

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 hips, 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!

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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.

"AHRH!! 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 a 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.

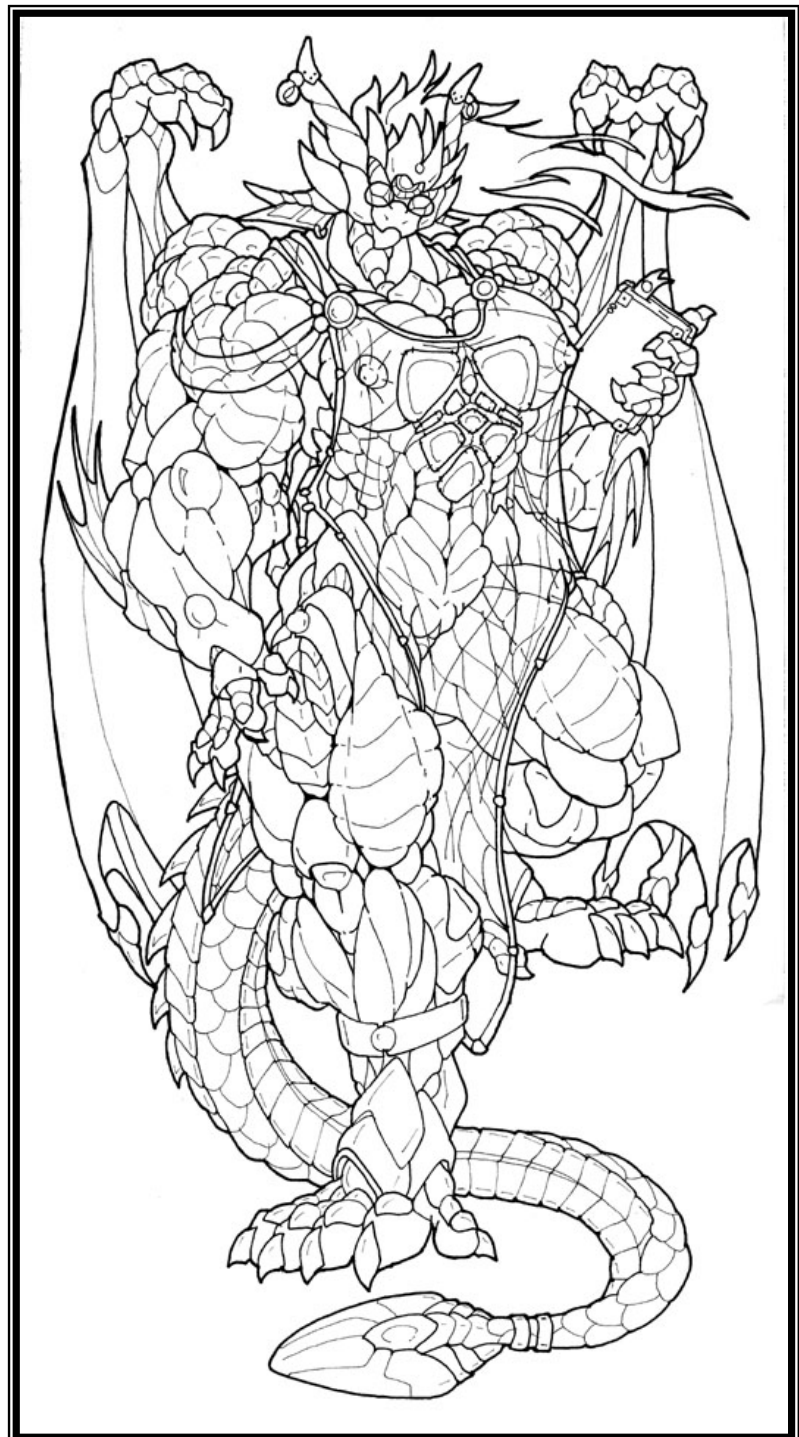
“Truthfully, no, it is not my lady. Your facilities I’d have to rate somewhere around fifth or so most impressive in my experience.”

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.

Pleeयो is © 2003 DocWolph



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.