

## **Chapter 6: The Strength of a Warrior**

I awoke early in the morning, before the sun had risen and prepared for my daily jog. But unlike every day prior, this time I donned some gravity bracers, gravity anklets, and a gravity belt, and stepping outside, set their weights to their maximum settings. Hundreds of metric tons suddenly weighed down on me and I sank into the sand a little, and I had to charge my power up a little to keep me from sinking down to my knees. Then pulling up the hood of my sweatshirt up over my head – the sweatshirt cut open to display my midriff – and my simple swimsuit for a bottom, I took to jogging.

A jog for me was a full on tilt for everyone else in the league, with the possible exceptions of very few other individuals. Illia had been one of those few people. Seventy five kilometers per hour was nonetheless pretty fast, but during that jog, I remarked minutely upon my friend.

I was... saddened, at what had happened to my friend, and a little angry that it'd been Sage who'd done it, but I know that it'd been an accident; something that'd happened because there was an untreated mental instability... I didn't really know if I should hate or thank Sage for revealing that trait and forcing her to relive her fears.

But he's trying ardently to try and right the wrong... and to see him collapse after spending himself in the task of resetting her mind... if only Namah had been there... but sadly she was off planet.

Every day since, and every evening since, Sage had gone to her, spent a couple hours with her, and helped her cope with the fears as they passed over her one by one. He was a healer of the highest order, and he cared for those who came into his care. It was a trait to admire...

He was so kind, so loving... and for someone who was nearly Illia's size in that hybrid form of his, so incredibly gentle.

I felt a warmth on my cheeks and my breasts as I blushed at the thought of him passing his hands over my thighs and breasts, and I shook my head, jostling out some of the sweat in my mane as I continued to jog.

In the early morning mists, with my feet running in the surf as I ran, I felt quite alone and at peace as I occasionally looked over my shoulder toward the rising sun. It was a beautiful sun, one that I'd grown up with, which cast all the moons over my opposing shoulder into a brilliant array of color. And to top it all off, my body was burning with the exertion. It took quite a lot to make my body *'exert'* itself anymore, but it was nice to know that it was still possible.

I jogged in warm up for the first couple of hours, and then for the second two hours sped forward into my own full on tilt; a speed that was nearly the speed of sound on this planet. I ran along the shore, and then up over the land, speeding across plains, and then over hills, then up over a mountain through the freezing snow cap, leapt off its peak, and then landed at its base with a

lunge heavy enough to collapse a hill before I leapt forward again and made my way home. The last fifteen minutes were done in a slower jog to warm down as I came into the Mystic League's school grounds for a late breakfast before the next phase of the tournament.

The ceramic tiles of the courtyards of the Mystic League were constructed to be able to handle thousands of metric tons of weight apiece, built over a framework of supports to help cushion any blows. It was made to take the footsteps, and falls and blows of students during combat training, but despite that, when I entered the courtyard, it was with no less than five thousand tons weighing down on my usual five hundred pounds of natural body weight.

But I needed to weight train, and power train, so I stepped up my power levels a little higher to help lift me so that the stones didn't depress with every step I took. This had the added effect of allowing my powers to be tested as well, like flexing one's magical muscles.

*'One grows in a skill through the use of a skill.'* Mother Meniko would say often to strengthen the resolve of students – including myself – when we were unfamiliar or scared to use a new skill that was being taught.

As I walked past the student quarters toward the open-air commissary, however, I saw a great crowd of students and faculty gathering there. Curious as ever, I veered over to it to find out what was going on.

I would tap a student, smile at them when they turned around, and seeing me they would promptly move out of the way. I only had to do this a few times before a general murmuring through the students got them to move out of the way for me so I could see, but once I'd gotten into the center of the ring their collected bodies formed, I found myself looking at quite a spectacular sight.

There was a great cat sunning himself atop a flat space of rock in the center of one of the small gardens dotting the courtyard. But not just any cat, this one was *immense!* Even with him lying down on his front paws, his forward body raised above his lower body – which rested on its side – stood as tall as any standard humanoid from the top of their heads. Even as I approached him as he laid in the direct sunlight coming over the roof of the school, I could see that in that position, the great male cat could look down on me.

His fur was frost white, and there was an elaborately beautiful stripe system decorating his body. His long tail waved lazily only at its end, tapping the great stone the cat rested upon lightly while it gave a deep rumbling sound like an idling engine.

*That was a purr?!*

One of his ears flicked briefly to swat a fly away, while his forward facing paw flexed, and several of the students backed away as long, hooking ebon claws slid out of its thick, wide paw and hooked on the edge of the stone slab briefly. When he withdrew his paw, it scraped out some shallow grooves out of the stone!

“What is it?” I asked to no one in particular, pulling my hood from off my head, my ears giving a gentle wiggle as I looked at this giant cat with awe.

“It’s feline!” came Noxi’s voice as she slid in beside me, her ears flattening against the back of her head as she pulled out her holo computer and began scanning before she pushed her large glasses up over her eyes. “Some sort of quadrapedal feline of unknown origin. Carbon based, B-positive compatible blood type, and... and... Great Maker! It has a muscle density that would render most Power Leaguers, and even yours and Illia’s to shame!”

“It looks like a Casid Tiger... but of white fur?” one of the faculty suggested.

“Kitty!” one of the younger students exclaimed.

“And it has an incredibly immense power level too.” Noxi spoke then. “Off the chart! Damn it! If so many of you super powers are coming around me now, I need to upgrade this damn thing.” She groaned and slapped it against its side in an attempt to get it to work better.

“But where did it come from?” I asked.

“Second star on the right and straight on till morning.”

Silence permeated everything, and I half jumped despite that I’d seen who’d said it, or rather what.

That great cat had actually voiced those words, in a vaguely familiar voice, but in a much deeper tone.

“Apparently, if I have a crowd here,” the cat said, speaking in a broken common with its feline mouth and tongue rolling the R’s of his speech. “And if I am being analyzed, then the time for my sun bathing is over.”

Just then the tiger opened his eyes, and a pair of piercing green eyes shone out from within those wide angling sockets. But strangely enough, those eyes glowed a dark green within green.

“Lord Sage.” I breathed as the great tiger rose to his feet, and the crowd all moved quickly back from him as he stepped off the rock and onto the courtyard cobblestones and then shook himself to shake the dust out of his pelt.

The cobble stones gave way slightly to his weight, and I blinked as I stepped back. At his shoulder, he was even taller than me.

“Miss Iksaki, Miss Noxi.” The beast nodded to each of us in turn. “Would either of you like to join me for breakfast?”

I saw Noxi's jaw work, opening and closing repeatedly as Sage fixed her with that gaze. She seemed rooted on the spot, and turning to look at her, I lifted a hand and placed it on her muscled shoulder, which calmed her enough to answer.

"N-n-no... No." she managed, and Sage turned his feline features to me.

"And you, Miss Iksaki?"

I looked to Noxi again, and then managed to smile at this massive beast. "I'd love to. I was about to go there myself."

Sage gestured with a paw, his toes spreading open briefly to indicate a direction. I nodded quickly and stepped in line with him. I looked sidelong to him several times as he stepped beside me, and looking down at his feet, I watched as the stones gave less and less depressions to his weight, till eventually I couldn't even hear his foot steps.

*Such a remarkable creature.*

"You surprise me, Lord Sage." I said at last. "You don't seem to be the sort to show off."

He chuckled, which sounded like it was combined with a deep rumbling purr as he did, shaking his great maned head briefly before looking to me. "I wasn't. A cat, as a multi-universal truth, loves sun bathing, and I thought that with me amidst a place of the spectacular and the super real, that for me to indulge myself in my feline form would've been ok.

"I didn't think that it would've created such a stir."

Just then, a couple of students who'd been coming out of their dorm together gasped and stumbled back at the sight of the great beast walking beside their star student.

"Though I am beginning to see that there are still surprises... Even here." Sage sighs, and then I have to slow my step to watch in amazement at his transformation as he pushes off from the ground with his front paws, his form immediately shifting into that massive Battle Form that had broken Illia. That form then changed immediately thereafter, shrinking, compressing, becoming more humanoid as a black goop erupted out of his every pore to create a body suit, which then shifted into his usual sleeveless jerkin, priestly loin cloths and baggy black pants. But not before I had a chance to see his cluster.

My lips pursed in thought of that in me, sliding in an out... and I indulged in a daydream over it.

I shook my head to clear it of those thoughts when I realized what I was doing, and smiling skipped forward a little to come back into step with him. The strange, strange creature known as Sage was truly a sight to see, his stature taller than nearly every last person around here, and yet he was the one who'd walk around others, and always with a smile that crinkled the corners of his wide angling eyes.

His eyes, those wide, wise, exotic, angling eyes, always seemed to smile and laugh as he did. I soon found myself walking a wee bit closer to him.

*Was I attracted to him? What is this force, this power that keeps drawing me to him? Or perhaps... was he drawn to me?*

We entered into the commissary together, and gathering our food – fruit for me, and a high protein diet for him – I sat down, the table creaking with the weight of my gravity weights, and I again exerted my power to hold myself up so that the effects of my body wouldn't damage anything, but my strength was still tested by the continual weight. Sage sat across from me, I, so far, being the only friendly face to him here.

Well... there *was* Equis... but she wasn't here.

Our table was remarkably empty at the moment.

But he stayed, and spoke with me over breakfast, and the two of us simply conversed about simple things, not really talking about the tournament. There was still a chance he'd fail to meet me, after all. Genohn was still in the line up... and he was perhaps the only one, other than Illia, in whom I'd've given stern conscious thought to. But if he could defeat Illia so easily...

As time grew closer to the start of the finals of the tournament, I began to grow quieter and quieter, stirring my fruits in their sauce.

"You seem quiet all of a sudden." His voice came to my hearing, and blinking I looked up at him sharply. I was touched by the sound of genuine concern in his voice.

"I... uh... yes." I answered, blushing slightly.

"Something bothering you, Miss Iksaki?"

"Not truly." I managed a smile for him, and found myself looking into those aged eyes of his. They held such wisdom, such a beautiful light... for someone who looked so young.

My tongue licked the backs of my teeth as I looked at him, and then I realized what I was doing, blushed again and turned away.

"Just thinking about the future." I answered at last and I pressed my thighs together to try to stem off the urge I was beginning to have.

"The far future... or the near future?"

I blanched, my lips working briefly as I looked at that exotic, beautiful cat, and my lips pursed. "I..."

Then there was a chime. A repeating pinging sound from way up high to signify that the tournament was starting again. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Some other time, perhaps.” Sage smiled, and picking up his tray, walked around the edge of the table to help me up with one hand.

*Such a gentleman.*

“Allow me to walk you to your seat.” He said quietly, and gestured with one hooking arm forward. Again, I blushed, and moved to hook my arm in his.

He didn’t really say a word as he escorted me right up to the box, and at least inclined his head to the assembled members there, before retreating. I took my seat as he went to the fighter’s bench to sit with Makahn and Genohn. I noted that Makahn was looking at Sage with an almost seething hatred.

Sage sat there completely nonplussed from Makahn’s withering glare while students and spectators slid into the seats in the bandstand.

Soon, the priest-referee made his way onto the now altered mat, which formed a bowl now. Standing on the edge of the mat before the three remaining fighters.

“Well met, fine warriors.” He called out so that everyone could hear, and the crowd hushed in order to do so. “But we come to an impasse! There are *three* fighters, and only two may fight at a time, so the judges have ruled that one of these warriors shall have a bye. So the time comes to it again, gentlemen, to take your places by random draw.” Another pair of priests appeared, carrying a small pouch between them.

“Inside are only three balls. The fighter to take the third ball will be able to rest while the other two fighters eliminate one or the other. Gentlemen, please reach in and take your choosing.”

The three fighters reached in, and Genohn and Sage both entered a hand together and retrieved a ball, but Makahn waited till Sage had gotten out of the way before he reached in. They then, one by one showed their selections to an administrator, and soon the holographic displays on either end of the fighting area displayed the next match ups.

I was surprised as to how it finally wound up...

**Fight Ten:** King Makahn –Vs- Lord Sage Preypacer  
**Bye:** Lord Genohn

“The selections have been decided by Fate!” the priest-referee stated.

“The first fight shall be against King Makahn of Tamsleint and Lord Sage. Lord Genohn shall stand in waiting. Makahn and Sage, if you will please kindly take your corners; your fight will begin in five minutes.”

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The arena's configuration now was with the corners rising upward, and the center dipping downward, creating a deep smooth bowl, with the only level portions of the arena the corners, and the lowered center. Everything else was an upright hill.

Sage stood in one corner, taking his jerkin off by it simply reverting into black goop again and retracting into his body, and Makahn, in his tarre – sort of like a kilt but it fell all the way down to the ankles – also bare chested, glared at him.

I didn't know why he was hating Sage, only that I knew that there was hate there. He was about to do something rash.

The priest/referee was standing on a platform at one edge due to the terrain. As he took his position, he pointed first at Makahn.

“Fighter ready?” he called and Makahn nodded, punching his fist into his palm with the sound of cascading thunder.

The priest then pointed at Sage.

“Fighter ready?”

Sage merely nodded.

“Then... FIGHT!”

Makahn leapt down immediately, skittering forward to get into the ring, ready to fight, but Sage merely stepped forward, and walked down the edge of the ring. The odd thing was, was that he always remained level with the incline! Instead of being straight up and down all the time to keep in with the pull of gravity, it was like gravity moved for him as he walked calmly down into the very center of the ring, planted his feet, and held his hands behind his back, while facing Makahn.

He didn't even bother putting up a fighting stance.

Makahn skipped back and forth, his fists upraised while Sage watched him. I could hear Makahn growling from back here already.

“Grr... **why don't you fight?!**” He hollered

Sage remained placid-faced and calm, and merely blinked in answer.

“**ANSWER ME!!**” Makahn bellowed, and still Sage remained quiet, hands at his back still, watching Makahn balancing on his toes and using his tail as a counterweight.

But Sage didn't answer, and to force him to speak, Makahn lunged outward to slam Sage to the floor with a swinging fist to his ear, but Sage merely turned his head to one side and shifted his body with a snap of motion, and Makahn's fist traveled through empty air.

Makahn followed it up with repetitive strikes, and Sage merely twisted this way and that, keeping his body free from harm, and above all, in the exact same place as it was before. His footing did not move.

My lips pressed together as I watched this, seeing Sage make a fool of Makahn, who was the crowd favorite. Even now, the crowd was whooping and hollering for Makahn... but all around me, here and there, there was the occasional voice for Sage.

Makahn was definitely losing his temper... I've never seen him lose his cool, but this was bringing forth a deeply repressed, instinctual feral temperament that some Aphkei were capable of, and which even Sage was forced to react to.

Makahn moved from his punches and kicks to raking claws, and I watched as Sage actually lifted a hand to block his movements, but remarkably kept the other hand behind his back. I wondered, what on Earth Sage was doing... *why* was he tormenting Makahn like this? But then I looked into Sage's eyes, saw the intensity, and only when Sage moved at last from his spot did I understand why.

Sage was learning how Makahn fought.

That learning paid off as Sage broke through all of Makahn's defenses and struck with an oddly-shaped fist, one that had his middle knuckle projected forward and rapped Makahn firmly on the sternum and then withdrew.

Again there was the oddity on the space time continuum as time slowed down, and I saw Makahn freeze briefly as Sage uncoiled, just before the force of Sage's strike transferred into Makahn's body, and he was knocked backward to slam firmly onto the flat of his back on the incline of the mat.

The crowd gave a tumultuous "OH!" as they watched Makahn slapped down so readily.

I rose from my seat and moved forward to see Makahn as he laid there, and then spasmed around the point where Sage had struck him; legs squeezing together up toward his chest, while his hands clutched at the air above his heart. Makahn then exhaled sharply, and spat out a spray of blood, and then rolled over onto one hand and knees, panting while Sage remained standing patiently for him, watching him with those same intense eyes of his.

Makahn spit out another mouth full of blood, but this time it was intentional before he turned to look over his shoulder at Sage, his eyes darkening visibly as he growled. He then rose and placed himself into a ready stance, his movements like that of a marionette being controlled from above.



“No one will think less of you if you give up, Makahn.” Sage said quietly, and I could hear the concern in his voice urging that Makahn do as he says.

*Please give up Makahn*, I thought, my hands squeezing the guard rail around the royal box till it squealed underneath my grip and tightened into compressed steel.

“I never loose!” Makahn screamed, and then leapt at Sage across the massive mat, claws at his sides.

What happened next was almost too quick to see, even for me.

Sage’s hand leapt up and took the wrist that Makahn had led with to tear Sage’s throat out with, and gave Makahn’s arm a subtle twist. Makahn’s momentum was redirected before Sage’s other hand lifted to grab Makahn’s head and haul him upward over Sage’s body, only to come crashing down on Sage’s upraising knee directly into Makahn’s sternum again. Makahn raised upward, was spun by another redirection, and then kicked in the small of the back.

Makahn was lanced forward to land face first into the incline of the mat with enough force to dislodge several of the plates around his body.

The crowd again gave out a gasp as their hero was slapped downward again, and Sage simply reset his stance and waited for Makahn.

“Please give up. I will not loose this fight, Sir Makahn. I will win by whatever means are necessary.”

Makahn upon hearing this, however, lurched himself out of the ground with both hands, snarling like a feral beast, saliva mixing with blood as they strained through his sharp canines, and whirling himself around, he rushed Sage again, fitting all of his training in the simple act of destroying Sage.

Sage swatted his blocks away with both hands now, being met by one of the hard core battle rages a trained fighter can place themselves within, moving Makahn’s hands about him, and occasionally throwing Makahn away, to which Makahn would roll out of and attack again.

Every time Sage struck, it was always to Makahn’s sternum, he waiting for the opportunity to come, and then striking swiftly and unchallenged each time, to rap Makahn forcefully on his sternum.

But this seemed to only fuel Makahn’s rage, but I nonetheless saw Makahn rubbing that spot whenever he got the chance...

He was also being more and more cautious.

Sage hadn't even broken a sweat, he wasn't even breathing hard! Everything that he was at the moment infuriated Makahn, and Makahn wasn't about to give up. Repeating combos didn't land a single blow, claw rakes failed to sever even hairs, and other than blocking Makahn's moves, Sage had yet to be struck.

It was a fight that, even in my mind, was thought to go on forever. Till a single, mistake was made:

Makahn lunged again, his body sailing toward Sage in a body check motion, both his arms rising to strike down on his head. But then Makahn stopped in mid air right before Sage with a lurch, his double-fisted strike falling on Sage's upraised arm, and a collective gasp went through the whole of the stadium.

Makahn looked down with a gasp and a look of astonished disbelief.

A palm strike had struck him directly in the chest, but at the last moment it had transformed in a claw attack, which had dug Sage's own long, retractable claws into Makahn's flesh, hooking around his sternum, piercing his flesh, and holding Makahn firmly in place.

Makahn managed a moment to look into Sage's eyes, those intense, hardened eyes, just before Makahn was hauled upward above Sage and throttled. What should have been a throw stopped at a point right above Sage's body, and transformed into a juggle as Sage began to beat upward into Makahn's continuously falling body, and every time with that fist with the pronounced knuckle.

I rapidly lost count as to how many times Sage stuck Makahn, juggling him up long enough to land up to three other blows – *or was it more?* – At a time. A hundred, perhaps a thousand strikes later, Sage mercifully ended it with a kick shot straight up his own body, his foot moving for the first time in the whole match to smack Makahn right in the chest again. This kick then arched around and down, and Makahn fell to the ground with a thunderous crash.

Beaten...

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Sage stood rock still, looking down at his fallen opponent, and waited for the Ref-priest to finally count Makahn out, but only after someone had to smack him upside the head to remind him of his duty.

But then I was amazed as Sage moved forward, bent down, and hauled Makahn up over his shoulder, not an undignified slinging of his whole body over a shoulder, which he looked able to do, but rather it was like what a soldier would do to carry a wounded comrade off the field of battle.

The crowd remained deafly silent while the mat reset to flat as Sage carried Makahn off toward the medical tent.

I arrived just in time to see Sage placing Makahn's limp and unconscious body into a cot, and kneeling beside him, planted a single hand on his chest, I saw a soft blue glow suffuse his hand and Makahn's chest.

I winced at hearing Makahn's ribs cracking as they reset, and his chest pushed outward rapidly, but remarkably Makahn didn't seem to be pained at it. That was a trait of an expert healer to be able to do that and not even discomfort the patient. Sage then touched Makahn's forehead, and Makahn fell further into sleep before Sage pulled a blanket over him and then rose to his feet.

When he turned and saw me, he stopped.

Those eyes... those pure green within green eyes, that had so recently been so intense and focused, were now apologetic and filled with compassion.

He looked to Makahn, his hand twitching briefly toward him before whatever gesture he was about to do stopped, and he looked to me again.

Then, without saying another word he walked forward, still watching me, looking away only after he'd passed me by.

I stood there, watching his retreating muscular back for a time, amazed and attracted to this enigma all at once. And when he disappeared from view, I continued to stare at the last place he'd been.

"Will Rae Iksaki please return to the Royal booth for the final match?" A voice came over the loud speaker, shocking me out of my repose.

Not wishing to miss this, I hurried and took my place.

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I took my seat even as the announcer continued, and I waved off a concerning touch from Leski as she reached over to me to see if I was ok.

"Lord Sage has informed the judges that he is willing to continue after such a spectacular bout." The priest-ref was saying, even as the one hundred yard square mat transformed itself into an uneven terrain of platforms and pillars, with a very great portion of it all sinking down to their lowest points far below.

"In this corner, weighing at over five hundred and eighty pounds... Headmaster of the Demon League, Lord Genohn!"

I held my breath as Genohn stepped onto his starting position, facing Sage, his face placid. Of all the people in this competition, aside from Illia, Genohn was perhaps the person I had thought

would meet me in the final bout. He was powerful and skilled as well, and apparently a new favorite as the crowd applauded him.

“And in this corner, weighing at over twelve hundred pounds...” The ref paused, and then looked at his record sheet, and then at Sage, who nodded that that insane weight was correct – I blanched – and the ref continued. “Weighing at over twelve hundred pounds, Lord Sage!”

The applause for Sage was perhaps a tad less enthusiastic as it was for Genohn. Even I hoped that Genohn would be the one to meet me, but from what I’ve seen of Sage’s skill and determination, I didn’t think that that was likely.

“Fighter ready?” The ref said, a hand toward Sage, and Sage nodded. The ref then turned to Genohn. “Fighter ready?”

The question hung in the air... and I sat there, still holding my breath as Genohn actually seemed to consider it!

And consider it...

And consider it....

Genohn turned suddenly, stepping to his marker on his side of the Arena, a wooden panel bearing his name, and reaching behind it, took out a white flag, hung it on two pegs over his name on the marker, and pulled the white cloth of the flag over his name.

“Ah... ah this is amazing, ladies and gentlemen!” The ref says into his loud speaker as Genohn bows toward Sage, one hand across his chest. “Lord Genohn surrenders!”

My mouth dropped as the ring immediately reset itself, and Genohn walked forward, the hand that had been on his chest now in the air as he approached, and Sage met him in the center of the flattened ring.

I leaned forward and tilted my head, wanting to hear this conversation.

“Well, met, fellow wild card.” Genohn said in his low resonating voice as the two of them shook hands.

“Well met, sir.” Sage said, nodding as he understood Genohn’s words. “I am sorry that we could not have matched wits on the field. I’d hoped to have challenged you.”

“Not today. You want to fight our Rae far too much, Lord Sage, far more than I would, and unlike you, I can only choose paths of fate... not alter them. Every time I chose a path, I found it altering right before me to your advantage. I didn’t care to blow up this planet in an attempt to defeat you, so I shall let you have the win and avoid the beating I would’ve received in the process.”

“Perhaps a game of chess then.”

“I’ll hold you to it.” Genohn said, and then bowed again. Sage returned the bow and the two turned away from one another and left the ring.

There were some complaining in the crowds as Genohn was met by Lyamia, and the two exchanged the briefest of touches as Genohn continued forward to where the Demon Leaguers were staying.

Sage, however, seemed to step off the mat and disappeared.

I rose, looking around for him, and not seeing him; I tried to sense him out, and was wholly stunned when I could not.

Nonetheless, I rose, and began looking for him while the crowd around me dispersed.

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I found Sage later that evening, but only by sheer presence of following the sound of that hauntingly beautiful flute playing of his. When I finally did find him, I stood by, hands folded neatly before me while I listened to him play.

There was a sort of paradox in the air at that moment. Sage himself was filled with a horde of negative emotions, but the expression of the music was so calming and so beautiful... and that beauty was slowly, but surely, negating the darker things in Sage.

It was like how some people go work out after an argument, or go write, or play, create, do anything after feeling something bad, that they work their darker thoughts into something good.

What sort of creature was Sage that he could play something so beautiful? Was the darkness inside him *that* intense? Whatever things there were in him that were bright and beautiful; however, they seemed to sufficiently suppress the darkness...

A creature of lights and shadows...

Sage stopped his playing after a very long stint, in which I felt so enlightened, and so at peace that I felt a loss at him stopping.

Sage turned his head to look at me out of the corner of one eye from over his shoulder; his ears twitched lightly to angle toward me.

“Thank you for listening.” He said quietly, holding his flute in both hands.

“It was my pleasure,” I said, stepping forward as Sage seemed to let go of his flute, and the thing hung in midair for a moment before a ripple in space claimed the instrument and it disappeared. I was sorry to see it go.

“I’m sorry, Rae. I’ve disturbed the peace in this world of yours, and have placed you ill at ease with my presence. Command me to leave, and I shall leave.”

He looked up at me, his eyes stating all his seriousness in his words, and for a moment I considered doing so. But then I found myself entranced by those beautiful, exotic eyes of emerald green, and squatting down in front of him, I reached out and took his hand.

“You and I have a bargain, Lord Sage. Do not think that you can get out of it that easily.” I smiled at him, and then helped him to his feet.

Just then, with him so close to me, I was struck at exactly how large this creature was. He looked well down at me, this eight foot tall creature of so much strength and might, and I blushed as I looked up at him. Blushed so hard that I felt a burning in my cheeks before I gasped and looked down, only to see his hands holding mine.

He was so gentle...

“I’ve traveled a very long ways in my life, Rae Iksaki. I believe that I will be hard pressed to ever find a creature as pure as you again.”

My blush actually deepened, and I bit my lower lip before looking up at him, seeing the way his mane fell about his face and eyes to either side of his head; the play of light and shadows showing a creature of exotic beauty.

“You honor me, Lord Sage.” I managed at last, and retracted one of my hands to cover my cheek to hide the blush.

“Sage.” He said, and wrapped both his hands around one of mine. “Just Sage.”

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I... I don’t know how it really happened. It just did. Like he and I were mutually attracted to one another like two opposite forces of energy. Like one migrating to the other. He was with me the rest of the evening, his presence transforming from intense warrior into that of a gentle caregiver within moments. It... it was exhilarating to feel a presence transform like that.

I’ve never felt the like! Never knew anyone to do such a thing. Always before it was a presence, and it was always the same. Presences change, but it takes an age for it to happen. It was as if Sage had multiple minds... multiple spirits. Heaven knows... it may be true. He already had multiple bodies.

The small human, the noble tiger man, the viscous tiger beast, and the gentle giant.

So very strange...

We had journeyed to my home where I'd changed out of my work out clothes, detached my gravity weights and took a quick shower before dressing in something a little more flattering... a light blue shoulderless shirt and panties, with white slacks.

The panties came from the side of my underwear drawer that I used only when I wanted to feel sexy... sexy for someone else, and with the low hip of my slacks, the pink straps of my panties arched high over either of my hips.

When I arrived in my living room once I'd dressed, I found Sage setting my table with water goblets, and food he'd managed to get from my food replicator. What he created smelt positively delicious.

Sage's appearance likewise had changed. Somehow without ever leaving my home, he'd seemed to have cleaned himself, and likewise put on a more regal attire. Loose-fitting black pants, a white silk shirt, and a double breasted jacket with the front sides left opened and pinned to his shoulders, and his shirt undone a few buttons.

He looked regal and refined... just like the lords I'd met but without the pomp and flair.

We ate dinner together before going out for a walk around campus on a tour.

I don't know how we wound up on this date, but again... it just seemed... to happen.

After an hour, I was holding his hand. After two, I was holding his arm, and after three, I was leaning my head against that broad shoulder of his.

"And what's this building called." He asked. His attention always seemed to be on me. He made me feel for a time like I was the only person in his world. It drew me closer, and I hugged his arm tighter.

"The high energy facility. It's where we practice high level magics under a regulated atmosphere. If a spell goes wrong there, then it can be contained without blowing the planet up. And sometimes if a spell goes right too..."

"Sounds dangerous."

I nodded, allowing him to guide me around.

"We do a lot of research at this school too. That is one of the facilities that allows for it."

Our conversation seemed to stay that way for all that time, till at last we came to the dormitories... and Sage's temporary apartment.

"I find this awkward, Rae... Usually it's customary for me to be dropping you off... instead of the other way around."

I chuckled. “I think I can walk home without being bothered by muggers, Lord Sage, but it’s very sweet of you to think that way. But if I may, I’d like to see your quarters here. I’m still trying to figure out how you were able to put so large a space into such a tiny room.”

Sage smiled down at me and lifted his hand, and with a wave, the door’s glyphs flared to life and the door opened.

“My people have a magic,” he began as we entered. We didn’t have to leave our shoes by the door, because neither of us was wearing any. “That we call Temporal Magics. The manipulation of space and time, and changing the rules of the universe within a certain area.

“These red obelisks create the borders, and their glyphs work with one another to manipulate space inside their realm. Length, width, and depth are all manipulated by them.”

I fingered one of the red obelisks. “And what of the ones at your door?”

“Safe guards and locking mechanisms.” He didn’t say anything else about that.

I tried to contemplate the glyphs of the obelisks as we moved through his home. There was a lot of mathematics in them; geometry mainly, which in comparison to the magical glyphs, written like blocks of shapes and lines one over the other, were simple to understand. The magical language Sage used was unbelievably complex, and glyphs working together seemed to form larger glyphs... which shifted this way and that depending upon the moment.

“But how did you get all of this in here so quickly? It was less than a day!” I said, gesturing about me at all the greenery, the gardens, the fishery, and all the rooms and walls.

“That would be mostly Dallas’s work.”

“Holograms?”

“No... everything here is very, very real...” he said, fingering some leaves in his garden. “But all of it is constructed from his mainframe. Others... like this garden are my work. One starts with seeds, and simply helps them grow.”

I smiled. *He must be an Ecomancer too or something. He should meet Mother Sanari! Too bad she’s away at the moment.*

Sage continued to show me his home... To his temple, which was a place of peace, but had the air of warriors about it; warriors who enter only after sheathing their swords. Vaulting walls and pillars, and a perpetual scent of incense.

Then to his well-stocked kitchen, to which I sampled one of his fruits, to his bath, which was similar in construction to that we here at the League used, and I said as such. Sage smiled, and a flicker of memory shone in his eyes of that day in the bath house, when he’d entered at a time of women only due to Fatima’s trickery.



Guest quarters, storage lockers, living room, and finally, Sage's bedroom.

He was a man who liked his comfort...

His bed was built very close to the floor, if not right into it... covered with dark blue sheets now, and folded perfectly, as if the sheets had been ironed right onto the bed. Daedalus, just like his master, was a quandary. More than just a machine or a hologram, in this place, Dallas was everywhere.

"Thanks for the tour, Sage." I managed, folding my arms behind my back, and looked up, seeing Sage's eyes on me. He looked like he was trying to hold back his emotion with difficulty.

"I should thank you for the same. This school is a marvelous one."

"You should stay; be an instructor... you know so much!"

"We shall see." He responded, and watched me as I unconsciously took a couple steps closer to him. "Fate still hasn't made up his mind about me and this place yet."

"Oh?" a couple steps closer. "What's keeping him from making up his mind?"

"You." He said simply, and I looked down, and when I looked up again, it was to look straight up into his eyes.

"Why me?"

"I... don't know." He said in all honesty, and his gaze grew more somber as he looked straight into mine.

"Then it appears as if there are still some things that are uncertain." I managed, and lifted my hands to his chest, my fingers playing with the ends of the collar of his shirt before my breasts pressed against his ribs.

"There are..." and he touched me... his hands folding about my shoulders, and I looked to one of his large clawed hands gripping my shoulders.

"I-it's late, I really should go." I said after a brief pause, and then looked back up at him, managing a smile for him.

"I understand." He responded, still looking at me, and now unblinkingly.

"Good night then..." I smiled, and lifted up onto my toes and kissed his cheek.

But when I withdrew, I was that much closer to his eyes, and now found myself unable to look away. And then I was bending forward again, and when I kissed him, it was to taste his lips.

His touch lowered to my arms, his five fingers coiling about their sides, his thumbs sliding over my biceps, fingering the thickened artery that slid over them as that kiss lasted, and I felt him returning it, a gentle pressure; full of meaning... affectionate.

My breathing was calm, but my heart beat rapidly in a cascade inside my chest, pattering heavily, rapidly while the kiss lasted, and lasted...

Then I felt dizzy as I moved backward, and looking up at him, feeling the tensile strength of his chest muscles with my fingers as I looked down at my hands, I'd found that I'd unconsciously undone the buttons of his shirt, and had slid my fingers beneath the white silk. My mind cleared a little as I looked up at him, and in spite of myself I pushed my hands deeper; sliding my fingers upward along his chest and over his shoulders; pushing his shirt and jacket off those thick arms of his, and I looked closely upon his strange, alien physiology.

There were more muscle groups than there were on an Aphkei, the muscle definition more acute... with a dozen abdominals, eight laterals, two over lapping sets of pectorals, and a segmented ribcage that feathered from his sternum and that beautiful green gem in his chest down along his ribs.

I fingered his body while he looked down at me, his expression somber as he smelled my scent, his hands now on my layered stomach and its eight tightly packed folds. I felt his strength, his natural physical strength, felt how immense it was. Beyond supernatural.

His head was close to mine as he smelled my scent deeper, his lips opening to show a glimmer of white from his teeth as he breathed in my scent as well, and he kissed my forehead, and then the bridge of my nose, and finally caught my lips again with his.

The beating of my heart slid down the length of my bodice as my teats erected, my breathing quickened some, and my thighs pressed close together as I became incensed. And then I was helping him to sit on the edge of his bed, his hands on my wide hips as his fingers slid underneath the bands of my panties, the tips of his fingers sliding along my rump as I straightened for him, arching my back, and then crossing my arms I took hold of the hem of my shirt and pulled it up over my head; my breasts bouncing one after the other as I removed it, standing there quietly as he looked upon my well developed adult bodice.

I breathed in deeply, my breasts expanding as my lungs filled with air with my teats standing on end for him. He bent forward and kissed my navel just beneath my belly button before I felt him pulling my trousers and panties downward with one hand; his fingers coiling into the hem of my trousers and the front of my panties, while his other slid over my bottom to help my trousers down off my waist.

I stepped out of the legs of my trousers as he brought them down to the floor, and then lifted a hand to caress my sex as he kissed my navel again, and I felt it clench and swell for him.

For a short while I stood before him, naked and vulnerable to this aged master... a man whose exotic eyes seemed to hold back an ancient life and an ancient knowledge.

Kneeling before him, looking up into those pure emerald eyes, I felt him caress my cheek while I undid his own trousers and priestly cloths, pulling them off his legs before I rose up to him, kneeling first along the edge of his rounded bed as I pushed him backward with one hand, then sliding up onto his chest, my breasts compressing against his body between my arms as I pulled all of my mane over one shoulder before kissing him.

His touches were that of a learned lover... they did not grope, but rather caressed. He did not pinch or poke, but rather merely touched, and the simplest of those touches seemed to enliven me... and I soon found myself needing release from him.

And then I sat up on his lap, my fingers sliding down his abs to his pelvis, and then over his groin, spying... an oddity in his maleness as it erected below me: there was a notch in it, and definite scar tissue, and I pursed my lips at this as it expanded into a head. I looked up at him as he smiled up at me as I marveled at an almost unheard of oddity in this universe called circumcision, and though the races that I knew of that did practice it did it for health reasons, Sage would later recall that the purpose of his was religious.

It was a concept that I was about to enjoy about his religion.

Sage's hands cupped either cheek of my rump as my back arched, my breasts pointing outward and away from one another and I closed my eyes, exhaling a sigh as his fingers caressed the folds of my femininity, and coaxed them to moisten and spread open.

*Was this really happening? Was this about to happen?*

I looked down, folding both my hands over my heart momentarily, feeling it patter as I leaned forward to kiss Sage again, and then waited as his body maneuvered itself, and he slid into me.

I bit my lower lip, and exhaled a groan as he, a male so much larger than me, slid deep inside me with the lips of my sex spreading wide open for him; his mouth and nose nuzzling my muscled neck before his tongue with its combing bristles licked my neck.

I closed my eyes, arching my back before sliding backward onto him, rolling my hips as I exhaled a gasp, gritting my teeth as his thickness pierced me to his hilt before it withdrew a little, and then pushed again.

"Ngh!" I managed before I was suddenly rolled onto my back, Sage keeping his weight off me as he looked briefly down into my eyes; his mane sliding to either side of his head as he continued his stroke into my womanhood.

He affixed me with such an intent gaze, unblinkingly, loving me as he pushed in, stirred me, and withdrew... stirred and pushed in again, over and over... slowly... gently... allowing me to get used to it.

For my pleasure as much as his.

He helped me to lay my arms up over my head before he took to massaging one of my breasts, always looking me in the eye, affectionately kissing me whenever I closed my own eyes. And as he caressed me... I desired him more.

I had no idea how long this continued before we changed positions, and then it was me laying on my stomach as he continued to cajole my femininity with that piercing sword of his as he pressed against my back. A long stroke, steady and rhythmic, moved to rub against my body in just such a way as he leaned above me with both hands steadying himself. His lips kissed my back and cheeks, his subtle lovemaking touching a center in my body as his fingers memorized my being.

And then we changed positions again as I saddled him, working into his endowment and holding onto my belly as I felt that shaft pierce me from the inside and create a lump in my tight abs. He did so many things that I liked; almost s if he was inside my head...

He held my clit to his shaft with his thumb as I raised and lowered onto him, some of my moisture leaking from me and onto his hard pelvis. He caressed my thighs, massaged my rump, and even helped in the motion of our bodies as he sometimes followed my rising body with a couple of follow up pumps.

Surprisingly... my first orgasm came long before his.

When he finally did climax into me, he didn't simply roll over and fall asleep... bur rather he and I laid in his bead beneath his soft blue sheets, Sage holding tenderly onto me while I lapsed in an out of sleep, feeling my body tremble from a combination of micro orgasms, and the deep rumbling of his whole body as he purred.

His second wind came later, and we managed another gentle romp before again we lay together, with Sage coddling me in his arms, massaging my breasts and nuzzling my neck and cheeks.

For the first time in a long, long time... I felt protected, instead of being the one having to protect others. That was a portion of his strength, I felt, that overwhelmed mine. His ability and willingness to give his strength to others for their protection, and I fed off it willingly.

I fell asleep quietly ensnared within his arms, using his thick bicep for a pillow, and clinging onto him while he clutched the whole of me against him with both arms.

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I began to awake slowly. At times past, thanks to my training, I would awake rapidly, but I didn't want to wake up, hoping that what I'd just experienced wasn't quite a dream...

But then I felt a loss of warmth, and then I had to open my eyes, and half expected to awake within my own bed, but then I rose, the dark blue blankets of Sage's bed sliding off my shoulders

and catching at my waist and upturned hip to show off my full formed breasts. A realm of goose bumps rose against my body from the cool in his room as I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, and looking before me, and then behind me, I found that I was alone here in this bed...

I reached forward and felt the place where Sage had been, and felt that place to be still warm.

*He just left*, I thought, and sliding forward out of the bed, not bothering to cover up, I stepped elegantly up to my full height, and stepped around the bedding to try and find my clothes. I paused at the foot of the bed where they should have been, finding them gone, and turning only slightly, I found them cleaned, pressed and ironed nearby, hanging from an ensemble hanger; the sort that holds all pieces of a particular outfit, with a clasp for my pants and panties, and a hanger for my shirt.

*Dallas's doing, I suppose...* I thought smiling at the care of Sage's servant, and then dressed before leaving to look for Sage.

Room by room, even in his temple, I looked for him, and finally left his rooms by the front door before following a feeling I had inside me. I followed that feeling all the way to the main courtyard of the school before I found him.

It was still very early morning... the sun only just beginning to illuminate the horizon. In the darkness, Sage's brilliant white fur allowed him to be seen easily. *Then why is it that he can disappear so easily whenever he wanted to?* I thought as I watched him, holding myself from the morning chill.

He was practicing his form, though unlike before, when I watched him during his power training, this time his form was a dance. Fluidity over power, flexibility over speed, and I was amazed at how absolutely graceful and precise he was. There were an exceedingly few number of people that I knew of who could perhaps mimic that level of grace that he was displaying.

I could count them off, including him, on only one hand, and unlike him, I had only four fingers.

I folded my arms as I watched him in the early morning mists, noting his movements till he came to the last form, stood up straight with legs and hands close together, and bowed to an invisible opponent.

"You are very graceful, Lord Sage." I said from across the courtyard, and he turned to face me.

"Thank you. Did you sleep well?"

I couldn't help but smile, and my thighs pressed together a little closer. He'd touched me very deeply, and it was lasting.

"Well enough." I managed through a slight burn in my cheeks and breasts from a blush. My heart fluttered as he smiled at me. "I seem to be at a loss, Lord Sage. I believe that I still owe you a fight."

“Do you? Do you wish to fight me now, my lady?” he asked, his bright green eyes piercing through all the mists.

I smiled and settled myself backward into a fighting stance. “Ready when you are...”

Sage bowed to me at the waist, lowering his eyes as he did so, and then rising and lifting his hands, his fingers began to trace glowing blue lines in the air, creating a small magic circle before his foot raised to where his fingers had come together and then stomped down to the ground, tracing one final line into the ground. This illuminated a *vast* magic circle over the entire courtyard that appeared out of nowhere.

“Then I have but one request:” He said and slid his fingers through three small circles that were held within the larger glowing circle before him as he turned it; the glyphs turning with his hand and the greater magic circle energized into a barrier that went straight up into the atmosphere. “Do not hold back.”

And he stepped forward, and I blinked as something unlocked inside him, and a power unlike any I’d ever felt, an alien magic, surged forward to wash over the entirety of the courtyard, his body energizing with sparks of electricity as he walked toward me. While I stood there, whole blocks of the courtyard rose up out of the ground.

He settled then back into his own fighting stance, his arms loose at his side as he looked at my midsection instead of my face.

I stepped, and he stepped in the opposite direction, while floating blocks rose and fell all around us, his ears twitching, and I stepped again, and he followed in the opposite direction, and when I finally lunged, his arm rose to block it. I lunged forward again, giving a couple of quick jabs, and he pushed my blow out of the way each time.

*He’s watching my movements... learning how I fight. Just like he’d done with Makahn.*

I was immediately glad that we weren’t enemies.

I pressed the attack, lunging and twisting repeatedly, and he backed up step for step, gently pushing my hands out of the way, blocking my strikes in exact motion as if this whole fight was a choreographed dance.

And then amidst his blocks and parries, he lunged upward with his foot and clipped me directly beneath the chin, and landed on the balls of his feet, his tail waving for balance while I regained my composure, working my jaw and smiling.

He still was not looking directly at my face, he was looking at the whole of me, and... and listening.

Grinning, I set myself forward and began to twist and turn myself, lunging forward and twisting my body in insane directions; he twisting and turning around them till I arched my own foot up under his jaw and he stepped back and felt his mouth from the blow.

“Touché.” Sage grinned, and then lunged forward.

I had to stop that insane punch aimed for my gut with both hands, and even that pushed me back several feet, but not bothering in the failed punch, his fist snapped backward and began punching at my head, and he landed two quick strikes to my face before I was able to block, but I pushed forward and lifted my knee right into his steel-hard abs. His fist came down in turn into my face, and he hopped back onto one of the floating slabs of cobblestones from the power supporting the protective ring, and jumping up to one facing him on nearly the same level, we faced one another.

*He’s quick. Time to turn it up a notch.*

I stepped back, stamping my foot down onto the ground and cried out a power cry, and my muscles tensed as they thickened with my magical powers, while Sage simply stood there and watched. I was well aware of his Battle Form, knew that it was stronger than I could manage just now, but I wasn’t about to give up. He’s the best challenge I’ve had other than Illia!

I leapt at him, my fist coming downward, but he caught it and flipped me away, but not before I grabbed his arm and twisted him in front of me, and as he hit the shield wall, I lanced into him with my knee into his gut.

*Uh! It’s like hitting a starship’s hull!*

Sage nonetheless felt that blow as he grit his teeth, his eyes wild with what he was feeling, and before I knew it, he’d grabbed my head and promptly thrust his own head into it.

We fell downward to the ground again, and I looked up just in time to see him turning to thrust his arm downward, and I rolled out of the way even as that elbow smashed right where my solar plexus had been. I hopped up to my feet as he spun to trip me, his legs clipping my legs down and I fell. Spinning myself I clipped his own legs out from underneath him, and we both kipped up at the same moment to face one another.

And then I saw Sage take a different stance, his whole body changing into a different form with his fist lifted back like a scorpion’s tail. Not wanting to find out what that fist would do, I surged forward and spun, thrusting my elbow toward his face, but he blocked it off, pushing it away. I used that momentum to thrust my leg toward the back of his head, but he lifted his arm and leg to form a T-block and turned to ward off the attack. Then I flailed on him, and each time he blocked with a hand or a foot, and before I knew it, that hand that he held cocked back behind his head had arched downward straight into my face, and I was hammered to the ground.

“OW!” I said through clenched teeth, and rolling to my feet I faced him again.

He blew on his knuckles and shook the sting out of his hand but said nothing more. I grinned back at him, surprised that a simple strike like that could've hurt his hand. It sure did hurt my face.

He was still looking at my body, not in a perverted way... he was reading my moves I was sure. His body was too relaxed in return though, and he only moved when he was about to act. I'd fought people who could read your movements but not when I couldn't accurately read his in return.

I leapt at him, throwing my shoulder into his chest, but he skipped up off the ground and did a light push off me, landing a few feet away before he did an odd little side step by crossing his legs, and then spun, lowering downward to trip me with his long leg. Hopping up, I avoided the blow and lanced downward to kick him in the face, and he angled himself so that my foot merely brushed his ear. He tried to rise to throw me, but I skipped away, ending with a pirouette and we both righted ourselves a dozen or so feet away from each other.

We were both smiling at one another.

Then both at once we powered up, his lightning erupting from his body, and an aura of power lighting up mine before we surged at one another.

Each punch was met by the other, fists smashing against fists, erupting sounds like cannon fire each time the strike came, but each time our fists collided, I got a minute shock from his power. If I was causing extra damage with my blows, he wasn't showing it, and I was determined not to show him the same.

And then I landed a blow, straight into the center of his chest, and the force of my kinetic energy exploded right there as he was blasted backward. He fell backward limp, and I followed, looking for a quick double strike, but when he landed it was on his feet, and when he looked up, it was straight into my eyes, and when he surged forward to my rapidly moving body, it was to slam his fist directly into my solar plexus.

Again time slowed down, and I saw the black disk around his arm as his blow carried me backward, but I wasn't about to feel that blow like Pleeyo did, and I bent backward as the black disk spun and surged forward, and a kinetic blast that erupted from his fist tore the bottom of my shirt open as I flipped backward. The blow struck the shield formed by the magic circle, and it rang like a bell. A quick glance over my shoulder showed me the blast filtering through the shield as its energy dissipated before I looked back.

We were both breathing heavily now, and we were still smiling at one another...

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Students began coming out of their dorms as soon as we started the power hitting, with sounds like gunshots and explosions happening, and when one came out, they immediately went to hammer on the doors of those right next to them, to see what was happening. A good many of



them arrived just in time to see me up in the air, powering up a force strike that lit like a sun between my hands.

They began to line up to watch as Sage, down on the ground braced himself.

“HaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!! **SOLAR BLAST!**” I cried, and pushed the ball forward, and an eruption of golden light flared outward from my hands.

Sage’s hands made a ball too, and I was startled at how quickly it rose up, erupting into a ball of lightning even as he was swinging it upward to slam against my own blast.

“**T’SALB GNI’N’THGIL!!**” The arcane tongue Sage used summoned forth a power to counteract my own, and a blast like rolling thunder erupted as that blast of brilliant white and blue met with my own yellow and orange, and the two of us fought to overpower the other.

“**HA!**” I cried, and opened my hands wider, my blast surging downward to push Sage to his knees, and he pushed upward and twisted his arms, and his blast focused just before my Solar Blast lanced down to burry him into the ground.

I felt victorious for a brief second before I saw a brilliant ball of blue and white streaming up the length of my blast, and the next thing I knew I was struck right in the solar plexus with a stinging energy ball of raw lightning that carried me backward to slam into the shield wall.

I bounced off the wall, still electrified from all the blazing hot electro-death, while Sage crawled out of the hole he was in, with singed pieces of his clothing and fur growing back. He was grinning at me.

With both of us on the ground, we both surged at one another, with Sage lifting his hand to grab one of the floating slabs and flinging it at me, which I deftly crushed with a single punch, and then the two of us met together, and I took another of the floating slabs and went to slam it into his face. But instead he punched right through it and into my face. I was blown off balance, and opened my eyes in time to bring my hands before my face to stop his rising knee. My arm whipped sideways to crack him along side the head, and as he fell sideways, his leg extended to kick me in the head.

We both landed in the growing rubble of the courtyard.

“Nice shot.” He smiled.

“Good kick.” I smiled in return, and the pair of us simultaneously struck the ground with a single fist to right ourselves before we both stepped back into ready stances.

Immediately we set ourselves forward our arms and legs moving with blinding speed now as we both matched each other block for block.

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“Great Maker! What a wonderful blow by Rae Iksaki! Lord Sage has been slammed to the ground with a *beautiful* power axe drop. But what’s this? Lord Sage counters with a knuckle blow to Rae’s inner thigh! Watch out Rae... that will hurt for awhile.”

I was grinning. What the Referee-priest was saying was really true! I couldn’t feel my toes. Sage’s punches were hurting, and he was breathing hard, staring at me from underneath stray bits of his hair.

The crowd had grown massive, and now there was that shield made by the priests now to protect the crowd, but Sage’s shield was nonetheless still there. The whole school had shown up, and there was a cacophony of cheers below as they watched us battle.

And we’ve been at it for a long time. The sun was nearly at its peak, and we’ve been doing this since just before dawn.

Sage launched himself up into the air to meet me now, catching one of the last of the floating stones and hurling it at me. I caught it easily and hurled it back like a Frisbee, and Sage took it with both hands and hurled it back, whipping it around and adding to its momentum. When it came up to me, I smashed down on it with one hand, but even its spraying fragments hurt me enough to sting, and when I looked up, I saw Sage do something strange, saw his whole body moving, dragging lines of energy at his finger and toe tips that disappeared soon after being written, and at the very center of the motion, his hands came together, twisted, drew them back into a force ball summoning motion, and the next thing I knew, a fireball was lobbed forward straight at my face.

I lashed upward with a shield only to see a black disk arise right before the fireball and it disappeared. Then I felt the change in space behind me and turned just as the fireball struck me square in the back.

“Ngh!” I groaned as it burned the back of my shirt off, singeing my fur off there and burning some of my flesh before it all healed back rapidly. It still drained me of some of my precious energy. “Lucky shot... teleporting a fireball behind my shield.” I said through clenched teeth from the sting in my back.

When I looked again, Sage was making another motion with the strange lights dragging off his fingers and toes, and at the center, his hands again met, and then turned, and when they came outward, a burst of fireballs erupted outward all around me. I waited for them to move enough and then I teleported, driving my elbow into his face which drove him back into the perimeter shield, but when he looked up at me, it was with a smile.

I turned too late to see all those fireballs turning around, and I erected a shield too weak to repel them all, and they broke into the shield, shattered it and then lanced into my body, driving me into the wall right next to Sage.

“Ah. I need a drink of water.” Sage said, and I looked at him with a whimsical smile on my face.

“You and me both. Guess we can’t really stop now for a water break.”

“Why? And miss all this fun?” he grinned at me, and taking my hand helped propel me out into the open air as he rose after me.

Again we readied ourselves, and I took a moment to repair my shirt at least as it closed about my body. My tit was about to pop out of one side, and though I didn’t mind getting naked in front of Sage, there were a lot of young minds below who didn’t need a peep show.

Those of the students who could fly were now floating up around the shield to get closer ‘seats’ to this fight, and I saw Fatima and Equis floating close by, cheering me on. Noxi was on another side, shouting out strategies, and I smiled at them.

*I wished Illia could be here.*

I looked at Sage, tried not to hate him for what he’d done to my friend, but that was an accident, and he had tried his best to repair the damage after all. But still... I wished she were here.

But that didn’t stop me from putting a little extra hurt into the next force blast I lobbed at him. But then his hands lifted and he caught it, trapping it between his fingers, and I watched as my yellow orange power transformed rapidly into a green and blue, just before he threw it back at me, and I had to dodge as a whole section of the wall suddenly lit up brilliantly but not before I’d launched another blast at him. What he wasn’t prepared for was the blast striking him right in the face as I teleported right up to him, caught my own force ball and smashed it home.

There was a mass of cheers below as Sage was sent reeling backward, but then in a flash he was gone, and the next thing I knew I had an elbow in the back of my head, followed by a double foot smash into the small of back, and finally the sting of being smashed right into the shield wall before a knee busted into the peak of my back. I turned and caught him and swung him into the wall, pinning him there as I kneed him a couple times myself, brought his head back and smashed it into the wall, rotating his arm into his back.

“Give in!” I said through gritted teeth, feeling my strength swelling inside my body.

“No! You haven’t earned that yet!” He gritted back, and the next thing I knew, I heard a crunch as his arm popped out of its socket, and he pushed away from the wall with his feet, rotated upward and then back down onto the top of my head to drive me straight to the ground.

I looked up at him from the flat of my back as he half grinned, half snarled at me as he reset his arm with another crunch, just before his hands drew back into a chi ball and I felt multiple forces of magic being conjoined as one, and I gasped as I suddenly understood how his power worked.

*Multiple powers... their combined powers coming from multiple focuses, creating powerful magic in a fraction of the time. Chi, Psionics and magic all summoned at once. Damn he was fast!*

And I watched as a blazing white and blue ball formed that outshone the sun briefly, and he pushed the ball forward and exploded the spell, and a force wave of incredible might surged down at me. I brought both hands and feet up, channeling a shield spell to hold back the blast, erecting it just as the force wave lanced down at me and pushed me further into the Earth. Then I dared to remove one hand and began to chant through gritted teeth, my hand forming the somatic portion of the spell as it arched and signed, and then dropping my other hand, I dug my fingers into the Earth and drew from a source while holding the shield with my feet, feeling the shield cracking beneath the sustained power as it rumbled around me. I wasn't even sure if the words of my spell could be heard by whatever force granted me the power to enact it, but nonetheless the glow started, and as soon as Sage's force wave dissipated, the shield broke and I pushed my arm upward.

“HA!” I cried out, my fingers forming the last glyph and an equally powerful force wave was sent upward at him, the Earth rumbling as it was released.

Sage curled up into a ball and a shield of his own was formed, a glittering thing that looked like a perfect piece of crystal just as my force wave hit him and I lost him in the flare.

I got to my feet then, and stood there, waiting for the flare to dissipate, and when it did I saw Sage's body reeling backward at the end of the wave, his shield shattering around him. He righted himself way up there, and I saw him trace more lines in the air while he was above me, wondering if that was how he cast his spells, and I teleported up to him just as he finished the movement, brought his hands together and twisted them. I appeared and rose up in a rising uppercut, my fist flaring with fire, but Sage's came down just at the same time and connected with mine, his blazing with lightning, and a flash of electricity and fire erupted in a broad disk between us and blasted us both back.

“And a stunning display of magical might between both competitors!” the ref was saying. “A Blazing Knuckle maneuver meeting with a... *Lightning*...Knuckle maneuver I guess, and the resulting explosion has blasted both competitors off balance. But it looks as if Lord Sage is ready to act first.”

I blinked in surprise to clear my head as I heard the announcer's words, and looked up even as Sage appeared before me. He winked at me and then I felt him punch my body repeatedly, hundreds of times it felt, and I blinked back at him when they didn't even hurt. Little more than baby taps...

I was so shocked that he'd do this, that I wasn't ready for the punch to my gut that sent a flash through the whole shield wall as I struck it.

I groaned and fighting off the daze, swung back with a quick one-two which he dodged both times, though I connected with a hard hitting blow to his head that carried him down and away from me. I balled up underneath that last blow, feeling it do odd things inside me as I tried to clear my head. The force of the blow seeped deeper and deeper inside me and dissipated.

I'd never really felt a punch like that, and I gasped when I was suddenly able to breathe.

Far below me, Sage was once again moving his hands, those shining lights following after them, and then I watched his hands meet and then rotate. I tried to discern his motions, tried to see what he was doing, but then he was drawing back, muttering.

I didn't wait this time, and balling up against the shield wall, I launched down at him, pulling my fist back, but Sage canceled his spell, and I was suddenly met with an aura shield.

*An aura shield? Come on Sage... those are child's play to break thr... OW!*

My hand came smashing down against it, and I felt it ripple in opposition to my power, and it solidified right at the point of impact to deflect my blow. I chanced a look to see what he'd done, saw the alien magic weaving it; saw it coiling to deflect my next blow, and then the next, while Sage held the shield with one hand.

*It's only a matter of time before I figure this out... and then it's just like any other Aura Shield I go against.* I thought, but Sage's free hand drew back, and he pushed it upward, and an eruption of electricity flew upward, passed right through the shield and into me even as I pulled my hands back to block. I felt the shocking biting of the head of a dragon that formed from it, felt its body snap as it passed through me, with the tail swatting me as it passed completely through.

"Owchie." I cried softly, tears in my eye from the sting, and I unfolded, still in midair as Sage and I fell downward. With a snap his shield dissipated and his hand lanced upward, tapping me in several dozen places, little more than taps, but it was that last blow, a tight fistful blow that lanced up into me struck some sort of nerve and dissipated into my body in that same cold way.

"Stop that!" and I swung down, and like a ton of bricks, my fist broke into his face.

His body hit ground first and I came down with my elbow then, ready to strike him in the gut. But he rolled forward and I felt his hand grab my tail as he transformed my downward motion into a side motion, and I flipped and landed on my feet with a skid, managing to get my hands down in front of me as his body seemed to become liquid thunder leading his fist forward in an uppercut. When it struck my hands, there was the sound of rolling thunder as it roiled around us. The next thing I knew, we were ground fighting again, with slaps and hits, blocks and parries, and a flurry of kicks far too fast for just about anyone here on the ground to count.

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The sun was nearing setting. Sage and I had paused on the ground, breathing hard. It was a fight that had lasted for over twelve hours, and I was smiling again, having to repair my shirt yet again, but left the torn sleeve off to conserve energy.

"I have to admit Sage. You are a solid piece of iron at light speed." I said, and then set myself into another fighting stance.

“And you are as relentless as the sun.” he panted, and lifted his own hands into yet another fighting stance. I’d lost count as to how many he had...

There was a raucous amount of cheering going on, for both Sage and me. It was a wonderful fight. The Emperor himself had taken a place at the front lines, with his newly repaired Dragon and several troopers arrayed around him to keep a decent distance between him and the other members of the crowd.

Leski hung onto his arm.

“Let’s end this soon, Sage. I’m getting really thirsty.” I said, still smiling.

“I agree. My body thinks my throat’s been cut.” He smiled pleasingly back at me.

This was it.

And then I blinked and Sage disappeared, and when he reappeared it was directly in front of me, his fist coming down for my head in a blow that would’ve floored me had I not teleported away. I reappeared in the air, only to see him reappear directly in front of me, his foot again swinging for my face, and I blocked with one massive fist before swinging for home on him with my other fist. This time it was he who disappeared, and I was about to try to follow him when he reappeared in the same place and grabbed my head, swung me over his shoulder and thrust me downward with a kinetic blast erupting into my solar plexus.

Despite all my efforts, I knew how Pleeyo felt the first day Sage arrived as all that power erupted directly between my bosoms in a brilliant disk of light, I heard the explosion that pushed all the air out of me, and I rocketed down to the ground, landing on my hands and knees with an impact crater arising about me.

Gasping for air I rolled even as Sage’s elbow crushed the ground where I’d been, and still laboring for air I rose as he spun on the ground, tripping my legs, but I landed on the tips of my fingers, pushed back up, hopped down and spun in a tight circle to catch his body as he was righting himself and knocked him backward toward the shield wall. He rose to his full height as he was thrown back, his legs straining while his toe claws dug into the Earth, tearing up great fragments before he slapped his chest where I’d struck him, exhaled sharply and lifted his green-eyed gaze to look at me with a grin on his face.

And I blinked again and he was there before me, and only then did my combat perception kick in as he began his attack. He was faster than me, but I was stronger... I hoped... as we blocked and kicked and punched and parried one another in a flurry of strikes too fast for the naked eye to see yet again. Only our combat perceptions allowed for the two of us to see, and sometimes feel, where the next strike was coming.

And then his arms rotated outward, and for a split second both of our chests were wide open with this maneuver, and seizing the moment, both of us kicked at one another. By sheer fact that

Sage's leg was longer and his speed faster, he connected with my head, stunning me for a mere second before his hands grabbed my head and he head butted me right on the bridge of the nose.

A spray of blood erupted from both my nostrils, and without thinking I surged forward and uppercut him, and his body was lanced straight upward, a spray of his own blood being spit into the air through his teeth before he fell backward.

A bloody nose was nothing to have right now, and I healed it, but as I braced myself and Sage landed on his back, I noticed the spray of his blood in the air suddenly slap right back into him, pushing its way back up into his slits for nostrils. As he rose, he did a farmer's blow with both nostrils to clear them. I saw also that I'd broken his jaw like he'd broken my nose, but while my nose still healed, he simply clenched his jaw, there was a loud crunch, and he lifted a hand to work his mandible again.

*Unbelievable! No one can heal that fast!!*

I was still healing when he surged forward, and I sniffed in deeply, forcing the magic to work faster as I palmed his strikes out of the way, and then stepping sideways hit him in the head, but he moved the top of his head in the way and head-butted my fist, and I heard a crack and my fingers went numb.

*Ah!* I cried inwardly, and brought my other hand forward and called a quick spell, reciting the words rapidly under my breath and it erupted like a blazing storm right into his face. His arms rose to ward off the attack, and the force of the blast pushed him back several meters, though my force blast simply rolled around some invisible barrier.

Gritting my teeth I clenched my hand and then opened it suddenly, knowing the cost of resetting numbed bones immediately as they healed in mere seconds, and as Sage came at me again, I hauled upward with my newly healed hand and stuck him in the chest with a palm strike. He was pushed backward and I shot my foot into his middle, skipped forward and then pounded him to his knees with an axe drop with my thick leg.

He was beginning to rise just as I reached behind his head, grabbed him by the hair and began pounding him repeatedly in the face. I only managed about half a dozen before his hands rose to my hand holding his long hair, and with a jerk downward from his head he tore a large collection of his mane off right at the roots.

I stood there dumbly, holding a large clump of it all, still with the leather thong that had bound it all as he felt the back of his head.

He smiled and I managed a laugh that stopped even as his long mane grew back.

The crowd was in awe, and I could hear cheers still as they pressed up against the outer shield made by the priest at the display they've been treated with thus far. I dropped Sage's bundle of hair with a smirk, and then I moved.

To those who watched, it was as if we'd both just disappeared, but in reality we were moving too fast for the untrained eye to see. What was happening was a mass of attacks and counter attacks, chains of combos in the hundreds that ended with either he or myself being slammed against some hard surface. We slammed one another at least once before that bundle of his hair fell to the ground and then disintegrated into ash.

Sage landed face first with me elbowing him in the back, then it was me landing head first as I was suplexed into the ground, me hopping on one foot after I'd kicked him between the legs, my foot having met with something enormously hard.

“What do you got in there... iron balls?” and Sage smiled, and rapped a knuckle on his groin. At least he was smart enough to wear a cup.

Then the actions began up again, and the next ended with me smashing Sage's head into the ground, the next whipping him up over my head by the tail for him to land again in the ground, then next me being flipped with his legs about my neck head first into the ground, and then with one titanic explosion both of us ended back first into the shield wall.

The whole wall chimed like a bell, ringing a single perfect note before we both hauled off at one another again.

Every time our racing bodies emerged, it was with some new spray of blood, some new bruise here or there, or a brief moment to heal injuries before rocketing back in again.

It was like a dance of many fists.

We were becoming worn out, I knew, enough to where those watching below could see us better because we weren't moving nearly as fast.

And then Sage stopped, and turning in midair as he moved to face me, I lunged at him, and his body stiffened as he roared, and an explosion of fiery heat erupted outward from his body, and I felt an *intense* fire aura explode about him so powerful that it actually created a physical fire. I lifted my arms as the shockwave hit me, pushing me straight against the barrier and I used it to support my back as I erected a stronger field in front of me.

When the shockwave ended, he was there, his hand raised with one of his own blue and white force balls just before he tossed it at me, and another, and another, in rapid succession. I dropped the shield and ran along the shield wall, looking up at him watching where the force balls were hitting as he tossed them forward, behind his back, off to his side, and then dozens of them straight in front of him before raising both hands.

I was so busy dodging all his blasts as he forged one massive force ball, blazing with electricity before he lobbed it at me. I braced myself then, lifting my hands and repelled it.



“AHH!!” I screamed, feeling the biting hurt from his power snapping at my fingers, clawing at the backs of my hands as I was pushed against the shield wall again with the remnants of his force balls colliding with the much larger one to add to its power.

I began to push back, and steadily forced his power away, and I smirked at him for a moment, and then my expression went blank as he lifted a hand, pulled it back, and made a pushing motion, and all his strength surged into the back of the ball to push it against me.

I sucked in my gut and lay flat as it forced its way around my arms like a bubble about to pop, and when it did pop, I was caught within the spirit energies that buffeted me around, tore at my clothing, knocked all the wind out of me and snapped at my being with electrical damage.

And it felt so *cold!*

Sage was still standing there in mid-air as I fell several feet before catching myself and levitated again, and I opened my eyes, staring at him from underneath my bangs, and this time, it was my turn to grin.

“Is that all you got?” I called out.

“No!” he returned, and lifted a hand to beckon me to him.

And then I flexed, and poured on the power, feeling all my muscles thicken, straining against my pants and the remains of my shirt – I wasn’t bothering to cover up any more and one of my breasts tore through the ruined shirt – and I surged forward, feeling renewed with all this new power in me.

“I can keep...” I began as I lunged forward quick as lightning at him and he dodged. “...This up...” my fists began swinging at him, connecting almost as often as I missed or he parried. “... For a *long* time...” and began working my legs into it, feeling his baby taps against my body again as he poked me with a toe or a pair of fingers. “...So just give up!”

And then time slowed, and I saw Sage bend impossibly, sliding sideways through my defenses as he grabbed my arm, twisted and extended his own hand into my face till his claws pierced the skin about my brows.

“No,” he said simply, and I watched that black disk rise up about his arm again, watched it spin, and I saw what Illia must’ve seen, saw the white light in his palm aimed right between my brows. “You haven’t earned that yet...”

It was the second time I’d heard him say that to me, and I gritted my teeth.

*Come on Rae! He’s willing to sacrifice to win. What about you?*

And with that thought I grabbed his arm and kicked upward into his forearm with both legs, and I ripped my face out of his claws, feeling the biting, stinging ripping sensation of my flesh being rent, even as a blast of his energy erupted over my head, burning off a good section of my mane.

But then I realized I still had him by the arm, and he was still retracting that energy lance.

And I acted, twisting his arm I held it in an unbreakable grip with both hands, swung around behind him, and kicking him in the back of the head, the two of us plummeted toward the ground, and Sage lifted a hand to slow the impact even as the fullness of my weight smashed his head with both feet straight into the ground.

“OHHHH!” The crowd winced at such a blow as I kicked off back up into the air like a rising angel, powering up for a fusillade, and I formed a force ball and threw it, and then another, and another... over and over till I lost count.

“Have... I... Earned... It... **YET... Sage?!**” I cried, and then muttered a spell, opened my arms, and straight from the heavens a fiery column of flame lanced down to explode at where Sage had been, and the whole base of the arena erupted in a conflagration.

The crowd was silent as the flames cooked everything, and resting up there, I fingered my lip, hoping I really didn't kill the guy, and began to fear for the worse as all that was left below was rubble.

A cheer rose up, and they were cheering me, and I felt on top of the world! I'd defeated a true master. But then there was a cry from below, and looking down, I gasped, and saw an arm lift out of the ground, followed by another, and with two jerking motions, a head abruptly pulled itself out of the rubble.

Sage looked up at me as I climbed out of his hole.

“Not... Just... Yet!!” he answered, and I steeled myself.

And his hand rose, and in it was a white ball, and around his wrist was a rapidly spinning white disk. I gasped, recognizing this power, and I prepared a spell to counteract it, just managing to summon it even as I heard Sage cry out.

“**ENDESTE' ESTAS EN TERRA!**” and an explosion of holy light erupted from the globe he held onto, even as a firestorm surged downward to meet it.

Sage was driven to one knee as I pushed downward with all my might but was nonetheless steadily forced upward by the power surging up at me, and gritting my teeth as I felt that power, that immense holy power rising steadily up to meet me.

*Sacrifice! You must sacrifice!*

And I pushed downward harder. “Ngh!” I cried and a fight of wills was pushing the beams up and down

“AH!” Sage cried out below me, reinforcing his spell arm with his other, and the force intensified.

Spell energies poured through me, a churning cacophony of fire that burned me from the inside, and my eyes lit with fire, the pair of them burning as my body was encased in flames, and I pushed harder, and harder.

My arms rose then, releasing the strain, and I watched Sage’s force surge upward, and then I pushed my arms down again, and added a reinforcing spell into my firestorm, and in the next instant, the whole of the shield wall from end to end and from ground to the upper stratosphere was engulfed in fire...

I did feel a surge of holy light strike me, and I was bathed in it, felt the all encompassing heat of white fire burn around me, and I screamed, but my force on Sage had been far, far more intense. The pillar of fire dissipated and burned itself out, and I floated down several dozen feet before catching myself and looking down, I saw Sage, flattened against the ground, his body singed and repairing itself.

“You’ve lost too much energy Sage.” I said. “You cannot hope to win now.”

But Sage rolled forward, and with an ache he stood up on wobbly legs, and lifted his eyes to face me.

“I... have... only one thing to say... Rae.” He said, and I watched his body healing rapidly, felt his power levels climbing anew. I’d have to surge down there and beat him down soon if he didn’t decide to give up now.

“What’s that?”

“Bishop takes knight... check!”

I was sure that everyone gathered thought he was mad at saying that, and I did too... my brows knitting as I wondered why he was calling off a chess move. And then I screamed, feeling myself as if I’d just been hit by a titan’s fist, and looking down to where my shoulder, chest and breast met, I saw a fist mark indentation in my flesh that slowly filled back out with a bruise.

“What?” I whispered, and looked down at him, and he smiled triumphantly.

Then a second blow struck my other side, and then was followed quickly by one in the gut and I gasped as all the wind was exhaled out of me. And then the blows of foot marks, fist marks and finger strikes poked their way all over my body, and I cried out as I was hit repeatedly by what rapidly became hundreds of blows, striking me in the head, the legs and thighs, everywhere Sage had hit me reliving itself.

I could feel some sort of dark power expelling from inside me, forcing me to relive every last physical blow he'd dealt over twelve hours of fighting, while below me he scribed his fingers rapidly in the air, his hands meeting in the center before they both turned once.

"Knight takes queen... Checkmate!" Sage said, and lifting a single finger, touched a space directly above him, and I watched as a massive glyph surrounded by a complicated spell circle appeared right before I received one of Sage's earlier upper cuts followed by a blow to the temple.

I tried to heal the damage, tried to keep up with it while all around me, more glyphs in spell circles lit up, and finally above me one final glyph appeared. Four all around me, one above and two below. Then from the center of each glyph came a beam of light that touched me, and before I knew it while I was still being pummeled, the individual spell circles closed into a spell sphere!

*Impossible!*

The Spell sphere locked itself around me and I screamed suddenly as I felt my healing power drain away, followed by my defenses and then offences, and spasming with the final blows, I felt my body shrinking, my muscles thinning my arms narrowing while my clothes became baggy around me, and in rapid succession, I felt all my power drain.

*It's a spell seal! I gasped. He's sealed off my power! He'd actually constructed a spell seal... while we were fighting!!*

"No!" I moaned as I felt a few last punches in my gut, and cried. "Please make it stop!"

But below me, Sage was grabbing his head, and I could see a burning rising beneath his fingers as he was screaming. Something was hurting him. Surely nothing that I'd done...

He spasmed backward and I saw green smoke coming from his forehead as he cried outward, the spell seal closing about me till it became skin tight, sealing off my connection to my sorceries and sources as surely as if Meniko had done it, and I writhed at a loss of all that glory, all that power as I became... normal.

And below me, a green fire burned out of Sage's forehead, and something brilliant shone forth from beneath his skin as his face broke with what looked like slices made by a surgical tool. A starburst formed around the gem in his chest, and I saw a horde of cuts in his body as he cried out in utter pain, clawing at his forehead to end it.

But then the spell circle ended, and I fell, my body too weak to move, I simply smiled, wondered if death were coming. But despite his pain, Sage was there, moving below me, half blinded by his own pain as that fire burned out of his forehead, and he caught me, and we both landed in a heap on the ground.

And all went black.

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I awoke at last with a start, gasping heavily as I rose from a hospital bed, my chest heaving heavily while a cool white gown covered me. I clutched at my body, gasping as I saw my arms appearing slender in comparison to my old arms, my breasts small buds, and my thighs long and slender.

“Shh...” A voice said and helped me to lie down, and I looked up at Sage as he stood over me, a bandage around his brow, while he smiled down at me. “Just rest for a second Rae.” He said and reached beside him and produced a glass of water. “Here... drink. This... you do deserve.” And his eyes twinkled as he smiled at me.

“Did I win?” I asked, just before Sage helped me to drink.

“I don’t know. I conked out too when you landed on me. The judges couldn’t make up their minds, so the Emperor is going to make the final decision.”

His hand was on my face and he was smoothing my supple cheek with a thumb as I finished drinking and he removed the glass.

“Ngh... thanks.” I rose again and looked at my now slender hand as I swung my feet to hang off the edge of the medical bed.

“Those were some nice tricks.” I smiled. “What did you do?”

His hand rested on my knee, and despite what he’d done to me, I really didn’t mind. He beat me fair and square. It had been a fight after all, and we were supposed to both use all that we could to win. I even covered his hand and gave it a squeeze affectionately.

“A trick of my order. Half the power of my strikes was delayed to a specific time so that they would all release all at once. It’s a matter of controlling your own body... and that of your opponent. Like an explosion that takes time to reverberate back off a wall.”

“Heh. You sure did take control of my body all right.” I said. “And that spell sphere stealing all my power away?” I lifted my eyes and stared at him. I was prepared to beg if necessary as I opened my mouth and spoke. “Sage... I want my power back.”

I didn’t say it pleadingly, but neither was there menace in my voice. I just said it.

“Granted. I dispelled the field while you slept.”

I looked up at him. I’d... honestly half expected him to make me beg, but as he looked down at me, only one of his eyes visible through the shadows cast by his hair, he was smiling at me. To test him, I reached out with my mind and found that there was no barrier to be had anymore,

found the closest of my sources and tapped it. A stream of power flowed back toward me, and Sage stepped back as I hopped off the table and braced myself against it. I tapped the next one, and gave off a sigh of relief, and then tapped the next one, and with a sudden burst of thought surged outward in all directions to re-tap all my sources.

They flowed into me and I groaned, feeling my nipples harden as I groaned, holding onto the medical table with both hands as my muscles began to fill again, and both my hands squeezed against the edge of the table and compressed the metal to fold about my fingers.

My chest lifted as my breasts began to swell, and though I didn't gain in height any, I simply thickened.

My hips broadened as my ribs flared outward, my back broadening as my chest thrust outward, my gown compressing tightly about my form and riding up to show off my sex as I grew heavier in muscle weight before the first tears formed between my legs.

I exhaled a sigh as my swelling breasts ripped open the front of the gown, and Sage watched me transform back into the muscular maiden I was before; my shoulders broadening and tearing open the short sleeves of the gown, while my abs hardened, creased and re-creased, sinking below my ribs while my thighs pressed against one another.

My calves bulged, my inner thighs sunk below the outer, and my beautifully erect muscle definition criss crossed my body in ripples of motion before I lifted a hand to feel my throat even as my neck swelled, and I passed a hand downward over my chest, over one of my swelling breasts and over my abs as the last strips of my gown ripped across my hips and fell about my feet.

I panted heavily as the transformation slowed, my thighs pressing closer together as I creamed a little bit, and looking down at my supremely muscular body, I blushed, realizing I'd gone too far and pulled some of it back in and my body softened some.

*I'd forgotten how much I enjoyed that...* I thought.

"That was quite a sight." Sage mused as I stood there, nude, and as I looked up at him, there was a minute hunger inside me for him.

I felt the return of my immortality, and felt the catalog of my powers restacking themselves rapidly inside me as I stepped forward and placed my hands against his steel hard abs. There was very little give in that flesh of his, and he lifted his hands to hold mine.

"How do you feel?" he asked, and I moved forward to stand against him, my breasts, still a little too large, moved about his sides as I looked up at him, and then frowned at the sight of the bandage about his brow.

“Sage... what is that for?” I asked, forgetting about his question as I remembered seeing him in utter pain below me while my powers were siphoned from me and I was being beaten. Remembered the green fire burning from out of the center of his head.

He lifted a hand, and he felt what looked like a big knot in his skull then, and then exhaling, he turned his hand, and lifted the bandage away from his forehead. I gasped as I saw a glittering green gem, just like the ones on his wrists and in the center of his chest.

“This... is my prize, Rae.” He said, fingering the glittering thing. “My Seed has matured enough where this next stage in our evolution has become possible, and what you saw at the end of our fight was it forming inside me. But despite all the pain, whether I’ve won or lost, finally receiving my Dragon’s Eye has made it all worthwhile...”

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Sage and I had retreated to the facilities of the hospital while we talked. The hospital was rather empty at the moment, as if the place had been left to just Sage and me to use, and so I walked beside him naked as I was on clothes washing day, holding onto his arm before we entered into the shower rooms.

I took a shower first, cleaning my body of all the sweat and grime while Sage told me of his home, the valley of Shangri-La; the holy sepulcher of his entire world. I learned of the Lycan, known as the Undying Breeds for how long they all lived, and of the humans that lived there.

I’d always thought of humans as a bit underdeveloped, but these ones that he described were eons ahead of the ones I knew of... and humans came from only one place in this universe... a backwater planet of very little note called Aearth. But he talked of an inter-universal society! This must mean that there are humans elsewhere, and when he spoke of the multiverse, I began to understand exactly how alien he was.

He wasn’t even from this universe!

The Aphkei have of course experimented in inter-dimensional travel, but the extent that the many denizens of his world have gone would far outweigh even the Aphkei’s influence. He counted five whole universes and sections of space held in a dozen others. That was nothing in comparison to their explored knowledge of at least a hundred more.

Then I exited the shower and began to brush myself, and watched Sage undress, surprised that his clothing simply melted into his skin and I was met with his muscular back and tight behind – *mph!* – With his long tail swinging close to his ankles as he too took the shower.

I told him of this universe, at where I was born, how Meniko had snatched me up and made me strong, at my many adventures, all the while I watched Sage’s silhouette in the shower screen. I told him of how I went back home, and rescued my sister Fatima, and heard Sage laugh at the mention of her. Fatima seemed to already have a crush on Sage.

Then my smile faded, and abandoning my brush, I rose to my feet and padded over to the door to Sage's shower stall, and opening it he turned to look at me, and I remarked on his nude form and smiled warmly before I stepped into the shower with him, and embraced him.

I wanted to feel his strength, wanted to make sure.

In him I had an equal, a powerful male with incredible strength and wisdom... and an expert lover, I assure you. And with me, he was gentle and affectionate, and when I embraced him, he held me back.

We didn't have sex just then... not at all. Just a loving embrace. The fight was over, the competition done with, and I wanted just the kindness and love now. Sage had that way of holding me that made me feel safe... like I didn't need to be the strongest in creation...

I liked listening to his heart beating beneath my ear.

Finally the water started to get cold, and Sage reached forward and turned off the faucets; and with both of us nude, we exited the shower stall, and in spite of myself, I reached out and took his hand. He smiled at me.

It was quiet for a time while I dried off and began to brush my fur again. Sage dressed – if that's what one would call his body being enveloped with black viscous fluid that shifted into clothing, using his claws for a comb, he straightened his hair back and then bound it with a leather thong that he produced from out of nowhere.

For me, I had to go back to the room I awoke in, and made repairs on my clothes that I'd worn this morning with the tatters of my hospital gown. Magic helped that immensely, and the fibers knitted themselves and changed color and texture to how I wanted them to be, even as they knit themselves right onto my body.

It was then that Sage and I decided to exit the hospital.

It was nearly dawn, but despite that there was a massive crowd that cheered us in thanks for the show. They must've been waiting outside for us to arrive, and as we stepped forward, either of us looking as if we hadn't just beaten each other senseless, we approached to where the Emperor waited for us. He sat on the slightly modified box he'd watched most of the tournament in. Meniko stood beside him in her bird maiden form, her beautiful wings folded against her back while she stood in pristine white robes.

Captain Leski was to his other side.

Sage and I approached and stopped before him, and though I crouched low in a curtsy, Sage did little more than bow his head. A warrior's honor, I guessed. He would not bow unless he recognized the person as a greater warrior, and he would not kneel unless he was giving fealty.

An inclination of the head was all that he could permit.



We held that till the emperor rose, and all those gathered all bowed and curtsied while he stood there. Leski, as his consort for these proceedings, was to remain sitting.

His guard and the recently repaired dragoon remained still, watching for trouble as was their duty.

“I find my decision difficult.” Jaikard spoke soundly so that everyone could hear it. “The battle that happened here today is one of legends. I am able to say that I am greatly impressed. Credit goes to Rae and the Mystic League for producing such a wonderful combatant. But you, Lord Sage... no matter how hard I try, your species, your home world, and everything about you is a mystery, but nevertheless, wherever you came from, whatever trials that forged you, you have proven yourself to be a fighter on par with our own Champion.”

There was applause, but the emperor lifted his hands for silence.

“My difficulty in deciding a final outcome comes from the fact that you beat each other into unconsciousness, and both passed out simultaneously. Likewise, you were both removed from the field on stretchers.

“And there is a bargain that revolves on this decision I am about to make. If Lord Sage was to win, then he stays here for as long as he wishes in order to absorb this school’s knowledge. If Lady Rae was to win, then Sage is to stay for no less than a decade, and teach his ways to this school.”

He lifted his scepter.

“I have made a decision.” And lowered it... onto Sage’s shoulder’s declaring him the winner.

There was disappointment in the crowd as the Emperor lifted his scepter, and with a moment’s pause, he then lowered it onto my shoulder.

I blinked, and all eyes turned to the emperor for explanation.

“Since this is considered a double KO, and since the conditions of both of you winning are impossible, I therefore rule that both of you loose.

“Lord Sage is to remain for ten years, as per his bargain, and impart his knowledge. This school, in turn, is to give him access to its store of knowledge so that he can learn your ways. As a final matter... since both champions have lost, and the Demon League has forfeited, the prize and the purse of this tournament therefore lies on the last runner up.

“Makahn of Tamsleint.” Cheers immediately rose up that the crowd favorite did in fact did win. Sage and I exchanged looks with one another, and we both gave a wry look at each other. “Now! Time for celebration!” The emperor called, and in short order Sage and I were forgotten in the face of the party that suddenly rose up from all this.

As if on cue, he and I walked off quietly with one another.

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We'd found our way to the gardens, and we quietly walked along beside each other.

"I admit, Sage... you have my respect. It's been a long time since I'd been clocked upside the head as hard as that."

"Same for me. But I have a question." He said, and I turned to look at him. "Why did you hold back?"

I stared at him, and then lowering my head I shrugged. "I... didn't want to hurt you."

Sage nodded, and then lifting a hand, he felt his forehead, felt the new jewel imbedded there.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

"Just a slight headache." He nodded. "It will pass."

There was more silence as we walked quietly together for a time. I chanced a look out of the corner of my eye at that gem in his forehead, and wondered what new powers were rising up in this already powerful Weretiger. And with it in his head, does that mean... psychic powers?

"Sage? Did you... did you hold back?"

Again there was more silence before he answered. "Yes."

"Why?"

He smiled down at me. "Because I didn't want to hurt you. Though I feel, perhaps, I was holding back less... You are truly a power, Rae. In one universe I toppled an evil dictator. In another an immortal emperor who'd abandoned his people... each of them had some sort of flaw in them... and then I came here, and met a pure goddess..."

"I felt it would've been a sin if I'd even tried to utterly defeat you like I did them."

"You did utterly defeat me, Sage." I smiled. "But it wasn't a sin." I turned to him, and standing up on my toes I kissed this massive tiger man. "You maneuvered me into a corner of your own making, and when my power was peaking, you took it away. Had you not been halving your power to split between blows... you would've worn me out a long time ago..." I hung on him. "I need to train harder now that you're going to be around." I gave him a hug. "I'm in training now... for the next time we fight."

Sage laughed and embraced me.

“I hope that there isn’t a *‘next time,’* Rae. I truly don’t. Fate brought me here, and as it is, I am here for awhile now. Best if I was to set myself for the long run, but I have no desire to fight such a grueling battle again any time soon.” He kissed my forehead. “Once a decade is more than enough...”

I chuckled, and I looked up at him, and was about to kiss him again when I heard someone call out.

“**Get away from her!!**” and we both turned to see Makahn charging up toward us. “Get your hands off her!” He demanded, in a frightful temper. “Hands off or fight me!”

Sage looked at me and then at Makahn. The new gem in Sage’s forehead twinkled briefly as he watched Makahn set back into a fighting stance.

“Makahn, who do you think you are to tell who can or can’t touch me?! You are not my husband, and even if we *were* married, don’t ever think...” Sage laid a hand over my lips to quiet me, and I looked up at him, and there was a sad smile on his face before he turned to Makahn.

“Do you challenge me, Makahn?” he said, and I heard my breath catch.

*Oh no... Sage will massacre Makahn.*

“In a heart beat.” Makahn growled, hunching in on himself.

“Even though I can beat you away like I was flicking away a flea?” Makahn’s jaw set firmly into a snarl.

“Yes!” he answered with a shout, and again reset his stance, fists up.

“Why?”

That got both me and Makahn to blink, and I looked from Sage and then to Makahn as Sage released me and faced Makahn. *Yes Makahn. Why?* I practically screamed inside my head, and Sage lifted a hand to press his fingers against his temples as he looked sidelong at me briefly.

*Was he reading my mind?* Sage smiled and looked at me again, and then he focused on Makahn now.

Makahn had frozen to his spot, his jaw open as if he’d just been hit in the face.

“Why?” he repeated, and looked at me.

“Yes, Why?” Sage repeated.

Then Makahn set his jaw and reset his fighting stance again.

“Because I *love* her!” He said at last, and I gasped. “I’d come here, begged to come here, to be released from my mission to come here, so that I could fight my way to the top and standing in the same ring with Rae, submit myself to her and ask her to marry me. But you ruined all that. You just waltz in here, fine as you do, you take my place, you take my love, and you ruin *everything!*”

“That’s why I will fight for you now, Rae. I will lay down my life for you. I love you!”

“Makahn...” I whispered, standing straight on the spot, and Sage laid a gentle hand on my shoulder and my gaze snapped up to him, but he was still staring at Makahn unblinkingly.

“I accept your challenge then, Makahn of Tamsleint... And I yield.”

I gasped and looked at him and saw the sadness behind his eyes, though his face was emotionless.

“What?” Makahn asked, standing up straighter, and Sage’s hand shifted on my shoulder to palm my back, and he gave me a slight push toward Makahn.

I took a halting step closer but stopped and turned, looking into Sage’s face as he smiled for me.

“I will tell you a secret, Makahn. I have exceptionally acute hearing, at certain distances... And during my battle with you, I heard Rae gasp every time I struck you, and I heard her breathe a sigh of relief every time you got up. And I understood why you had such blind determination to beat me.

“Rae,” he said then and turned to me. “I must profess that I do already care for you. It was even painful for a moment there... I thought that I’d finally found an equal. But despite that finding you an equal, I am afraid that I do not love you any where near as much as this man does.”

He stepped forward, and I felt his hand palm my belly, and I looked down in surprise at that touch and then back up into his face.

“I felt something in you last night, something resting here in your navel. It is the *spark* of a baby...” I gasped and stared at Sage as he continued. “It is just a spark, Rae... ready to finally be given physical form, but it needs a male who can help you create that physical form. Makahn has that ability, but with me... I am sorry to say that my genetic code is too alien for a wolf, and I could never help you to father that child. It would forever be inside you, screaming for life, and I would be unable to give it.

“But Makahn can... and for me to take you from him... now *that*... would be a sin.

“Go to him Rae. Besides... he’s rather rich now. And he’s going to be the father of your babies soon.” Sage smiled, and he stepped away from me.

It was as if I needed someone to tell me how to feel, and now that I think about it, many of my feelings that I'd had before Sage's arrival had all been for Makahn, and now that I felt my heart swell again for that grey wolf, I surged forward into his grasp and felt Makahn's arms around me.

Like Sage's arms... I felt safe in those arms, but unlike Sage... I felt that heart beat quicken as Makahn held me, and felt the passion in his body as he wrapped his arms about my body and rubbed his cheek against my hair.

"Oh beloved... please say that you'll marry me. I'll be lost forever if you say no." he whispered into my ear.

"Yes." I whispered back, tears falling from the corners of my eyes and I threw my arms around his neck and felt him lift me off the ground.

And then I heard Sage clear his throat and we both looked at him.

"Listen to my words, Makahn... you must cherish this creature with every mote of your being for the fullness of your life. For if you don't... then I will be there to take her from you." He stepped forward and planted a large hand on Makahn's shoulder. "And may the Fates damn you should you ever fail to protect her, and know that I am the instrument of Fate." He smiled then. "Now love this beautiful creature with all your heart... mind... and strength. And be unrelenting about it."

And then Sage left us, fading into the shadows as assuredly as if he never was. Keen on Sage's words, Makahn immediately took me into the deepest, most passionate kiss I'd ever experienced, so strong that it made my heart flutter with the feel of it.

So powerful was that kiss that I felt dizzy from it, so dizzy that I didn't even realize that he and I had laid down in a thick clump of bushes while I let him undress me, and while the other students and the whole of the school was gathered for celebration elsewhere, I gave myself wholly to this great male, surprised that he filled me more perfectly than even Sage did.

*'If you love... love without remorse,'* I heard the words in my own head while I was half dazed with the love of passion then hearing someone else's voice in my head. *'If you fight, fight with honor, and the Fates will smile on you... Rae Iksaki.'*

And then I was lost to the passion.

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Morning came as if an eternity had passed, and the celebrations lasted well into the morning. Sage stood guarding the gateway into the gardens, playing his flute while a Moon Singer watched him play from a perch high above. No one seemed to want to go past him into the gardens while he played like that.

Nestled alone in the gardens, the two of us naked and our bodies entwined with one another as we slept contented, I felt a twinge in the universe suddenly click into place as my life altered for the better.

And the strange creature known as Sage Preypacer... played us a lullaby...

**End**