

## Chapter 5: The Mind of a Warrior

I stirred awake, and then lifted myself. I was alone within Sage's great circular bed, with the blanket I'd draped over my shoulders the night before falling down to my waist as I rose.

Sage wasn't here. But being that there was another blanket thrown over me, I assumed that Sage must've wrapped me up before leaving. Lifting a hand, I brushed some of my soft mane away from my eyes, my legs tucking beneath me as I looked around.

"Sage...?" I prompted a little sleepily, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes with one hand.

Except who greeted me was the doors to Sage's room opening, and a now clothed, and a much more solid Daedalus entered the chamber with a large tray balanced on one hand. He looked real now.

"Good morning, Miss Iksaki." He says, and the lights in the room raised a few levels to at least dimly light the room. "I hope you slept well."

I blinked at him in surprise. He even had a semblance of hair now, and was dressed smartly.

*Drs. Hurri Namah © 2004 by: DocWolph*

"Morning?" I repeated dumbly, still a bit groggy from sleep. "Is it that early already?"

"Indeed Miss Iksaki. A little more into the day and I'd've had to greet you in the afternoon."

"Afternoon?!" I started, coming fully awake as I rose immediately to my feet. "But... t-the competition..."

"...Has been delayed per Emperor Jaikard and Headmistress Menikomenqolui's orders." Dallas said, and placed his tray on the chest at the end of Sage's bed, and began pouring tea. "They had decided that it was implicit that a rest time for the fighters be granted, as well as having your Chief Medical Officer – Doctor Hyurri Namah, I believe her name was – to be summoned."



I sat back down where I was before rising, my muscular legs splayed before me while I looked off into nothingness. “Because of Illia...” I managed.

“Indeed. Sage is the most potent healer I’ve ever seen in my existence, but the ways of the mind are still a difficulty, even for him. He’s been meditating more and more lately in order to develop his consciousness beyond just his defenses. He rarely sleeps anymore in place of it.

“Last night was one of the longest times I’ve seen him sleep in nearly an age.”

There was a slight pause as I accepted the tea that Dallas handed me and took a sip of the wonderfully delightful sweet tea that Sage seems to drink all the time. It warmed the heart and the navel quite well.

“There we go,” Dallas mused. “Just the thing for a cool misty morning. But I must beg for forgiveness for my master. He was concerned about the one known as Illia Romov, and so has gone to look in on her.”

I looked up, suddenly reminded completely about the happenings of last night, and why exactly I’d just awoken in Sage’s bed-chamber. I stood up immediately and looked around for my clothes, wanting to know how my old friend was doing.

“Where are my clothes?” I asked suddenly, and began upturning sheets looking for them.

“Calm yourself Miss Iksaki. I have simply taken them to have them cleaned for you. They are still moist, but I am sure that I can find something for you to wear in the interim.”

I stared at Dallas as I sat down in my underclothes. “You take your duties quite seriously.” I said, running a hand through my mane, smiling at the humanoid creature.

“It is my purpose.” He said simply, opening up a hidden panel in the wall and pulling out a long clothes rack, covered with different types of cloth hanging in rolls of bolts, and pulling a few pieces off he brought over to me, holding up one piece of cloth after the other in front of me.

“Your purpose?” But isn’t that what Lord Sage built you to be?”

Dallas smiled whimsically, replacing pieces of cloth back on the rack and removing a bolt of one light blue color off the rack.

“Not originally.” He admitted, and pushed the entire length of the clothes rack back into its compartment, closed it and opened another compartment, complete with a sewing machine, needles, thread and trimmings. “I was Sage’s first creation. He was eight at the time that the other children kept harassing him about all of his constant studies, and told him if he wanted friends then maybe he should make some.

“So he did.”

I blinked at Dallas as he immediately went to work sewing me clothes.

“You are a wonderfully advanced Artificial Intelligence, Daedalus.” I said, watching him work so nimbly. “I’ve never seen an AI as advanced as you.”

“Truthfully, Miss Iksaki, there is nothing ‘Artificial’ about me.” He managed out of the corner of his mouth due to holding some pins in his teeth. “Sage’s technology is genetic manipulation, bio-engineering, and anything living. Living steel make up my framework and housings, my circuitry is made up of a style of high speed nervous network instead of fiber optics, while my ‘CPU’ is a massive throbbing brain.”

He grinned at me, several pins still sticking out of his teeth.

“My first representation that you saw here was nothing more than a hologram with tractor beams and force fields. What you are looking at now is a principal drone. Grown at a latter time after construction of any of Sage’s lairs in which to provide a more personal service to my master.

“But even this drone,” he pauses, lifting a hand and moving his fingers for me to see. “Is a thing of blood, nerve endings, bone and muscle; instead of lubricants, fiber optics, metal braces and pistons.”

He moved back to sewing.

“I am an intelligence; Magic and Psionics have all proven that I am a living thing with a soul. Sage professes that he only created the facility for me, and it was the Creator Himself that had gifted me with a mind and a soul. Sage merely gave me the heart.”

I leaned forward, watching this representation of Sage’s house computer, a drone of sorts with unknown abilities and powers. But if it could hack into the imperial computer net to get the blueprints from imperial R&D, then its hacking skills at least are top notch.

“You mentioned that serving was your purpose. But isn’t that what Sage built you to do, Dallas?”

“No... it is not.” Daedalus responded, and began to rapidly work another piece of clothing with the same colored material at blinding speed and accuracy. “My first and foremost function was as a friend. But unlike his other creations, I am far easier to upgrade and enhance. I became an assistant with his studies at first. Most of what I know was because he and I learned it together.

“He continued to enhance me, make me better and improve my data storage capabilities, till finally he plugged me into his home’s power network. I was given more upgrades, more attachments, more tasks, and I moved up to lab assistant, then a lab partner. I wanted to help, wanted to serve. It became my driving force.

“They were desires that Sage never designed into me. They sort of just... developed.”

“Sage even asked me one day, if I wanted to be anything else. He offered me that should I ask of it, he would transform me into a real human or something similar of my choosing. Transform my entire logic base inside the head of an advanced drone made into the form of whatever I chose...

“I didn’t know how to answer that. I still don’t know. Many a day I still compute about that. In the mean time, however, I have chosen to serve. Not because I was created to, not because I am forced to or obligated to due to hardwired circuitry – in which in me there is none – but because I want to.”

The sewing machine whirrs with a few more rapid motions as he utilizes it for a few final stitches, and then removing his work, he brings them over to me to observe and survey.

I hold up the two piece pants and jacket he’d just made for me, with the light blue accenting my eyes, and the flare work done in beautiful gold and crimson to accent my fur; the gold done in wonderful scrawl work of some society on his and Sage’s home world.

“They’re beautiful.” I said, and meant it. “And so soft...”

“They’re made from a special polymer I am sure you have available somewhere in this universe. As soft and as smooth as silk, but have the tensile strength of many steel alloys, so they are guaranteed never to rip or tear during general tasks. And unlike silk, they will not turn translucent when wet.” He said with his hands clasped behind his back and his body poised just like one of the imperial servants hold themselves whilst awaiting commands.

*They’re so lovely...* I thought, and immediately began trying them on. Dressing quickly in my new clothing and closing everything up tight.

The trousers hugged my legs gently, allowing for stretch ability, conforming about my crotch with an extra layer of cloth there for decency sakes to hide any embarrassment that usually formed from females wearing tight clothes. The waist band actually was two straps that folded one over the other, attaching to adhesive strips just above my thighs to create a deep downward arch beneath my stomach, and low enough in the back to allow my tail to wave freely.

They were quite sexy.

The jacket was sleeveless just like the jerkin’s Sage tended to wear, letting my thick muscular arms free to the open air, while the single-breasted jacket held my breasts in place and, again, revealed my belly. It’s hem stopped at just above my midriff. Dallas then proffered me a pair of slippers of the same color – which I pulled on too – and lifting his hand, a reflective hologram appeared before me in the form of a full-length mirror, allowing me to admire myself.

“You have a master’s hand, Dallas. These look beautiful, and a virile sexiness I didn’t even think I could possess.” I turned, checking out my back and backside, seeing how the rearward face of my trousers hugged my rounded buttocks so superbly. There were strings inside that

pulled a little of the fabric so that they only *just* followed the contour of my rear. Half for my tail and half to improve that general sexiness trait they seemed to give me.

“I have been given my master’s trait for the appreciation of the female gender. ‘The Creator’s greatest gift to mankind, and his most beautiful works of art,’ he has been known to say.”

I turned fully around, and actually giggled, taking pleasure in my new clothes as I pirouetted once in a circle before the mirror and then hugged myself.

“Thank you.” I said and turned again to Dallas.

“You are, again, quite welcome Miss Iksaki. Now if you’ll please follow me, I shall show you out. I am sure Sage shall be found at your medical facility.”

I followed Dallas, and he paused just long enough to shut the doors to Lord Sage’s bedroom. We crossed a lighted living room, very simple looking, very comfortable with a warm lighted fire crackling in a great fireplace in the center of the room.

Then out over the central island in Sage’s present Lair, where I petted the Moon Singer’s plumage as we passed and was rewarded with a quick twittering and ghostly song, Dallas then saw me out, bowing deeply as I stepped out over the mist covered cobbles of the League’s grounds.

The early risers were already walking about, hoping to get a good look at some of the fighters. I waved to a few of them as I made my way to the hospital wing. Entering into the door closest to Sage’s quarters, I walked right up to observation deck overlooking Illia’s recovery chamber. They’d given her her own room since last night, and it took me a bit to find her. Sage was sitting beside her, his hand stroking her mane while she slept, his eyes closed and his head bowed.

He was singing a soft lullaby in a strange language that had a delicate lilt to the tone, and a sing-song undertone. Just listening to it put me at peace.

I walked up to the railing overlooking her room. It was dark up here so that the window beneath me was practically a one way on her side. I knew that Sage could sense me, knew that he knew that I was there. He didn’t move though other than his hand. I hugged myself, hefting my bosom a little higher atop my chest while I watched them together.

Just then Illia shivered and awoke, taking in a deep intake of breath before crying out. Sage was immediately on his feet.

“It’s ok. It’s ok... it was only a bad dream.” He said, there beside her. Seeing Sage, she turned immediately to embrace him.

“It... it was terrible... Mr. Sage.” She sobbed in a voice that seemed a little too high pitched to be her voice. Like the voice of a child. She clutched onto his broad back, her massive body crushing him within her massive arms and bosom. “I dreamt that I saw my sister. I... I had her

in my hands and I... I was wringing her with my bare hands. O-only I was big! I wished that I'd be big a-and..."

"It's ok, Illia. It's ok." He tried to embrace her, but his great arms could barely reach around her body. "Illia...I have something to tell you, something I didn't get the chance to do before you slept. There... has been an accident with your sister. She was crushed. I am afraid that she couldn't be saved."

Illia gasped, settling back and covering her mouth with both hands. "No! I-it happened again." Her eyes were glistening with tears. "I had a bad dream, and something bad happened! No! Cyvel!" She broke down to sobbing.

"Merely coincidence, Illia." Sage whispered into her rounded ear atop her head, caressing her head hair softly with one clawed hand, combing her hair with those ebon claws. "It was an accident. These things happen."

"B-but I... I will never get to see her. I was supposed to look out for her!" she gasped, her eyes running over with tears.

"And you did your best. Not even the most powerful and gifted of guardians can protect everyone all the time." I bit my lip at that, but Sage continued. "She is in a better place now. She is where nothing can harm her, and now she has the power to look after you."

"W-will she ever come back. Some of the priests... the healers! They can sometimes bring them back!"

"There is no bringing her back this time, Illia, despite how much you may wish her to return. If I had the power to do so, I would. But she is beyond any priest's power to revive now." Sage tilted her face up so that she was looking at him. He fingered her black-lipped mouth. "Go ahead, Illia. Go ahead and cry. No one is looking, and I won't tell."

"This is a time when you don't have to be strong..."

Illia's eyes glistened for a moment or two, and then she squeezed her eyes shut tightly and returned to sobbing, clutching at Sage clawing at his black sleeveless jerkin. In spite of myself, my own eyes began to glitter as I looked down at this, and I felt my heart flutter while I covered my mouth with one hand to cover my quivering lower lip.

"C-can I see her?" Illia asked at last, withdrawing again to look at Sage.

"No." he answered simply. "She has already been returned to the Earth. You've been asleep for a long time. You too were hurt in the accident. Something inside you was broken but we fixed it. You should be ok now."

"Wh-where am I?" she asked.

“At school.” Illia’s tears dried as she folded her hands and sat back, staring at the floor from where she sat atop her elevated bed, her breasts hanging from her chest, objects that in her mind she did not yet possess because her mind had been reduced to that of a little girl.

Sage continued to stroke her hair though as she looked to him. I was amazed at how quickly she was shifting through emotions, but remembered something Sage had said last night, that she would be feeling each and every last painful memory until they’ve all been lived. That could take awhile.

“Can I see her? Her grave... I mean.” She asked timidly.

“No.” Sage responded, whipping away the last of her tears with one thick thumb, which she blinked against. “She’s been returned to your home world. Your parents have come to take her and place her in the soil near to where she was born.” *How does he know that?* I wondered. “They wished that they could take you home too, but you were too hurt to move at the time. They watched over you as long as they could. They left me, and Headmistress Meniko to look over you.”

I watched Sage in his slurry of half-truths to her. He never really lied, but he was telling her only enough of the truth that she could handle right now. But it was amazing to see the healing process at last being done. I blinked away my own tears as I felt one slide over my cheek and wet my fur, and I wiped them away with my hand before returning it to my lips to watch.

“I have something for you, Illia.” He said at last, a little more cheerful now to help her recover from her hurt.

She looked up at him, a little sad. This must be weeks, maybe months later in mourning now. She had a depressed tone of voice, like she didn’t feel like she wanted to live.

“Do you like magic?”

She nodded. “I-I know a little... of it myself. Meniko and the teachers taught me. They said they could make me stronger.”

“Then watch.”

Sage’s hands clasped before him, and when he opened them, a light brown teddy bear unfolded out of nothingness within his hands. I felt the barest of snaps in the world around me as Sage worked that strange alien magic of his. It was a bit large, but for Illia, it was just the right size. Sage, holding it by its rump and one arm, gave it to her.

After seeing what she was like last night, it so wonderful a sight to see her smile a little while accepting the gift.

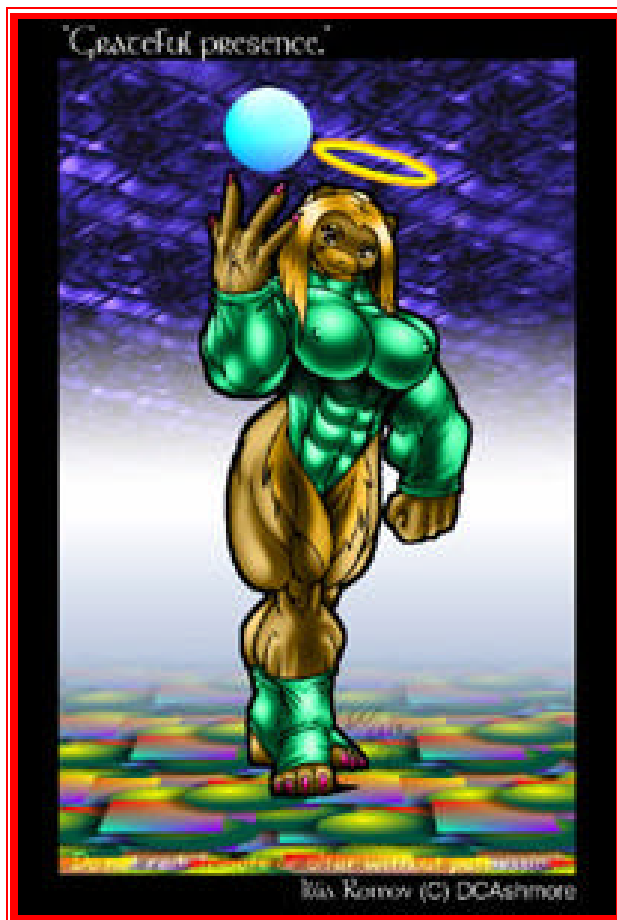
“S-she... she looks like Cyvel.” She whispered. New tears rising within her eyes.

My brows creased as I looked at the Teddy bear Sage was offering. I'd only seen Cyvel's image a couple of times, but indeed, that bear looked like her. Same hairstyle, same colored eyes, same favorite clothes in the form of the simple T-shirt it wore.

*How is he doing that?*

"A very close friend of mine made this for you when he heard what had happened." I heard him say, and I smiled then. *Dallas. He must've hacked the system to find Cyvel and then make the bear.* "Whenever you're feeling lost, alone," Sage continued. "Or maybe even scared, just hold this little bear and dream that you are hugging your sister. I can assure you that her spirit at least, will be hugging back. At first you may not be able to feel it, but the closer you feel to her, the stronger her embrace back to you will be.

*Illia Romov is © 2004 by: DocWolph*



"She will bring you the strength you seek."

Illia looked at the bear and hugged it tightly, nuzzling it with her big cheek while new tears leaked from her eyes.

Sage was in the midst of stroking her hair again when the door hissed open, and our Chief Medical Officer – fresh from her vacation – Doctor Hyurri Namah stormed into the room. Illia, I noted, flinched openly and moved shyly backward as Hyurri entered, the CMO's face etched into an expression of incredible annoyance.

"You!" she growled harshly and stabbed Sage in the chest with one finger. "You must be the dissident who's been tearing up my hospital and causing all sorts of wonton damage!"

I bit my lower lip, seeing Illia bite hers as well and hold her bear even tighter as she began to shiver with fear at the presence Hyurri was projecting.

"I must apologize, ma'am," Sage said, Hyurri tensed up at being called 'Ma'am.' Most women didn't like being referred to by the more mature title. "But I truly do not know what you mean." He made to rise. "Perhaps we can speak about this outside?"



“My Hospital!” she raised both hands over her head in exasperation. “You barge in here,” She poked him in the chest again. “Use expensive medical equipment without supervision,” again she jabbed him in the chest. “*And* then perform an improper Mental Surgery that leaves one of this school’s most talented graduates as a *vegetable!*”

Sage turned to look at Illia, who’s lower lip was now trembling as she hid behind him in fear of Hyurri, curled up almost into a fetal position while hugging fiercely onto her new bear to the point I thought she might squeeze its head off. When he turned back, he lifted a hand to Hyurri’s mouth in order to quiet her, just as she was about to continue on her tirade, clamped his large hand down about her jaw and then moved her gently yet forcibly backward; forcing her body to follow her head, which is following its mouth. I stepped sideways to the part of the observation deck overlooking the hall they’d just stepped into as Illia’s door closed, and Sage continued to push Doctor Namah until her back was against the opposing wall.

“You... are... upsetting the *patient... doctor...*” he said in a controlled sort of way through his sharp teeth, with just a bit of warning before he released his grip on her mouth and stepped back away from her. “You are undoubtedly the CMO here. No one else in a medical profession would dare do what you just did unless they had that sort of flack in the hospital.

“Now, my dear doctor, why don’t you calm yourself and voice your concerns in a civilized way.”

“I AM...!” she began in outrage but Sage interrupted immediately.

“AH!” and he looked sternly before lifting a hand with all his fingers open, and then slowly brought his fingers together like a closing mouth to tell the doctor to lower her voice.

“I am *appalled* that you, an untrained git of a creature, could think you can waltz right into my hospital and perform a very complex, and very difficult psychic procedure without any supervision.” She said in a rushed voice, and Sage lifted his arms and crossed them before his chest as he looked down the great space between them in height. “This is *my* hospital, and I will not have someone I have not approved for access to the equipment here just arbitrarily waltz around, doing nary as he pleases, and doing them unsuccessfully for that matter too!”

Sage raised an eyebrow into the silence, took a deep breath, and then released it.

“Firstly, this isn’t your hospital.” He said in a quiet, controlled voice. “It’s Meniko’s. She authorized my usage of it last night. You are merely the chief of staff.” He said, lifting a finger to count the point off, and Hyurri fumed.

“Secondly,” he continued, raising another finger. “The Psychic Surgery in which I accomplished was aided by at least a dozen others. So far in my lifetime, I’ve done over two hundred surgeries like it unaided, and this time it was a team operation aided by several specialists in the telepathic orders who were more than helpful in this particularly nasty disintegration of psyche.”

Namah opened her mouth to protest, but Sage continued before she could.

“Thirdly,” still another finger. “My medical know-how has so far been unparalleled by any race that I have yet encountered and your expensive *toys* here are less than what I am used to dealing with. I’m kind of new in this general area of space, so I may yet find someone who’s better than me. If there is a tool, device or piece of ‘expensive equipment’ in there that I don’t know about or know how to operate, you will know that I would not dare utilize such a device under any circumstance without proper supervision.

“Fourthly, the patient was not rendered a vegetable, as you’ve just seen. Right now, her psyche is fully repaired, and she is now going through a possibly long healing process which will take many long months if not years to sort out. And on top of it all, *doctor*, if you are indeed the head of staff here, responsible for the mental, physical and spiritual health of everyone in this school or who comes to this school, then explain to me why you have missed such a critical psychological element in Illia’s being?”

“Th-*that’s* Illia?” she said, staring at Sage, and then looked to the door, before she surged forward, and took the medical datapad from its wall hanging tray by her door and began to read it.

Hyrri’s features moved from concern, to rage, to fear and then understanding whilst she red. When she looked up to Sage, it was an expression of indignation. Sage, on the other hand, was looking straight into her eyes.

“You *knew!* You knew her condition and did nothing about it.” He said as a statement instead of a question daring her to confirm the fact. “Her present state of mind could have been completely avoided. Why? Why didn’t you fix it?”

Sage’s eyes were crumbled with confusion and with a hint of anger, but he made no advancement toward her.

“Because she was able to function perfectly within society with her primary ability to experience pain and suffering deadened. She seemed to be able to function even better than most! How could I have changed it? There was nothing that could’ve worsened her mental state, so I left it alone.”

A muscle in Sage’s cheek twitched, but other than that, his features no longer betrayed his irritation. His expression was calm, serene.

“I will assume that all of the doctors and psychics who were present last night have added their words to the report you just read. So I shall make a statement and then ask a question.

“Statement: every warrior who enters a battle must be of the utmost health. Mentally, physically and spiritually. Those who are not whole have weaknesses, those who have weaknesses tend to be hurt seriously, or worse, killed.

“Question: What do you think would happen to Illia when someone like me comes along and uses a spell or spell like power that *forces* her to feel the emotions of pain and fear?”

“If she had all her wits about her, she would have recovered completely by now, and now functioning perfectly fine. But because you neglected to remove this mental stymie, her psyche shattered and had to be rounded up and pieced carefully together again. The result of which is now forcing her to live through all the fear and pain in which she was unable to feel because you *neglected* – and oh yes... it is negligence – to do it before hand.”

“Negligence?! How dare you cite that before me! I am a class P-Twelve Super Psionic. My *specialty* is telepathy. I could have fixed the damage you caused in a heart beat! The report stated that you had her in suspended animation. She wouldn’t have gotten any worse, and when I came back, everything would’ve been fixed as fine as you do! And now... because of this... this *fracas!* Illia has now been reduced to the mind of a child!”

Sage stared at her for a moment and then bowed his head a little, still staring unblinkingly at Namah.

“Then there is the tragedy. I was unaware of you last night. Even when I spoke to your second, and the other members of your staff, I was not made aware of you or your abilities. None of them thought to tell me of it, and I did not think to ask due to the necessity of the task we were facing, even after I’d asked for every psychic to be rounded up for the process of the surgery. Had I known, I would’ve held off on the surgery till you could perform it.”

Now it was her time to cross her arms, her slender hands crossing over one another beneath her bosom and hefting its ample fortitude up over her arms. She looked sternly into his eyes, but then her features softened as she noted that he meant what he had said.

“So... you’re admitting that I am the better doctor now? Your search is finally over?” she smirked.

“No. I am admitting that you are the better telepath. I said nothing about you being the better doctor.” Hyurri fumed again. “Illia’s mental aspects have her acting as a child, but she is rapidly moving through her life, sometimes days or weeks at a time. She has proven to be very fearful at first. Sudden movements and loud voices tend to upset her. She may be a child, but she has the body of a fully developed woman and an accomplished fighter. Second best in the universe, if I miss my guess.”

For the barest of instants his eyes glanced up at me and back at Namah.

“I will be coming back periodically to check up on her, doctor. I shall check in with you each time to see how she is developing. Good day, doctor.” He said, bowed and then turned to leave.

Hyurri then began to stare at him, here eyes narrowing, and Sage suddenly stopped. When he turned around, his beautiful green eyes had turned a bloody red, and his face had contorted into an unnatural snarl. I heard and ever so brief high-pitched noise inside my head before Hyurri

suddenly stumbled backward, her head jerking upward as if just smacked, and when she regained her composure, blood was beginning to seep out of her nostrils.

She then stared at him, aghast, letting the blood run down over her chin while her jaw lay slack open. I felt my hands grasp against the railing as for an instant, I feared the worst.

“I... I am sorry for that.” Sage said, shaking his head and pushing a finger to the center of his brow. When he opened his eyes again, they had returned to an emerald green. “I am *truly* sorry for that.” He approached her and she flinched, but instead of striking her, Sage helped her to stand, and even pulled a cloth wipe from a surgical tray on a table nearby, prompted her to raise her head and held the wipe under her nose.

“I may not be as powerful a telepath as you, but I am a rather potent specialist in a discipline in telepathy. Psychic Dueling. My mental defenses are built to hamper attacks from psychics of class P-Fifteens or lower, while at the same time dishing disruptive psychic attacks back at them.

“Regardless to say, it is best not to try to probe me without my permission again. My defenses are trained to act automatically, and are quite aggressive and vicious in their dealings, and I have yet to control said instincts completely.” He removed his hand and let Hyurri hold it herself as she stared at him dumbstruck. “I’ll take my leave of you, Doctor. Again... forgive me.” And he bows, ducking out the main corridor door and out onto the grounds.

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Hyurri was still holding the wipe to her nose as I found her in the main commissary of the hospital, re-reading the notes of Illia’s file.

“Was he right?” I asked quietly, standing above her, and she looked up at me, removing the wipe to show a slightly bloodstained fur moustache on her upper lip.

She then lowered her head and looked to the file again.

“He is.” She answered. “Meniko knew, I knew, and no one else. To go through life without fear was a gift we thought, so we left that portion of her mind deadened.”

I lowered myself into the chair opposing her.

“But I must admit, that creature does know his science. His notes are generalized and gets into specifics only when necessary. Even explained the process of the surgery he used. Funny... I never thought to do it that way before...” she mused and keyed a few more buttons to scroll down.

“Can you fix the existing damage?” I asked quietly.

Hyurri was quiet for the longest of times. “No.” she answered at last. “The Original damage is, regrettably, more extensive than I had thought it was. Her condition has... destabilized since I

last scanned her when she was sixteen. What's done had been done, and now that I look at Sage's notes and those of the others here, I don't even think I could've accomplished the surgery without help."

Hyrri clicked another key and turned off the datapad.

"Rae... do you think me too arrogant?" she asked at last and looked up at me,

I managed to smile. "You have your times." I shrugged. "Sage though, has a way of stepping on toes. He doesn't mean to, and he learns instantly from his mistakes, and he has the insatiable desire to help others. It is his ever driving force, the deepest emotion inside the very core of his being."

"But what is he doing here?"

I smiled impishly, and then began retelling the tale of Sage's arrival. Hyrri stared at me and listened in amazement at what Sage has done since his arrival.

"He *challenged* you?! He's audacious, I'll give him that." Hyrri stated once I'd finished.

"And seemingly on a mission to prove himself." I added.

Hyrri slowly rose, picking up the datapad and holding it before her with both hands. "I need to go check in on Illia." She said at last. "Mayhap probe her and see if Sage has left any loose ends in there." She chuckled, which trailed off into an exhaling sigh. She then looked to me.

"Do you believe him to be evil, Rae?"

"Not in the slightest." I answered, and meant it.



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The following day came quicker than I was hoping it would. I'd spent some time with Illia, which was a wonderful trip down memory lane. She talked of high jinx the two of us had gotten into ages ago as if it had happened yesterday. And all through the day, she hugged tightly onto her teddy bear.

She saw me like she saw herself. A dozen years or so younger and her own age.

I stayed with her till she fell asleep again later that night.

Morning came and found me atop the pinnacle tower, watching out over the world about me, and reflecting on the happenings of these past few days. I hadn't slept all night, and the sun rose earlier than I thought it would. I stood there and watched it rise before the sounds of the gathering spectators summoned me back to ground level.

I later found myself again sitting with the Emperor and his entourage, with Meniko directly behind us on her many cushions and poufs again, and an entourage of security all about us.

The last two fights that I had missed the day before yesterday were those of Pleeyo versus Queen Qama from the Powered League, Genohn versus Jassa Kесе from his own league; and finally Riikoa versus the one known as Maka "leopard."

*Jassa Kесе is © 2003 by: DocWolph*

The winner of Genohn's fight was obvious. Genohn put Jassa in her place without even moving from his starting point and without breaking a sweat. She was promptly sent back home to be looked after by her brother while Genohn was away.

Qama and Pleeyo was a wonderful fight, in which Pleeyo won just by the skin of her teeth. Looking at the fighters that were left after the first round, it was obvious that she would not last the second.

The final surprise came from Riikoa's fight. She towered over Maka, and had incredible muscle mass over her opponent, but Maka, surprisingly, simply toyed with Riikoa throughout the entire fight before taking the win hands down.



I watched some of the recorded Trid images yesterday of the fights that I'd missed during the rest period before I went to go be with Illia. The ferocity of some of the opponents would make my final task all the more daunting.

As it was, the way things sat now was like this:

**Fight One:** Ghennal  
Royal Dragoon Alkenphel == **Winner:** Royal Dragoon Alkenphel

**Fight Two:** Queen Chiuзо Kemono  
King Makahn == **Winner:** King Makahn

**Fight Three:** Illia Romov

Lord Sage Preypacer == **Winner:** Lord Sage Preypacer

**Fight Four:** Pleeyo  
Queen Qama == **Winner:** Pleeyo

**Fight Five:** Lord Genohn  
Jasa'Kese == **Winner:** Lord Genohn

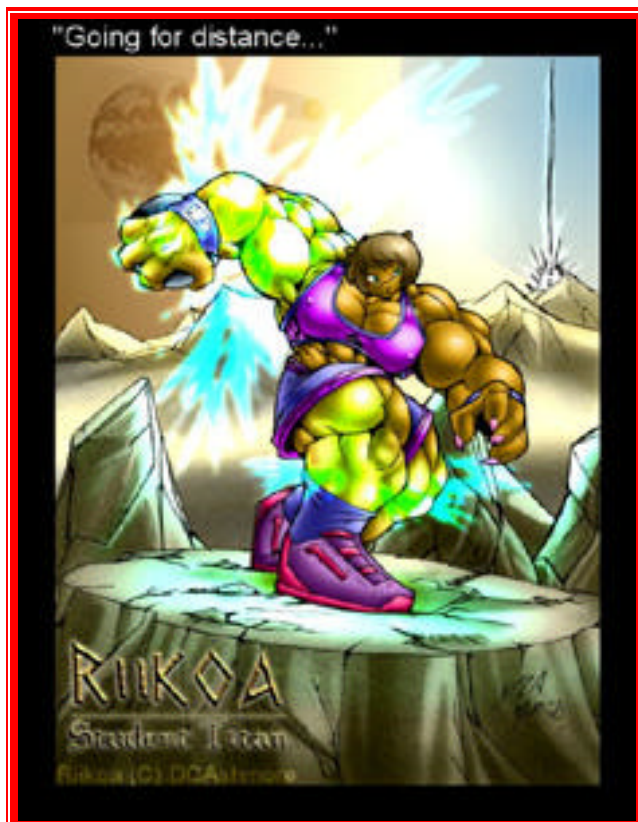
**Fight Six:** Maka "Leopard"  
Riikoa == **Winner:** Maka "Leopard"

And again, the remaining opponents stood before the viewing stand, before the eyes of the emperor, myself and the young Lieutenant Leski, and the holy priests were brought forward to administer the next round of fighter placement. One at a time, each fighter came up and drew out a numbered ball from the sack, held their ball aloft for all to see, and then accepted their placement for the next round of fights.

My eyes watched Sage as he stepped forward, now wearing only a pair of loose fitting breaches, even despite his massive size, and a single black jerkin. Dangling from one his left hand were a string of prayer beads, which he twisted idly between thumb and forefinger as he walked forward. His long black striped mane was drawn backward at the ends of the strands by a green band, his massive form stepping gracefully from toe to heel as elegantly as a ballet dancer, his tail flicking for better balance.

*Or a skilled assassin, my inner voice told me, and I sighed at the thought. No, he's not come as an assassin. If he had, then whoever his target was would already be dead.*

*Riikoa is © 2004 by: Docwolph*



"He has a good heart." I said allow, quelling any more thoughts of assassination.

"Who does?" came a voice, quelling my thoughts, and I turned to see Emperor Sarvic looking at me. Despite that his throne was raised slightly on our already raised dais, he and I looked eye to eye, simply because I was so much larger than he was.

"Oh nothing," I blanched, blinking quickly to clear any betraying light from my eyes. "I was just thinking out loud."

He nodded and sat back to lean against one of his arm rests to direct more of his attention toward me. "Truly?" His eyes flicked to Sage, even as he held aloft his

own number for placement. I noted some cheers in the crowd, but they were nothing compared to the ones that had been for Pleeyo, Makahn and Genohn.

He radiated power though. Few in this universe had that capability. In the present line up down there, only Genohn had the same quality.

“Remarkable that our new ‘guest’ has done so well so far. I had nearly thought that Illia had flattened him.”

“Yeah... Illia.” I mused, pursing my lips.” *Poor Illia. Reduced to the mind of a child. But is it so bad? She is happy... to an extent.*

Sage had visited her, as promised several times yesterday, and again this morning, testing her with brain wave monitors and checking her psychically. Our CMO Doctor Hyurri Namah was always around whenever he looked over Illia, as if to find some sort of mistake in any of his procedures. As of yet I assumed she had found none being that Sage was still looking over her.

At last all the names were drawn as the last fighter, Pleeyo, took her default ball and the last position on the newly drawn fighter board. I looked to the board even as the Priests administering this competition cleared away before it, and I felt my lips part slightly as I looked at the names now arrayed there.

**Fight Seven:** King Makahn –Vs- Royal Dragoon Alkenphel

**Fight Eight:** Lord Genohn –Vs- Maka “Leopard”

**Fight Nine:** Lord Sage Preypacer –Vs- Pleeyo

I pursed my lips and shook my head at the last bracket. *Pleeyo is fighting Sage? Talk about throwing gas on an already lit fire...*

Once the new fight sets were announced, the arena cleared and the fighters took their seats amidst the little stand at the edge of the mat, and after a brief fifteen minute rest period, Makahn and Alkenphel were called to fight.

I looked first to Makahn, and involuntarily held my breath as I then compared him to the massive Cyborg known as Alkenphel. Unlike any of the fighters, Alkenphel has several unfair advantages which, surprisingly, no one really made any fuss over. He had body shielding and heavy armor, servos and metallic muscles.

The Emperor’s Champion.

Makahn was waving to his fans, while Alkenphel just stood there, watching him, his metallic face and artificial eyes betraying no emotion, simply because his face plates were not designed that far. It was armor after all, what need did he have to show such emotions?

The Priest-Referee arrived in the center of the circle.



“Today’s first bout will be between King Makahn of the Powered League, and Royal Dragoon Alkenphel of the Unlimited League. Now to you both, gentlemen are you ready?” he pointed first to one, and then to the other, and they both nodded in turn. “Then get ready and... FIGHT!”

The Referee *ran* away as quickly as he could as the fighters immediately set themselves to fighting stances.

“Makahn is the Powered League’s Champion, is he not?” Leski said near me, the sword Sage had given her still gripped in one hand as if it were a token scepter.

“He is.” I answered even as Makahn began to set himself pounding at Alkenphel’s armor and shielding, striking with blows that sounded like peals of thunder while Alkenphel tried to fend himself off.

“Some said that you and he were an item, is that true?” she continued, and this time more eyes upon the stand turned to look at me as I blushed.

“Well, I...” I managed. “There was only that one time...”

There was a mighty cry as Alkenphel took Makahn in a ponderous strike that grabbed him by the head, lifted him off the ground as he swung him up and then back down and slammed him hard into the mat.

There was a collective gasp from the crowd and I winced as Makahn landed. But then he immediately kipped-up to his feet and swept Alkenphel’s massive armored feet from underneath him.

“He’s big, and strong. Good shoulders.” Leski commented, her long fingers gripping the palm guard of the sword.

I only listened with half an ear as I was drawn more into the fight.

“And what a wonderful fight he’s in. Against one of our most skilled tacticians and fighters functioning as the brain inside a machine that is the equivalent of a miniaturized mech with full armaments! He’s far braver than I.”

I shot the Emperor and Leski a hard glance.

“Alkenphel’s fully armed?!” and I stood before I knew what I was doing and moved right to the edge of the stand to get a closer look.

“Of course.” Jaikard returned. “Alkenphel is being combat trained after all. We announced as such, and no one objected or complained.”

I turned to look incredulously at the emperor and his lieutenant, and then shot a glance at mother, the great Phoenix Dragasier situated behind them. She raised her eyebrows and gestured with one clawed hand as if in a shrug.

But then to prove Leski's words, Alkenphel set himself, hopping up onto his toes and activating thrusters and maneuvering jets, and immediately becoming far more mobile. He slid away from Makahn, his shoulder guards opening up to reveal an assortment of missiles and rockets before launching a pair of them at Makahn.

I held my breath without knowing it when Makahn rolled away from the first, and actually caught the second before turning it around and launching it back at Alkenphel, running after the swifter moving rocket.

"This is also a test to see if the Powered League should continue to receive such high Imperial grants and stipends." Jaikard stated. "So far both of them have proven themselves quite well. You would not see a regular soldier do what Makahn just did."

I released the breath I was holding even as Makahn slipped forward, his leg muscles going into action as he pounded forward as quick as a cheetah and landed on Alkenphel, pushing his way – through great personal pain – through Alkenphel's electromagnetic shielding, and apply his weight to the flying contraption and forcing it to the ground before flipping the thing over his shoulder onto the mat.

Alkenphel's engines shattered beneath him as his electromagnetic shielding sputtered out, but then he kicked outward, and his toe claws pinched around Makahn's body, forcing him down as Alkenphel rose, and then unsheathing some sharp claws, Alkenphel slashed at Makahn twice before kicking him away.

Again I held my breath, mildly aware of the conversations behind me while Makahn rolled to his feet, and again pounded forward, now bloodied before he crashed against Alkenphel, pounding at his chest with blows equal in strength to a battleship cannon's impact.

They collapsed to the ground with Makahn creating dents in Alkenphel's armor, each pound creating a larger and larger impact crater in the mat with each blow, till at last Alkenphel opened his mouth and blasted a heat beam right at Makahn's solar plexus.

Despite the pain and the smell of burning fur and flesh, Makahn reached forward, forced the jaws shut, and then pushed Alkenphel's head straight upward to redirect the blast, and holding those sharp jaws upward with the gouts of flame erupting through the sides, Makahn began pounding with just one hand now.

Alkenphel then lurched, and as Makahn lifted up into the air, he was caught by both of Alkenphel's legs and its prehensile toes, and thrown off of the dragon-mech with all the might his servos could muster. Makahn soared through the air, managing a summersault to land on one of the upright columns surrounding the ring, and then leapt backward. His fist drove before him,

and struck Alkenphel against the side of the head, knocking the whole metallic body straight to the mat with enough power to force Alkenphel to skid several meters along the mat.

Makahn landed and then turned even as Alkenphel rose.

The fight continued relentlessly, the two wearing each other down, my grip tightening on the metal bar holding the decorative draperies before the dais till my hands compressed them thin and bent the pole with a loud squealing sound.

Makahn was a bloody mess, and Alkenphel was literally torn apart, his primary armor plates laying strewn over the entire field, one arm broken and hanging useless at his sides, with the other fending himself off. He was leaking lubricants and blood alike.

The last few blows were them exchanging punches, with the final one coming from Makahn as he simply pushed on Alkenphel to knock him down. At that point, when Alkenphel went down, he made only a few more feeble movements to rise, and amidst doing so, the Priest Referee arrived and began counting him out, all the while Alkenphel continued to rise.

At last the referee called “ten,” and Alkenphel fell backwards for the last time, defeated, and Makahn rose his fists into the air and turned fully around amidst a raucous cheer and applause.

Behind me, the Emperor rose and moved forward to stand beside me, signaling to his aides to gather Alkenphel and his parts and set him for repair. But I watched Makahn as he half collapsed into the waiting healers to tend to his wounds, and I exhaled a long breath that I had pent up inside me that he wasn't seriously hurt.

Looking left and then right, I unceremoniously left the viewing stand and followed after them.

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“I see that you won.” I said as I entered into the pavilion where the healers were caring for Makahn.

Makahn looked up at me and smiled immediately. Without anyone here to primp and preen for, he was a little more candid. “Glad that you were watching.” He said, not even noticing as the healers washed and sealed up his wounds. “I saw you in the stands.” He said quietly as I came to stand in front of him.

“Oh?” I managed to smile, my ears lifting slightly, and then I turned to the healers. “Could you all leave us alone for a moment?” I asked with a soft smile.

“But miss Iksaki. He still needs a lot of work!” one of them protested.

“Please go.” I repeated, still looking at Makahn, and they reluctantly left.

Once the pavilion was cleared, I stepped forward and pressed my hands against his chest, and a warm blue glow suffused my hands as I healed him instead. All his wounds began sealing themselves immediately, the scars disappearing and his fur growing back.

I dared to lean in a little closer, my breasts now pressing against his chest, just a touch, but the moment they did, both my nipples hardened.

Immediately I remembered those three nights we'd spent with one another, almost totally alone despite our standings in our respective leagues and in the universe. I remembered the hard press of his body, the way he caressed me, made me feel like a woman instead of just a girl, or some super powerful entity. For a time I forgot that I even had power, and reveled in his. He protected me within his embrace.

Looking at him then, I felt his breath on my neck and I looked down at him, my lips spreading in a nervous smile while I leaned a little closer, and felt how well his groin fit within the V-shaped wedge formed by my pelvis and thighs.

I remembered how pleasing it was when he took my maidenhood, and a piece of my heart.

"I wish that you'd healed me, Rae." He whispered into my ear, reaching up to cradle one of my arms that was touching him as I dared to press closer, my bosom flattening a little more. Despite that his arms and body in general were larger than mine I was still the stronger by far. *Then why was it that I felt so much safer in his arms?* "You have a gentler touch." He continued, and I felt the heat of his breath draw closer.

"Do you think so?" I managed, looking into his eyes from the short distance between us, and a couple of my fingers tensed a little to press further into his chest fur. I wasn't even aware that my healing magics were coursing into him anymore.

Outside the pavilion, the referee was announcing the fight between Genohn and Maka "Leopard."

"I know so." He whispered again, kissing my cheek then as his other hand settled upon my hip, his thumb caressing my fur there, and by sheer placement of his touch I took a step closer till I was butting up against the table he was sitting on. "Though if you continue to heal me like that, I may actually start to get younger..."

It was then that I started and drew back, noting that all his wounds were now healed. "Oh! Sorry..." the blue glow faded

"Don't be." He grinned and again pulled me closer till my chest was again pressing against his.

He was so warm... I didn't even try to resist and just merely allowed myself to be there.

"Rae..." he began, and then swallowed, and I saw his eyes dilate.

“Yes?” I returned, feeling my heart pause and my breathing stop.

“Rae I...”

Whatever he was about to say was immediately drowned out by the cheers and cries, and louder still over the loud speakers came: “And the winner by forcing a submission from his opponent, Lord Genohn!”

“Oh... the fight’s over.” I mused, covering my lips with one hand, holding its wrist with the other.

“So I hear. But Rae... there was another reason why I came here today. I wanted to...”

“Rae Iksaki, please report to the viewing stand.” The loud speaker pealed. “Rae Iksaki, please report to the viewing stand.” It repeated relentlessly, and I looked up at the roof of the tent in hopes to will it to be quiet.

“You were saying?” I grinned, giving a small hop within his grasp as I stood there in my impatience to hear what he had to say to me.

“No. You’re needed. You should go.” He sighed, and managed a weak smile for me.

And to reflect his words, again the loud speaker called out.

“Rae Iksaki, Please report to the viewing stand for the start of the third fight.”

I swore inside my head. “But...” I began, but Makahn silenced me with a hand over my lips.

“No. It can wait. Go.” And he released me.

I half opened my mouth to respond, but then swallowed what I was about to say, and then hurried out of the pavilion for the viewing stand, taking my seat beside the Emperor. Even as my rump settled into my chair, the Priest-Referee again approached the center and announced the fight.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we now bring a fight between two power houses. Lord Sage Preypacer of the Unlimited League versus Pleeyo of the Mystic League.” I noted Pleeyo folded her arms and pout that she wasn’t called first. “Pleeyo, our known combatant today, and a student of the Mystic league, now faces one of our new challengers, who’s powers and abilities have already stunned and amazed you all during the defeat of Illia of the Mystic league.” My lips pressed together, and for a moment I began to hate Sage for drawing me away from Makahn at such a moment and for what he did to Illia, but then I saw his face change once Illia’s name was mentioned, a hurt expression that she was brought into this, and my hatred melted.

Sage has shown himself to be a capable healer, especially on how he has pandered himself to Illia in helping her regain her mind.

“Fighters, are you ready?” the referee stated, breaking into my thoughts as he pointed to Pleeyo and then Sage. Pleeyo called out a raucous “Ready!” while Sage merely nodded his head, and turned his right side to face Pleeyo, arms dangling at his sides in a relaxed way. “Then...Fight!”

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*Fight Three: Lord Sage versus Pleeyo*

Pleeyo immediately powered up, her shrill cry echoing out over the stadium, her fur standing on end while her fists clenched at her sides.

Sage merely stood there, fingering his prayer beads innocently dangling from one hand.

He continued to stand there as Pleeyo went into action, her hands coming together as she quickly began spitting out words in a spell, and she threw a massive ball of force at Sage. Sage did not move as he watched the ball speed toward him, he merely stood there, his eyes tracking it while he fingered his beads, just before it slammed straight into his body, all the while Pleeyo pounding feet skirted her around his blind side to strike him from behind.

An explosion rumbled around the coliseum, with the force of energy being released, from Pleeyo’s spell, and a cloud of smoke rose from where Sage was standing.

“Here I come!” she laughed, and charged into the smoke, drawing back her fist to slam at where Sage had just been, and she led forward with the striking punch that carried her in even as the dust and smoke were clearing. “He-yah!” she cried and disappeared for a moment only to immediately arrive from the other side.

Pleeyo settled to a stop and turned quickly even as the smoke cleared, showing off an impact crater where Sage had been standing, but no Sage!

But as the smoke cleared, Pleeyo was found standing there confused, looking around for Sage. She finally settled backward into a relaxed stance, planting her hands on her hips and began to chuckle.

“Hah! I vaporized him!” she laughed, thrusting a fist up into the air in a victory pose and laughed harder.

The crowd was on their feet, not believing that someone who’d bested Illia like he had could be defeated so easily, and even the emperor, Leski and myself were on our feet trying to find him.

And then I felt him, and my gaze immediately looked up, and I saw positioned elegantly up about a quarter mile up in the air, holding himself elegantly while he looked down at Pleeyo. My mental eye focused on him, telescoping in on him even as he took his prayer beads and slipped them over his hand so that they would stay there. He then descended.

I had no other way to call it but a decent, but it was like he teleported, moving more than a thousand feet in an instant to softly lower the last foot onto the mat, calmly walk up to Pleeyo, slip his hand beneath his arm, arch it up, grasp her by the throat, and with a single arm movement thrust her straight, back first, into the mat with a shuddering slam.

The whole of the mat shuddered with the impact, and Pleeyo actually bounced a meter or so back up into the air to fall again as Sage calmly walked out of the way to come to another sideways facing stance, this time showing Pleeyo his left side.

An impression of her body was left in the ground as Sage relaxed himself, waiting for Pleeyo to rise.

With a growling roar, she slapped her hands behind her head, and kip-upped her body to an immediate stand, and with another roar she began throwing punches and raking at Sage with her claws, trying to trip him up with his feet, but he never moved his hands, keeping them behind his back, merely moving out of the way.

He was a positive contortionist as he moved out of Pleeyo's way with such speed it looked as if he was moving before she did. He used his legs to block whenever he needed to, stretching them up high to kick her fists unerringly away from striking him, and when she kicked he merely chambered to block.

Then with one of her kicks, he hooked his own leg upward, blocked her foot, and then twisted his and forced her foot down to where he stood on it, before he surged forward quickly and head butted her back down to the mat, and sliding forward, leapt up onto her stomach and began jumping up and down on her as if she were a trampoline. His last bounce was ended with a flip over himself and one final strike downward before he hopped down and again stepped away, showing his side off to her.

Having just had an eight hundred pound creature jump up on down on you was enough to knock the air out of even me, and Pleeyo was hugging her middle as she tried to catch her breath.

Again, Sage merely waited for her to get up.

Eventually she rose, now angered to new levels at being humiliated like this, she roared a terrible, blood-curdling roar that only an enraged, female scorned Casid could roar, and as she did, her body exploded with newer and heightened levels of power.

“OW!” she screamed at him. “That hurt!”

Sage merely raised an eyebrow at her, one arm held limply at his side while the other – the one facing away from Pleeyo – folded into the small of his back. His face remained placid and at peace.

Pleeyo gritted her teeth, and summoned yet more of her power, moving up to the next stage of power boosting, her fur turning golden and standing on end even as her hands came together, and she summoned another ball of force.

“Grr!” she growled, and the ball doubled in size as she drew on her sources of power.

Sage cocked his head to one side as she continued to power up, just before she threw yet another force of power into her spell sphere before chucking it at him. Again, Sage stood there, seeming to wait for the damaging power of Pleeyo’s onslaught. The power ball screamed at him as if doing so with Pleeyo’s own voice, she forcing all her might into sending it at him. It was about to strike Sage, that is till his hand slapped outward and stopped the ball with a jerk of pseudo-motion. The ball of glowing gold being held by fingers of crackling green and white lightning.

I myself was stunned as Sage held another’s force there before him, the ball of gold quickly changing into one of crackling green and white, just as it compressed on itself, becoming more concentrated.

“Teth!” Sage exclaimed, and the ball erupted outward at a blinding speed, Moving in a straight, directly line instead of a slow arch like Pleeyo’s attack had done, narrowly missing Pleeyo as she rolled out of its way in a dodge.

“Ha!” she mocked, but then Sage’s arm was turning, led by index and middle fingers. Pleeyo wondered for a moment what was going on, I was sure, just before two and two was put together and she turned in time to get the full force of her mutated power ball straight in the solar plexus.

It exploded against her, a rippling action spreading through her body from the force of it all, while an added electrical effect snapped and bit at Pleeyo as she was again knocked down and sent skidding along the mat to stop right at Sage’s feet, to which he looked down at her with his hands clasped behind his back. All he did then was raise an eyebrow again, but that enraged Pleeyo. She twisted her body as she screamed, trying to clip his feet out from under him, but he merely hopped upward and down again, and as she rose to her feet to give him a raking uppercut with her claws, Sage bent over backward nearly double, avoiding her blow, and then crumpled his legs and came to a cross-legged squat to avoid her follow up kick at where his head had been.

When he righted himself, it was only to at last uncoil, raising a hand to ward off her attack, a simple redirection of her momentum out of his way.

“Rarh!” Pleeyo growled. “FIGHT FAIR!”

But Sage simply stood his ground, redirecting her form, pushing her hands and feet out of the way, some of which turned her fully around, in which on the last occasion, he finished it off with a swift foot to her bum.

Again she screamed, and spinning, she brought both of her hands up over her head, her body arching powerfully, displaying off all her feminine glory with nothing more than three pasties



covering her nakedness. But then Sage reached forward as he uncoiled, and pushed his fingers beneath her sternum and lifted.

Everyone in the stands rose to their feet and surged forward, including those in the stand in shock of this as Pleeyo was lifted by three fingers from Sage's hand by her sternum, Sage staring at her eye to eye now as she spasmed lightly, unable to move more than a few jerking motions as Sage held her there.

Pleeyo was panicking as she was held there; the pain must've been intense! I could even feel it as she struggled to even breathe, her heart beating erratically.

"Ah... AHHHH!" she cried, her tail writhing at her backside.

Still holding her there, Sage slipped his fingers from beneath the ridge of her sternum, twisted his hand and slapped her in the same place he'd just been grabbing her. But the moment of his strike, I felt an upsurge of that strange power of his, and a concaved disk of shadow erupted at the striking point, followed by a flash of light, and she was sent careening out of the fighting mat, landing against the shield that the priests here were generating just before the stands where the crowd was standing. She hit the shield with so much force that one whole side flashed translucent pink.

She collapsed slowly to the ground just outside the mat.

"Ring out!" the referee called from his corner of the mat. "Opponent has ten seconds to return to the fighting mat. One... Two..."

There was a hush over the crowd, Sage watching where his opponent had fallen, and I rose further in an attempt to see where she was, standing on tip toe.

"...Six... Seven..." the ref continued, but just before he called eight, a great muscled arm slammed against the mat, just before Pleeyo's head rose above its edge with the semblance of a menacing snarl as she crawled onto the mat again. She was seething in pain, embarrassment and anger... three emotions she was best left not to feel during a fight.

Whenever she was in such conditions, she tended to act rashly.

And even as she rose to her feet, she was already powering up, a static charge transforming into lightning as she lifted her hands above her head, and I felt her power levels immediately skyrocket, charging up over and over as she drew from all her sources at once.

Her muscles engorged, her body swelled as she grew several inches, her breasts heaving as they amassed in thickness. She stomped on the ground, thundering the entire mat, and rising up on her toes, she levitated, and surged forward, flying at Sage even as he rose to meet her.

In her empowered state she was hammering at Sage, connecting blow after blow which he took, and then faced her again, determination in his face as he tried to block all her moves. Each of

her strikes to the head, chest and stomach were blocked or shrugged off, despite that I saw body react adversely as if she'd shattered every bone there.

And then she caught him, her arms folding about his body as she pressed him between her now mountainous breasts and her thick burly arms. They constricted about Sage, bent him almost double, rendering him immobile it seemed.

But then I saw him breathe in, and for a full minute, Pleeyo simply squeezed, trying to break that spine of his.

And then Sage reacted. His hands lifted, his fingers splaying open beneath her arms and then...

...He pinched her at where her massive shoulders met with her triceps.

"Ow," she hissed but Sage had just activated a reflex in her, and her arms loosened. His hands slapped outward, opening her arms full spread before he lanced upward and kned her in the face, his leg surging straight through the space between her breasts to connect with her chin.

She was thrust upward, and then Sage moved, seeming to disappear and reappear from one place to another, like an instantaneous teleport with a fraction of the power needed for it. He grabbed hold of her as she flew backward, her head grasped within one arm that suddenly thickened far fuller than it had been before to hold her, and he simply fell downward to drive her head first into the mat.

"Oh-ho! SUPLEXED!" Leski laughed, cringing in her seat beside the Emperor.

The force of the downward thrust punched Pleeyo's head right through the floor, and once done, Sage flipped himself back up to his feet, and pulling her back out by her tail, he then spear chucked her head first into the floor again to create another hole through it, and as her body fell, he flipped downward and drove his elbow straight into her mid back with all the weight of his falling.

At last he rose, and left her there to recover herself, and with her head stuck in the floor, she was growling, breasts mashed against the floor, as she planted hands and feet and wrenched her head out of the hole.

She looked left and then right with a growling roar, and then turning fully around, she screamed, her power levels flaring briefly with her anger.

Reaching backward, her hand clawed around air and a ball of golden light formed there before she threw it at Sage, followed by another, and then another, and more, over and over again as she tried to hit him once with that tirade of balls, all of them following after him as he dipped in dodged as he flew, blocked and deflected some of them, all the While Pleeyo set herself, rising her hands into the air, and she began to drive power into one more power ball.

But this power ball was far, far more intense than the previous two, and within moments it had grown massive!

“RAHHHHHHH!” she screamed, putting even her life energies into it I felt even as Sage deflected the last of the energy blasts and turned to face her.

“No!” Meniko cried behind me. “That’s far too much energy! She’ll destroy this planet!”

“Die, you mother fu-!” but her curse dies as the rumbling of her power caused the whole island to quake, and the brilliant sun of her power rose suddenly as she leapt upward into the air and then back down as it was thrown at Sage, who had taken on a more serious stance, his hands lifting to his side in a cupping motion, and immediately a spark of blue and green lit between his clawed fingers.

The ball continued to descend, Pleeyo egging it on as she pushed down on it with her power.

Sage’s hands then moved forward and rotated, and stomping on the ground, there was the echoing peal of thunder from his motion, and immediately lightning coursed up from the ground to enshroud him, surrounding the miniature ball and feeding it. There was a definite drain in the forces of the world all around me, and I felt a mote of my own energy travel down out of my body and into the ground, and felt it slide through the Earth away from me and up into Sage.

An aura, of all things to do, lit about him. *Such an ineffectual power! Why is he using Aura magics against Sorcery?!*

But in answer to that, Sage’s hands opened, leaving the ball there, his fingers trailing lines of light rapidly away from the ball which he wove into a disk directly around the ball. His fingers shifted direction and rotation to create a magic circle around that, repeating this rapidly over and over again until he had a sort of emblem surround by seven magic circles! All the while that he was doing this, his hands were moving blindingly, rapidly, unerringly, their rapidness making it look like he had six arms.

“He’s... Spell Weaving!” Meniko said behind me, and I heard the definite awe in even her voice.

But then Sage slammed his fingers through each of the disks, his aura changing color each time – Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet – an aura for each spectrum, and that disk took on that color of the aura. Then as a last piece of the casting, Sage’s hand slapped through the center of the ring, and I surged to my feet as he linked *seven* spell circles! Their colors exploded within the linked disks, and immediately transformed into white. The seven disks segmented, surrounding his wrist as they began to spin, the ball of crackling energy setting itself at his palm as it began to crackle in a celestial white.

“An *Eighth aura!*!” Meniko gasped, surging forward as I had, not believing that he was using aura magics at such a grade of power. “Great Maker.” I heard her whisper then. “What in the name of all that is holy is he doing?!”

Holding out his palm, fingers coiled around the raging white-hot ball on his palm, Sage held onto his arm holding the disk even as the great sun was about to strike the ground, his whole body turning white while blue and green lightning cascaded about him and into that hand. His hand with the ball was lifted, the segmented disk rotating blindingly fast as Sage leveled the blast at the power ball.

“Endeste’ Estas En Terra!”

Sage cried out the words, the words echoing solidly throughout the land, the words of power charging the very air around us to better enhance the spell he was using by giving it a name.

*‘By all that is holy’ is right!* I thought, hearing Meniko’s words inside my head, as the power of holy on a grade and level that even I have never felt surged from the earth, surged through Sage and turned him into an angelic being of energy, focused into the ring like a lens focusing sunlight and an ear-splitting scream, as if from a thousand voices, erupted from that disk and Sage’s hand as a beam of light so bright that in its passing it temporarily burned blue and purple motes onto my retina.

It lanced upward, caught Pleeyo’s power ball, and disintegrated it in its passing, the beam cracking the shield set up by twelve priests, the combination of which should have been unbreakable! And looking up, all saw the beam slide ever outward till it pierced the very reaches of space, and was long from fading as it passed outward into the cosmos

Pleeyo was watching all this, and when she turned, Sage was there directly in front of her.

She gasped and slid backward in surprise through the air at the being of waning sparkling light standing in midair before her, and she watched Sage’s hand rise ponderously, festoon atop her head, and then clench his fingers. She spasmed just before she was forced straight to the ground in a downward throw, so hard and heavy that she collapsed on her toes, was forced to her knees, and she fell over with a groan of pain as both her legs shuddered, spasmed and broke beneath her.

Then moving so fast it appeared as if he’d just teleported, Sage was there before her, and drawing back his hand, even as the ring he had been holding dissipated, he punched forward and knocked her right in the forehead and out of the ring.

“Ring out! The contestant has ten seconds...” the ref began, but then Sage’s hand, the same that had just held her head, opened up and a ball of lightning lanced from his palm to strike Pleeyo, and she writhed in pain, screaming as she was electrocuted.

But it lasted only long enough to knock her out.

“Uh...” the Ref began. “And the winner is Lord Sage! By a ring out and a knock out!” he managed at last, his fervor rising as he slid back into his usual mannerism.

“Guards!” Meniko called at once. “Take Pleeyo into custody for punishment!” and out of nowhere, the school guardians appeared, dressed in their white and gold armor, placing a collar

around Pleeyo's neck to seal her powers, and then bracing her hands behind her back in a pair of massive binding cuffs that were immediately linked to one another. They then hauled her up by either arm, and began dragging her to the tower, where her powers would be – again – sealed till she learns more responsibility.

It was then that I looked to Sage as he turned to us all, his jaw set, his eyes shining with an unknown light before he clapped his hands together, the sound of which sent a peal of thunder across the stadium, pressed them to his face and bowed sharply at the waist to those of us on the viewing stand before promptly leaving the mat.

Immediately repair bots scurried up to repair all the damage.

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Lord Sage had disappeared shortly after his most spectacular match with Pleeyo. She herself had promptly been punished by Mother shortly thereafter, in which the last I'd felt of her was being reduced in power to be that of almost a first year.

People were still trying to figure out what Techniques Sage had employed, many of which they called 'legendary,' and even 'impossible.' They were trying to figure it all out, especially Noxi, who'd delved into collecting all the information that she could on him.

"Damn it! If he's not overloading my scanners, he's interfering with them!" I heard her mutter as she shook a pair of tech-specs. "Can't detect a damn thing!"

For an hour or so, I asked everyone if they'd seen him, but he'd positively disappeared, and something was interfering with several of my powers to detect where he was. His presence was still here, alright, I could feel that at least, but the feeling was vague. Normally I could detect anyone in the universe, and teleport myself to their exact location.

Sage, somehow, was blocking that.

It was only when I heard... something... remarkably *beautiful*... and that I followed the sound, did I finally find him.

Sage had placed himself on the furthest edge of the island, near my home actually, where the island ended abruptly on a cliff face overlooking the ocean. What drew me to him was the unearthly sound of a flute, a low, crystal clear sound that flowed out of the end of the instrument that he was playing, and at its holes along its length. It sang with the song of whales and the host of heaven, touching off emotions of beauty, peace and love.

Things and evil being could not truly convey.

I just stood there a short ways away, folding my hands together before me as he played, and I listened to quick twitters from the high notes which were simultaneously played with a long, wavy and constantly long note that sat as an undertone for the whole song. The flute he was

playing was longer than most flutes I'd seen, perhaps a meter or more long, thin, and with ornate gold designs in the silver piping. His long fingers pressed down on the many leavers and holes to coax out notes that stuck together inside the heart, waving emotions together inside my bosom as if it were a spell of command.

I felt as if I were going to swoon, and I sighed at last, feeling those emotions catch me, holding me, covering my heart as it fluttered.

Other than his fingers, only his tail moved and nothing else. Not even the touch of the wind blowing about us seemed to touch even his hair.

And then the song died, and I found my eyes opening, not knowing that they had closed in the first place.

"Is she alright?" he asked without preamble, in that usual soft tone of his, which rumbled in the back of his throat as he exhaled.

I had to mentally re-gather my thoughts and resort my emotions before I could answer.

"Not once Meniko gets done with her." I admitted and sat beside him, dangling my legs off the edge of the cliff. "She'll be punished again, sealed for sure this time. She's shown far too much wonton recklessness with her powers, and this most recent display of her power was the last straw for Meniko."

"So this isn't the first time she's done this?" he said, moving finally and turning to look at me, his hands fingering the long flute.

"We've honestly lost count." I said, and threw a stone off over the edge to land in the water. "I overheard Meniko mumbling something about breaking her."

"Such a willful youth." He said simply, picking at the grasses between her legs.

"Willful is an understatement." I laughed, and pushed my hair back out of my eyes. "But I don't envy the punishment she is about to endure."

Sage turned to look at me. "What is the punishment?"

"Meniko has only two punishments." I said, throwing another rock out over the cliff. "Loss of credits, and sealing. Pleeyo will be enduring both tonight. She's being reduced a whole year in the school, that, and she'll be collared, and all her might and magic will be sealed from her till she can earn the ability to use them again."

"Have you... ever been sealed?" he asked, and I turned to look into those solid green eyes of his in surprise. Then recovering myself...

“No. I have not. Meniko let me witness a student being punished as such once, and just witnessing it was enough to keep me in line till I matured a little more. But even so, she’s like a mother to me. I don’t think she’d have the heart to seal me.”

There was a quiet between the two of us as the sun continued to set along the horizon. It was an odd moment for me, sitting beside this male cat that was large, broad shouldered strong... perhaps as strong as me, even. He held the sort of ease of defeating opponents as Genohn has shown so far.

“What was that you were playing? It was beautiful.” I asked.

“The composition’s name is Dragon’s Song. It’s... my first attempt, and I’ve been working on it for quite a long time. I mean it to be my opus of sorts.”

“It was wonderful...” I said softly, looking to the pipe for a moment or two, biting my lower lip in thought.

“Sage?” I prompted then, and he turned those green eyes toward me, which in the glowing darkness, pierced it with ease. “What was that power you used? It felt like Aura magics.”

“It was.” He admitted, still looking at me, into my eyes rather, and piercing me with that gaze. I saw a smidge of a smile cross his feline features as he watched me.

“But, Aura magics have always been so ineffectual. The Mystic League only teaches it as extra curricular because it has such a low level of output.

“I find that to be the general consensus here.” He said at last. “To which then I have a terrible advantage over everyone here, because you have no defense against it. Aura magics act as a corner stone, or basis for many other magics where I come from. You use it as a foundation and expound upon it.

“Many of the abilities used here would be far more potent if one were to develop one’s auras first. To fuel and empower your other abilities.”

“Yes... that I wondered about. Before today, many of us thought there were only seven auras. You showed us an eighth.” I leaned to face him more, lying on my side and bracing myself with one hand.

“Yes. Seven principal Auras, peaked by an eighth in which resides all others, with each aura having its own different effects and abilities. But adversely, there are also Shadows, all in opposition to the auras. Seven Shadows, peaked by an eighth.

“One uses an aura to control a shadow, and a shadow to control an aura. That effect you saw is known as the ‘Power of God on Earth.’ It is a ‘Master Technique’ of my Order.”

“Yes,” I managed after awhile. “It was pure Holy. Enough to split a planet.”

“Enough to counter Pleeyo’s Power Ball.” He corrected. “Created by ‘borrowing’ a speck of power from all those gathered around me, and with so many super powers in one place, the effect was quite stunning.”

“It was.” I admitted, and we both fell quiet again for a short while, during which the sun set beyond the horizon. The darkness was growing heavier before I finally broke the silence.

“Sage,” I prompted, and looking up, I saw that he was still watching me.

“Yes?” his voice was ever so kind and soft. It was hard to believe that this gentle creature was capable of such dark and vicious powers. It was perhaps that knowledge, or the feeling of those powers, which cast so many to be afraid of him and to avoid him.

“H-how...” I began, pausing while gathering my thoughts. “How is Illia doing?”

Sage looked down away from me and out over the glittering sea.

“I understand that she was your best friend.” I nodded. “No amount of ‘I’m sorry’ can account for what had happened to her. But despite that, Illia’s mind is whole for the first time in what I understand would be over a decade. It confuses me that of all the psychics who’d examined her, all the doctors who’d looked over her, as to why they did not repair that fractioned mind of hers.

He then looked straight at me. “Did I do a bad thing repairing her mind?”

“N-no!” I exclaimed waving a hand to ward that thought off. “It’s just that... well, she was so happy. I think none of the doctors and psychics could bare to remove what can be considered a gift. To never feel pain, to be the type of person that bad things wash over you. To never know fear.

“Illia was truly fearless. Everyone looked up to her because of it. That’s why she was so well loved.”

Sage nodded. “If she were any other person other than a warrior, then I myself perhaps could have abided by and let her stay like that. But it’s dangerous for a person like her to have no fear. Those who have no fear have no caution, those who have no caution charge into situations without thinking about its outcome. Illia is a truly powerful individual. Truly comparable to even you, Rae.

“Among a sea of stars that is the Mystic League, you are like a sun your power blazes so strongly. Illia was like the moon in comparison. It still pains me that I was the cause for her state. I will only be able to breathe easily once she has regained her old self. But she has a lot of growing up to do now.”

He chuckled.



“On my world, we consider it a gift to relive one’s life again, to right the wrongs and correct the regrets in your life. Illia is getting a chance to do that as new memories merge with old ones.” His blackened lips broadened into a smile. “We had a birthday for her this morning. She said it was her birthday. It is amazing to see the flurry of stored up emotions whizzing through her head, being experienced one at a time.”

“Her birthday? I wish I was there.” I mused.

“It was an impromptu one. She wanted nothing more than a birthday cake. Said she never had one before. Namah got her a cupcake from the commissary with a candle in it. She was ecstatic.”

“I’m happy for her.” I said at last, and then blinked as I felt him take my free hand, and I turned to him just as he rose the back of my hand to his lips and kissed it.

“What was that for?” I asked, blinking again.

“For talking with me.” He made to rise, but my hand closed around his and I held it for a moment, and then moved forward to kiss his wrist and then nuzzle his arm with my forehead before rising beside him.

“And that?” he asked.

“For... being so kind. You seem to give with little regards for yourself. I’ve been so many places in this Great Wide Universe that I know how rare and precious of a gift that is.

He was so large, built like a siege tank, and despite all that, he was so gentle. He brushed my cheek and kissed my forehead. A longing kiss, caressing my face with his lingering fingers.

“I must go. I will need to be at my best if I am to prove myself worthy of challenging you, Rae Iksaki.” he managed a smile and backed off away from me. Mistakenly, right off the cliff.

I gasped as he fell, and I rushed to the edge as he fell, but only to watch as he twisted into a dive, and with a flare of that aura magic he used, he turned at once ninety degrees to fly right over the water, and then shot off back up into the air, curling back upward by me and waving good bye as he made his way back toward where he was staying.

In spite of myself, I gave a small wave and a smile back. But that smile slowly faded as I remarked on his words.

*‘I will need to be at my best if I am to prove myself worthy of challenging you.’*

My heart sank a little.

It created a bit of a dampener on a relationship, knowing that your new friend will eventually be fighting you. Giving off a sigh, I rose into the air myself, but flew home slowly, remaining

upright most of the time till I arrived back at my sea front home. I really didn't feel like walking that night. And in the morning, I vowed that I would start doubling my training routine.