

## **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...”

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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!”

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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!"

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### *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.

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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.

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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.”

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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...

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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.

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“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...