

The Formation of the Shadow League

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06/17/05 – Editorial update: *Lengthened the fight between Sage and Nyl Dousaka, and fixed a few minor things – You may not notice the others – for consistency sakes. This should be the only update.*

Headmasters

Mother Sanari sat quietly in a passenger seat of the shuttlecraft descending from the massive space liner, with numerous returning students and a few new hopeful youths arrayed in the seats about her.

The other people in the seats around her varied from super-endowed fems, males and the occasional herms who were returning to school, to young adults and children who've earned the chance of taking the Mystic League's entrance exams. There were also one or two new faculty members on this shuttle, additions to Meniko's school.

As it was, it was the younger students to whom she looked to, young possible hopefuls for even her school... which has a skeleton crew of students at the present moment at best but her school is slowly growing. But the fact that she got one or two new hopeful additions to The Faith every year, and less losses of those who just used her school as a foot in the door in order to gain an extra chance at the Mystic League, was allowing her to make her chapter of the League a worthwhile addition.

Being that she was a headmistress of The Grace League, allowed her to have close contact with her own student, the headmistress of the Mystic League itself, the Dragaseir Menikomenqolui.

Sanari's school was a chapter of the Mystic League, the youngest and most recent, and was apart of the what was considered to be one of the premier schools of learning in the universe for sorcery and combat. But unlike Meniko, who taught the art of magic as a science, Sanari taught it as an art of faith, teaching the advanced forms of spiritual magic and growth following after teachings of The Faith; the art of priests and priestesses along with a solid understanding of the Creator and other holy arts like Ecomancer Druids and Shamanism.

It filled her heart with joy that more and more students every term were beginning to voluntarily ask to enter her league straight away.

This was a new term, and all headmasters and mistresses of the three chapters of the League, which meant Meniko, Sanari herself, and of course Genohn – the Headmaster of the Demon League, were to all be in attendance.

The current relationship of the three chapters was sort of like light and darkness bordering the core school.

The Powered League would also show up sometimes and try to steal away some of the new hopeful students, as did certain other schools, but they only seemed to get the washouts.

Sanari cleared her mind, not wanting to call those who didn't make the stringent requirements of any of the three leagues a '*washout*.' It did horrors to a developing child's mind to be called a '*washout*,' and she forbid any of her students to call those who failed the entrance exams as such.

Sanari turned and looked out her window as the Shuttle headed for the Mystic Island, as the island in which Meniko's school was built upon was called; an island on a backwater world nicknamed '*Wave World*' for all its many seas and oceans, the fact that most of the planet was considered to have a tropical climate, and also for lack of any official name in the Imperial or Assembly Registrar of Planets.

Rising from one side of the large island was a pillar of light, coming from the Pinnacle Tower located at the top of a steadily rising hill in the center of a town-sized school that housed several hundred students, and over a thousand or more faculty.

She felt her lips rise in a smile as the shuttle began its long spiral to land in its space port, glad that she was finally home.

Home, she thought closing her eyes, sitting there in her beautiful purple and blue robes, bearing silk prints of her birth flower that was symbol of her order. She was a flawless beauty... a trait of an immortal like her, and her perfect shape and form having come from over two and a half millennia of life, and toned from practice in this universe's most lethal martial form.

It made her strong, beautiful, and dangerous. But that was her former life. In her current life as a High Priestess, she hoped to atone for the sins of her past...

...Which were many, dark, and steeped in blood.

The shuttle landed smoothly as it settled on its keel blocks, just before the back of the shuttle opened up into a ramp to allow exit. Sanari waited for all the other students to disembark before rising herself, taking up her staff that'd been balanced against her shoulder and pulled the hood of a beautiful traveling cloak up over her head.

As she stepped off, her chief student Yusuma was there to meet her with a pair of the younger male acolytes in their blue robes, Yusuma in lavender as per dress requirements in the order between sexes. The males bowed and Yusuma curtsied, all lowering their heads respectfully as Sanari finally disembarked.

“Welcome home, Mother.” Yusuma greeted; her young face quite pretty in her pink robes as she held her own staff in her hand. “I trust you had a pleasant trip to the home temple at Cersla?”

Yusuma and the other two students fell into step behind Mother Sanari as she stepped gracefully forward, her grace as flawless as a swan swimming across a placid lake.

“It was uneventful.” Sanari said, listening to the tap of her staff as it hit the ground with her right foot. Yusuma wasn’t quite trained with it yet, and the rhythm of walking her own staff was no where near as perfect as her mentor’s.

There was a slight discord in the way Yusuma’s staff hit the ground... sometimes with her right foot, sometimes with her left, and more often than not, not even with a foot fall.

“Were you successful in your mission, mother?” Yusuma asked then after a short distance away from the shuttlecraft, her voice very hopeful. Sanari smiled and then turned to her three attendants, and opening one of the folds of her traveling cloak, revealed a sling of soft white cured leather hanging from her shoulder, and underneath a fold of the sling held her prize.

“My old master was very kind. Practically disobeyed the order of the council in giving me a copy of the holy book... But with this, we can finally start teaching more advanced arts.”

Yusuma and the two male students gave a sigh of relief. It meant that their chapter of the school was gaining enough flack that they may someday soon be able to actually create a temple here! Instead of just a simple shrine. Yusuma was eager to begin her training as a priestess herself.

“But for now... I wish to just take a bath... enjoy some tea... and...” and Sanari stopped, and blinked, feeling a twinge of something... Alien.

She looked around herself, finding herself in the center of the main courtyard, and lifting her fingers, she rubbed them together, feeling the remnants of a style of magic she’d not felt in a very, very long time.

“Mother?” Yusuma prompted, and reached forward to hold onto her headmistress’s arm. “Mother, what’s wrong?”

“What has happened here while I was away, Yusuma?” Sanari asked, turning to her student.

“Well, the competition that you heard telling of occurred as planned, Mother.”

“Yeah! But then that Lord Sage showed up and just put in the best damn...” one of the male students queued up, and Yusuma turned and shot them both a dark look to keep silent and they immediately stopped their excited explanation.

But when Yusuma looked back at Sanari, it was to see her looking discerningly at her, one of her hooded ears swiveling forward while her lips pursed a little. Yusuma then promptly lowered her head in humility.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened.” Sanari said, her words spoken in such a way that it demanded explanation in the gentlest of manners. One couldn’t help but do as she asked whenever she spoke that way. Even Headmistress Meniko was powerless against that gaze and that tone of voice.

“Well,” the other male student piped up. “The Demon League, the Powered League and the Imperials showed up just like normal, but right as they were about to start the proceedings, there was this *big vortex*,” and he gestured wide with his hands, and Sanari smiled softly, and nodded at the explanation. “And from out of *nowhere* comes this *huge* guy in black and dark green armor, all duded-up like he was a giant insect.”

“He was so cool!” the first student says, and they both laugh.

“Well,” the second continues, “An imperial Ranger steps up and commands him to bow, and he was like *forget that...* and so she attacked him, and with a *single strike*, he disarms her!”

“Truly?” Sanari asks and they both nod vigorously.

“Then in comes Pleeyo, and she just starts *hammering* at him,” the first student says now. “He’s asking her to stop and all as she just pounds against an *aura* shield. Mother! He uses *aura* magic like I’ve never seen anyone able to do! Such incredible levels!” Sanari continues to smile and nods. “Well he finally gets frustrated at it all and lays her out. *All in a single strike!* He lays a high level Mystic Leaguer out with a *single strike!*”

“I understand.” Sanari said simply. “Then what happened?”

“Well then he walks right up to Rae Iksaki, and... and challenges her!”

“It was sweet.” The second adds this time.

“Challenges Rae Iksaki?” Sanari blinks, and then looks to Yusuma, who still has her head bowed, and lifting her hand, Sanari turns Yusuma’s head upward and she smiles at her.

“Exactly. Well she doesn’t accept it right away, so he joins in on the Tournament. Mother, you shoulda seen him fight! He was untouchable. He beat everyone... even got Lord Genohn to back down and leave the battle without a fight, and so finally he gets to fight Rae!”

“And the fight lasts for *twelve hours!*” the second ads in, the two of them getting enthusiastic with their story now, forgetting that they were to remain humble and refined.

“Really... who won?” Sanari asked and Yusuma looked at her headmistress, surprised that she held interest in any sort of fight. Sanari always seemed so removed from getting involved with any sort of fighting. Yusuma thought that she’d even chosen that time to go to Cersla to avoid having to watch it.

“Well... that’s sorta complicated.” The first says, scratching at the back of his mane. “You see, Rae and Lord Sage just sorta beat each other senseless, and it was deemed a double KO... so neither of them won. Because Lord Genohn forfeited, then the win goes to the last runner up... which was King Makahn of the Powered League.”

“Hmm.” Sanari said, the corners of her lips still held in a smile. “A roaring story.” She says at last, her gaze falling on the two young fellows as they start talking about the fight. “Please run ahead, the two of you, and start in on your meditations for the day.”

“But Mother, we aren’t supposed to start meditations until evening. We...” and they stopped, looking at their headmistresses’ kind face, and knowing what they’d done wrong. “I am sorry Mother, I misspoke.” He bowed and his friend bowed with him as they folded their hands into their simple robes.

“It is quite all right, both of you. But your exams are coming up, and you must be able to achieve The Calm this year, and it’s best if you get some added practice after all of this excitement.”

“Yes mother.” They said at once, and then hurried off in a jog.

“Yusuma.” Sanari spoke then, turning to her apprentice. “How many members of The Faith witnessed this battle in my absence?”

Yusuma bowed her head again and she turned to follow Sanari like before. “In truth Mother... all of them.”

“It was that exciting?” Sanari mused, and then shifted her staff and her way of walking to lay a hand on her student’s narrow shoulder.

“I am sorry Mother. I know you didn’t want the competition to interfere in our studies, but after seeing this Lord Sage approach, and seeing all the things that he could do, we found it harder and harder to continue in our meditations and our studies. I simply gave up trying to do anything. The only thing I managed to keep control of was to make sure the Shrine was cleansed each evening and it was lit each morning.

“I am actually surprised at the speed and perfection my classmates seem to have been able to accomplish this task, but it was all so that they could get to the competition in time.”

“Do not fret, Yusuma. I think you did exceptionally well in the face of something so intoxicating.”

“Thank you Mother,” Yusuma said, and managed a quick curtsy before hurrying up to her mistress.

“We will have to study harder this semester, Yusuma.” Sanari said and then slowed as she saw two red pillars situated before one of the student dorm rooms, marked with arcane glyphs the sort she’d almost forgotten of. “But for now... I want you to return to the shrine. See to its purification.” Sanari lifted her hand, felt the radiance and the cadence of this magic, knowing it to be the same that she’d felt in the courtyard. The first was a gateway, this was a seal. “I shall return to the shrine this evening at the time of The Closing of the Gates.

“I must see to the safety of our new Holy Book, and after that... I must see who our new guest is...”

Sanari stepped quietly as she always did, as delicate and as precise as a bird of paradise in all her glory and beauty, and approached the Pinnacle Tower as the sun was beginning to set.

Sanari had no sooner secured the Holy Book in a case of wards to insure against theft and age when a message from Meniko had asked her to come to the Dragaseir’s audience chambers to discuss an *‘Altering of the League.’*

Sanari was slightly uneasy as she approached the Pinnacle Tower, having felt ripples of a totally alien magic in this school. It radiated as hot spots here and there, but the courtyard held the vastness of most of it. She’d walked through the biggest pocket of it as she crossed over a section of the courtyard that was being reconstructed by worker bots.

Something cataclysmic had happened on that spot. High level magics had happened here, both of this alien sort and of standard Sorcery spells. Sanari stood in the center of that reconstruction and again lifted her hand, rubbing her long, slender fingers together to feel the remnants of those strange magics.

“Mother Sanari!” came a familiar voice, and she paused in her sensing and turned as Rae approached. Rae’s demeanor was contagious, even from a distance, and Sanari soon found herself smiling at the young immortal. “Welcome home Mother,” Rae greeted, and the two women hugged.

There was a pair of new scents on her body, one of which carried with it a wave of the same magical essence Sanari was feeling all over the place.

“What news, Rae? Any idea as to why Meniko wishes to see all the members of the faculty?”

She smiled immediately, and folding her arms behind her back stepped forward with Sanari to descend to Meniko’s audience chamber.

“That would have to do with our new guest...” she smiled slyly.

“Rae... no secrets, please... who is he?”

“Well... It took Noxi some doing, but she finally found his homeworld... in another universe. It was difficult to do because our scans of that world were from long distance and done over a thousand years ago.”

Sanari nodded, her suspicions made more real by the moment. *It’s true, she thought. One of them is here.*

“What’s he like?” Sanari asked, favoring Rae with a sidelong glance.

“Well... he’s a warrior, the likes of which I’ve never seen before.”

“Rae... Warriors are all alike. They smell of battle, live by the sword, die by the sword, and think only of combat.” Rae was listening quietly, smiling softly and shrugging her shoulders at Sanari’s words. “They’re all alike.”

And then they entered Meniko’s audience chamber and Sanari stopped, lifting her head to a new voice in the chamber.

“Thank you for seeing me Headmistress.” The voice said in a soft, kind masculine voice. “I seek to open a new chapter to the League, Headmistress Menikomenqolui. I consider it to be the best way to honor my bargain with your student to create a new school for the purpose of teaching?”

Sanari’s lips pursed as she looked upon this individual, dressed in loose fitting black trousers but no slippers, choosing to stand barefoot. He was wearing what looked like priestly attire, and aside from that, with a coat of dark blue that had slits at the shoulders, with one of the deep sleeves having been rolled up along with the white sleeve of the silk shirt beneath to reveal a massively thick arm of frost white striped with black. His coat had a low collar, and was opened like a Gi in the front, with a sash around his middle underneath that.

And above all, he was a cat... and a big one at that. As tall as any Casid, but there was a power inside him that was... overwhelming! But those wide arching eyes, green as emeralds, were shadowed by his frost white fur that was groomed handsomely, and the delicate stripes on his body were simply... exotic.

“I must apologize, Rae.” She said under her breath. “But I am again reminded that there are indeed exceptions to every rule.”

Rae giggled, and Sanari opened her mouth as her nostrils were assailed with this strange new scent. He was even freshly bathed... and smelled of a strange sort of sweet herb.

“But starting a new school, Lord Sage, even a new chapter of an existing one, is a lengthy, difficult and an *expensive* task.” Meniko was saying as Sanari took her place amongst all the other members of the faculty and stood beside Genohn.

Genohn acknowledged her presence with a simple nod, his great wings fluffing slightly before he redirected his attention back to the goings on.

“The work shall be left solely to myself, and my companion Daedalus.” Sage answered, and Sanari remarked on the name of his companion. *The God of Labyrinths?* “And as for the cost... well... I shall front the supports and fees for that if my school may enjoy having the same benefits as the other two chapters of the League on this world once it’s been formed. Students who study underneath my chapter shall be able to earn and loose purchase credits from the overhanging space station, and shall study and achieve goals just like any other student here. The support costs and so on for the chapter itself shall be fronted by myself alone.”

“Well...” Meniko began, and Sanari could see the hesitance in her eyes. “Allow me to converse with the other heads of schools, Lord Sage, and we’ll consider your offer.”

“I understand, headmistress.” Sage said, bowing his head, a quick curt nod, and Sanari noticed that he definitely acted like a gentleman lord. “If I may, however, I would like to start scouting for locations, and begin the process as if I do have authorization. I will not finalize or submit anything till I am actually approved.”

“You may.” Meniko answered, and Sage again gave one of those curt nods.

“Then I take my leave, headmistress.” And he turned, and it was then that Sanari got a good look at his face... and felt her breath catch as this great cat looked straight at her.

Eyes as green as jade or emerald, and both shining pure in color without pupil or iris, focused on her. They looked as crystal as the gem in his forehead, and the one in his chest and on the backs of his hands, and they glowed with the power in him.

He stepped up to Sanari and Rae as silently as if he wasn't even there and bowed his head to Sanari and Rae, and in spite of herself, Sanari found herself giving him a curtsy. Rae just stepped up and hugged his arm.

“Sage, I can't thank you again for what you did for Makahn and me. It was truly noble of you.”

Sanari watched this exchange, and saw this tiger creature smile, if a little sadly and longingly for Rae, and when he raised a hand to palm Rae's head, Sanari saw it then... the five fingers.

“I am glad, Rae, that something I've done has been able to make you so happy. And that is quite an attractive promise ring he gave you there.”

Sanari blinked, seeing the copper ring around Rae's wrist. *She'd been engaged?*

“Yes. Makahn went mad when trying to make it. Spent a good chunk of all his prize money to make this one and its mate. “Oh I can't wait! We're thinking of getting married in the spring.”

“Perfect time for it.” He said, and turned his eyes back to Sanari, and she saw that smile, such an intoxicating smile. *So this is him?* She thought. “My lady.” He said, and before Sanari knew it, he'd taken her hand, bowed at the waist and kissed the back of her hand. When he rose, he was looking at her with those eyes, those glowing green eyes that glimmered with ancient knowledge.

He's an immortal! “So kind of you, milord.” Sanari spoke softly.

“It is my pleasure.” He said, and bowed his head again over her hand before finally releasing it. “I wish I might remain and enjoy the company of such beautiful maidens,” he said and Rae giggled. “But I find that I must go and pack...”

“I don't like him.” Came a voice, and a magical illusion of a red and black colored horned dragon solidified in the middle of the audience chamber.

His name is Hawthorne, and this dragon is a relatively unique creature in this universe, being that he is the only dragon of significant power in the whole of the Great Wide Universe. There were other Dragons, genetic throwbacks from Dragaseir that were less than the least of the Dragaseir, But Hawthorne, even in his own universe, was always talented.

As a Quirk of fate, the closest species to him were the Dragaseir... like Meniko. It is said that Hawthorne desires Meniko, but the two never speak of such things. But upon seeing her for the first time, Hawthorne gathered up her students who were leaving her, kept

them close and taught them the ways in which they sought to learn, ways in which he himself knew second hand...

Those ways were of Necromancy, Demonology, and the Dark Arts. He was the patron of the Demon League, and his students made up some of the greatest of Demons in the Great Wide universe – Genohn being one of them – but he also taught the discipline to rule the magic, instead of the magic ruling you.

“He’s so uptight that I’m sure if you stuck a lump of coal up his ass, you’d get a diamond within a fortnight.” Hawthorne continued and chuckled at the mental image. “Best to get rid of him before he becomes an even greater nuisance.”

“No one asked you your opinion you old Wyrms.” Meniko said through slitted eyes, and breathed a puff of smoke out of her nostrils.

In comparison, Meniko was like a full adult to a teenager, in both size and power. Though Hawthorne was trying to win her heart, Meniko at present desired nothing of Hawthorne.

“Hmm. All right, so what’s that Casid wannabe want here anyways?”

“He wishes to open a new Chapter of the League, Hawthorne.” Genohn answered, stepping away from Mother Sanari and folding his wings about him like a hooded cloak and approaching his patron. Sanari watched her counterpart approach the aged dragon. “A new school of mystic learning.

“I respect him.” Genohn answered. “My vote is to allow him his school.”

“W-w-w-wait.” Hawthorne said, waving his hands to hold the proceedings. “You all aren’t *seriously* thinking of giving him a school!”

“What so wrong, Hawthorne?” Meniko grinned, showing off all her teeth. As powerful as Hawthorne is... even as a Greater Wyrms, Meniko was even greater in size and far greater in power. “He’s even from your home universe. One would’ve thought that you’d give more kindness to a member of your own dimension.”

Hawthorne turned his head to Meniko slowly. “Excuse me? But did you just say that... that... that *creature* I just scryed here, is from the Prime Universe?”

“Not only that, but he’s also from your Earth.” Meniko continued, still grinning.

“A Teran?!” he exclaims, his image seeming to back away a bit. “Then it’s official. I really don’t like him now.”

Every one in the chamber noticed it. How Hawthorne flinched at the knowledge of a Prime Universe Human here. The humans they were all aware of in their own universe

were barely beginning to reach into space, with archaic spacecraft that had no hope of ever breaching their own solar system. Unassuming, unobtrusive and un-evolved beings that were largely unaware of exactly how vast the universe was, with certain exceptional beings showing up here and there. But upon hearing that a human from his own universe was here, Hawthorne's reaction was as if there was fear in his mind.

"And a slayer as well." Noxi remarks suddenly, taking advantage of a very rare opportunity to see the Great Wyrms squirm.

Hawthorne controlled his reaction far better than, and only his eyes twitched, but his jaw dropped suddenly.

"Mother Meniko, I believe it would be a danger to allow this creature to dwell here and teach here." Hawthorne said then, suddenly very humble as he addresses Meniko. "I must vote in all good consciousness not to allow him to remain. Headmistress, I implore you to..."

Meniko held up her hand.

"Hawthorne, your concerns are so noted. But I must hear good reason as to why you believe it necessary to reject Lord Sage."

The image of Hawthorne's head bowed, his eyes pinching to slits, but despite his early conjectures, he suddenly grew very tight-lipped.

"Enough then." Meniko finally commanded, and looked over the assembled faculty, in particular the two other Headmasters in her midst, and then she focused on Sanari.

"Mother Sanari, what say you?"

Sanari looked up at Meniko, and the two females exchanged a look of meaning between them before Sanari stepped forward and stood beside Lord Genohn.

"I believe that for the same reasons that Hawthorne is rejecting Lord Sage, that I must be inclined to accept him." Hawthorne shot a glance at Sanari. "I have had a chance to meet these Terans. Though they do have their shortcomings, I have yet to meet a more noble race. They are wise beyond the age of their race, but their wisdom comes from learning from their mistakes and the mistakes of others... and... from much hardship.

"I approve Lord Sage's school."

Meniko nods slowly, looking at Sanari's expression as Sanari looked up at the Dragaseir. Meniko then looked to Rae, who nodded, and then to Noxi, who shakes her head.

“I... must consider this then.” Meniko says at last, tapping one great claw against the cobbles of her audience chamber. “Thank you all for your input, but if you could please leave me... I... need to consider this matter in private.” She smiles at everyone.

Hawthorne’s image disappears with a snap, Sanari curtseys as Genohn bows, and slowly the whole of the faculty and the other headmasters exit through the great double-doors while Govnov – Meniko’s aide – closes them behind them.

Shortly, Meniko lowered her head and looked at her great clawed hand... and thought...

Sanari passed by the quarters being utilized by Lord Sage and paused, looking to the simple oaken door, staring at the obelisks attached to the door frame, and feeling the warping of magical energies around them.

Humans... she thought in memory of a time long ago. Their influence is spreading far now...

“Mother?” someone prompted and Sanari turned to see Aauie standing there before her.

“Aauie.” Sanari smiled and hugged the young cat-elf girl who’d come into her care. She was still a young woman, and rather attractive. “Good evening child. How are you today?”

Aauie rubbed her head and concentrating, the corners of her eyes pinching in thought as she ordered her words. “I have a good day, Mother...” she says speaking in broken English.

As this maiden had grown older, she had found it harder and harder to think, for as a precaution, and the reason why she was here, she was placed into Meniko’s care in order to hold back her power... which, in a word, was overwhelming. As vast as Rae’s power, but only in the realm of the psychic. There had yet to be a member of her race that was recorded as high of a psychic ability as she, but until Meniko released her, there was no particular way to measure exactly how vast her powers were.

The simple act of thinking as the child grew was becoming more and more difficult as she literally outgrew Meniko’s hold on her. Her mental powers were growing far too fast, and she unfortunately needed to be shackled back till she could learn control. What was also unfortunate was that the child’s growth in other areas that required her mind - emotional, social and so on – was likewise being hampered. Her mental training had become imperative on Sanari’s and Meniko’s mind before she suffered too much elsewhere.

“He lives there.” Aauie said suddenly, looking to Mother Sanari with those bright eyes that seemed to be looking off in the distance all the time.

“Who lives there?” Sanari spoke softly.

“The Tiger Man of Terra. Third world from his home star of Helios.” Aauie spoke softly.

Sanari nodded. Her suspicions were being reinforced from all directions apparently whenever she wondered about this creature, as if Fate was dictating that she learn of him as quickly as she could.

“He is handsome...” Aauie said then, and Sanari blushed.

“You must be mindful not to read such thoughts from others, Aauie.” Sanari said, covering one cheek with her long slender fingers to cover the blush. “It could cause undo embarrassment in others.”

“Forgive Aauie, Mother... but what Embarrassment mean?”

Sanari was about to tell her of this when she felt a minute disturbance in the magical field as the door to Sage’s temporary home opened, and that tall tiger man stepped out. He paused with his hand on the door, and Sanari felt her blush deepen till it touched her breasts beneath her gown as she looked at this warrior priest.

They’ve evolved far faster than anyone would’ve believe, she thought. And only in two thousand years!

His hand remained on the knob of his door, and he smiled at her before pulling the door shut quietly behind him.

“He likes you too Mother.” Aauie said, and reached forward to squeeze Sanari’s hand assuringly.

“Thank you Aauie, but why don’t you go home and prepare for sleep? I will be right along to tuck you in. I’d like to speak with Mr. Preypacer privately for a time.”

“Yes Mother.” Aauie said and curtsied before turning to walk home. When Sanari turned again she was surprised that this tall tiger man had moved rather close without her notice, but he was standing a short ways off so as to be polite.

“I find myself at a loss,” he said as she stepped closer to him. “I have yet to learn your name.” he again bent to kiss her hand, and when he looked up, his thumb caressed her fingers and he watched her with a soft smile on his features.

He was handsome...

“Sanari, milord.” She answered and curtsied. “I am the High Priestess of The Faith here and headmistress of the Grace League.”

“So you are Mother Sanari. I must say that every one’s description of you did not do you justice. You are far more ‘graceful’ and ‘stunning’ than they let on to believe.”

Again Sanari blushed, and she smiled wider than she’d done for a long time at him. She felt girlish even, being entreated by a popular boy at school.

“Thank you for the kind words, sir, but I am also curious as to why you are here. I am told that your warrior prowess has earned you a place in our cosmos on par with our own Rae Iksaki.”

Sage smiled at her. “I’m afraid that I may never be able to have as legendary a name as Rae in this universe. I endeavor to avoid such things even. But as to the why I am here... I am merely a man on a search for enlightenment, who, as Fate would have it, has now been anchored in one place for a time.”

“And how is that?” Sanari asked, and automatically, she felt herself swept up in his wake as they both started walking together. She looked down at her feet, not really believing what had just happened. It’d been such a long time since she’d met someone who pulled her life along with theirs instead of the other way around.

“I’d struck a bargain with Rae when I challenged her to a duel. As it was... we both... lost to each other.” He smiled wryly, and Sanari mused at him. “As it is, I am now charged to teach my knowledge to a new generation before I am allowed to move on. At least a decade of time. Likewise, I am to begin studying here as well.”

Sanari nodded. “And have you found anything of interest here, Lord Sage?”

“I seem to be finding things every day that have taken my attentions. Some more than others.” And he fixed her with his gaze and smiled.

Sanari felt herself blush again, and if she wasn’t careful, the coloring would burn itself in beneath her fur.

“I am intrigued... but I have a question, milord. Where are you from?”

Sage looked at her then, and one of his ears turned forward slightly as he favored her with a discerning look. “A world called Earth. Far removed from this one.”

Sanari smiled, her suspicions finally confirmed from his very mouth. Very few individuals were familiar with the concept of the multiverse. Sanari was one such individual. In this universe, the homeworld of the Humans was the world known as Aearth. In another universe it was called Oearth. But those were merely seed planets for

the original Earth, which existed in the big sister to this Great Wide Universe, called the Prime Universe.

The Prime Universe was the largest and eldest of all universes, found mostly in the center of the multiverse.

“I see.” Sanari spoke softly, smiling up at him, admiring him in the waning light of late evening.

His frost white pelt seemed to have a light of its own, radiating the last vestiges of light absorbed from the sun as he walked, though his black stripes seemed to create holes of darkness in him. His long hair was held about his face and eyes in a very handsome way, and he possessed a strength that made her feel... safe... while in his presence.

It was an intoxicating feeling for her, after having lived so long it was good to meet someone who gave off such a feeling for others. Rae gave off a similar feeling... just by stepping into her presence one felt that she loved you, and felt as if she'd always loved you. This... Lord Sage... gave off a feeling as if he'd lay down his life for your welfare even if he didn't know you.

A single word radiated from his presence. Immediately, Sanari became aware that it was this one word that defined him.

Protect.

She smiled at him, enjoying that feeling.

“And so you've petitioned for a position as a new headmaster, Lord Sage?” she asked softly, and he nodded. “Perhaps I can help you with that.” She said, glad to meet a new headmaster who was willing to carry an entire school, and perhaps help take off some of the stress on Meniko. “What sort of teachings do you promote?”

“Martial form, self evolution, guardianship. Though admittedly, I've never handled more than a dozen students before...”

“You're nervous.” She stated, and surprisingly she wrapped her arms about one of his.

“A little.”

“If I may be impetuous enough, Lord Sage... I'd like to invite you in for tea...”

Lord Sage had never met anyone so... beautiful, interesting or so wise, and though he felt as if she were simply grilling him for information, he truly did not mind. He actually felt reassured and emboldened from his meeting with Mother Sanari, and he'd learned more

from her in the past hour of this world, this school and this universe than he'd been able to divulge in the past several weeks on his own before he left her shrine in the late evening.

That and she served one of the most curiously delicious blends of herbal tea...

He was in good spirits, feeling uplifted and...

There was a ping in the back of his mind, and he got the sudden view of a poor young woman, crying out as she was violated fiercely by a far larger wolf whose maleness literally tore her femininity apart as he raped her, and at that moment she saw the maiden running across the courtyard, followed quickly by four large wolves, Aphkei, who were calling insane and improper things to her.

His stride was silent as he turned toward the point where his vision would take place if unaltered, with his feet stepping one before the other as he quickly followed the would be assailants... a whole pack of wolves after a single bunny. It made his blood boil at the cowardice and depravity of males some times.

Sage finally came to stand in the school gardens just in time to witness the young bunny fem, an Oliverian if he remembered the name of her species correctly, the same as Noxi, having her clothing ripped from her by a much larger wolf. His jaw set as they fondled her, and Sage's ears turned forward as his jaw set while they maneuvered her to lie down on a bench, and the largest of the four wolves even slapped her in the head with his erect phallus.

This was where the image that had just appeared in his head, a vision of Fate, was about to occur. His teeth clicked as he ground them against one another even as the Aphkei wolves forced her legs open and one of them began the act of trying to force his overly large erection against her much smaller femininity.

"Damn it! She's too small!" the one who was doing the act was saying.

"So force it." One of the smaller wolves said.

"Yeah! Tear her open and split her hips." The remaining wolf said. "This is for your pleasure, not hers."

And they laughed, and the one trying to pierce her came all over the girl.

"Yeah! Go lubrication!" one called.

That did it.

Lord Sage lifted a hand and a Spirit Bolt leapt outward from his hand to slap against the head of the wolf who was attempting to do the raping. It was only sufficient to knock

him away, not knock him out, and suddenly Sage had four pairs of eyes on him, all of them reflecting the ambient light to glow amber.

“Go away, you,” the largest of the four said. “This doesn’t concern you.”

Sage’s body suddenly snapped and hissed with his strongest aura, and sparks of white lightning were dancing about him menacingly. Three of the four wolves were now cowering, their tails between their legs, but the largest... there was something powerful about him as if he was unafraid of Sage.

The small bunny was staring at him, crying with weeping eyes, begging for his protection though her mouth was silenced by the big wolf.

Rudfuul, Sage thought, delving that from his mind. His growing senses from his Dragon’s Eye were allowing him to explore deeper and deeper avenues of his own and other’s psyche.

Sage’s jaw set, and his hand twisted, and from inside his palm his flesh seemed to push outward, coiling around a center portion and harden into an elaborate hilt like thing, just before a long black blade with a silvery glittering edge extended out of its end. His mindset altered, his stance changed, and in an instant he’d take up the form of a warrior... a guardian.

Protect!

The word pounded in his temples as he set his jaw. Sage’s hand clenched harder on his sword – a Bio Blade as the Panzer Dragons called it – and he entered into the shadows of the Garden, still sparking with his power here and there.

“You boys are in violation of curfew. I suggest that you return to your dorms immediately before I report you for greater crimes.” He said quietly, with just a hint of menace to his words.

The largest wolf merely stared at Sage, and after ejecting a brief jet of spoooge over the small rabbit’s naked bodice, he opened his mouth and uttered only two words.

“Get him.”

Sage didn’t move as three wolves assailed him, growling with fangs and claws barred, their fear of their leader outweighing the fear they had for Sage. And then as they drew near, Sage’s arm moved, and the three fell, howling in pain as they suffered from immobilizing wounds as, in a single movement, he’d felled all three.

“Idiots.” *Rudfuul* said, and letting the girl go, he rose to his feet, his penis erect and hard, throbbing as he patted the girl bunny on the face. “I’ll be right back sweetling... keep that pussy warm for me.”

He huffed and puffed, and then roared at Sage before leaping at him, and Sage snapped his leg upward right into his face, and even as he fell, twisted his sword and created a deep gash right down the center of Rudfuul's being from chest to the tip of his prick, opening a deep cut all the way down his body.

Sage looked down at the beast that was so willing to inflict terrible pain on another that when even a small amount of pain was visited upon him, he howled in pain. Sage merely lifted his wrist computer and his fingers of the same hand with the computer moved quickly through a series of holographic keys that arose with the motion to type in the sequence for the island's security forces.

"Security, I have four juvenile Aphkei students who've been brawling after curfew. Require medical assistance. Please alert CMO Doctress Namah, I will be arriving shortly with a special case."

Sage then nonchalantly stepped over the wolves to approach the shocked young woman, and his demeanor went from unrelenting guardian, to loving caregiver as he knelt beside her, ground his blade into the earth and lifted his hand to her side carefully so as not to hurt her more, and calling forth his healing powers, reset her hip bone that they'd dislocated with nary a twinge of pain in her.

Sage then removed his jacket and wrapped the girl in it, which wrapped her down to her mid thighs due to the difference in size between the two, and lifting a hand to his grounded blade, retracted it quickly into his hand before picking her up in his arms even as the security forces arrived, he nodded to the four on the ground, and Sage again stepped over them again and made his way immediately for the hospital.

"Great Aul, Sage... where did you find her?" Namah said as she tucked the girl in, stepped back and saw a couple of pins in her neck with strange-looking frills on their ends.

She'd of course heard of acupuncture, but had never met anyone who actually used it, but whatever Sage had done, it had completely shut her mind down so that she'd sleep.

She straightened and then turned to Sage as he looked down at the rabbit girl with arms crossed, seeing her tucked in sweetly and sleeping quietly. He was looking at her with a pitying expression

"She'd befallen a nasty little accident in the garden. I was... impressed to go there."

"What happened?"

"I should leave that for her to tell if she is up to it. Can you tell me who she is?"

Namah looked down at the medical chart that had been provided when the girl had been admitted.

“Her name is Mayia Gallant. It appears as if she is a self entrant. Was almost too old to join the League, and she’d placed all of her savings into getting a ride on a space liner... registered as baggage. Spent a week in the cargo hold of a space liner with only as much food as she brought with her or was able to work for. But despite that, she was exceptionally bright and well-educated. Kind of a book worm. Noxi snatched her up in half a second to act as her mentor.”

“Has Noxi been informed?”

“Yes I have been. Oh Great Maker... what happened?” Namah and Sage turned just as Noxi arrived, dressed in her one-piece bodysuit and a coat, she rushed to kneel beside Mayia’s bed.

“Oh little one. What has happened? And why are there needles in her neck?!”

“Do not touch them, Noxi...” Sage said suddenly, and moved over to the tall bunny to lay a hand on her shoulder. “It is helping her to sleep and keeping her dreams from her at the moment.”

“Why would you guard her against her own dreams? What has happened, Sage? Please tell me.” Noxi didn’t really like Sage, and for that matter, neither did Namah, but both of them placed their dislike for him aside in the face of Mayia’s plight.

Sage looked to Noxi, and then to Namah and back again. Even without his Dragon’s Eye gem in the center of his forehead, he would’ve been able to sense that they needed to know what had happened. Sage then exhaled not really thinking it was his place to tell them, but nonetheless psychically projected loud enough so that Noxi’s empathic abilities, and Namah’s own much more refined psychic abilities could hear, and both women gasped and covered their mouths in shock.

“Oh my dear student, no!” Noxi whispered, and despite that Mayia was asleep, she embraced the young girl. “Will Fate not leave you alone and give you a good life at long last?”

Sage’s eyes opened at Noxi’s words as she mentioned Fate.

He’d just interfered with another’s Fate. Along the path, if Sage hadn’t interfered with Fate, if he himself had not been there, Mayia would have been raped, cast aside broken and used, those who’d done it would’ve gone unpunished, and three years later, Mayia Gallant would’ve ended her own life; long after being kicked out of the Mystic League for her failing grades.

Already it was happening. Sage had just thrown a wrench into Fate's plans for this universe by altering so many lives at once. At times past he'd arrive, find a universe's champion, defeat that champion and move on. But also, as Fate had it, he'd been made to stay here. He wasn't meant to be here, and already he was altering its denizens' lives.

Hence was the role of a Wild Card. He knew that some time in the future... he'd have to pay for his interference. Fate... did not like his hand to be forced.

"She will be safe here." Sage said, and knelt down beside Mayia, rubbing her forehead. "Namah, I shall arrive late in the morning to wake her up. In the mean time, keep the pins in her neck so that she can rest."

Namah nodded dumbly, not able to do anything else as Sage looked down at her. Just then... he got another impression of fate as he looked at this rather attractive young rabbit fem.

"No, scratch that. If you could have a droid bring me in a chair... I'd like to watch over her tonight."

"Make that two!" Noxi said and stood erect suddenly.

Namah smiled and nodded, seeing the looks in their eyes. "I'll have breakfast brought in near dawn for you two... and I think I'll stay too. I was thinking of going home early... Illia is making remarkable progress now, so I thought I wasn't really wanted tonight. Best if I stay. She'll need some psychological help, and the headmistress will need to be notified of this affront..."

Meniko settled her mass atop a high hill, looking out over the seas and oceans of this world that she functioned as the guardian for. She loved watching the waters move and wash over the rocks below, and had desired to be this close to them when her school was stationed high up in space on what was now an outpost mall and space port for the school.

There were of course a couple other outposts in this solar system, but they were small and little more than mining outposts. Other than the miners, the only other people other than students and faculty who visited that space station were spacers and the occasional government ship.

This world was where all the life and beauty was in this solar system, and it gave her a sense of peace and tranquility despite all of her past experiences. But she couldn't help but feel a little uneasy. That human, that *Dragon Slayer*, wanted to start up a new school.

She could already feel the winds shifting strangely around her.

But there was a bargain her star student had made that needed to be honored, and she'd have to either let him have his school or worse yet, have him as an actual teacher directly under her.

Why couldn't her decisions be more easily made more often?

"You seem troubled, Meniko." A soft voice said, and Meniko lowered her gaze to see Mother Sanari approach, and Meniko managed a smile.

"Teacher... I'm so glad that you've returned. I'm... in a quandary."

And then Meniko transformed; a swirling of winds and mists wrapped themselves around her as her form immediately shrank in on itself and in a humanoid form, muscular with good, well-groomed plumage and well pronounced breasts, Meniko settled to the ground nude before Sanari before the mists around her closed in on her naked body, knitting beautifully white silk robes. Then Meniko was embracing her mentor, standing well over her, stepping back with a hopeful smile on her face.

"What sort of quandary?" Sanari asked as the two fems began to walk along the cliff's edge, the roar of the surf hammering at the cliffs always in hearing.

"It's in regards to our new visitor that has come among us. I don't know how much you've been made known to since your return, but this creature... frightens me."

Sanari managed a comforting smile. "He doesn't strike me as a man who wishes to cause fear, Meniko."

"You've met with him?"

"For a time. He's a warrior, and warriors live by codes of conduct. His order has a very broad code of conduct, which actually makes he and its members... civilized. Why does he frighten you?"

"He has... many skills. A good deal none of us have ever really heard nor seen of, some of them even I've only heard of as hearsay and legend, but he wields them easily and to a such a level in which he can match Rae. And then there is the simple fact that he is a Dragon Slayer."

"Dragon's Slayer, Meniko." Sanari corrected, and Meniko stopped. Sanari walked a couple more steps before stopping herself and turning, favored her student with another comforting smile. "He told me. Feared that you had concern about that. But like I mentioned in your audience chamber the other day, I also have a certain familiarity with his kind... and in my travels, I walked amongst members of his order before."

"You have?"

“Meniko, they are warriors of the light. They do not kill needlessly.

“The term Dragon’s Slayer means to be Servant to the Dragons. Dragons and humans share a remarkable bond, Meniko. Their fates are intertwined and immutable, and their relationships between each other grow more and more powerful as the ages progress. As a Dragon’s Slayer, the Dragons of his world employ him and the other high level members of his order as guardians of the greatest of sacred places of their world.

“I’ve never met a race so willing to lay down their lives in order to protect something else.”

The light in Sanari’s eyes changed then... and her face lost some of the beautiful wisdom as she reflected on something dark from her past. Her smile then returned and it was as if the sun had found a new place to rest again as she looked up at the Dragoness, but immediately Meniko wondered what she could’ve thought of.

“He is an honorable man, Meniko. Humans do indeed have their faults, sometimes showing themselves to be arrogant at times, but I believe them to be truly noble creatures, Meniko, and far wiser as a race than nearly all other races were at their age of evolution.

“I think that he will be of great influence to this world if you allow him to have his school.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of, Sanari.” Meniko smiled wanly. “Even creatures like the Dragaseir still do find cause for fear. As a hatchling, I was told of the great and terrible might of the Dragons that this Sage seems to idolize and follow. I find that hard to believe, especially when the dragons in our own universe are such pathetic things, but he speaks of them as if they were matches for the Dragaseir.

“I was told legends of humans at their homeworld, of how they pushed the dragons from their own seat of power...”

“And you fear that happening here.” Sanari stated instead of questioned. Meniko hugged herself, pushing her ample bosom higher while her wings tightened at her back. She finally nodded.

“I don’t think you should. I think you shall see some truly great things happening from him, and this school will benefit from them. I feel... reassured that this is true.”

Meniko looked at Sanari, blinking at her as this much older feline immortal smiled at the young dragoness. Sanari sometimes had bouts of inspiration that came to her... almost as if she were telling the future with her feelings about something. Meniko finally nodded, knowing that it was foolhardy to disregard Sanari’s impressions on such a thing.

“Alright.” Meniko said at last. “With yours and Genohn’s support, I will contact Emperor Jaikard and ask for another extension on our charter so that a third chapter of the Mystic League may be created.”

“You won’t regret this, Meniko.” Sanari smiled. “I know you won’t.”

A week had passed since Sanari had had her conversation with Meniko, but unfortunately due to the sluggishness of a bureaucracy, it would be well after the start of term before an answer would come. But despite that, Sage stated that he would produce facilities, instructors, and so on as time progressed.

He’d scouted tirelessly every day, all over the world looking for a suitable site, and for the past three days, he’d lunged off in the exact same direction, apparently having found something that interested him. This as it was as Sanari stepped quietly from the Pinnacle Tower on her way to her shrine, she’d not expected to see him here...

She slowed as she watched him on one of the smaller practice platforms off of the main courtyard, her arms folding into her robes as she watched this enigmatic, eight foot tall creature do his Katta.

Katta, as she knew, had several purposes depending upon the way it was done. If it was done as fast as one could manage, it was for speed. If it was done in quick decisive actions, it was to develop power. The third method, to do it slowly, was to create control.

This third method was nearly all that she herself did of her own form, and to watch Sage do just this same thing was a wonder in and of itself. She knew of very few males who could be called ‘graceful,’ but Sage managed it with an almost feminine way of moving. His body slid like water, stepping from one point to the next, keeping on his toes as he held himself upright in maneuvers most would hurry through due to the lack of balance.

She watched him balance on only two toes as his other leg slowly rose straight up his body, his body not even shaking with the exertion while his arms and even his long, thick tail moved delicately to maintain his balance.

But above all, she could feel his spirit energies flowing about him, again, like water, straining through his opened fingers as they passed about him, and as she watched him she felt a subtle smile steadily rise upon her face.

She’d seen the masters of his own order, long before this creature was ever born, charge forward into the fray of a grand melee, where on one side there were demon princes, demon lords and a veritable horde of the Dark One’s army, watched them use these same motions into felling even the most powerful of those creatures.

She stood there, watching him in his dance, half admiring him, while the other half of her was reminded of struggles she'd faced beside members of his race. She stood there, remarking upon both of these, for a rather long time, for what felt like over an hour, till Sage finally came to his final stance, straightened, and then bowed to an invisible opponent and then straightened.

He'd been practicing with his eyes closed, so as to practice the refinement of his powers, and when he opened his eyes, it was only to find himself looking at the beautiful visage of Mother Sanari.

"Forgive me, my lady," he bowed again promptly to her. "I was not aware that I was being watched.

"No forgiveness is needed, milord." She said simply. "I was admiring your form. Very refined, very precise."

"Thank you, though my own master sometimes says that it could still be refined." Sage's smile spoke of the creature that he was; a creature that was so gentle and loving, so knowing, and seeing that smile focused on her, Sanari felt her heart pause a beat before she was able to take it back under her precise control again.

Sanari then blinked as Sage took a moment to reclaim his shirt and jacket, which formed themselves immediately out of a black goop from around his waist that closed about his form and sealed him up.

"You must be a beautiful dancer." Sanari remarked, and she had the pleasant sight to see the burn rise up in Sage's cheeks this time.

"I honestly do not do it too often." He admitted as he approached, and before either of them had a moment to think otherwise, his hand lifted, and one of hers unfolded from her robes and they slid into one another.

Sage blinked and looked down as Sanari herself did, and he was surprised to find his hand coiling about her long slender fingers.

For some reason... this felt right.

"Pardon me." Sage managed, and let go of her hand, and Sanari remarked that he looked like a bashful boy just then.

"Think nothing of it, milord. Do you favor yourself for a walk with me?" she asked then, and Sage smiled, and turned in beside her as they walked up the hill leading around the edge of the school toward the shrine before Sanari continued. "A question for you, milord: are you enjoying your stay here, Lord Sage?"

“I do feel a little out of place.” Sage said admittedly, looking over the various students around, remarking on how many different variances of species there were represented right here in this school.

“Is that what is prompting you to create a school away from this one to administer your teachings?”

“I... don’t know. I felt... prompted to do so. Promptings do not come upon me lightly, and I’ve learned not to ignore them. Ignoring them tend to cause some great catastrophe for either myself or others. Besides, I don’t think Meniko really likes me.”

“I am sorry, Lord Sage.”

Sage chuckled. “Just Sage. But it’s all right. I’ve grown used to people looking at me funny.” He sighed and lowered his eyes, and Sanari felt that he truly was not used to it.

Her hands lifted and they closed about his thick arm, so broad that both her hands together were not large enough to encompass it. Sage looked down at her from over his shoulder at her reassuring touch.

A touch, after all, was a powerful thing. Both of them, in their own ways, knew that. “I will not argue your desire to set your school apart from the rest of us, but you should not be a stranger, sir. There will prove to be many a kind face for you here. I am sure of it.”

That made him smile at her again, and again she felt the odd feeling of her heart skipping a beat.

“Thank you Mother Sanari, for all your kind words to this old tiger.”

“Sanari, sir. Just Sanari.”

The Lair of Light and Shadows

Sage had received the transmission earlier that morning.

It arrived with all the paperwork necessary for the formation of a new school underneath the jurisdiction of the present headmistress of The League of Mystic Arts and Combat. Sage had spent most of the day with the aide of his bioroid companion, Dallas, putting together all the necessary information and transferring it to Meniko for final inspection, along with a very, very generous processing fee and donation to the school.

Meniko was rather surprised at the speed of the paperwork's return, and most especially at the generosity of Sage's *'donation,'* as, amazingly, several billion credits were transferred with the paperwork, and she wondered how a being from another universe could've produced that much money so soon.

She spent the rest of the afternoon reading over the proposed charter for his new school... and a proposed name:

"The Shadow League." She said aloud.

"Forgive me ma'am?" Govnov said as he delivered tea for his mistress.

"Lord Sage has apparently decided on a name for his school. *'The Shadow League.'*" Meniko gave a brief chuckle. "And it's beginning to fit. Right in between the purity of the Grace League, and the dark arts of the Demon League."

"Almost as if this situation were tailor-made for you, my lady." He said and poured his mistress her tea, added two lumps of sugar and some cream like she preferred it.

"That's what worries me." She took her cup of tea and drank, and made a sound of pleasure. "Hmm... thank you Govnov."

Govnov bowed.

"You are most welcome, mistress."

Meniko continued to read over Lord Sage's charter even as outside, as he launched himself into the sky from just outside her Pinnacle Tower, and within moments an aura of yellow light formed about him and he took off like a shot. Far below, all the Leaguers gasped in exclamation as he soon broke the sound barrier; a blossoming disk erupting around him from the point where he'd achieved Mach.

It was a very simple trick that came from this rippling aura... and once mastered one could form a form of magical propulsion.

The trouble with flight was that it was achieved by working with the gravity of whatever world you were on and magically re-directing it in the direction you wanted to go. As such, you could only fly as fast as you could fall.

Sage's method of flight, however, was two fold: Levitation to make him buoyant in the air, and propulsion... which was achieved by the glowing and swirling aura surrounding him as he skimmed the clouds before banking off to one side.

This magic he was using was the only thing keeping the members of the Leagues from achieving faster speeds than a rate of fall. Inertia was the one of the few things that was difficult to limit with this power, and so he felt some of it against him. But this was good... it still allowed for the thrill of speed! Letting some of the wind pass through his aura as he breathed shallowly allowed him air to breathe.

At cruising speed he accelerated across the sky like a comet; a bulge forming just before his face that spread outward into a serrated disk, and then rapidly cascaded downward the length of the aura to fan all the air the ripple catches of air behind him. Over and over again these ripples propel him forward before he intensifies the aura, and blasts forward... practically doubling his speed.

But he soon came to his choice spot and slowed to a stop just above it, his body coming to a stop in midair with a snap of pseudomotion, his aura exploding behind him as he paused in his flight to hover.

Below him, framed in the whole of his vision was an island, capped with a wide caldera that was tens of miles across, sitting on an island roughly a few dozen miles long. It was a barren place due to how active the volcano was... erupting at least once every few years... much like Mount Kilauea on Hawaii; a volcano that was fed by a hotspot in the Earth's core that kept it island building as the tectonic plate it was built upon kept moving.

There were other islands that had been built by the hotspot that had created this island; most of them were now submerged underneath the waves of the waters. It'll be several million years before this hotspot moved elsewhere.

It was the perfect place for a new school.

He imagined that when he announced that his new school would be based on a semi-active volcano he was sure that people would call him mad, and a corner of his mouth rose slightly at the thought of all that disbelief.

But it was the apex of where the Earth, the Sea, the Sky and the might of Fire all came together. It was also the sight of the most powerful Ley-Nexus on the planet, which Sage figured was why Meniko had chosen the nearby island the size of Japan for her school.

Even its proximity gave her Pinnacle Tower immense power... enough to project a spire of power straight to the heavens.

“Penny for your thoughts, Lord Sage?” came a voice, and Sage turned in mid air, seeing Rae floating there.

Instinctively upon seeing her, Sage backed away from her slowly, trying to respectfully distance himself from her to keep away the temptation of close contact. She was Makahn’s now, and she had likewise chosen him.

Sage stopped and hovered several feet away from her, a mild sadness in him though he tried very, very hard to hold the sadness from his face. He could still feel himself caring for her, but she was Makahn’s – heart, mind and soul – and he wanted to distance himself from her so that she didn’t feel pressured by him any longer.

He didn’t want to interfere.

“Just considering locations for my school.” He answered, and gestured to the island below.

“Sage... that’s a volcano.” Rae said quietly.

“Yes I know.” He said, managing to smile for her.

“It’s erupted a dozen times since I’d come to live here.” She urged, folding her arms beneath her bosom. Sage tried not to look as her breasts rose over her arms.

“Yes, I know...” he said quietly, still smiling, and then he did turn to her and smiled. “Do not tell anyone, Rae, but this is it. I’m sure of it.”

“Sage... no one will want to attend a school built on an active volcano...”

“I was actually considering building it inside the volcano.”

Rae’s mouth dropped. “Tell me you’re joking!”

“I’m not.” And Sage laughed as he did finally get that look that she thought he was mad. “I intend to tame the volcano.” Still he got that look, and he laughed at her expression, before he flew closer to her, lifting his hands to cup her face.

“I know what you’re thinking Rae, but before I move a single individual onto this island, I promise you... the volcano will be tamed.”

“You’re MAD!” Noxi said as Sage chose his location on the planet. “Mother, please tell him he’s mad!”

“I am quite aware of that fact, Mrs. Noxi.” Sage said quietly. “Sane people don’t think the way I do.” Sage said quietly, and was answered with much silence. “All right... all of you are aware that no level of power, either technological or arcane, can tame a natural power. Only another natural power or the life force of the planet itself can hold sway over such power.”

“This is correct,” Mother Sanari said; hers a voice of wisdom amongst all the faculty members that were gathered. “Lord Sage, you indeed have power in you, but even if the whole of the League, including Rae, were to put their powers into trying to tame a natural power the size of a planet, we would fail.”

“I trust your understanding, Mother; you are rated as a very high level Ecomancer.” Sage commented, and then turned to address Meniko. “But I have a bargain, Headmistress. If I can manage to tame the volcano and build my school soundly upon it, then I will have support from the League in helping me to gather a small student population of those willing to come learn from me.

“Not a single student will be moved there till this task can be completed.

“If I cannot manage to tame the volcano, then my school dissolves, the land reverts to you, you keep the donations we’ve already made, and you may disregard my previous engagement here as a teacher and I will trouble you no more; my bargain with Rae likewise dissolved.

“Are we agreed.” And he held out a five fingered hand.

Meniko, who had transformed herself into her tall bird maiden form to gain access to the mapping room of the school, looked hard at Lord Sage’s smiling face for a moment before her gaze lowered to his outstretched hand. In spite of herself, she lifted her hand and shook his.

“Agreed.” She said with a small smile.

No one was powerful enough to control a force of nature.

Sage approached the island and descended into the Caldera. As his feet found purchase, he stepped forward, walking down the inward bowl of solidified magma that’d capped the mouth of the volcano for the past several years, ever since the last time it had erupted.

As it was... it was nearing its time to erupt again, and beneath his feet, Sage felt a shallow tremor.

“Just hold together for a little longer.” He said aloud, and approached the smoking cinder cone at the center of the caldera.

Images of a powerful firebird erupting from that cinder cone came to mind as he reached into his belt pouch and removed what looked like an acorn the size of his fist. Attached to the acorn instead of a cap was a sort of bio-mechanical matrix. Stepping forward, holding the seed in his hand, he lunged forward and punched it into the depth of the cinder cone, releasing it right in its center and then quickly removed his hand, blowing on his hand from all the heat that had singed all the fur off his arm as it rapidly grew back.

He then stepped back from the cone as he felt an immediate change in the world around him, and looking up he watched storm clouds roiling out of nowhere, even as the island quaked again beneath his feet.

“It begins.” He said, and then promptly sat down.

Rae Iksaki lowered herself onto the crater rim of the caldera, a ridge of rock only a few meters wide. Far below, down in the center of the crater, sitting on the ground and staring at the smoking cinder cone sat Lord Sage.

She’d remembered when this volcano had erupted with the force of a nuclear blast. The ash it poured up into the sky was sufficient to block out the sun for days, and she and all the other students had to seek shelter inside the school while this force of nature spent itself and then abated.

She remembered the Mystic League having been grey with ash for weeks afterward while the worker bots cleaned and scoured everything.

Lifting her eyes, she saw the clouds amassing, felt their sprinkling waters falling on her even now while she stood with arms akimbo, true concern for this alien werecat coming into her heart.

Just then an umbrella found its way above her, and a powerful male body pressed against her back, one hand holding up the umbrella, and the other wrapping around her middle to hold her stomach. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Makahn even as he drew near to nuzzle her cheek and lips.

They both knew that Sage had been correct in her holding the spark of their first child, and as soon as their marriage was done, they would try very, very hard to make that child a reality. Makahn held her as if she already carried his child, and in essence at least... she was.

“You are a very difficult fem to track down when you’re flying about.” He whispered into her ear, rubbing her tight muscular belly.

“And you are relentless. What did you do... commandeer one of the boats here and follow me while I was flying?” she chuckled, and turned her head to feel his lips against her cheek again.

“How’d you guess?” he asked mockingly, and nuzzled her neck before looking down at the mad tiger himself. “Something about that boy ain’t right.” He said at last. “Who in all of creation can control a force of nature?”

And at that moment, the rains began to fall harder, and straight from the heavens a crash of lightning forked to strike the cinder cone, and Rae remarked that the probability of that lightning strike striking right there must’ve been nigh astronomical!

She could feel the forces of magical essence transforming all around her, the ebb and flow of the whole planet... altering.

“You’re tense Rae... perhaps we should leave.” Makahn said, still holding onto her.

“Not yet... I...” and she stopped, and felt a sudden explosion of force echo around her. Makahn could feel nothing because of his greatly lessened sensitivity to the natural forces of magic, but to her it was like she’d just been hit by a tidal wave of magical forces suddenly erupting out of the center of the volcano.

But a few brief moments later, a green spell circle formed as Sage slowly got to his feet, and from the very center of the cinder cone, a beam of magical light, very thin and very narrow at the moment – a hair’s breadth at the most – broke from its peak and streamed straight up into the sky, challenging the selfsame beam that erupted from the peak of the Pinnacle Tower.

This beam began to broaden, breaking open the cinder cone, and from its top she saw a shoot of green spread upward into the air, tracing along the beam of magical power, followed by another, and still another, while roots erupted out of its sides and bored themselves rapidly into the ground.

Both she and Makahn felt a tremble of force erupt about them, and the soft earth of the volcano suddenly solidified and firmed, and she felt a remarkable force of power, greater than anything she’d ever experienced, suddenly surge as the whole of Wave World trembled.

“Ah! Now he’s done it!” Makahn cried out, stumbling a little as the soft ash began to transform into fertile, black dirt beneath his feet.

“Yes! But what *has* he done!?” Rae cried, and taking hold of her lover, she held him in her arms and lifted both of them off the ground while the whole of the island, even the air shook.

Far below them, more trailers of those soft green shoots were climbing up into the air, coiling with the others, and the whole of the cinder cone shattered as something large, bulbous and mechanical swelled into existence. It twisted, and then three large bulbous protrusions lanced into the ground for support as this mass of mechanics then separated, three large tubes projecting outward and morphing... seeming to grow into technological devices... just before large turbo fans on each tube began to spin and quickly rise in speed to a high-pitched whine. As these three pieces began to grow, Rae felt a shuddering spasm in the magic field... like a heart beat.

And there was Sage, his hands opening while he floated higher, and with determination, Rae carried herself and Makahn close to him.

“Sage! Sage! What’s going on?!” she cried, Makahn looking down to the bottom of the crater far below as thick roots surged deeper and deeper into the ground.

Sage turned to her, and she saw his eyes glowing brighter than ever before, and when he answered her, he spoke only one word.

“Birth!”

Meniko’s great wings surged out into the air, her feathers glittering as she flapped about in a mild storm. Nowhere near the power of a hurricane, which would’ve been a welcome bit of exercise, but what spurred her enthusiasm forward was the sheer unmitigated power churning so close to her home.

Something incredible was happening to her world, and she could feel its life forces altering all around her, and as she dipped downward toward the volcanic Island Sage had said he was basing his new school at, she gasped at the sight of a power spire of beautifully glittering green erupting from the center of the volcano.

Great Aul! What has that cat done?! She thought, and her great wings flapped harder as she surged downward into a power dive, landing with a lunge on the outer most rim of the volcano and looked down at a truly awesome sight.

There was a mass of something growing here, an overwhelming power that drew all the natural powers of the world into it, and all of it swelling to make a writhing mass of shoots, roots and power radiations both natural and technological.

She was confused as to what was going on, and looking across the ring of the caldera, she spied the source of all this, and she leapt forward and sailed to where she saw three figures watching the transformation of the volcano valley.

“Sage! Damn you, what have you done?!” Meniko cried, her great head coming very close to Sage.

“Mother! It’s all right!” Rae answered for him, and he merely smiled at Meniko – a bit nervously – with Makahn whooping and applauding this transformation like it was a fireworks display. “Can’t you feel it? It’s so natural... so full of life. It’s radiating throughout the whole of the planet! It’s so beautiful I want to cry!”

And Rae folded her hands over her cheeks as she looked back to the center of the volcano, even as the volcano’s fury began to weaken as its power was lanced upward into the roots of this... thing.

Meniko could indeed feel it, she could feel such a power that outweighed even her own connection to the planet, and that’s what scared her. But as this... this thing... whatever it was that was growing in the valley center grew, she could feel the spiritual resources of the planet growing, and increasing her own power in turn.

“What’s going on, Sage.” She asked, in all earnest, her eyes showing a minute level of her fear of all this.

Sage smiled at her. “The single most powerful natural force in the multiverse! You are witnessing the birth of something that would’ve taken this planet several tens of thousand more years to produce on its own. What you are watching, Meniko... is the birth of a Millennium Tree.”

Sanari appeared out of no where, stepping into existence atop the volcano’s lip and stepping in right beside Sage as he sat on the edge of the volcano’s lip watching with Rae and Makahn who were not too far away; the two lovers cuddling with one another sweetly.

She’d grown curious. That’s why she was here.

She’d felt the forces of nature and all the spiritual energies of this world shifting and surging toward a single point, and for an Ecomancer and a High Priestess like Sanari, such a happenstance would definitely have gotten her attention.

Then she jumped as she heard the squeal of turbines far below, the things having been dormant as of late up until now, and loads of rock and dirt were spit up into the air as three massive constructs of technological might surged into the ground.

“What are those?” she asked quietly, and turning to look at her, Sage promptly rose and bowed.

“Forgive me Mother; I did not know that you’d arrived.” He said before straightening.

Sanari, still looking at the chaos reordering itself below, both physically and spiritually, she lifted a hand to Sage's arm and watched those bulbous things drilling deeper into the ground.

"No need to apologize, Lord Sage." She said quietly, and she smiled. "But could you please tell me what's happened?"

"Of course." He smiled, and then drew close to her, and she felt the press of his chest close to her ear as he began to explain what was happening.

It was an innocent thing, and he'd done it so that she could hear him over the rumbling and the sounds below, but it had also brought her ear close to his chest so that she could hear his heart beating, and her eyes half closed as she listened to that powerful heart beat.

Instinctively, one of her hands rose to flatten against his chest, and she felt a lazy smile decorate her face as she listened more to it than his explanation.

It was a good... strong heart, she mused, her lips pursing as she settled into that feeling of protection he radiated.

Sage continued to point out things to her, leaning over her as he indicated what was going on now, and she drew back from him at the mention of what a Millennium Tree was, and she grew far more interested in what was happening below.

"Even now it's roots are digging deep into the Earth, and it's growing stronger from the rain and the natural power of the planet's lifeblood pumping right into it from the volcano. Those three turbine like things will be my lair's thermal generators. I must admit, I do not envy Daedalus in his work."

For the second time, Sanari stepped back to stare at him in wonder.

"That robot is down there?!" she exclaimed, and then looked down to see Sage's robot roaming around below.

"Bioroid," he corrected. "Yes... but only a part of him is. You can see his components growing with the tree down there. They're the tan growths, and the tree is the green and dark brown you can see writhing about down there."

"What do you mean the tan growths are his?"

Sage mused. "Daedalus is more than the hologram or the bioroid that you've met... he is in essence a massive multi-dimensional quantum computer connected to unique bio-technology. What you know of as Dallas is his principal drone. His face to the world."

Sage drew close again, and she was favored with the sound of his heart as he continued to explain the stages of the tree's growth, and while he explained, she spied Meniko as she

landed a bit of a ways away, just before several of the more powerful Mystic Leaguers landed as well, with Equis and Noxi among them, and she smiled at the sight of Noxi with all her science gear on her.

Just then Sage's arms closed about her, and she looked up at him as he steeled his stance and lifted a hand to call out to everyone.

"Everyone grab onto something! A spirit wave is about to explode!"

Sanari gasped, and she clutched onto Sage's jerkin, feeling him protecting her by his sheer presence while the others indeed did brace themselves, and far below there was a blossom of natural growth forming along the edges of the spell circle far below, the most complex of natural circles she'd ever seen, and at the base of the beam of light projecting up into the sky, the green energy began to swell rapidly, just before it popped, and a wave of life imbuing energy erupted to envelop the whole island.

It was like a rush of sound had just washed over them, and a renewing life that healed and blessed all those who were touched by it, and from out of the corner of her eye, she saw Rae give a gasp as one of her hands clutched at her belly, and when the wave passed, she was gasping, rubbing her tummy and smiling with a new light in her eyes.

And then looking down onto the interior of the volcano, a remarkable thing began, and the bottom half of the crater began to turn green, and looking down, Sanari saw grasses and moss growing everywhere, and turning to look down onto the other side of the volcano slope, she saw the same affect happening all over the island.

The swell of life in the world simply blossomed.

Rae and Makahn had returned back to the school, and even Noxi had grown bored with the birth of this tree, preferring to just leave her science equipment behind on automatic. Sanari stood with one arm draping her deep sleeves of her robes down before her, her other hand hanging against her side while she stood beside Meniko as the great Dragaseir held onto the rim and outward edge of the volcano with her massive claws, both watching this part of Meniko's world that, until now, had been dead, now transform into a tropical paradise.

The shoots from the cinder cone had grown a thousand feet up into the air and were weaving in amongst themselves and thickening, coiling about the power beam. Both the women knew that the magical forces of this world were realigning themselves for the birth of this tree, while below their very feet, the chaos of the volcano was subsiding, and the vicious natural power of the earth was calming in the presence of this tree.

"He's already done it." The Dragaseir mused. "Damn him... now I have to tolerate him for ten whole years... or more."

“What is that Meniko?” Sanari asked, turning to look at the feathered dragoness.

“My bargain with Sage. He’s taming the volcano, and transforming it into the corner stone of the world in the process. Damn him...”

“Be careful not to damn someone who may be undeserving of damnation,” Sanari smiled. “Else wise you may find The Creator damning you instead.”

Meniko chuckled, and then she began to change, the mists wrapping around her as she transformed into a tall, beautiful dragoness, with soft muscles and great endowments in femininity that allowed her gown to hang off her body.

“No one has the power to control a force of nature. But apparently some *thing* does. Sage is using one force of nature to calm another force of nature, and while he’s at it, he’s building his new home inside its bowels.”

Sanari nodded. “Sage told me that there are thirteen such trees on his homeworld.” Sanari mentioned in passing, trying to get Meniko’s mind off brooding. “This one is the child of the eldest and greatest of the thirteen.”

“Hmm...” Meniko exhaled in a thoughtful expression, watching the wonders unfolding below even as Dallas’s construction of the lair was pushing the tree about its growth. “And so with its birth here on this world, Sage had advanced this planet’s evolution by thousands of years. Is such a thing natural?”

“I believe so.” Sanari admitted. “Is it wrong to raise others higher up into the light?”

Already the spiritual power of the whole planet was advancing noticeably. If the planet was advancing, then how then would that reflect on the other students here who were in tune with it’s spiritual ebb and flow? How then would the natural denizens of this world advance? Would they too advance thousands of years?

In all her life, and in all her travels, even in her travels to Sage’s own Earth, she’d never heard of such a power like the Millennium trees. The only possible reason as to why she’d never felt a power such as this before was because they’d have to blend so perfectly in with the forces of the world to be unnoticeable.

If they were so natural a force as that, then was it truly a bad thing releasing this power on this world? Only time will tell...

Lord Sage had spent much of his time at the island supervising things, and each time Rae and anyone else returned to the island, the tree had grown larger and more majestic than ever. The students of the League had been showing tremendous progress in only a few

short days with the growth of that tree going on, and it had to be more than just coincidence for that. The tree was changing the world they were all on, and as it grew, they all felt the benefits from it.

Today when she'd visited, the tree was now growing leaves that were larger than a grown male Casid, and there were all sorts of natural growths everywhere else on the island in the forms of saplings and bushes, and wildlife was appearing as if by magic.

Rae herself had noticed that her boobs had firmed up, and that the force of life in her navel had grown stronger. It ached in its desire to be born, but she and Makahn had promised that they'd not make love again until after their marriage.

And strangely, a small scar that'd been on the back of her hand since she was a little girl had healed completely.

It was a wonderment.

And so it was then that she saw Sage at his temporary quarters back on the main island, the ones that he'd occupied since coming here; the door wide open as he detached the red pillars around the door. Rae stepped over to him, seeing past him into his room, and finding that it had been reverted back to its own simple chambers to house the upper classmen of the school. The vast sprawling home he'd created was gone, as was Daedalus's constructs. Even the furniture that'd been moved out when he moved in was resting by the door, ready to be replaced so that a new wave of students could use it.

"Moving out now I see." She managed as she approached, and rising, Sage looked at her and smiled.

"Daedalus has done well enough where the new lair is in habitable status. The tree itself is in its final stages of growth. It's time for me to fasten some of my own tricks to the school."

"Tricks like those you used in your room here?" Rae asked

"Of course," he smiled. "I have to be able to fit an entire school inside a tree that will have a base a mile wide."

Rae chuckled at that, and then began to help him in the moving process, and with two bodies it went fast enough where she could invite Sage over for dinner. Makahn had moved in with her, for the time being, but was sleeping in the guest room for now till he and she could finally be married. Preparations were going swiftly for that, mainly because Meniko had taken over much of the preparations to allow them time to themselves.

Sage was treated with an incredibly well prepared and home-cooked meal by Makahn, and the great Weretiger was amazed immediately that such a fighter as Makahn could have the cooking skills of a master chef.

He even wore an apron and a chef's hat while he cooked.

"My father had always told me, *'never trust a thin cook.'*" Makahn grinned as he laid a large dish of meats and beans on the table. "But since I don't like being fat, I had to take his words that a large cook is just as good."

Rae chuckled as her lover finished setting the table like a professional would manage, with a wine glass, water glass, three forks, two spoons, and a knife, with Rae's ornate bone china arrayed in perfect form before each diner.

Makahn then prepared them all for a five course meal.

"He's been doing this practically every night since he moved in." Rae said after Sage had commented on the quality of the meat.

Makahn shrugged.

"Some people work out to relax, others draw... I cook. Now try some of this sauce... It's got seven spices in it, one of which is really hard to come by." He winked at Rae and she giggled, reaching over to hold his hand.

Watching them, Sage was gladdened that he'd not interfered too much in their relationship. Such a thing indeed *would* have been a sin.

After dinner, with a delicious chilled berry desert, Sage took to doing the dishes, allowing Rae and Makahn time to themselves, and was amidst drying the last dish when his wrist computer chimed. Lifting the hand the computer was on and opening his hand, a holographic display appeared, and he keyed a quick command into the holographic keys before returning to drying the dishes.

"Yes Dallas?"

"Begging your pardon, master," the bioroid supercomputer spoke through the COM-link. "But the tree is entering into the last stages of his growth. He should be set and completed in his growth in roughly twelve hours."

"And how goes construction of this side of the lair?"

"I have full power, and my factory is now completed. I am downloading worker drones from my core at this very moment. Main floor is now completed, as is sub basements one through six. Basement seven is thirty-six percent completed and eight and nine will be dug as soon as the volcano cap has solidified more. The tree has already dug very

deep himself and is eager to dig deeper. It's difficult keeping up with him. Floors one through eighteen are in varied levels of construction, and I have the hope to go higher, but it would be best for the tree to finish growing before I start building on his branches."

"Very good job, Dallas. And how is your integration with the tree coming along?"

"You were right master, my Tritanium Bio-Steel make up is intergrading quite well with Tre'Ent's son. I can feel him tapping into my functions here, and he's learning quite well. I am allowing him almost full reign of my systems, and I am likewise teaching him how to grow faster, and in turn he's allowed me access to some of his own functions.

"He is a very happy little boy, master."

Sage chuckled. "I thought he might be. He is of course getting an ample opportunity that his father and all the other trees have not been able to receive. The most fertile soil from volcanic activity, a heavy purchase for all his roots, all the air he can breathe, and all the water he can drink. Plus, a direct tap to this planet's life force. Have you delved any further understanding regarding that?"

"Yes Master. The child has currently altered three super Ley Lines and five smaller lines both aerial and ground so that they all intersect inside him and the life web of the planet has been drawn up straight into his very bark. Additionally, he has a firm hold of the Galactic Ley Lines. He'll grow stronger than his father if this keeps up."

"Yes, he will be a strong one." Sage agreed, already having seen an image of fate for the tree... a thousand years from now as a massive thing whose leaves were a city block wide, and whose branches covered the whole of the island he was built upon.

But why was it that he saw nothing of Wave World beyond that island? He shook his head to clear it of further thought, dismissing it as probably nothing.

"Indeed, Master. Shall I inform your brother of the progress so that he can relay it to the child's father? I'm sure he'll be more than happy to hear what you've done for him."

"Wait until everything has been completed, Dallas. Other than dimensional communications with your core, do not open any other communications until your CPU in this dimension can be linked back your core MCPU. We'll inform the order and Tre'Ent then."

"Understood master. Dallas out."

"Goodnight Dallas."

Sage placed the last of the dishes back into the cupboard and wiped the table tops down with a hand towel before turning back to the couple.

“Sage! Come play a game with us.” Rae was saying as she surged up to him, taking his arm with both of hers and led him to sit with them before the fire. Sage sat across from them, and happy all the more that he hadn’t interfered too much in their lives even as Rae brought up a holographic game on her gaming table.

Meniko looked down on the tree as it moved gracefully in the winds blowing about the island. She looked at it both physically and metaphysically, and despite all her knowledge of the arcane, she was still nonetheless amazed and impressed.

This tree, this *thing*, was simultaneously controlling all of the spiritual and elemental forces around it in a symbiosis, as if it were processing the energies around it into purer and stronger emanations, in which it released back into the world to filter amongst the raw forces. It was purifying everything, even the air as a tree should.

In the physical world, this tree was luscious green and warm wood, and in the metaphysical realm of Realm Space, the tree was surrounded with a golden halo. It just radiated natural power.

And projecting from the center of the tree, straight up toward heaven, was a power spire similar to the one that projected from her own Pinnacle Tower, but this one was green in color, and was more refined, though not presently as powerful as the one she’d made.

Her gaze lowered some more, and she saw Lord Sage toiling amongst the roots far below. Just over a week ago, this island was a dead island. Too new and far too active seismically to support even plant life, and now it was a luscious tropical island, complete with fully grown trees, beautiful black sands at its shore, and even creatures of this world who’d somehow appeared over night... some of which she knew weren’t even native to this world, and still more weren’t even native to this universe

Resting in the presence of this tree, she felt... warm... and at peace. But the planet... there was an unease there...

Lord Sage and his servant, Daedalus, just then completed whatever it was they were doing, and from their resting places, four great crystal shields that Dallas’s beam emitters had actually *constructed* out of raw molecules in the surrounding air and ground began to rise into the air. Her own magic could create things out of the air and the ground, like her robes when she was in bird maiden form, but even she had no capability to duplicate these shields as of yet. An older Dragaseir probably could, though...

It was almost magical how each shield was produced, with each marked with ornate cuts and trimmed in red.

The four shields, along with eight crystal spheres and four crystal diamonds, all smaller than the shield, rose up to encircle about the tree midway along the trunk and held

themselves there steadily for a brief moment before they all began to spin. Shield, sphere, diamond, sphere and then a shield again, repeating all the way around the trunk as they spun slowly in the air, Meniko could hear them vibrate every now and again against the wind, and she could likewise see a faint glow of a ring interlocking all the individual pieces of what was undoubtedly a magic circle.

Looking down at this tree amidst all the greenery, feeling the earth below her more stable than that of even her own island because of this tree, she knew already that she'd solidly lost her bargain with Lord Sage, and a wry smirk rose upon her face before she turned and lunged off the rim of the volcano to head home.

Looks like I have ten years to get used to him, Meniko sighed, and took to enjoying her flight as she rose majestically up high into the air, her feathers fanning greatly.

Rae arrived at Lord Sage's growing new home late one afternoon to find a group of the most intriguing looking robots – bioroids – working to lay down a courtyard between two of the trees radial roots. As she approached, they stopped what they were doing, straightened and bowed till she'd passed.

“Good afternoon, Miss Iksaki.” One particularly attractive bioroid said.

All of these bioroids had been modeled in the appearances of males and females... having stylized tendrils of some thick fibers for hair, and perfectly realistic features. This one smiled at her as it paused to greet her.

“G-good afternoon.” She greeted in return, continuing along as the bioroid bowed to her.

When she'd finally approached the entrance point for Sage's new Lair, she found the familiar looking red pillars here on either side of the double doorway made to be twenty feet high, only these glyph-ridden obelisks were much larger than before.

She lifted a hand to slide her fingers down its length, feeling the power radiating from it as it controlled some magic that was as of yet unknown to her. Sage had called these particular pillars *'Guardians.'* *Magical wards to ward off evil,* she thought. *But they also mark the entrance of that space altering magic of his...*

“May I help you Miss Iksaki?” a voice asked suddenly, and she turned abruptly to see the physical representation of Daedalus standing before her, hands behind his back and dressed in his usual servant's attire, with a metal control band that wrapped about the back of his bald head and temples.

Rae jumped. “Oh! You startled me Daedalus.”

“My apologies.” He bowed his head humbly. “If you wish to see Lord Sage, he is currently laboring in the back corridors.”

“H-how do I get there?”

“I’ll guide you... just follow the lights.” He gestured, and against one of the walls there suddenly appeared a series of repeating lights moving in one direction.

“Th-thank...” she began, turning to face Dallas again, only to find him already gone. “You?” she finished and looked around for him, finding only the laboring bioroids.

She turned around twice, amazed that this creature that Sage had created was able to disappear and reappear so easily without anyone’s notice. What she’d just seen hadn’t been a hologram, because Dallas’s holograms looked like an ethereal spirit.

A wry quirk raised one corner of her mouth as her gaze then fell upon the moving lights, and she stepped inside the lair of Lord Sage Preypacer.

She was directed through this place, amazing at the construction, so unlike anything she’d ever seen before. It had a natural life and a natural breath to it, and when she felt the walls she withdrew her hand as if burned in her surprise at what she had just touched. She felt the minute feeling of a *pulse* radiating through it! She touched the wall again, palming it now, amazed that the walls felt like... well felt! Yet they were harder than steel.

But they’re so organic, she thought, running her hand against the wall as she walked, seeing that everything here was covered in this odd metal save for the many braces that appeared here and there; those instead were made out of hardened wood from the tree itself. When she touched that she gave a yelp and withdrew her hand again, but that was rather in the feeling that she felt as she touched the wood of the tree.

Another surprise.

Her hand flattened against it, and she was assailed by feelings of love and an almost euphoric sense of reality. This place showed love for her, and with such close contact, she felt her heart quicken as if Makahn were embracing her.

And then she stepped forward, touching the walls where so much *life* flowed through it. Life in its purest and most refined form, unlike anything she’d ever felt.

“Good morning Miss Iksaki.” A voice said, and she whirled around to see a supple looking automaton, this time female with a gentle double slope to her breast plate, her supple body covered with white plating that was gently luminescent, with the rest of her body made of the same living metal that this whole lair was made out of. “Forgive me if I startled you, miss I am designated as Sigma.” She bowed. “Do you require assistance, miss?”

Rae stammered, trying to respond. “N-no. Daedalus is guiding me.”

“That he is.” Sigma smiled, and she was struck at how realistic her face was.

The eyes looked real, and she even had pupils that dilated, brow ridges that compressed and supple lips that smiled at her. The bioroid’s *‘hair’* was folded backward into a complex style that ended with a braid. On her chest plate, over her right breast, as well as her left shoulder and left thigh, was a small circle with a Z drawn with a line through it.

“Very good miss.” And she bowed again. “Call to Father Daedalus if you require any further help then.” And the bioroid turned back to her work, installing a component module in a wall, leaving Rae amazed at how fluid the bioroid’s movements were.

“What technology...” she said aloud, and continued following the moving lights, looking around her in wonder at everything. It had such a beautiful magical flow to it, and even the bioroids that she passed gave off an essence of life. The autonomous droids she was used to always cast themselves as shadows in the ether stream. These... these creatures actually had a resonance! And they all resonated in a way she’d never seen before.

Then the corridor she was following suddenly opened up, and she stopped, and her breath caught inside her throat.

In the center of the Lair, *that must be it*, she thought, was a vast chamber, where the lights were kept dim. The only illumination came from the occasional glow lamp set in the walls here. Water was spilling downward from catcher pockets in the tree itself, forming water falls, while a garden similar to the one Sage had created in his temporary quarters back at the Core League had been duplicated here, only there were far more islands here, and the islands were larger, some actually having a shore that lead into the lapping waters of the small lake.

She stepped onto one of the bridges connecting the lighted corridors with the islands built over this small series of islands, and looking over the bridge, she saw beautiful multi-colored fish, again like Sage’s last place, many of which she’d never seen the like of, swimming around.

She smiled down at the fish, many with whiskers, before many of them suddenly darted through the water, and looking up to see why, Rae saw a familiar figure throwing bread crumbs onto the water.

“Good afternoon, Miss Iksaki,” Daedalus greeted as she drew near. “Welcome to the hub of the school.”

“This place is amazing!” Rae said and meant it, even as Dallas spread more bread crumbs.

“Master had created many of the preliminary designs, but he’s given me free reign to alter it as was necessary to accommodate the tree’s growth and my own aesthetic design of myself.”

“It’s all very beautiful and... wait... did you just say ‘*my self?*’”

“Indeed I did. My nature is a complex one, Miss Iksaki.” Dallas answered, and Rae sat down on a bench as he passed more crumbs out to the fish. “I am what many have termed a ‘*brain-in-a-jar.*’ My Central and Master Processing Units are a complex cerebral cortex directly linked to the entire lair. But it composes more than just ‘*wires*’ leading to sensors and cameras, but rather every cubic nanometer of everything inside this place that isn’t wood, is my body.” He turned to face her and smiled before gesturing toward himself. “What you are looking at is simply my principal drone. The face Sage helped me design.

“Every drone and mech in this place is all apart of me, like an ant hill, and me being the hive mind, though unlike most hives the hive mind in this case is male.”

Rae simply stared at him in disbelief as he spread the last of the crumbs, a subtle smile on his face.

“And thank you for the gentle touches, Miss Iksaki.” He said suddenly, and she found her hand in his as he held her fingers. “You have a very gentle hand.” He smiled at her and released her hand. “If you are still looking for my master, you shall find him down that corridor.”

He indicated the direction as he rose and then bowed, remaining where he was, and Rae stepped past his smiling face, and into the corridor. When she looked back, Dallas was gone again.

Curiouser and curiouser, Rae thought, following this new hallway now, still looking about her.

This place was like a maze! The space here was warped, just like it’d been inside Sage’s rooms back at the school, how else could one fit all this into something a mile wide?

Then at last she found Sage, and covered her mouth as she chuckled at seeing him there.

He was kneeling on the floor, playing with a junction node on the floor, using some strange looking tools while he worked with his shirt and jerkin off, and he had a bandanna wrapped on top of his head in a way so that his ears could stick out.

“Alright Dallas, energize the gate.” Sage was saying, and right before her, she saw a wall begin to ripple like water to where she could see her reflection – the image of a rather muscular young Aphkei pooch – the very walls moving like water moves after a stone had been thrown into it, rippling in waves from the very center.

And just then the wall liquefied into shimmering water before it slowly became flat again, though a subtle ebb and tide remained. She could see a corridor past that rippling water way, and Sage then removed another tool and began manipulating a series of dialing gears with numbers on their faces.

Rae watched with interest as Sage lifted his hand and passed it into the water, and she gasped as his hand vanished as it touched the water. He retrieved his hand and continued to work.

The first three dials he set to maximum level till he moved onto the next one. This time as he dialed it up to maximum he dialed it up too quickly and suddenly the field of water transformed into a chaotic field of lightning. Sage swore and moved it back a couple of touches and it returned to water again.

Rae suppressed a giggle at his folly, and looking up, saw the corridor that lay on the other side of that rippling wall now appeared far shorter, and she could see another rippling wall on the far end of it.

Sage continued to manipulate the dial, getting it to a particular setting before moving onto the next one.

He was fine tuning something, Rae thought, watching as his hands moved while he watched the corridor shorten with each click of the dial gears.

One dial right after the other the corridor got shorter and shorter, and this time as he passed his hand through the water or whatever that ripple was, she could see his hand reappearing down the corridor on the other side of the other rippling wall... like two force fields holding back a cache of water, and anything passing through the water immediately showed up on the other end. Five more gears beyond the first three had passed, and three more he manipulated till there were only two left.

These last two gears he paid particular attention to as the two walls were now very close to one another. As he fine tuned the gears, the distance between the two grew shorter and shorter, till the walls were snapping and hissing electrically between one another as he reached the very last dial. Then he clicked the dials one at a time, till with one final click both walls disappeared, revealing an open corridor beyond.

Sage passed his hand through where that wall had been, and she saw his hand move freely this way and that without a single trace of disturbing any strange energies.

“Alright Dallas, how’s the integrity?” Sage said aloud into the open air, looking up and passing his hand through the space again.

“One hundred percent and holding, master.”

“Good, energize your network link and reconnect to your MCPU. I know you’ve been feeling a bit naked out here, and it’ll be good to link up with your core.”

“You know it, master. Energizing link now.” And Rae blinked as a series of beams were energized through the junction box, with each beam incased in a separate crystal tube.

Where the wall had been, there was now a hairline fracture going all around the corridor. The deck plates met one another here, and even as she watched, that fracture sealed itself, creating a seam that quickly smoothed itself out. The only remaining fracture that remained was between the crystal tubes between this original corridor, and the one Sage somehow just connected...

“Connecting to MCPU.” Dallas’s voice called out. “MCPU connection established. Adding resources. Updating source files. All is well master; it’s good to see you again.”

“Good to see you too Dallas. Are you getting all the new information from your shard personality?”

“Indeed I am, master. And I can’t believe you lost a bet too.”

“Very good Dallas, continue intergrading your shard personality back to core. Save the interdimensional ratios for any future access points between the Great Wide Universe and the Prime Universe. We may need them to connect to the hub in the future.”

“Information saved. And if I may, master, you have a guest standing behind you.”

Sage turned, and he smiled at Rae.

“Indeed I do. Thank you Dallas, I’ll continue from here. Go ahead and lock the junction point, I’m done here.” He then nodded to Rae. “Good afternoon Rae. It’s good to see you.”

“Wh-what just happened there? Why did Dallas act as if he hadn’t seen you for awhile?”

“Because this version of him hasn’t. He’s integrating a shard of himself that he cut off from his core personality to serve me while I’m here, a shard that was hoped to be only on a temporary basis, but Fate and circumstance have changed that, so he needs to absorb that portion of his personality again.

“Now, tell me, how are you enjoying my lair?” he smiled, replacing the tool in his hand to his tool belt and waited for Rae to answer.

“It’s a marvelous creation Sage. It feels so peaceful here...”

“Thank you. Why don’t you come with me... there’s a final process that I need to do in the center of my Lair in order to complete this junction. Would you like to see more?”

“Please.” Rae smiled, and followed Sage deeper into the lair.

She followed him around as he opened the occasional console, adjusting measurements while the pair of them talked, and she noted that he was keeping a certain distance from her... careful not to touch her.

She smiled at the honor of this creature that he would not interfere with another man’s fiancé... even in passing. Whatever female finally earned his affections would truly be a woman given the gift of one a very loving, caring and devoted male.

Eventually, she found herself in a chamber with many corridors leading off of it while Sage worked on a central panel in the floor with his strange tools.

“You and Dallas have a very artful eye for natural surroundings.” She mused, kicking her legs like a young woman as she sat on fold in the wall where it met the floor here. “I wish I could see what your homeworld looks like.”

“Would you?” Sage said, pausing as he looked up at her with a subtle smile.

“Yes. It must be a beautiful place to create Daedalus and you.” She smiled.

Sage then bent, made one final adjustment, and she saw a shield melt over his workplace before Sage closed an access panel. The panel sealed itself so well that it didn’t even look like an access panel any more, melding seamlessly with the floor.

He then rose, planting his tools into his belt, and raising a hand, he offered it to Rae to help her off her roost, led her five steps off to the right, and stood her facing a blast door.

“Dallas, please open hub door one.” Sage said into the air.

“Compliance, Master Sage,” and the blast door slid open.

Rae gasped as she was shown a mountain valley, and paramount off to one side of the valley was a great tree that positively *dwarfed* the one that had just grown in the volcano caldera Sage’s Lair had been built within. But this was no Caldera... this was a valley bordered on all sides by towering mountains with pointed crags. The tree here had a golden trunk and brilliantly white leaves that created a canopy over the entire valley, letting in great shafts of the sun that shimmered and moved over the valley.

Sage remained behind as Rae took a step forward, seeing all the plentiful life here, and ether streams that crisscrossed the valley in hundreds of locations, all intersecting with that great tree, who’s base was miles across.

Greenery climbed up the mountain as high as it could go, and nestled in the mountain walls, the valley floor, around and even in the tree itself and its branches were the homes of the denizens of this valley.

There was the sound of a low song in the air, and looking up she saw a beautiful creature all of white flying across the sky, his song chilling her heart and speaking to her deepest heart-felt emotions.

“Wh-what is that?!” she pointed.

“That would be Lord Blind IO. His penchant for sounds makes his song the most beautiful of all the dragons. He’s a royal dragon and a member of the Dragon Council here on Earth.”

“We’re on Earth?! *Your* Earth?!” she stammered, turning around to stare at Sage. “B-but how? We went through your lair on Wave World!”

A Temporal Mage’s skills at work.” Sage said quietly. “And a mixture of the advanced technology that make up Daedalus’s body. Dallas’s physical form spans across six separate universes. You are now standing in the original portion of my Lair on Earth.

“What you witnessed earlier with the shimmering fields of light merging and the corridor was me adjusting the temporal flux between your universe and mine so that the passageway appears to be one continuous construct.

“The barely noticeable groove between each wing of my Lair and the network connection node that use multiple lasers at that junction point to link Dallas’s constructs together is where your universe and other universes end and mine begin.

“There are two other corridors exactly like it, between our universes, but do not worry... Dallas will not allow anyone from your universe to cross over into mine. The corridor that you entered through has already been sealed against intrusion...”

Rae only listened with half an ear as she stepped further outward into the shimmering light of what felt like dawn here on Earth. Back on Wave World, the sun had been setting. The beauty of this place, this valley, was unfathomable. She didn’t think that it was possible that so much life, so much pure, unadulterated life could be found anywhere in the multiverse. The barrier between the etherscape and the physical realm was so thin here that they were practically overlapping. She could see the spirits walking here, but only because of her connection to magic, and they bowed and waved at her as they passed being that they were aware of the connection within her.

Then she felt Sage’s hand on her shoulder, and she turned to look at him and he smiled comfortingly at her as he took her deeper into the valley.

All below her, she saw the denizens of the valley, more humans all in one place than she'd ever seen in her life, and Lycan of all breeds and descriptions. Lions, and Tigers and Bears... oh my... and nearly all of them with white fur. There were white falcons, white foxes and white hares like the Oliverian. There were other species she didn't recognize, and after asking Sage about them, he described them.

"She's a Great White Were Shark, don't worry, her bark is worse than her bite." Rae amazed at all the teeth in that mouth, "And that one there is my counterpart with the Azure Clan, they're made up of mostly by the aquatic were species. He's a tiger shark, and the big brutish but gentle giant beside him is Orca... he's a... well... a were orca, or killer whale. Don't worry... the *'killer'* portion of their name is undeserving."

Rae continued to stare. "This is all so amazing!"

"Well Rae..." Sage grinned. "Welcome to the Valley of Shangri-La."

Mother of Songs, Father of Music

Rae returned with a euphoric expression, and returning to her fiancé, she and Makahn cuddled for hours as she shared her intoxicating feelings of what she'd experienced on Sage's homeworld. Her impression of humans and Sage's sub-species of Lycans had raised several fold to see what they've built for themselves there.

Sanari passed by her house in the late evening, going for a walk along the seashore, and smiled as she felt the feelings of love from that house, and paused for a moment, feeling her heart patter a little quicker as she opened her mouth a little and breathed in the sea breeze through both her mouth and nose.

To a cat, this was the ultimate sensory experience; to both smell and taste the air at the same time. The combined scent and taste of the sea air relaxed her.

But then her ears picked up as they heard something on the wind over the crash and roar of the ocean in the strong evening breeze, and opening her eyes she turned toward the sound and strained to hear it.

It was a melody... someone was playing a flute, she thought.

She stepped off in the direction of its melody, and the closer she got, the more her heart yearned to hear more of this intoxicating music; of what sounded like three flutes now, playing all at once.

And then she climbed up a hill and stopped, seeing Lord Sage sitting on a wooden costal marker overlooking the ocean, the moons rising to play against his white pelt while he held a long flute to his lips, with his long fingers playing a melody that seemed to sing of its own accord.

It made her feel feelings that she'd thought were forgotten to her, and she began to weep at the sound of the melody.

A high pitched twittering, a mid-tone melody, and a low sound that seemed to generate the perfect white noise as it rose and fell in pitch along with the melody. It was like a fife, and two flutes combined in one.

Sage's fingers played the notes, while his hands moved the flute forward and backward, and she heard the sounds changing as he blew down different tubes in the long flute with the three tubes joining at the lips ... and the focus of the sounds changed to focus from the high-pitched voice to the low voice as he played all three of the different flutes at once.

She'd never heard of such an instrument. The control one must have to use it must be remarkable. Something inside her remarked that the finger, lip and tongue, and breathing control to control such an instrument must be enormous!

Just then Sage ended the melody and lowered the pipe, and turned to look over his shoulder at Sanari, and she saw the half-slit of his eye from over that broad shoulder of his as it glowed brightly through the haze of approaching darkness.

"I often try to find seclusion while I practice, but more often than not I find that I drag in an admirer or two. Thank you for listening, Mother of Songs, I hope that it pleased you."

"I-I have a new song to add to my name now, Lord Sage." She said as she wiped her eyes with both hands, and then felt a tissue move into her hands, and when she looked up, she saw that great Weretiger was standing before her, his hands in hers, and the tissue between their fingers.

Despite her own abilities of a former warrior, she'd never personally known anyone who could move so quickly, or so silently. There were legends of fighters here in her own universe who could do what he could do, but she'd yet to meet any of them. She looked down at the tissue and smiled as Sage backed a couple of steps away from her to give her room to wipe her eyes.

"You play so beautifully, Lord Sage." She said, holding the tissue with both hands. "What is that instrument called?"

Sage looked down at the long greenish-black pipe with silvery highlights in his hand. He held it up for better view of it for himself... the thing made from parts of his own body using the art of the bio-mage combined with Biokinetics; it held his own life force inside it, along with his own power.

It still surprised him that this instrument was actually the peaceful, gentle version of his bio blade.

"I... don't know. It has no name. It is believed that to name it in a language would be to belittle it. I had to refer to it as *'that instrument'* too." He smiled at her. "The most talented of Satyr of my world used it to charm the hearts of women, while the Siren used it to charm the hearts of men.

"The closest one comes to naming such an instrument is instead an untitled short melody of only a few notes." Sage thought for a moment, and then taking Sanari's hand, placed the flute into her slender, long four-fingered hand.

"It's so warm. It pulses with a life force." She whispered.

Sage took her other hand and placed it against his own chest, and she gasped as she realized the connection between master and instrument, she looked up into his green eyes,

and felt a connection as thin as spider silk connecting her to him, and she gasped at the feeling of it.

“In order to be a great warrior, one must learn to hold a sword in stillness. The same goes for being a great musician, for in order to learn to play this flute, one must learn to hold it in stillness.

“This flute is also my blade,” he said, and lifted his hand to hold it, and the thing immediately transformed, breaking apart into coiling wisps that formed a pommel and then ejected a shining black and silver-edged blade out into the air, and Sanari felt its peace transform into an instrument of protection. Not war, like other weapons... this one was used to protect; the last bastion for the innocent against violence. But like the flute, this thing beat with the same heartbeat that Lord Sage possessed, and resonated with the same lifeforce. “Two halves of the same coin. One of peace, the other of chaos.

“Yin and Yang.”

Sanari looked up at Sage again, the corners of her eyes pinching as she began to understand more of him.

In order for balance to be made, the darkness and the light must be equal. To know greater light means one must know greater darkness. Bitter and the sweet, and to create a melody so perfect in its light and sweetness... how great then is the darkness and the bitter that this tiger man has experienced in order to create such a melody?

Sanari’s small mouth pursed and she felt for this tiger greatly as she removed her hold on the sword and his chest.

“You are a creature of many talents, Lord Sage.” She said quietly.

“Some I wished that I could undo.” Sage said quietly, and sighing retracted the blade into his hand.

Sanari stared at him, and she felt... compelled... to act on a feeling that entered into her heart, and taking a breath, she opened her mouth and spoke it.

“Lord Sage, please come to my home in the morning... I wish to have tea with you so that I may learn to know you better.”

She smiled as Sage did, and her heart fluttered at the sight of that smile, and again she felt as if he’d become her protector again, and with his next words, her heart lightened.

“I would be honored, Mother of Songs.”

The morning after, Sage had enjoyed the company of one of the most enlightened of women it'd ever been his privilege to know. The tea that she served was sweet, and they talked over the steam and vapors rising off the tea. Sage had a smile on his face as he watched this graceful maiden, and took to laying his hand on the table between them in his desire to reach out and touch her.

“Do you mind if I smoke, Mother?” Sage asked at last.

“Depends upon what you smoke, milord.” She smiled warmly back at him.

Neither of them realized it, but Sanari had placed her own hand on the table before herself as well.

“It’s a mixture of natural herbs. It is against my faith to use narcotics or harmful chemicals. If it offends, I will stamp it out immediately.”

“Very well...” she said, and Sage reached into his belt pouch, removing his long pipe – a pipe that was longer than the pouch it came out of – and a brick of the strange mixture of herbs he used for smoking, and breaking off a piece off the brick of the odd mélange of herbs, he packed his pipe, flicked his fingers to produce a flame, held the flame between his thumb and forefinger and lit the mixture. Then holding the bowl in one hand, he inhaled some of the smoking herb, and blew its contents downward toward the table.

He watched as Sanari closed her eyes and inhaled briefly, and then after a second inhaled more deeply.

“It’s... so... sweet. Almost like incense, and it clears the mind.”

“It’s a mass of medicinal herbs, most of which are designed to clear the air passageways, allowing one to breathe easier. More air in the lungs means more oxygen in the blood, and more oxygen in the blood means a clearing of the mind. I do use it as incense in its brick form but to smoke it, as a shaman showed me once, has additional benefits.”

“Like what?” Sanari smiled, leaning forward and balancing her head on the backs of her hands as her fingers laced with one another.

Sage smiled and puffed some more, and then let the smoke escape simultaneously from his mouth and nostrils, and then waft up from the bowl, mixing with the vapor from the tea. His other hand moved in amongst the swirling mists, and moving his fingers through the air, he mixed them briefly before withdrawing his hand, and Sanari watched as a shape began to form.

“He used it to tell stories to young children. This was the first one I saw him use.” He chuckled. “Forgive me... it is a children’s story...”

Sanari smiled but allowed Sage to continue.

“There once was a baby dragon, that’d lost his home.” Sage said, and the smokes changed color and coiled, to show a miniscule Dragonette flying through the air, and when it opened its mouth, it gave off a small squeak of sound. “He was very sad.” And the baby landed on a rock that rose up in the mists, and began to rub its eyes, making soft chirps and squeaks as it cried. “And he cried out, softly at first, and then louder still...”

“Mama! Mama! Where are you?” the image spoke in its squeak, and Sanari blinked at it. “Mama! Mama! Where are you mother? I’m lost!”

Sage then lifted his hand and slid his fingers through the image to disrupt it and cancel it out, and again puffed out more smoke.

“And from afar,” he continued. “A mother Dragon that had lost its kitling, heard her baby’s voice,” and Sanari watched, enraptured as a great dragon with gossamer wings suddenly appeared atop another mountainous rock, her wings unfurling grandly to wrap around both Sanari’s and Sage’s heads before she took off up into the air.

“My baby!” She cried, and Sanari watched it fly over her head, and then circle around her, trailing wisps of smoke even as the baby and its rock reformed, and she landed upon his rock and surged forward to take up her child.

“The mother heard her baby’s voice and soared through the air to find him, and picking him up and cradling him,” Sanari watched the image do exactly as Sage said it as the baby squeaked and the mother Dragoness sang like Sage’s flute. “She returned home with her baby, to tuck him in, safe and sound in his own little nest.” And Sanari watched the images following Sage’s descriptions, the mother dragoness folding the baby’s wings about him like a blanket as he dozed off. “And the baby was happy, and dreamed sweet dreams.”

And Sage’s hand twisted around the coils of smoke beneath the image and it unraveled before dissipating into the air. Sanari was left with the feeling of comfort, as if she’d just been laid down by her mother and set off to rest for the night.

She applauded Sage, and he nodded at her in a mock bow.

“It’s... just something I use to put cubs to sleep before they go to bed.” He smiled.

“It was a good story, milord.” She commented, and then took a sip from her tea. “It even has its appeal with an old immortal like me.”

Sage smiled at her, and continued to puff on his pipe as they continued to talk, about the weather, about music and art, and outside Sanari’s home, the sun steadily rose, and then began to sink

It was late afternoon when they finally emerged from her home and then stepped out of the shrine, Sage being the gentleman as he lifted his hand to help her down any steps they traversed.

“Milord... I may be over twenty five centuries old, but I am not so helpless.” She laughed as she again took his hand.

“Forgive me, milady. An old tiger’s habits toward the fairer sex. Especially toward one as beautiful as you...”

Sanari covered her cheek and laughed, trying to hide a deep blush.

“You do an old woman honor, Lord Sage. But why do you call yourself old? You look so young.”

They began walking with one another. “That is true. But the eyes of an immortal always give them away, no matter what form they hold. Like yourself, milady. Your eyes are deep in color, and have aged and matured despite that your body has not, and shine with the glow of the wisdom that comes with all your years.

“It compliments you.”

Sanari never remembered smiling so much... her cheeks burned with it, and she walked beside this tall Weretiger, she held her hands clasped close to her chest, not wanting them to be too far from her cheeks so as to cover them. But Sage’s words to her were burning a deeper color into her cheeks every time she blushed, and were etching dimples in her face that were already so prominent in his own face whenever he smiled.

“You seem to have that look that you speak of, Lord Sage. If I may ask... how old are you?”

“I’m eighty-five.”

“So young.” Sanari remarked, and looked up at the tiger, that made him smile instead, and her heart fluttered more at the sight of that smile directed at her again. “How did you become an immortal?” she said, asking the question at last.

“I was born one.” He said simply, shrugging, and Sanari’s pace slowed and then stopped, and Sage turned toward her, concerned at the look on her face.

Her own immortality came with intense violence in her past life, violence that eventually led her to an equally violent and ignominious death. That death had become her trigger, and she awoke half a day later, completely healed, and now empowered with immortality.

To believe that someone stood before her who’d been given the gift of immortality, instead of earning it like she and so many others she knew of was almost ludicrous.

“How do you mean?” she asked, her eyes narrowing some.

Sage stepped back to her and took both her slender hands in his.

“My people, the Lycan, are called the *‘undying breeds’* because most often we live for centuries before death claims us. The reason for this is our healing factor, which rapidly replaces lost limbs and repairs even mortal wounds.

“I likewise have that ability, but it has been amplified in me several hundred fold. Where it takes a member of my race to regenerate a lost limb in hours, I do it in less than a minute. But because of this healing factor, it has a tendency of slowing the aging process. We still mature, but upon reaching maturity, depending upon your breed, we age very, very slowly.

“In me, the healing factor is so efficient that it has the ability to even reverse the affects of aging. I stopped aging upon achieving the body of a mature adult, somewhere in my mid-twenties. Because of this, this power that I’d been granted for some unknown reason has allowed me to be deemed *‘clinically immortal.’*”

“By all rights to everyone around me, I should be middle aged now. It’s not easy watching friends and loved ones grow old all around you. I know that they will begin to die eventually.” Sage looks sad, and then lifts his head to Sanari, looking quite timid. “Do you ever get used to it?”

“No.” Sanari managed, and took both his hands in hers now. “Though you try not to make attachments, they eventually do happen anyways, and you find yourself sitting at their death bed. You do, however, learn to not mourn their passing... but you do... sometimes... envy it.”

“It must be lonely.”

“It is... at times. But then someone special walks into your life, and while they are there, you try to live in their life and be apart of them while they are here.”

Sage smiled down at her. “Sounds like a plan.” And his fingers closed about Sanari’s. “Now... what was it we were talking about just now?”

Sanari giggled, and slid her arm into Sage’s, and they spent the rest of the day just walking around the school... talking.

Meniko stood before the towering tree as it waved in the wind and sunlight, casting its shadows over the world. Daedalus’s drones had built an advanced school over night, with facilities to allow for the transport and housing of students and faculty, and there

was already a list of faculty members who'd be joining this new school from all over the Universe, and from Sage's home universe.

Sage hadn't asked for a single penny from her, the league, or their imperial backers. Instead, he had corporate backers in the form of an uprising corporation known as '*Ronin Enterprises*.'

Oddly enough, this Ronin Enterprises didn't ask for its logo to be placed anywhere on Sage's school, and had given him an immense grant. It provided for the advertisements for schooling and employment on the Interstellar Computer Matrix and holo-vid lines, and had taken an ad out at every major interstellar news syndicate there was, and all the while asking for absolutely nothing in return from Sage.

Curious about this corporation, she learned that its headquarters was a mobile ship based one, being that their major occupation was archeology, their headquarters moved to wherever their archeological site was. The company uncovered lost information from planets that were destroyed from the Aphkei rampage so long ago, and likewise occasionally found new bits of information like alien technology, even Hadran science and more some said, though knowing more about the Hadran than the average person, she surmised that that last rumor about the Hadran was false.

As of late, however, this company was now spreading out, opening its markets into finance, law, cosmetics, weapons development, ship development, research and discovery, exploration and so on. It'd already gobbled up multiple smaller companies as it grew, having surpassed its status as a single world company and evolved into a galactic company within only five years since its inception.

It was already apart of the Galactic fortune five hundred, and would perhaps soon span into multi-galactic status.

When Meniko entered inside Sage's lair and the natural ergonomic feel of its walls and floors, she could've sworn that Sage was benefiting from their discoveries of Ronin Enterprises first, though she could feel nothing of the Hadran Metal DNA technology here. This was all purely biological science.

The whole of the lair was alive!

She found herself to the hub of the school, with its pools and fish. For a time, nestled here underneath the tree in her bird maiden form, she felt at peace and unworried. Something... nurturing... like a father wrapping his arms around her inside a warm fuzzy blanket assailed her, and she forgot for a moment that this was Sage's home, and he was an annoyance.

"Good morning, Headmistress." A voice said breaking into her repose, and she turned to see that bioroid Dallas bowing toward her. "I trust that you are finding your way easily here?"

“A school, built inside a giant tree, resting atop a once active volcano.” She mused, and then looked to the bioroid. She’d never seen an automaton that felt alive before.

“Yes, ma’am, though if I may correct you, this volcano is still active. The tree controls any major eruptions, and lava is redirected to venting tubes around the mountain to allow the island to grow naturally. Given a few thousand years, there’ll be a land bridge between your island and ours.”

“Indeed.” She spoke softly, and half dreaded this dragon slayer – excuse me... *dragon’s slayer* – living upon her world for that long. “Daedalus, I want you to answer me a question...”

“What is, exactly... the Holy Order?”

Sage sat watching the wonders wrought by the students of the Mystic League, marveling at the spectacular skills they were able to produce. A plethora of students in varying degrees of Godhood, from young gods and goddesses with chiseled Olympian bodies, to full-blown God-like immortals. As he watched them, he came to realize that he himself had massive holes in his understanding of certain concepts, and watched on while he smoked his pipe, learning scores of information in just this simple act of observation.

His free hand mimicked many of their movements, his lips mumbling words that were incanted into the open air in the form of fierce shouts. At the tips of his fingers, minute glares of magical fire and electricity, raw energy were being formed as he memorized all this information flooding into him.

But despite how vast their chosen magic of sorcery was, as it was, however, their knowledge of chi magics here was rudimentary, which was perhaps because they decided against such teachings, in comparison to the teachings of the Holy Order, and their knowledge of Aura Magics was abysmal. Their knowledge of Shadow Magic and Temporal Magic – magics his own people held for granted – was positively nonexistent.

What they *did* have, however, was in a word: *vast!*

Their sorcery library was the largest he’d ever encountered, and their counts of sources to draw power from were incredible.

But take one of these sorcerers and teach them how to tap the One Source and their powers will be truly incredible. No wonder so many immortals and near immortals all exist in one place.

While he waited for his next interview with yet another possible instructor for the Shadow League to arrive, he decided to walk among the students, tapping out his pipe and

letting go of the long curved thing to allow it to disappear into the air beside him before he stepped forward quietly with his hands behind his back.

He'd stand and watch the students in varying tasks, his ears twitching while his eyes watched the magical flow and emanations going on all about him, viewing their aura's translating the magic into force while not saying a word.

He was feeling the old craving again just being in this place... it wasn't a craving for power. Not in the slightest. It was a craving for knowledge, a drive that'd allowed him to advance so far in his life as it was... power was just a result of said knowledge.

He stepped lithely then to come to stand behind an ensemble practicing their combat magics. They were throwing force balls at tall stone pillars, trying to destroy them, and when a pillar was destroyed it quickly reformed itself back up automatically.

His glowing green eyes watched the motions of those who seemed to be destroying their target readily, following their motions and then watched the magical emanations from their spell energies as they flew passed, even slowing down his perception to watch it better.

"Finding anything of interest, Mr. Sage?" a voice suddenly entered his hearing, and he turned, time abruptly returning to normal as he did, and then looked down to see Noxi standing there.

"Hello Miss Noxi." He tried to smile and gave a respectful nod to her, seeing her standing there with arms crossed and her fingers tapping her sizeable bicep.

"What do you think of them?" she asked.

"They're all doing quite well, and those on the far end there are exemplary."

"But?" she prompted.

"Nothing. They should be complimented on their abilities."

"Hmm... why don't you show them how you'd do it, Sage." She said with a buck-toothed grin, and began to push him forward.

"But..." he managed.

"Tien," she said to one of the students as she pushed Sage forward. "Allow Mr. Sage to take your spot for a moment. "Now everyone! Lord Sage will be demonstrating how he will break a pillar of Pseudomatter at long range. He seems very apt at disintegrating these substances at close range,"

"But." Sage tried at last as the students stopped and began to gather.

“...But let’s see just how well he can do at long range. Now... Mr. Sage... whenever you’re ready.”

Sage’s eyes pinched at the corners as he looked at Noxi, and then at her students who looked up at him expectantly, and then he sighed and looked back at Noxi apologetically, lifted a hand and flicked something small up into the air with his thumb that immediately began to squeal with a high pitched whine that rapidly went beyond everyone’s hearing spectrum as it hovered in midair.

Sage continued to watch Noxi without even looking at the target as he threw his hand outward like he was tossing something casually away, and that little glowing thing that whined snapped outward and screamed toward the pillar, where it dug deeply into the pillar, but it did not explode.

Noxi smirked. “You see! All the stories that have been circulated about Mr. Sage aren’t what they appear to be. His powers are pretty fast and impressive at first, but they pale in comparison to Sorcery. Now, Mr. Sage, what do you have to say to these students?”

Sage crossed his arms, staring at Noxi for a moment longer, and then turned to face the students with a wry smile. “Wait for it...”

And just then there was a scream of energy, and as a result, all the sound in the world ceased, and in its place was a single chord of sound, so loud it seemed to suck all other sounds into it. The pillar Sage’s tiny little energy ball struck suddenly shattered into dust, and a radial shockwave erupted outward from a blossom of released energy, the shockwave cutting the other pillars in half and shattering them into dust as well.

The cobbles around the pillars likewise shattered into dust, right along with the hillock behind the pillars.

Sound slowly returned and Sage turned his gaze toward the students.

“One school of Magic is not greater than any of the others. Every school of magic has its strengths and its weaknesses, which all depend upon the being using the magic. Magic is also likewise empowered by one’s knowledge of reality. The knowledge of a thing, allows one to control a thing, and the ability to control a thing allows one to destroy a thing. The greatest power of knowledge is to create a thing...”

“Pseudomatter is the second densest material in creation, but it, like anything else, has a certain resonance in which it can shatter. I used a spell method of using something the target was weak against in order to destroy it. You were all doing exemplary work with Miss Noxi’s instruction, and some of you were succeeding in even destroying the target! That is phenomenal against such a target, using neutral energy to destroy something so daunting, and you should be congratulated.”

Sage then turned to Noxi, and bowed his head, and when he raised it, he spoke directly into her mind. *'I am not an enemy, Miss Noxi. Please don't force me to remain one. You are too close of a friend for those I've learned to care about here for us to remain like this. Whatever I have done to wrong you, please forgive me.'*

And then he bowed even deeper to her before rising.

“Excuse me students, but I have a prior engagement that I must attend to. Miss Noxi.” He said her name one last time with a nod, for proper respect before leaving.

The devastation of his little spell had worked its damage. The magic that reassembled the pillars was having problems sorting out all the pieces as Sage met with what might prove to be his next language instructor.

“The Holy Order is an order of guardians over a hundred and twenty thousand years old.” Dallas was saying. “The order has been the principal defense of Terra’s Holy of Holies since the age of Dragons. Control of the Order has passed hands as each new species has arrived on Earth Prime, moving from the Dragons to the Fae, from the Fae to the Elf, and recently from the Elf to the Lycan... who represent the bonding of Humanity and the Earth.

“Lycans, guided by the Dra’Con – the Weredragons – have controlled the Ruling Council of the Order for the past fifteen thousand years.”

Meniko sat at a table listening to this oration as Dallas poured her some sweetened green tea.

“What is the Ruling Council?” Meniko asks.

“There are nine members. The Center has only one member to it. The requirement of this position is that the one holding it must be a Dra’Con. Lord Sage has been selected for and passed the tests of worthiness for this position to succeed the current Grandmaster of the Order in that position. As soon as he earns his last Soul Gem, he will return to Terra and assume control of that position and allow his Grandmaster to retire after three thousand years of service.

“Surrounding the position of the Grandmaster or the Center, are the Three Highmasters, also known as the Aspects.

“The Aspect of the Sage, the Aspect of the Priest and the Aspect of the General.”

“Let me guess, Lord Sage holds the Aspect of the Sage.” Meniko commented after sipping her tea. It had a good taste to it.

“Indeed he does. But the Aspect of the Sage is a scholarly position. Sage acts as the chief healer for the Order, but some say he can hold any of the other two offices better than their existing holders... which some believe has prompted the Grandmaster to name my master as successor.

“The Aspect of the Priest is the High Priest of the Order, and is likewise Lord Sage’s Half-brother Patch. The Aspect of the General is held by a towering fem – a Werebear of the Polar breeds – who’d perhaps give your Illia a run for her money strength wise.”

Meniko snickered at the concept of Illia being outmatched strength wise, but then remembered what had happened to her the last time someone challenged that strength. She’s recovering... but...

“Beneath The Three – or the Inner Circle of Sages – are The Five, or the Outer Circle of Sages. They represent the five elements of Earth, Fire, Wind, Water and Wood. They are the governors over the whole of the Earth in regards to the Order, and the most advanced masters of the Order.

“Two of its members are Sage’s graduated students, and not only are they quite accomplished, but they are well loved members of our society.”

“Stop trying to butter me up regarding Sage, Dallas.” Meniko mused, and the bioroid bowed, stepping back to a respectable distance as a servant should.

“As you wish, but to continue, there are places on the Earth in which it is the responsibility for the Holy Order to protect, such as The Lost City of Atlantis, El Dorado, Shangri-La, and so on. Holy places in which the spiritual power is so potent that the barrier between Astral Space – what you’d call Realm Space – and the Physical Realm are so thin that it’s practically nonexistent.

“There are... otherworldly forces who’ve been trying to lay their hands on these places for billions of years... and as such, Earth has been invaded by major incursions hundreds of times. Which brings us to the second reason as to why the Order exists, and that is to protect Earth from those otherworldly forces.

“The greatest percentage of the Order is now Lycan, either naturally born, or transformed.”

“Transformed?”

Dallas paused, delivering a small plate of cookies and then sat down, folding his hands together.

“A Lycan, under certain circumstances, can pass on the... ‘*Condition*’... of Lycanthropy unto another species.

“The mouth,” Dallas gestures to his own mouth with an opened hand and a circling motion. “And it’s many fangs, contains supremely virulent saliva armed with a retro-virus that re-orders the bitten individual’s DNA so that they become a Lycan themselves.”

Meniko lowered her tea cup to her plate with a click of china. “You mean that... that... *Monster*, can make *more* monsters just like him?!”

“Please calm yourself, Mother Meniko. Lord Sage does not seek to transform all of your students into slaving beasts... even if that was what Lycanthropy caused. For Lord Sage to pass on the trait, he must bite someone during the full moon. Once bitten, it takes three whole days for the virus to painlessly, albeit erotically, transform its new host into a Lycan.

“In which case, treatment to halt the virus can be handled with your standard ‘*Rite of Cleansing*,’ which is available to many members of The Faith in your Sanari’s Chapter of the Grace League of your school. Without the magical enchantment following with the virus, the virus cannot stand up against a healthy body’s immunities and is killed out. The Cleansing can be done up to seventy hours after having been bitten, but must be completed before the start of the seventy first hour.

“Once, however, that that seventy first hour begins, by destroying the enchantment you will invariably kill the new Lycan... in a most horrible way as their body disintegrates from the inside.”

Meniko’s eyes pinch and lips compress at the thought of one of her students dying like that. Dallas takes the opportunity to pour her more tea.

“Once the virus has run its course, it is a permanent condition, and the enchantment becomes unbreakable... having latched itself with the new Lycan’s life force. The only way to kill the enchantment then, is to kill the Lycan.”

Meniko ruffled her wings in thought, and then turned slightly to watch the elegant and beautiful bioroids working on assembling bases to future exterior constructs.

“Lord Sage, is also an honorable man, Headmistress, and as such, acts with honor. To seriously alter a life like that without their permission is considered a great sin and a dishonor. It goes against his honor, and his faith to bite another to force the change. Unless they ask of it. In which case, if the individual is the ward of another, he asks permission first.”

Meniko nods as she turns back to him, and takes another sip of the tea. “What else were you saying about the Order?” she asks and looks at him.

“The Order is currently populated mostly by Lycan because of their ability to blend in with the human populace of our world. They’re the watchers and observers, looking for

new members to introduce into the faith, and likewise looking for new holes to plug up from possible invasions.

“Because of their work, Lord Sage himself has lived and acted through three whole scale wars, which, thankfully, have remained totally unknown to the rest of the world’s populace.

“As to the remaining organization of the Order, the individuals, they are separated into the three aspects... Like the Inner Circle of Sages.”

“Monks, Priests and Warriors.” Meniko states, seeing where Dallas was going with this.

“Correct. Sage, as the Aspect of the Sage, is the head of the Sages of the Order. They are the fewest, the scholars and thinkers of the order, but... they are stalwart caretakers and guardians.”

Dallas paused, again folding his hands together. “Mother Meniko... is it wrong to desire to Protect, or to care for another?”

Meniko blinked at such a question with an obvious answer.

“Why no, why would you ask such a thing?” she asked, confused. She had thought that this living machine had that understanding at least.

“Because so many people are already persecuting my master for trying to protect and care for others, I had thought... that he might be interfering in other people’s lives in trying to do this if the thought of his actions were conceived of as bad in this universe.”

Meniko was silent, stricken at this logic from this bioroid. Her lips pressed together.

“Lord Sage... is not an evil person.” She finally got out. “He... is not doing anything wrong in his desire to serve and protect, but it is the *how* of his doing that have earned him others ire. He flaunts his powers, and that is considered insensitive. It’s like he wants to be feared, and he wants to be respected.

“Such things are earned... not taken.”

“He doesn’t mean so.” Dallas mentioned.

“I know.” Meniko sighed, and placing her tea cup on its place, slowly rose to her feet from the table Dallas had his bioroids had brought out for them. “He will meet with many a humbling experience here, Daedalus, lest he learns to change the way he thinks about others. He is not a sociable being.”

“Tigers rarely are, headmistress, but I will speak with my master when the time is right.” Dallas rises to his own feet. “But please don’t hate him.” Meniko couldn’t help but smile

as she suddenly began to transform, and where her feet once were, both of her fore claws now laid, with her head high above the bioroid, and she looking down at him.

“That all depends upon Lord Sage, Dallas. He is in a land of Gods and Goddesses. Best if he were to watch his step, for if he treads on the wrong tail, he will find himself truly overwhelmed.”

Meniko flared her wings and beat them down once, rising quickly up into the air, and with another pair of down beats she thrust herself up over the lip of the volcano, while Dallas looked up at her beautiful, luxuriously feathered body.

“I shall inform him, headmistress.” He said quietly, and then retreated back to the lair.

Sanari walked studiously though the morning mists, finding some quiet time for herself as she stepped in silent and graceful steps, feeling the moist air around her feet as she walked toe to heel; an elegant walk with each footstep stepping one right in front of the other.

Her movements were purely instinctual, coming from tens of centuries of repetition and practice.

It was sometimes a good thing for a person just to walk quietly, not really thinking of anything, just listening to the sounds of the world, and she listened to the wash of the waves crashing against the shore, listened to the crickets and the birds, heard her own heart beating softly beneath her bosom, and the swish of her robes.

Lord Sage had given her something new to ponder, in regards to his sword and his flute, that to become truly great at either, one must learn to hold them in stillness. She looked to her staff that tapped the ground at every other foot step, and imagined holding that in stillness.

A staff was an instrument of both war and peace. There were no sharp instruments on it, no blades, no hooking things, just solid coiling wood. It was also the symbol of every holy organization she could think of – either as the primary or the secondary symbol – and she knew quite a few. It was a symbol of healing, a symbol of wisdom, and a symbol of faith...

It was a thing that was hard to ignore.

Her hand turned and she palmed her staff, and closing her eyes, she tried to feel what this stillness was, and began to focus on the peace in the world. Her head lowered and she concentrated on the wood, feeling its polished and smooth surface, and breathed softly as she felt its connection to the earth from where its tip rested against the ground. She

exhaled, and tasted the air, and slowly opened her eyes, finding herself nearing a wakeful meditation that washed over her.

But then her eyes began to focus on something inside her, and her meditation broke, and she blinked as she came out of it, seeing the shadows crystallize suddenly into a form and then a person, and she found herself looking at the now familiar form of Lord Sage Preypacer.

The corners of her mouth turned upward as she saw him moving with his eyes closed, his hands moving in a graceful Katta form.

She took a closer step to him, standing on the edge of the small practice platform he was in, watching his feet, covered in toeless and heelless wrappings as he then stepped forward, stepping first with his toes, rocking off his trailing foot and settling on his leading foot.

Even she, master of the Final Fist, envied his sense of balance.

Her lips turned a little more toward a smile as she watched him move, enjoyed gazing upon a strong, agile male with his shirt off... something she never really got to do anymore with all the young strapping males in the Grace League being robed all the time.

And he *did* have a really nice butt.

His form was perfection in motion. Amazing for one so young. From their conversations the other day, she'd learned that he was a Bio Mage, and a Biokinetic. The control he held over his own body was amazing from his training in these arts, that for one so young as he, he held the mastery of someone centuries old.

Nonetheless... he had a ways to go, she smiled.

She watched his motions, his arms moving gracefully about him in a controlled meditative dance, his fingers moving as the situation might dictate to control the flow of energies about him. It was amazing...

Then he slowed, placed himself into one final stance, bowed his head, and then seemed to wake up and then gave a start seeing her there.

“Mother Sanari. Forgive me; I... did not know that you'd arrived.”

“I think that in such a trance, Lord Sage that an orbital weapon could've split the planet in two and you wouldn't've noticed.”

He smiled boyishly as he straightened, and Sanari smiled in return, nodding her head.

“If I may, Lord Sage, might I practice with you?”

“I don’t see why not?” he managed, looking down the distance that separated them in height.

But then Sanari turned and stepped away several paces, and Sage paused as she let go of her staff and it floated in mid air before she began to untie the drawstrings about her robes. A corner of Sage’s mouth twitched as she opened the layers of her robes one after the other and allowed them to fall off her bodice down to her hands, and then with a flourish of movement, those robes were wrapped about her staff, and the being known as Mother Sanari stood before him, wearing a pair of thigh socks, along with a simple set of white cotton panties that cut low beneath her navel and a white shirt cut at her midriff.

Despite that her white undershirt held her bosom together and up neatly, Sage could still see the reddened disks of a secondary set of nipples along the bases of her chest. He licked the insides of his teeth for a moment and then closed his eyes and turned his head away, trying not to disrespect her like that.

Sage’s cheek twitched a couple more times as he felt the fur at the nape of his neck stand on end, and when he opened his eyes again and chanced to look back at her, his pupils dilated open. It took every force of command he had of his body to keep it from reacting to such a pleasantly perfect sight, and though his manhood did unsheathe a little, it did not thicken.

Her body was supple, and perfect, full of all the womanly graces that a male would find pleasing, and he watched her with his eyes as she drew close to him, turned and then stood beside him. The perfect muscle tone, the perfect shapeliness. He was so enthralled by her that he had to do a double take when she spoke at last.

“Whenever you are ready, Lord Sage.” She smiled.

Sage took a calming breath, trying to rid his mind of the thoughts rushing through it even as they arrived, and setting himself up into a particular stance, he then moved, and Sanari moved with him in perfect harmony. It didn’t even appear as if she were following him, she simply moved in time with him, as if this were a well practiced choreography.

She was a master, Sage decided at once. And a potent one at that. How else does she possess the skill to match another so easily with nary having seen me move in this way once? He thought, setting himself into a form that she hadn’t seen yet. Then in this case, he continued, am I leading her... or is she leading me?

Sage chanced a sidelong glance at her, watching as she copied his slow motion kick, her muscles sliding beneath her skin with barely even a ripple, so toned and so well used to moving that her grace utterly shamed his.

Sage watched her perfect breathing, saw how her breasts hung heavily into the front of her undershirt, how she balanced on her feet and used her tail – set between those beautifully, and well-rounded glutes – readjust to help keep balance.

Her every line, curve and bulge, her every form and movement... *Perfect*, he thought, his brows beetling. *Great Maker, she's beautiful.* He finished inside his head and continued from the basics into the intermediate designs, and just like always, she moved with him in perfect motion.

He did not notice Sanari turn her head slightly and open one eye as he uttered that thought. Having trained her mind in such ways, she found his mind remarkably logical and calculating, even more so than most males she knew, but to know that he took pleasure in her beside him, pleasure enough to mentally admire her beauty, brought a smile to her face.

She listened to the thoughts in his head as he imagined the movement before doing it – *Very dangerous thing you are doing Sage, projecting your thoughts like that. But then... is that only because I am not an enemy?* – and she followed it in time, noting that as his form grew more and more advanced, that she was surprised that the Humans of Earth indeed did possess a form like this. It was so advanced! And the more she waited for him to move, the more advanced that form became, till... remarkably... he passed onto movements that defied even her vast knowledge of martial arts.

And these were just the movements of the form, she thought. What of the other powers?

And she found herself moving into extensions of the body that actually strained some of the smaller muscles in her body, in particular those in her inner thighs and under arms, and she made a note of this movement so as to exercise them better.

Whenever she needed to move, she wanted to be able to move without hindrance.

He finally brought them both into the finishing stance, and she bowed with him before they uncoiled.

“Very nice, Lord Sage... you possess both power and grace in your movements.”

“My thanks.” He smiled, and she once again felt another comment about her beauty from his mind, and she smiled all the more at him.

“If you don’t mind,” she said, indicating the sun which was only half risen now. “I wish to practice my own form if you’d like to join me.”

“I would be honored.” He said, and again they settled into ready stances of her form, and then the movement began.

Sanari was watching him as she went through her form, and she saw him begin by copying her, but then bit her lower lip as he soon began to move with her like she had done with him. And this time it was her turn to look upon him, at all that superb muscle in his back, from his broad shoulders to... to just below his tail.

She swallowed at that thought and continued, swaying upward, and feeling him matching her. It was a wonderful feeling, that after so long... to actually have a match. As she turned into her next movement she turned her head to look at him as he too propped his tail against the ground for support, and even lifted up on said tail – *I thought only I and the masters of the art had tails strong enough to do that move*, she thought. *I like this Sage* – and she mused at how well he was accomplishing the most advanced motions of her form.

At long last, even as the sun was just fully exposing itself from over the horizon and the sparkling waters, Sanari finished the movement, and as she straightened, she went straight to her robes and dressed even as the first of the students were leaving their dorms for breakfast. The morning mists still disguised the two of them as her hand lifted to her staff and she held it, again trying to hold it in stillness, keen on learning this concept Lord Sage held.

“You dance unlike any I’ve ever had the privilege to meet.” Sage said, smiling dreamily at her. “Far better than even my master possesses.”

“Thank you, milord.” She bowed slightly, lowering her head. “You have a mighty understanding of the art as well.

They stood there for a time, just smiling at one another before the school bell chimed, waking up any other students that were left sleeping. The school would soon be a bustling bee hive.

Sanari let go of her staff again, allowing it to float there while she began to tie up all the strings of her robe. Sage noted that the lowest set looked almost like a Gi. His brows beetled in wonder at why she didn’t disrobe down to that instead of her undergarments, but did not ask why.

“I’d like to see you again for tea, Mother of Songs... if I may. Perhaps bring a blend of my own?”

Sanari’s gaze lifted once she’d finished the last draw string, and she smiled at him. “I’d like that, milord. Say tonight at tenth bell? I will set a place inside my garden.”

“I will be there.”

There was a minute pause, and both of them stiffened as they held back a hand in order to touch one another... perhaps nothing more than a handshake. Instead, they merely

inclined their heads to one another and both turning, began to walk directly away from one another.

Rae, who'd been watching the exchange, and had been watching all three dances – one with just Sage, and then the two following thereafter – folded her arms beneath her breasts and felt a wry quirk of her mouth raise it into a smile.

Like black and white, she thought watching them move away from one another. Somehow, she knew... something had already sealed those two together...

Sage's school was now awaiting final inspection from the Imperium. The fact that his school was officially a corporate sponsored school, meant that his resources came from said company and not the Imperium, which likewise meant that he had certain bonuses of not having to deal with imperial watchdogs all the time, or at least not face to face, unlike Meniko, who had a yearly inspection and was watched constantly by certain members of her own security staff.

But unlike Sage, Meniko enjoyed an infinite level of resources from both the Imperium and the Assembly.

With Daedalus handling all the final adjustments and legal matters, Sage had ample free time on his hands, and so he found himself often times in the school library, pouring over its text books.

When Mother Sanari walked in looking for a good book to curl up with at night time tea, with all her fine robes, silks and linens, looking like the goddess figure that many of the students aspired to be, she found Lord Sage with a pile of opened books arrayed before him. She smiled at the aged Weretiger as he sat in a high-backed chair, one hand keying blindly over a holographic keyboard beside him, a pair of reading glasses balanced on the end of his nose while he rested his chin and mouth on the back of one hand.

Reaching up to pick up her favorite book from the shelf, she held it in one hand as she approached him, watching as his glowing eyes glittered as they moved rapidly as if in REM sleep, pages turning through the power of his mind, and books moving to be reshuffled in the same way before him.

The flurry in his mind was chaos being ordered exceptionally fast.

She was impressed by this Lycan's ability to learn. In the months since being here, he'd already tested out of three years of Mystic League training syllabus and was nearly through his fourth. On top of that, he was simultaneously studying for the Medical Guild exam, and at present qualified as a paramedic.

“Good morning, Lord Sage.” Sanari greeted, and he abruptly looked up at her in shock, despite that his hand keying in notes continued to hammer at keys for a few seconds longer to complete his thought.

“Oh, Mother Sanari, I...” he said and paused halfway from standing up. “Wait... is it morning already?” he looked at his wrist bio-comp, and his eyebrows rose.

“How long have you been here?” she asked with a bit of humor playing across her face.

“Since mid-day yesterday apparently. I get a little caught up when I’m learning something new.”

A little? Sanari thought with a wry quirk to her mouth.

“Please forgive me for not noticing you when you first came in.”

“It’s all right, I only came for a little light reading.” She looked up at him across the table and smiled. “When you have time to take a break, Lord Sage. I’d like to invite you to afternoon tea again. You seem to have missed our last engagement.” She managed to smile whimsically at him.

Sage deflated in exasperation. “I am so sorry... I forgot.”

“You are forgiven, milord... but you do still owe me a taste of that tea you promised me,” she stepped closer, her thighs pressing against the table as her four-fingered hand pressed against the table top. “I do still wish for you to join me.”

“I’d be honored. What time do you wish to expect me?”

Sanari’s smile widened. “Should we say noon, Lord Sage?”

“I shall endeavor to do so.” He smiled.

“Twelve then...” Sanari smiled and walked away. Sage watched her float on by before he set himself to hurrying with his studying. He did not wish by any means to miss this date.

Again...

Sanari sat in her garden, on a stone patio set close to her shrine, her book already several chapters read. Though she’d long developed the ability to read whole pages at a time and understand them like Sage apparently was able to do, there was nothing like taking the time to read a good book a word at a time.

She sat with her legs crossed elegantly beneath her robes and gown, one hand idly stirring some tea sitting beside her. There was a cup sitting upside down on a tea plate waiting for its user, and a pile of untouched desert cookies.

Sanari looked up just then, and was startled to see Lord Sage suddenly standing there. *Such stealth!*

“Forgive me, Mother of Songs. I had to finish my homework first. And also, forgive me if I startled you. Seeing you there... I didn’t want to disturb such a perfect sight.”

Sanari placed her bookmark in the book, blushing a little at his comment, and bade for him to sit, and he deposited a book bag beside the table, pulled out a chair and sat down across from her.

It was a wonderful sensation being in his presence. She felt... Safe. Always safe.

As he’d promised, Sage had brought some of his favored green tea from his homeland. It was bitter tasting, but adding honey to it, to which he added a generous amount, made it taste much better.

And then it happened again. They sat in each other’s company well into the night, and the sun was already setting before they knew what’d happened.

“I’m so sorry for keeping you Sage.” Sanari mused, leaning forward and smiling at the tall cat man.

“You didn’t keep me.” He smiled. “I needed the break anyways.”

“That’s good.” And she rose to her feet. “Lord Sage, there is a ball being prepared by the Imperium that happens yearly. All of the headmasters of the leagues and schools are invited to it. I would very much like to see you there.”

Sage stood across from her. “Meniko informed me of it, and I’d considered not going, but if my lady wishes for my presence, then I shall come.”

“Very good. It’d be nice to see a friendly face there for once.”

Sage blinked as she collected her book and stepped away from him. *‘See a friendly face for once?’* he mused, and made his way out of the garden. *‘Who could possibly show that fem ire?’*

Several weeks later, right after the end of term, Sage found himself standing amongst several other dignitaries of the Empire and some of the assembly, and though he’d arrived with Meniko – standing in her beautiful bird maiden guise – Genohn, and Sanari,

he'd found himself standing alone in his simple but stylish suit, a thing of Lycan design made to be able to shift through their forms easily. In his human form everything was loose and overlapping, but in his hybrid form, one finally saw the gaps in his shoulders and sides form.

His tail end wagged from side to side while he held a champagne glass full of cream. The ballroom servants looked at him rather oddly when he'd asked for it, but for a cat like himself, cream had a certain intoxicating effect to it that was thankfully missing the effect of the hangover. Additionally, as a portion of his faith, he was forbidden to drink alcohol.

His glowing green eyes looked over the gathered dignitaries, seeing once again Emperor Jaikard, with Captain Leski at his side yet again. The captain was presently the emperor's consort for the time, and she had the capabilities of a strong woman who could stand even as the empress – Atichiqa Vega – and was currently standing at the emperor's side in her absence. She was functioning as both a body guard and a consort tonight. A quick look to her body showed all sorts of implements that could be used as weapons, and her gown was segmented in places, hiding ornate body armor...

They looked quite elegant in their white garb.

Sage hated high society gatherings like this... being a Lycan who was born in the snow of one of the coldest regions of Earth, he'd always mingled with the commoner, even more so after he was appointed as a Sage in the Circle of Sages.

These people didn't care who he was, didn't bother with him, and some even seemed to shun him. He'd wished that he could be mingling closer with Sanari and the others.

He was about to move off to another portion of the ballroom when there was the sound of metal shod feet close by, and he turned and straightened suddenly to see an Aphkei in heavy black armor stepping up to him, the wolf flanked on either side and behind him by other soldiers.

"Excuse me, but are you the one known as Lord Sage?" he had the air of a general... or at least a master soldier. This was a wolf that was used to giving orders, and it showed in his mannerisms as he approached.

"I am." Sage admitted, surprised that this wolf stood eye to eye with him, but a look to his heavy boots surmised that there was a good deal of his height added there. Sage was barefoot aside from a pair of spats.

"Then I wish to challenge you, Lord Sage."

Sage stared at him, aware that the chatter in the ballroom was subsiding, and standing there he lifted his glass of cream to his lips and drank from it before licking his lips to clean off the milk.

“A question first, if you will favor an old tiger something, my lord. I ask who I am addressing.”

“Warmaster Nyl Dousaka.”

Sage’s black lips pressed together at the name.

“Your family name is both famous and infamous, Warmaster.” Sage said, and drained his glass and sucked the milk moustache off his top lip. “I’ve been studying the history and politics of this universe, and your family name seems to keep popping up.”

“Do you accept or not?” Nyl stated simply.

“Oh I’ll accept, but before I do, what are your terms?”

“When I defeat you, Lord Sage, then you will accept my son into your school.”

Sage’s brow rose. Dallas had informed him of the Dousaka, or rather the Reformed Dousaka Clan. Nyl, the present head of their clan, had only been defeated in battle twice, and each time, it had been as a sacrifice on his own terms. He was a master tactician; there was no doubt about that.

But as to his son...

Prince Siklohn Dousaka was a protégé in the art of war. The art of the Shadow Masters in his hands would make this individual a respected name in this universe.

“And if I defeat you?” Sage prompted, still staring at the wolf, not having blinked for the past minute or so. But for that matter, neither had Nyl. It was as if they were in a staring contest.

“That won’t be necessary, but by some odd miscalculation that you *do* manage to defeat me, then you can name your prize, Lord Sage.”

“Forgive me for interrupting gentlemen,” came a voice, and the two warriors finally looked away from one another at the new speaker. Standing before them was Emperor Jaikard himself. “But I must interfere in this. You are causing quite a stir, Warmaster. Is this really necessary here?”

“Forgive me, my emperor,” Nyl bowed. “But this is in regards to that matter in which we discussed.”

“About your son?” Jaikard stated simply, and the Warmaster bowed again.

“Lord Sage, I ask a favor from you then,” the Emperor stated simply and then lifted his hand, and Leski stepped forward to place the back of her hand into his palm as she drew close to him again. “The favor I ask is that should you win, you are to ask for his son to join your school.”

“I have considered that very request, Emperor Jaikard. I will honor your favor.”

“Thank you Lord Sage. Your school is hereby acknowledged and accepted into the Imperium under its proposed charter. Now, if the two of you would please take this to a more private location, I wish to continue with this ball.”

“Yes, my emperor.” Nyl bowed studiously, and then turned to leave. “Lord Sage... if you’d please follow me, we will take this to a better locale.”

Sage turned into Nyl’s step as he led the way out onto a veranda and along a catwalk surrounding the dome of the ball room in the Imperial Summer Palace on Tannis Prime.

Sage took a moment to regard the chill in the air of this forested world that was so much like the Aphkei homeworld of Aphka, the chill a welcome and missed sensation, and lifted his eye to see the Great Ring that encircled the planet, once again, just like their homeworld, though this one was no where near as heavily populated and served more as a spaceport and mall than a major population center. It encircled the planet like an artificial belt, the ring slowly rotating along with the planet to remain in constant geosynchronous orbit to instill proper gravity to the ring.

To see such a galactic wonder was a testament to the advancement that is Aphkei society.

What then... would these Aphkei say to the rings of Sol? Sage thought.

What *would* they think of humanity when viewing the rings surrounding not only nearly every planet and moon of the Sol system, but likewise Sol itself, the asteroid belt, and the furthest reaches of their solar system?

Halo, Midway and Frontier... each were marvels that hundreds of billions worked onto constructing to protect earth. The entire solar system was a fortress...

How much alike these two civilizations were, Sage thought, and then lowered himself to his opponent of the moment.

Nyl had led them to a large patio, where Nyl’s lieutenants stood before the only entrance and exit here to bar visitors. Sage was very relieved that Mother Sanari had detached herself from the ball to witness this.

She felt like a friend, and he felt better that someone was supporting him here. Ever since he and Rae lost their bet to each other, he’d begun to feel... loneliness here in this universe.

Sage's clothing rippled and a simple layer of armor formed about him as his bio-armor transformed into the armor of a warrior monk... but despite that, there was something inside Sage that suggested he pull out his maximum armor. A pan hat formed atop his head, shoulder guards, forearm and shin guards, belt, and chest plate. From out of his hand extended his bio blade, a long curving black sword with a singularly glittering edge of mono-molecular thickness.

He settled back into his unorthodox fighting style, balancing on his rearward foot, the edge of his blade pointing forward and upward as he grabbed the pommel with one hand and steadied it with the other.

Nyl Dousaka lifted his hand before him, and a massive blade as tall as the Warmaster was, assembled itself out of the air. It was a long curving thing were apart of the blade covered both of his gauntleted hands. It hummed with power, with a black crystal blade and a perfect mixture of magic and technology that very, very few in the multiverse have ever mastered before.

The two of them faced with one another, Sanari folding her hands into her robes to stay warm from the chill air of Tannis Prime.

She'd been in this situation before... a stand off, a psychic duel of wills between two warriors as they tried to stare each other down. Not a single eye bat, not a single twitch, and only the wind disturbed the playing field.

Sage himself had faced down demon lords like this before, evil dragons and anti-heroes, but, personally, in the face of this man, he'd rather be facing a demon lord.

Nyl Dousaka was a powerful man... and he was aware of that fact. He was a legend amongst a legendary family. Eight feet tall in his armor, which, like his sword, was a remarkable conglomeration of technology and magic. Sage's eyes squinted as he read the magic while holding the psychic duel of wills with Nyl... very complex. Very...

The corners of Sage's eyes crinkled as he saw the field about Nyl. A field of shadowy resistance whirling around him right now in a chaotic effigy whose one and only purpose was to cancel and nullify.

Even cancel out life.

Sage's lips pursed together as he licked his teeth, but he would not back down.

And the silence went on for what felt like forever, with the only sounds being that of the winds through the trees, and the sounds of the party going on.

The tension was mounting, like a rubber band being twisted and twisted, over and over again... until eventually...

Snap!

Both warriors swung at each other at the same time, and when their swords collided a force like a thunder crash erupted between them, and then they were locked with one another, Sage and his powerful form easily holding the Dousaka Warmaster back even despite all the enhancements in the Warmaster's armor both magical and technological. But then Sage wasn't pushing Nyl back either, the Warmaster's form bracing against Sage's remarkable powers and holding him in place.

Behind them even their swords seemed to be at battle, the magics in both of them, either of them easily of artifact power. Nyl's sword, Technomancy in perfection, and Lord Sage's Bioblade a sheer blend of natural magics empowered by abilities that only he knows, bit and cut at each other, neither actually able to break one another.

"I'm surprised," Nyl said. "Your sword did not break. I have greater respect for you Lord Sage. Rarely does anyone come even this far."

"The same to you." Sage mused, holding his sword strangely, Sanari noticed, just like he did with his flute, but with a far tighter grip. "The masterwork of your sword is too unique and compliments you very well. I applaud you on your hand at the forge, Nyl Dousaka."

Nyl tried to force Sage backward, and despite all the power in that armor, Sage did not move. The only contact between the two warriors was between their swords, Sage avoiding that field about Nyl. Leaving a buffer of several feet between them.

"And your sword is not of the forge. I'd hoped to see the blade that could disarm a member of the Black Gear, and its form is truly unlike anything I'd ever seen." Nyl commented, and the pair suddenly switched places as they garnered to control the middle ground, their swords shifting and grinding against one another, creating a point of angry blue light where they met.

"Good... now that we've seen each other's sword blades up close, shall we continue?" Nyl asked.

"Of course." Sage agreed, as one they broke off from one another, their swords making a wicked sound of metal against metal as they did, Sage skipping backward as Nyl leapt back, landing with a heavy lunge before they launched at one another again.

Secretly, Sanari urged Sage on with her heart. The Dousaka had been the reason why her once beautiful blue, white and green homeworld is still a black charred, pock-marked wasteland. It took decades before all the dust settled after their attacks, and decades more before life could be cultivated, and as such, the progress to reseed her homeworld was slow and tedious.

Despite all her gentle ways, she wanted to see the Dousaka Lord on his back for having to watch her home decimated like that.

The silence between the two warriors was absolute after their original conversation about each other's blades, with Nyl a battle hardened and scarred warlord, and Sage a calm warrior monk in his battle trance.

Either were Generals of armies, either had been in hundreds of thousands of battles and missions, either were relentless combatants, and either have never seen defeat... save it be on their own terms.

Nyl was a demon in his armor, his horned helmet making him look like an oversized Dragoon Black Knight of Old Earth, with massive shoulder guards and chest plates, hardened armor sheathing his body and tail while he used relatively simple spells to teleport and haste himself in time with even Sage's incredible speed.

And as Sage began to be pushed back, barely deflecting the blows of that massive energized sword, he fought back with powers of his own.

Nyl Dousaka was unlike any individual Sage has ever fought, a tough battle... a battle that tested his metal, and Sage began to grin as he put his effort into the battle. This was like the battle against Rae. He felt a challenge, and he shifted forward into a more advanced stance and attacked back.

Again their weapons clashed, locking with one another, and multiple times they swapped places, their sword blades changing positions as they slid against one another, the two swords' energies snapping and hissing at one another in an attempt to destroy each other.

As the battle continued, others arrived, more witnesses, finding this fight more enjoyable to watch than the actual ball, they all pressed against the two guards keeping others away. Sage was a nobody in their eyes, and remarkably, he was standing up against one of the most feared warriors in all the Great Wide Universe.

They watched even as the two broke against one another, either an unbreakable barrier as they forced one another to move in one direction or the other, and surprisingly, against their renowned Warmaster, this... 'Lord Sage' was holding his own.

Nyl and Sage dipped away from one another, Nyl hopping over Sage's sword even as Sage ducked underneath Nyl's, their blades turning to clash once, then twice against each other, each time a flash of blazing light erupted from the blows before they retreated from one another.

And then Nyl had thrown his sword at Sage, sending it in a spiraling track straight toward Sage, and Sage had but a moment to bring his own sword up. To a lesser person, this move had cut people, complete with swords and armor straight in half, but as Nyl hastened himself, moving rapidly behind Sage as the cat-man redirected the spinning blade around

himself with a motion, Nyl was there to catch his blade, and bring it up even as Sage's sword came hammering down with all his might. A few armor and buffering spells were all that saved Nyl from being hammered into the ground.

Nyl swung his sword around and tried to cut at Sage's side, but the werecat was no longer there. Nyl had a moment to rise to his feet, look rapidly around him and then up before skipping back, Sage's sword blade stripping straight down the place where Nyl had been.

If he hadn't moved, Sage's sword would've pinned him straight to the ground. Sage looked up at Nyl, and despite the blade was buried to the hilt, he pulled it straight out and swing the long blade left and right before him, and Nyl dodged the first, blocked the second and parried, Sage turning sideways as the blade lunged forward before his main hand shifted and he swung the blade upward in a rising arch.

This arch cut a line in Nyl from thigh to shoulder, knocking him briefly off balance, and Sage stepped back, faltering a moment as a deep red cut split open his jacket, showing blood straight across his body from a deep wound even as it immediately sealed itself.

"Ow." Sage said as Nyl felt the groove in his armor with one gloved hand, and watched as a piece of his armor broke open and fell away, and looking back to Sage, he saw Sage's clothing change into a black jumpsuit, lined with grooves in the jumpsuit indicating armor plating.

They'd wounded each other...

They stared at one another for a moment, holding their poses, keeping it for only a moment more before they launched themselves at one another.

For every strike Nyl tried to exert on the Weretiger, Sage landed one of his own, and then he began to land two of his own... Nyl found himself seeing Sage's focus intensify and found himself now having to deal with unconventional, unorthodox and even purely made up measures of fighting, forcing even Nyl to step up his game.

With a loud howl, Nyl surged forward even as Sage gave off his piercing terror cry, and despite all their conditionings, battle hardened experiences and iron hard wills, both faltered with the terrible battle cries being flung between them, and their swords struck one another with a ringing of metal against metal. A vicious, powerful sound that rang through the air.

But Sage was stronger, Sage was faster... but Nyl was a tactician, Nyl had patience for the perfect moment to arrive for him to claim victory, and when it arrived, he took it without hesitation. In his entire career, Nyl had only lost twice, but that was on his own terms. This was the first time that he'd ever considered that he might loose, and that he would loose without it being his own choice to do so.

And, stunningly now, the Warmaster was actually loosing ground.

Till Nyl swung his sword, screaming his howling war cry, and when Sage's blade came up to block, an explosion of tremendous magnitude that actually vibrated the air, knocked Sage backward. Long slashes in the stone formed from his toe claws digging into the stone patio, and when he recovered, it was to see Nyl leaping up into the air, bringing his massive sword weighing well over a quarter ton above his head to hammer downward.

Sage arched his own slender blade upward, hitting Nyl's and creating another flash of light that redirected the blow. The massive blade of the Warmaster hammered into the cobblestones, shattering several marble plates with its force, but nonetheless left Nyl wide open. It did, however, create another gaping slash against Sage's chest.

Sage lifted his free hand, aimed it for Nyl's face, and a sudden spark of electricity formed and then released right into the Warmaster's face.

Sage gasped as the energy of his charge simply dissipated into the air around the Warmaster, and Nyl lifted his head, his face mask focusing its red eyes on him as Sage's magics were scattered across the field that stuck out a foot in every direction. Sage's surprise lasted long enough for the Warmaster to recover his sword, and swing it upward as if to cut the tiger man in half, but Sage skipped backward, blocked with his sword, and let the momentum of Nyl's attack thrust him to the other side of the patio where Sage landed easily on his feet.

Even as Nyl turned, Sage lifted his hand and fired off two more sparks of electrical damage, and three more smaller fire bolts, even a blast of ice. All of them splashed against the invisible shield or barrier, Sage's eyes narrowing as he focused again. He'd thought he'd understood the field before, but now that this was happening, he looked closer and re-read the magic.

"Surprised?" Nyl asked in a perfectly emotionless tone. It sounded as if he was expecting a statement of logic from Sage as the Warmaster righted himself and turned to Sage.

Sage didn't answer, but instead rotated his hand gently and twisted his five fingered hand in an odd way. This time it was Nyl's turn to act surprised as he saw a totally alien magic forming there, and from the center of Sage's palm another charge of static white energy appeared, before the charge rapidly darkened into black lightning. And then the bolt lanced off his hand, leapt across the air between the two combatants, striking Nyl in the shoulder guard with enough force to turn him and shatter the guard.

The crowd gasped at the sight of that shattering guard, and Sanari held her breath. She'd seen Nyl's defensive field... it would kill anyone who touched him in his armor, and it canceled all other magic sent at him.

How then did this one strike him so efficiently? She wondered.

"How?" Nyl asked...

With the shoulder guard gone, its power somehow canceled enough and weakened enough in which to shatter, had now created a hole in his defenses.

“Your field is a null field.” Sage answered. “The field is made to nullify all sorts of energy. Even life itself. It is Death Magic at its fullest, and it stops all energy... save for more death magic.

Apparently my Magery still does have its benefits in this universe.” Sage finished, one corner of his mouth rising.

And then holding his sword with one hand, Sage lifted his magic-casting hand to the blade, and sliding two of his fingers along the blade, the same black static charge lanced all up and down the length of the blade.

Sage then reset himself into his fighting stance, waiting for Nyl to do the same, which he did with his face all the more stone-faced than before.

Some individuals, when faced with the unknown, feel uneasy and unsure of themselves. Certain individuals, when faced with the unknown, even when it means it counteracts everything they knew before that moment, grow all the more determined.

Nyl’s face had hardened... he was looking at a creature that outside of any form of armor was as tall as he was while inside his armor, and with his alien magics, had a method in which to pierce Nyl’s defenses.

Just to touch Nyl in his armor, even a few inches away from his armor, would’ve sucked years off Sage’s life. But Sage had used magic, it had taken more time than a Sorcerer’s magic, but it nonetheless penetrated that defense. It defied everything Nyl understood about magic; for everything Nyl knew about magic said that that blast should have been nullified upon reaching that field.

Nyl took a step backward to reset his stance, bringing his sword up to guard himself while Sage began to advance; the Weretiger steeling his gaze unblinkingly onto Nyl. Sage approached using a sideways step by bringing his legs together and then stepping toward Nyl, seeming to slide forward with the way his body was moving. He drew close, and when Sage gave off his battle cry, it was an ear splitting roar that would’ve made lesser people wet their pants. Nyl answered it with his own howl and when his sword arched forward, Nyl felt a minute charge of that energy on Sage’s sword cascading down his blade actually reach his fingertips... even despite all the electrical protection his armor was blessed with he felt his fingers numb.

Sage pressed the attack unlike any warrior or swordsman Nyl had ever faced. Nyl’s jaw set as he began to calculate while he began to maneuver Sage, but found his maneuvering blocked or redirected, and amidst all his planning and motions, a stray thought slid into his already complex thought process.

Finally! A challenge!!

Sage had no idea as to how much respect and praise that was to inspire such a trait. In all their future dealings, he never learned that the infamous Nyl Dousaka had ever even thought such a compliment for the Weretiger. For such a long time, Nyl Dousaka had yet to meet an opponent who truly tested him aside from his own father.

Sage was no where near a match for that monster – Nyl’s father – but still, he was a challenge nonetheless.

And Nyl pressed back, that massive sword of his swinging about him as an unrelenting force that made Sage step back now and again before he pressed his own attack again.

And then there was the impossible! Sage’s sword snapped outward, slashing at Nyl’s helmet, and the Warmaster turned his head so that the blade glanced off his face plates. Another scar in his armor was formed as the black lightning along Sage’s blade snapped and hissed, burning at his armor as it struck, and when Nyl turned his head back, that plate on his face fell away, and a stinging cut – no deeper than a paper cut – bled.

Nyl swung his sword several more times, attacking and blocking with the quarter ton monstrosity, but then Sage’s blade plunged again, Nyl turned his head again only to feel the sting of that electrical blade snap and slap at the side of his bared face as another long slash bled against the side of his face. The blade retracted and lanced outward again, and this time it plunged right through Nyl’s remaining shoulder guard, erupting on the other side.

And Nyl was blessed with something he’d never had the privilege of doing during battle before.

He looked directly into the eyes of an opponent, their faces inches away from one another, to which the whole of one’s vision were nothing but those eyes. Nyl Dousaka became the first in this universe to see the variations of color beneath the glow of Sage’s eyes, saw the iris and almond-shaped pupils as they flared and contracted.

Such intense eyes, such... focus. I like this Sage.

Nyl stared back at Sage, his mind devoid of emotion at the moment other than mild curiosity. He brought the base of his sword striking forward, and the ball of the pommel of his sword struck Sage right in the solar plexus, knocking him backward gasping for air as Sage’s sword was wrenched right out of Nyl’s shoulder guard.

His sword swung forward as Sage gasped, and clapping at his chest, his fingers poking his chest in a myriad of ways, he got himself breathing again almost instantly, but he still had to parry with only one hand.

Nyl pressed the advantage, lunging forward and swinging, twisting his massive sword forward, coiling it about him, facing that imbued black blade of Sage's with the silver edge, and a seemingly endless waltz beat between them. And then Nyl watched Sage do something strange.

He switched hands.

The main hand of his sword was his right now instead of his left, the switch-up was so quick and the resulting strike that came at Nyl threw him off balance.

There was far more power than Nyl had been fighting in that right hand, and as he watched, Sage's outward demeanor changed, even his face looked darker.

Nyl then found himself fighting a completely different man, and found his advantage disappearing.

He played me! Got me used to a different fighting method and switched it!

Nyl tried to compensate, but Sage was pressing the attack even harder than before, and not only was his right handed stance more powerful, but faster too. The blows were coming faster and in odd directions, and Nyl was forced to evolve his own fighting ways on the spot to compensate for these unorthodox fighting styles, till their swords met, clashed, moved in several full circles before them, before with a mighty roar, Sage threw Nyl off balance; Nyl's sword flying wide while the Warmaster held onto its pommel with one hand, his body swinging a quarter turn away from Sage.

Sage roared again, holding his sword above his head for a winning strike.

It was then that Nyl lowered his head and spoke into the communicator in the collar of his chest armor.

“Now.”

And Nyl looked up as Sage set his footing, setting himself to strike the Warmaster and claim the win. But then Nyl saw Sage do the oddest of things...

Sage was a wild card. He was Fate's harbinger of chaos. His actions upset the future no matter how much he tried to keep out of Fate's way, but nonetheless, his sheer presence negated any attempt to look into the future. As such, where he was concerned, he often got impressions of the future with his affect to them, fits of clairvoyance that allowed him to choose paths for himself.

And at that moment, he saw a shot pierce him through the top of his brain pan, exploding his brain and killing him.

He blinked as he saw this, and immediately began to look for the source of the attack. To Nyl, he looked left, looked right, and then suddenly looked upward and skipped backward just as a stream of disrupted air lanced downward from the heavens to shatter the stone cobblestone Sage had just been standing on, and then he twisted in time to a second clairvoyant burst of inspiration as a second lancelet struck from the heavens, shattering the edge of his pan hat.

Sage staggered backward, looked down at the shattered cobbles, and then looked upward as if seeing what Nyl knew was up there resting in high orbit, and then Sage lowered his gaze toward Nyl, his eyes turning red and a snarl mutating his face.

He dodged?! Nyl thought incredulously.

“What treachery is this?!” he demanded.

“Orbital Snipers, Lord Sage.” Nyl said calmly, holding his heavy blade with one hand before him. “And the next shot will cut you in half unless you surrender to me right now.”

“You brought other warriors into a duel?! You treacherous bastard!”

Nyl stared at Sage. Those shots were meant to save Sage. One of them was off, and if Sage hadn't dodged, he'd be dead right now. That pilot would have to be disciplined for such a miscalculation.

“You misunderstand, Lord Sage.” Nyl said instead. “I said I wished to Challenge you. I never said it was going to be a duel.”

Nyl saw Sage's hand twitch, his fingers coiling about the air, what he didn't know was what was going on in Sage's mind.

He'd found the snipers at where they rested in high orbit, outside the atmosphere.

To a sorcerer, their powers were all limited to existing only inside an atmosphere. To a Mage, there was no such limitation, and as his hand clenched, the two snipers suddenly had to readjust their scopes to what they thought was a solar wind reacting with the upper atmosphere. What had happened, however, was the power of this Shadow Master had just seized both their mechs and their Long Bow sniper rifles. It was a simple matter to throw the mechs into the lower atmosphere, drag them down where they might burn up in reentry, or perhaps just exert his will and crush the metal shells where they were.

His fingers twitched as he considered doing this, and while he hesitated, a part of him, the brightness that remained of his soul, touched his heart and calmed it, and he remembered what has happened in the past from misunderstandings and not thinking before you leap.

And above all, he recalled his own personal rule:

I kill only when I have reason to, and then, only as a last resort.

Those Aphkei in those Sniper Mechs were living beings... and they were only obeying orders. And to defeat the Dousaka Warmaster would mean to shame their clan. Sage then lifted his eyes, and Saw Mother Sanari standing off to one side, just within eyesight of the smiling Dousaka Lord.

Sage's heart softened, and his fingers unclenched, and his grip on the mechs was released.

I hate loosing... and I hate being duped...

"Then I will yield, Nyl Dousaka." He said simply, and one corner of his mouth rose in a smirk.

Conniving bastard, he thought, I'll get you for this someday...

Sage picked up the broken piece of his pan hat, and holding it in his hand, he stood apart of the crowd that was congratulating Nyl on yet another masterful victory, and concentrating briefly, the broken piece melded into his hand, even as the other pieces of his armor slid into his clothing and flesh.

I've been duped, lead into a trap, and forced to surrender due to politics. I hate politics. Sage thought.

"But you nonetheless did the right thing, Lord Sage." Came a soft voice, and Sage turned immediately to see Sanari, in all her beautiful white robes standing before him.

Great Maker she's beautiful. Sage thought, smiling at her.

"Thank you." She blushed, and Sage blinked, suddenly realizing what had happened.

"And apparently a mind reader." Sage managed with a half smile as she came to stand before him. As one final effort, Sage sheathed his sword inside himself retracting the deadly blade and merging it with pieces of his own body.

"Are you ok?" she asked, perhaps already knowing the answer, but wanting to hear it from his own lips.

"Nothing hurt but my pride." Sage stated quietly, and then felt a hand on his chest, and looking down saw Sanari's long, slender fingers on his chest, her manicured nails curling slightly to hold him there.

“You must let Nyl have this victory, Sage. Much harm can happen to our universe if you take it from him.”

Sage exhaled, and bowed his head.

“I will.”

Sanari smiled up at him, her puckered black lips spreading wide before she slid into the side of this warrior priest and wrapped both her arms around his massive arm.

“You seem far too much alone, milord. Please allow this humble priestess to accompany you for the rest of the ball.”

“You do me incredible honor, Mother of Songs.”

“Sanari.” She said, and Sage looked down kindly at her. “Just... Sanari. And I feel that the honor is mine... Father of Songs.” She mused, and the two of them rejoined the ball.

So, we do have something in common, he thought, guarding his thoughts more closely now, not knowing how well it was working against the high priestess.

Music... is a good place... for harmony.

The Soul of a Student

Mayia Gallant had suffered from her experience at the hands of Rudfuul and his crew. She remembered fully all of the hateful remarks, the feeling of being played with like a toy. Steadily but surely, her once prime grades and performance began to wane, and steadily she moved from a top performer to rock bottom.

As it was, she had just come from her mentor, Noxi, and was told that she was in danger of expulsion if she couldn't bring her grades up.

Mayia wasn't crying... she didn't have any tears left in order to cry.

It was then that she saw a throng of students all trying to see a notice on the student board.

"It's finally happened?"

"Who would'a thought he'd been able to make a school so fast."

"Next semester is its first..."

Mayia, perplexed as to what was going on, joined the stand of students who, to a last, were twice her size. Even her own classmates were accelerating far, far beyond her. She was athletic, but positively frail in comparison to them, and it hurt her more when a student several years behind her was doing better than she.

Eventually she did manage to get to the forefront and read the notice, a poster for the up and coming Shadow League.

Accepting new applicants and or transfers for immediate acceptance. The Entrance Exam is scheduled for the first week following the opening semester of the Core League. Please contact the following Electronic Mail location with your name and method of return contact, and you will be given the exact date ad time of the exam.

*For those hoping for a new beginning, or just a second chance,
Lord Sage Preypacer
Headmaster of the League of the Shadow Arts*

"That's smart of him. Plans the start of his school a week after the Core League begins." Mayia heard then as she read and re-read the notice.

"Why's that?" a particularly muscular girl asked.

"Gives him a chance to snatch up all the wash outs."

Mayia stared at the notice, and lifting a hand, ran her four fingers across one particular line.

For those hoping for a new beginning, or just a second chance...

She wrote down the Electronic Mail address, skipped her next class, and took the time to send in her name for application.

Mayia arrived early on the appointed day for the entrance exam. This was her last chance now. Lord Sage's school was now her last chance. At the end of her last semester at the Core League, she'd discovered that she had been expelled due to her failing grades.

It was a sign as to how poorly she'd been doing, when the core league didn't expel anyone unless they've been doing very, very poorly. At such a time, a decision as this happens only when Meniko herself had given up on being able to teach her.

"You have lost the will to even exist in this school, Mayia. I am sorry... but we must let you go."

Mayia was, strangely, not so sorry to leave. Noxi, her mentor, had offered to let her stay with her for a while; perhaps give her some private tutoring in hopes that she could rejoin the Core League.

Mayia turned her down.

If she couldn't prove herself this one last time... then she was unfit to be in the leagues.

She was there in the early hours of the morning as a strange looking transport landed, opening its back end to allow a series of the strangest looking automatons out. They were all realistic looking things, with soft white bodies and the most natural movements in a robot she'd ever seen.

She'd heard of Lord Sage's Bioroids, but had yet to see them up close. Their grace was flawless. It shames some flesh and blood individuals that she knew of.

These bioroids carried with them a pavilion that they set up in the grass off of one of the courtyards, erecting the thing to which an air-conditioning unit and what looked like cots were being brought inside.

Another shuttle landed at this time, and several more bioroids disembarked, this time with that human-looking Daedalus bioroid, followed by a half dozen of the standard bioroids – each marked with red crosses on the right side of their chests, as well as their right thigh and left shoulder – and following them all was the enigmatic figure of Lord Sage.

Mayia bit her lower lip as she looked upon her savior. She felt a sense of pride well up in her that she'd thought had been killed since the time she was attacked, as well as a power of determination that steeled her.

A couple others had arrived by now, among them was Fatima Iksaki!

But when Sage disembarked, and that biological looking shuttle that he'd arrived in took off, she found herself being drawn under the focus of those glowing green eyes of his.

She'd thought that there were so many other subjects that could've drawn his attention of the students that were lining up – Fatima Iksaki, for example – or anyone else, but his placid features focused on her and her alone.

Sage then turned idly and stepped to where a couple of bioroids were setting up a table and a pair of chairs, and then she felt a tap on her arm and turned to see another of the bioroids standing beside her.

“Excuse me, Miss Mayia Gallant,” it... HE... said, and handed her a small data pad. “I must ask that you fill out this short questionnaire and release form before you will be allowed to take the test.”

Mayia paused, looking at the realistic looking male bioroid, with a stunningly supple female bioroid at his side holding a stack of datapads, and where the female had a white torso with a black “sixteen” written in solid bold numbers the upper portion of the right side of her chest, the male had a red torso, with a white “zero-three” in bold letters at the same place.

The bioroid smiled at her, and she took the datapad from his five-fingered hand.

“Th-thank you.” She said.

“You are most welcome.” The bioroid said and moved to the next person.

“Excuse me, Mister Korzhak Maeoo, I must ask you...” and so the pair continued, handing a datapad to each person in turn, with the lead bioroid greeting each person by name.

Mayia read the instructions, filled out a minimal amount of personal information, and then read the waiver form before signing it. She then went to the desk, and where Dallas and Sage sat and handed in her datapad.

“Here you go, sirs.” She tried to smile, but was quite nervous.

Lord Sage nodded at her, his smile soft, but his eyes shone with an even greater smile that he wanted to show her while Dallas held up the datapad, skimmed through the information, blanked it and placed it on a pile beside him.

“Thank you, Mayia,” Sage said, and gestured. “Please follow Thirty-Six here, and she will bring you to your place.

Mayia smiled again and nodded, and turning, saw another bioroid who smiled back at her and led her to a place on the courtyard, and bid her to sit.

One by one, all the other applicants were sat amongst several rows, all facing toward the rising sun, where they all paused, watching as the glowing of the morning light of dawn approached.

Lord Sage rose and Dallas departed, stepping onto a shuttle that approached, turned, and without landing lowered its gangplank to allow him to step onto the shuttle; the shuttle already rising and was on its way with him even before the door at its rear had even fully closed yet.

The table was moved to sit before the students, with only a single chair remaining, and a large umbrella was raised behind the chair. Sage came to stand before the table and chair, and out of the corner of her eye, Mayia saw the bioroids with the red crosses on their bodies putting on Doctor Robes.

“Thank you for coming,” Sage greeted, his eyes looking over the few dozen individuals who’d arrived. Mayia again saw his gaze linger on her. “In a few moments, the test will begin. It’s task is simple, if the act is not. From the moment the sun rises, till the sun sets, you must all stand in one place.

“If you leave this field before the test is concluded, you forfeit your entrance. If you willingly sit down, you forfeit your entrance. If you willingly use any of your existing powers, you will forfeit your entrance. During the course of the trial, the only thing you are allowed is water. Please, drink as much as you will, my bioroids will disperse as much of it as you’d like.” And he gestured to a trio of the beautiful white bioroids, all of whom carried large tanks of water with ladles to drink out of.

Sage then turned to look toward the sun. “As the first light touches this section of the world...” he stated, and watched. And then the top of the sun peaked its way over the ridge of the horizon. “Now... will you all please rise,” and they did. “The test now begins.”

Sage had situated himself in his chair beside the table, with a comfortable shade protecting him from the pounding sun as he watched the students. He’d been sitting, staring at the hopefuls for his future students even as the fullness of the light of Wave World’s solitary sun blazed down on the students when one of his ears twitched, and an unmistakable scent entered into his senses.

“Hello Rae.” He said and turned toward the pooch as she stood there in simple clothes, sweat bottoms with a sleeveless and bellyless sweat top with a hood.

She walked barefoot as she came up to look at the students arrayed before her. She remained remarkably silent before Sage reached over and took hold of her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“I know you didn’t want your sister here, Rae,” he said, and got a return squeeze from Rae in return. “But I cannot turn away someone who under their own free will wishes to join.

“Though I wish you would.” Rae said, and rubbed her muscular arm. “If she joins your school, it will be the first time since I rescued her from our homeworld that she hasn’t lived under the same roof as me. Well... she did go into student housing when Makahn moved in, but all roofs in this school is Meniko’s house.”

Sage nodded. “She isn’t even showing signs of fatigue. She’ll pass the exam with flying colors.”

It was at that moment that Rae felt a click in the air, a change in the background magic in the area that was so subtle even she almost missed it, and her head turned slowly toward Sage.

“What was that?” she asked, commenting on that change.

“A one-tenth increase in gravity and a two degree increase in temperature around the students.” Sage said quietly.

“You did that?” she asked, leveling her gaze on him.

“Yes.” Sage answered simply, and continued to watch the students.

“B-but why?”

Sage was silent for a moment. “The teachings of my order are quite harsh, Rae. You must take the bitter with the sweet, for the bitter will be force fed, and the sweet provided only on how well one deals with the bitter. As it is, those who learn from this way of thought must have determination. They will have to WANT to learn.”

Rae was silent for a moment. “Sage... I... I know that your teachings must produce some fantastic individuals in your order, but... but that could be a bad thing for these children.”

“I know... all who enter into the teachings will hate it unless there is a balance somewhere. All of the strain and effort that they go through must be rewarded as soon as they achieve a certain goal, and the environment outside of the practice ring must be that of a family...”

“They will learn great bitterness by the end of this day, Rae... but, for those who remain... they shall also be shown great love and kindness.

“But as to the other reason as to why I am doing this, Rae, is that those who are unwilling to learn from me, will leave of their own volition...”

Sage was quite right in his statement. Rae herself had taken up one of the buckets of water and ladled water to those who called for it, and managed to smile at her sister, and show Fatima her support now, despite that she wished that she hadn't done this.

Meniko will be angry that Fatima has decided to leave the school, but that anger will be more toward Sage than at Fatima. By noon, the gravity of the area surrounding the students had been increased a total of four-tenths of a G, and the heat had been raised a total of eight degrees.

With the tropical weather, a usual ninety-seven degree temperature was made all the worse with a one-hundred-and-five degree temperature. And then taking in the balmy humidity, the students there were beginning to suffer already.

By this time, four of the would-be entrants had already left.

“Forget this!” “I’m not gonna endure this much aggravation for a girl. Later babe... hope you freaking die in this heat.” And other such comments as they left.

Rae had to admit, it was weeding out those who didn't want to learn...

Sage, however, was paying particular close attention to one of the students... the Oliverian girl Mayia. Noxi had told her of this girl, and every time Rae walked by her, she just wanted to pick her up and hug her till the pain in her heart went away, but now that she was this close to the young fem, she felt a determination and a power inside her that she'd never felt matched before.

This young bunny's internal strength was on fire, and she was determined not to show weakness, refusing the water bucket every time it was offered. Rae tried multiple times to get her to drink... she'd dehydrate herself rapidly if she didn't.

She refused each time with a smile, till at last she turned to face forward again after refusing Rae for the fifth time, and found herself looking right at Lord Sage. He took the ladle from Rae and dipped it into the icy cool water, and holding its base, held it up for her.

“I want you to drink, Mayia.” He said. “But you may still refuse if you wish. Rae is trying to get you to drink because of how kind she is... and she sees that you are in distress. Please drink, Mayia... it is very dangerous for you to continue in this way.”

Mayia looked at the Lycan she had developed great respect for, and a certain degree of daughterly love for, and then toward Rae, who, just because of the way she was, loved everyone...

Mayia looked down at the crystal water, and found herself wanting, and lowering her hands, took hold of the ladle and drank...

Ten hours had passed since the beginning of the test, and more than half of the entrants had left Sage’s testing grounds. But... still more had collapsed from the heat.

There was only a couple dozen individuals left standing, and Rae now found herself inside the medical tent that Sage’s bioroids had erected, air conditioned, and well stocked for those suffering from heat exhaustion and heat stroke. The tent flaps opened and a young girl, no more than six, but already firming up with muscular form, was being brought in on a stretcher by a pair of bioroids, and Rae went to comfort this girl immediately.

Outside, the students were now trembling under a pounding two gravities, and an added twenty degrees of temperature.

Just two more hours of sunlight left, Rae thought as she sat down beside this one child, running her hand through the girl’s short mane of fur.

“I failed.” She sobbed... “I failed...”

Damn you Sage. Rae thought then. How can you do this to kids?

Mayia stood with many others, teetering with her mind numb from heat exhaustion and the weight and pull of the gravity about her. Her shoulders sagged, but her knees locked. She would not be defeated, not now.

It was nearly dusk.

Sweat beaded on her nose, and slicked her fur down, with more sweat trickling between her breasts and wetting her underwear. She felt positively sick at the moment, and the weight on her was so extreme that even her eyelids were trying to close.

Just a little bit more! She thought, she thought hard, tried to summon the power to remain standing, tried to force her knees to remain locked. She could feel the waning light on the back of her neck, could feel her body straining till it ached. She would grow stronger; she would not fail... not again! She would be strong!

Time went by, and her knees unlocked, they began to sag...

Please, Great Aul, please give me the strength to last through this, she prayed, trying to summon every last bit of her power that she could muster. *Just a little... just a little bit more!*

Her body began to droop, the weight of her own body now pressuring down on her, weakening her under all the strain, and with the world spinning, she tipped forward onto her knees, struggled to stand, and then collapsed forward onto the ground before blacking out.

In her mind, as she collapsed, there was only one thought in her mind:

I failed...

A good time later Mayia awoke with a splitting headache and a cold damp cloth over her brow.

“How could you do this to these students, Sage?” Namah, the Mystic League’s Chief Medical Officer was saying over her, and Mayia looked up at the Nyrian.

“Some things are necessary, Namah.” She heard Sage answer, and turned her head to look down at her with those kind, green eyes while she heard grumblings from Namah.

Her eyes quickly scanned around her, seeing all the other people who’d failed here as well... *but why was Fatima here? Surely she didn’t fail...*

But Mayia bit her lower lip with those oversized front teeth of hers, her lip trembling as tears welled up in her eyes

“No!” she groaned, and began to cry, pushing her hands to her face. “I failed. I failed.”

But then she felt a sharp prick in her brow, and then someone removing her hands from her face, and, curiously, she saw a pin sticking out of her brow, and likewise, she felt her headache abating rapidly.

“Failed? No, I don’t think so, young Mayia. You passed my test. You stood your ground for as long as you could, though your body failed. I do not discriminate between the weak and the strong. All can benefit from my teachings.

“Now sleep.” And he flicked the needle’s end in her head, and her eyes immediately closed of their own accord.

Even as sleep overtook her, she felt... and overwhelming feeling inside her.

Success!

Sage sat with Mayia, smoothing her forehead with his thumb and massaging pressure points to keep her mind asleep. She was smiling, so brilliantly in her sleep, and even in her sleep, she was radiating feelings of happiness.

‘You can stop fuming now, Namah.’ He sent telepathically to the Doctress.

‘How can you possibly smile at the misfortune of all these students, Sage? If one of your “failure” students hadn’t come get me, I would’ve never arrived in enough time.’

‘Namah, I and my bioroids are...’

‘Are unauthorized to study medicine in the Imperium.’ She hissed into his mind, adding a bit of an echo to punctuate her anger.

Sage deflated. He couldn’t argue with that. It was something he was planning to rectify even now as they spoke.

‘Namah... tell me something. How do those students who have passed my test feel to you?’ he asked.

‘What in Aul’s name is that supposed to mean Sage?’ she demanded.

‘Listen to their thoughts. How are they feeling at this moment, Namah?’

Namah set her jaw, but nonetheless did as he asked, placing her attention on one student after the next, and her expression slowly softened.

“They’re... happy.” She breathed aloud.

‘Yes... they are. Especially this one.’ He intoned mentally again. *‘Do you remember her?’*

‘W-why that’s Mayia. She’s... happy.’

'Indeed, Namah' Sage said quietly. 'Her heart needed a boost like this. She was dangerously close to giving up... on everything. Including her life. It does this old tiger good to see someone snatched away from such a fate.'

Namah looked at Sage, not saying anything. Mayia had become an extra special project of hers. Namah had known that she was failing rapidly, and that Namah herself had been unsuccessful in rehabilitating the young Oliverian Fem from the hateful and debilitating happenstance of being raped.

And Sage repairs her shattered psyche in a day.

Namah was one of the universe's foremost minds in medical science... and here... here she was meeting against someone who's knowledge of healing far outweighed her own. Despite her calm, outward appearance, Namah began to fear for her job.

It was this fear... perhaps... that had led Namah to hate Sage so much when they first knew each other...

The Gift of a Healer

Chief Medical Officer Doctress Hyurri Namah looked down at Lord Sage as he sat in the center of a small classroom, his school desk being the only one in the room aside from her own. Normally, Namah would be overjoyed at a situation like this... a student, testing for their medical exam, but there was something about Lord Sage that irked her.

The first reason was because he walked freely and all willy-nilly about her hospital, and it was her hospital despite who actually owned it, and also because he had made a simple statement to her and made it sound as if it was the Creator's honest truth.

"I'm the greatest healer in existence, Namah. Only the Creator Himself has shown to know more about life than I."

The fact that he'd made that comment to her face, and said it as a simple truth steeled in her mind that he was an arrogant bastard, and he was about to sit for the universe's hardest series of tests:

The Medical Exam.

"I've been told, Lord Sage, that you are so confident in your abilities as a medical technician that you've opted to test out of all of my courses without ever seeing even a training syllabus?"

"I have doctor, and I'd like to thank you for..."

"...Doctress." Namah interrupted him, her three fingers of her right hand clenching around the data chip in her hand.

"Forgive me?" Sage managed, blinking up at her as he sat at the desk that was a size too small for him.

"Doctress." Namah repeated. "My official Title is *Doctress* Hyurri Namah. I do not know where you come from, Sage, but we practice proper conjugation in this universe regarding genders."

"I... am truly sorry Doctress. The term Doctor for me is a title for both male and female, and I thought..."

"Never mind Sage." She said, and deposited the data chip on the table before him.

"You are considered a paramedic, and I am marginally impressed at how well you aced that test – not a single answer wrong – but you will find that the proceeding tests for a Medical Technician are far more a stringent of a task than the Paramedic exams.

“You must go through a battery of tests, firstly is your nurse’s exam, and then your Doctor’s exam.

“Each exam comes in two parts... one for the Imperium Grade, and the other for the Assembly Grade. Though the Imperium is far harder of a test, the Assembly Grade is approximately twice as long for the nurse’s test.

“The Doctor’s exam is even longer and tougher in both regards. I see here,” she prompted and held up her datapad to verify something on it, “That you also wish to take the optional supplementary exam for plant and silicon life forms.”

“I have.” He replied, and Namah nodded, and depressed a button to download that exam as well.

“Each grade is separated into first multiple choice, then essay and finally hands-on.

“You have two hours for each grade of your nurse’s exam, and four hours for each grade of the Doctor’s exam and... Yes... what is it Sage?” she finished this off with a hint of annoyance as she turned back to Lord Sage once having reached the instructor’s desk at the front of the class and seeing his thick, muscular arm raised like he was asking a question in a lesson.

“I would also ask if I may also sit for the Post-Doctorate and also the Medical Research exams today, Doctress.” He stated humbly. “I know you’ve kindly cleared a very large section of your schedule for me, to which I am truly appreciative of, and I was wondering if you’d be willing to allow me to sit all exams.”

Sage then sat there and watched as Namah’s lips split into a sinister smile as she focused her eyes on him, and her lips continued to spread to show off all her teeth. She’d love to watch this tiger-man suffer brain fry as he labored through all those tests.

“Very well.” She said through grinning teeth. “I’ll be downloading the tests while you are taking the first of the nurse’s exam.

“The Post-Doctorate Exam comes once again in two grades for each major nation of the universe, and each grade is in three parts just like all the other previous exams. Though all the other exams are machine scored, this final exam is scored by the Chief Medical Officer of whatever hospital you are taking the exam under, as well as a body of staff in said hospital. I am, of course, the head of that team that will grade your scores in that matter.

“Each grade of the Post-Doctorate Exam takes one hour.

“The Medical Research Exam, however, is a single grade for both Imperial and Assembly due to the combined medical organization between either nation, and only a single part,

and covers your understanding of theoretical medicine, and will ask for you to include a copy of your thesis for acceptance.

“The Board that will review your application for this final exam is made up of The CMO of the Hospital you are in; again, this would me, as well as the Surgeon General of the Imperium and the Chief Healer of the Assembly. Two other Notable Doctors or Doctresses – one from each government – will likewise sit on that said board.

“As a warning Sage, you have now agreed to sit for fourteen hours of exams. Leaving in the middle of any such exam is considered as a sign of an inability to be a Doctor and undertake the strain of such a position, and as such, your CMO will decide as to the next time you will be able to take a test to be authorized to practice medicine.”

Sage watched her, his eyes blinking once while he fixed her with a half smile. “I understand, Doctress.” He said simply. “I am ready to begin.”

Namah sat down behind her desk, and keyed in a simple series of commands and a holographic display of the conjoined medical emblem – created as a combination of the Imperial and Assembly medical insignias – appeared before Sage, as well as a series of glyphs in Aphkei stating that this was the Standard Nurse’s Exam, Grade One.

“Insert your Data Chip,” she said, and Sage did so. “You may begin now.” Namah spoke, and Sage lifted his five-fingered hand and tapped the holographic glyph before him, and immediately a holographic keyboard, similar to the one in his bio-comp wrist computer, displayed itself, along with the first question.

Sage read it, and Namah was surprised that he could understand Aphkei already, and began keying in his answers.

Namah sat at her desk working on past due work, observing charts, and grading papers, and other than the constant click-beep of Sage’s fingers writing his answers, she’d forgotten all about him.

If she was going to be sitting here this long, then she was going to make sure that she got something productive done.

And then she heard the tell tale Beep-beep, just before Sage called to her.

“Forgive me for interrupting your work, Doctress, but I am completed with the first Nurse’s exam.

“Very well, then you may work on the essay then.” She said without looking at him, waving her hand dismissively.”

“I’m already done with that section as well.” He replied.

“Well... then work on the hands on exam.” She said, a little annoyed.

“I’m already done with that section as well, Doctress.” He said then, and Namah sat there for a moment, her brows beetling as she turned to Sage at last, and saw the Completed Icon hovering over his desk.

She then leaned back, depressed a switch on her own computer to read the time it took for him to complete, and almost gasped in surprise at seeing that he’d finished this entire series of exams in sixty-four minutes.

“May I have the next nurse’s exam, Doctress Namah?”

Namah blinked at him for a moment, and then keyed into her desktop computer to upload the next portion of the exam to Sage’s Desk.

“You may begin.” She said, a little wonder playing into her voice as Sage immediately hit the activation icon on the holodisplay, and began keying information.

Namah sat back, an eyebrow rising as she watched him work.

He kept his eyes on the screen, his glowing green and sloping eyes blinking only every now and again, while his five fingered hands moved at a remarkable speed.

No other individual other than the humans on Aearth had five-digits on their hands and feet that she knew of. She herself had only three digits. It was an amazing thing to see how quickly a five fingered entity could work. She’d heard of six-fingered entities, but never saw them key on a keyboard.

She then hit a display on her keyboard and watched him work, seeing his answers being entered only after a moment of thought on the entire screen. Her eyes lifted again to watch him.

She was forbidden to scan an individual taking the tests, for such a thing could be considered grounds for forcing errors on an individual for distracting their thought processes, but she considered that he must be such an individual who had a perfect photographic memory to be able to read whole pages at a time.

It was impressive that he was doing this trick with a language that was alien to the whole of his universe.

Her Medical Professor had such a trait. He could read your entire thesis paper of five hundred or more pages in a few seconds just by flipping through the pages as quickly as he could. Sage was doing the same thing, reading the whole page all at once... and understanding.

It took only a few seconds per page for him to complete the answers.

Her lips pursed as she shrugged and then went back to work, continuing in her backed up work while Sage continued to work rapidly through the exam. She didn't even pay attention to his essay portion, and before she knew it, ninety one minutes into his start time...

"Doctress, I am finished." He said, and she looked up, checked the time and took note at the speed at which he'd accomplished this test as well.

Must have a horde of wrong answers on them... she thought to herself and rose to her feet, walked over to him, ejected his current Data Chip, inserted another, and returned to her desk to upload the next test for the doctor's exam for him.

"You may now begin." She said, and then inserted his first test chip into a receptacle on her desk to have it graded while Sage continued into the Doctor's exam.

Namah had gone to get herself some tea when her data pad beeped, and she lifted it before her as she walked down the corridor and keyed a receive button in order to get the incoming message from the hospital's central computer, and then spit her tea out as Sage's exam scores came in.

Not only were they one hundred percent correct, but they were also done in record time.

She hurried back and peaked into the classroom window before entering, seeing Sage still staring at the holoscreen, his fingers clicking away rapidly as he continued to do his thing.

Namah only needed to wait a short while longer before the computer gave a beep-beep, signifying that he'd completed the first phase of the Imperial Doctor's Exam.

Namah put her tea down and her data pad with his results there as well and looked at him simply with her deep black eyes for a moment or two before continuing, realizing he'd just gotten through a portion of the test that was designed to take four hours in just over sixty minutes.

"Lord Sage, the next stage of your Doctor's exam is a hands on exam using a Holographic patient. I will be observing you, now if you'll please rise from your desk and come to my desk, we'll begin the next stage."

Sage nodded and rose, sliding out of the student's desk to her desk, and she keyed in several commands and a holographic patient, perfect in every detail of an Aphkei appeared.

“You are to diagnose and correct the problem that this individual is experiencing. You have two hours.”

Namah had never been so surprised in her life. Sage had correctly diagnosed the Aphkei patient within fifteen seconds and had treated the patient in forty-six minutes. And this wasn't any simple malady like Tonsillitis or Appendicitis. Not even a Heart Attack! They were always life threatening diseases like cellular break down from radiation, cardiovascular collapse due to intense gravity, high energy weapon burns and the like.

Sage successfully diagnosed and removed a parasitic organism, its eggs, cleansed the body, and made it significantly healthier than its baseline statistics before ending the test.

Namah chanced a glance at him as he smiled at her in a soft, friendly way.

The way this man knew how to heal was uncanny... and Namah was now beginning to feel in danger of being replaced...

She was old, she was ready to retire, but she was unsure as to whether or not this Lord Sage should be the one to replace her. He was knowledgeable and all... but... there was something in his attitude that was missing...

Sage had passed both his doctor's exams with perfect scores, again, in record time, with all of the bonus questions answered as well. Namah received an email from a member of the Medical Board, asking if her medical computer was on the fritz, she sent the test results to him, and they came back the same as they did when processed through her colleague's central mainframe.

Perfect scores, all bonus questions answered, and in record time.

What was even more spectacular was the fact that The Assembly's hands-on test was designed to be a patient who was nigh un-savable. Sage saved him... and became the ninth in the history of the test to do so.

So, when Namah approached again, clearing her throat, she administered the Supplementary Medical Exam that would allow him able to administer onto the rare plant-based and silicon-based life forms should he pass it.

And then Namah saw Sage falter over the next couple of hours. He didn't work as fast, and though he got through the entire exam, he thankfully didn't do it at record time and at a level that was just shy above passing.

It was as if he was working on nothing but theory, but nonetheless, he scored excellent marks for plant life forms, and passable marks for the silicon life forms. Namah took some pleasure at the knowledge that she knew something better than he did as she administered the next exam.

Late evening had come, and Namah had just completed all of her backed up work and sent it for processing when Sage finished his exam. Four hours ahead of schedule.

“Just leave the chip on your desk and I will collect it.”

“When will I hear about the post-doctorate and the research-doctorate grade exams, if I may ask, Doctress?”

“I will convene with my chiefs of staff tomorrow evening, Lord Sage, and we will review your marks and your contributions and make a decision then.

“As for the research grade... I will be sending them a report along with your exam results, and from there, your guess is as good as mine. A battery of five individuals must review that exam, Sage, and each will review and then send a Yea or Nay concerning that exam.”

Namah folded her fingers together and looked down. She couldn't seem to bring herself to look at him at the moment.

“You... are excused, Sage.”

“Thank you for your time Doctress. I look forward to hearing from you.”

And he left.

Namah lifted her hand and telekinetically summoned the chip to her hand, which she held. In her hand was the future of a man who wished to practice medicine in her hospital... a man, who so far, had outscored her and the rest of the universe in nearly every regard.

Namah had been hand-picked for this position, and now... now she was fearful that she was soon to be replaced.

How easy it would be to snap that chip in half, and for a moment, but a moment, Namah considered such a thing. But then she shifted her hand, inserted the chip into her desk and uploaded its results.

For the next hour, she wrote her summary of what she'd just seen for the Galactic Medical Board.

High in the heavens, outside the glittering sphere of atmosphere that surrounded Wave World, a star liner suddenly winked into the empty space near to the space station with a snap of pseudo motion, its hull fading into this space as it space folded from a far off place; its hull snapping with purple phase energy eruptions. It turned on its axis and slid sideways to attach itself to the space station, while from the hangar in its underbelly, a shuttle made its way for the Mystic League... far below on the ground.

It swept into the atmosphere like a falling star, turning close to the vast oceans here and turned toward the Mystic Archipelago, soaring over the growing Millennium Tree and then to the Mystic League's ground-based space port, lowered itself, turned ponderously and then landed as softly as it could on one of the landing pads.

Droids approached immediately, attaching hoses designed to refuel the reactor, drain wastes and purify them, while other droids capped the engines and chucked the landing wheels, even as the gangplank to the shuttle slowly lowered from between the engines.

Shadows moved within the flood of light that came from within the ship, and down the gangplank came two figures dressed in white, and following them came an Aphkei Vixen in nurse's garb pushing a hover bed laden with medical devices, but with the odd exception of any fluid hangers or bio-fluid bags.

The individual, a young female who was barely awake, but only because the pain kept her from sleeping, looked on with a barely managed smile for her parents as they bent lovingly over her hover bed to touch her lips and kiss her forehead like loving parents do.

They then made a B-line straight for the Hospital.

"They just arrived minutes ago, Doctress." One of the orderlies reported, walking next to the Nyrian as they moved swiftly down the wide halls. "All of the other staff Doctors agree that you will want to see this one."

Namah read the inpatient report on her datapad.

"Fluid in her lungs, stinging pain everywhere, full body achiness... yes, yes, yes... this is just a simple case of Par Virus or something similar. Why does everyone think that I am needed for such a simple..." and then Namah stopped, and saw the unbelievable.

Firstly, this was a race that was unknown to her, and was likewise a race that was unknown to the medical library. Secondly, they belonged to a religion that was not of the celebrated religion of the Universe, and this particular religion had certain restrictions on medical practices.

“No surgical remedies?” she gasped.

“That...” the orderly began. “Is why this is being brought to you, Doctress. We don’t know what to do.

“Even the insertion of nano-probes interferes with this religion. We’ve... we’ve managed to make the girl comfortable with electronic pulse emissions to key areas of her brain, but they are simply delaying the inevitable. The girl is in the critical stages of her sickness.”

Namah sat down on one of the nearby waiting benches and began wracking her brains for something to do...

“Where are the parents?” she asked at last and rose to follow the orderly as he gestured to her to do so.

Namah entered into an observation room overlooking the girl’s chambers, where a male and a female stood, both wearing the finest of white robes.

They were known as the Kath; a race of evolved insects, and a race where their religion had become paramount to them. Various faiths across the Great Wide Universe, were currently trying to convert this race, but not one success had ever been recorded. It was a kind-hearted resistance from the Kath to these missionaries.

As Namah entered, the mother and father turned to look at her.

They were beautiful creatures, having soft faces with only subtle bulges where their noses would be, smooth flesh and slender bodies, with long fingers and large arching eyes.

“I know that look.” The father, D’Ka by name, said. “You cannot do anything either, and you’ve come to petition us to lift our religious restriction.

Namah stood there, barely keeping her incredible check on her emotions reined in. She wanted to scream, she wanted to cry... there was someone in her hospital that she could cure with two simple cuts no larger than a quarter inch long, and a restriction of the legal parents was keeping her from doing this.

She swallowed her emotions with difficulty, then nodded. “And you will tell me no.” she said in return.

“We had hoped... and prayed, that we could find a cure here.” The female said, lowering her head. Namah recalled her name being A’Li. “I’d... never had greater hope inside me, and no greater prayer in my hearts than to have this one pay off.” She looked up at her husband with her large eyes, which spilt their reservoir of tears.

“Oh husband...” she choked, and buried her face in her mate’s chest. “M-my faith is faltering. I-I don’t know how I can live with peace with the Creator if He takes my baby...”

“Be strong, Wife. We... we will continue to pray. For as long as Ki is alive... Then there is still hope.”

And they both turned to watch their daughter die.

Namah couldn’t take it any longer. She promptly turned, and found herself standing directly before Lord Sage, her mouth agape and her eyes heavy with tears. And then she felt his touch on her face, such gentle hands, hardened from conflict, softened from care giving, wiped the tears from her eyes with a simple movement of his thumbs over where her eyes met her cheeks.

“Namah... am I a doctor?” he asked, and Namah blinked at him. “Namah... this is important, right now. I need to know.”

“Y-yes.” She whispered, not knowing what else to say.

“Thank you.” And he turned, leaving her there.

Namah, half confused, half sorrowful, stared after his large back as he moved away down the hall.

Sage had found Ki’s medical suite. It was the sort that was reserved for quarantine. Though correctable, Par Virus was highly contagious.

Sage looked in through the double-paned and laser proofed, unbreakable transparent plassteel over her pressure door. Sage ran his hand over the security device feeling its keys, testing the feel around the keypad as he thought better of trying to surpass security and caused a possible security breach.

Instead he faced the door, placed his hands against the thick steel and phased right through the entire door and glass as if he were a ghost.

He could see his breath as he approached Ki on the other side of the door... the cold temperature was to induce topor in insects... and Ki would be quite comfortable right now. He passed his hand over the girl, feeling the bio energies surrounding her, found the trouble immediately, and then turned to look up toward the observation deck, which had gone dark.

Sage had felt the addition of a very sick life force at the school, and went to investigate. Once in the hospital, he'd overheard the orderlies and Doctors and Doctresses discussing the case, and despite the simplicity of it, they shook their heads at the restrictions being imposed.

Sage lifted his hands and depressed the inhibitors on the child's forehead and removed them, and immediately she gave off a moan of displeasure, and then a groan, and then her eyes snapped open as she gasped.

"Ah!" she said very weakly, and Sage lifted his hand again, but this time it was to slide his thumb against her forehead to soothe the sheering migraine that, to the girl, felt like it was about to split her head open.

"Don't be afraid." Sage smiled. "I'm here to help you."

"Hurts! It hurts so bad..." she cried softly, her voice little more than a whisper.

"I know. I'm here to make it go away, little one. Now I need your help. You must help me cure you, and you must stay awake to guide me. Listen to my voice. Focus on it as best as you can... and we'll get that sickness out of you..."

Namah had fallen asleep on a couch in the doctor's lounge, hugging herself having just cried herself to sleep. Namah was a Doctress who cared, and when a Doctress who cares is told that she cannot use a surefire fix to repair a simple malady and is forced to watch a child die – and in Namah's case, feel that life force slip away – such a thing weighs heavily on what heart remains inside the chest of a Medi-technician who's seen enough death for ten lifetimes.

She was amidst a sleep where she dreamed of people dying all around her, and she was unable to stop it. It was then that the door to the lounge burst open and another Doctor thrust himself through it. "Doctress!"

Namah woke with a start, sitting upright before rubbing her eyes with the back of a hand.

"Ngh... what is it?" she asked, truly not in the mood for anything at the moment.

"Doctress... you... you will not believe it."

Namah stared down at the young girl known as Ki as she played with a simple little plush doll, hugging it and putting it on her shoulders as if she were carrying a baby.

“Praise the Maker, for he is great and can do all things.” D’Ka said, and Namah found herself being embraced again. “Our hope has paid off, Doctress Namah, and you say that you did nothing?”

“None of us did.” She reassured them.

“Praise the Maker, praise His greatness, for He has provided.” A’Li was on her knees, having been constantly begging for forgiveness for her lack of faith.

“Not even a single mark on her. Not a single incision, but I thought that this malady could only be released by draining the excess liquids from her lungs.”

“You... are correct.” Namah smiled, but was nonetheless very, very confused. “Could you excuse me, D’Ka.” She said then, and turned to place her hand on the door handle. “But I must do some additional work tonight before I retire. We... will be keeping your daughter under observation in the meantime until morning. Just as a precaution...”

“I understand.” D’Ka said while his wife continued to pray. “We... we will indeed wait to satisfy the master of science in this school, but there is nonetheless hope in this place, and my people will indeed hear of it.”

“I appreciate it, Master D’Ka. You may speak with any of my Doctors, Doctresses or Orderlies if you require anything.”

Namah then opened the door and exited it, standing there in the quiet, dim hall for a moment, and then turned toward her office and once arriving sat immediately down before her desk, thought for a moment, and then lifting her hand, depressed the activation switch, and a holographic screen immediately appeared from nowhere, and she keyed in several commands before laying back.

<Accessing Quarantine room one-oh-six> The computer stated. <Please identify yourself.>

“User: Doctress Hyurri Namah, Chief Medical Officer of the Mystic League, Wave World. Password: Kismet.” Namah recited, and the image began playing from midnight.

“Fast forward to time index Zero-Two-Thirty-Six.” She said, and the time index display immediately jumped forward to that point.”

It was immediately after the child had been placed in her isolation bed and hooked up to nothing but external monitors, as per their religious beliefs.

She watched for seventeen minutes before a shadow passed by the lower observation window, and due to the dim lights outside the window, the individual was hidden from view. And then a face peaked in through the portal in the pressure door, and Namah leaned forward to be sure.

“Sage.”

Namah found Sage resting on one of the many couches in the waiting room. She had just watched the impossible on her computer screen.

“Get up.” She demanded, folding her arms beneath her bosom and holding onto her arms in an attempt to keep herself from trembling.

Sage’s eyes opened immediately to look at her, and in the dim lighting of the evening shift, his green eyes pierced through the darkness to look straight at her. He then lifted himself, turned on the couch, rose to his feet and turned again to face her, towering over her small frame.

“How!” she said, her voice quavering.

Sage then began to tell her.

“Don’t be afraid.” Sage smiled. “I’m here to help you.”

“Hurts! It hurts so bad...” she cried softly, her voice little more than a whisper.

“I know. I’m here to make it go away, little one. Now I need your help. You must help me cure you, and you must stay awake to guide me. Listen to my voice. Focus on it as best as you can... and we’ll get that sickness out of you...”

Sage then lifted his hands and pulled down the covers to her blankets to her waist, and then parting open her gown to leave her budding chest covered but revealing her segmented flesh beneath it, he laid the back of his hand against her flesh and pushed in. And remarkably, their flesh became one, his hand descending into her body as he shifted forward, and taking hold of her hearts, he began to help pump them.

The girl gasped and her small hand moved to hold onto his thick wrist.

“Ah!” she cried aloud, and Sage reached with his free hand to the wrist that she held, caressed her hand for a moment, and then slid a long pin out of its holder in the wrist that she held. He then lifted it to her neck, felt it for a moment, and then inserted the pin into her flesh.

It didn’t break the flesh; it merely was inserted into an existing pore. Once there, Sage flicked the pin and the harmonics sent a reverberation through her nervous system to stop some of the pain.

She calmed, but was still in pain.

“How old are you Ki?” he asked, pressing on points on her sickly chest.

“T-twelve.”

“A good age, you’re practically a woman.” His thick fingers pressed on a point on the side of her brow, and removing another pin, he inserted it into her forehead. “Does that still hurt, Ki?”

“Y-Yes. Hurts... my body, my chest...”

Sage’s hand inside her body continued to massage her hearts, keeping them beating solidly.

“Can you open your eyes? Does the light still hurt?”

Ki opened her eyes and then shut them again. “Yes.” She choked, and Sage inserted another pin in her forehead, and she gasped from it.

“How about now?” he asked.

She chanced to open her eyes, blinked, and then opened them fully. She had the most marvelous blue within blue eyes.

“I-it doesn’t hurt as much.” She managed. “The light doesn’t hurt.”

“I’m glad.” Sage said, and took her hand and secured it about his wrist. “Now hold on to my arm, Ki.” And she did so while he placed three pins into that wrist of hers.

Still, he pumped her hearts.

For the next hour, he worked, tracing lines in her body with his fingers, leaving a solid line on her flesh that glowed a soft blue as he connected paths between the pins, all the while talking with the girl, till she felt no pain, but then again, she was so weakened by whatever he was doing that she couldn’t move.

And then... finally:

“Ki... I want you to listen to me now.” Sage said, and stroked her brow, being careful of the pin sticking out of her forehead, and the girl looked up at him. “Do you know what the word *‘purge’* means?”

“T-to expel?”

“Precisely. There is a vile sickness inside you, Ki. It wants to kill you slowly, but I’m not going to let it. We are going to purge it from your body, and you will have to suffer some to rid yourself of it.

“You will feel some pain, but not as much as you would otherwise. Your lungs are full of a foul liquid that is multiplying, and in a moment, I will activate your body’s own resiliencies and force it to expel this sickness. You will throw up, and you will lose your breath, and you will feel as if you’re drowning, but just remember that I’m here... that you are holding onto me, and I am your anchor. Hold onto me, tightly, and you will get through this.

“Do you understand?”

“Y-yes...” she replied.

“Are you ready?”

She swallowed, coughed, and then nodded.

“Then here we go.”

And Sage removed one more pin and inserted it into her sternum, and Ki suddenly choked on something, and then coughed. She coughed again, and there was a watery sound in her chest, and cradling her head, Sage helped her up a little as she spasmed, still massaging her hearts, and on the next cough a thick, sickly green mass of goo welled up inside her mouth.

Her body was tensing, squeezing itself, forcing her ribcage closed while her diaphragm pushed upward, compressing the lungs, squeezing the fluids from them.

Ki hunched over herself and threw up a constant stream of goop from her one lung, uncoiled a little as she gurgled heavily, coughed again, and then another gurgling sound rose from her as another wave of the goop erupted from her mouth.

“Ah! It hurts!” she breathed in a wheeze, coughed, coughed again, a ragged sickly cough before another mouthful of fluids erupted from her and she held onto Sage’s hand like she was told.

And then she went into a coughing fit that appeared as if she’d just threw up bile, stomach acids that were so strong that they sizzled and burned Sage’s arm... but still he didn’t flinch from them.

And then the girl heaved a couple times and then spasmed backward, Sage still cradling her head as she took in the deepest breath anyone ever did see, filling both lungs to their capacity before she went into a coughing fit, but then this fit was a healthy one... none of

the gurgling noises, none of the ragged voice and breath. Sage then laid her down and slowly slid his hand that was in her body outward.

“You are a very strong young woman, Ki... do you know that?”

“Can I be as strong as you?” she mused as Sage began removing his pins from her body and reinserting them into a guard in his wrist. The glowing lines on her body rapidly dissipated.

“I think you’ll become stronger than you’ll ever dream to be, Ki. Just some patience, I think.”

“Are you an angel?”

“A Guardian Angel, perhaps,” he said, and then got her to undress, removed her blankets and then dressed her in another fresh gown, remade her bed, and laid her down again before depositing the old linens into the biohazard receptacle. “Now... I want you to sleep now, Ki...” he said, tucking her in, and from nowhere, he produced a new plushy doll for her and placed it by her.

She squealed with glee and hung onto the doll with both arms.

“Your mother and father will want to see you soon, but you need to stay here for now.”

“Thank you... Mr. Angel. Thank you for taking the pain away.”

“You are welcome...”

Namah was staring at Sage as he finished his oration. She couldn’t believe this tale of magic and wonder he’d just spun for her.

“H-how...” she began, but her mind hurt and was numb.

She was considered to be a great thinker, as all psychics were, but the things that she had seen tonight and heard reiterated defied everything that she knew.

“Sage... you’ve just caused enormous harm! That girl is on a religious restriction that her skin is not to be pierced!”

“I know... and it wasn’t.” he said, and Namah began to mouth words that didn’t come out of her mouth. Sage stepped forward, gestured and a chair slid across the room and he helped her to sit before he sat back down on the couch himself.

“Her body wasn’t pierced at any given instance, Namah, because I employed two natural healing techniques of my world and universe that I’ve yet to see duplicated anywhere else.

“To pump her heart, I utilized a matter of Biokinetics that allowed me to merge a piece of me with her and provide the muscle control necessary to help her heart to beat. The pins inserted into her skin are near the thickness of a fiber optic strand. These were inserted into her existing pores to actuate nerve endings... Not once during the operation was she even nicked, Namah.”

Namah stared at him and then swallowed hard.

“Bio... kinetics?” she asked. She’d never heard of such a psychic power.

“Yes... the manipulation of biological matter psychically. It is a rare trick the Panzer Dragons do not share lightly. One of my old masters found favor enough to give the gift to me.”

“Oh...” she said, her eyes looking every which way before she rose to her feet, stepped over to the automatic food dispenser and keyed in a strong cup of tea and downed half of the steaming hot liquid before turning to him. “I... I um... Sage... I don’t know how you do what you do... but all things aside, thank you for helping that girl. I don’t know what I would’ve done if I had to watch a sweet little girl like that slip away.”

“I couldn’t stand by either...” he said, hanging his head for a moment and then turning to her and smiling. “Namah, I assume my Doctor’s license came in.”

“It did. If it hadn’t, I would’ve had you arrested for practicing medicine without a license.”

The two of them smiled at one another in a friendly manner... and perhaps... even as friends.

Lord Sage had set some remarkable new strides in medical history, having rated himself in one fell swoop as the highest ranked medical technician for biological life forms in the whole of the Imperium and the Assembly in history. After what he did for that little girl, Namah had forgotten her misgivings about Sage and had sent in his applications for post doctorate and research doctor status.

Within one month, he had both of them... with honors from the medical boards.

Reporters wanted to speak with him all the time, but all requests were sent away, and after awhile, Namah’s thought that he’d try to control her hospital soon vanished. He seemed content to be where he was, and even turned down an offer by Namah to be her second lieutenant in the hospital.

“But that wouldn’t be fair to all the other doctors, Namah.” He said while he keyed in with the hospital’s Genetic Machine. “There are people here who are far better administrators than I am, and I don’t want to outplace someone who’s been here for years and has been trying for that position to help feed his or her family.

“I don’t even have tenure.”

Namah smiled at him, but then noticed who he was checking with in the Genetic Machine.

The Genetic Machine was a towering edifice whose purpose was to show the affects of genetic growth as an individual matures. It was a necessary addition to the school in order to track the changes that happened to the myriad of students there as their bodies generally transformed dramatically through the affects of magic upon their bodies.

It had a myriad of functions to discover the affects of any environmental contributor imaginable, from radioactive mutation, demonic mutation, the affects of increased hormonal concentrations, enhanced bio-energy and blood-oxygen levels, and so on.

Taking a genetic sample and feeding it a full spectrum bio-scan, it could produce a trideo holographic image of what would happen as the individual progressed through a timeline.

The individual in whom he had in it now was the girl Ki.

Ki and her family had stayed here for several days, and Ki was happy and energetic, running around and playing with the other students. She called Sage her Guardian Angel and showed genuine love for the great Weretiger.

“Sage, why is Ki’s genetic signature in the machine?”

“I have... a theory.” He said, and inserted a data chip, which undoubtedly held her full spectrum bio-scan.

An image of Ki appeared, wearing the computer’s censoring programs in the form of a girl’s panties and shirt, and the computer began to extrapolate how she’d develop as she grew older.

She grew slender, grew tall and very beautiful, with long hair and even longer antennae, long ears and large, wide and beautiful eyes. At sixteen she had a supple, segmented body, the computer having stretched her girl’s panties into a sexy thong that barely covered her sex and the top of her bottom, and her shirt stretched to hold in a pair of large breasts.

She was slender, beautiful and exotic.

“She’ll be very beautiful.” Namah said, folding her arms about herself. “I’m so glad that such a treasure like her could be saved.

“Yes,” Sage said, removed the data chip and then inserted another. “She would have been.”

Namah blinked and then turned to Sage as he began entering in a new sequence, and she saw his fingers put in a myriad of gene sequencing, and to her it looked like the words GATACA and similar were speeding their way across the screen.

“The image on the left,” he said, and the image moved to their left while a new one materialized, once again of Ki as she is now. “Is what she would’ve been if she hadn’t experienced the sickness. This is as she would be from the information your staff collected when she was admitted a month ago. And this,” he touched a key on the holographic keypad to start the new sequence. “Is what will happen to her now that the sickness has run its course.”

And Namah gasped as the little girl’s growth began to accelerate faster than it had for the before image, and was surprised as this image grew rapidly in muscle mass too. What was more was that this innocent little girl was growing in armor, she had claws, she had muscle galore framing the whole of her back. Namah watched as great wings spread from wing sheathes at her back, and this new Ki now stood a good three feet taller than the slender goddess she was before.

Soft purple chitin armored her porcelain form, and she had feathered muscles, enhanced strength levels that were hundreds of times greater than they should be in proportion to her body, let alone her race’s known biological limits.

Clothing was replaced by natural body armor over her breasts to hewn them together like claws holding her tits – four of them now, with several tertiaries lining her abs – and an arching and overlapping series of chitinous plates covered her sex.

But... despite all of that growth, all that power in such an innocent little girl at the same age of sixteen, her face was still lovely, her body still sinuous and exotic.

“When I was merged with her, Namah, I felt something click. It was a biorhythm change.”

“But biorhythms can only change if... if a species evolves...”

“I’ve had Dallas check into it. There is apparently a plague on their homeworld regarding the Par Virus. Thousands are dying. But we are mistaking this for what you call the Par Virus, Namah. The bio-matter taken from Ki’s lungs is cast off genetic material. Their bodies are literally evolving. Ki may have been strong enough to survive the ordeal, to learn to throw up all the material from her lungs, and if she had, she’d eventually be like this.” And he gestured to the image on the right. “The reason why she

appears as this,” and gestured to the image on the left. “Is because this is as she is now. Not her entire body has evolved. She’s evolving from the inside out, and our only genetic material allowable is dead skin cells.”

“And with their religion as it is,” Namah supplied. “It will not allow for modern science to repair the problem. And if they don’t allow it then they will die into nigh extinction.”

“Yes.” Sage turned and leaned against a blank portion of the console. “There is Religious upheaval, Namah, to an order that I can only typify as an inquisition. Their very faith is being sundered, and if it goes much farther, their entire race will be torn in civil war, and either the evolved will arise triumphant... or their entire race will die out as they kill each other.

“Ki and her parents have been labeled as Heretics for even seeking outside help. That’s why they’re still here. It’s because they cannot go back, and they have no where to go to.”

“Oh Great Aul.” Namah said, her eyes watering. “What about Ki?! Does she know about this?”

“No. And I cannot bring myself to tell her Namah.” His own eyes watered and he closed them shut before leaning over the console. “To inform her as to what will happen to her will break her... and to do that to such a precious gift of life like that little girl is a sin, Namah.

“It is a sin and I will not be the one to cause it.

“To return her to her people, even if her parents were forgiven by their religion, would mean that she’d live the first few years of her life in perfect happiness... until her puberty hit her.

“She’d begin to mutate and transform, growing rapidly in strength and in power, and if she managed to escape her people’s *‘cleansing fires’* – death by bonfire since death by sword is unacceptable – then she’d be labeled as an abomination and killed on sight. If she managed to survive that far, and achieve this...” he gestured to the new image in the Genetic Machine. “Then she’d know nothing but harm, hurt and bloodshed.”

“I-is there anything we can do for her?”

“Perhaps...” he said and straightened. “All she needs now... is a new faith...”

Sanari watched the little girl Ki at play, laughing and giggling, strong and free as a bird at play.

Sanari held herself in regal stance and attire. She was a goddess of beauty, and though she didn't play upon her beauty, she was nonetheless revered for it.

"Sage, do you know what you ask?" Sanari asked, and turned to Sage and to Namah standing close by.

"I do." He said, and continued watching Ki at play.

Sanari watched him, and then turned to the child. She knew that the two doctors were right... and smiling, she stepped forward to where the child's mother and father sat.

"Good morning." Sanari greeted, and the girl's parents immediately rose and D'Ka bowed while A'Li curtsied, either holding onto each other's hand.

"Good morning." They said in unison. "How may we be of service to you?" D'Ka finished.

"Your child is a very happy child." Sanari said softly, smiling at Ki as she skipped in her one-piece white bathing suit.

"She is." A'Li agreed. "I sometimes think that she is the old Goddess of Laughter reborn." And A'Li blushed. "I don't know what I'd've done if I'd lost her. The Creator bless this place... bless it eternally."

"I want to offer something to you and to your daughter." Sanari said then. "We want to learn from your daughter, learn of your people, and learn of your holy ways, so that we may possess a greater understanding about yourselves, and in turn share our light with yours. Some notables in this school have fallen in love with your child, and wish for her to stay with us. In return, we are willing to provide you with a home, and an environment in which you may worship freely, and we will help to provide for your daughter as if she were one of ours."

"B-but are you not a Reverenced Mother? A priestess of The Faith?" D'Ka asked.

"I am."

"B-but..." D'Ka continued, and Sanari smiled in return.

"I am not here to force my beliefs on you. I believe in what I believe, and you believe in what you believe. I shall not force you to change or to alter your thoughts in any way, but our teachings are always there should you wish to learn from them. This is a school after all." Sanari curtsied to them and then rose. "Do you wish to take our offer? Otherwise we are willing to send you wherever you wish to go."

And the silence hung, and Ki's parents turned to look at their daughter. "Please... tell us more."

Sage sat quietly in his human form, bent over himself, in what appeared to be utter exhaustion. And yet... he had an utmost happiness shining from his face.

Sanari approached and he lifted his head to look at her, and he rose to his feet to the sight of her smiling face and her success, and to her surprise, he stepped forward and embraced her

“Thank you for this. I... I will somehow pay you back.”

Sanari’s face softened and she smiled at Sage, and breathed a sigh herself, feeling content and safe in those arms, and then she blinked and looked around to see if anyone had seen this exchange even as Sage stepped away.

“Mother Meniko is willing to allow them a temporary place to stay while their new home is being built.” Sanari said, and then sat on a nearby bench. Sage sat down beside her.

“We’ll be breaking ground on their home tomorrow.” Sage said, and stared off in the distance where the child sat in her mother’s arms, sleeping against her in the late evening.

“Sage... why did you ask me to teach Ki?”

“To ensure her happiness.” He smiled. “And hopefully... she can return to her people and share that with them. Again... thank you for helping us to preserve such a life.”

“Sage... I’ve felt Ki’s soul... and if the spirits are right... then I may wind up owing you for such an honor as teaching her.”

End of the Beginning

Sage waited...

He stood quietly in his uniform... the one he hadn't worn in over forty years. Daedalus had to seriously take it out due to his increased muscle mass and height, though Sage had thoughts that Dallas simply disposed of his old one and made a new one. The fabric felt too new.

With Sage having doubled his thickness all around, his uniform indeed needed to be remade.

The Millennium tree stood behind him, and the courtyard in which he found himself upon between the primary two radial roots had just finished being constructed.

He waited while behind him were dozens of Bioroids, and beside him was Daedalus.

And then a shuttle appeared from over the caldera and then slowly lowered, turned, and then opened its back, and eighteen students stepped out, with the first two being Fatima Iksaki, and that young Mayia Galant. Between the two of them, with Fatima having grown so much greater than any other student her age, there was a vast contrast between the small bunny and the powerful pooch.

Sage waited for them to disembark, line up before him as he continued to hold himself in militaristic parade rest, and waited for the shuttle to take off.

"Line up." He said, even as the students were watching the shuttle leave, and his new students all lined up.

"The first thing I will state is that none of you are losers. I intend to prove that. Some of you have been having thoughts that you are here because the Mystic League was about to fail you. Some of you are here because you believe this to be your last chance.

"You will abandon that way of thinking immediately.

"This school is a shard of another... an ancient school that trained my world's most potent protectors who've held off the hordes of darkness for over a hundred thousand years. It is the extension of another school of thought that spans backwards in time for a million years, which came from another school ten million years old, and finally a last school that spans backwards for tens of billions of years.

"Each time that it has passed hands from one species to another, the school was remade and tailored for that new race. And now it shall be passed onto you.

“But unlike the past versions of this school, the newly formed League of the Shadow Arts must become tailored for the needs of this new race. In this, I require your help. Everyone’s help.

“As your Master, I will work along with you, to help you grow as fast or as slow as you wish. As it is, I am authorized to teach you only the basics from the founding organization till you have all deemed yourselves capable of learning more. As such, as a need is created, a need will be met.

“My rules are simple. Do not be late. Do not ever be late. Obedience is a requirement. Disobedience will be punished with lessons in humility. Fighting, unless authorized and supervised, is strictly forbidden.

“Do I make myself clear?”

There were a series of mumbled agreements and nods.

“Louder! Let me hear you! Have pride in hearing your own voice.”

“Yes sir!” they chimed in, and Sage smiled.

“This courtyard is the practice ring. Inside of it I am a relentless taskmaster.” He said, showing them the left side of his face, and for an instant they saw a dark expression on his features... till he turned his head to show them the other side, and the expression immediately became pleasant and loving. “Outside of the practice ring, I am your loving father. There is no question too small for you to ask. Asking questions is the quickest way to enlightenment.” He turned to face them all.

“Are there any questions?”

There was a pause, and then one small girl raised a hand.

“Yes Marieluka?” he said. Sage had made it a point to memorize the faces with the names of his new students before they ever arrived.

“Are... are we safe here, Master Sage?” she asked, rather timid for a young Casid Lioness. “Isn’t this a live volcano?”

“It is. But the power of the tree you see behind you keeps it tamed, and likewise, my companion Daedalus,” he said, and tapped a friendly hand on Dallas’s shoulder “Who acts as my Lair’s computer, has taken additional measures to make sure that other than the occasional quake, you shall not have to fear.”

“Our first order of business is to have you all fitted for uniforms, a brief orientation and room and partner assignments given, and finally... you will all choose your paths today.”

“Paths, Master Sage?” an Aphkei wolf by the name of Abraxis said. His twin Xerxes stood beside him.

“Yes. You will choose a weapon which shall become your own. Your choice of preference shall dictate your future.”

“Now... if there are no other questions... let us begin...”