the sound shifted. “**SHAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRR.**” And I actually covered my ears as my head spun with all sorts of dark images. The sound was maddening, like roaring thunder, mixed with a thunder lizard’s hunting roar on top of a bird of prey’s cry. And there were other roars in there, all sorts of cries and evil yells that screeched and rumbled into a maddening cacophony.

The inside of Sage’s mouth was a pit of fire, his whole body a tumultuous bonfire of shadow and light.

It went on and on, tearing through the heart, pulling up your nightmares, your fears, forced you to relive your deepest, darkest memories that you’d chosen to block out.

Children were crying, there were screams within the crowd, and with all these reactions, I managed to open my eyes and look through the haze of dark memories at Illia, who was bearing the full force of that terrible cry.

Sage’s voice ended, finally, but the cry still echoed throughout the entirety of the makeshift stadium for several long seconds, before the world returned to normal and the light came back. Sage’s body reverted to normal then; normal in coloring and in form as he shrunk back to

normal, his grip releasing Illia as he righted himself. Then ponderously, her eyes wide with her pupils as small as pinpricks, Illia fell over, falling against the mat to land in a crumpled lump.

“Referee...” Sage said in the relative silence. The only other sounds are crying children. The referee jerked awake and approached, but still remained well outside Sage’s arm reach. “Do your duty.” He finished simply without looking at him, and he waits as the priest referee counted Illia out, the referee forgetting a couple times what number comes after what.

“Ten.” He says at last, matter-of-factly in a quavering voice, and then slowly looks up at Sage. “Lord Sage is... the winner.”

Only then did Sage move forward, kneeling as he put his arms beneath Illia’s body and lifted her up. Then cradling her, he turned and stepped over to the edge of the mat, hopping down and facing the paramedics, who all backed away from him and Illia.

“Where is the medical center.” He asked quietly, calmly, his eyes having returned to their soft emerald green.

All they could do was point as one to the Medical Wing. Sage then turned without another word and walked off in that direction.

“Illia.” I gasped, and hopped forward, forgetting to bow away from the Emperor before I left in my effort to follow Sage and Illia, the only thought in my mind as to what in the Heavens Sage had *done to her!*

Behind me, the only activity was that of the repair drones repairing the battle arena for the next match.

Sage was just exiting the medical wing as I approached, with even his clothing mending themselves now like the wounds on his body had, his black shirt reforming out of some black goo to cover his upper torso and the dark green gem in his chest.

I slowed and stopped, staring at him as he watched me, calm and demure as always. One of his ears swiveled forward so as to hear whatever I might want to say. When he blinked, an inner eyelid slid over his eyes and back again.

I took a hesitant step forward, still staring at him.

“What... *happened?*” I said in an angry sounding whisper.

“A touch of darkness. A breath of shadow unlocking said darkness found within the hearts of all who hear the *Terror Cry.*”

“The what?” I breathed, feeling a little panicky for some reason. I’d meant this to be a calm conversation.

“A dark gift I... *procured*’ from my shadow. One usually reserved for ancient evils and powerful demons. It reaches into the heart and soul, and unlocks the darkness within it. The experiences all the way since an individual’s birth is brought back and forced upon them, and they experience all the fear they’ve ever felt in their life all at once.

“A childhood fear of the dark, fear of lightning, claustrophobia, experiences of near-death and disorder... all come rushing on you all at once.”

I gasped.

“But to hear the cry of darkness is not enough. One must also see the *Face* of Darkness as well.”

“But... I am worried...” he turned to look at the door he’d just come out of. “She didn’t react as she should have.”

“And how *should* she have reacted?!” I cried, raising my voice, my body lighting dimly with my own tremendous power as it rose within me on instinct.

“She should’ve come out of it by now...”

His words found my rational brain somewhere behind my instincts for fighting and reasoned with it. *Something went wrong*, I thought, and my power dropped immediately.

Just then the door exploded open and Noxi stormed out of it, found Sage and launched herself at him, hammering his chest and face with her hands.

“How could you?! How could you?!” she repeated over and over, and though she was physically more powerful than any member of her race, against Sage her blows were little more than baby taps.

Sage caught her hands and shook her. “What? What happened?!” Sage demanded.

Noxi was crying, and lanced a pointed finger back toward the medical wing. “You’ve... you’ve left her a mindless *vegetable!*!” she screeched and struggled to strike him some more, giving up on her arms as she started to kick at him with her much more powerful legs.

For the first time, I saw an emotion other than calm, and anger in Sage’s face, and his expression transformed into a look of horror.

Sage forced Noxi to sit on a landscaping awning and then lunged forward, jerking the door open, forcing it to slide into its wall before surging inside with me close behind to a dimly lit room with row upon row of medical beds.

At the far end, with a light shining on her, Illia laid still, staring unblinkingly up at the light. The two of us rushed to her.

Once there, Sage looked down at her, lifting one of her hands and then dropping it, to where it landed with a thump beside her. He then waved his hand before her eyes, before retrieving a small flashlight and shining them into each eye.

“No response. No response whatsoever. This isn’t catatonia... if it were then her arm would’ve remained where I placed it instead of dropping to the bed. It’s like her mind is completely shut off.”

Noxi came in, covering her mouth with both hands, tears streaming in her face while Sage used the medical tools with professional precision. And then giving up on the tools, he pressed his hands to her temples and nasal ridge, his head bowing as he closed his eyes for a second before releasing his touch and taking a step back.

“Dear God... what have I done?” He then looked at Noxi and me. “I do not have time to explain. Round up every psychic in this school, I do not care how strong or weak their abilities are, get them here immediately!”

I hesitated only briefly at the ludicrous nature of this request, but Sage had gone back to placing his fingers against Illia’s temples, and Noxi and I went to round up every Psychic we could.

Only half a dozen were able to join us in the Medical Wing. Even Meniko forwent her usual powerful draconic form to choose something smaller and more humanoid to join them there. The Emperor’s own Psychic aides likewise joined us, among a handful of other telepaths and Empaths like Noxi.

“The *Terror Cry* I let loose is a power that brings forth the darkest fears in a person since the time of their birth and forces them to relive it all at once.” Sage was explaining to all those gathered, who hadn’t yet heard his explanation of the power yet. Behind them, with regular medical technicians working on Illia’s body, all those gathered were about to simultaneously work on Illia’s mind. “Most warriors who I’ve faced have a psyche that is generally made to resist fear tactics and spell-like powers like mine. Theirs are psyche’s that are complete and intact.

“Illia, however, was a schizophrenic.”

“Her psyche was incomplete and fragmented into at least three segments. Her core personality had fragmented, with her super ego taking over the internal personality of her “power,” as I’m sure you’ve heard her reference it, with the portion of the mind that deals with pain, sorrow and fear suppressed deep, deep inside her. Without this last portion of her mind active, when the *Terror Cry* was released on her, and she was *forced* to feel all her fears, she had nothing in her personality that could cope with it.”

“So her mind shut down.” One of the Emperor’s psychics supplied.

Sage nodded. “And it’s not reactivating. There is also a mental block inside her head that comes from two parts. The first is the fact that with her mind forced to feel all those fears at once, it has shattered. Her ID, her super ego and ego, her varying personalities and her subconscious all now act separately. There are over a hundred different voices in her head.

“The second block is a mental barrier that has somehow formed right where the spinal chord meets with the brain. There is a psychic blockage there which is shutting off all voluntary nerve impulses to the rest of her body.”

“Great Maker...” one of the student psychics breathed. “How do we fix something like that?!”

“How *can* we fix something like that?” another asked. “We don’t have the technology. We don’t have the skills! Oh Poor Illia...”

“Calm yourself. I’ve placed a neural dampener on her, which will keep her state from deteriorating any further.”

“A neural what’s-it?” another asked.

“A piece of technology from my home world. But that’s not important. What we will be doing is what my home world calls a ‘Psychic Surgery.’” There was a tittering amongst everyone present. I stood in one corner and just listened, holding onto Makahn who’d come to comfort me. “The reason why you’ve all been summoned is because the grade of deterioration of her psyche is immense. I will need your help.

“Now the Empaths and the lesser Psionics will go about the task of shepherders. You will gather her various psyche’s together, with one of the more powerful psychics here – you Meniko – will act to corral them all in.

“She knows and trusts you, Meniko. So shall the fragments.”

“The mental blocks will need to be unlocked at the same time her persona is repaired. The unlocking of the blocks and the merging of the persona I will direct the two of you,” he nodded to the Emperor’s joint psychics. “Because you work psychically as a pair, and can act as one mind in two places with greater ease than I can.”

“And what will you be doing, Lord Sage?” Meniko asked with a bit of acidity in her voice. Sage lifted his gaze to look at her.

“I will be producing the conduit and the power source for all of us to enter her mind, headmistress, as well as the direction in order to repair her shattered psyche. Probing her mind with a psychic knife to repair the damage is a very difficult thing to do, and something I do not trust with the untrained.”

Meniko simply nodded in return to his answer.

“Now, all of us, whatever feelings you have for another – be it good or ill – must be forgotten. We must work as a professional coherent team or Illia’s mind may be lost forever. Do you all understand?”

They all nodded.

“Good... then come with me.”

I felt a strange, alien power unknown to me being activated as Sage laid one hand on Illia’s forehead, which had been braced to immobility by a pair of pads to either side of her head. A sparkling blue-green spire erupted out of the back of Sage’s second and third knuckles as all the other members of the psychic team touched Sage in one way or another. Sage then plunged the knife into Illia’s cranium, and I gave off a small cry, half expecting a spurt of blood to erupt from that point. But the knife passed through fur, flesh and skull and into her brain without any cuts whatsoever.

Makahn embraced me, keeping me warm from the chill I felt in the pit of my stomach as they worked on her, trying to repair already present damage made worse by Sage’s actions.

For her fear suppression defenses to have been rendered inactive like that would mean that somewhere in Illia’s past she’d encountered something so incredibly frightening, that the remembrance of the thing pushed her ability to even *feel* fear deep, deep inside her.

Sage’s explanation of her being a schizophrenic made sense now.

Often she’d be found talking to herself or to an invisible friend, and whenever she was asked who she was talking to, she would always respond “To ‘my power.’” And the fact that the only emotion she could truly experience was joy only reinforced the idea.

What happened to her that would make her mind fragment like that? I wondered.

The tournament continued outside, with the other three fights finishing themselves after everyone had a chance to recover from Illia and Sage’s fight. Emperor Jaikard and Leski remained to watch over it till this round of fighting was complete before coming to watch this strange surgery.

Sage, Meniko, Noxi and all the others were still at it, even hours later. Some of them were showing definite signs of weakening. Sage’s legs were beginning to sag.

“How goes?” Jaikard asked, handing me some tea.

I explained to him what they were doing; he standing looking down at them from the observation booth above where they were working.

The medical technicians had done repairing Illia's body long ago. All that we were waiting for was news from one of the members of the Psychic surgery.

An hour later, some of the lesser psychics were collapsing. I felt my heart wrench when the first one collapsed, and then rend straight out of my chest when the second one did. Sage himself was struggling to remain upright.

But then he removed his fist suddenly with a flash of blue green light, and everyone broke contact.

Illia blinked and opened her eyes once, her pupils dilating rapidly open as she gasped, and began to lurch about in her restraints before Sage released them. Illia immediately began to bawl, hugging herself closely rocking herself gently and endlessly repeating: "Oh sister... oh sister, sister, sister. What have I done?!" amidst her bawling.

"I didn't know Illia had a sister." Makahn said quietly behind me as he grasped my shoulders.

"Neither did I..." I admitted, and just stared at her...

Meniko was staying with Illia, holding her while she cried out her tears. Jaikard and Leski were looking after their psychics, and all the other psychic students had chosen different medical beds to sleep off their ordeal. Even Noxi.

"I've never felt so exhausted." She admitted.

"But what about Sage?" I asked suddenly, out of earshot from Makahn as he tucked in one of the younger psychic members of the League. This gentle version of him was a face so few saw, and one I usually only saw in private.

"Is-isn't he here?" Noxi asked, looking around her at all the beds.

"I saw him leave." Leski said and pointed toward the door. "Right out that way. Went walking by like a walking zombie. He looked like he was bleeding too."

"Bleeding?" I repeated, and then hurried away after him, seeing Makahn watch me leave out of the corner of one eye.

I found Sage just outside, catching his breath on the edge of one of the landscaping awnings, cupping his nose with one hand.

"Oh, Rae. Hello." He greeted weakly. It was an effort for him to even keep his eyes open.

“What happened?” I asked quietly, letting the sliding door close shut behind me.

“It was a success.” He said, and I felt my heart leap inside me at his words. “Though...” he began again, and I felt my heart sink again. “Though she has reverted to a small child’s psyche. One of the removed mental blocks was a virtual dam of dark fears that she has yet to feel. They are assailing her one after the other, forcing her to feel each and every last one.”

“But this time, Meniko’s there with her.” I said and sat down beside him, taking his free hand with both of mine.

Sage nodded. “Meniko appears very early in Illia’s consciousness. She sees her almost as much of a mother as her own mother. The problem is, is that she has the mind of a child now, though I surmise that that mind will slowly evolve to where it was before this... experience as all her memories are reintegrated.”

“And what happens when she comes back to this fight and hears that terror cry again?”

Sage pinched his nostrils shut with his hand and stared at the ground.

“That... is nothing compared to the hurt she’s just felt.” I heard him say, and my mouth went dry.

“Wh-what did you find?”

“A memory... of an accident she faced, and the biggest fear we found trapped inside her head. In comparison to the Terror Cry...” Sage shook his head, and when he opened his green eyes again, they sparkled with the gathering of tears.

“What happened?” I breathed. “I-is it, about her sister?”

Sage looked at me solemnly. “You will eventually find out, so I shall tell you. But bear in mind that you should never mention it to her. She must be ready to reveal it. Do not lead on that you know, and do not state that you did know when she tells it.”

I nodded.

“Illia... had a baby sister. A couple years younger than she. Illia, however, has been born with a trait that seems to be fairly common in this universe, that of being able to translate personal internal energies and transform it into raw physical might upon instinct. With Illia, as you know, this is a profound talent, but until coming here, uncontrollable.”

“Yes, she’s told me that she’s gone on rampages she couldn’t account for, but no one’s ever been killed.”

He shook his head. “Yes... there has been one, single death...”

I thought about this for a moment and then gasped, and covered my mouth as I gasped again at the thought. “Her sister.” I breathed, and I gasped a third time as Sage nodded. This time, tears actually *did* leak out of those green eyes.

“She so dearly loved her sister.” He breathed; the tragedy of it all striking even him to the core. He closed his eyes, squeezing out the last bit of his tears and was silent for a time. “I must go.” He said then and then rose, removing his hand from his nose.

Image © 2003 by DocWolph



“But Sage, you’re in no condition to...”

“I’ll be f..fine...” he began, but then I saw why he’d been plugging his nose as two trickles of crimson red blood leaked out of either nostril. His last word escaped from him in a weak breath as he fell forward, landing on the solid concrete and then moved one last time, his claws scraping the Earth.

“Oh Great Maker...” I said, and rushed to his side. “You are in no condition to be walking out here alone.” I finished my earlier words and helped him up. More blood

was escaping from his nose and he quickly plugged them up again.

“Mental... strain was more than I th-thought.” He managed, and actually allowed me to haul his arm across my shoulders. “Need to get to my chambers. D-Dallas... Dallas has the medicines I need.” And he slumped more against me.

The night air was cool, and all the moons were up and shining their fullest now. I half drug Sage all the way across the compound to his rooms and pounded heavily on the glyph-engraved door. “Master Daedalus! Master Daedalus! Please open up!” I cried.

Daedalus emerged from the glyphs in the door. He took one look at Sage and the gasped. “Lady Iksaki... please! Come in immediately!” He faded quickly back into the door and the door was thrown open. He was just inside to help me with Sage. “This way, please.” He said, the door closing behind me as he took Sage’s feet.

Dallas led me down the short hallway to the arboretum, and we circled around the walkway around the island to one of the side rooms. There the door opened before we arrived, and we entered what I could only assume was Sage's bedchambers.

"Help me lay him there." Dallas indicated and the two of us placed him in bed.

I immediately began undressing him before I knew what I was doing, managing to get his series of loincloths off and his shirt before I realized what I was doing, my fingers on the drawstrings of his pants.

I released my hold on them just as Dallas arrived with a small vial that he procured from somewhere, and holding Sage's head up, cracked the top open and let the vapors waft their way under his nose.

"What's that?" I asked as the vapor filled Sage's nostrils.

"PSI-Medicine." He said simply. "When a psychic overtaxes themselves, they risk suffering aneurisms and worse. This repairs the capillaries inside his head, reduces some of the strain, and restores some of the lost psychic energy he cannibalized from himself.

"There, that out to do it." He said as the last of the vapor slid into Sage's head and he slipped off toward sleep.

Dallas then covered him up in the layers of blankets, and then went to a closet to add more blankets over him. "The serum lowers his body temperature, an unfortunate side affect." Dallas explained. "But he should be restored by morning." The apparition then turned to me. "May I get anything for you then, Lady Iksaki."

"No.... no thank you." I said, still looking at Sage while he slept. *He looks so peaceful.* I thought.

"Then please call if you need anything." And he then retreated from the room and closed the door, leaving me there.

I moved off to leave, my hand actually on the doorknob. But I paused, and looked back. I saw him shiver.

It was an accident. I thought. *He destroyed her as an accident, and then did everything in his power to save her. How can anybody who does that be bad?* I struggled with a decision as that last thought echoed in my mind, and then finally, letting go of the doorknob, I walked as quietly as I could over to him, pulled off my shirt and soft pants, leaving only my underwear, and then pulling a soft blanket over me, laid beside him to keep him warm with my body heat.

"You may never know this, Sage... but thank you... for saving my friend." I whispered into one of his triangular hooded ears, and then pulled myself closer to him."

All through the night, Sage shivered with cold. It was the least I could do to at least keep him warm...

Chapter 5: The Mind of a Warrior

I stirred awake, and then lifted myself. I was alone within Sage’s great circular bed, with the blanket I’d draped over my shoulders the night before falling down to my waist as I rose.

Sage wasn’t here. But being that there was another blanket thrown over me, I assumed that Sage must’ve wrapped me up before leaving. Lifting a hand, I brushed some of my soft mane away from my eyes, my legs tucking beneath me as I looked around.

“Sage...?” I prompted a little sleepily, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes with one hand.

Except who greeted me was the doors to Sage’s room opening, and a now clothed, and a much more solid Daedalus entered the chamber with a large tray balanced on one hand. He looked real now.

“Good morning, Miss Iksaki.” He says, and the lights in the room raised a few levels to at least dimly light the room. “I hope you slept well.”

I blinked at him in surprise. He even had a semblance of hair now, and was dressed smartly.

Drs. Hurri Namah © 2004 by: DocWolph

“Morning?” I repeated dumbly, still a bit groggy from sleep. “Is it that early already?”

“Indeed Miss Iksaki. A little more into the day and I’d’ve had to greet you in the afternoon.”

“Afternoon?!” I started, coming fully awake as I rose immediately to my feet. “But... t-the competition...”

“...Has been delayed per Emperor Jaikard and Headmistress Menikomenqolui’s orders.” Dallas said, and placed his tray on the chest at the end of Sage’s bed, and began pouring tea. “They had decided that it was implicit that a rest time for the fighters be granted, as well as having your Chief Medical Officer – Doctor Hyurri Namah, I believe her name was – to be summoned.”



I sat back down where I was before rising, my muscular legs splayed before me while I looked off into nothingness. “Because of Illia...” I managed.

“Indeed. Sage is the most potent healer I’ve ever seen in my existence, but the ways of the mind are still a difficulty, even for him. He’s been meditating more and more lately in order to develop his consciousness beyond just his defenses. He rarely sleeps anymore in place of it.

“Last night was one of the longest times I’ve seen him sleep in nearly an age.”

There was a slight pause as I accepted the tea that Dallas handed me and took a sip of the wonderfully delightful sweet tea that Sage seems to drink all the time. It warmed the heart and the navel quite well.

“There we go,” Dallas mused. “Just the thing for a cool misty morning. But I must beg for forgiveness for my master. He was concerned about the one known as Illia Romov, and so has gone to look in on her.”

I looked up, suddenly reminded completely about the happenings of last night, and why exactly I’d just awoken in Sage’s bed-chamber. I stood up immediately and looked around for my clothes, wanting to know how my old friend was doing.

“Where are my clothes?” I asked suddenly, and began upturning sheets looking for them.

“Calm yourself Miss Iksaki. I have simply taken them to have them cleaned for you. They are still moist, but I am sure that I can find something for you to wear in the interim.”

I stared at Dallas as I sat down in my underclothes. “You take your duties quite seriously.” I said, running a hand through my mane, smiling at the humanoid creature.

“It is my purpose.” He said simply, opening up a hidden panel in the wall and pulling out a long clothes rack, covered with different types of cloth hanging in rolls of bolts, and pulling a few pieces off he brought over to me, holding up one piece of cloth after the other in front of me.

“Your purpose?” But isn’t that what Lord Sage built you to be?”

Dallas smiled whimsically, replacing pieces of cloth back on the rack and removing a bolt of one light blue color off the rack.

“Not originally.” He admitted, and pushed the entire length of the clothes rack back into its compartment, closed it and opened another compartment, complete with a sewing machine, needles, thread and trimmings. “I was Sage’s first creation. He was eight at the time that the other children kept harassing him about all of his constant studies, and told him if he wanted friends then maybe he should make some.

“So he did.”

I blinked at Dallas as he immediately went to work sewing me clothes.

“You are a wonderfully advanced Artificial Intelligence, Daedalus.” I said, watching him work so nimbly. “I’ve never seen an AI as advanced as you.”

“Truthfully, Miss Iksaki, there is nothing ‘Artificial’ about me.” He managed out of the corner of his mouth due to holding some pins in his teeth. “Sage’s technology is genetic manipulation, bio-engineering, and anything living. Living steel make up my framework and housings, my circuitry is made up of a style of high speed nervous network instead of fiber optics, while my ‘CPU’ is a massive throbbing brain.”

He grinned at me, several pins still sticking out of his teeth.

“My first representation that you saw here was nothing more than a hologram with tractor beams and force fields. What you are looking at now is a principal drone. Grown at a latter time after construction of any of Sage’s lairs in which to provide a more personal service to my master.

“But even this drone,” he pauses, lifting a hand and moving his fingers for me to see. “Is a thing of blood, nerve endings, bone and muscle; instead of lubricants, fiber optics, metal braces and pistons.”

He moved back to sewing.

“I am an intelligence; Magic and Psionics have all proven that I am a living thing with a soul. Sage professes that he only created the facility for me, and it was the Creator Himself that had gifted me with a mind and a soul. Sage merely gave me the heart.”

I leaned forward, watching this representation of Sage’s house computer, a drone of sorts with unknown abilities and powers. But if it could hack into the imperial computer net to get the blueprints from imperial R&D, then its hacking skills at least are top notch.

“You mentioned that serving was your purpose. But isn’t that what Sage built you to do, Dallas?”

“No... it is not.” Daedalus responded, and began to rapidly work another piece of clothing with the same colored material at blinding speed and accuracy. “My first and foremost function was as a friend. But unlike his other creations, I am far easier to upgrade and enhance. I became an assistant with his studies at first. Most of what I know was because he and I learned it together.

“He continued to enhance me, make me better and improve my data storage capabilities, till finally he plugged me into his home’s power network. I was given more upgrades, more attachments, more tasks, and I moved up to lab assistant, then a lab partner. I wanted to help, wanted to serve. It became my driving force.

“They were desires that Sage never designed into me. They sort of just... developed.”

“Sage even asked me one day, if I wanted to be anything else. He offered me that should I ask of it, he would transform me into a real human or something similar of my choosing. Transform my entire logic base inside the head of an advanced drone made into the form of whatever I chose...

“I didn’t know how to answer that. I still don’t know. Many a day I still compute about that. In the mean time, however, I have chosen to serve. Not because I was created to, not because I am forced to or obligated to due to hardwired circuitry – in which in me there is none – but because I want to.”

The sewing machine whirrs with a few more rapid motions as he utilizes it for a few final stitches, and then removing his work, he brings them over to me to observe and survey.

I hold up the two piece pants and jacket he’d just made for me, with the light blue accenting my eyes, and the flare work done in beautiful gold and crimson to accent my fur; the gold done in wonderful scrawl work of some society on his and Sage’s home world.

“They’re beautiful.” I said, and meant it. “And so soft...”

“They’re made from a special polymer I am sure you have available somewhere in this universe. As soft and as smooth as silk, but have the tensile strength of many steel alloys, so they are guaranteed never to rip or tear during general tasks. And unlike silk, they will not turn translucent when wet.” He said with his hands clasped behind his back and his body poised just like one of the imperial servants hold themselves whilst awaiting commands.

They’re so lovely... I thought, and immediately began trying them on. Dressing quickly in my new clothing and closing everything up tight.

The trousers hugged my legs gently, allowing for stretch ability, conforming about my crotch with an extra layer of cloth there for decency sakes to hide any embarrassment that usually formed from females wearing tight clothes. The waist band actually was two straps that folded one over the other, attaching to adhesive strips just above my thighs to create a deep downward arch beneath my stomach, and low enough in the back to allow my tail to wave freely.

They were quite sexy.

The jacket was sleeveless just like the jerkin’s Sage tended to wear, letting my thick muscular arms free to the open air, while the single-breasted jacket held my breasts in place and, again, revealed my belly. It’s hem stopped at just above my midriff. Dallas then proffered me a pair of slippers of the same color – which I pulled on too – and lifting his hand, a reflective hologram appeared before me in the form of a full-length mirror, allowing me to admire myself.

“You have a master’s hand, Dallas. These look beautiful, and a virile sexiness I didn’t even think I could possess.” I turned, checking out my back and backside, seeing how the rearward face of my trousers hugged my rounded buttocks so superbly. There were strings inside that

pulled a little of the fabric so that they only *just* followed the contour of my rear. Half for my tail and half to improve that general sexiness trait they seemed to give me.

“I have been given my master’s trait for the appreciation of the female gender. ‘The Creator’s greatest gift to mankind, and his most beautiful works of art,’ he has been known to say.”

I turned fully around, and actually giggled, taking pleasure in my new clothes as I pirouetted once in a circle before the mirror and then hugged myself.

“Thank you.” I said and turned again to Dallas.

“You are, again, quite welcome Miss Iksaki. Now if you’ll please follow me, I shall show you out. I am sure Sage shall be found at your medical facility.”

I followed Dallas, and he paused just long enough to shut the doors to Lord Sage’s bedroom. We crossed a lighted living room, very simple looking, very comfortable with a warm lighted fire crackling in a great fireplace in the center of the room.

Then out over the central island in Sage’s present Lair, where I petted the Moon Singer’s plumage as we passed and was rewarded with a quick twittering and ghostly song, Dallas then saw me out, bowing deeply as I stepped out over the mist covered cobbles of the League’s grounds.

The early risers were already walking about, hoping to get a good look at some of the fighters. I waved to a few of them as I made my way to the hospital wing. Entering into the door closest to Sage’s quarters, I walked right up to observation deck overlooking Illia’s recovery chamber. They’d given her her own room since last night, and it took me a bit to find her. Sage was sitting beside her, his hand stroking her mane while she slept, his eyes closed and his head bowed.

He was singing a soft lullaby in a strange language that had a delicate lilt to the tone, and a sing-song undertone. Just listening to it put me at peace.

I walked up to the railing overlooking her room. It was dark up here so that the window beneath me was practically a one way on her side. I knew that Sage could sense me, knew that he knew that I was there. He didn’t move though other than his hand. I hugged myself, hefting my bosom a little higher atop my chest while I watched them together.

Just then Illia shivered and awoke, taking in a deep intake of breath before crying out. Sage was immediately on his feet.

“It’s ok. It’s ok... it was only a bad dream.” He said, there beside her. Seeing Sage, she turned immediately to embrace him.

“It... it was terrible... Mr. Sage.” She sobbed in a voice that seemed a little too high pitched to be her voice. Like the voice of a child. She clutched onto his broad back, her massive body crushing him within her massive arms and bosom. “I dreamt that I saw my sister. I... I had her

in my hands and I... I was wringing her with my bare hands. O-only I was big! I wished that I'd be big a-and..."

"It's ok, Illia. It's ok." He tried to embrace her, but his great arms could barely reach around her body. "Illia...I have something to tell you, something I didn't get the chance to do before you slept. There... has been an accident with your sister. She was crushed. I am afraid that she couldn't be saved."

Illia gasped, settling back and covering her mouth with both hands. "No! I-it happened again." Her eyes were glistening with tears. "I had a bad dream, and something bad happened! No! Cyvel!" She broke down to sobbing.

"Merely coincidence, Illia." Sage whispered into her rounded ear atop her head, caressing her head hair softly with one clawed hand, combing her hair with those ebon claws. "It was an accident. These things happen."

"B-but I... I will never get to see her. I was supposed to look out for her!" she gasped, her eyes running over with tears.

"And you did your best. Not even the most powerful and gifted of guardians can protect everyone all the time." I bit my lip at that, but Sage continued. "She is in a better place now. She is where nothing can harm her, and now she has the power to look after you."

"W-will she ever come back. Some of the priests... the healers! They can sometimes bring them back!"

"There is no bringing her back this time, Illia, despite how much you may wish her to return. If I had the power to do so, I would. But she is beyond any priest's power to revive now." Sage tilted her face up so that she was looking at him. He fingered her black-lipped mouth. "Go ahead, Illia. Go ahead and cry. No one is looking, and I won't tell."

"This is a time when you don't have to be strong..."

Illia's eyes glistened for a moment or two, and then she squeezed her eyes shut tightly and returned to sobbing, clutching at Sage clawing at his black sleeveless jerkin. In spite of myself, my own eyes began to glitter as I looked down at this, and I felt my heart flutter while I covered my mouth with one hand to cover my quivering lower lip.

"C-can I see her?" Illia asked at last, withdrawing again to look at Sage.

"No." he answered simply. "She has already been returned to the Earth. You've been asleep for a long time. You too were hurt in the accident. Something inside you was broken but we fixed it. You should be ok now."

"Wh-where am I?" she asked.

“At school.” Illia’s tears dried as she folded her hands and sat back, staring at the floor from where she sat atop her elevated bed, her breasts hanging from her chest, objects that in her mind she did not yet possess because her mind had been reduced to that of a little girl.

Sage continued to stroke her hair though as she looked to him. I was amazed at how quickly she was shifting through emotions, but remembered something Sage had said last night, that she would be feeling each and every last painful memory until they’ve all been lived. That could take awhile.

“Can I see her? Her grave... I mean.” She asked timidly.

“No.” Sage responded, whipping away the last of her tears with one thick thumb, which she blinked against. “She’s been returned to your home world. Your parents have come to take her and place her in the soil near to where she was born.” *How does he know that?* I wondered. “They wished that they could take you home too, but you were too hurt to move at the time. They watched over you as long as they could. They left me, and Headmistress Meniko to look over you.”

I watched Sage in his slurry of half-truths to her. He never really lied, but he was telling her only enough of the truth that she could handle right now. But it was amazing to see the healing process at last being done. I blinked away my own tears as I felt one slide over my cheek and wet my fur, and I wiped them away with my hand before returning it to my lips to watch.

“I have something for you, Illia.” He said at last, a little more cheerful now to help her recover from her hurt.

She looked up at him, a little sad. This must be weeks, maybe months later in mourning now. She had a depressed tone of voice, like she didn’t feel like she wanted to live.

“Do you like magic?”

She nodded. “I-I know a little... of it myself. Meniko and the teachers taught me. They said they could make me stronger.”

“Then watch.”

Sage’s hands clasped before him, and when he opened them, a light brown teddy bear unfolded out of nothingness within his hands. I felt the barest of snaps in the world around me as Sage worked that strange alien magic of his. It was a bit large, but for Illia, it was just the right size. Sage, holding it by its rump and one arm, gave it to her.

After seeing what she was like last night, it so wonderful a sight to see her smile a little while accepting the gift.

“S-she... she looks like Cyvel.” She whispered. New tears rising within her eyes.

My brows creased as I looked at the Teddy bear Sage was offering. I'd only seen Cyvel's image a couple of times, but indeed, that bear looked like her. Same hairstyle, same colored eyes, same favorite clothes in the form of the simple T-shirt it wore.

How is he doing that?

"A very close friend of mine made this for you when he heard what had happened." I heard him say, and I smiled then. *Dallas. He must've hacked the system to find Cyvel and then make the bear.* "Whenever you're feeling lost, alone," Sage continued. "Or maybe even scared, just hold this little bear and dream that you are hugging your sister. I can assure you that her spirit at least, will be hugging back. At first you may not be able to feel it, but the closer you feel to her, the stronger her embrace back to you will be.

Illia Romov is © 2004 by: DocWolph



"She will bring you the strength you seek."

Illia looked at the bear and hugged it tightly, nuzzling it with her big cheek while new tears leaked from her eyes.

Sage was in the midst of stroking her hair again when the door hissed open, and our Chief Medical Officer – fresh from her vacation – Doctor Hyurri Namah stormed into the room. Illia, I noted, flinched openly and moved shyly backward as Hyurri entered, the CMO's face etched into an expression of incredible annoyance.

"You!" she growled harshly and stabbed Sage in the chest with one finger. "You must be the dissident who's been tearing up my hospital and causing all sorts of wonton damage!"

I bit my lower lip, seeing Illia bite hers as well and hold her bear even tighter as she began to shiver with fear at the presence Hyurri was projecting.

"I must apologize, ma'am," Sage said, Hyurri tensed up at being called 'Ma'am.' Most women didn't like being referred to by the more mature title. "But I truly do not know what you mean." He made to rise. "Perhaps we can speak about this outside?"

“My Hospital!” she raised both hands over her head in exasperation. “You barge in here,” She poked him in the chest again. “Use expensive medical equipment without supervision,” again she jabbed him in the chest. “*And* then perform an improper Mental Surgery that leaves one of this school’s most talented graduates as a *vegetable!*”

Sage turned to look at Illia, who’s lower lip was now trembling as she hid behind him in fear of Hyurri, curled up almost into a fetal position while hugging fiercely onto her new bear to the point I thought she might squeeze its head off. When he turned back, he lifted a hand to Hyurri’s mouth in order to quiet her, just as she was about to continue on her tirade, clamped his large hand down about her jaw and then moved her gently yet forcibly backward; forcing her body to follow her head, which is following its mouth. I stepped sideways to the part of the observation deck overlooking the hall they’d just stepped into as Illia’s door closed, and Sage continued to push Doctor Namah until her back was against the opposing wall.

“You... are... upsetting the *patient... doctor...*” he said in a controlled sort of way through his sharp teeth, with just a bit of warning before he released his grip on her mouth and stepped back away from her. “You are undoubtedly the CMO here. No one else in a medical profession would dare do what you just did unless they had that sort of flack in the hospital.

“Now, my dear doctor, why don’t you calm yourself and voice your concerns in a civilized way.”

“I AM...!” she began in outrage but Sage interrupted immediately.

“AH!” and he looked sternly before lifting a hand with all his fingers open, and then slowly brought his fingers together like a closing mouth to tell the doctor to lower her voice.

“I am *appalled* that you, an untrained git of a creature, could think you can waltz right into my hospital and perform a very complex, and very difficult psychic procedure without any supervision.” She said in a rushed voice, and Sage lifted his arms and crossed them before his chest as he looked down the great space between them in height. “This is *my* hospital, and I will not have someone I have not approved for access to the equipment here just arbitrarily waltz around, doing nary as he pleases, and doing them unsuccessfully for that matter too!”

Sage raised an eyebrow into the silence, took a deep breath, and then released it.

“Firstly, this isn’t your hospital.” He said in a quiet, controlled voice. “It’s Meniko’s. She authorized my usage of it last night. You are merely the chief of staff.” He said, lifting a finger to count the point off, and Hyurri fumed.

“Secondly,” he continued, raising another finger. “The Psychic Surgery in which I accomplished was aided by at least a dozen others. So far in my lifetime, I’ve done over two hundred surgeries like it unaided, and this time it was a team operation aided by several specialists in the telepathic orders who were more than helpful in this particularly nasty disintegration of psyche.”

Namah opened her mouth to protest, but Sage continued before she could.

“Thirdly,” still another finger. “My medical know-how has so far been unparalleled by any race that I have yet encountered and your expensive *toys* here are less than what I am used to dealing with. I’m kind of new in this general area of space, so I may yet find someone who’s better than me. If there is a tool, device or piece of ‘expensive equipment’ in there that I don’t know about or know how to operate, you will know that I would not dare utilize such a device under any circumstance without proper supervision.

“Fourthly, the patient was not rendered a vegetable, as you’ve just seen. Right now, her psyche is fully repaired, and she is now going through a possibly long healing process which will take many long months if not years to sort out. And on top of it all, *doctor*, if you are indeed the head of staff here, responsible for the mental, physical and spiritual health of everyone in this school or who comes to this school, then explain to me why you have missed such a critical psychological element in Illia’s being?”

“Th-*that’s* Illia?” she said, staring at Sage, and then looked to the door, before she surged forward, and took the medical datapad from its wall hanging tray by her door and began to read it.

Huurri’s features moved from concern, to rage, to fear and then understanding whilst she red. When she looked up to Sage, it was an expression of indignation. Sage, on the other hand, was looking straight into her eyes.

“You *knew!* You knew her condition and did nothing about it.” He said as a statement instead of a question daring her to confirm the fact. “Her present state of mind could have been completely avoided. Why? Why didn’t you fix it?”

Sage’s eyes were crumpled with confusion and with a hint of anger, but he made no advancement toward her.

“Because she was able to function perfectly within society with her primary ability to experience pain and suffering deadened. She seemed to be able to function even better than most! How could I have changed it? There was nothing that could’ve worsened her mental state, so I left it alone.”

A muscle in Sage’s cheek twitched, but other than that, his features no longer betrayed his irritation. His expression was calm, serene.

“I will assume that all of the doctors and psychics who were present last night have added their words to the report you just read. So I shall make a statement and then ask a question.

“Statement: every warrior who enters a battle must be of the utmost health. Mentally, physically and spiritually. Those who are not whole have weaknesses, those who have weaknesses tend to be hurt seriously, or worse, killed.

“Question: What do you think would happen to Illia when someone like me comes along and uses a spell or spell like power that *forces* her to feel the emotions of pain and fear?”

“If she had all her wits about her, she would have recovered completely by now, and now functioning perfectly fine. But because you neglected to remove this mental stymie, her psyche shattered and had to be rounded up and pieced carefully together again. The result of which is now forcing her to live through all the fear and pain in which she was unable to feel because you *neglected* – and oh yes... it is negligence – to do it before hand.”

“Negligence?! How dare you cite that before me! I am a class P-Twelve Super Psionic. My *specialty* is telepathy. I could have fixed the damage you caused in a heart beat! The report stated that you had her in suspended animation. She wouldn’t have gotten any worse, and when I came back, everything would’ve been fixed as fine as you do! And now... because of this... this *fracas!* Illia has now been reduced to the mind of a child!”

Sage stared at her for a moment and then bowed his head a little, still staring unblinkingly at Namah.

“Then there is the tragedy. I was unaware of you last night. Even when I spoke to your second, and the other members of your staff, I was not made aware of you or your abilities. None of them thought to tell me of it, and I did not think to ask due to the necessity of the task we were facing, even after I’d asked for every psychic to be rounded up for the process of the surgery. Had I known, I would’ve held off on the surgery till you could perform it.”

Now it was her time to cross her arms, her slender hands crossing over one another beneath her bosom and hefting its ample fortitude up over her arms. She looked sternly into his eyes, but then her features softened as she noted that he meant what he had said.

“So... you’re admitting that I am the better doctor now? Your search is finally over?” she smirked.

“No. I am admitting that you are the better telepath. I said nothing about you being the better doctor.” Hyurri fumed again. “Illia’s mental aspects have her acting as a child, but she is rapidly moving through her life, sometimes days or weeks at a time. She has proven to be very fearful at first. Sudden movements and loud voices tend to upset her. She may be a child, but she has the body of a fully developed woman and an accomplished fighter. Second best in the universe, if I miss my guess.”

For the barest of instants his eyes glanced up at me and back at Namah.

“I will be coming back periodically to check up on her, doctor. I shall check in with you each time to see how she is developing. Good day, doctor.” He said, bowed and then turned to leave.

Hyurri then began to stare at him, here eyes narrowing, and Sage suddenly stopped. When he turned around, his beautiful green eyes had turned a bloody red, and his face had contorted into an unnatural snarl. I heard and ever so brief high-pitched noise inside my head before Hyurri

suddenly stumbled backward, her head jerking upward as if just smacked, and when she regained her composure, blood was beginning to seep out of her nostrils.

She then stared at him, aghast, letting the blood run down over her chin while her jaw lay slack open. I felt my hands grasp against the railing as for an instant, I feared the worst.

“I... I am sorry for that.” Sage said, shaking his head and pushing a finger to the center of his brow. When he opened his eyes again, they had returned to an emerald green. “I am *truly* sorry for that.” He approached her and she flinched, but instead of striking her, Sage helped her to stand, and even pulled a cloth wipe from a surgical tray on a table nearby, prompted her to raise her head and held the wipe under her nose.

“I may not be as powerful a telepath as you, but I am a rather potent specialist in a discipline in telepathy. Psychic Dueling. My mental defenses are built to hamper attacks from psychics of class P-Fifteens or lower, while at the same time dishing disruptive psychic attacks back at them.

“Regardless to say, it is best not to try to probe me without my permission again. My defenses are trained to act automatically, and are quite aggressive and vicious in their dealings, and I have yet to control said instincts completely.” He removed his hand and let Hyurri hold it herself as she stared at him dumbstruck. “I’ll take my leave of you, Doctor. Again... forgive me.” And he bows, ducking out the main corridor door and out onto the grounds.

Hyurri was still holding the wipe to her nose as I found her in the main commissary of the hospital, re-reading the notes of Illia’s file.

“Was he right?” I asked quietly, standing above her, and she looked up at me, removing the wipe to show a slightly bloodstained fur moustache on her upper lip.

She then lowered her head and looked to the file again.

“He is.” She answered. “Meniko knew, I knew, and no one else. To go through life without fear was a gift we thought, so we left that portion of her mind deadened.”

I lowered myself into the chair opposing her.

“But I must admit, that creature does know his science. His notes are generalized and gets into specifics only when necessary. Even explained the process of the surgery he used. Funny... I never thought to do it that way before...” she mused and keyed a few more buttons to scroll down.

“Can you fix the existing damage?” I asked quietly.

Hyurri was quiet for the longest of times. “No.” she answered at last. “The Original damage is, regrettably, more extensive than I had thought it was. Her condition has... destabilized since I

last scanned her when she was sixteen. What's done had been done, and now that I look at Sage's notes and those of the others here, I don't even think I could've accomplished the surgery without help."

Hyrri clicked another key and turned off the datapad.

"Rae... do you think me too arrogant?" she asked at last and looked up at me,

I managed to smile. "You have your times." I shrugged. "Sage though, has a way of stepping on toes. He doesn't mean to, and he learns instantly from his mistakes, and he has the insatiable desire to help others. It is his ever driving force, the deepest emotion inside the very core of his being."

"But what is he doing here?"

I smiled impishly, and then began retelling the tale of Sage's arrival. Hyrri stared at me and listened in amazement at what Sage has done since his arrival.

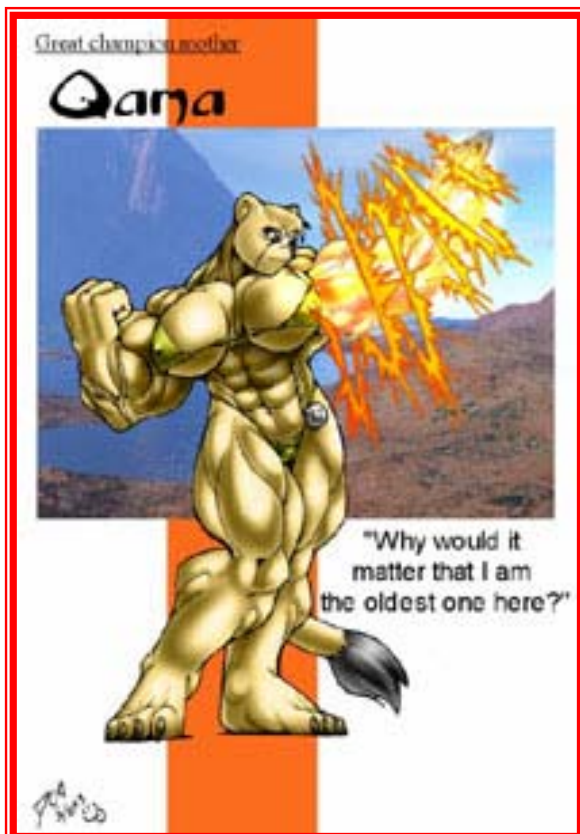
"He *challenged* you?! He's audacious, I'll give him that." Hyrri stated once I'd finished.

"And seemingly on a mission to prove himself." I added.

Hyrri slowly rose, picking up the datapad and holding it before her with both hands. "I need to go check in on Illia." She said at last. "Mayhap probe her and see if Sage has left any loose ends in there." She chuckled, which trailed off into an exhaling sigh. She then looked to me.

"Do you believe him to be evil, Rae?"

"Not in the slightest." I answered, and meant it.



Queen Qama is © 2003 by: DocWolph

The following day came quicker than I was hoping it would. I'd spent some time with Illia, which was a wonderful trip down memory lane. She talked of high jinx the two of us had gotten into ages ago as if it had happened yesterday. And all through the day, she hugged tightly onto her teddy bear.

She saw me like she saw herself. A dozen years or so younger and her own age.

I stayed with her till she fell asleep again later that night.

Morning came and found me atop the pinnacle tower, watching out over the world about me, and reflecting on the happenings of these past few days. I hadn't slept all night, and the sun rose earlier than I thought it would. I stood there and watched it rise before the sounds of the gathering spectators summoned me back to ground level.

I later found myself again sitting with the Emperor and his entourage, with Meniko directly behind us on her many cushions and poufs again, and an entourage of security all about us.

The last two fights that I had missed the day before yesterday were those of Pleeyo versus Queen Qama from the Powered League, Genohn versus Jassa Kесе from his own league; and finally Riikoa versus the one known as Maka "leopard."

Jassa Kесе is © 2003 by: DocWolph

The winner of Genohn's fight was obvious. Genohn put Jassa in her place without even moving from his starting point and without breaking a sweat. She was promptly sent back home to be looked after by her brother while Genohn was away.

Qama and Pleeyo was a wonderful fight, in which Pleeyo won just by the skin of her teeth. Looking at the fighters that were left after the first round, it was obvious that she would not last the second.

The final surprise came from Riikoa's fight. She towered over Maka, and had incredible muscle mass over her opponent, but Maka, surprisingly, simply toyed with Riikoa throughout the entire fight before taking the win hands down.



I watched some of the recorded Trid images yesterday of the fights that I'd missed during the rest period before I went to go be with Illia. The ferocity of some of the opponents would make my final task all the more daunting.

As it was, the way things sat now was like this:

Fight One: Ghennal
Royal Dragoon Alkenphel == **Winner:** Royal Dragoon Alkenphel

Fight Two: Queen Chiuзо Kemono
King Makahn == **Winner:** King Makahn

Fight Three: Illia Romov

Lord Sage Preypacer == **Winner:** Lord Sage Preypacer

Fight Four: Pleeyo
Queen Qama == **Winner:** Pleeyo

Fight Five: Lord Genohn
Jasa'Kese == **Winner:** Lord Genohn

Fight Six: Maka "Leopard"
Riikoa == **Winner:** Maka "Leopard"

And again, the remaining opponents stood before the viewing stand, before the eyes of the emperor, myself and the young Lieutenant Leski, and the holy priests were brought forward to administer the next round of fighter placement. One at a time, each fighter came up and drew out a numbered ball from the sack, held their ball aloft for all to see, and then accepted their placement for the next round of fights.

My eyes watched Sage as he stepped forward, now wearing only a pair of loose fitting breaches, even despite his massive size, and a single black jerkin. Dangling from one his left hand were a string of prayer beads, which he twisted idly between thumb and forefinger as he walked forward. His long black striped mane was drawn backward at the ends of the strands by a green band, his massive form stepping gracefully from toe to heel as elegantly as a ballet dancer, his tail flicking for better balance.

Or a skilled assassin, my inner voice told me, and I sighed at the thought. No, he's not come as an assassin. If he had, then whoever his target was would already be dead.

Riikoa is © 2004 by: Docwolph



"He has a good heart." I said allow, quelling any more thoughts of assassination.

"Who does?" came a voice, quelling my thoughts, and I turned to see Emperor Sarvic looking at me. Despite that his throne was raised slightly on our already raised dais, he and I looked eye to eye, simply because I was so much larger than he was.

"Oh nothing," I blanched, blinking quickly to clear any betraying light from my eyes. "I was just thinking out loud."

He nodded and sat back to lean against one of his arm rests to direct more of his attention toward me. "Truly?" His eyes flicked to Sage, even as he held aloft his

own number for placement. I noted some cheers in the crowd, but they were nothing compared to the ones that had been for Pleeyo, Makahn and Genohn.

He radiated power though. Few in this universe had that capability. In the present line up down there, only Genohn had the same quality.

“Remarkable that our new ‘guest’ has done so well so far. I had nearly thought that Illia had flattened him.”

“Yeah... Illia.” I mused, pursing my lips.” *Poor Illia. Reduced to the mind of a child. But is it so bad? She is happy... to an extent.*

Sage had visited her, as promised several times yesterday, and again this morning, testing her with brain wave monitors and checking her psychically. Our CMO Doctor Hyurri Namah was always around whenever he looked over Illia, as if to find some sort of mistake in any of his procedures. As of yet I assumed she had found none being that Sage was still looking over her.

At last all the names were drawn as the last fighter, Pleeyo, took her default ball and the last position on the newly drawn fighter board. I looked to the board even as the Priests administering this competition cleared away before it, and I felt my lips part slightly as I looked at the names now arrayed there.

Fight Seven: King Makahn –Vs- Royal Dragoon Alkenphel

Fight Eight: Lord Genohn –Vs- Maka “Leopard”

Fight Nine: Lord Sage Preypacer –Vs- Pleeyo

I pursed my lips and shook my head at the last bracket. *Pleeyo is fighting Sage? Talk about throwing gas on an already lit fire...*

Once the new fight sets were announced, the arena cleared and the fighters took their seats amidst the little stand at the edge of the mat, and after a brief fifteen minute rest period, Makahn and Alkenphel were called to fight.

I looked first to Makahn, and involuntarily held my breath as I then compared him to the massive Cyborg known as Alkenphel. Unlike any of the fighters, Alkenphel has several unfair advantages which, surprisingly, no one really made any fuss over. He had body shielding and heavy armor, servos and metallic muscles.

The Emperor’s Champion.

Makahn was waving to his fans, while Alkenphel just stood there, watching him, his metallic face and artificial eyes betraying no emotion, simply because his face plates were not designed that far. It was armor after all, what need did he have to show such emotions?

The Priest-Referee arrived in the center of the circle.

“Today’s first bout will be between King Makahn of the Powered League, and Royal Dragoon Alkenphel of the Unlimited League. Now to you both, gentlemen are you ready?” he pointed first to one, and then to the other, and they both nodded in turn. “Then get ready and... FIGHT!”

The Referee *ran* away as quickly as he could as the fighters immediately set themselves to fighting stances.

“Makahn is the Powered League’s Champion, is he not?” Leski said near me, the sword Sage had given her still gripped in one hand as if it were a token scepter.

“He is.” I answered even as Makahn began to set himself pounding at Alkenphel’s armor and shielding, striking with blows that sounded like peals of thunder while Alkenphel tried to fend himself off.

“Some said that you and he were an item, is that true?” she continued, and this time more eyes upon the stand turned to look at me as I blushed.

“Well, I...” I managed. “There was only that one time...”

There was a mighty cry as Alkenphel took Makahn in a ponderous strike that grabbed him by the head, lifted him off the ground as he swung him up and then back down and slammed him hard into the mat.

There was a collective gasp from the crowd and I winced as Makahn landed. But then he immediately kipped-up to his feet and swept Alkenphel’s massive armored feet from underneath him.

“He’s big, and strong. Good shoulders.” Leski commented, her long fingers gripping the palm guard of the sword.

I only listened with half an ear as I was drawn more into the fight.

“And what a wonderful fight he’s in. Against one of our most skilled tacticians and fighters functioning as the brain inside a machine that is the equivalent of a miniaturized mech with full armaments! He’s far braver than I.”

I shot the Emperor and Leski a hard glance.

“Alkenphel’s fully armed?!” and I stood before I knew what I was doing and moved right to the edge of the stand to get a closer look.

“Of course.” Jaikard returned. “Alkenphel is being combat trained after all. We announced as such, and no one objected or complained.”

I turned to look incredulously at the emperor and his lieutenant, and then shot a glance at mother, the great Phoenix Dragasier situated behind them. She raised her eyebrows and gestured with one clawed hand as if in a shrug.

But then to prove Leski's words, Alkenphel set himself, hopping up onto his toes and activating thrusters and maneuvering jets, and immediately becoming far more mobile. He slid away from Makahn, his shoulder guards opening up to reveal an assortment of missiles and rockets before launching a pair of them at Makahn.

I held my breath without knowing it when Makahn rolled away from the first, and actually caught the second before turning it around and launching it back at Alkenphel, running after the swifter moving rocket.

“This is also a test to see if the Powered League should continue to receive such high Imperial grants and stipends.” Jaikard stated. “So far both of them have proven themselves quite well. You would not see a regular soldier do what Makahn just did.”

I released the breath I was holding even as Makahn slipped forward, his leg muscles going into action as he pounded forward as quick as a cheetah and landed on Alkenphel, pushing his way – through great personal pain – through Alkenphel's electromagnetic shielding, and apply his weight to the flying contraption and forcing it to the ground before flipping the thing over his shoulder onto the mat.

Alkenphel's engines shattered beneath him as his electromagnetic shielding sputtered out, but then he kicked outward, and his toe claws pinched around Makahn's body, forcing him down as Alkenphel rose, and then unsheathing some sharp claws, Alkenphel slashed at Makahn twice before kicking him away.

Again I held my breath, mildly aware of the conversations behind me while Makahn rolled to his feet, and again pounded forward, now bloodied before he crashed against Alkenphel, pounding at his chest with blows equal in strength to a battleship cannon's impact.

They collapsed to the ground with Makahn creating dents in Alkenphel's armor, each pound creating a larger and larger impact crater in the mat with each blow, till at last Alkenphel opened his mouth and blasted a heat beam right at Makahn's solar plexus.

Despite the pain and the smell of burning fur and flesh, Makahn reached forward, forced the jaws shut, and then pushed Alkenphel's head straight upward to redirect the blast, and holding those sharp jaws upward with the gouts of flame erupting through the sides, Makahn began pounding with just one hand now.

Alkenphel then lurched, and as Makahn lifted up into the air, he was caught by both of Alkenphel's legs and its prehensile toes, and thrown off of the dragon-mech with all the might his servos could muster. Makahn soared through the air, managing a summersault to land on one of the upright columns surrounding the ring, and then leapt backward. His fist drove before him,

and struck Alkenphel against the side of the head, knocking the whole metallic body straight to the mat with enough power to force Alkenphel to skid several meters along the mat.

Makahn landed and then turned even as Alkenphel rose.

The fight continued relentlessly, the two wearing each other down, my grip tightening on the metal bar holding the decorative draperies before the dais till my hands compressed them thin and bent the pole with a loud squealing sound.

Makahn was a bloody mess, and Alkenphel was literally torn apart, his primary armor plates laying strewn over the entire field, one arm broken and hanging useless at his sides, with the other fending himself off. He was leaking lubricants and blood alike.

The last few blows were them exchanging punches, with the final one coming from Makahn as he simply pushed on Alkenphel to knock him down. At that point, when Alkenphel went down, he made only a few more feeble movements to rise, and amidst doing so, the Priest Referee arrived and began counting him out, all the while Alkenphel continued to rise.

At last the referee called “ten,” and Alkenphel fell backwards for the last time, defeated, and Makahn rose his fists into the air and turned fully around amidst a raucous cheer and applause.

Behind me, the Emperor rose and moved forward to stand beside me, signaling to his aides to gather Alkenphel and his parts and set him for repair. But I watched Makahn as he half collapsed into the waiting healers to tend to his wounds, and I exhaled a long breath that I had pent up inside me that he wasn't seriously hurt.

Looking left and then right, I unceremoniously left the viewing stand and followed after them.

“I see that you won.” I said as I entered into the pavilion where the healers were caring for Makahn.

Makahn looked up at me and smiled immediately. Without anyone here to primp and preen for, he was a little more candid. “Glad that you were watching.” He said, not even noticing as the healers washed and sealed up his wounds. “I saw you in the stands.” He said quietly as I came to stand in front of him.

“Oh?” I managed to smile, my ears lifting slightly, and then I turned to the healers. “Could you all leave us alone for a moment?” I asked with a soft smile.

“But miss Iksaki. He still needs a lot of work!” one of them protested.

“Please go.” I repeated, still looking at Makahn, and they reluctantly left.

Once the pavilion was cleared, I stepped forward and pressed my hands against his chest, and a warm blue glow suffused my hands as I healed him instead. All his wounds began sealing themselves immediately, the scars disappearing and his fur growing back.

I dared to lean in a little closer, my breasts now pressing against his chest, just a touch, but the moment they did, both my nipples hardened.

Immediately I remembered those three nights we'd spent with one another, almost totally alone despite our standings in our respective leagues and in the universe. I remembered the hard press of his body, the way he caressed me, made me feel like a woman instead of just a girl, or some super powerful entity. For a time I forgot that I even had power, and reveled in his. He protected me within his embrace.

Looking at him then, I felt his breath on my neck and I looked down at him, my lips spreading in a nervous smile while I leaned a little closer, and felt how well his groin fit within the V-shaped wedge formed by my pelvis and thighs.

I remembered how pleasing it was when he took my maidenhood, and a piece of my heart.

"I wish that you'd healed me, Rae." He whispered into my ear, reaching up to cradle one of my arms that was touching him as I dared to press closer, my bosom flattening a little more. Despite that his arms and body in general were larger than mine I was still the stronger by far. *Then why was it that I felt so much safer in his arms?* "You have a gentler touch." He continued, and I felt the heat of his breath draw closer.

"Do you think so?" I managed, looking into his eyes from the short distance between us, and a couple of my fingers tensed a little to press further into his chest fur. I wasn't even aware that my healing magics were coursing into him anymore.

Outside the pavilion, the referee was announcing the fight between Genohn and Maka "Leopard."

"I know so." He whispered again, kissing my cheek then as his other hand settled upon my hip, his thumb caressing my fur there, and by sheer placement of his touch I took a step closer till I was butting up against the table he was sitting on. "Though if you continue to heal me like that, I may actually start to get younger..."

It was then that I started and drew back, noting that all his wounds were now healed. "Oh! Sorry..." the blue glow faded

"Don't be." He grinned and again pulled me closer till my chest was again pressing against his.

He was so warm... I didn't even try to resist and just merely allowed myself to be there.

"Rae..." he began, and then swallowed, and I saw his eyes dilate.

“Yes?” I returned, feeling my heart pause and my breathing stop.

“Rae I...”

Whatever he was about to say was immediately drowned out by the cheers and cries, and louder still over the loud speakers came: “And the winner by forcing a submission from his opponent, Lord Genohn!”

“Oh... the fight’s over.” I mused, covering my lips with one hand, holding its wrist with the other.

“So I hear. But Rae... there was another reason why I came here today. I wanted to...”

“Rae Iksaki, please report to the viewing stand.” The loud speaker pealed. “Rae Iksaki, please report to the viewing stand.” It repeated relentlessly, and I looked up at the roof of the tent in hopes to will it to be quiet.

“You were saying?” I grinned, giving a small hop within his grasp as I stood there in my impatience to hear what he had to say to me.

“No. You’re needed. You should go.” He sighed, and managed a weak smile for me.

And to reflect his words, again the loud speaker called out.

“Rae Iksaki, Please report to the viewing stand for the start of the third fight.”

I swore inside my head. “But...” I began, but Makahn silenced me with a hand over my lips.

“No. It can wait. Go.” And he released me.

I half opened my mouth to respond, but then swallowed what I was about to say, and then hurried out of the pavilion for the viewing stand, taking my seat beside the Emperor. Even as my rump settled into my chair, the Priest-Referee again approached the center and announced the fight.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we now bring a fight between two power houses. Lord Sage Preypacer of the Unlimited League versus Pleeyo of the Mystic League.” I noted Pleeyo folded her arms and pout that she wasn’t called first. “Pleeyo, our known combatant today, and a student of the Mystic league, now faces one of our new challengers, who’s powers and abilities have already stunned and amazed you all during the defeat of Illia of the Mystic league.” My lips pressed together, and for a moment I began to hate Sage for drawing me away from Makahn at such a moment and for what he did to Illia, but then I saw his face change once Illia’s name was mentioned, a hurt expression that she was brought into this, and my hatred melted.

Sage has shown himself to be a capable healer, especially on how he has pandered himself to Illia in helping her regain her mind.

“Fighters, are you ready?” the referee stated, breaking into my thoughts as he pointed to Pleeyo and then Sage. Pleeyo called out a raucous “Ready!” while Sage merely nodded his head, and turned his right side to face Pleeyo, arms dangling at his sides in a relaxed way. “Then...Fight!”

Fight Three: Lord Sage versus Pleeyo

Pleeyo immediately powered up, her shrill cry echoing out over the stadium, her fur standing on end while her fists clenched at her sides.

Sage merely stood there, fingering his prayer beads innocently dangling from one hand.

He continued to stand there as Pleeyo went into action, her hands coming together as she quickly began spitting out words in a spell, and she threw a massive ball of force at Sage. Sage did not move as he watched the ball speed toward him, he merely stood there, his eyes tracking it while he fingered his beads, just before it slammed straight into his body, all the while Pleeyo pounding feet skirted her around his blind side to strike him from behind.

An explosion rumbled around the coliseum, with the force of energy being released, from Pleeyo’s spell, and a cloud of smoke rose from where Sage was standing.

“Here I come!” she laughed, and charged into the smoke, drawing back her fist to slam at where Sage had just been, and she led forward with the striking punch that carried her in even as the dust and smoke were clearing. “He-yah!” she cried and disappeared for a moment only to immediately arrive from the other side.

Pleeyo settled to a stop and turned quickly even as the smoke cleared, showing off an impact crater where Sage had been standing, but no Sage!

But as the smoke cleared, Pleeyo was found standing there confused, looking around for Sage. She finally settled backward into a relaxed stance, planting her hands on her hips and began to chuckle.

“Hah! I vaporized him!” she laughed, thrusting a fist up into the air in a victory pose and laughed harder.

The crowd was on their feet, not believing that someone who’d bested Illia like he had could be defeated so easily, and even the emperor, Leski and myself were on our feet trying to find him.

And then I felt him, and my gaze immediately looked up, and I saw positioned elegantly up about a quarter mile up in the air, holding himself elegantly while he looked down at Pleeyo. My mental eye focused on him, telescoping in on him even as he took his prayer beads and slipped them over his hand so that they would stay there. He then descended.

I had no other way to call it but a decent, but it was like he teleported, moving more than a thousand feet in an instant to softly lower the last foot onto the mat, calmly walk up to Pleeyo, slip his hand beneath his arm, arch it up, grasp her by the throat, and with a single arm movement thrust her straight, back first, into the mat with a shuddering slam.

The whole of the mat shuddered with the impact, and Pleeyo actually bounced a meter or so back up into the air to fall again as Sage calmly walked out of the way to come to another sideways facing stance, this time showing Pleeyo his left side.

An impression of her body was left in the ground as Sage relaxed himself, waiting for Pleeyo to rise.

With a growling roar, she slapped her hands behind her head, and kip-upped her body to an immediate stand, and with another roar she began throwing punches and raking at Sage with her claws, trying to trip him up with his feet, but he never moved his hands, keeping them behind his back, merely moving out of the way.

He was a positive contortionist as he moved out of Pleeyo's way with such speed it looked as if he was moving before she did. He used his legs to block whenever he needed to, stretching them up high to kick her fists unerringly away from striking him, and when she kicked he merely chambered to block.

Then with one of her kicks, he hooked his own leg upward, blocked her foot, and then twisted his and forced her foot down to where he stood on it, before he surged forward quickly and head butted her back down to the mat, and sliding forward, leapt up onto her stomach and began jumping up and down on her as if she were a trampoline. His last bounce was ended with a flip over himself and one final strike downward before he hopped down and again stepped away, showing his side off to her.

Having just had an eight hundred pound creature jump up on down on you was enough to knock the air out of even me, and Pleeyo was hugging her middle as she tried to catch her breath.

Again, Sage merely waited for her to get up.

Eventually she rose, now angered to new levels at being humiliated like this, she roared a terrible, blood-curdling roar that only an enraged, female scorned Casid could roar, and as she did, her body exploded with newer and heightened levels of power.

“OW!” she screamed at him. “That hurt!”

Sage merely raised an eyebrow at her, one arm held limply at his side while the other – the one facing away from Pleeyo – folded into the small of his back. His face remained placid and at peace.

Pleeyo gritted her teeth, and summoned yet more of her power, moving up to the next stage of power boosting, her fur turning golden and standing on end even as her hands came together, and she summoned another ball of force.

“Grr!” she growled, and the ball doubled in size as she drew on her sources of power.

Sage cocked his head to one side as she continued to power up, just before she threw yet another force of power into her spell sphere before chucking it at him. Again, Sage stood there, seeming to wait for the damaging power of Pleeyo’s onslaught. The power ball screamed at him as if doing so with Pleeyo’s own voice, she forcing all her might into sending it at him. It was about to strike Sage, that is till his hand slapped outward and stopped the ball with a jerk of pseudo-motion. The ball of glowing gold being held by fingers of crackling green and white lightning.

I myself was stunned as Sage held another’s force there before him, the ball of gold quickly changing into one of crackling green and white, just as it compressed on itself, becoming more concentrated.

“Teth!” Sage exclaimed, and the ball erupted outward at a blinding speed, Moving in a straight, directly line instead of a slow arch like Pleeyo’s attack had done, narrowly missing Pleeyo as she rolled out of its way in a dodge.

“Ha!” she mocked, but then Sage’s arm was turning, led by index and middle fingers. Pleeyo wondered for a moment what was going on, I was sure, just before two and two was put together and she turned in time to get the full force of her mutated power ball straight in the solar plexus.

It exploded against her, a rippling action spreading through her body from the force of it all, while an added electrical effect snapped and bit at Pleeyo as she was again knocked down and sent skidding along the mat to stop right at Sage’s feet, to which he looked down at her with his hands clasped behind his back. All he did then was raise an eyebrow again, but that enraged Pleeyo. She twisted her body as she screamed, trying to clip his feet out from under him, but he merely hopped upward and down again, and as she rose to her feet to give him a raking uppercut with her claws, Sage bent over backward nearly double, avoiding her blow, and then crumpled his legs and came to a cross-legged squat to avoid her follow up kick at where his head had been.

When he righted himself, it was only to at last uncoil, raising a hand to ward off her attack, a simple redirection of her momentum out of his way.

“Rarh!” Pleeyo growled. “FIGHT FAIR!”

But Sage simply stood his ground, redirecting her form, pushing her hands and feet out of the way, some of which turned her fully around, in which on the last occasion, he finished it off with a swift foot to her bum.

Again she screamed, and spinning, she brought both of her hands up over her head, her body arching powerfully, displaying off all her feminine glory with nothing more than three pasties

covering her nakedness. But then Sage reached forward as he uncoiled, and pushed his fingers beneath her sternum and lifted.

Everyone in the stands rose to their feet and surged forward, including those in the stand in shock of this as Pleeyo was lifted by three fingers from Sage's hand by her sternum, Sage staring at her eye to eye now as she spasmed lightly, unable to move more than a few jerking motions as Sage held her there.

Pleeyo was panicking as she was held there; the pain must've been intense! I could even feel it as she struggled to even breathe, her heart beating erratically.

"Ah... AHHHH!" she cried, her tail writhing at her backside.

Still holding her there, Sage slipped his fingers from beneath the ridge of her sternum, twisted his hand and slapped her in the same place he'd just been grabbing her. But the moment of his strike, I felt an upsurge of that strange power of his, and a concaved disk of shadow erupted at the striking point, followed by a flash of light, and she was sent careening out of the fighting mat, landing against the shield that the priests here were generating just before the stands where the crowd was standing. She hit the shield with so much force that one whole side flashed translucent pink.

She collapsed slowly to the ground just outside the mat.

"Ring out!" the referee called from his corner of the mat. "Opponent has ten seconds to return to the fighting mat. One... Two..."

There was a hush over the crowd, Sage watching where his opponent had fallen, and I rose further in an attempt to see where she was, standing on tip toe.

"...Six... Seven..." the ref continued, but just before he called eight, a great muscled arm slammed against the mat, just before Pleeyo's head rose above its edge with the semblance of a menacing snarl as she crawled onto the mat again. She was seething in pain, embarrassment and anger... three emotions she was best left not to feel during a fight.

Whenever she was in such conditions, she tended to act rashly.

And even as she rose to her feet, she was already powering up, a static charge transforming into lightning as she lifted her hands above her head, and I felt her power levels immediately skyrocket, charging up over and over as she drew from all her sources at once.

Her muscles engorged, her body swelled as she grew several inches, her breasts heaving as they amassed in thickness. She stomped on the ground, thundering the entire mat, and rising up on her toes, she levitated, and surged forward, flying at Sage even as he rose to meet her.

In her empowered state she was hammering at Sage, connecting blow after blow which he took, and then faced her again, determination in his face as he tried to block all her moves. Each of

her strikes to the head, chest and stomach were blocked or shrugged off, despite that I saw body react adversely as if she'd shattered every bone there.

And then she caught him, her arms folding about his body as she pressed him between her now mountainous breasts and her thick burly arms. They constricted about Sage, bent him almost double, rendering him immobile it seemed.

But then I saw him breathe in, and for a full minute, Pleeyo simply squeezed, trying to break that spine of his.

And then Sage reacted. His hands lifted, his fingers splaying open beneath her arms and then...

...He pinched her at where her massive shoulders met with her triceps.

"Ow," she hissed but Sage had just activated a reflex in her, and her arms loosened. His hands slapped outward, opening her arms full spread before he lanced upward and kned her in the face, his leg surging straight through the space between her breasts to connect with her chin.

She was thrust upward, and then Sage moved, seeming to disappear and reappear from one place to another, like an instantaneous teleport with a fraction of the power needed for it. He grabbed hold of her as she flew backward, her head grasped within one arm that suddenly thickened far fuller than it had been before to hold her, and he simply fell downward to drive her head first into the mat.

"Oh-ho! SUPLEXED!" Leski laughed, cringing in her seat beside the Emperor.

The force of the downward thrust punched Pleeyo's head right through the floor, and once done, Sage flipped himself back up to his feet, and pulling her back out by her tail, he then spear chucked her head first into the floor again to create another hole through it, and as her body fell, he flipped downward and drove his elbow straight into her mid back with all the weight of his falling.

At last he rose, and left her there to recover herself, and with her head stuck in the floor, she was growling, breasts mashed against the floor, as she planted hands and feet and wrenched her head out of the hole.

She looked left and then right with a growling roar, and then turning fully around, she screamed, her power levels flaring briefly with her anger.

Reaching backward, her hand clawed around air and a ball of golden light formed there before she threw it at Sage, followed by another, and then another, and more, over and over again as she tried to hit him once with that tirade of balls, all of them following after him as he dipped in dodged as he flew, blocked and deflected some of them, all the While Pleeyo set herself, rising her hands into the air, and she began to drive power into one more power ball.

But this power ball was far, far more intense than the previous two, and within moments it had grown massive!

“RAHHHHHHH!” she screamed, putting even her life energies into it I felt even as Sage deflected the last of the energy blasts and turned to face her.

“No!” Meniko cried behind me. “That’s far to much energy! She’ll destroy this planet!”

“Die, you mother fu-!” but her curse dies as the rumbling of her power caused the whole island to quake, and the brilliant sun of her power rose suddenly as she leapt upward into the air and then back down as it was thrown at Sage, who had taken on a more serious stance, his hands lifting to his side in a cupping motion, and immediately a spark of blue and green lit between his clawed fingers.

The ball continued to descend, Pleeyo egging it on as she pushed down on it with her power.

Sage’s hands then moved forward and rotated, and stomping on the ground, there was the echoing peal of thunder from his motion, and immediately lightning coursed up from the ground to enshroud him, surrounding the miniature ball and feeding it. There was a definite drain in the forces of the world all around me, and I felt a mote of my own energy travel down out of my body and into the ground, and felt it slide through the Earth away from me and up into Sage.

An aura, of all things to do, lit about him. *Such an ineffectual power! Why is he using Aura magics against Sorcery?!*

But in answer to that, Sage’s hands opened, leaving the ball there, his fingers trailing lines of light rapidly away from the ball which he wove into a disk directly around the ball. His fingers shifted direction and rotation to create a magic circle around that, repeating this rapidly over and over again until he had a sort of emblem surround by seven magic circles! All the while that he was doing this, his hands were moving blindingly, rapidly, unerringly, their rapidness making it look like he had six arms.

“He’s... Spell Weaving!” Meniko said behind me, and I heard the definite awe in even her voice.

But then Sage slammed his fingers through each of the disks, his aura changing color each time – Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet – an aura for each spectrum, and that disk took on that color of the aura. Then as a last piece of the casting, Sage’s hand slapped through the center of the ring, and I surged to my feet as he linked *seven* spell circles! Their colors exploded within the linked disks, and immediately transformed into white. The seven disks segmented, surrounding his wrist as they began to spin, the ball of crackling energy setting itself at his palm as it began to crackle in a celestial white.

“An *Eighth aura!!*” Meniko gasped, surging forward as I had, not believing that he was using aura magics at such a grade of power. “Great Maker.” I heard her whisper then. “What in the name of all that is holy is he doing?!”

Holding out his palm, fingers coiled around the raging white-hot ball on his palm, Sage held onto his arm holding the disk even as the great sun was about to strike the ground, his whole body turning white while blue and green lightning cascaded about him and into that hand. His hand with the ball was lifted, the segmented disk rotating blindingly fast as Sage leveled the blast at the power ball.

“Endeste’ Estás En Terra!”

Sage cried out the words, the words echoing solidly throughout the land, the words of power charging the very air around us to better enhance the spell he was using by giving it a name.

‘By all that is holy’ is right! I thought, hearing Meniko’s words inside my head, as the power of holy on a grade and level that even I have never felt surged from the earth, surged through Sage and turned him into an angelic being of energy, focused into the ring like a lens focusing sunlight and an ear-splitting scream, as if from a thousand voices, erupted from that disk and Sage’s hand as a beam of light so bright that in its passing it temporarily burned blue and purple motes onto my retina.

It lanced upward, caught Pleeoyo’s power ball, and disintegrated it in its passing, the beam cracking the shield set up by twelve priests, the combination of which should have been unbreakable! And looking up, all saw the beam slide ever outward till it pierced the very reaches of space, and was long from fading as it passed outward into the cosmos

Pleeoyo was watching all this, and when she turned, Sage was there directly in front of her.

She gasped and slid backward in surprise through the air at the being of waning sparkling light standing in midair before her, and she watched Sage’s hand rise ponderously, festoon atop her head, and then clench his fingers. She spasmed just before she was forced straight to the ground in a downward throw, so hard and heavy that she collapsed on her toes, was forced to her knees, and she fell over with a groan of pain as both her legs shuddered, spasmed and broke beneath her.

Then moving so fast it appeared as if he’d just teleported, Sage was there before her, and drawing back his hand, even as the ring he had been holding dissipated, he punched forward and knocked her right in the forehead and out of the ring.

“Ring out! The contestant has ten seconds...” the ref began, but then Sage’s hand, the same that had just held her head, opened up and a ball of lightning lanced from his palm to strike Pleeoyo, and she writhed in pain, screaming as she was electrocuted.

But it lasted only long enough to knock her out.

“Uh...” the Ref began. “And the winner is Lord Sage! By a ring out and a knock out!” he managed at last, his fervor rising as he slid back into his usual mannerism.

“Guards!” Meniko called at once. “Take Pleeoyo into custody for punishment!” and out of nowhere, the school guardians appeared, dressed in their white and gold armor, placing a collar

around Pleeyo's neck to seal her powers, and then bracing her hands behind her back in a pair of massive binding cuffs that were immediately linked to one another. They then hauled her up by either arm, and began dragging her to the tower, where her powers would be – again – sealed till she learns more responsibility.

It was then that I looked to Sage as he turned to us all, his jaw set, his eyes shining with an unknown light before he clapped his hands together, the sound of which sent a peal of thunder across the stadium, pressed them to his face and bowed sharply at the waist to those of us on the viewing stand before promptly leaving the mat.

Immediately repair bots scurried up to repair all the damage.

Lord Sage had disappeared shortly after his most spectacular match with Pleeyo. She herself had promptly been punished by Mother shortly thereafter, in which the last I'd felt of her was being reduced in power to be that of almost a first year.

People were still trying to figure out what Techniques Sage had employed, many of which they called 'legendary,' and even 'impossible.' They were trying to figure it all out, especially Noxi, who'd delved into collecting all the information that she could on him.

"Damn it! If he's not overloading my scanners, he's interfering with them!" I heard her mutter as she shook a pair of tech-specs. "Can't detect a damn thing!"

For an hour or so, I asked everyone if they'd seen him, but he'd positively disappeared, and something was interfering with several of my powers to detect where he was. His presence was still here, alright, I could feel that at least, but the feeling was vague. Normally I could detect anyone in the universe, and teleport myself to their exact location.

Sage, somehow, was blocking that.

It was only when I heard... something... remarkably *beautiful*... and that I followed the sound, did I finally find him.

Sage had placed himself on the furthest edge of the island, near my home actually, where the island ended abruptly on a cliff face overlooking the ocean. What drew me to him was the unearthly sound of a flute, a low, crystal clear sound that flowed out of the end of the instrument that he was playing, and at its holes along its length. It sang with the song of whales and the host of heaven, touching off emotions of beauty, peace and love.

Things and evil being could not truly convey.

I just stood there a short ways away, folding my hands together before me as he played, and I listened to quick twitters from the high notes which were simultaneously played with a long, wavy and constantly long note that sat as an undertone for the whole song. The flute he was

playing was longer than most flutes I'd seen, perhaps a meter or more long, thin, and with ornate gold designs in the silver piping. His long fingers pressed down on the many leavers and holes to coax out notes that stuck together inside the heart, waving emotions together inside my bosom as if it were a spell of command.

I felt as if I were going to swoon, and I sighed at last, feeling those emotions catch me, holding me, covering my heart as it fluttered.

Other than his fingers, only his tail moved and nothing else. Not even the touch of the wind blowing about us seemed to touch even his hair.

And then the song died, and I found my eyes opening, not knowing that they had closed in the first place.

"Is she alright?" he asked without preamble, in that usual soft tone of his, which rumbled in the back of his throat as he exhaled.

I had to mentally re-gather my thoughts and resort my emotions before I could answer.

"Not once Meniko gets done with her." I admitted and sat beside him, dangling my legs off the edge of the cliff. "She'll be punished again, sealed for sure this time. She's shown far too much wonton recklessness with her powers, and this most recent display of her power was the last straw for Meniko."

"So this isn't the first time she's done this?" he said, moving finally and turning to look at me, his hands fingering the long flute.

"We've honestly lost count." I said, and threw a stone off over the edge to land in the water. "I overheard Meniko mumbling something about breaking her."

"Such a willful youth." He said simply, picking at the grasses between her legs.

"Willful is an understatement." I laughed, and pushed my hair back out of my eyes. "But I don't envy the punishment she is about to endure."

Sage turned to look at me. "What is the punishment?"

"Meniko has only two punishments." I said, throwing another rock out over the cliff. "Loss of credits, and sealing. Pleeyo will be enduring both tonight. She's being reduced a whole year in the school, that, and she'll be collared, and all her might and magic will be sealed from her till she can earn the ability to use them again."

"Have you... ever been sealed?" he asked, and I turned to look into those solid green eyes of his in surprise. Then recovering myself...

“No. I have not. Meniko let me witness a student being punished as such once, and just witnessing it was enough to keep me in line till I matured a little more. But even so, she’s like a mother to me. I don’t think she’d have the heart to seal me.”

There was a quiet between the two of us as the sun continued to set along the horizon. It was an odd moment for me, sitting beside this male cat that was large, broad shouldered strong... perhaps as strong as me, even. He held the sort of ease of defeating opponents as Genohn has shown so far.

“What was that you were playing? It was beautiful.” I asked.

“The composition’s name is Dragon’s Song. It’s... my first attempt, and I’ve been working on it for quite a long time. I mean it to be my opus of sorts.”

“It was wonderful...” I said softly, looking to the pipe for a moment or two, biting my lower lip in thought.

“Sage?” I prompted then, and he turned those green eyes toward me, which in the glowing darkness, pierced it with ease. “What was that power you used? It felt like Aura magics.”

“It was.” He admitted, still looking at me, into my eyes rather, and piercing me with that gaze. I saw a smidge of a smile cross his feline features as he watched me.

“But, Aura magics have always been so ineffectual. The Mystic League only teaches it as extra curricular because it has such a low level of output.

“I find that to be the general consensus here.” He said at last. “To which then I have a terrible advantage over everyone here, because you have no defense against it. Aura magics act as a corner stone, or basis for many other magics where I come from. You use it as a foundation and expound upon it.

“Many of the abilities used here would be far more potent if one were to develop one’s auras first. To fuel and empower your other abilities.”

“Yes... that I wondered about. Before today, many of us thought there were only seven auras. You showed us an eighth.” I leaned to face him more, lying on my side and bracing myself with one hand.

“Yes. Seven principal Auras, peaked by an eighth in which resides all others, with each aura having its own different effects and abilities. But adversely, there are also Shadows, all in opposition to the auras. Seven Shadows, peaked by an eighth.

“One uses an aura to control a shadow, and a shadow to control an aura. That effect you saw is known as the ‘Power of God on Earth.’ It is a ‘Master Technique’ of my Order.”

“Yes,” I managed after awhile. “It was pure Holy. Enough to split a planet.”

“Enough to counter Pleeyo’s Power Ball.” He corrected. “Created by ‘borrowing’ a speck of power from all those gathered around me, and with so many super powers in one place, the effect was quite stunning.”

“It was.” I admitted, and we both fell quiet again for a short while, during which the sun set beyond the horizon. The darkness was growing heavier before I finally broke the silence.

“Sage,” I prompted, and looking up, I saw that he was still watching me.

“Yes?” his voice was ever so kind and soft. It was hard to believe that this gentle creature was capable of such dark and vicious powers. It was perhaps that knowledge, or the feeling of those powers, which cast so many to be afraid of him and to avoid him.

“H-how...” I began, pausing while gathering my thoughts. “How is Illia doing?”

Sage looked down away from me and out over the glittering sea.

“I understand that she was your best friend.” I nodded. “No amount of ‘I’m sorry’ can account for what had happened to her. But despite that, Illia’s mind is whole for the first time in what I understand would be over a decade. It confuses me that of all the psychics who’d examined her, all the doctors who’d looked over her, as to why they did not repair that fractioned mind of hers.

He then looked straight at me. “Did I do a bad thing repairing her mind?”

“N-no!” I exclaimed waving a hand to ward that thought off. “It’s just that... well, she was so happy. I think none of the doctors and psychics could bare to remove what can be considered a gift. To never feel pain, to be the type of person that bad things wash over you. To never know fear.

“Illia was truly fearless. Everyone looked up to her because of it. That’s why she was so well loved.”

Sage nodded. “If she were any other person other than a warrior, then I myself perhaps could have abided by and let her stay like that. But it’s dangerous for a person like her to have no fear. Those who have no fear have no caution, those who have no caution charge into situations without thinking about its outcome. Illia is a truly powerful individual. Truly comparable to even you, Rae.

“Among a sea of stars that is the Mystic League, you are like a sun your power blazes so strongly. Illia was like the moon in comparison. It still pains me that I was the cause for her state. I will only be able to breathe easily once she has regained her old self. But she has a lot of growing up to do now.”

He chuckled.

“On my world, we consider it a gift to relive one’s life again, to right the wrongs and correct the regrets in your life. Illia is getting a chance to do that as new memories merge with old ones.” His blackened lips broadened into a smile. “We had a birthday for her this morning. She said it was her birthday. It is amazing to see the flurry of stored up emotions whizzing through her head, being experienced one at a time.”

“Her birthday? I wish I was there.” I mused.

“It was an impromptu one. She wanted nothing more than a birthday cake. Said she never had one before. Namah got her a cupcake from the commissary with a candle in it. She was ecstatic.”

“I’m happy for her.” I said at last, and then blinked as I felt him take my free hand, and I turned to him just as he rose the back of my hand to his lips and kissed it.

“What was that for?” I asked, blinking again.

“For talking with me.” He made to rise, but my hand closed around his and I held it for a moment, and then moved forward to kiss his wrist and then nuzzle his arm with my forehead before rising beside him.

“And that?” he asked.

“For... being so kind. You seem to give with little regards for yourself. I’ve been so many places in this Great Wide Universe that I know how rare and precious of a gift that is.

He was so large, built like a siege tank, and despite all that, he was so gentle. He brushed my cheek and kissed my forehead. A longing kiss, caressing my face with his lingering fingers.

“I must go. I will need to be at my best if I am to prove myself worthy of challenging you, Rae Iksaki.” he managed a smile and backed off away from me. Mistakenly, right off the cliff.

I gasped as he fell, and I rushed to the edge as he fell, but only to watch as he twisted into a dive, and with a flare of that aura magic he used, he turned at once ninety degrees to fly right over the water, and then shot off back up into the air, curling back upward by me and waving good bye as he made his way back toward where he was staying.

In spite of myself, I gave a small wave and a smile back. But that smile slowly faded as I remarked on his words.

‘I will need to be at my best if I am to prove myself worthy of challenging you.’

My heart sank a little.

It created a bit of a dampener on a relationship, knowing that your new friend will eventually be fighting you. Giving off a sigh, I rose into the air myself, but flew home slowly, remaining

upright most of the time till I arrived back at my sea front home. I really didn't feel like walking that night. And in the morning, I vowed that I would start doubling my training routine.

Chapter 6: The Strength of a Warrior

I awoke early in the morning, before the sun had risen and prepared for my daily jog. But unlike every day prior, this time I donned some gravity bracers, gravity anklets, and a gravity belt, and stepping outside, set their weights to their maximum settings. Hundreds of metric tons suddenly weighed down on me and I sank into the sand a little, and I had to charge my power up a little to keep me from sinking down to my knees. Then pulling up the hood of my sweatshirt up over my head – the sweatshirt cut open to display my midriff – and my simple swimsuit for a bottom, I took to jogging.

A jog for me was a full on tilt for everyone else in the league, with the possible exceptions of very few other individuals. Illia had been one of those few people. Seventy five kilometers per hour was nonetheless pretty fast, but during that jog, I remarked minutely upon my friend.

I was... saddened, at what had happened to my friend, and a little angry that it'd been Sage who'd done it, but I know that it'd been an accident; something that'd happened because there was an untreated mental instability... I didn't really know if I should hate or thank Sage for revealing that trait and forcing her to relive her fears.

But he's trying ardently to try and right the wrong... and to see him collapse after spending himself in the task of resetting her mind... if only Namah had been there... but sadly she was off planet.

Every day since, and every evening since, Sage had gone to her, spent a couple hours with her, and helped her cope with the fears as they passed over her one by one. He was a healer of the highest order, and he cared for those who came into his care. It was a trait to admire...

He was so kind, so loving... and for someone who was nearly Illia's size in that hybrid form of his, so incredibly gentle.

I felt a warmth on my cheeks and my breasts as I blushed at the thought of him passing his hands over my thighs and breasts, and I shook my head, jostling out some of the sweat in my mane as I continued to jog.

In the early morning mists, with my feet running in the surf as I ran, I felt quite alone and at peace as I occasionally looked over my shoulder toward the rising sun. It was a beautiful sun, one that I'd grown up with, which cast all the moons over my opposing shoulder into a brilliant array of color. And to top it all off, my body was burning with the exertion. It took quite a lot to make my body *'exert'* itself anymore, but it was nice to know that it was still possible.

I jogged in warm up for the first couple of hours, and then for the second two hours sped forward into my own full on tilt; a speed that was nearly the speed of sound on this planet. I ran along the shore, and then up over the land, speeding across plains, and then over hills, then up over a mountain through the freezing snow cap, leapt off its peak, and then landed at its base with a

lunge heavy enough to collapse a hill before I leapt forward again and made my way home. The last fifteen minutes were done in a slower jog to warm down as I came into the Mystic League's school grounds for a late breakfast before the next phase of the tournament.

The ceramic tiles of the courtyards of the Mystic League were constructed to be able to handle thousands of metric tons of weight apiece, built over a framework of supports to help cushion any blows. It was made to take the footsteps, and falls and blows of students during combat training, but despite that, when I entered the courtyard, it was with no less than five thousand tons weighing down on my usual five hundred pounds of natural body weight.

But I needed to weight train, and power train, so I stepped up my power levels a little higher to help lift me so that the stones didn't depress with every step I took. This had the added effect of allowing my powers to be tested as well, like flexing one's magical muscles.

'One grows in a skill through the use of a skill.' Mother Meniko would say often to strengthen the resolve of students – including myself – when we were unfamiliar or scared to use a new skill that was being taught.

As I walked past the student quarters toward the open-air commissary, however, I saw a great crowd of students and faculty gathering there. Curious as ever, I veered over to it to find out what was going on.

I would tap a student, smile at them when they turned around, and seeing me they would promptly move out of the way. I only had to do this a few times before a general murmuring through the students got them to move out of the way for me so I could see, but once I'd gotten into the center of the ring their collected bodies formed, I found myself looking at quite a spectacular sight.

There was a great cat sunning himself atop a flat space of rock in the center of one of the small gardens dotting the courtyard. But not just any cat, this one was *immense!* Even with him lying down on his front paws, his forward body raised above his lower body – which rested on its side – stood as tall as any standard humanoid from the top of their heads. Even as I approached him as he laid in the direct sunlight coming over the roof of the school, I could see that in that position, the great male cat could look down on me.

His fur was frost white, and there was an elaborately beautiful stripe system decorating his body. His long tail waved lazily only at its end, tapping the great stone the cat rested upon lightly while it gave a deep rumbling sound like an idling engine.

That was a purr?!

One of his ears flicked briefly to swat a fly away, while his forward facing paw flexed, and several of the students backed away as long, hooking ebon claws slid out of its thick, wide paw and hooked on the edge of the stone slab briefly. When he withdrew his paw, it scraped out some shallow grooves out of the stone!

“What is it?” I asked to no one in particular, pulling my hood from off my head, my ears giving a gentle wiggle as I looked at this giant cat with awe.

“It’s feline!” came Noxi’s voice as she slid in beside me, her ears flattening against the back of her head as she pulled out her holo computer and began scanning before she pushed her large glasses up over her eyes. “Some sort of quadrapedal feline of unknown origin. Carbon based, B-positive compatible blood type, and... and... Great Maker! It has a muscle density that would render most Power Leaguers, and even yours and Illia’s to shame!”

“It looks like a Casid Tiger... but of white fur?” one of the faculty suggested.

“Kitty!” one of the younger students exclaimed.

“And it has an incredibly immense power level too.” Noxi spoke then. “Off the chart! Damn it! If so many of you super powers are coming around me now, I need to upgrade this damn thing.” She groaned and slapped it against its side in an attempt to get it to work better.

“But where did it come from?” I asked.

“Second star on the right and straight on till morning.”

Silence permeated everything, and I half jumped despite that I’d seen who’d said it, or rather what.

That great cat had actually voiced those words, in a vaguely familiar voice, but in a much deeper tone.

“Apparently, if I have a crowd here,” the cat said, speaking in a broken common with its feline mouth and tongue rolling the R’s of his speech. “And if I am being analyzed, then the time for my sun bathing is over.”

Just then the tiger opened his eyes, and a pair of piercing green eyes shone out from within those wide angling sockets. But strangely enough, those eyes glowed a dark green within green.

“Lord Sage.” I breathed as the great tiger rose to his feet, and the crowd all moved quickly back from him as he stepped off the rock and onto the courtyard cobblestones and then shook himself to shake the dust out of his pelt.

The cobble stones gave way slightly to his weight, and I blinked as I stepped back. At his shoulder, he was even taller than me.

“Miss Iksaki, Miss Noxi.” The beast nodded to each of us in turn. “Would either of you like to join me for breakfast?”

I saw Noxi's jaw work, opening and closing repeatedly as Sage fixed her with that gaze. She seemed rooted on the spot, and turning to look at her, I lifted a hand and placed it on her muscled shoulder, which calmed her enough to answer.

"N-n-no... No." she managed, and Sage turned his feline features to me.

"And you, Miss Iksaki?"

I looked to Noxi again, and then managed to smile at this massive beast. "I'd love to. I was about to go there myself."

Sage gestured with a paw, his toes spreading open briefly to indicate a direction. I nodded quickly and stepped in line with him. I looked sidelong to him several times as he stepped beside me, and looking down at his feet, I watched as the stones gave less and less depressions to his weight, till eventually I couldn't even hear his foot steps.

Such a remarkable creature.

"You surprise me, Lord Sage." I said at last. "You don't seem to be the sort to show off."

He chuckled, which sounded like it was combined with a deep rumbling purr as he did, shaking his great maned head briefly before looking to me. "I wasn't. A cat, as a multi-universal truth, loves sun bathing, and I thought that with me amidst a place of the spectacular and the super real, that for me to indulge myself in my feline form would've been ok.

"I didn't think that it would've created such a stir."

Just then, a couple of students who'd been coming out of their dorm together gasped and stumbled back at the sight of the great beast walking beside their star student.

"Though I am beginning to see that there are still surprises... Even here." Sage sighs, and then I have to slow my step to watch in amazement at his transformation as he pushes off from the ground with his front paws, his form immediately shifting into that massive Battle Form that had broken Illia. That form then changed immediately thereafter, shrinking, compressing, becoming more humanoid as a black goop erupted out of his every pore to create a body suit, which then shifted into his usual sleeveless jerkin, priestly loin cloths and baggy black pants. But not before I had a chance to see his cluster.

My lips pursed in thought of that in me, sliding in an out... and I indulged in a daydream over it.

I shook my head to clear it of those thoughts when I realized what I was doing, and smiling skipped forward a little to come back into step with him. The strange, strange creature known as Sage was truly a sight to see, his stature taller than nearly every last person around here, and yet he was the one who'd walk around others, and always with a smile that crinkled the corners of his wide angling eyes.

His eyes, those wide, wise, exotic, angling eyes, always seemed to smile and laugh as he did. I soon found myself walking a wee bit closer to him.

Was I attracted to him? What is this force, this power that keeps drawing me to him? Or perhaps... was he drawn to me?

We entered into the commissary together, and gathering our food – fruit for me, and a high protein diet for him – I sat down, the table creaking with the weight of my gravity weights, and I again exerted my power to hold myself up so that the effects of my body wouldn't damage anything, but my strength was still tested by the continual weight. Sage sat across from me, I, so far, being the only friendly face to him here.

Well... there *was* Equis... but she wasn't here.

Our table was remarkably empty at the moment.

But he stayed, and spoke with me over breakfast, and the two of us simply conversed about simple things, not really talking about the tournament. There was still a chance he'd fail to meet me, after all. Genohn was still in the line up... and he was perhaps the only one, other than Illia, in whom I'd've given stern conscious thought to. But if he could defeat Illia so easily...

As time grew closer to the start of the finals of the tournament, I began to grow quieter and quieter, stirring my fruits in their sauce.

"You seem quiet all of a sudden." His voice came to my hearing, and blinking I looked up at him sharply. I was touched by the sound of genuine concern in his voice.

"I... uh... yes." I answered, blushing slightly.

"Something bothering you, Miss Iksaki?"

"Not truly." I managed a smile for him, and found myself looking into those aged eyes of his. They held such wisdom, such a beautiful light... for someone who looked so young.

My tongue licked the backs of my teeth as I looked at him, and then I realized what I was doing, blushed again and turned away.

"Just thinking about the future." I answered at last and I pressed my thighs together to try to stem off the urge I was beginning to have.

"The far future... or the near future?"

I blanched, my lips working briefly as I looked at that exotic, beautiful cat, and my lips pursed. "I..."

Then there was a chime. A repeating pinging sound from way up high to signify that the tournament was starting again. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Some other time, perhaps.” Sage smiled, and picking up his tray, walked around the edge of the table to help me up with one hand.

Such a gentleman.

“Allow me to walk you to your seat.” He said quietly, and gestured with one hooking arm forward. Again, I blushed, and moved to hook my arm in his.

He didn't really say a word as he escorted me right up to the box, and at least inclined his head to the assembled members there, before retreating. I took my seat as he went to the fighter's bench to sit with Makahn and Genohn. I noted that Makahn was looking at Sage with an almost seething hatred.

Sage sat there completely nonplussed from Makahn's withering glare while students and spectators slid into the seats in the bandstand.

Soon, the priest-referee made his way onto the now altered mat, which formed a bowl now. Standing on the edge of the mat before the three remaining fighters.

“Well met, fine warriors.” He called out so that everyone could hear, and the crowd hushed in order to do so. “But we come to an impasse! There are *three* fighters, and only two may fight at a time, so the judges have ruled that one of these warriors shall have a bye. So the time comes to it again, gentlemen, to take your places by random draw.” Another pair of priests appeared, carrying a small pouch between them.

“Inside are only three balls. The fighter to take the third ball will be able to rest while the other two fighters eliminate one or the other. Gentlemen, please reach in and take your choosing.”

The three fighters reached in, and Genohn and Sage both entered a hand together and retrieved a ball, but Makahn waited till Sage had gotten out of the way before he reached in. They then, one by one showed their selections to an administrator, and soon the holographic displays on either end of the fighting area displayed the next match ups.

I was surprised as to how it finally wound up...

Fight Ten: King Makahn –Vs- Lord Sage Preypacer
Bye: Lord Genohn

“The selections have been decided by Fate!” the priest-referee stated.

“The first fight shall be against King Makahn of Tamsleint and Lord Sage. Lord Genohn shall stand in waiting. Makahn and Sage, if you will please kindly take your corners; your fight will begin in five minutes.”

The arena's configuration now was with the corners rising upward, and the center dipping downward, creating a deep smooth bowl, with the only level portions of the arena the corners, and the lowered center. Everything else was an upright hill.

Sage stood in one corner, taking his jerkin off by it simply reverting into black goop again and retracting into his body, and Makahn, in his tarre – sort of like a kilt but it fell all the way down to the ankles – also bare chested, glared at him.

I didn't know why he was hating Sage, only that I knew that there was hate there. He was about to do something rash.

The priest/referee was standing on a platform at one edge due to the terrain. As he took his position, he pointed first at Makahn.

“Fighter ready?” he called and Makahn nodded, punching his fist into his palm with the sound of cascading thunder.

The priest then pointed at Sage.

“Fighter ready?”

Sage merely nodded.

“Then... FIGHT!”

Makahn leapt down immediately, skittering forward to get into the ring, ready to fight, but Sage merely stepped forward, and walked down the edge of the ring. The odd thing was, was that he always remained level with the incline! Instead of being straight up and down all the time to keep in with the pull of gravity, it was like gravity moved for him as he walked calmly down into the very center of the ring, planted his feet, and held his hands behind his back, while facing Makahn.

He didn't even bother putting up a fighting stance.

Makahn skipped back and forth, his fists upraised while Sage watched him. I could hear Makahn growling from back here already.

“Grr... **why don't you fight?!**” He hollered

Sage remained placid-faced and calm, and merely blinked in answer.

“**ANSWER ME!!**” Makahn bellowed, and still Sage remained quiet, hands at his back still, watching Makahn balancing on his toes and using his tail as a counterweight.

But Sage didn't answer, and to force him to speak, Makahn lunged outward to slam Sage to the floor with a swinging fist to his ear, but Sage merely turned his head to one side and shifted his body with a snap of motion, and Makahn's fist traveled through empty air.

Makahn followed it up with repetitive strikes, and Sage merely twisted this way and that, keeping his body free from harm, and above all, in the exact same place as it was before. His footing did not move.

My lips pressed together as I watched this, seeing Sage make a fool of Makahn, who was the crowd favorite. Even now, the crowd was whooping and hollering for Makahn... but all around me, here and there, there was the occasional voice for Sage.

Makahn was definitely losing his temper... I've never seen him lose his cool, but this was bringing forth a deeply repressed, instinctual feral temperament that some Aphkei were capable of, and which even Sage was forced to react to.

Makahn moved from his punches and kicks to raking claws, and I watched as Sage actually lifted a hand to block his movements, but remarkably kept the other hand behind his back. I wondered, what on Earth Sage was doing... *why* was he tormenting Makahn like this? But then I looked into Sage's eyes, saw the intensity, and only when Sage moved at last from his spot did I understand why.

Sage was learning how Makahn fought.

That learning paid off as Sage broke through all of Makahn's defenses and struck with an oddly-shaped fist, one that had his middle knuckle projected forward and rapped Makahn firmly on the sternum and then withdrew.

Again there was the oddity on the space time continuum as time slowed down, and I saw Makahn freeze briefly as Sage uncoiled, just before the force of Sage's strike transferred into Makahn's body, and he was knocked backward to slam firmly onto the flat of his back on the incline of the mat.

The crowd gave a tumultuous "OH!" as they watched Makahn slapped down so readily.

I rose from my seat and moved forward to see Makahn as he laid there, and then spasmed around the point where Sage had struck him; legs squeezing together up toward his chest, while his hands clutched at the air above his heart. Makahn then exhaled sharply, and spat out a spray of blood, and then rolled over onto one hand and knees, panting while Sage remained standing patiently for him, watching him with those same intense eyes of his.

Makahn spit out another mouth full of blood, but this time it was intentional before he turned to look over his shoulder at Sage, his eyes darkening visibly as he growled. He then rose and placed himself into a ready stance, his movements like that of a marionette being controlled from above.

“No one will think less of you if you give up, Makahn.” Sage said quietly, and I could hear the concern in his voice urging that Makahn do as he says.

Please give up Makahn, I thought, my hands squeezing the guard rail around the royal box till it squealed underneath my grip and tightened into compressed steel.

“I never loose!” Makahn screamed, and then leapt at Sage across the massive mat, claws at his sides.

What happened next was almost too quick to see, even for me.

Sage’s hand leapt up and took the wrist that Makahn had led with to tear Sage’s throat out with, and gave Makahn’s arm a subtle twist. Makahn’s momentum was redirected before Sage’s other hand lifted to grab Makahn’s head and haul him upward over Sage’s body, only to come crashing down on Sage’s upraising knee directly into Makahn’s sternum again. Makahn raised upward, was spun by another redirection, and then kicked in the small of the back.

Makahn was lanced forward to land face first into the incline of the mat with enough force to dislodge several of the plates around his body.

The crowd again gave out a gasp as their hero was slapped downward again, and Sage simply reset his stance and waited for Makahn.

“Please give up. I will not loose this fight, Sir Makahn. I will win by whatever means are necessary.”

Makahn upon hearing this, however, lurched himself out of the ground with both hands, snarling like a feral beast, saliva mixing with blood as they strained through his sharp canines, and whirling himself around, he rushed Sage again, fitting all of his training in the simple act of destroying Sage.

Sage swatted his blocks away with both hands now, being met by one of the hard core battle rages a trained fighter can place themselves within, moving Makahn’s hands about him, and occasionally throwing Makahn away, to which Makahn would roll out of and attack again.

Every time Sage struck, it was always to Makahn’s sternum, he waiting for the opportunity to come, and then striking swiftly and unchallenged each time, to rap Makahn forcefully on his sternum.

But this seemed to only fuel Makahn’s rage, but I nonetheless saw Makahn rubbing that spot whenever he got the chance...

He was also being more and more cautious.

Sage hadn't even broken a sweat, he wasn't even breathing hard! Everything that he was at the moment infuriated Makahn, and Makahn wasn't about to give up. Repeating combos didn't land a single blow, claw rakes failed to sever even hairs, and other than blocking Makahn's moves, Sage had yet to be struck.

It was a fight that, even in my mind, was thought to go on forever. Till a single, mistake was made:

Makahn lunged again, his body sailing toward Sage in a body check motion, both his arms rising to strike down on his head. But then Makahn stopped in mid air right before Sage with a lurch, his double-fisted strike falling on Sage's upraised arm, and a collective gasp went through the whole of the stadium.

Makahn looked down with a gasp and a look of astonished disbelief.

A palm strike had struck him directly in the chest, but at the last moment it had transformed in a claw attack, which had dug Sage's own long, retractable claws into Makahn's flesh, hooking around his sternum, piercing his flesh, and holding Makahn firmly in place.

Makahn managed a moment to look into Sage's eyes, those intense, hardened eyes, just before Makahn was hauled upward above Sage and throttled. What should have been a throw stopped at a point right above Sage's body, and transformed into a juggle as Sage began to beat upward into Makahn's continuously falling body, and every time with that fist with the pronounced knuckle.

I rapidly lost count as to how many times Sage stuck Makahn, juggling him up long enough to land up to three other blows – *or was it more?* – At a time. A hundred, perhaps a thousand strikes later, Sage mercifully ended it with a kick shot straight up his own body, his foot moving for the first time in the whole match to smack Makahn right in the chest again. This kick then arched around and down, and Makahn fell to the ground with a thunderous crash.

Beaten...

Sage stood rock still, looking down at his fallen opponent, and waited for the Ref-priest to finally count Makahn out, but only after someone had to smack him upside the head to remind him of his duty.

But then I was amazed as Sage moved forward, bent down, and hauled Makahn up over his shoulder, not an undignified slinging of his whole body over a shoulder, which he looked able to do, but rather it was like what a soldier would do to carry a wounded comrade off the field of battle.

The crowd remained deafly silent while the mat reset to flat as Sage carried Makahn off toward the medical tent.

I arrived just in time to see Sage placing Makahn's limp and unconscious body into a cot, and kneeling beside him, planted a single hand on his chest, I saw a soft blue glow suffuse his hand and Makahn's chest.

I winced at hearing Makahn's ribs cracking as they reset, and his chest pushed outward rapidly, but remarkably Makahn didn't seem to be pained at it. That was a trait of an expert healer to be able to do that and not even discomfort the patient. Sage then touched Makahn's forehead, and Makahn fell further into sleep before Sage pulled a blanket over him and then rose to his feet.

When he turned and saw me, he stopped.

Those eyes... those pure green within green eyes, that had so recently been so intense and focused, were now apologetic and filled with compassion.

He looked to Makahn, his hand twitching briefly toward him before whatever gesture he was about to do stopped, and he looked to me again.

Then, without saying another word he walked forward, still watching me, looking away only after he'd passed me by.

I stood there, watching his retreating muscular back for a time, amazed and attracted to this enigma all at once. And when he disappeared from view, I continued to stare at the last place he'd been.

"Will Rae Iksaki please return to the Royal booth for the final match?" A voice came over the loud speaker, shocking me out of my repose.

Not wishing to miss this, I hurried and took my place.

I took my seat even as the announcer continued, and I waved off a concerning touch from Leski as she reached over to me to see if I was ok.

"Lord Sage has informed the judges that he is willing to continue after such a spectacular bout." The priest-ref was saying, even as the one hundred yard square mat transformed itself into an uneven terrain of platforms and pillars, with a very great portion of it all sinking down to their lowest points far below.

"In this corner, weighing at over five hundred and eighty pounds... Headmaster of the Demon League, Lord Genohn!"

I held my breath as Genohn stepped onto his starting position, facing Sage, his face placid. Of all the people in this competition, aside from Illia, Genohn was perhaps the person I had thought

would meet me in the final bout. He was powerful and skilled as well, and apparently a new favorite as the crowd applauded him.

“And in this corner, weighing at over twelve hundred pounds...” The ref paused, and then looked at his record sheet, and then at Sage, who nodded that that insane weight was correct – I blanched – and the ref continued. “Weighing at over twelve hundred pounds, Lord Sage!”

The applause for Sage was perhaps a tad less enthusiastic as it was for Genohn. Even I hoped that Genohn would be the one to meet me, but from what I’ve seen of Sage’s skill and determination, I didn’t think that that was likely.

“Fighter ready?” The ref said, a hand toward Sage, and Sage nodded. The ref then turned to Genohn. “Fighter ready?”

The question hung in the air... and I sat there, still holding my breath as Genohn actually seemed to consider it!

And consider it...

And consider it....

Genohn turned suddenly, stepping to his marker on his side of the Arena, a wooden panel bearing his name, and reaching behind it, took out a white flag, hung it on two pegs over his name on the marker, and pulled the white cloth of the flag over his name.

“Ah... ah this is amazing, ladies and gentlemen!” The ref says into his loud speaker as Genohn bows toward Sage, one hand across his chest. “Lord Genohn surrenders!”

My mouth dropped as the ring immediately reset itself, and Genohn walked forward, the hand that had been on his chest now in the air as he approached, and Sage met him in the center of the flattened ring.

I leaned forward and tilted my head, wanting to hear this conversation.

“Well, met, fellow wild card.” Genohn said in his low resonating voice as the two of them shook hands.

“Well met, sir.” Sage said, nodding as he understood Genohn’s words. “I am sorry that we could not have matched wits on the field. I’d hoped to have challenged you.”

“Not today. You want to fight our Rae far too much, Lord Sage, far more than I would, and unlike you, I can only choose paths of fate... not alter them. Every time I chose a path, I found it altering right before me to your advantage. I didn’t care to blow up this planet in an attempt to defeat you, so I shall let you have the win and avoid the beating I would’ve received in the process.”

“Perhaps a game of chess then.”

“I’ll hold you to it.” Genohn said, and then bowed again. Sage returned the bow and the two turned away from one another and left the ring.

There were some complaining in the crowds as Genohn was met by Lyamia, and the two exchanged the briefest of touches as Genohn continued forward to where the Demon Leaguers were staying.

Sage, however, seemed to step off the mat and disappeared.

I rose, looking around for him, and not seeing him; I tried to sense him out, and was wholly stunned when I could not.

Nonetheless, I rose, and began looking for him while the crowd around me dispersed.

I found Sage later that evening, but only by sheer presence of following the sound of that hauntingly beautiful flute playing of his. When I finally did find him, I stood by, hands folded neatly before me while I listened to him play.

There was a sort of paradox in the air at that moment. Sage himself was filled with a horde of negative emotions, but the expression of the music was so calming and so beautiful... and that beauty was slowly, but surely, negating the darker things in Sage.

It was like how some people go work out after an argument, or go write, or play, create, do anything after feeling something bad, that they work their darker thoughts into something good.

What sort of creature was Sage that he could play something so beautiful? Was the darkness inside him *that* intense? Whatever things there were in him that were bright and beautiful; however, they seemed to sufficiently suppress the darkness...

A creature of lights and shadows...

Sage stopped his playing after a very long stint, in which I felt so enlightened, and so at peace that I felt a loss at him stopping.

Sage turned his head to look at me out of the corner of one eye from over his shoulder; his ears twitched lightly to angle toward me.

“Thank you for listening.” He said quietly, holding his flute in both hands.

“It was my pleasure,” I said, stepping forward as Sage seemed to let go of his flute, and the thing hung in midair for a moment before a ripple in space claimed the instrument and it disappeared. I was sorry to see it go.

“I’m sorry, Rae. I’ve disturbed the peace in this world of yours, and have placed you ill at ease with my presence. Command me to leave, and I shall leave.”

He looked up at me, his eyes stating all his seriousness in his words, and for a moment I considered doing so. But then I found myself entranced by those beautiful, exotic eyes of emerald green, and squatting down in front of him, I reached out and took his hand.

“You and I have a bargain, Lord Sage. Do not think that you can get out of it that easily.” I smiled at him, and then helped him to his feet.

Just then, with him so close to me, I was struck at exactly how large this creature was. He looked well down at me, this eight foot tall creature of so much strength and might, and I blushed as I looked up at him. Blushed so hard that I felt a burning in my cheeks before I gasped and looked down, only to see his hands holding mine.

He was so gentle...

“I’ve traveled a very long ways in my life, Rae Iksaki. I believe that I will be hard pressed to ever find a creature as pure as you again.”

My blush actually deepened, and I bit my lower lip before looking up at him, seeing the way his mane fell about his face and eyes to either side of his head; the play of light and shadows showing a creature of exotic beauty.

“You honor me, Lord Sage.” I managed at last, and retracted one of my hands to cover my cheek to hide the blush.

“Sage.” He said, and wrapped both his hands around one of mine. “Just Sage.”

I... I don’t know how it really happened. It just did. Like he and I were mutually attracted to one another like two opposite forces of energy. Like one migrating to the other. He was with me the rest of the evening, his presence transforming from intense warrior into that of a gentle caregiver within moments. It... it was exhilarating to feel a presence transform like that.

I’ve never felt the like! Never knew anyone to do such a thing. Always before it was a presence, and it was always the same. Presences change, but it takes an age for it to happen. It was as if Sage had multiple minds... multiple spirits. Heaven knows... it may be true. He already had multiple bodies.

The small human, the noble tiger man, the viscous tiger beast, and the gentle giant.

So very strange...

We had journeyed to my home where I'd changed out of my work out clothes, detached my gravity weights and took a quick shower before dressing in something a little more flattering... a light blue shoulderless shirt and panties, with white slacks.

The panties came from the side of my underwear drawer that I used only when I wanted to feel sexy... sexy for someone else, and with the low hip of my slacks, the pink straps of my panties arched high over either of my hips.

When I arrived in my living room once I'd dressed, I found Sage setting my table with water goblets, and food he'd managed to get from my food replicator. What he created smelt positively delicious.

Sage's appearance likewise had changed. Somehow without ever leaving my home, he'd seemed to have cleaned himself, and likewise put on a more regal attire. Loose-fitting black pants, a white silk shirt, and a double breasted jacket with the front sides left opened and pinned to his shoulders, and his shirt undone a few buttons.

He looked regal and refined... just like the lords I'd met but without the pomp and flair.

We ate dinner together before going out for a walk around campus on a tour.

I don't know how we wound up on this date, but again... it just seemed... to happen.

After an hour, I was holding his hand. After two, I was holding his arm, and after three, I was leaning my head against that broad shoulder of his.

"And what's this building called." He asked. His attention always seemed to be on me. He made me feel for a time like I was the only person in his world. It drew me closer, and I hugged his arm tighter.

"The high energy facility. It's where we practice high level magics under a regulated atmosphere. If a spell goes wrong there, then it can be contained without blowing the planet up. And sometimes if a spell goes right too..."

"Sounds dangerous."

I nodded, allowing him to guide me around.

"We do a lot of research at this school too. That is one of the facilities that allows for it."

Our conversation seemed to stay that way for all that time, till at last we came to the dormitories... and Sage's temporary apartment.

"I find this awkward, Rae... Usually it's customary for me to be dropping you off... instead of the other way around."

I chuckled. “I think I can walk home without being bothered by muggers, Lord Sage, but it’s very sweet of you to think that way. But if I may, I’d like to see your quarters here. I’m still trying to figure out how you were able to put so large a space into such a tiny room.”

Sage smiled down at me and lifted his hand, and with a wave, the door’s glyphs flared to life and the door opened.

“My people have a magic,” he began as we entered. We didn’t have to leave our shoes by the door, because neither of us was wearing any. “That we call Temporal Magics. The manipulation of space and time, and changing the rules of the universe within a certain area.

“These red obelisks create the borders, and their glyphs work with one another to manipulate space inside their realm. Length, width, and depth are all manipulated by them.”

I fingered one of the red obelisks. “And what of the ones at your door?”

“Safe guards and locking mechanisms.” He didn’t say anything else about that.

I tried to contemplate the glyphs of the obelisks as we moved through his home. There was a lot of mathematics in them; geometry mainly, which in comparison to the magical glyphs, written like blocks of shapes and lines one over the other, were simple to understand. The magical language Sage used was unbelievably complex, and glyphs working together seemed to form larger glyphs... which shifted this way and that depending upon the moment.

“But how did you get all of this in here so quickly? It was less than a day!” I said, gesturing about me at all the greenery, the gardens, the fishery, and all the rooms and walls.

“That would be mostly Dallas’s work.”

“Holograms?”

“No... everything here is very, very real...” he said, fingering some leaves in his garden. “But all of it is constructed from his mainframe. Others... like this garden are my work. One starts with seeds, and simply helps them grow.”

I smiled. *He must be an Ecomancer too or something. He should meet Mother Sanari! Too bad she’s away at the moment.*

Sage continued to show me his home... To his temple, which was a place of peace, but had the air of warriors about it; warriors who enter only after sheathing their swords. Vaulting walls and pillars, and a perpetual scent of incense.

Then to his well-stocked kitchen, to which I sampled one of his fruits, to his bath, which was similar in construction to that we here at the League used, and I said as such. Sage smiled, and a flicker of memory shone in his eyes of that day in the bath house, when he’d entered at a time of women only due to Fatima’s trickery.

Guest quarters, storage lockers, living room, and finally, Sage's bedroom.

He was a man who liked his comfort...

His bed was built very close to the floor, if not right into it... covered with dark blue sheets now, and folded perfectly, as if the sheets had been ironed right onto the bed. Daedalus, just like his master, was a quandary. More than just a machine or a hologram, in this place, Dallas was everywhere.

"Thanks for the tour, Sage." I managed, folding my arms behind my back, and looked up, seeing Sage's eyes on me. He looked like he was trying to hold back his emotion with difficulty.

"I should thank you for the same. This school is a marvelous one."

"You should stay; be an instructor... you know so much!"

"We shall see." He responded, and watched me as I unconsciously took a couple steps closer to him. "Fate still hasn't made up his mind about me and this place yet."

"Oh?" a couple steps closer. "What's keeping him from making up his mind?"

"You." He said simply, and I looked down, and when I looked up again, it was to look straight up into his eyes.

"Why me?"

"I... don't know." He said in all honesty, and his gaze grew more somber as he looked straight into mine.

"Then it appears as if there are still some things that are uncertain." I managed, and lifted my hands to his chest, my fingers playing with the ends of the collar of his shirt before my breasts pressed against his ribs.

"There are..." and he touched me... his hands folding about my shoulders, and I looked to one of his large clawed hands gripping my shoulders.

"I-it's late, I really should go." I said after a brief pause, and then looked back up at him, managing a smile for him.

"I understand." He responded, still looking at me, and now unblinkingly.

"Good night then..." I smiled, and lifted up onto my toes and kissed his cheek.

But when I withdrew, I was that much closer to his eyes, and now found myself unable to look away. And then I was bending forward again, and when I kissed him, it was to taste his lips.

His touch lowered to my arms, his five fingers coiling about their sides, his thumbs sliding over my biceps, fingering the thickened artery that slid over them as that kiss lasted, and I felt him returning it, a gentle pressure; full of meaning... affectionate.

My breathing was calm, but my heart beat rapidly in a cascade inside my chest, pattering heavily, rapidly while the kiss lasted, and lasted...

Then I felt dizzy as I moved backward, and looking up at him, feeling the tensile strength of his chest muscles with my fingers as I looked down at my hands, I'd found that I'd unconsciously undone the buttons of his shirt, and had slid my fingers beneath the white silk. My mind cleared a little as I looked up at him, and in spite of myself I pushed my hands deeper; sliding my fingers upward along his chest and over his shoulders; pushing his shirt and jacket off those thick arms of his, and I looked closely upon his strange, alien physiology.

There were more muscle groups than there were on an Aphkei, the muscle definition more acute... with a dozen abdominals, eight laterals, two over lapping sets of pectorals, and a segmented ribcage that feathered from his sternum and that beautiful green gem in his chest down along his ribs.

I fingered his body while he looked down at me, his expression somber as he smelled my scent, his hands now on my layered stomach and its eight tightly packed folds. I felt his strength, his natural physical strength, felt how immense it was. Beyond supernatural.

His head was close to mine as he smelled my scent deeper, his lips opening to show a glimmer of white from his teeth as he breathed in my scent as well, and he kissed my forehead, and then the bridge of my nose, and finally caught my lips again with his.

The beating of my heart slid down the length of my bodice as my teats erected, my breathing quickened some, and my thighs pressed close together as I became incensed. And then I was helping him to sit on the edge of his bed, his hands on my wide hips as his fingers slid underneath the bands of my panties, the tips of his fingers sliding along my rump as I straightened for him, arching my back, and then crossing my arms I took hold of the hem of my shirt and pulled it up over my head; my breasts bouncing one after the other as I removed it, standing there quietly as he looked upon my well developed adult bodice.

I breathed in deeply, my breasts expanding as my lungs filled with air with my teats standing on end for him. He bent forward and kissed my navel just beneath my belly button before I felt him pulling my trousers and panties downward with one hand; his fingers coiling into the hem of my trousers and the front of my panties, while his other slid over my bottom to help my trousers down off my waist.

I stepped out of the legs of my trousers as he brought them down to the floor, and then lifted a hand to caress my sex as he kissed my navel again, and I felt it clench and swell for him.

For a short while I stood before him, naked and vulnerable to this aged master... a man whose exotic eyes seemed to hold back an ancient life and an ancient knowledge.

Kneeling before him, looking up into those pure emerald eyes, I felt him caress my cheek while I undid his own trousers and priestly cloths, pulling them off his legs before I rose up to him, kneeling first along the edge of his rounded bed as I pushed him backward with one hand, then sliding up onto his chest, my breasts compressing against his body between my arms as I pulled all of my mane over one shoulder before kissing him.

His touches were that of a learned lover... they did not grope, but rather caressed. He did not pinch or poke, but rather merely touched, and the simplest of those touches seemed to enliven me... and I soon found myself needing release from him.

And then I sat up on his lap, my fingers sliding down his abs to his pelvis, and then over his groin, spying... an oddity in his maleness as it erected below me: there was a notch in it, and definite scar tissue, and I pursed my lips at this as it expanded into a head. I looked up at him as he smiled up at me as I marveled at an almost unheard of oddity in this universe called circumcision, and though the races that I knew of that did practice it did it for health reasons, Sage would later recall that the purpose of his was religious.

It was a concept that I was about to enjoy about his religion.

Sage's hands cupped either cheek of my rump as my back arched, my breasts pointing outward and away from one another and I closed my eyes, exhaling a sigh as his fingers caressed the folds of my femininity, and coaxed them to moisten and spread open.

Was this really happening? Was this about to happen?

I looked down, folding both my hands over my heart momentarily, feeling it patter as I leaned forward to kiss Sage again, and then waited as his body maneuvered itself, and he slid into me.

I bit my lower lip, and exhaled a groan as he, a male so much larger than me, slid deep inside me with the lips of my sex spreading wide open for him; his mouth and nose nuzzling my muscled neck before his tongue with its combing bristles licked my neck.

I closed my eyes, arching my back before sliding backward onto him, rolling my hips as I exhaled a gasp, gritting my teeth as his thickness pierced me to his hilt before it withdrew a little, and then pushed again.

"Ngh!" I managed before I was suddenly rolled onto my back, Sage keeping his weight off me as he looked briefly down into my eyes; his mane sliding to either side of his head as he continued his stroke into my womanhood.

He affixed me with such an intent gaze, unblinkingly, loving me as he pushed in, stirred me, and withdrew... stirred and pushed in again, over and over... slowly... gently... allowing me to get used to it.

For my pleasure as much as his.

He helped me to lay my arms up over my head before he took to massaging one of my breasts, always looking me in the eye, affectionately kissing me whenever I closed my own eyes. And as he caressed me... I desired him more.

I had no idea how long this continued before we changed positions, and then it was me laying on my stomach as he continued to cajole my femininity with that piercing sword of his as he pressed against my back. A long stroke, steady and rhythmic, moved to rub against my body in just such a way as he leaned above me with both hands steadying himself. His lips kissed my back and cheeks, his subtle lovemaking touching a center in my body as his fingers memorized my being.

And then we changed positions again as I saddled him, working into his endowment and holding onto my belly as I felt that shaft pierce me from the inside and create a lump in my tight abs. He did so many things that I liked; almost s if he was inside my head...

He held my clit to his shaft with his thumb as I raised and lowered onto him, some of my moisture leaking from me and onto his hard pelvis. He caressed my thighs, massaged my rump, and even helped in the motion of our bodies as he sometimes followed my rising body with a couple of follow up pumps.

Surprisingly... my first orgasm came long before his.

When he finally did climax into me, he didn't simply roll over and fall asleep... bur rather he and I laid in his bead beneath his soft blue sheets, Sage holding tenderly onto me while I lapsed in an out of sleep, feeling my body tremble from a combination of micro orgasms, and the deep rumbling of his whole body as he purred.

His second wind came later, and we managed another gentle romp before again we lay together, with Sage coddling me in his arms, massaging my breasts and nuzzling my neck and cheeks.

For the first time in a long, long time... I felt protected, instead of being the one having to protect others. That was a portion of his strength, I felt, that overwhelmed mine. His ability and willingness to give his strength to others for their protection, and I fed off it willingly.

I fell asleep quietly ensnared within his arms, using his thick bicep for a pillow, and clinging onto him while he clutched the whole of me against him with both arms.

I began to awake slowly. At times past, thanks to my training, I would awake rapidly, but I didn't want to wake up, hoping that what I'd just experienced wasn't quite a dream...

But then I felt a loss of warmth, and then I had to open my eyes, and half expected to awake within my own bed, but then I rose, the dark blue blankets of Sage's bed sliding off my shoulders

and catching at my waist and upturned hip to show off my full formed breasts. A realm of goose bumps rose against my body from the cool in his room as I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, and looking before me, and then behind me, I found that I was alone here in this bed...

I reached forward and felt the place where Sage had been, and felt that place to be still warm.

He just left, I thought, and sliding forward out of the bed, not bothering to cover up, I stepped elegantly up to my full height, and stepped around the bedding to try and find my clothes. I paused at the foot of the bed where they should have been, finding them gone, and turning only slightly, I found them cleaned, pressed and ironed nearby, hanging from an ensemble hanger; the sort that holds all pieces of a particular outfit, with a clasp for my pants and panties, and a hanger for my shirt.

Dallas's doing, I suppose... I thought smiling at the care of Sage's servant, and then dressed before leaving to look for Sage.

Room by room, even in his temple, I looked for him, and finally left his rooms by the front door before following a feeling I had inside me. I followed that feeling all the way to the main courtyard of the school before I found him.

It was still very early morning... the sun only just beginning to illuminate the horizon. In the darkness, Sage's brilliant white fur allowed him to be seen easily. *Then why is it that he can disappear so easily whenever he wanted to?* I thought as I watched him, holding myself from the morning chill.

He was practicing his form, though unlike before, when I watched him during his power training, this time his form was a dance. Fluidity over power, flexibility over speed, and I was amazed at how absolutely graceful and precise he was. There were an exceedingly few number of people that I knew of who could perhaps mimic that level of grace that he was displaying.

I could count them off, including him, on only one hand, and unlike him, I had only four fingers.

I folded my arms as I watched him in the early morning mists, noting his movements till he came to the last form, stood up straight with legs and hands close together, and bowed to an invisible opponent.

"You are very graceful, Lord Sage." I said from across the courtyard, and he turned to face me.

"Thank you. Did you sleep well?"

I couldn't help but smile, and my thighs pressed together a little closer. He'd touched me very deeply, and it was lasting.

"Well enough." I managed through a slight burn in my cheeks and breasts from a blush. My heart fluttered as he smiled at me. "I seem to be at a loss, Lord Sage. I believe that I still owe you a fight."

“Do you? Do you wish to fight me now, my lady?” he asked, his bright green eyes piercing through all the mists.

I smiled and settled myself backward into a fighting stance. “Ready when you are...”

Sage bowed to me at the waist, lowering his eyes as he did so, and then rising and lifting his hands, his fingers began to trace glowing blue lines in the air, creating a small magic circle before his foot raised to where his fingers had come together and then stomped down to the ground, tracing one final line into the ground. This illuminated a *vast* magic circle over the entire courtyard that appeared out of nowhere.

“Then I have but one request:” He said and slid his fingers through three small circles that were held within the larger glowing circle before him as he turned it; the glyphs turning with his hand and the greater magic circle energized into a barrier that went straight up into the atmosphere. “Do not hold back.”

And he stepped forward, and I blinked as something unlocked inside him, and a power unlike any I’d ever felt, an alien magic, surged forward to wash over the entirety of the courtyard, his body energizing with sparks of electricity as he walked toward me. While I stood there, whole blocks of the courtyard rose up out of the ground.

He settled then back into his own fighting stance, his arms loose at his side as he looked at my midsection instead of my face.

I stepped, and he stepped in the opposite direction, while floating blocks rose and fell all around us, his ears twitching, and I stepped again, and he followed in the opposite direction, and when I finally lunged, his arm rose to block it. I lunged forward again, giving a couple of quick jabs, and he pushed my blow out of the way each time.

He’s watching my movements... learning how I fight. Just like he’d done with Makahn.

I was immediately glad that we weren’t enemies.

I pressed the attack, lunging and twisting repeatedly, and he backed up step for step, gently pushing my hands out of the way, blocking my strikes in exact motion as if this whole fight was a choreographed dance.

And then amidst his blocks and parries, he lunged upward with his foot and clipped me directly beneath the chin, and landed on the balls of his feet, his tail waving for balance while I regained my composure, working my jaw and smiling.

He still was not looking directly at my face, he was looking at the whole of me, and... and listening.

Grinning, I set myself forward and began to twist and turn myself, lunging forward and twisting my body in insane directions; he twisting and turning around them till I arched my own foot up under his jaw and he stepped back and felt his mouth from the blow.

“Touché.” Sage grinned, and then lunged forward.

I had to stop that insane punch aimed for my gut with both hands, and even that pushed me back several feet, but not bothering in the failed punch, his fist snapped backward and began punching at my head, and he landed two quick strikes to my face before I was able to block, but I pushed forward and lifted my knee right into his steel-hard abs. His fist came down in turn into my face, and he hopped back onto one of the floating slabs of cobblestones from the power supporting the protective ring, and jumping up to one facing him on nearly the same level, we faced one another.

He’s quick. Time to turn it up a notch.

I stepped back, stamping my foot down onto the ground and cried out a power cry, and my muscles tensed as they thickened with my magical powers, while Sage simply stood there and watched. I was well aware of his Battle Form, knew that it was stronger than I could manage just now, but I wasn’t about to give up. He’s the best challenge I’ve had other than Illia!

I leapt at him, my fist coming downward, but he caught it and flipped me away, but not before I grabbed his arm and twisted him in front of me, and as he hit the shield wall, I lanced into him with my knee into his gut.

Uh! It’s like hitting a starship’s hull!

Sage nonetheless felt that blow as he grit his teeth, his eyes wild with what he was feeling, and before I knew it, he’d grabbed my head and promptly thrust his own head into it.

We fell downward to the ground again, and I looked up just in time to see him turning to thrust his arm downward, and I rolled out of the way even as that elbow smashed right where my solar plexus had been. I hopped up to my feet as he spun to trip me, his legs clipping my legs down and I fell. Spinning myself I clipped his own legs out from underneath him, and we both kipped up at the same moment to face one another.

And then I saw Sage take a different stance, his whole body changing into a different form with his fist lifted back like a scorpion’s tail. Not wanting to find out what that fist would do, I surged forward and spun, thrusting my elbow toward his face, but he blocked it off, pushing it away. I used that momentum to thrust my leg toward the back of his head, but he lifted his arm and leg to form a T-block and turned to ward off the attack. Then I flailed on him, and each time he blocked with a hand or a foot, and before I knew it, that hand that he held cocked back behind his head had arched downward straight into my face, and I was hammered to the ground.

“OW!” I said through clenched teeth, and rolling to my feet I faced him again.

He blew on his knuckles and shook the sting out of his hand but said nothing more. I grinned back at him, surprised that a simple strike like that could've hurt his hand. It sure did hurt my face.

He was still looking at my body, not in a perverted way... he was reading my moves I was sure. His body was too relaxed in return though, and he only moved when he was about to act. I'd fought people who could read your movements but not when I couldn't accurately read his in return.

I leapt at him, throwing my shoulder into his chest, but he skipped up off the ground and did a light push off me, landing a few feet away before he did an odd little side step by crossing his legs, and then spun, lowering downward to trip me with his long leg. Hopping up, I avoided the blow and lanced downward to kick him in the face, and he angled himself so that my foot merely brushed his ear. He tried to rise to throw me, but I skipped away, ending with a pirouette and we both righted ourselves a dozen or so feet away from each other.

We were both smiling at one another.

Then both at once we powered up, his lightning erupting from his body, and an aura of power lighting up mine before we surged at one another.

Each punch was met by the other, fists smashing against fists, erupting sounds like cannon fire each time the strike came, but each time our fists collided, I got a minute shock from his power. If I was causing extra damage with my blows, he wasn't showing it, and I was determined not to show him the same.

And then I landed a blow, straight into the center of his chest, and the force of my kinetic energy exploded right there as he was blasted backward. He fell backward limp, and I followed, looking for a quick double strike, but when he landed it was on his feet, and when he looked up, it was straight into my eyes, and when he surged forward to my rapidly moving body, it was to slam his fist directly into my solar plexus.

Again time slowed down, and I saw the black disk around his arm as his blow carried me backward, but I wasn't about to feel that blow like Pleeyo did, and I bent backward as the black disk spun and surged forward, and a kinetic blast that erupted from his fist tore the bottom of my shirt open as I flipped backward. The blow struck the shield formed by the magic circle, and it rang like a bell. A quick glance over my shoulder showed me the blast filtering through the shield as its energy dissipated before I looked back.

We were both breathing heavily now, and we were still smiling at one another...

Students began coming out of their dorms as soon as we started the power hitting, with sounds like gunshots and explosions happening, and when one came out, they immediately went to hammer on the doors of those right next to them, to see what was happening. A good many of

them arrived just in time to see me up in the air, powering up a force strike that lit like a sun between my hands.

They began to line up to watch as Sage, down on the ground braced himself.

“HaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!! **SOLAR BLAST!**” I cried, and pushed the ball forward, and an eruption of golden light flared outward from my hands.

Sage’s hands made a ball too, and I was startled at how quickly it rose up, erupting into a ball of lightning even as he was swinging it upward to slam against my own blast.

“**T’SALB GNI’N’THGIL!!**” The arcane tongue Sage used summoned forth a power to counteract my own, and a blast like rolling thunder erupted as that blast of brilliant white and blue met with my own yellow and orange, and the two of us fought to overpower the other.

“**HA!**” I cried, and opened my hands wider, my blast surging downward to push Sage to his knees, and he pushed upward and twisted his arms, and his blast focused just before my Solar Blast lanced down to burry him into the ground.

I felt victorious for a brief second before I saw a brilliant ball of blue and white streaming up the length of my blast, and the next thing I knew I was struck right in the solar plexus with a stinging energy ball of raw lightning that carried me backward to slam into the shield wall.

I bounced off the wall, still electrified from all the blazing hot electro-death, while Sage crawled out of the hole he was in, with singed pieces of his clothing and fur growing back. He was grinning at me.

With both of us on the ground, we both surged at one another, with Sage lifting his hand to grab one of the floating slabs and flinging it at me, which I deftly crushed with a single punch, and then the two of us met together, and I took another of the floating slabs and went to slam it into his face. But instead he punched right through it and into my face. I was blown off balance, and opened my eyes in time to bring my hands before my face to stop his rising knee. My arm whipped sideways to crack him along side the head, and as he fell sideways, his leg extended to kick me in the head.

We both landed in the growing rubble of the courtyard.

“Nice shot.” He smiled.

“Good kick.” I smiled in return, and the pair of us simultaneously struck the ground with a single fist to right ourselves before we both stepped back into ready stances.

Immediately we set ourselves forward our arms and legs moving with blinding speed now as we both matched each other block for block.

“Great Maker! What a wonderful blow by Rae Iksaki! Lord Sage has been slammed to the ground with a *beautiful* power axe drop. But what’s this? Lord Sage counters with a knuckle blow to Rae’s inner thigh! Watch out Rae... that will hurt for awhile.”

I was grinning. What the Referee-priest was saying was really true! I couldn’t feel my toes. Sage’s punches were hurting, and he was breathing hard, staring at me from underneath stray bits of his hair.

The crowd had grown massive, and now there was that shield made by the priests now to protect the crowd, but Sage’s shield was nonetheless still there. The whole school had shown up, and there was a cacophony of cheers below as they watched us battle.

And we’ve been at it for a long time. The sun was nearly at its peak, and we’ve been doing this since just before dawn.

Sage launched himself up into the air to meet me now, catching one of the last of the floating stones and hurling it at me. I caught it easily and hurled it back like a Frisbee, and Sage took it with both hands and hurled it back, whipping it around and adding to its momentum. When it came up to me, I smashed down on it with one hand, but even its spraying fragments hurt me enough to sting, and when I looked up, I saw Sage do something strange, saw his whole body moving, dragging lines of energy at his finger and toe tips that disappeared soon after being written, and at the very center of the motion, his hands came together, twisted, drew them back into a force ball summoning motion, and the next thing I knew, a fireball was lobbed forward straight at my face.

I lashed upward with a shield only to see a black disk arise right before the fireball and it disappeared. Then I felt the change in space behind me and turned just as the fireball struck me square in the back.

“Ngh!” I groaned as it burned the back of my shirt off, singeing my fur off there and burning some of my flesh before it all healed back rapidly. It still drained me of some of my precious energy. “Lucky shot... teleporting a fireball behind my shield.” I said through clenched teeth from the sting in my back.

When I looked again, Sage was making another motion with the strange lights dragging off his fingers and toes, and at the center, his hands again met, and then turned, and when they came outward, a burst of fireballs erupted outward all around me. I waited for them to move enough and then I teleported, driving my elbow into his face which drove him back into the perimeter shield, but when he looked up at me, it was with a smile.

I turned too late to see all those fireballs turning around, and I erected a shield too weak to repel them all, and they broke into the shield, shattered it and then lanced into my body, driving me into the wall right next to Sage.

“Ah. I need a drink of water.” Sage said, and I looked at him with a whimsical smile on my face.

“You and me both. Guess we can’t really stop now for a water break.”

“Why? And miss all this fun?” he grinned at me, and taking my hand helped propel me out into the open air as he rose after me.

Again we readied ourselves, and I took a moment to repair my shirt at least as it closed about my body. My tit was about to pop out of one side, and though I didn’t mind getting naked in front of Sage, there were a lot of young minds below who didn’t need a peep show.

Those of the students who could fly were now floating up around the shield to get closer ‘seats’ to this fight, and I saw Fatima and Equis floating close by, cheering me on. Noxi was on another side, shouting out strategies, and I smiled at them.

I wished Illia could be here.

I looked at Sage, tried not to hate him for what he’d done to my friend, but that was an accident, and he had tried his best to repair the damage after all. But still... I wished she were here.

But that didn’t stop me from putting a little extra hurt into the next force blast I lobbed at him. But then his hands lifted and he caught it, trapping it between his fingers, and I watched as my yellow orange power transformed rapidly into a green and blue, just before he threw it back at me, and I had to dodge as a whole section of the wall suddenly lit up brilliantly but not before I’d launched another blast at him. What he wasn’t prepared for was the blast striking him right in the face as I teleported right up to him, caught my own force ball and smashed it home.

There was a mass of cheers below as Sage was sent reeling backward, but then in a flash he was gone, and the next thing I knew I had an elbow in the back of my head, followed by a double foot smash into the small of back, and finally the sting of being smashed right into the shield wall before a knee busted into the peak of my back. I turned and caught him and swung him into the wall, pinning him there as I kneed him a couple times myself, brought his head back and smashed it into the wall, rotating his arm into his back.

“Give in!” I said through gritted teeth, feeling my strength swelling inside my body.

“No! You haven’t earned that yet!” He gritted back, and the next thing I knew, I heard a crunch as his arm popped out of its socket, and he pushed away from the wall with his feet, rotated upward and then back down onto the top of my head to drive me straight to the ground.

I looked up at him from the flat of my back as he half grinned, half snarled at me as he reset his arm with another crunch, just before his hands drew back into a chi ball and I felt multiple forces of magic being conjoined as one, and I gasped as I suddenly understood how his power worked.

Multiple powers... their combined powers coming from multiple focuses, creating powerful magic in a fraction of the time. Chi, Psionics and magic all summoned at once. Damn he was fast!

And I watched as a blazing white and blue ball formed that outshone the sun briefly, and he pushed the ball forward and exploded the spell, and a force wave of incredible might surged down at me. I brought both hands and feet up, channeling a shield spell to hold back the blast, erecting it just as the force wave lanced down at me and pushed me further into the Earth. Then I dared to remove one hand and began to chant through gritted teeth, my hand forming the somatic portion of the spell as it arched and signed, and then dropping my other hand, I dug my fingers into the Earth and drew from a source while holding the shield with my feet, feeling the shield cracking beneath the sustained power as it rumbled around me. I wasn't even sure if the words of my spell could be heard by whatever force granted me the power to enact it, but nonetheless the glow started, and as soon as Sage's force wave dissipated, the shield broke and I pushed my arm upward.

“HA!” I cried out, my fingers forming the last glyph and an equally powerful force wave was sent upward at him, the Earth rumbling as it was released.

Sage curled up into a ball and a shield of his own was formed, a glittering thing that looked like a perfect piece of crystal just as my force wave hit him and I lost him in the flare.

I got to my feet then, and stood there, waiting for the flare to dissipate, and when it did I saw Sage's body reeling backward at the end of the wave, his shield shattering around him. He righted himself way up there, and I saw him trace more lines in the air while he was above me, wondering if that was how he cast his spells, and I teleported up to him just as he finished the movement, brought his hands together and twisted them. I appeared and rose up in a rising uppercut, my fist flaring with fire, but Sage's came down just at the same time and connected with mine, his blazing with lightning, and a flash of electricity and fire erupted in a broad disk between us and blasted us both back.

“And a stunning display of magical might between both competitors!” the ref was saying. “A Blazing Knuckle maneuver meeting with a... *Lightning*...Knuckle maneuver I guess, and the resulting explosion has blasted both competitors off balance. But it looks as if Lord Sage is ready to act first.”

I blinked in surprise to clear my head as I heard the announcer's words, and looked up even as Sage appeared before me. He winked at me and then I felt him punch my body repeatedly, hundreds of times it felt, and I blinked back at him when they didn't even hurt. Little more than baby taps...

I was so shocked that he'd do this, that I wasn't ready for the punch to my gut that sent a flash through the whole shield wall as I struck it.

I groaned and fighting off the daze, swung back with a quick one-two which he dodged both times, though I connected with a hard hitting blow to his head that carried him down and away from me. I balled up underneath that last blow, feeling it do odd things inside me as I tried to clear my head. The force of the blow seeped deeper and deeper inside me and dissipated.

I'd never really felt a punch like that, and I gasped when I was suddenly able to breathe.

Far below me, Sage was once again moving his hands, those shining lights following after them, and then I watched his hands meet and then rotate. I tried to discern his motions, tried to see what he was doing, but then he was drawing back, muttering.

I didn't wait this time, and balling up against the shield wall, I launched down at him, pulling my fist back, but Sage canceled his spell, and I was suddenly met with an aura shield.

An aura shield? Come on Sage... those are child's play to break thr... OW!

My hand came smashing down against it, and I felt it ripple in opposition to my power, and it solidified right at the point of impact to deflect my blow. I chanced a look to see what he'd done, saw the alien magic weaving it; saw it coiling to deflect my next blow, and then the next, while Sage held the shield with one hand.

It's only a matter of time before I figure this out... and then it's just like any other Aura Shield I go against. I thought, but Sage's free hand drew back, and he pushed it upward, and an eruption of electricity flew upward, passed right through the shield and into me even as I pulled my hands back to block. I felt the shocking biting of the head of a dragon that formed from it, felt its body snap as it passed through me, with the tail swatting me as it passed completely through.

"Owchie." I cried softly, tears in my eye from the sting, and I unfolded, still in midair as Sage and I fell downward. With a snap his shield dissipated and his hand lanced upward, tapping me in several dozen places, little more than taps, but it was that last blow, a tight fistful blow that lanced up into me struck some sort of nerve and dissipated into my body in that same cold way.

"Stop that!" and I swung down, and like a ton of bricks, my fist broke into his face.

His body hit ground first and I came down with my elbow then, ready to strike him in the gut. But he rolled forward and I felt his hand grab my tail as he transformed my downward motion into a side motion, and I flipped and landed on my feet with a skid, managing to get my hands down in front of me as his body seemed to become liquid thunder leading his fist forward in an uppercut. When it struck my hands, there was the sound of rolling thunder as it roiled around us. The next thing I knew, we were ground fighting again, with slaps and hits, blocks and parries, and a flurry of kicks far too fast for just about anyone here on the ground to count.

The sun was nearing setting. Sage and I had paused on the ground, breathing hard. It was a fight that had lasted for over twelve hours, and I was smiling again, having to repair my shirt yet again, but left the torn sleeve off to conserve energy.

"I have to admit Sage. You are a solid piece of iron at light speed." I said, and then set myself into another fighting stance.

“And you are as relentless as the sun.” he panted, and lifted his own hands into yet another fighting stance. I’d lost count as to how many he had...

There was a raucous amount of cheering going on, for both Sage and me. It was a wonderful fight. The Emperor himself had taken a place at the front lines, with his newly repaired Dragon and several troopers arrayed around him to keep a decent distance between him and the other members of the crowd.

Leski hung onto his arm.

“Let’s end this soon, Sage. I’m getting really thirsty.” I said, still smiling.

“I agree. My body thinks my throat’s been cut.” He smiled pleasingly back at me.

This was it.

And then I blinked and Sage disappeared, and when he reappeared it was directly in front of me, his fist coming down for my head in a blow that would’ve floored me had I not teleported away. I reappeared in the air, only to see him reappear directly in front of me, his foot again swinging for my face, and I blocked with one massive fist before swinging for home on him with my other fist. This time it was he who disappeared, and I was about to try to follow him when he reappeared in the same place and grabbed my head, swung me over his shoulder and thrust me downward with a kinetic blast erupting into my solar plexus.

Despite all my efforts, I knew how Pleeyo felt the first day Sage arrived as all that power erupted directly between my bosoms in a brilliant disk of light, I heard the explosion that pushed all the air out of me, and I rocketed down to the ground, landing on my hands and knees with an impact crater arising about me.

Gasping for air I rolled even as Sage’s elbow crushed the ground where I’d been, and still laboring for air I rose as he spun on the ground, tripping my legs, but I landed on the tips of my fingers, pushed back up, hopped down and spun in a tight circle to catch his body as he was righting himself and knocked him backward toward the shield wall. He rose to his full height as he was thrown back, his legs straining while his toe claws dug into the Earth, tearing up great fragments before he slapped his chest where I’d struck him, exhaled sharply and lifted his green-eyed gaze to look at me with a grin on his face.

And I blinked again and he was there before me, and only then did my combat perception kick in as he began his attack. He was faster than me, but I was stronger... I hoped... as we blocked and kicked and punched and parried one another in a flurry of strikes too fast for the naked eye to see yet again. Only our combat perceptions allowed for the two of us to see, and sometimes feel, where the next strike was coming.

And then his arms rotated outward, and for a split second both of our chests were wide open with this maneuver, and seizing the moment, both of us kicked at one another. By sheer fact that

Sage's leg was longer and his speed faster, he connected with my head, stunning me for a mere second before his hands grabbed my head and he head butted me right on the bridge of the nose.

A spray of blood erupted from both my nostrils, and without thinking I surged forward and uppercut him, and his body was lanced straight upward, a spray of his own blood being spit into the air through his teeth before he fell backward.

A bloody nose was nothing to have right now, and I healed it, but as I braced myself and Sage landed on his back, I noticed the spray of his blood in the air suddenly slap right back into him, pushing its way back up into his slits for nostrils. As he rose, he did a farmer's blow with both nostrils to clear them. I saw also that I'd broken his jaw like he'd broken my nose, but while my nose still healed, he simply clenched his jaw, there was a loud crunch, and he lifted a hand to work his mandible again.

Unbelievable! No once can heal that fast!!

I was still healing when he surged forward, and I sniffed in deeply, forcing the magic to work faster as I palmed his strikes out of the way, and then stepping sideways hit him in the head, but he moved the top of his head in the way and head-butted my fist, and I heard a crack and my fingers went numb.

Ah! I cried inwardly, and brought my other hand forward and called a quick spell, reciting the words rapidly under my breath and it erupted like a blazing storm right into his face. His arms rose to ward off the attack, and the force of the blast pushed him back several meters, though my force blast simply rolled around some invisible barrier.

Gritting my teeth I clenched my hand and then opened it suddenly, knowing the cost of resetting numbed bones immediately as they healed in mere seconds, and as Sage came at me again, I hauled upward with my newly healed hand and stuck him in the chest with a palm strike. He was pushed backward and I shot my foot into his middle, skipped forward and then pounded him to his knees with an axe drop with my thick leg.

He was beginning to rise just as I reached behind his head, grabbed him by the hair and began pounding him repeatedly in the face. I only managed about half a dozen before his hands rose to my hand holding his long hair, and with a jerk downward from his head he tore a large collection of his mane off right at the roots.

I stood there dumbly, holding a large clump of it all, still with the leather thong that had bound it all as he felt the back of his head.

He smiled and I managed a laugh that stopped even as his long mane grew back.

The crowd was in awe, and I could hear cheers still as they pressed up against the outer shield made by the priest at the display they've been treated with thus far. I dropped Sage's bundle of hair with a smirk, and then I moved.

To those who watched, it was as if we'd both just disappeared, but in reality we were moving too fast for the untrained eye to see. What was happening was a mass of attacks and counter attacks, chains of combos in the hundreds that ended with either he or myself being slammed against some hard surface. We slammed one another at least once before that bundle of his hair fell to the ground and then disintegrated into ash.

Sage landed face first with me elbowing him in the back, then it was me landing head first as I was suplexed into the ground, me hopping on one foot after I'd kicked him between the legs, my foot having met with something enormously hard.

“What do you got in there... iron balls?” and Sage smiled, and rapped a knuckle on his groin. At least he was smart enough to wear a cup.

Then the actions began up again, and the next ended with me smashing Sage's head into the ground, the next whipping him up over my head by the tail for him to land again in the ground, then next me being flipped with his legs about my neck head first into the ground, and then with one titanic explosion both of us ended back first into the shield wall.

The whole wall chimed like a bell, ringing a single perfect note before we both hauled off at one another again.

Every time our racing bodies emerged, it was with some new spray of blood, some new bruise here or there, or a brief moment to heal injuries before rocketing back in again.

It was like a dance of many fists.

We were becoming worn out, I knew, enough to where those watching below could see us better because we weren't moving nearly as fast.

And then Sage stopped, and turning in midair as he moved to face me, I lunged at him, and his body stiffened as he roared, and an explosion of fiery heat erupted outward from his body, and I felt an *intense* fire aura explode about him so powerful that it actually created a physical fire. I lifted my arms as the shockwave hit me, pushing me straight against the barrier and I used it to support my back as I erected a stronger field in front of me.

When the shockwave ended, he was there, his hand raised with one of his own blue and white force balls just before he tossed it at me, and another, and another, in rapid succession. I dropped the shield and ran along the shield wall, looking up at him watching where the force balls were hitting as he tossed them forward, behind his back, off to his side, and then dozens of them straight in front of him before raising both hands.

I was so busy dodging all his blasts as he forged one massive force ball, blazing with electricity before he lobbed it at me. I braced myself then, lifting my hands and repelled it.

“AHH!!” I screamed, feeling the biting hurt from his power snapping at my fingers, clawing at the backs of my hands as I was pushed against the shield wall again with the remnants of his force balls colliding with the much larger one to add to its power.

I began to push back, and steadily forced his power away, and I smirked at him for a moment, and then my expression went blank as he lifted a hand, pulled it back, and made a pushing motion, and all his strength surged into the back of the ball to push it against me.

I sucked in my gut and lay flat as it forced its way around my arms like a bubble about to pop, and when it did pop, I was caught within the spirit energies that buffeted me around, tore at my clothing, knocked all the wind out of me and snapped at my being with electrical damage.

And it felt so *cold!*

Sage was still standing there in mid-air as I fell several feet before catching myself and levitated again, and I opened my eyes, staring at him from underneath my bangs, and this time, it was my turn to grin.

“Is that all you got?” I called out.

“No!” he returned, and lifted a hand to beckon me to him.

And then I flexed, and poured on the power, feeling all my muscles thicken, straining against my pants and the remains of my shirt – I wasn’t bothering to cover up any more and one of my breasts tore through the ruined shirt – and I surged forward, feeling renewed with all this new power in me.

“I can keep...” I began as I lunged forward quick as lightning at him and he dodged. “...This up...” my fists began swinging at him, connecting almost as often as I missed or he parried. “... For a *long* time...” and began working my legs into it, feeling his baby taps against my body again as he poked me with a toe or a pair of fingers. “...So just give up!”

And then time slowed, and I saw Sage bend impossibly, sliding sideways through my defenses as he grabbed my arm, twisted and extended his own hand into my face till his claws pierced the skin about my brows.

“No,” he said simply, and I watched that black disk rise up about his arm again, watched it spin, and I saw what Illia must’ve seen, saw the white light in his palm aimed right between my brows. “You haven’t earned that yet...”

It was the second time I’d heard him say that to me, and I gritted my teeth.

Come on Rae! He’s willing to sacrifice to win. What about you?

And with that thought I grabbed his arm and kicked upward into his forearm with both legs, and I ripped my face out of his claws, feeling the biting, stinging ripping sensation of my flesh being rent, even as a blast of his energy erupted over my head, burning off a good section of my mane.

But then I realized I still had him by the arm, and he was still retracting that energy lance.

And I acted, twisting his arm I held it in an unbreakable grip with both hands, swung around behind him, and kicking him in the back of the head, the two of us plummeted toward the ground, and Sage lifted a hand to slow the impact even as the fullness of my weight smashed his head with both feet straight into the ground.

“OHHHH!” The crowd winced at such a blow as I kicked off back up into the air like a rising angel, powering up for a fusillade, and I formed a force ball and threw it, and then another, and another... over and over till I lost count.

“Have... I... Earned... It... **YET... Sage?!**” I cried, and then muttered a spell, opened my arms, and straight from the heavens a fiery column of flame lanced down to explode at where Sage had been, and the whole base of the arena erupted in a conflagration.

The crowd was silent as the flames cooked everything, and resting up there, I fingered my lip, hoping I really didn't kill the guy, and began to fear for the worse as all that was left below was rubble.

A cheer rose up, and they were cheering me, and I felt on top of the world! I'd defeated a true master. But then there was a cry from below, and looking down, I gasped, and saw an arm lift out of the ground, followed by another, and with two jerking motions, a head abruptly pulled itself out of the rubble.

Sage looked up at me as I climbed out of his hole.

“Not... Just... Yet!!” he answered, and I steeled myself.

And his hand rose, and in it was a white ball, and around his wrist was a rapidly spinning white disk. I gasped, recognizing this power, and I prepared a spell to counteract it, just managing to summon it even as I heard Sage cry out.

“**ENDESTE' ESTAS EN TERRA!**” and an explosion of holy light erupted from the globe he held onto, even as a firestorm surged downward to meet it.

Sage was driven to one knee as I pushed downward with all my might but was nonetheless steadily forced upward by the power surging up at me, and gritting my teeth as I felt that power, that immense holy power rising steadily up to meet me.

Sacrifice! You must sacrifice!

And I pushed downward harder. “Ngh!” I cried and a fight of wills was pushing the beams up and down

“AH!” Sage cried out below me, reinforcing his spell arm with his other, and the force intensified.

Spell energies poured through me, a churning cacophony of fire that burned me from the inside, and my eyes lit with fire, the pair of them burning as my body was encased in flames, and I pushed harder, and harder.

My arms rose then, releasing the strain, and I watched Sage’s force surge upward, and then I pushed my arms down again, and added a reinforcing spell into my firestorm, and in the next instant, the whole of the shield wall from end to end and from ground to the upper stratosphere was engulfed in fire...

I did feel a surge of holy light strike me, and I was bathed in it, felt the all encompassing heat of white fire burn around me, and I screamed, but my force on Sage had been far, far more intense. The pillar of fire dissipated and burned itself out, and I floated down several dozen feet before catching myself and looking down, I saw Sage, flattened against the ground, his body singed and repairing itself.

“You’ve lost too much energy Sage.” I said. “You cannot hope to win now.”

But Sage rolled forward, and with an ache he stood up on wobbly legs, and lifted his eyes to face me.

“I... have... only one thing to say... Rae.” He said, and I watched his body healing rapidly, felt his power levels climbing anew. I’d have to surge down there and beat him down soon if he didn’t decide to give up now.

“What’s that?”

“Bishop takes knight... check!”

I was sure that everyone gathered thought he was mad at saying that, and I did too... my brows knitting as I wondered why he was calling off a chess move. And then I screamed, feeling myself as if I’d just been hit by a titan’s fist, and looking down to where my shoulder, chest and breast met, I saw a fist mark indentation in my flesh that slowly filled back out with a bruise.

“What?” I whispered, and looked down at him, and he smiled triumphantly.

Then a second blow struck my other side, and then was followed quickly by one in the gut and I gasped as all the wind was exhaled out of me. And then the blows of foot marks, fist marks and finger strikes poked their way all over my body, and I cried out as I was hit repeatedly by what rapidly became hundreds of blows, striking me in the head, the legs and thighs, everywhere Sage had hit me reliving itself.

I could feel some sort of dark power expelling from inside me, forcing me to relive every last physical blow he'd dealt over twelve hours of fighting, while below me he scribed his fingers rapidly in the air, his hands meeting in the center before they both turned once.

"Knight takes queen... Checkmate!" Sage said, and lifting a single finger, touched a space directly above him, and I watched as a massive glyph surrounded by a complicated spell circle appeared right before I received one of Sage's earlier upper cuts followed by a blow to the temple.

I tried to heal the damage, tried to keep up with it while all around me, more glyphs in spell circles lit up, and finally above me one final glyph appeared. Four all around me, one above and two below. Then from the center of each glyph came a beam of light that touched me, and before I knew it while I was still being pummeled, the individual spell circles closed into a spell sphere!

Impossible!

The Spell sphere locked itself around me and I screamed suddenly as I felt my healing power drain away, followed by my defenses and then offences, and spasming with the final blows, I felt my body shrinking, my muscles thinning my arms narrowing while my clothes became baggy around me, and in rapid succession, I felt all my power drain.

It's a spell seal! I gasped. He's sealed off my power! He'd actually constructed a spell seal... while we were fighting!!

"No!" I moaned as I felt a few last punches in my gut, and cried. "Please make it stop!"

But below me, Sage was grabbing his head, and I could see a burning rising beneath his fingers as he was screaming. Something was hurting him. Surely nothing that I'd done...

He spasmed backward and I saw green smoke coming from his forehead as he cried outward, the spell seal closing about me till it became skin tight, sealing off my connection to my sorceries and sources as surely as if Meniko had done it, and I writhed at a loss of all that glory, all that power as I became... normal.

And below me, a green fire burned out of Sage's forehead, and something brilliant shone forth from beneath his skin as his face broke with what looked like slices made by a surgical tool. A starburst formed around the gem in his chest, and I saw a horde of cuts in his body as he cried out in utter pain, clawing at his forehead to end it.

But then the spell circle ended, and I fell, my body too weak to move, I simply smiled, wondered if death were coming. But despite his pain, Sage was there, moving below me, half blinded by his own pain as that fire burned out of his forehead, and he caught me, and we both landed in a heap on the ground.

And all went black.

I awoke at last with a start, gasping heavily as I rose from a hospital bed, my chest heaving heavily while a cool white gown covered me. I clutched at my body, gasping as I saw my arms appearing slender in comparison to my old arms, my breasts small buds, and my thighs long and slender.

“Shh...” A voice said and helped me to lie down, and I looked up at Sage as he stood over me, a bandage around his brow, while he smiled down at me. “Just rest for a second Rae.” He said and reached beside him and produced a glass of water. “Here... drink. This... you do deserve.” And his eyes twinkled as he smiled at me.

“Did I win?” I asked, just before Sage helped me to drink.

“I don’t know. I conked out too when you landed on me. The judges couldn’t make up their minds, so the Emperor is going to make the final decision.”

His hand was on my face and he was smoothing my supple cheek with a thumb as I finished drinking and he removed the glass.

“Ngh... thanks.” I rose again and looked at my now slender hand as I swung my feet to hang off the edge of the medical bed.

“Those were some nice tricks.” I smiled. “What did you do?”

His hand rested on my knee, and despite what he’d done to me, I really didn’t mind. He beat me fair and square. It had been a fight after all, and we were supposed to both use all that we could to win. I even covered his hand and gave it a squeeze affectionately.

“A trick of my order. Half the power of my strikes was delayed to a specific time so that they would all release all at once. It’s a matter of controlling your own body... and that of your opponent. Like an explosion that takes time to reverberate back off a wall.”

“Heh. You sure did take control of my body all right.” I said. “And that spell sphere stealing all my power away?” I lifted my eyes and stared at him. I was prepared to beg if necessary as I opened my mouth and spoke. “Sage... I want my power back.”

I didn’t say it pleadingly, but neither was there menace in my voice. I just said it.

“Granted. I dispelled the field while you slept.”

I looked up at him. I’d... honestly half expected him to make me beg, but as he looked down at me, only one of his eyes visible through the shadows cast by his hair, he was smiling at me. To test him, I reached out with my mind and found that there was no barrier to be had anymore,

found the closest of my sources and tapped it. A stream of power flowed back toward me, and Sage stepped back as I hopped off the table and braced myself against it. I tapped the next one, and gave off a sigh of relief, and then tapped the next one, and with a sudden burst of thought surged outward in all directions to re-tap all my sources.

They flowed into me and I groaned, feeling my nipples harden as I groaned, holding onto the medical table with both hands as my muscles began to fill again, and both my hands squeezed against the edge of the table and compressed the metal to fold about my fingers.

My chest lifted as my breasts began to swell, and though I didn't gain in height any, I simply thickened.

My hips broadened as my ribs flared outward, my back broadening as my chest thrust outward, my gown compressing tightly about my form and riding up to show off my sex as I grew heavier in muscle weight before the first tears formed between my legs.

I exhaled a sigh as my swelling breasts ripped open the front of the gown, and Sage watched me transform back into the muscular maiden I was before; my shoulders broadening and tearing open the short sleeves of the gown, while my abs hardened, creased and re-creased, sinking below my ribs while my thighs pressed against one another.

My calves bulged, my inner thighs sunk below the outer, and my beautifully erect muscle definition criss crossed my body in ripples of motion before I lifted a hand to feel my throat even as my neck swelled, and I passed a hand downward over my chest, over one of my swelling breasts and over my abs as the last strips of my gown ripped across my hips and fell about my feet.

I panted heavily as the transformation slowed, my thighs pressing closer together as I creamed a little bit, and looking down at my supremely muscular body, I blushed, realizing I'd gone too far and pulled some of it back in and my body softened some.

I'd forgotten how much I enjoyed that... I thought.

"That was quite a sight." Sage mused as I stood there, nude, and as I looked up at him, there was a minute hunger inside me for him.

I felt the return of my immortality, and felt the catalog of my powers restacking themselves rapidly inside me as I stepped forward and placed my hands against his steel hard abs. There was very little give in that flesh of his, and he lifted his hands to hold mine.

"How do you feel?" he asked, and I moved forward to stand against him, my breasts, still a little too large, moved about his sides as I looked up at him, and then frowned at the sight of the bandage about his brow.

“Sage... what is that for?” I asked, forgetting about his question as I remembered seeing him in utter pain below me while my powers were siphoned from me and I was being beaten. Remembered the green fire burning from out of the center of his head.

He lifted a hand, and he felt what looked like a big knot in his skull then, and then exhaling, he turned his hand, and lifted the bandage away from his forehead. I gasped as I saw a glittering green gem, just like the ones on his wrists and in the center of his chest.

“This... is my prize, Rae.” He said, fingering the glittering thing. “My Seed has matured enough where this next stage in our evolution has become possible, and what you saw at the end of our fight was it forming inside me. But despite all the pain, whether I’ve won or lost, finally receiving my Dragon’s Eye has made it all worthwhile...”

Sage and I had retreated to the facilities of the hospital while we talked. The hospital was rather empty at the moment, as if the place had been left to just Sage and me to use, and so I walked beside him naked as I was on clothes washing day, holding onto his arm before we entered into the shower rooms.

I took a shower first, cleaning my body of all the sweat and grime while Sage told me of his home, the valley of Shangri-La; the holy sepulcher of his entire world. I learned of the Lycan, known as the Undying Breeds for how long they all lived, and of the humans that lived there.

I’d always thought of humans as a bit underdeveloped, but these ones that he described were eons ahead of the ones I knew of... and humans came from only one place in this universe... a backwater planet of very little note called Aearth. But he talked of an inter-universal society! This must mean that there are humans elsewhere, and when he spoke of the multiverse, I began to understand exactly how alien he was.

He wasn’t even from this universe!

The Aphkei have of course experimented in inter-dimensional travel, but the extent that the many denizens of his world have gone would far outweigh even the Aphkei’s influence. He counted five whole universes and sections of space held in a dozen others. That was nothing in comparison to their explored knowledge of at least a hundred more.

Then I exited the shower and began to brush myself, and watched Sage undress, surprised that his clothing simply melted into his skin and I was met with his muscular back and tight behind – *mph!* – With his long tail swinging close to his ankles as he too took the shower.

I told him of this universe, at where I was born, how Meniko had snatched me up and made me strong, at my many adventures, all the while I watched Sage’s silhouette in the shower screen. I told him of how I went back home, and rescued my sister Fatima, and heard Sage laugh at the mention of her. Fatima seemed to already have a crush on Sage.

Then my smile faded, and abandoning my brush, I rose to my feet and padded over to the door to Sage's shower stall, and opening it he turned to look at me, and I remarked on his nude form and smiled warmly before I stepped into the shower with him, and embraced him.

I wanted to feel his strength, wanted to make sure.

In him I had an equal, a powerful male with incredible strength and wisdom... and an expert lover, I assure you. And with me, he was gentle and affectionate, and when I embraced him, he held me back.

We didn't have sex just then... not at all. Just a loving embrace. The fight was over, the competition done with, and I wanted just the kindness and love now. Sage had that way of holding me that made me feel safe... like I didn't need to be the strongest in creation...

I liked listening to his heart beating beneath my ear.

Finally the water started to get cold, and Sage reached forward and turned off the faucets; and with both of us nude, we exited the shower stall, and in spite of myself, I reached out and took his hand. He smiled at me.

It was quiet for a time while I dried off and began to brush my fur again. Sage dressed – if that's what one would call his body being enveloped with black viscous fluid that shifted into clothing, using his claws for a comb, he straightened his hair back and then bound it with a leather thong that he produced from out of nowhere.

For me, I had to go back to the room I awoke in, and made repairs on my clothes that I'd worn this morning with the tatters of my hospital gown. Magic helped that immensely, and the fibers knitted themselves and changed color and texture to how I wanted them to be, even as they knit themselves right onto my body.

It was then that Sage and I decided to exit the hospital.

It was nearly dawn, but despite that there was a massive crowd that cheered us in thanks for the show. They must've been waiting outside for us to arrive, and as we stepped forward, either of us looking as if we hadn't just beaten each other senseless, we approached to where the Emperor waited for us. He sat on the slightly modified box he'd watched most of the tournament in. Meniko stood beside him in her bird maiden form, her beautiful wings folded against her back while she stood in pristine white robes.

Captain Leski was to his other side.

Sage and I approached and stopped before him, and though I crouched low in a curtsy, Sage did little more than bow his head. A warrior's honor, I guessed. He would not bow unless he recognized the person as a greater warrior, and he would not kneel unless he was giving fealty.

An inclination of the head was all that he could permit.

We held that till the emperor rose, and all those gathered all bowed and curtsied while he stood there. Leski, as his consort for these proceedings, was to remain sitting.

His guard and the recently repaired dragoon remained still, watching for trouble as was their duty.

“I find my decision difficult.” Jaikard spoke soundly so that everyone could hear it. “The battle that happened here today is one of legends. I am able to say that I am greatly impressed. Credit goes to Rae and the Mystic League for producing such a wonderful combatant. But you, Lord Sage... no matter how hard I try, your species, your home world, and everything about you is a mystery, but nevertheless, wherever you came from, whatever trials that forged you, you have proven yourself to be a fighter on par with our own Champion.”

There was applause, but the emperor lifted his hands for silence.

“My difficulty in deciding a final outcome comes from the fact that you beat each other into unconsciousness, and both passed out simultaneously. Likewise, you were both removed from the field on stretchers.

“And there is a bargain that revolves on this decision I am about to make. If Lord Sage was to win, then he stays here for as long as he wishes in order to absorb this school’s knowledge. If Lady Rae was to win, then Sage is to stay for no less than a decade, and teach his ways to this school.”

He lifted his scepter.

“I have made a decision.” And lowered it... onto Sage’s shoulder’s declaring him the winner.

There was disappointment in the crowd as the Emperor lifted his scepter, and with a moment’s pause, he then lowered it onto my shoulder.

I blinked, and all eyes turned to the emperor for explanation.

“Since this is considered a double KO, and since the conditions of both of you winning are impossible, I therefore rule that both of you loose.

“Lord Sage is to remain for ten years, as per his bargain, and impart his knowledge. This school, in turn, is to give him access to its store of knowledge so that he can learn your ways. As a final matter... since both champions have lost, and the Demon League has forfeited, the prize and the purse of this tournament therefore lies on the last runner up.

“Makahn of Tamsleint.” Cheers immediately rose up that the crowd favorite did in fact did win. Sage and I exchanged looks with one another, and we both gave a wry look at each other. “Now! Time for celebration!” The emperor called, and in short order Sage and I were forgotten in the face of the party that suddenly rose up from all this.

As if on cue, he and I walked off quietly with one another.

We'd found our way to the gardens, and we quietly walked along beside each other.

"I admit, Sage... you have my respect. It's been a long time since I'd been clocked upside the head as hard as that."

"Same for me. But I have a question." He said, and I turned to look at him. "Why did you hold back?"

I stared at him, and then lowering my head I shrugged. "I... didn't want to hurt you."

Sage nodded, and then lifting a hand, he felt his forehead, felt the new jewel imbedded there.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

"Just a slight headache." He nodded. "It will pass."

There was more silence as we walked quietly together for a time. I chanced a look out of the corner of my eye at that gem in his forehead, and wondered what new powers were rising up in this already powerful Weretiger. And with it in his head, does that mean... psychic powers?

"Sage? Did you... did you hold back?"

Again there was more silence before he answered. "Yes."

"Why?"

He smiled down at me. "Because I didn't want to hurt you. Though I feel, perhaps, I was holding back less... You are truly a power, Rae. In one universe I toppled an evil dictator. In another an immortal emperor who'd abandoned his people... each of them had some sort of flaw in them... and then I came here, and met a pure goddess..."

"I felt it would've been a sin if I'd even tried to utterly defeat you like I did them."

"You did utterly defeat me, Sage." I smiled. "But it wasn't a sin." I turned to him, and standing up on my toes I kissed this massive tiger man. "You maneuvered me into a corner of your own making, and when my power was peaking, you took it away. Had you not been halving your power to split between blows... you would've worn me out a long time ago..." I hung on him. "I need to train harder now that you're going to be around." I gave him a hug. "I'm in training now... for the next time we fight."

Sage laughed and embraced me.

“I hope that there isn’t a *‘next time,’* Rae. I truly don’t. Fate brought me here, and as it is, I am here for awhile now. Best if I was to set myself for the long run, but I have no desire to fight such a grueling battle again any time soon.” He kissed my forehead. “Once a decade is more than enough...”

I chuckled, and I looked up at him, and was about to kiss him again when I heard someone call out.

“**Get away from her!!**” and we both turned to see Makahn charging up toward us. “Get your hands off her!” He demanded, in a frightful temper. “Hands off or fight me!”

Sage looked at me and then at Makahn. The new gem in Sage’s forehead twinkled briefly as he watched Makahn set back into a fighting stance.

“Makahn, who do you think you are to tell who can or can’t touch me?! You are not my husband, and even if we *were* married, don’t ever think...” Sage laid a hand over my lips to quiet me, and I looked up at him, and there was a sad smile on his face before he turned to Makahn.

“Do you challenge me, Makahn?” he said, and I heard my breath catch.

Oh no... Sage will massacre Makahn.

“In a heart beat.” Makahn growled, hunching in on himself.

“Even though I can beat you away like I was flicking away a flea?” Makahn’s jaw set firmly into a snarl.

“Yes!” he answered with a shout, and again reset his stance, fists up.

“Why?”

That got both me and Makahn to blink, and I looked from Sage and then to Makahn as Sage released me and faced Makahn. *Yes Makahn. Why?* I practically screamed inside my head, and Sage lifted a hand to press his fingers against his temples as he looked sidelong at me briefly.

Was he reading my mind? Sage smiled and looked at me again, and then he focused on Makahn now.

Makahn had frozen to his spot, his jaw open as if he’d just been hit in the face.

“Why?” he repeated, and looked at me.

“Yes, Why?” Sage repeated.

Then Makahn set his jaw and reset his fighting stance again.

“Because I *love* her!” He said at last, and I gasped. “I’d come here, begged to come here, to be released from my mission to come here, so that I could fight my way to the top and standing in the same ring with Rae, submit myself to her and ask her to marry me. But you ruined all that. You just waltz in here, fine as you do, you take my place, you take my love, and you ruin *everything!*”

“That’s why I will fight for you now, Rae. I will lay down my life for you. I love you!”

“Makahn...” I whispered, standing straight on the spot, and Sage laid a gentle hand on my shoulder and my gaze snapped up to him, but he was still staring at Makahn unblinkingly.

“I accept your challenge then, Makahn of Tamsleint... And I yield.”

I gasped and looked at him and saw the sadness behind his eyes, though his face was emotionless.

“What?” Makahn asked, standing up straighter, and Sage’s hand shifted on my shoulder to palm my back, and he gave me a slight push toward Makahn.

I took a halting step closer but stopped and turned, looking into Sage’s face as he smiled for me.

“I will tell you a secret, Makahn. I have exceptionally acute hearing, at certain distances... And during my battle with you, I heard Rae gasp every time I struck you, and I heard her breathe a sigh of relief every time you got up. And I understood why you had such blind determination to beat me.

“Rae,” he said then and turned to me. “I must profess that I do already care for you. It was even painful for a moment there... I thought that I’d finally found an equal. But despite that finding you an equal, I am afraid that I do not love you any where near as much as this man does.”

He stepped forward, and I felt his hand palm my belly, and I looked down in surprise at that touch and then back up into his face.

“I felt something in you last night, something resting here in your navel. It is the *spark* of a baby...” I gasped and stared at Sage as he continued. “It is just a spark, Rae... ready to finally be given physical form, but it needs a male who can help you create that physical form. Makahn has that ability, but with me... I am sorry to say that my genetic code is too alien for a wolf, and I could never help you to father that child. It would forever be inside you, screaming for life, and I would be unable to give it.

“But Makahn can... and for me to take you from him... now *that*... would be a sin.

“Go to him Rae. Besides... he’s rather rich now. And he’s going to be the father of your babies soon.” Sage smiled, and he stepped away from me.

It was as if I needed someone to tell me how to feel, and now that I think about it, many of my feelings that I'd had before Sage's arrival had all been for Makahn, and now that I felt my heart swell again for that grey wolf, I surged forward into his grasp and felt Makahn's arms around me.

Like Sage's arms... I felt safe in those arms, but unlike Sage... I felt that heart beat quicken as Makahn held me, and felt the passion in his body as he wrapped his arms about my body and rubbed his cheek against my hair.

"Oh beloved... please say that you'll marry me. I'll be lost forever if you say no." he whispered into my ear.

"Yes." I whispered back, tears falling from the corners of my eyes and I threw my arms around his neck and felt him lift me off the ground.

And then I heard Sage clear his throat and we both looked at him.

"Listen to my words, Makahn... you must cherish this creature with every mote of your being for the fullness of your life. For if you don't... then I will be there to take her from you." He stepped forward and planted a large hand on Makahn's shoulder. "And may the Fates damn you should you ever fail to protect her, and know that I am the instrument of Fate." He smiled then. "Now love this beautiful creature with all your heart... mind... and strength. And be unrelenting about it."

And then Sage left us, fading into the shadows as assuredly as if he never was. Keen on Sage's words, Makahn immediately took me into the deepest, most passionate kiss I'd ever experienced, so strong that it made my heart flutter with the feel of it.

So powerful was that kiss that I felt dizzy from it, so dizzy that I didn't even realize that he and I had laid down in a thick clump of bushes while I let him undress me, and while the other students and the whole of the school was gathered for celebration elsewhere, I gave myself wholly to this great male, surprised that he filled me more perfectly than even Sage did.

'If you love... love without remorse,' I heard the words in my own head while I was half dazed with the love of passion then hearing someone else's voice in my head. *'If you fight, fight with honor, and the Fates will smile on you... Rae Iksaki.'*

And then I was lost to the passion.

Morning came as if an eternity had passed, and the celebrations lasted well into the morning. Sage stood guarding the gateway into the gardens, playing his flute while a Moon Singer watched him play from a perch high above. No one seemed to want to go past him into the gardens while he played like that.

Nestled alone in the gardens, the two of us naked and our bodies entwined with one another as we slept contented, I felt a twinge in the universe suddenly click into place as my life altered for the better.

And the strange creature known as Sage Preypacer... played us a lullaby...

End