

Pryde Pride

Written By: DocWolph and Psudodrake

Edited By: Psudodrake

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One

"If he ends up making friends more often the beating up people then I won't complain. I do believe Jhan can relate to you, Sage. It also helps that he wants to be with a strong male role model. Don't make him too focused yet, he has to want to be there first... I want him to be a happy young cub, for a little while at least... but you know that."

Eriruka spoke so strongly but uncharacteristically quiet, not the blasting opera diva voice that left Sage's ears ringing after only a few syllables. She would continue to tower over him even in his famed Battle form, but it was a high seat she rarely looked down on others from. She knelt before him, humbly and very pleasantly. This giant lioness, wore a bodycloth that was like a fine patterned wall hanging depicting a great mountain and sky; not at all unlike Mount Kilimanjaro.

Sage looking her squarely in her blue in black eyes saw her concern. Jhan was frightfully anger driven and he was, like most Casid tiger cubs, quite large and strong already. Teal and Nuu complained more than once about his desire to fight them... for real. It was just upsetting the great lioness not being able to handle this herself. Still she knew the answer lay in this community she was now a part of.

"I will do all that I can..." Sage said calmly, but still kept his ears flattened against the back of his head. There were some problems associated with having such sensitive hearing.

"If you must punish him for any reason you have my permission..."

"Not that he'll be the youngest of my students and he's already larger than most of them, I will want to warn you that I may have to be rather rough with him..."

Eriruka smirked, "Just don't break him. Angry cubs are easy to break... permanently."

"The utmost care will be taken. I'll expect him in the morning..."

Eriruka clasped Sage's shoulders with both paws; covering them firmly and completely over much of his chest and back as well, which was a true testament as to how large of a female she was. Sage towered over nearly every last denizen in the Leagues, with very few exceptions.

Eriruka was one such exception, and a prime example of such.

She bowed her head releasing him, her hands now on her lap, the shape of her gargantuan breasts become apparent against the heavy body tapestry, "Thank you. Thank you so much." She stood up and strode away briskly. Soft '*thooms*' coming from her huge, hefty feet that rang through the halls as she walked away.

Sage marveled at the fact that those footsteps didn't grow quieter as she got further away nor louder and they seemed to have a warding effect against fear. It was amazement to him as well that he could still feel the impact tremors through the ground as far away as she was.

Her way of walking was maybe a matronly skill she learned caring for Jhan Wan and Xu-Mei... and yet those hands could have easily and instantly crushed him. *That is one mother I would not like to upset... ever...*

Two

The next day...

Sage stood quietly after all the other students had left, the wind surrounding his volcano mountain lair swirling softly amidst the great towering Millennium tree his lair was built within.

Sage had removed himself from the island of the Mystic League, to find a place where he could be undisturbed by the normal interferences that came with. Great ancient wards and super technology met one another with natural druidic and shamanic magics to create a world aside from itself, this lair connected to the five others Sage has in different realities, forming a massive complex that only he and his house computer, Daedalus, knows all the secrets to.

The young tiger, Jhan Wan, massive and powerfully built like Omega Leaguers are, though notably smaller at little more than six feet tall, he has a tenuously relaxed, overbearing sort of exposure before his rigidly firm and upright new master.

The bioroid Daedalus, with his wrap around control module surrounding the crown and temples of his head, stands with a uniform on a hanger just behind his master, already perfectly tailored for the young tiger.

Sage walks forward, his precise silent footing, practiced of a ninja grandmaster, steps lithely around Jhan Wan. Only when he has completed a full circle around the cub does Sage finally speak.

"All of my students must pass through an initiatory test before I take them on. It is meant to prove that you are here of your own volition, with the desire and determination to learn what I have to offer you."

Numerous eyes are peering out of nooks and crannies, from windows and others at the

newcomer.

"Each of them has proven themselves by passing through a difficult ordeal."

"I have offered to give you this test. *IF* you take it and pass, then you become mine until I release you. If you take it, and fail... then I shall send you right back to mother."

"I understand and I accept." Wan says, and rights himself in a semblance of the ready stance he saw all the other students use in training formation. *Not a very good one though*, Sage thinks, *but he is as of yet untrained*. "What shall I prove myself with? Lifting, fighting, breaking, fighting?"

Sage notes the use of the word '*fighting*' twice, and raises an eyebrow at that.

"None of the above. Instead, I have a simple question that I seek an answer to. Give me the wrong answer, and you will be punished. Give me the same answer more than once, and you will be punished more." Jhan nods, hoping that it isn't multiple-choice.

"Who are you?" Sage asks.

Jhan is taken by surprise. Of course he knows who he is. Everyone knows who he is.

"I am Jhan Wan."

Sage's hand leaps up, and a snap of electricity leaps from his hand and strikes Jhan, the force of which is enough to make his brain skip.

"Who are you?" Sage repeats.

"I am Jhan Wan!" Jhan repeats, and is greeted by another snap of electricity, this time more intense, and enough to force his knees to sag.

"Who are you?" he again repeats.

"I... am a Casid Warrior." another snap, this one lasting a full second, driving the tiger straight to his knees.

"Who are you?"

Answer after answer, with the same question each time, first coming in snaps, then in flicks and full fledged ball lightning. Eventually, Jhan feels the searing pain of a full Chain lightning spell, feeling himself bitten by the tongues and teeth of painful electricity that forces him to writhe in pain. He roars, crying out before Sage finally releases him again. Trails of smoke rise up off his massive body, while Sage looks down at him, trying to hide his remorse for having to try the cub in this way, but Jhan cannot see the healer's concern... Not just yet.

'In the practice ring, I am your harsh master; outside I am your loving father. Obey me and my instructions and you shall grow faster than any of you would hope to dream. Obedience brings knowledge and honor, disobedience brings punishment and dishonor.' Sage had quoted this to each new student, just like his master had quoted to him.

Sage hoped that he'd get the chance with this boy.

"Who are you?" Sage asked yet again, and the cub clawed at the ground.

"I... do not... know... anymore." he voiced, forcing himself slowly to his knees, and then hesitantly rose to his feet, with much trouble, to stand proudly before Sage. "But, I will not fail." He was shivering, his eyes only half open from the ordeal, but despite much of the fluids in his body having been cooked off, there were still tears of pain in his eyes; glistening.

I must be careful, Sage thought, he is near the breaking point.

"Destroy me if you want," Jhan continued. "I will be nameless, unknown and unwanted, but I will... NOT... Give up!"

Sage's mouth opened to exhale inaudibly the pent up concern he'd been having. "Correct." the old tiger voiced, and Jhan half winced in expected pain and suffering, and half in surprise.

"What?" Jhan croaked, turning to sage sharply.

"Have you looked at what my school's student roster consists of, Jhan?" Sage asked, and without waiting for an answer, continued. "I took the Mystic League's rejects and near failures. I was the last chance for many of the individuals here. I didn't snag all of them, but each and every last one of them came to me because they wanted to be here, wanted to learn at all costs. They defied pain; they defied suffering, with some of them collapsing in the process in order to be here.

"They were among the first I chose for my teachings.

"The school in which I teach is an ancient order on my world that is over thirty one thousand years old, and is rumored to be even older than that. But by and by it is wholly unknown by my world. The skills you will learn here are not so that you can garner a name for yourself in the cosmos. You are taught to heal before you are taught to hurt, and evade rather than fight.

"That shall be your greatest ordeal, I am afraid, the learning of that one lesson.

"You will become a guardian, the type of which where those in whom you protect as a whole rarely know your last name, let alone your first. Do you understand this?"

"Y-yes... Master Sage."

"Good. Now that I have seen your true character, Jhan Wan, I will expect you to follow it. Every time that you break from your true character, you shall be punished like unto our first exercise here today."

Dallas arrives then, in one hand holding a shiny new white uniform, and in the other hand balancing a tray with a decanter and some tea. Sage took the decanter and filled both bowls, and then handed one to Jhan and took the other himself.

"Drink." he said, and they both drank from the hand bowls before replacing them onto the tray. Dallas then proffered the uniform to Jhan.

"This is your uniform, Jhan. For now it shall be your only clothing. It must be kept clean. The more often you can meet my challenges, the faster you shall grow, and the faster you grow, the more of the Lair's benefits shall be made available to you.

"Daedalus here will show you to your quarters. Breakfast will be at six a.m. Do not be late or you do not eat."

"Yes Master Sage." and Jhan bowed at the waist. Sage returned his bow, but only at the neck, and stood by as Jhan was brought to his new quarters consisting of little more than a pallet for a bed on the floor in a square stone room.

"Good night." Dallas said quietly, and left Jhan to himself.

Despite his situation, Jhan was actually ecstatic. *I made it!*

Three

Eriruka waited for the week's reports from the other deans and masters. She wasn't yet quite used to doing paper work in such large amounts or close detail but was grateful for the help of a few well trained members of Sato Hima's old staff from his days as student body representative. Sato was still forced to do some very time-consuming work with the Casid armies... something to do with the recent announcement that Master Ahn, the current Supreme Leader and an admittedly none too successful one, was seeking a replacement. All signs pointed straight at Equis.

Poor girl, Eriruka thought. She's worked so hard to be as free as she can be of the Casid hierarchies and now she's about to be nailed into our highest throne...

Most of the reports were not delivered by the deans and masters themselves. It was the start of a week long rest period from work and studies and many of the faculty were looking forward to visiting their homes and families. So it was a surprise when Sage looked in as if he may be intruding. It was a cute boyish thing he did though Eriruka had

the clear impression he was hiding from her voice. She tried to be softer in her inflections if not her volume, smoothing the transitions between syllables for the sake of his ears. "Vice-Headmistress," Sage spoke looking in seeing the giantess sitting on a thick pad before a fine table of stone and boulders.

It was a favored motif of many Casid lions, especially those of a high station: the 'cave' motif. Indeed the entire chamber looked like a cave despite being three stories above the ground in a thoroughly modern megalithic structure. Several holoscreens, enlarged for her sense of proportion, scrolled through work requests, complaints, student notices, grades, and more. She takes a swipe at the screens with one of those enormous paws that could palm Sage like a kitten. The roar of the rushing air around that paw was low but clear... and frustrated.

Not getting an answer, Sage entered anyway, "Eriruka?" He was firm his ears batted down.

Slowly she turns looking at him. A long gaze as she simply enjoyed those exotic green eyes of his like a long gaze at a cloudy sky. "Yes? You brought the week's report for you school?" Her voice was drained even depressed. There was no thunder there. No power.

"I have," Sage placed the reports on the table quietly. She turned around to face the wall window. The sky was clear and the ocean was calm. The were-tiger moved to round the table as she continued to look out there to... something. "You are troubled, I gather?"

"This is not how I expected to spend my probation... pushing papers," Eriruka moaned her voice vibrating the immediate area, "I wanted to spend more time with Xu-Mei and Jhan Wan in peace not moving around all the time... how is my son faring? He didn't return last night so I assume he is 'in...'"

"Jhan is well. I am afraid I nearly overestimated his resilience..." Sage looked to the giantess a moment before sharing the view outside, "Young were-tigers are much more flexible... I loathe asking this, but I must. Did you ever allow him to come to harm?"

"He has always been a fiery spirit, Sage. I did my best by him but I could not instill the same wonder and joy that is in Xu-Mei's heart. Jhan wants to be strong so badly. I have seen how he glares at how easily Teal wields his power and Nuu his preposterous strength. He is jealous and wants something... anything to hold as a torch to them.

I guess a candle would be awful small to you, Vice-headmistress, Sage thought half musing as he put his hand on her immense arm. Her pulse was soft like a padded sledgehammer beating on a firm mattress. *Such power here even at rest... This and she's so focused on her son's well-being, as any mother should be.* "I hate to nag..."

"Nag? You? Mr. Know-it-all?" She chuckled weakly only half distracted, "Go on?"

"You'll make yourself sick worrying about him. He has never been very far from you before... at least not very long, has he?"

"Never. I swore I'd protect and raise him. Over 200 years of forced solitude blinds me to the fact that he is a tiger cub... and a male at that. He will seek his independence more forcefully than his sister, Xu-Mei. I wanted him to find it but not by fighting everything with a pulse..." She fell silent stifling her tears.

Sage moved between her and the window bidding it open with a wave of his hand. The air outside was cool and the breeze soft, the smell of the forest blossoms filled the air. Sage could tell the rare flowers Sanari raised in her nursery and was sure the change would lighten her mood. "Jhan will do well. He is..."

"His father and mother fought constantly. Not each other but anyone who crossed their path. They killed for pleasure and fought to grow stronger. During the old Casid regime, ages before the Leonus Dominion, the cheetah were hunted to near extinction - DocWolph tells me those who survived hid in other dimensions or the farthest corners of this one - and the tigers were either enslaved and brutalized or forced out where they became barbarians and marauders... I don't want Jhan ending up like his parents... the first and last people I killed since my probation began..."

Sage was about to speak. That mask of his contemplation quickly transmuted to his older self, that Wiseman he often laid aside as his eyes of wisdom often cloud him from the spontaneity of the moment. "Probation? You were a prisoner."

"No a dead body kept alive by unlimited, ever-expanding, power," Eriruka looked down at Sage, "I was made to be like Ajurror and Liimio of the Aphkei were some 10,000 years ago. I was to be a progenitor of a new master race of super-lions. But I rebelled and slaughtered millions. DocWolph captured me... or rather made me capture myself and sealed me in an ever-growing restraint that grew in accordance with my strength and power until it occupied an entire star system and yet it is still growing... trying to catch up to my growth even now almost eleven years removed. I was released over 100 years ago but it took until 11 years ago for it to release me. I am now on probation, rather lax but given how hard I am to even make myself respond to the most deadly of attacks, it still very strict..."

Millions..? Sage's face froze a moment looking into those blue in black eyes of hers, "I assume Meniko knows about this..."

"She does..." Her attention turned with finality to the open air, "I will be visiting my son in two days. I want him made proper for my visit. And from the moment I leave I want him to fight until he can't stand it anymore. Beat him bloody, patch him up and then break a few of his bones..."

"Eriruka! This is your son," Sage almost pleading.

"He is a Casid Tiger who wants to be a warrior in an age that has no need of the kind of warrior he wants to be. You will beat the fight out of him then make him up right. You

have until the end of the year to show me results or I will come for you." Her tone was like an approaching storm in the distance, "Casid Proverb: A mother teaches how to live and a father teaches how to survive. Teach him to survive by means besides fighting. Dismissed..."

Sage turned and left in a half fury. *She's not serious. She can't be... First don't break him now...*

Then the afternoon a few months ago he had spent with Sanari in her garden filled his mind. *Like a banzai tree... I will bend him and break him to the proper shape as I intended before... Or is this a warning that I may have to go further than I would want? Heaven help me if I'm wrong,* he thinks of that tree so gracefully twisted and masterfully formed.

Sage leaves the chambers and the heavy stone doors swing shut like two boulders falling into place.

"He isn't a boy with tiger stripes, Sage" Sanari whispered as she walked past with Tla and Aauie following. She smiled sweetly to him as she continued without pause. Her body language not inviting pursuit. Perhaps later... He had questions.

"I know... He is a tiger that stands like a boy." Sage sighed before heading back to the Shadow League. He was not looking forward to the next few days.

Four

"COME ON! FIGHT ME!" Jhan had cornered one of the students of the League, an upper classman even; a small yet very well toned young bunny femme. Unlike most of Sage's student's, she had earned the full privilege to carry her chosen weapon - a simple bolt of light blue cloth - which criss-crossed over her body this way and that, worn to leave off a long strip down her front and back, and showing off all of her sexiness in all its glory.

"I don't want to." she said, shrugging her shoulders at the massive Casid's form over her, her books held close to her petite bosom. Although she had chosen the weapon that led to the seductive assassin, with her hair stays, bracelets and collars carrying more weapons than one would think, she could have felled him at that moment but made no significant move to do so...

The fact that she could do it in multiple life-threatening ways was all that was staying her hand.

"Damn you. You're supposed to be the top student here. **FIGHT ME!** I demand my Challenge!"

"No. I fill not fight... **gasp** Master Sage!"

They had rounded a corner, Sage standing there in his usual white loose fitting pants and

black sleeveless jerkin. His bare feet were shoulder width apart, his hands clasped smartly behind his back, and he watched his chief student bow sharply, spilling a couple of books, while Jhan continued to stand there.

His second mistake was not bowing. The first... was inciting a fight inside the halls of Sage's peaceful lair.

Sage did nothing, other than lift a hand to a control panel beside him, and depressed a call switch. Daedalus's central command center recognized his DNA and activated the loud speakers.

"All students to the main courtyard. Immediately." he said simply and then removed his hand. He then strode forward, brushing passed Jhan and his upperclassman.

It was raining outside, but despite that, it took very little time for the entire class to get themselves onto the main courtyard covered in stone cobbles. Person by person, rank by rank as Sage stood with his back to them, slowly removing his Jerkin and tossing it aside. His intense hearing told him that Jhan had come last, taking his position at the very last position in the ranks.

He still didn't hold form correctly yet.

"Jhan... enter the practice ring." he said simply, and immediately the great circular ring on the courtyard lit up a soft white. Sage's students gasped, starting to look at one another, and Jhan suddenly felt something inside his chest sink, as if his heart had just fallen into his stomach and had started to dissolve there.

Jhan's third mistake, was hesitating.

"Do not make me repeat myself Jhan..." Sage said, still showing his back to everyone while he cinched up his belt sash tightly, and wrapped the ankles of his pants legs in a sort of laced sock that until now, had been underneath those pant legs.

Jhan hurried into the center of the ring just as Sage brushed off his trousers, and he turned, his green eyes shining brighter, burning even Jhan thought as Sage stepped across the ring, and its light flared brightly, creating a barrier there.

"Fight me." Sage said simply, in an acid monotone, his head tilting forward even as his eyes shifted from beautiful green, to menacing red.

"B-but Master Sage... I... *UWOLF*!!" he began, but a swift palm strike to his gut doubled him over, and the next thing Jhan knew he had emptied all of his lunch onto the stone ground.

It was like that simple slap had been the blow from a giant! Its strike radius thudded into his heart, pinched his groin, and struck every point of his flesh several feet around the strike

zone.

"I said... Fight me." Sage repeated himself, his mouth opening to show off all those frost white teeth, now dripping with saliva as they grew longer inside his mouth right before Jhan's eyes. "Fight!"

Jhan was becoming afraid, he felt his pupils dilating. This master of martial form was challenging him. Why? But he recovered from Sage's blow and swung at him, his massive fist swinging almost ponderously at Sage as the White Tiger dipped backward into an almost impossible angle to dodge it, balancing only on his toes. His hands then came upward to chop at his own, Sage's rearward hand clutching his wrist and pulling him forward, while his forward hand slapped Jhan in the upper chest.

The explosion of natural force was massive! It rattled his rib cage, knocked air out of his lungs, and forced his heart to miss a beat as another giant's blow stuck him several feet around the strike zone.

Sage's claws dug into his flesh then, taking a grip around the taut flesh of Jhan's chest, pinching off major nerve bundles as he lifted the comparatively much smaller Jhan up off his feet before Sage's foot lanced outward and jacked Jhan in the kidney that sent him reeling away.

Jhan landed several meters and rolled along the ground before butting up against a vertical shield that rose along the edge of the white ring on the ground. Suddenly Jhan realized that he was trapped as he looked at the wall, and gritting his teeth and looking back at Sage as he stood there, he knew that he was trapped.

Jhan's hackles rose as his ears flattened against his head, and a cat's cornered instinct took over as he looked fearfully at Sage.

Sage lowered his head, his bangs falling before his face, his eyes still shining a deep red as he grinned a sharp-toothed grin at Jhan. "Fight me." He said again

A low nervous growl raised inside Jhan's chest, before he let it out in an ear-splitting roar! He leapt forward, for a moment or two running on all fours as he brought himself right up to Sage, and uncoiling he began to lash outward with the claws on his feet and hands.

Sage's body was like water, bending freely and unbidden around Jhan's blows, while he blocked Wan's kicks with kicks of his own, and as Jhan punched, punched right back into his oncoming fists with enough reverse force that made Jhan think his arms would shatter with the power. Sage's leg then lanced upward straight through all of his defenses, lifting him momentarily off his feet, but Sage twisted over himself in a rising sun kick, landing with the foot he'd just kicked with and rose with the other to strike Jhan full in the gut.

Again Jhan was sent careening through the air, landed, bounced, and rolled right into the barrier. He growled and beat his fist ineffectually against the barrier, and then looked at

Sage with the thought of being killed by his new master, now chief in his mind.

"Again..." Sage called. "And this time... *'We play for real.'*" he mused, echoing the very same words Jhan had said to his friends.

Jhan saw his life flash immediately before his eyes, his eyes dilating fully at those words, and then roared again. He attacked, raking with claws, kicking and punching, but then the unexpected happened as Sage's mouth opened and clamped down on Jhan's jugular so that he could not breathe. One of his eyes twitched as he tried to breathe just before he was lifted up off the ground, was shook from side to side, and then flipped over Sage's body to be slammed onto his back into the hard ground. Then hopping upward, Sage and his twelve hundred pound plus weight began to jump up and down on Jhan's chest in a series of short hops, before leaping off again and twisting around to face Jhan.

Jhan was coddling his chest, squeezing his eyes to stem back the tears of fear and pain as Sage took on a menacing, murderous stance of a madman. And then in his perfectly unhurt ears, Jhan heard Sage speak.

"Again..." he said, and Jhan, the impressively powerful Jhan... actually began to cry.

But regardless, he got up, and one of his knees buckled briefly before he forced it up again. His hands jerked upward as he stared at Sage, his tears mixing with the droplets of the rain.

Jhan moved forward, forcing himself to move as fast as he could against this supernaturally fast Weretiger. But the much larger Sage lifted a hand and caught Jhan's, his fingers tightening immediately to crush Jhan's fingers. Jhan cried out, holding onto his forearm with his free hand as Sage's powerful grip crushed his fingers one after the other with a sickening crunching sound. Jhan then felt his arm twisted before Sage moved forward and brought his free hand upward to break the arm ninety degrees in the wrong direction and with several swift, merciless moves broke both his forearm bones, his upper arm bone, dislocated his arm from his shoulder and shattered his shoulder blade. Then taking Jhan's head in one hand, he drove it downward into his rising knee, and then still holding onto the back of his head, drove his face downward into the ground.

A final blow came when a shadowy ring formed around Sage's arm and surged down its length. The resulting blow created an impact crater in the earth around Jhan's face. When Sage pulled Jhan's head back upward again, he was bleeding from both nostrils, and was missing several teeth.

Sage released his grip and stepped back, and Jhan slowly turned his head toward the red-eyed white devil.

"Again..." Sage said, in a low, growling tone, and Jhan's jaw dropped, when tears escaped from their ducts, it was mixed with blood. His eye there was bloodshot, and there was an ugly bruise forming beneath the fur.

Sage was neither injured nor winded.

Jhan took several breaths quickly in desperation and rose, surging forward to strike at Sage, screaming with pain and exertion and striking with his good hand, his mangled and battered other arm hanging limply at his side.

Sage caught his hand, his clawed fingers lacing through Jhan's, with an extra finger with Sage's pinkie on the outside of his hand for greater grip. Sage then flexed his hand, extending all his claws, dug them deep into Jhan's flesh, as Sage's foot lanced outward and broke Jhan's kneecap forcing him to his knees. Sage's claws continued to sever tendons and cracking bones in Jhan's hand, before Sage twisted the hand sharply.

A repeat of Jhan's other arm happened as every last bone from pinky to shoulder blade was broken. Jhan bellowed out with the pain, his other arm dropped to hang at his sides.

Sage then braced himself, his right hand drawing backward as a static charge cascaded down its length, and several multi-colored, segmented rings formed, all of them spinning briefly till two separate disks of white appeared from them all, which then locked together and formed one domed ring of negative shadow.

Sage's hand then lanced forward into a palm strike, and with the barest of touches that ring surged down his arm, dragging with it the brunt of the electrical charge on Sage's arm. The ring lanced into Jhan's chest, and he screamed as every last bone in his chest was broken and shattered.

He fell backward onto himself, a sack of flesh with no support, bones pushing painfully into his heart and lungs, in which the sheer simplicity of breathing sent lances of excruciating pain through his body.

He was staring up into the sky, the rain pattering against his face while he just tried to breathe, closing his eyes briefly to the pain, praying for it to stop. When he opened them again, he found himself looking at the red-eyed Sage, stern faced and menacing as the shadow master suddenly knelt beside him, and grabbing a tuft full of his mane, lifted his other hand, index and middle finger pointing, other fingers curled beneath it. Jhan watched Sage's claws extend, impossibly long things that couldn't possibly fit within even the entire length of his fingers, before those clawed fingers opened to aim for both of his eyes.

Jhan was hyperventilating, crying even, the muscles in his arms vainly constricting, enhancing the pain.

"You... see... Your death." Sage spoke plainly, and Jhan cried harder, but he stared at the claws forcing them to remain open. "Meet it!" And then claws jabbed forward.

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Jhan's lips open to exhale sharply as he continued to stare at those claws, which were now a hair's breadth from his retinas. Just before Sage's claws retracted, his hand descended and he pinched Jhan's nose.

"Honk."

Jhan's mind just stopped working at that as Sage's eyes shifted from red back to green, and that demonic mask he seemed to wear dissipated.

Sage let go of Jhan's head with both hands, and instead redeposited them to rest over one thigh and knuckle against the ground.

"Is this what you seek, Jhan?" Sage intoned quietly, softly. "To rush into a battle, only to be so thoroughly defeated, your body broken and dismantled, and your life chord nearly severed?"

Jhan did not answer, merely continued to stare at Sage while breathing quick and shallow.

"The battlefield is something you should hope to never find yourself on, cub. You will meet opponents who, if they get the chance, will hamstring you, gut you, cut out your throat, cut out your eyes and thoroughly skull frag you as you slowly die. After that, they will freely piss right on your brain.

"Never," and Sage lifted a finger to point it directly at Jhan's face. "Challenge an opponent unless you know of their capabilities. And treat all fighters who you come up against as if they are potentially stronger than you.

"Oop..." Sage said suddenly as he felt Jhan's life functions halting, his hand moving over Jhan's chest as his fingers twitched, and Jhan's heart beat not of its own accord. "Don't you give up just yet, boy. I won't let you."

Jhan then felt himself rising into the air, his body being held in its same position as he was placed in a container with a green gel as he sank into it. Daedalus, or at least his drone, was there, affixing him quickly with an air breather mask, several needles with thick hoses attached to them, and monitor patches on his head and chest.

He was at an angle, so he was in a position perfect to see Sage address the rest of the school.

"What is the principal rule of the Shadow League?" he bellowed.

"Fighting within school halls are strictly prohibited, sir!"

"What is the second rule of the Shadow League?!"

"Evasion, then avoidance, then confrontation, sir!"

"Very good. You are dismissed."

And the class skittered away.

Sage waited till all were gone before turning back to Jhan.

"You will have to learn this lesson the hard way, Jhan. Your wounds could be repaired near instantly with medical science and healing magic, but you must learn the penalties of disobeying school rules, which I am sure we've briefed you on when you arrived.

"Secondly, entering into combat is something you take far too lightly. A healer or a doctor will not always be around to heal your wounds, or the medical science of the world you may be on will be too ineffectual and outdated.

"These are wounds you'd surely die from if I were to leave you to them."

Jhan's lips opened as he breathed in a regulated mixture of oxygen, and he stared at Sage, one eye giving him a red tint from the beating. He was only able to exhale.

"No, I did not do this to break you, Jhan." Sage said, reading his surface thoughts with that dragon's eye imbedded in his forehead. "If I had, it would've been far crueler a lesson than what you've just endured. No, I did this for two reasons.

"Firstly, you must realize that you are still mortal. You can be hurt, and you can be killed.

"Secondly, you are not nigh invulnerable like your mother is. Mayia, the upperclassman you were challenging, is quite shy, but she is furthest along in her training, and she would've cut you down before she was able to stop herself. Her skills are such that they are like instinct, but she has yet to learn to control those instincts."

Sage paused, and then smoothed a flock of Jhan's hair away from his hair like a doting father.

"For more reasons than one, you are going to spend the next month inside this chamber. You will be... most uncomfortable as you learn the meaning to what it means to feel hurt and pain. Your studies will continue on the viewscreens in the front of the pod, and you will be fed intravenously.

"But most of all, I want you to reflect on all the occasions that you have challenged people to fights. Including your friends and *former* playmates."

Again, Jhan exhaled, and Sage smiled.

"I will be checking in on you daily. But for now, you are going to sleep."

Sage lifted his hand as if he were throwing something into Jhan's face, and Jhan's eyes closed as he settled immediately into sleep, settling into the green fluids as the forward shield of the pod closed over him, and the rest of the empty space filled up with the gel.

"The healing will be difficult, master Sage." Dallas intoned as he stood there by the pod.

"I know. But the boy must learn a harsh lesson without being broken. I will deal with his mother on the morrow."

"Then here, Master... you may want these." and Dallas lifted a pair of ear plugs, "They are programmed to deaden any sound meeting a set decibel level." Sage chuckled. "Hopefully they won't overload." he sighed then. "Thank you Dallas. See to it that he is placed in a shock proof containment strut. I don't want a micro-quake disturbing the healing process."

"Yes master."

Dallas, showing strength well beyond his simple human form, moved the great pod away into the Lair. Sage, however, went to go retrieve his jerkin before showering and retiring for the day. It was early, but he wanted to be ready for the ensuing confrontation on the morrow when he tells Jhan's mother that he just put him in traction.

Five

Menikomenqolui had fallen ill and had become content to simply sleep for the week as all was well in the school, for now. Sage had hoped to try to mend fences with her but with the constant stress being leveled on her by the Dragaseir Council of Elders, and what ever demons plagued her thoughts, it was no surprise to him that she needed to rest a while. Looking in on her, he felt a presence there that made him feel as if he were looking in on the true Meniko, a being of light and joy but shrouded in a smothering blanket of... He just couldn't place it but it was just barely within the reach of instinct and still beyond reason to discern. *At least whatever demons plague you, they don't seem to follow you into sleep,* Sage thought leaving the Phoenix Dragoness to sleep, a low snore-like, warbling rose from the dragoness.

"Oh!" came the voice of one of Sanari's pupil's from the temple shrine as Sage exited the Pinnacle tower adjacent to the shrine. Looking down the Were-tiger had startled Tla, a tiny Oggremaran Fola girl and apparently one of Sanari's personal projects.

She must've been on her way to the great library... Sage considered. He never looked down on someone who appreciated libraries.

The poor girl had been heinously abused as a small child being prepared for a life a sex slave until 'hunter' Fola found her and rescued her. But so broken by her experiences as

she was, she was beyond their ability to help, so they gave her over to the gentler and much more loving 'acrobat' Fola who did their best and sought out help in the Mystic League; hoping that the League's mix of a largely female student body and an attested record of nurturing care for lost souls was deemed the best chance for her.

Many had come into the Leagues of all its many chapters with a less than nurturing background.

"Sorry," Sage smiled warmly. She still cringed even though he never presented himself as a threat. She bowed hastily as she ran on by, her robes scarcely hindering her movements.

I guess she's still a little shaky, Sage thought looking after her.

Sage continued to Eriuka's office where she was finalizing the schedules for the student's various "errands", most upper-class and over-class students choose to undertake quests to test their abilities. Some are harder than others... Sadly, some fail to return... The Vice-Headmistress had the unenviable task of assigning errands this semester. Matching the errands to test the strengths and weaknesses of those who chose to take an errand was hard work for often as soon as she made a match it seemed to fit another student better.

Sage entered bit more confidently than usual; his steps were light and certain.

"Sit down," Eriuka said strongly and absently. As he sat down, the lioness showed him a particular errand, "This one claimed more students than any other. Who would dream of assigning this errand to anyone?"

Sage quickly scanned the quest: The Behemoth, an ancient biologic that transforms the environment and the native life forms of any living world to meet its needs. It is utterly unstoppable but stays in one place for eons before moving and even then it is a sub-light spacefarer. So it's pretty easy to send it off elsewhere, but still, it's a thing best left alone. "I am told Rae Iksaki fought one in the remote territories. She couldn't stop it either..." Eriuka moaned loudly still laboring over the other "errands".

"Sometimes you are the plankton and not the whale..." Sage commented not recalling ever encountering something that quite fit that description. Still it sounded interesting, "I'll take that one off your hands. Who assigned it last?"

"No one did. The Headmistress stamped this one as 'completely voluntary' but Rae was the last one to undertake it... She was in active decontamination for a month afterwards and she still couldn't find a way to destroy it. It's the only exam Rae failed by 'incomplete,' she was forgiven for it because she survived it..."

"I take it she wasn't that powerful then."

"She had not blossomed yet, no. She was maybe measuring at 31 percent of the Absolute Limit."

There was a silence that hung in the air for a few moments. Sage opened his mouth to speak but the words didn't want to come up. He just couldn't say it at first; recounting what he would say to the enormous lioness he then started. "I have done as you asked..."

"Part of it. You broke him to pieces," Eriruka's voice was low and shook the room like a small quake. "Now you are putting him back together. Hard to imagine that he is only 10, isn't it?"

"Not really. After seeing how quickly Casid mature, none of his behavior or attributes surprises me."

"He is very hard-headed. As soon as he feels he is ready he will go right back to his old habits. I think... as his mother... I want you to talk with him regularly. He's going to need it more than most of those "washouts" in your chapter..."

"He is a growing boy. I know. I was like him for a while... Trust me... I will make him a proper fighter and a worthy young male..."

"Worthy of what?" Her eyebrow rose slightly. Today's body tapestry was a tribal pattern depicting the land and the moon, which was laid flat on the shelf of her massive bosom.

"I can see a great fire in him that if tuned and focused will burn clean and strong... Quite a few masters of the art have begun their lives as raging young tigers. I'm sure he will gain the mindset to be such a master..."

"I want to see him." She stated then. "I want to let him know that he is not abandoned to some cruel teacher for sins he doesn't understand nor never committed..."

"I have made him understand the 'why,' and I see that he does understand." Sage lowered his head, "I warned you I may have to be rough with him. You also gave me permission to do so..."

"Is he that bad?" Eriruka's voice was a whisper. There was a hollowness as if she may have made a grievous error.

"I didn't crack his skull or break his spine... His tail may have a permanent kink in it if I am not careful in the healing though..." Sage matched her tone, "He drifts in and out of sleep. He is in some agony but the pain of his injuries will teach him much better than repeated beatings and is better for both of us in the end..."

Eriruka sat half stunned staring straight at the Weretiger; her eyes glossed over and her breathing became shallow. She had never let him be too hurt before, and now he was utterly helpless and in pain. Her every instinct was screaming to help her son, "G... go... I..."

Sage again made the voyage to step silently around that table to stand next to the giantess, who was nearly as tall sitting on the thick pad as he was standing. He put a warm hand on her shoulder and his clawed grip tightened comfortingly on her massive shoulder. The contrast of size was like a child to an adult and Sage, in hindsight, marveled at this. Then there was her pulse, powerful and soft. He rubbed her shoulder which relaxed a bit, "I will teach him... I will train his mind and spirit. He will not end up like his parents, neither as killers or crushed.

"I will do my best for his sake..."

The lioness turned at the waist, quite a feat given her thickness, to face Sage placing a hand on his cheek, palming his head like a small melon. She leaned forward touching her nose, that cool typically damp nose, to his opposite cheek. Lion's rarely actually kiss because there was a most lethal hold in that, *'The kiss of death.'*

"Thank you," She spoke plainly and rather strongly. The earplugs worked beautifully her words were still a whisper. "I will bring Xu-Mei with me as well. I think seeing her there will help as well..."

Sage stepped away after a moment and bowed, "There is no need to thank me yet. As you said I have only done part of the task you set before me. When should I expect your next visit? Just to be clear..."

"Xu-Mei and the other children will have a few days off in a couple of days. I will contact you before coming. Don't tell my son... please don't..."

"Of course," Sage said bowing and left.

As he stepped out of the office, Xu-Mei, and equally large, though much less muscular, showing a definite family resemblance to her brother, stood waiting. She didn't hesitate to stomp his foot cracking the floor, "You meany! I hate you!" She stormed away without another word as soon as she had gone a few more steps she bolted down the hall.

"Ow..." was all he said in belated response. He would have his chance to speak to her later.

He then turned and went the other way, planning to see how the Iksaki's were doing. Class would be letting out soon and he wanted to look in on them...

A promise to Makahn while he was away...

Six

Lord Sage's footsteps carried him over the grounds of the Mystic Leagues Core School, leaving nary a footprint in dirt, sand, stone or mud; the impressions left being minute and nearly imperceptible.

Like a ghost.

He did it without thinking, partially due to the predator in him, and partially from the developed skills of the Assassin. Unfortunately, it was also one of the traits that so unnerved so many people who met him; to not be there, and then suddenly occupy space that was a second ago empty.

A masterful trick of sleight-of-hand to make oneself appear and disappear without magic.

Thankfully, his visual profile was quite obvious. An eight foot tall creature heavily laden with defining muscle with a frost white fur covered with ebon black stripes. He was the only other person in all the leagues aside from Mother Sanari to possess a *'perfect'* body. That was such that if he wasn't trying to hide himself, people could see him coming from a mile away. Especially when being surrounded by so much green and blue from the ocean and the light forests of the island sanctuary of the Mystic League.

In the snow-capped mountain regions and the polar caps, this was an entirely different situation...

His footsteps were leading him down the last path on the leeward side of the island, the side that was protected from the easterly sea winds and the larger pounding surf. The rare westerly winds were something different, and since Young Clio's arrival years ago, the Mystic League has on occasion had strange storm fronts arrive from the young Stormseeker's weather controlling power.

Thankfully, Xu-Mei's foot stomp did not damage him for long, the original pain gone and even the numbing sensation dissipated within seconds of the strike. Now Sage's steps led him straight up to this sprawling house that built up to a light house and was surrounded by a white picket fence.

A mansion on the seaside...

Every stone, every board, every nail in this place was placed by Rae herself, but without the use of any conventional tools. Nails were driven with her own fingers, wood and stone hewn with her own hands.

Sage smiled as his hand lifted to inspect the fine woodworking on the home's doorway, a great portal ten feet tall just for the sake of whoever might come knocking. With some of the individuals in the League - Meniko and Illia being among them, and occasionally Hawthorne (Sage shuddered at the thought of Hawthorne) - coming to visit, the entrance of the home would need to be large for whatever guests may come.

Sage was a prime example of this due to his eight and a half foot stature, but that could simply be remedied by transforming to his human form, or his lesser hybrid form.

But regardless, he lifted his five-fingered hand, and rapped a brief staccato rhythm on the

door.

There was a brief stampede from somewhere inside the home, and Sage raised an eyebrow, half knowing what was about to happen, and the door practically burst open as Teal leapt out at him, followed closely by his much smaller baby sister, Yuum.

"UNCLE SAGE!" they both intoned as Sage scooped them both up with either arm.

"Hey! I don't think I ordered anything to go. But here's your treat anyways." he grinned, and with his free hand, opened his fingers, twisted his hand suddenly, and two fortune cookies were suddenly being held between three of his outstretched fingers.

"Thanks Uncle Sage!" they both said in unison again, taking their treats and pulling him in.

Rae arrived soon thereafter in her workout outfit and a towel around her shoulders. "I thought I felt you arrive." she grinned, and then watched her children sharing the fortunes in their cookies with one another.

"Oh? You felt the impact tremor then?" he smiled, looking at her with a mild level of affection. He was never truly 'in love' with Rae, but their relationship with one another was beyond friendship, and briefly beyond that... Unfortunately, she belonged to another man.

'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife...' Sage thought, but Rae noted Sage's expression and turned away, blushing finely, enough so that her cheeks changed color slightly despite her fur.

"Those fortune cookies were such a nice treat. And it's always amazing how whatever fortune they get actually comes true. How is that?"

"Fate." Sage said simply, lifting a hand and making a pushing motion behind him and the door closed and clicked shut quietly while Rae gave him a knowing look.

Among many of Sage's talents, was the very seldom used ability to alter fate. He did, at least, seem to use this power quite often in the presence of her children. He knew something about people futures. About everyone else, he received vague impressions about key happenings in their past, present and futures. About her children, however, he was strangely tight-lipped about their fates.

"How is Makahn?" Sage asked at last, and Rae blinked and began toweeling the sweat out of her mane and ears.

"On another *'mission,'* as the imperialists put it." she sighs and hugs herself, hefting her bosom a little higher atop her chest. Sage forced himself not to watch that. "Sometimes I think someone is intentionally keeping him from me..."

Sage did not answer, nor did he move. They were so suddenly drawn toward Rae's

children.

"Pity... I was hoping to get him to try and make me more of that jambalaya he makes. Perhaps I can cook for you and your two pups?" he turned his head toward Rae, leveling those crystalline, emerald-like, pure green eyes on her. There was only the vague image of a pupil behind that light.

"I'd like that." she smiled. "Would give me a chance to wash up."

"It would be my pleasure." he then clapped his hands. "Alright pups! We're gonna have a game..."

Seven

Rae exited her shower, her fur sliding straight down her naked bodice as she toweled herself dry quickly, her body heating up to dry her freshly washed and conditioned fur out. She may be among the most powerful individuals in the known universe, but that didn't give her the excuse of smelling bad. Regardless, she donned her soft dressing gown, a white cotton thing that folded over itself on her front, concealing the whole of her bosom up to her throat, but was cut open high along the sides to leave her legs bare.

She checked herself in the mirror briefly, noted her bare legs, and then also pulled on a pair of softly flowing slacks - all of a dark blue and yellow trimmed color - for decency sake, before going into the main room.

Sage had her pups playing a brain teaser game, which was his favorite game to play, and helped children develop their minds at the age it mattered most, with Sage using his powerful kinetics to manipulate his pieces on the board; even rolling the multi-sided dice for his turn amidst carrying for several pots, a kettle, and... And one of those 'wok' thingies, which he was moving swiftly with both hands as he lifted one leg to grasp the stove top dials with his toes.

"Alright everybody... time for food! Now quickly set the table now that your mama's here." Sage said, and her pups quickly helped him set the table before he began dishing things out.

Sage's diet was, strangely, completely absent of so many things that both the mystic league and the powered league used. There was nothing artificial in his diet, no supplements, and a good balance of foods to make his meals.

He religiously cut all narcotics and even mild stimulants and depressants from his diet save for those for medicinal value. As a priest of his order, he was forbidden to take such things. And the strange thing was is that he was perhaps the most well-balanced individual she'd ever met.

A jack of all trades.

"I know I'm no where near as the flavor king your papa is, but I do my best." he grinned, and soon there was a full dinner for four there. A Hot and Sour soup, a main entrée of some spiced fowl, rice and several vegetables, a desert of sweet bread - the pups favorite - and the table all properly set by her children.

Rae giggled as she entered and took a seat opposing Sage. Then there was a moment as Sage took on a tight-legged hands pressed together at the ridge of his face stance as he gave a brief and silent prayer in thanks.

"Good... Now tuck in." he said, finally taking his seat, and while Rae and her pups ate with knives and forks, Sage ate with a pair of chopsticks.

The meal was devoured, mainly through the effect of Rae's cubs, well... Mostly Teal. He had a voracious appetite. Just like his father.

The pups had gone off to play for awhile while Sage and Rae had a moment to themselves at the table, picking at the leftovers of their meal.

"Very good." Rae smiled, leaning forward.

Sage nodded, smoking idly on the end of his pipe. Usually Rae disliked people smoking inside her home, but Sage's odd concoction of herbs and spices burned with the smell of incense.

Its scent filled her home with a sort of holy healing sensation that made her feel relaxed, especially her mind, which despite her intense physical abilities, has been quite weary as of late.

Sage caught on this, the green gem in the center of his head – the new center of his growing psychic abilities, the Dragon's Eye – glittering briefly as he took another puff on his pipe and then let it escape out of the corners of his mouth as he breathed out softly before speaking.

"You seem tired, Rae." he said quietly with genuine concern, so as not to alert her pups.

"Does it show that bad?" she asked, scratching her neck with one hand and holding onto her arm with her other hand while shrugging her shoulders.

"No, not entirely." he admitted. "But your mannerisms throughout the night all point to that truth."

Rae leaned forward, wondering how on earth this aged Were-tiger ever became so perceptive.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

"People... Are beginning to talk." she said quietly, hugging herself so that her swollen breasts, transformed now that she was a mother that had nursed her cubs, hefted up higher atop her chest. "New people that I meet give me condolences about Makahn, others point at me and wonder who the father was or gossip at who he is. They all try to be quiet, but it's one of the curses of immortality. I can hear them all too well."

"Makahn has become a very important Imperial." Sage said quietly, exhaling another breath of that sweet spice.

"I know, I know. But it's been... *Months!* Since I've seen him last. My babies are beginning to ask me where he is, when's he coming home, and the imperials don't even tell **ME** where he is and what he's doing. Somehow I think someone is trying to get back at me in the worst possible way."

"I can have Daedalus look into that." Sage supplied, raising his eyebrows a bit.

Rae looked at him. Daedalus, his house computer, was a biological entity that thought like a computer. And hacked like an elite. There was a lot about machines and computers that she didn't know, but Dallas, as Daedalus was also known, has been known to hack the Imperial library, and there have been rumors that he's hacked the Universal Observatory! But that can't be true, just hearsay! That place is the most secure data-vault in the Great Wide Universe! There's no way that even Dallas could get through that much security. Even if he could find it...

"No. Please don't go breaking any laws on my account." she demanded, a stern look on her face.

"Of course." Sage replied simply, and watched her pick at her food for a few minutes.

"I wish he were home." she said, her voice quivering.

But just then, Sage blinked, and one of his high tapering ears twitched. Sage, though not able to hear things at as long a distance as Rae, nonetheless had a much broader perception of sounds, his range passing into the subsonic and super sonic. He recognizes people by their scent, as well as by the sound their footsteps make.

But at that moment, Sage smiled genuinely, and then took a good long puff of his pipe before exhaling.

"Granted." he said, his eyes and forehead gem sparkling mischievously just then as the door to Rae's home burst open, and a towering Aphkian Wolf stood there with a massive duffle held over one shoulder.

"Beloved! I'm home!" he calls into the house.

"Daddy!" the pups say as one, as they rush up to Makahn as he closes the door.

Rae was on her feet, holding her hands together close over her heart as it fluttered like a humming bird's wings inside her chest. For a moment, she forgot how to breathe.

"Hey there!" Makahn says, picking up his daughter and hugging his son.

"Momma!" Rae's baby girl, Yuum, exclaimed. "My fortune came true! The fortune uncle Sage gave me came true!"

"Mine too!" her son said.

Rae looked to Sage to find him depositing the last of the plates in the sink for the bots to wash before turning to leave, tapping the ashes of his pipe out into a tray to smolder and leave the sweet smell of the spice and herbs in her home.

"Their fortunes... How... How did you do it?"

But he smiled softly.

"Fate. And the all powerful magic that is the hope of a child, Let alone two, combined with one selfless wish." It is a powerful mixture Rae, enough to move the heavens into coughing up your husband." he bowed his head and then quietly left the house, nodding to Makahn on his way out.

Rae in turn took this chance to surge right into Makahn's arms to hug him tightly... kissing him fully and being careful of her fragile husband, but nonetheless feeling empowered and strengthened by his presence.

Outside, Sage made a magician's pass and his pipe disappeared. He managed a few halting steps and then sagged, catching his weight on one of the posts of the picket fencing.

'And the defined power of someone who can alter fate' he added mentally to the reasoning he'd given Rae before lifting his free hand.

A black ooze erupted out of his skin, the tentacles realigning and wrapping about his arm before solidifying into his wrist computer. His fingers flexed in a specific pattern, and then flexed again as he passed his fingers through some holographic keys. A moment later, Daedalus's image - or rather that of his chief drone - appeared in the holographic image above his arm.

"Yes, Master Sage?"

"Could you please send Wild Kat to come pick me up?" Sage asked with half a smile. "I seem to have spent myself bargaining a favor out of Fate."

"Yes Master Sage, he is on his way now."

"I thought I told you not to call me *'Master.'*" he smiled, his eyes turning toward the direction of his lair to see Wild Kat, a transforming bioborg type creature he made after Daedalus rise along the horizon like a rising red star.

"That would not be proper Master Sage." Dallas smiled softly. "I will have your bed prepared for you for when you return."

"Thank you... Sage out." And Sage managed to walk further out away from Rae's home so that Wild Kat's engines and veneers wouldn't disturb them, walking down to the beach to await his arrival.

"Dearest Creator," he prayed as Wild Kat swung around, now in his Valkyrie configuration, his canopy sliding open. "I thank you for this changing of fate. Bring me strength to recover from it."

Wild Kat landed, and Sage climbed in, and the bioborg took him home.

Eight

The next day in the Shadow League was a change of pace for this chapter as several of the core students were there for a quick tournament. It was a single day's affair with only a few entrants.

Normally such a gathering would have taken place in the Mystic League's Coliseum, on the main island, but this time the students wanted a less formal environment to clash and the practice field on the Shadow League's island was the venue of choice.

This time it was no surprise that'd show up to this fight.

Kaya, often called *'The Little Princess'* for her appearance and very proper manners.

Salba, probably the only person no one could take in a game of *'reflexes'* without given a truly maximum effort.

Kah-Leah, the thong-wearing wrestling fiend with the cutest face and behavior.

And finally Re'en, a Yamachi who'd been called Fatima's worthy rival until recently when that most heralded, and to some, annoying, trait of quickly surpassing all rivals and threats she encounters.

All arrived early, dressed in their most useful fighting outfits. This typically means their least covering and least modest suits. They are, as ever, the big draw for the male members of the Shadow League... especially the giantess, Re'en, and the lovely *'Little Princess'* Kaya.

On the Shadow League's side, were some of the most powerful students in the whole Mystic League...

Fatima Iksaki, who under some protest – mostly from her sister, Rae – joined to get a better grip on her own burgeoning powers that radically changed the way she often felt. It was often said that she turned into a warrior version of her sister at times. It was that same power that allowed her to overpower Sage once. He quickly changed his strategies in dealing with her and she feels safer training with him now and he can easily defend himself and often defeat Fatima in sparring.

Next in line came Siklohn Dousaka, The singular son of the new Imperial Warmaster, Nyl Dousaka, and the heir to the reformed Dousaka Clan. He was sent to the Mystic League to train in ways that did not lead directly to being a conqueror. He is a strict and masterful young knight who refuses regularly to limit his training to only one weapon or fighting art. If Fatima is a pinnacle of strength in the Mystic League, then Siklohn is a pinnacle of skill. Even Sage had to agree this young, stubborn, hard-case of an adolescent wolf cub was every bit what he was at that age, through clearly being prepared for a life of nobility.

Next was Mayia, a stunning young lady whose beauty only really showed when in combat. A timid little Oliverian rabbit, she kept to herself and found her outlet after fending off Geevo's advances and then his own playful sash. She couldn't continue until she found a way to push back the bunny everyone jokingly called "Pervo-puff", a joke that Caliban made that stuck. Still few girls could avoid or resist his charms long. She was determined to be one of those who could.

And lastly was the triumphant return of Clio Sentholu; the Casid tigress who holds great sway over the weather. Her powers had grown as had her skills to control them as well. She had grown to enormous proportion with new strength and power that seemed to rival even Fatima's! Her confidence was much better but she still cringed a bit in the presence of some of the students, especially the radiant nobility of Siklohn Dousaka. Still she was a sure bet in most battles.

The students gathered as they had time. It was quickly getting crowded as the competitors gathered. The warm rays of the sun clouded over a bit as Clio emerged, getting several cat-calls then some well-humored ribbing from the students and some of the faculty. "Remember, Miss Sentholu," Siklohn spoke plainly with half a grin, "No lightning until after the start of your match."

"Cali's given you a sense of humor, I see," Clio spoke with a slightly defensive tone. Though stronger and more powerful, she was awed by his sense of command. Wearing a fine suit of exquisite, masterly worked plate armor didn't hurt his presentation at all. She wore her traditional body cloth that proved too much a see-through ensemble.

Then again, she has never been all that modest.

"Caliban has given me quite a bit," those words drew eyes, "She hasn't given me that." Off on the side, Caliban blushed at the innuendo. She was a he at one time but was slowly abandoning that identity for one as a vibrant, if occasionally moody and even hostile, vixen.

On the far side of the field, Kaya, Salba, and Kah-Leah stretched, flexed and threw a few practice swings. It was no surprise that most of the males were gathered near them. Meanwhile Re'en approached her friend, Fatima, quietly.

"Hail, Fatso..." Re'en said in that menacing tone that marked her as a bit of a bully, but she was rarely in a happy mood and didn't want to pretend. She missed her sparring matches with Fatima and resented her former partner's massive surges in growth of power and strength that made her too dangerous to practice with in any satisfying way.

"Hey, Tall Tree," Re'en's nickname, gotten from Re'en's lineage as a plant-based animal form and that she smelled like a pine tree in springtime. Fatima was sullen as she looked up at her friend. "I... I don't know what to say to you right now."

"This won't be anything like a fair fight, pooch."

"Can't we have fun with this? I mean we are friends, right?"

"You have to fight like you want to win or just lie down and die. I won't be having much fun. I'm not strong enough for that with you..."

"Please..." Fatima's expression dimmed as she was quickly sinking into despair. She had lost yet another friend and wasn't able to get her back. "This isn't a war..."

Re'en turns and walks away uttering only one word, "Weakling..."

Mayia walked up along side, "Can you beat her without hurting her?"
Fatima shook her head wiping away a tear.

Kaya, Salba, and Kah-Leah all practiced together. It was hard to get in between the kittens as they limbered up. They were like sisters and nearly inseparable.

"See any cuties," Salba said pumping effortlessly her vertical pushups. Her Black gi with pink trim shimmered in the slowly overcastting daylight.

"No one I would spend the day with," Kah-Leah mewed softly. Her bikini was the tiniest thing that was still legal by Mystic League dress standards. The *'butt-floss'* bottoms were the eye-candy. "Besides any guy who can't look me in the eye isn't worth my time... Myah."

"I hope I find someone soon," Kaya blushed as she whispered; "I've gone through several heats since I got here and they just get worse the longer I stay a virgin."

"Yeah and your fighting power jumps way up when you're horny." Salba smirked admiring Kaya's ropey muscles. Casid lionesses tend to be very lean. Large breasts were not that common even with mother lionesses. Eqis and Eriruka were clear exceptions to that rule and so, it seemed, was Kaya. Though her muscles showed a bit more readily than her elders.

"Don't let it get out or every guy will want me so they can beat me in the morning..." Kaya scowled at her *'sisters.'*

They all laugh...

Nine

Sage entered the medical chamber where Jhan Wan floated half awake, and wholly naked in the greenish healing gel. His bruises were healed, as were the deep cuts from the beating Sage gave him; at his mother's near demand. Sage was still hurt inside by his own handiwork as the boy, easily the size of a very large human male bodybuilder, labored still to breathe normally.

Those young eyes were sad and tired. The pain of his still relatively new wounds kept him awake most nights. Even sedatives did little to rest him for more than an hour at a time.

"h... hello, sssir," the tiger cub managed trying to show off his strength to persevere. It was good that he couldn't move; the gel dampens his motor nerves effectively cutting off his strength. But still he managed to tense his arms and chest a little.

It was amazing he could still speak with a broken jaw.

"Save your strength, boy... Jhan Wan," Sage said softly as he read the readouts.

He was healing fast. Typical for Casid, especially their cubs. But this level of regeneration was almost unreal for anyone except for an immortal. Calmly Sage considered that Jhan Wan and Xu-Mei were both genetically enhanced from birth. He let it sit on his mind a little before turning an eye to the boy in the bottle.

"I figured you could use a bit of a distraction today. A little fighting tournament between my students and a few from the Mystic League. It's not the wild sort of fighting you kept trying to engage in..." He noted Jhan nodding off.

The boy needed sleep badly, maybe worse than he needed to heal, but the pain of his wounds pulled his eyes back open after a few moments. "We'll watch together. Just try to relax."

Jhan's eyes blinked signaling his response. It was obvious he was crying even if no tears were to be seen in the healing gel booth. Sage waves a hand activating the huge holo

screen as the first match was about to begin.

"Salba and Clio. Speed and precision versus sheer power and strength," Sage was at a near whisper. He didn't have to look at the cub to know this distraction would be the sleeping pill he needed. A second screen showed the boy's mental activity and he was falling asleep... at last.

Just rest and dream a good dream, cub. You'll need a good rest when your mother arrives tomorrow.

Ten

In the red corner, Clio was a girl who never seemed to show much grit or courage. Even though she is easily one of the strongest students the Mystic League had ever seen, ranking very closely to, if not higher than, Riikoa, Clio was shy and very humble to the point of being a doormat. She'd changed a bit in the Demon League getting scared straight by Korho Kese and his sexually ravenous sister, Jasa Kese, having settled up with Caliban, and being maneuvered to be a competitor for the Supreme ruler of the Casid. Still she was humble and still remarkably slow to act.

"Even Riikoa puts her foot down faster than you while she's reading," she'd been told more than once.

Her time as a demon had made its impression on her as well. Two black wings, looking like decorations for their small size, stood out from her broad back as she stripped naked save polished chrome bracers for her wrist and ankles and a heavy sculpted gold and bejeweled collar. It was shameless but for this tournament it was fair. She struck a few mildly provocative poses.

Away in the medical labs, Sage quickly hid Jhan's eyes with a broad arm of unnaturally hard muscle covered in his snow white fur and ebon strips. Then he laughed at himself a bit before stepping out of the way.

What am I doing? The lad must get an eyeful regularly from his mother. He recalled the traditional Casid body cloth Eriiruka wears: slit up the sides leaving only the front and back covered, it isn't hard to see everything in a stiff breeze or if she moves too quickly from one side or another.

I wonder if I'll be like this with my sons and/or daughters one day...

In the white corner, Salba was the picture of a young austere martial artist. Her conservative gi rustled in the sea breeze as she stood firm, head down, seeming to meditate. Her jacket was loose and revealed her red one piece leotard underneath. The loose pants finished the outfit that was as appealing as being nude. The subtle notion of having the privilege to remove her clothes was as much a turn on as anything else to many of the males and herms, as well as a few females. Her demeanor had darkened a bit after the murder of

her first master, the Powered Leaguer Coinai-Shiko, but she found solace in having her Master's spirit as her guardian ghost, lending her power and knowledge when she needed it.

But today that was not an option.

Still her long years of training, and the constant brutal training by Kina, *'The Fist Queen,'* really put her on the high list of adept fighters in the Mystic League, ranking almost even with Kina herself! That fact alone meant Clio was almost not guaranteed to even walk away from the fight.

Neither fighter acknowledged that fact. In fact, they didn't seem to notice each other for a few moments.

As the referee, a trimmed old bird, Master Gigju-Tusa, walked to his mark between the start marks for red and white, Salba wasted no time walking up on firm footsteps like her feet were being sucked into the ground. Clio looked on a few moments showing, in split moments, intimidation and hesitation before walking up herself....

Gigju-Tusa looked at the kitten then the tiger cub and took a deep breath, "In the Red corner... Clio Sentholu! In the white corner... Salba! This match is to last ten minutes or until someone can not fight safely any longer." He turns to Clio, "Understood?"

"Yes, sir..." Clio sounded smaller than she was. Meek but very sweet.

Then the old bird turns to Salba as if she were the real problem, "Understood?"

She bows deeply and answers, "Aye. I do, sir."

"Bow to each other!" and the girls bow respectfully before assuming their stances. Salba's was a hard focused stance wasting no movement. Like a statue or a battle robot waiting to start, she stood firm. Her mane a limp collection of hanging spikes of red-orange dangled about her face. Clio, however, swayed and bounced lightly, her unhindered breasts swayed and bounced in counter to her movement. Thick, mighty, muscles bulged madly and her thick tail swung and swished.

"Your performances will be judged by three instructors, Leadra, Rango, and Tychu-Naga. The winner will proceed to the next round and so this will continue until we have one winner. Remember a knock out does not guarantee a victory. Mind your form and manners. The best fighter is not going to always be the last one standing..." The bird steps back and then, "Get ready! Set..."

What happened next had people stunned and amazed – even Sage – to see it. In the space of Gigju-Tusa's saying "fight", Salba moved to pounce her much, much larger opponent.

"Fi...", Salba tensed her legs causing a blast of sand to rise up and away from her like a bomb going off under her feet. "...igh...", The black clad karate kitten was in mid air,

screaming toward Clio's unawares midsection. "...ight!" Salba had firmly buried her elbow in the tensely muscled abs of the young tigress sending her sliding back to the edge of the ring still on her feet.

Clio settled herself as she watched Salba resume her normal stance. The tigress flapped her small wings settling her nerves. *Wow. It didn't hurt at all though. I got lucky.*

Clio moved away from the edge of the ring. Even though there were no 'ring outs,' it was best she didn't even let herself think she was cornered. Clio quickly moved lightly back toward her starting mark. Just then a solid fist found her left kidney, followed by a swift kick to the knee. Two shocks of numbing pain raced through her sending her down to her knees.

"Slow..." Salba said not betraying any emotion.

Clio stood up to be met by a swift kick in the head spinning her around all the way back onto her feet. She turned about trying to find Salba only to find herself nailed behind in the head with at least ten hard spinning kicks. As soon as the barrage ended, the great Stormseeker fell disoriented.

"A dead body puts up more of a fight," Salba brushed a lock of her mane out of her face.

Clio stood up again. Her memories of being the runt and the loser of the family, the whipping girl, and the joke. All this was in her past. This fight was going to prove that. But Salba was an adept, no longer a student but not yet a master; and Clio was only just good enough to pose a meaningful defense. To win she knew she had to pose a better defense than her offense.

Clio reached out with a pushing slap palm to stop Salba's advance, which simply dodged it and drove her fist in a strong upper cut into her tigress's brick like abs, then her opposite fist drove in as the first was withdrawn, lifting Clio off the ground. As Clio lost all control, feeling weightless, a sudden change fell over Salba. Her mane which had been limp and dangling stood upright with the force of her chi. She drew both hands back as if clutching a ball, as she stood side on, near her gut. Her jacket and pants puffed up as a bright light of fiery white mist formed there, in the span of one half of one hundredth of a second. Clio was still weightless and stunned.

"Haka-dou!!!" Salba shouted throwing her hands forward into Clio. A brilliant flash of light followed but it was a rattling explosion that sent Clio flying out of the ring like she had been shot from a cannon.

But before Clio landed hard on her head, she summoned a bolt of lightning striking Salba. The blinding flash of light subsided revealing Salba face down in the ring. A second transformation in Salba occurred then as ghostly flames rose up around her... She did not move as Clio came back to the ring.

"Okay...owww," She hissed rubbing the knot forming on her head, "You don't wanna get up now."

"Yes I do," Salba rose to her feet. The ghost flames faded away. "You ready to fight now?" Not waiting for an answer, the kitten jumped at Clio with a flying missile kick, one of Kah-Leah's specialties, at Clio who blocked it easily and countered with a high pump kick launching Salba into the sky where she launched several lightning strikes on the kitten.

"Sankura Haka-dou!!!" Salba roared sending down a massive fireball. Clio, startled by the speed that the attack came, barely managed to block it and is thrown to the ground before sliding back a few yards from the force of the blow. The sand and sparse grass of the field lost its manicure as the two girls battled madly.

Salba fell to the ground. That was a desperate maneuver on her part and Clio was stunned that she had taken all that lightning before throwing it off. Clio saw her opponent rising and was not able to wait any longer. She ran over and scooped up the karateka and holding her in a strong tornado, began to pummel her, "Stay down! Stay down! Stay down!!!!" Salba suddenly grabbed one of the massive pillars of muscle that was Clio's arms and pulls herself out of the tornado, punching the tigress in the face and dispelling the whirlwind. Clio looks up to see Salba and rakes at her with her claws madly.

Missing, Clio jumps away from where Salba was to land then, as if scooping dirt up and throwing it in one stroke; she launches a massive ground wave of electrically charged fire at Salba, who jumps over the flames and soars straight down at her with the *'drop toe flying kick.'* Upon connecting with Clio's buxom and thusly well-padded chest, the smaller cat-girl stomps away with deadly force on her chest. Clio stumbles back and falls while catching Salba and throwing her to the ground and rolling over her to squeeze the air out of her.

Salba pauses, unable to breathe... With incredible will, the kitten lifts Clio off her with her legs. Clio's longer legs, each easily as big as Salba's whole body, stomps down on the kitten, "Stay Down!" then repeatedly, "Stay Down! Stay Down! Stay Down!!!" her frustration starting to show as this kitten was beginning to scare the tigress. Stepping back from the apparently unconscious girl, Clio's eyes grow wide as Salba rises again and jumps at Clio driving her fist deep into her midsection, doubling her over

Not thinking, Clio slams both of her palms into the smaller girl's back and shoulders. As Salba staggers back, Clio drops to one knee and lunges forward leading with a fist aimed squarely at Salba's chest.

There is a loud cracking sound that frightens the whole crowd...

Sage seeing this stands at attention, "C'mon Gigju-Tusa don't enjoy this too much..." He had lost track of time as his attention dwelled on the fight and the cub only half-sleeping now behind him.

"Time over!!!" Gigju-Tusa bellows. Clio stands back hands up as to say, *'No more.'* Salba sits up; bright red strings of blood flowing from the corners of her mouth. "Judgment."

Leadra, an enormous and statuesque Yamachi female who regularly challenges Sage, not to beat him but to further her own training, reveals a red card with little hesitation.

Rango, an old Casid lion, looks at the girls a moment then shows his red card.

Tychu-Naga, a War-gauge Dragaseir, a warrior and easily Sage's rival in combat but falling well short on strategy and not much of a scholar reveals his red card.

"Clio Sentholu wins by unanimous decision." The crowd is silent amazed by the fight and terrified by Salba's sudden defeat. She was as deadly precise as any one they'd ever seen and blindingly fast yet she fell to one well-placed and very sincere punch in the chest. Yet she was almost able to stand for more.

"Is she immortal?" came one whisper...

"She must be almost as strong as Kina..."

"Yeah she's a monster."

"How could an adept lose like that?"

"I thought Kaya was the suicidal one..."

"What did Gehnohn... jinx... teach her?"

"Clio could take Fatima, I bet..."

The comments came but there was no cheering. They were just too amazed and shocked at the sudden cessation for the clash. Salba was the favorite to win...

"Damn..." Salba murmurs falling back as if she just died. Just then Sage appears and checks her over as Kaya, Kah-leah, and Clio approach.

"I have her. It doesn't look too bad." Sage Says. "She's had her ribs crushed before. She looks about as tough as Kina," He finishes as he jogs off, Kaya and Clio in tow. Kah-Leah starts to follow.

"Young lady, you still have a fight." Gigju-Tusa sang menacingly, stopping the girl as if yanking on some invisible leash.

"Myah...right!" Kah-Leah's shoulders sank as she turns to face her opponent... Siklohn

Dousaka.

He stood ready in fine armor brandishing a scepter mace. The fine detail in the gleaming armor shone in a dazzling display of his own handiwork and was both beautiful and frightening.

I hope Sage wasn't all that good when he was his age... She adjusts her top and waits for Daedalus's bioroids to finish leveling the field. Siklohn, eyes locked on the nearly nude kitten with apparent malice, puts on his helm, displaying two angelic wings spanned out.

"Myah... I'm screwed..."

Eleven

Salba had been stripped down to her underclothes, a simple white belly shirt and a pair of panties that arched high over her hips. She was resting quietly on a medical bed set at a slant, with numerous holographic displays arrayed about her showing her heart rate, her brain waves, and her body's structural integrity.

Sage, dressed in his usual black, loose-fitting pants and priestly attire, though now topless, was applying a salve to her burn marks.

Salba, however, was looking at the now sleeping form of Jhan Wan, admiring his naked body, and supremely physical form.

"What happened to him?" she asked quietly, turning her gaze back to Sage as he worked, massaging in the salve which, remarkably, was healing her wounds nigh on contact.

"A rather harsh yet necessary lesson." Sage said quietly, and went to go wash his hands off as a steady warmth – like liquid heat – soothed Salba's muscles.

"There are stories about you." she continued, the next fight between the young Dousaka and Kah-Leah occurring in a holo-screen before Wan. She however was dividing her attention between Wan and Sage.

"Are there?" Sage responded quietly, his radically emerald green eyes shining and glittering as he returned and after a few final checks, released the clamps holding the medical scanner wings bracing about her body to release her.

"They say that you are both demon and angel. A match even for Rae Iksaki!"

"I've heard rumors." He gave her half a smile before returning to Jhan, increasing the mixture to the intravenous feed that would help him to sleep. The regeneration procedure was accumulating slowly. Hopefully he could wait till after his mother arrived before he began the all too excruciating process of inflating his lungs and fusing the bones back together.

"They say your chi levels are unparalleled..."

"Not entirely true." he admitted, and then removing a pin from a bracelet on his left arm, lifted his hand with the pin, phased through the glass and fluids to set it in Jhan's neck at the nexus of a nerve bundle to stop the pain. He repeated the process three more times to shut down pain receptors and likewise, certain motor activity through acupuncture. This would force him deeper into sleep. Sage then telepathically massaged his mind and forced certain areas to shut off for the time being with his limited telepathy.

'He's done so well in battling this, he deserves a reward of some needed sleep,' Sage thought.

"Now... Is there something I may do for you, Miss Salba?" he turned to her finally, folding his arms and devoting his gaze and attention to her.

"Well... Uhm..." she began, biting her lip, listening to the impressions inside her head. "I want you to teach me!"

She drew herself up, as good as any of Sage's Leaguers. Sage favored her with a raised eyebrow.

"Truly?" Sage asked, looking at her, and she nodded. "Follow me."

Sage's form towered over her as he placed his data pad, but amidst passing by her, he shifted into his human form. A much smaller, far less muscular version of himself. Also without his fur.

Salba paused, watching this rapid transformation from something that she had thought was just a really big and strange looking Casid! She followed, still in her undergarments as they walked right across the hall to one of the internal training rings of Sage's Lair.

Sage walked promptly to the center of the ring, and standing with feet together and arms folded he faces Salba.

"All of my students pass a test of initiation. To see if they have the determination to join the league. All new students are tested depending upon their level of current strength. Yours is very high, so it will be very difficult."

"I'm ready..." she says quietly, but firms up her body, ready to fight.

"Very well then... Move me."

Salba blinks, staring at him. "Pardon?" she asks.

"I said: move me. Just from this position, in any direction."

Salba stared at him. No combat stance, no foot positioning. A sharp wind could blow him over. And why a human form? It's so small and weak. She shrugged and moved forward, lifting a hand to give a sharp push. But instead of pushing him over, her body reacts instead, and she has to suddenly regain her footing as her extending arm meets an immobile force and forces her body off balance.

"What the?" she managed after regaining her balance.

Sage waved his hand at her. "Whenever you're ready." he said quietly, before folding his arms again.

This time she used both hands, and pushed all of her weight into the task. Ngh!" she grunted, and every time she reset her balance to push, dug her toe claws in even; she succeeded in only creating long gashes in the stonework of the floor. She redirected her power into her muscles to accomplish her task, those muscles swelling briefly in an attempt to strengthen themselves, but the harder she pushed, the more immobile he seemed to become.

"Ready when you are." Sage said quietly, his eyes closed, and blocking her temper, Salba punched at him, her fur standing on end as a flame strike proceeded her punch, her chi flaring, but when her punch collided with something, it wasn't Sage's face. Instead, her fist connected with a shimmering wall of energy that was a bare inch surrounding Sage's form.

Surprised, only briefly, she tried all that she could. Hit him, scream at him, kick him, even tried to tackle him. She even pried up a plate of slate and broke it over his head. By the time she was done there was a shimmering sphere around Sage, and he had not moved.

Salba collapsed to her knees, panting. "I-I can't do it." she breathed, staring at him.

"Enough then." he said quietly, and the shield snapped out of existence as he stepped away and unfolded his body.

"You have failed your entrance exam, Salba. You may not try again for another three months. Normally it would be six, the start of next term, but you were weakened by your earlier fight.

"You have become ensconced in the searches of gaining power to fully understand the methods of Chi. There is your own harmony, your own balance, but there is also counter balance. Yin and yang, good and evil...

I defeated you by counter-balancing your power. You must defeat me by counterbalancing your own power.

"You must learn its... *'Subtleties'*" he accented the word. "As well as its strengths. Now come get your gi, and join the others in watching the outcome of the battle.

Twelve

Sage sat watching Siklohn mercilessly beat his opponent. Despite that, however, he had lost his helm, and his armor had deep fist dents in them, some of which were obviously making it difficult for him to breathe, but still he battled with nary a lapse in concentration or form.

Jhan was fully asleep now, his life signs in definite REM sleep.

Sage had reassumed his hybrid form now, and was watching the fight come to an end by means of several gauntleted hand strikes to the nearly naked Kah-leah's body, the final one to her head.

Siklohn was precise and noble, skillful... yet wholly arrogant. This trait Sage hoped to rectify soon. It was the command of his father, to drive the pride out of him... Daedalus was working on a mind probe program to program one whole year of lessons of humility into the cub within a ten minute session.

Siklohn would be placed under a brain scan, but only *'awaken'* from the scan in the heat of battle. Perhaps sending him up against the ravages of the Ka-Tao will also give him some worthy *'battle experience'* as well.

Sage then watched Siklohn declared as the winner by unanimous vote while Kah-leah's sisters picked her up as her head rolled around in a daze.

"Myah! I'll take one of those, and those... And ooo! One of those, and have em all shipped to me wrapped with pink ribbons." she said while still in her daze.

Sage rose and then turned to his ward, Jhan, as he slept near motionlessly. A quick look to the monitors found his life signs balanced, minimal, but balanced. The most active was his brain wave monitor as it continued to sputter and jerk in his REM sleep.

Sage reached up and keyed in a command, and a subtle fluid was injected into the vat to be absorbed through his skin.

'No nightmares for you either. Can't have you going into a spastic shock in your sleep. Will damage the healing you've already accomplished...' "I'm going to leave you be for awhile..." Sage said aloud to Jhan as he rested inside his tank. "Sleep tight."

"Daedalus..." he said then as he walked to the doors and tapped the light switch.

"Yes, Master Sage." came his disembodied voice. As the house computer, Daedalus was everywhere inside Sage's Lair.

"Keep an eye on Jhan. If his condition begins to change, alert me. When he awakes, we'll

inflate his lungs and reset his ribcage. And if you could, patch me through to Namah... I will need to ask for her help on this one."

"Of course Master Sage, but I am confused... Why do you seek Namah's help in this routine operation? You have the ability of doing this solo."

"Namah will need to see this boy." Sage said into the air, still pausing at the open door of the medical center. "I am sure she will find interest in some of my findings her previous report didn't uncover.

"Like the boy's limiter?"

"Yes. She'll need to become aware of that if anything should happen while I am away. I don't want him titanizing without someone knowing how to reinstate the limiter effect on him. Likewise, I need her to calm his mind during the operation. My skills are growing, but they are not yet as well refined as hers are."

"Should Meniko be notified?"

"I am sure she already knows. Make it so."

"Yes Master Sage. Connecting to Mystic League Mainframe..."

Thirteen

When Kaya and Mayia entered the arena it was like a scene from an ancient gladiatorial event. Both girls were at their finest, and most fit... and both nearly nude as Mayia shed her robe to reveal a few scant bits of cloth. Kaya wore the small sash that draped leisurely over her pert breasts and another strung through her legs and a small ring to cover her crotch. On her lower legs and feet she wore fine leather straps fastened with heavy bronze coins; each embroiled with the likenesses of various gods for different aspects of a warrior. Mayia was simply barefoot.

In comparison, Kaya looked almost overdressed. Gigju-Tusa bid them bow. As they did, Mayia's legs tensed ready to move. Kaya was relaxed and calm but she radiated a sense of alarm much like Kina did when she was ready to fight.

"You really do look like you could be Eqis's little sister," Mayia loosened her sash a bit ready to attack. It draped lightly over her taut and firm body revealing the fine contours of her young conditioned muscles, not the ropey, hard, physique of Kaya's, but still quite intimidating and equally appealing...

"You look like you could be Geevo's girlfriend," Kaya smirked at the thought, "Or his wife..." getting a roar of laughter from the crowd. Mayia sank a bit before reaffirming her stance.

"Fight!" The referee bled shot.

Mayia led in with a fierce roundhouse kick then a swipe with her silk sash. Kaya easily bent clear of it and shot her knee into the bunny's gut launching her skyward.

"Sloppy. You shouldn't think about guys right now." Kaya turned a strong back flip as Mayia continued to rise into the sky. A crescent-shaped shockwave blasted upward, "Kick sorceress #23!" The attack missed wide as Mayia rolled to the side in a jerk. The force of the blast peeled away one of her pasties as she landed gracefully. "Stop distracting yourself..."

Fourteen

Sage stood by carefully reviewing Jhan's condition. He marveled at the level of genetic manipulation the cub and likely his sister had undergone. *Simply unreal. Their entire gene structure has been completely reprogrammed. This boy could take an elder dragon in a few years...* Then he turned his attention back to the fight and smirked, "Kaya and Mayia? They are like two sides of the same coin in terms of training but Kaya is painfully more willing to go the whole distance to win. Mayia may get shaky quickly if she doesn't learn to use Kaya's recklessness to her advantage or go further herself."

He turns to Jhan seeing his closed eyes scan about in his dream. It was a very active and long dream.

Lost in thought, Sage never noticed Drs. Hyurri Namah walk in. A slight presence like a soft hand on his shoulder called him to turn around. "Doctress..." he says with a curt nod.

"So this is Jhan now?" Namah rarely spent time on greetings as she stared at the cub sleeping in the tube. That was simply her way. But then she turned to Sage, "You intend to manually reset his bones?"

"I do."

"How much more are you going to torture him?"

"It is not torture. It is a necessary lesson for his own good."

"We will see... When do wish to start?"

"When he awakes. Let him rest until then."

"We will likely have to re-break some of his bones. Casid bones knit almost instantly. You really should be a touch more merciful..."

"I won't argue the point. The bout has started. Care to watch?" Sage and Namah had come to a bit of an agreement. In it, they were partners in medicine and would try not to be rivals.

Truthfully, Namah was like another teacher for him. The myriad life forms in this universe baffled him sometimes and the subtle differences in those he should find familiar could trip him up too easily without some experienced hands to point him in the right direction.

But in turn, Namah was startled about the versatility of this healer. Any carbon-based life form was pliable in his hands. It was the plant-based, and even more so the mineral-based sentients that he had a problem with.

"Let's" she says waving a hand as a droid from Namah's clinic rolls into the lab with a basket and folding table, "Nothing fancy," she continues. "Just a small lunch. Join me."

Sage couldn't refuse... he wasn't asked. The delicate aromas and tastes were typical of Nyrian cuisine. Sage savored each morsel as if it were his last meal. It was rare to find such fine food so easily in one place.

"Kaya's trying hard not to let her reproductive imperative... her *'heat'* distract her. But it also makes her stronger until she's been satisfied or it passes. Mayia isn't likely to win if *'the little princess'* can keep her head on straight..."

"Then she'll likely lose..." Sage said, considering Mayia's current level of training.

"I hope so. Kina tells me all three kittens are in a bit of a slump and a swift butt-kicking should put them back in gear."

Fifteen

Kaya had been pushing Mayia around with little effort for most of the match. Her form was perfect and Mayia was constantly put on the defensive. Despite her obvious speed and agility advantages, the rabbit could not mount any counter-attacks. The lioness's every attack seamlessly led to the next.

Suddenly Kaya backed off. Her demeanor was playful and a little remorseful. "Sorry..."

"For what?" Mayia demanded. "For humiliating me? I'm a better combatant than you..."

"Excuses, excuses..." Kaya stood straight out of her stance. "I was told you were afraid of me. Why?"

"..." Mayia was not expecting to chat. Then it hit her that this was some delaying tactic and she skipped in whipping out her sash to bind the lioness' powerful legs, "We can talk after I win."

"That's just it." Kaya raked her deep sepia claws over the sash cutting it like a knife, "Sage taught you to fight but not how to win. You aren't thinking. Technical excellence will win an exposition but not a tournament or a *REAL* battle. I'm probably wrong but you never fought someone who wants to win right?"

"Everyone wants to win. Everyone here..." Mayia took a step back as Kaya reposed herself, adjusting the sash over her breasts innocently. Mayia's exposed nipple stiffened in the cool breeze.

"Wants to stay in this school. I know Siklohn's father put a sword over Sage to teach his son. Goath 'El wanted to be challenged hard. A few of these guys and girls are here for the challenge or at least because it hurts. I know you were a total loser when you got here..."

Gigju-Tusa put a hold on the clock during this exchange as if inviting someone to speak up. So far no one said a word.

Mayia grit her teeth as she took a half step forward with authority, "I am no loser now!"

"You're quicker than I am. At least as quick as Salba but you hesitate like you think I'll read your moves and counter them. I would but... That wouldn't give you a fair chance. Eqis never pushes her advantages until they aren't anymore. I'm stronger than you, I can take a hit that would kill you outright like a tap on the shoulder, and I can run 100 miles an hour all day without having to stop for more than food and water. Yet I'm just standing around kicking you from one corner to the next. You stand a chance. Why aren't you fighting back?"

Mayia slouched visibly as Kaya stared at her. "I don't want to hurt you..."

"Kina hurts me. My last challenge to Eqis ended with me in a coma for a week. You say you don't want to hurt me? YOU CAN'T!!! Loser!"

Mayia sneered as she silently dashed at Kaya, the remains of her sash lashing out like a barbed tongue in fury. She had been pushed around too long. She was Sage's best. He had... and she had invested far too much in her to be beaten because of some weak-willed excuses and sad clichés. Tunnel blind focus on striking *'The Little Princess'* took over...

Sixteen

"Gigju-Tusa enjoys his dramas," Namah sipped her broth, "So how do you see this?"

"Mayia needs to be tested. She is sure of herself but still untested in battle. Kaya has set a high mark to clear for herself and has tested and been broken in battle many times. She is easily the most potent student in the whole Mystic League her age right now..." Sage looks back to the sleeping tiger cub, "...right now..."

"He is strong and lovely but do you honestly believe you will tame him?"

Sage smiled a moment then looked down to Namah, "I suppose this is a test of my parental skills as well as my ability to teach. He's never known a proper father figure, only his mother, the Vice-Headmistress. As the Casid say: A mother teaches how to live. A father

teaches how to survive."

Namah looked at Sage warmly for the first time. She put down her cup of broth and smiled, "Remember to invite me to see the baby..."

Sage smirks then chuckles with the Doctress joining him, "After the match let's get ready."

"Poit..."

Sage pauses stunned to hear that line; *at least she didn't call me 'Brain'*. They turn back to the fight chuckling.

Seventeen

Mayia screamed as she pulled as hard as she possibly could, trying to affect her hold to separate Kaya's shoulder. It was utterly ridiculous as the much smaller bunny fought viciously to subdue the lioness.

Although face down in the dirt, Kaya yawned in boredom, "Wow you can really get worked up, fluffy-butt. Now..." Kaya easily flops over violently slamming the bunny into the soft sand and sparse grass, "Let go!"

Mayia disoriented by the slam did not move as Kaya scooped her up and tossed her just over her head.

"Impaler Fist... One of *'The Fist Queen's'* finishing moves!" uttered a student breathlessly.

"Shut up! Don't give her any ideas!" Shot another student following up with a sharp crack, a slap over the first student's head.

"Ow! You, dumb ass!"

Suddenly Kaya leapt straight up, plowing her shoulders into the bunny's back as she clasps the legs and neck of the smaller girl. Mayia screams in pain as the lioness lands hard, knees half-bent then pumping up hard to a full standing position.

"This is Kah-Leah's most muscular move. She got it from her brother. She calls it *'The Wonder Stretcher.'* Joent calls it..." she jumps into the air like a rocket, "*You're Finished!!!!*"

Kaya lands like a spike not giving her legs at all. Her back straight as a pole as she pulls Mayia's legs and neck with every ounce of strength she has. Kaya's young muscles swelled and hardened until they looked like steel cables under thin skin.

Mayia's screams stopped sharply after that slam. The lioness swings the bunny around to hold her like a rag doll by a limp shoulder.

She was passed out cold.

Gigju-Tusa walked up raising Mayia's arm and releasing it. The limb slapped sickeningly against the girl bunny's side. Once. Twice. Three times he tested the limb. His voice low as if announcing a tragedy, "Kaya wins. No judgment." The old bird took the bunny from Kaya gently as medics put her on a stretcher and took her away.

"Too much." Kaya sagged watching Mayia struggle just to move her body. "The Wonder Stretcher" is a move that is not recommended to be used on opponents smaller than the one using the move. "Great Father... I am sooo sorry."

Eighteen

"If you do go on and talk to Kaya just remember: She is sorry." Namah said reading the readout for the healing booth.

"Mayia owes the whole Shadow League an apology for that poor performance. Kaya... Well I'll think of something..."

"Kina might not approve of anything beyond a stern talking to..."

"Kina doesn't concern..." Sage started as Namah's attention suddenly turned to the cub, "What is it?"

"He's dreaming," she says looking at him with those eyes reserved for patients who gave her nothing but pleasure.

"Of what? My powers are not attuned well enough yet to read dreams or the unconscious mind," Sage admitted with curiosity.

"He is with his friends fighting each other... getting stronger together and swatting the occasional villain while we are all cheering them on. You and Eriuka are the center of his attention... Why isn't Nuu wearing any pants?"

"Possibly because that fox cub doesn't like to wear clothes." Sage smirks.

"Oh. I didn't give him his physical when he arrived..." She blushes a bit just catching a glimpse of what that cub looked like. A sculpted muscle-bound nearly to the point of hulking, young fox boy-cub; as well endowed as any adult and seeming to be totally oblivious to his condition. "Obviously, raised a nudist..."

"He's quite a sight. Just like his father, Guyv..." Looking to the scanners it was just about the end of Jhan's current sleep cycle, "It's about time."

Nineteen

Mayia was brought into the Medical wing and then laid down in one of Sage's many medical bays.

Namah, holding her tea with both hands, letting its aroma waft up into her face, watched as Sage examined his chief student. She wasn't fully awake just yet after the beating, but nonetheless, Sage worked over her supple body.

She then watched as his fingers moved swiftly, lifting her leg, twisting it into an odd position straight out to her side, and then began pinching and twisting locations on her body, and with a loud crunch, Mayia's arm snapped back into shape.

Namah was, nonetheless, surprised at how swiftly Sage had repaired such a vicious wound as that. She'd expected Mayia to be laid up for a week with that sort of damage.

But Mayia awoke immediately with a gasp at the motion as Sage reset her muscles and her nerve bundles. He maintained that there were universal similarities between species, and it was alarming on how often he was right in that nature.

But then he also maintained that he could visually see power-points and weaknesses in a body.

Mayia was looking at Sage while he worked; massaging her shoulder with one large hand as he telekinetically summoned a jar of salve from off a shelf, mentally unscrewed it, and dipping his hand into it, withdrew some of the salve, worked it into his hands, and mentally recapped the jar and replaced it on its shelf.

Mayia was looking at Sage now, seeing that his emerald green eyes hadn't linked or looked away from her since she had come in. Though his face was totally placid, she knew when her master was upset.

"You are... disappointed." she said, and scrunched in on herself.

"Yes." Sage answered, and looked away at last.

Namah could feel the shock in Mayia's mind.

Repairing the damage necessitated some embarrassing touches by his fingers, shifting her tit out of the way, undressing her from her silk cloth a little more.

"Kaya should have been subdued within three minutes with your level of expertise." he said. "She should be the one laying in here with body paralysis. Why were you not using your techniques?"

Again Sage focused on her, staring at her unblinkingly. His voice was soft and held no malice. He taught softly outside of the fighting ring, and harshly inside it.

"I... I did not want to hurt her..." Mayia said weakly.

Sage nodded, and exhaled a sigh before shaking his head.

"There were one thousand, two hundred and thirty two striking points that would have disabled her and not caused any pain. Your training should have deflected or even absorbed her blows, every time she struck at you she should have busted her fist on your iron shirt technique, and every time you struck you could have caused whole sections of her body to shut down.

"Why did you lose?"

Mayia cast her eyes around, looking for an answer, even settled on Namah, who tilted her head at the young rabbit, wondering what she would answer with.

"I... I was a-afraid..." her eyes glistened, and she remarkably raised both arms to her face and eyes to shield the sight of her tears." What if I lost control? What if I didn't touch her in just the right place? I could've burst an organ, paralyzed her for good, or even accidentally killed her!"

Namah blinked at this, and Sage turned to look at his fellow healer with a wry quirk on his face before returning to his student.

'To kill with a touch? How is that possible?' Namah thought.

Sage took his student's chin and lifted it, pulling her head out from underneath her hands, her makeup – a little bit of kohl underneath her eyes – smeared. He focused on the much younger rabbit kindly. Fatherly.

"You have reached a level of understanding that all students of the order reach that are of a good heart, Mayia. You have become so deadly, that you have become afraid of yourself. Even I went through that experience. Spent a year outside of the order to try to obtain inner peace again. Your lessons shall be altered to be able to account for this, and I believe we shall focus entirely on control and self confidence till you are past this fear."

He took her hands and helped her off of the medical bed, squeezing her much smaller fingers between his massive hands. The remains of her silk cloth fell to the floor about her, leaving her topless now, and only in a single triangular pasty over her sex.

"You will be required to apologize to the Shadow League for your poor efforts, and explain to them exactly why you hesitated and did not defeat your opponent. You are the one they look up to, they will need to see this, and likewise, you will need to do it to settle your mind more.

"Afterwards, you will come to me, daily, to receive your new training requirements.

"Once you have completed your training, I will arrange a special private match between you and Kaya again. For your final challenge."

Mayia looked up at him, her eyes going wide. "Master?"

Sage smiled. "Should you defeat her, I shall name you an Apprentice Master. You will likewise be assigned new students to train." Though in his mind any suitable challenge would suffice to promote her, Sage would keep something special for Mayia should she defeat Kaya.

Mayia bounced and leapt up on her master, hugging him thoroughly before bounding out the door, returning briefly to collect the remains of her silk sash and then rush back out.

There was a brief moment of silence before Namah took a sip from her tea and then lowered it again.

"I am impressed, Sage. On more levels than one. I wondered how you had garnered the ability to get all of your students to look upon you as a father figure, even Siklohn, and now I am no longer wondering."

"My Master taught the same way." Sage said quietly. "He took precious few students, but each of them always loved him for his teachings."

"Like a father." Sage's eyes saddened a little before brightening again. "He's been like a father to me..."

Namah remarked that Sage's mind was remarkably blank, or blocked, concerning who his real father was.

Sage turned once again, and looked to the young Jhan. Stepping forward, checking the monitor, he lifted a hand and let it hover over the panel, before he tapped the holographic key marked *'awake.'*

"I am interested, however..." Namah intoned into the quiet. "Mayia had said some things just now about your order. To kill with a touch?"

Sage nodded as he discharged a locking mechanism, and Jhan's pod slowly turned until it was horizontal.

"I have maintained that all life has similarities regardless as to what base element makes up their form. Carbon, Silicon... anything, though admittedly I am far more familiar with those based off carbon. All creatures have several key elements such as nerve bundles, Chakra points, Chi or Ki-Centers, and so on. My upper students are trained to *'see'* these pinpoints.

"Using motion and precision, Mayia can crush bones, burst internal organs, interrupt the flow of nerve impulses to a section of the body, and all without breaking the skin or leaving a visible bruise.

"All with a simple touch."

The nutrient bath inside Jhan's pod rapidly began draining, and he lowered within it till he was lying on a bed of the stuff. Sage reached in and removed the pins in his neck.

"These pins are currently interrupting nerve impulses from his body to his brain. He is essentially not feeling the pain until..." he removed a pin, and Jhan gasped as he became aware of the discomfort of his present ordeal. "The pin is removed."

"I've heard of acupuncture as an old remedy, but I've never heard of it being used in such a precise manner."

Sage nodded, and removed the last pin. "This one was programming his mind to remain asleep."

Namah folded her arms beneath her bosom as she approached the naked Jhan. She reached out and caressed his forehead and felt the slick of the nutrient bath in his fur. She felt his mind awakening, and she looked up at Sage with a pained expression.

"Why are you doing this to him?"

Sage's lips pressed into a very thin line.

"Because his mother and I do not want to see him repeat what happened to Illia." Namah definitely heard his voice quiver there. "What happens if you protect a child from all hurt and harm during their entire life, and then grow to an adult, and suddenly experience the harshness of the world?" Sage asked.

Namah pondered it, hugged herself tighter and looked away. "He becomes unprepared for it, and when he experiences such hardships, there is the greatly increased possibility that he will crumble beneath the strain.

Sage sighed and then nodded, "And he is training to be a warrior. In war there is pain, there is sorrow, there is hurt and there is anguish. There were certain degrees of preprogramming this cub has already obtained, and by doing this to him, I broke that mental programming and am now helping him to cope with the problem of rewriting his thinking. These experiences will temper him, in such a way that no other member of any of the Leagues will have ever experienced... He has lived through complete and utter hell."

This time Sage laid a hand on the cub's brow, and whispered a prayer. Then sliding him out of his pod and onto an operating table, Sage wheeled the pod out of the way as the cub was laid out on the table and clamped down on it.

"Namah, I have a medical gown here for you. It'd be best if we start as soon as he is fully awake.

Twenty

Jhan was slowly coming around.

Like a long sunrise his vital signs picked up. It was to be expected. Sage had taken great pains to insure the cub suffered no further shock. It would be almost a half hour before the tiger cub was awake.

Namah examined his young but powerful body to survey the damage that would need to be repaired. It was extensive and left the Nyrian quite pleased that Sage was not in charge of the school. She still found his techniques horribly, even needlessly, brutal but at least he could fix the damage he did.

Now if only he didn't go straight to doing the damage in the first place, Namah thought.

She had slipped on the medical gown quickly. It was the standard issue Imperial Navy sterilized garment for medical personal. Re-breaking some of the bone would entail some minor surgery and so the necessary attire was called for.

"I must make you feel as if I'm just some brute stomping around the school making trouble at times..." Said Sage, his head emerging from his own medical gown.

"At times I feel as if you are trying much too hard. Let others do their jobs..."

"When I got here I saw a school of such high caliber in disarray. On the verge of falling apart... But the outcome of my match with Rae set my path to aiding this school..."

"...And if that means breaking a few eggs as you were going to say?"

"Please don't do that..."

"Spoken words are the hardest to keep to yourself, Sage. I have seen the decline of school from its very first day till now and you are not helping matters much by making a majority of staff and students feel like they can't do anything while you can do everything..."

"Like Kina and Fierteh?"

"Mostly the staff, yes. I myself am distressed by how you wantonly do the most unorthodox things. I will admit that they work but keep in mind we need to examine the injuries to discern how they occurred so that measures can be taken to prevent them."

"Mayia's half crushed spine..."

"Diet and exercise. Oliverians can be almost impossibly limber but it requires rigorous lifelong training. Kaya knows this and used it to her advantage. Mayia could have benefited from how she was broken not just the healing. Instant gratification is not the best solution in all cases. Just like this cub," She points her two fingered hand to Jhan as he slowing stirred under restraint, "He is being made to examine the reasons for his wounds..."

"Earth studies such injuries as well... To learn to prevent and better correct. So it is no different here."

"Yes. This is not a patch 'em and pitch 'em outfit. My hospital is about study as well as healing. Many of Mother Sanari's students intern at my facility to extend their healing skills and how to improve them on their own. You might benefit from that perspective..."

"I will strive to that as a healer... Though I must say I am not as equally a researcher as a healer."

"Ninety-six in lions eighty-eight in tigers..." Namah said looking to the cub.

"Pardon me?" Sage puzzled by the absently made comment.

"The number of power nodes in a Casid. I believe panthers and leopards have one hundred and four, while cheetahs have only ninety. Cenuffii Aphkei has engineered themselves down to thirty-eight except Yarunnii who have six and Tagunnii who have none."

"Chi or pressure points... Tagunnii Aphkei has none. That would be impossible."

"They are living machines. A fusion of Hadran metal genetics and Aphkian genetics. Yet their usage of Chi is more than one-thousand times more efficient than any species known..."

"I'm curious how many would a Degeddii like Rae has?"

"One-hundred-and-eight... But Rae is so strong you wouldn't be able to exploit any save one and only unless she allows you to."

"Her nose..." Sage mused with a practiced if slightly labored bit of telepathy. Like being right handed and having to use the left.

"One quick '*bip*' and you'll temporarily cut off all but her ability to see and breath normally. A crushing blow would knock her out instantly. She doesn't go for the deadening of that one weak spot like her husband does..."

"Fascinating," Sage mused, a mask of logic falling on his face.

"Well the last bout is about to begin. I believe your chapter is up two wins to one?"

"Quite. Who is your favorite to win this bout?" Sage's almost youthful curiosity showing.

"Fatima only because she doesn't want to lose. But she is hurt for her friend Re'en's personal grudge against her. Poor girl. She seems to lose people in one way or another all the time..."

Her mother and father, her first boyfriend... those are hard loses to take especially at her age... Sage thought as the two girls entered the arena.

Twenty One

Re'en and Fatima were very close friends. But as Fatima's powers blossomed, much like Rae's did at her age, Re'en and all of Fatima's friends grew into insignificance in terms of strength and power. While Rae and Illia had remained very close friends, Fatima and Re'en grew apart becoming increasingly distant and Re'en becoming a very bitter rival with jealousy and self-loathing.

Now one of Sage's students in the Shadow League, Fatima is given to learn how to be a warrior and protector more than how to fight, and most of all how to control her temperament, which is sometimes flighty. Unfortunately, she seems destined to have no easy relationships.

Cordial, romantic or otherwise.

As the two girls stood apart from each other, leagues above most of the other students in skill, strength, power, and ability, the air was prickly with tension.

"Re'en..." Fatima started assuming her ready stance. A rather relaxed pose, with legs slightly bent but not at all spread, hands raised lightly like a boxer at ease before the bell.

"Shut it!" Re'en snapped instantly falling into her ready posture. Stiff and tightly sprung like a bow ready to send an arrow. Every muscle was balanced against each other as she hunched down slightly. A look of dejected hate loomed about her face and eyes. It was clear that she felt as if she was being abandoned because of Fatima's powers. The great blue, in color, Yamachi had said so herself at least once. "Get ready!"

Twenty Two

"This won't be fair," Namah murmured half telepathically, a Nyrian habit was more to speak telepathically but Psionic etiquette dictated differently. Even so, she couldn't help but let it slip once in a while. "Re'en is completely heartbroken that one of her best friends has left her..."

"Fatima?" Sage half said himself, though without telepathy as his abilities were nowhere as fluid as the doctress's, "I have forgotten quite a few friends in my quest to evolve. But

that seems to come back to me now seeing this. How they felt when I had outgrown them in one fashion or another... But to have a close friend up and leave you..."

"It's not really Fatima's fault or Re'en's..." Hyurri looked at Jhan as his vitals continued to rise slowly, thinking of how his friends might miss him or grow to resent him. She lightly stroked his forehead inciting a weak smile from him.

"...They will simply grow up and apart..." Sage's face was confident but still concerned. The relationships of teenagers could go from good to bad to worse faster than with adults and, unlike with young children, rarely fully recover. Fatima had a clear strength and power advantage; there is barely a person alive who could take Fatima in a fight. Sage and Rae were two; a scant number, but that didn't help matters much.

Re'en looked about ready to kill her *'former'* best friend... or maybe, "This is when the steam is finally set loose."

"Someone is going to be burned..."

Twenty Three

"Fight!"

Both girls stood firm unmoving for several moments as if still sizing each other up. Re'en slowly stepped sideways to circle and Fatima only too reluctantly followed. Sage encouraged, more like demanded, decisive action at all times but Fatima still adored her friends and was clearly torn between giving her friend the fight she desired or a swift beating.

Suddenly Re'en disappeared as if to teleport. Fatima casually caught the knee kick aimed for her face and that sensitive nose as if the move was rehearsed for a fighting movie. Re'en followed up with a vicious elbow set for her kidney that Fatima again caught leisurely. Re'en broke away but Fatima did not pursue.

"Fight me, Damn it!!!" Re'en shouted. She began to gather energy for a very deadly attack her arms glowing as if lit from within with the heat of molten rock.

"You are still my friend. I won't fight you when you're angry like this..."

Re'en launched at Fatima with one arm leading in a simple straight punch backed with incredible, unmeasured, power. Fatima, herself disappeared, dodging the attack and reappeared behind the blue giantess.

Re'en turns and swings again at Fatima who steps well out of reach as if moving outside normal time. The pooch's face saddens as she is lost in her fears and concerns. She misses the wide high kick to her head sending her sailing across the arena. Panicking students run clear as Fatima's careening body digs a trench over one hundred feet long.

"Get up!" Re'en screams throwing a massive barrage of energy balls at Fatima. They strike like lobbed artillery shells exploding brilliantly. Dozens of star-like nodules of might struck their target violently. They raised thick dust and smoke that loomed over the area. Re'en puts her hands together and as if opening a heavy pair of curtains spreads them and the dust and smoke part to reveal a deep crater where Fatima sat calmly at its bottom.

"I won't get up to fight you. You're still my friend..."

Re'en wasted no time diving into the crater the pummel Fatima. She covered her face and hardened her body against the raging giantess. The thundering blows shook the island. The shaking grew to incredible violence as if the island's live volcano was set to erupt itself. The students, those who could, levitated above the vibrating ground. The rest trembled with the land as Re'en screamed at the top of her lungs all her anger and fears, all her hurt and heartache, how she missed her best friend...

The shaking stopped...

Gigju-Tusa and the other judges ran over to the crater, now that they could, "Fatima Iksaki? Re'en?"

The old bird leaned over the rim of the much deeper hole in the ground. There he and the judges found Re'en sobbing into Fatima's arms as she lay in the dirt of the crater. Her young face bloodied, but now healed, from a few lucky blows but was otherwise unharmed.

"Could you give us a while here," Fatima whispered comforting the blue giant. Her eyes turned to Re'en, who continued to cry, now apologizing softly, "It's alright... I won't leave you. We're friends... It was my fault for not being you're friend..."

"I think we should declare this a draw," Leadra said quietly. The other judges agreed...

"This contest is a draw. No winner..." Gigju-Tusa called out warding off the repair droids. He looked to the girls, "Tell Mother Sanari that she's got some work to do... for a change." He turns to the crowd, "The Shadow League wins the first set two wins to one... If anyone was wagering credits they will be confiscated and the offenders will be sentenced summarily according to established rules of the Mystic League. Sage prosecutes fully in all matters as do I."

There were no violators. Sage tried and knows that you can't win a staring contest with an eagle and those eyes could break a soul in moments. And Sage was a cat, well known for not blinking for long periods of time. He didn't earn his title of *'instant confessional'* for nothing...

"That was close," Namah stepped back into the room as Sage gently released Jhan from his protective embrace.

"My lair is earthquake resistant. Nothing short of the planet actually coming apart would damage it."

"Can I just keep to some good habits, hmm?" Namah looked slightly annoyed. She knew his lair and every building in the Mystic League was nearly indestructible, but proper safety procedures were still encouraged in case of the unexpected and so they'd never be caught in the wrong during a disaster.

Sage, however, had the utmost faith in the stability of the tree his lair was built within.

"Sorry. I'm just used to not having to worry about my roof falling in."

"Some of us are not immortal and would rather go when its time and not a moment before," Hyurri Namah glared. It was easy for Sage to forget that she was over two-hundred and quite elderly. She still looked so young by all measures. Even her bosom was still pert.

"Sorry..." Sage's eyes turn to the monitors, "He's just about ready..."

"Good..."

Twenty Five

Sage had deactivated the holo-viewer, allowing the battle to rage outside while Namah and himself set themselves to such an arduous task. Masked and goggled, the two medical-physicians worked on either side of the young Casid to speed the process up, all of their surgical tools arrayed to their sides, tools of their trade from their own worlds, tools that they were used to using.

"Jhan," Sage directed, drawing the cub's attention, and he opened his eyes again as their heaviness drew them closed. "We need your input as we do this." he said, and adjusted the face mask over Jhan's face that was feeding him a nutrient air mixture. "We will be inflating one of your lungs at a time, the drugs and other measures we've taken," Sage flicked one of the much longer, flexible pins stuck in Jhan's neck, and the pin hummed as it vibrated there. "Will deaden the pain, but not totally. Any pain, even mild discomfort, we want to know about it. Understand?"

Jhan nodded.

"We will be inflating your lungs one at a time," Namah repeated where Sage left off, insuring that the patient understood the process amidst his stupor. "And then we will be re-breaking and resetting the bones, and then fusing them back into their proper place. Once we're done, there is the better chance that your bones will be even stronger than before."

She managed a quick smile and stroked his forehead, and his eyes blinked in a half smile to her.

"We will now begin." she continued, and reached for her first tool, a laser scalpel.

Twenty Six

Clio faced Siklohn and swallowed. Siklohn was by far much smaller than she, but being the son of a warlord made him a tremendously daunting opponent. She was now wearing nothing but a pair of fingerless gloves, and a pair of thigh socks. Like her friend and distant mentor, Equis, Clio tended to be naked as often as possible. Her itty bitty wings tensed at her back did, and she adjusted her gloves. Siklohn attached one of the last pieces of his arm armor on. Other than a breast plate and back plate and all the heavy armor attached to his arms and forelegs, the only other thing he wore were his trousers.

This was a battle both of them feared.

In Siklohn's eye, Clio was a goddess of sheer unadulterated power nearly on par with Fatima. If her full form weren't locked, she would've been far more foreboding.

In Clio's eye, Siklohn was a precise, pin point precision professional soldier, far more refined than any mere warrior. And with that mace in his hand...

Both of them swallowed as the referee came to a stance between them.

"Ready Clio?" Gigju-Tusa gestured to her, and she nodded.

"Ready Siklohn?" and he too nodded

"Then... *FIGHT!*"

Twenty Seven

"Great Maker..." Namah gasped, and Sage's glowing green eyes lifted to look at her.

"This is one of the reasons why I wanted you here, Namah. I believe Jhan and his sister were pushed passed your usual screening process for a reason.

Namah tapped one of the bones underneath the separated flesh and muscle. "They overlap..." she breathed.

"Nearly every bone in his body does this. They flare wide with a thick core, overlapping one another and are then laced with a natural polymer. An added cell-type in his body structure has been added to add to and repair the lacing to his bones. It is a very potent form of endoscopic armor.

"On top of that, his bone structure is a combination of Calcium-Carbonate," he tapped the white of the bone visible with the tip of his claw. "Whereas the silvery-grey stuff is a Boron-silicate.

"It explains why after he crushes pop cans against his head that he promptly eats it. And at first I thought he was just showing that he's being tough."

"But how does he digest..." she paused and thought about it, and Sage nodded as he felt her conclusion happening amidst her surface thoughts. "...A hydrochloric bath inside his belly capable of digesting a battery. I am sure his sister is capable of similar."

Namah's brows beetled as she set a sonic splitter tool to Jhan's bones while Sage inflated the lung with a hand pump.

"What else have you found?" She asks as she continues to break and reset, break and reset. His bones were healing themselves far too quickly, even for a Casid, and his flesh kept trying to seal itself. She found herself having to resort to the laser scalpel several times before each break.

"Respiratory tissue twenty times more dense than most living beings gives enhanced breathing and filtration abilities. He may even be able to breathe water. An enlarged heart with the ability to filter toxins like a liver. Enlarged spinal chord... he's loaded with bio-ware, Namah. It's packed so tightly inside him I'm surprised they had the technology to fit it all. Even his blood is saturated with several symbiotic organisms, some artificially manufactured, some not indigenous to Planet Casia.

"One type... isn't indigenous to this universe..."

Namah's face pinched with emotional pain, and Jhan, half awake, and not really listening, focusing entirely on remaining awake and following Sage's and Namah's instructions to understand what they were speaking about. All for his good as well. It's best if no one knows what has been done to him or his sister.

"Forced Evolution all in the name of war." she bit off, and a mental curse erupted from her that made Sage's eyes flutter briefly. He had to mentally halt his mind's defenses from attacking back at her, thinking that he'd just been Ego-Whipped.

Sanari's students were definitely helping his mental powers to grow rapidly. A couple weeks ago and Namah would've been barely *'nudged'* by his defenses.

She continued to work, resetting Jhan's bones and fusing them together again before reattaching muscle fibers as tight as they could go, and resealing the flap of flesh over it all.

"Your turn Sage." She said simply, tight-lipped even.

He nodded, and the two worked together to switch sides, and insert the air pump tube into Jhan's other lung.

Sage flicked the pin at the side of Jhan's neck again.

"What is that you're doing with that pin?"

Sage flicked it again as he lifted his hand to Jhan's side. "Sending a harmonic resonance down his nervous system. It disrupts all of his nerve endings and deadens his feelings to physical touch, as well as deadens his mind. Penetrate deeper and it will cut it off, and shut his mind off."

"So that's how you got him to sleep."

He nodded, and his hand on Jhan's side moved, a soft black glow on his hand, and he scraped off all of Jhan's fur along his side in one stroke. Sage then picked up his own laser scalpel, a thing made of living material, and began his half of the repair.

Twenty Eight

Jhan was glad to be slid back into his tube again. He was bruised and ached everywhere, and that nutrient bath was very soothing.

He was breathing easier now, but his sides ached. The nutrient bath, though, when it covered his sides soothed that too, like a full body massage.

His pod was righted then, and then pushed backward and locked into its containment place. He opened his eyes a little more to see Sage standing there checking the readings on his tank.

"How are you feeling?" Sage asked, and he could see Namah in the background.

"B-better." he breathed into his air mask. "Easier to breathe."

"Full lungs will help you heal faster, Jhan. Your mother and sister are coming tomorrow, and they want to see you. For now, I want you to sleep. No more lessons for today."

He nodded.

"I've placed a healing enchantment on you for all the good work you did today, helping Namah and me. The surgery went very well."

Again, he nodded; a smile on his face as he felt Sage's wonderfully soothing healing sleep washing over him.

"Good night, Jhan. I will see you in the morning."

Sage tapped a button, and the crystal shield of his pod darkened to a shadowy tint, blocking out the light. Jhan fell asleep under his own power for the first time in days.

Twenty Nine

The day was running on and the sun was growing tired as it lowered toward the horizon. The violets and pinks of late afternoon and early evening were setting in as the last rounds of the contest raged.

Siklohn had narrowly managed to stand after the incredible blasting Clio had given him. She was cautious after nearly having her arm cut off by the knightly wolf with his bladed mace. He rose one last time in that battle and surrendered.

In review, Sage imagined that the young over-achiever had chosen to walk away instead of being carried out. It was a nobleman's way of excepting his limits. A far cry from the behavior of some of his students. Clio, herself, was relieved that she didn't have to fight Fatima who had developed a habit of single brutal strikes to shatter an opponent's will or ability to fight and if, by chance, one was able to continue, then Fatima was feared, by even Mayia, for bringing down the *'big hammer.'*

Still Sage marveled at the closeness of Siklohn's team. Like a band of lifelong friends and adventurers he'd known in the past, this team was never too far away to help. Clio was, despite her relationship with Ki'arn, a bit of a loner... Largely out of her own still deeply set feeling of being some kind of freak. That would pass... especially with Kaya inviting Clio to join her and the other *'kittens'* on their team.

It would mean a transfer for Clio to the main school again. So far, the only chapter of the Mystic League she hadn't been in was the Grace League.

"I really should get back to my work now..." Namah drifted a bit as if holding back a thought, "I would really like you to submit an application to the Assembly as a researcher. You clearly have a solid understanding of the sciences and it goes too far to simply be a healer..."

"Thank you. I will think on it..." Then came that slight itch in his head. Another probe? Namah's sweep. *Being born a telepath must be wonderful if only a bit unsettling to those who aren't psychically aware.*

"It is *'unsettling,'* and you have already made up your mind. A shame." Namah placing her surgical gown in a hamper, "You shouldn't think of the functions of telepathy like the actions of machines or deliberate acts. For a natural Psion, what you perceive as deliberate acts is as natural to me as breathing and walking. You are learning this as you find your crude, if effective, defenses being increasingly bypassed. Like thinking instead of speaking will protect your thoughts from those not psychically aware, learning to suppress the mental expression of you thoughts will protect them from even actively prying

Psionics... Know your thoughts but not what your thoughts are..."

"It's like listening to someone speak aloud I suppose," Sage sighed realizing he had some training to go before he could keep his passive thoughts to himself. He was slowly learning not to be offended when a telepath let him know what he was thinking. Still it bothered him, though not as much as his *'automatic'* defenses not being as much a deterrent anymore.

Sage and Namah were quiet for a short time as they made their way outside to see the setting of the sun.

"Now you will actually think about that application. It is a good learning experience for you. The thin cross-section of species here are nothing compared to what's out there. I just wish we had a few reptiods here like Malyar..."

"Malyar?" Sage drifted in thought a moment, "I was surprised there aren't more dragons... ah... Dragaseir here."

"The Malyar are very good people but someone pushed them into a war they almost won. The history files as in the main library. The Dragaseir... That would be a political situation. I am not good with politics. Neither is the Headmistress... She simply wants this school to succeed and if more reptiods would apply and enter it would go a long way toward bolstering her spirits and that of the school's."

Sage looked to the sunset and was absorbed in the patterns of clouds and colors, "I see..."

Namah's gaze turned to the distant pillar of light from the Mystic League's pinnacle tower, "I have some paperwork to do before I retire from the evening. I will also be reviewing performance records in preparation for my retirement... I am not sure whether or not to add you to the list, Doctor Preypacer..." She mused on the title that Sage never really chose to let himself be called by, but in her presence, he didn't raise any objections.

Somehow putting *'doctor'* or *'Doctress'* before a name always seemed to sound good.

"I would be honored if you did consider me, Doctress Namah" Sage bowed his head to her with a friendly smile.

"Very well then," She returned the bow with a slight curtsy, "Now I will take my leave... Please keep me apprised of young Jhan's progress."

"I will." Sage watched the young-looking old woman walk away gracefully if with a lack of energy she obviously missed but accepted. He went on to see the last of the matches in person.

As he did go, he caught a glimpse of Fatima and Re'en simply sitting next to each other by a cliff overlooking the sea. They did not speak but were obviously seeking to mend their

friendship. Fatima was far more mature now than when he first met her, like a more serious Rae but still cuddly and personable when possible. He wished them the best and hoped that they'd seek some help before things got that bad again.

Thirty

"Master Sage," Siklohn said straightly as the Weretiger approached. He was already completely healed from his last match. All the students turned to greet their school's master.

"As you were," he said coolly as the last combatants entered the arena, Clio and Kaya. Though the girls were huge, Clio clearly had mass and power on her side. Kaya was fast and agile and had an arsenal of moves dwarfing all but the most accomplished masters in the school. Clio was still a bit of the blunt object relying on her power more than actually fighting skill but that could be made to work for her.

Sage took his position along side the other judges. Whether they looked at him or not it was clear the majority of attention was on Sage.

Clio was not all that happy to be in the Shadow League.

She was being sent around to experience the various chapters; the first multi-class student, as it was. Her stint under Sage's tutelage was more for her to get over her fear of him. A feeling she found much different than her fear of Kina, who was like a mean-spirited but well meaning big sister, or Gehnohn, who was something felt like an un-approving yet helpful uncle. She glanced over at Sage and just couldn't place how she felt about him, now. He was some creepy unknown and just couldn't escape trying to figure him out, but nonetheless, Sage had helped her, without ever asking for a thing in return in the past. She saw his ears dip as if saying *'maybe I shouldn't have come.'*

She looked back at Kaya, a willing friend and ruthless competitor.

Kaya stretched sensuously exciting the students, though their reactions were much subdued compared to before Sage had arrived. She shared the same views as her teacher, Kina, about Sage...

She just didn't like him.

He was someone to be conquered when she was ready. The quick spontaneous bout between Eqis and Sage a few months before ended with both knocking each other unconscious. Sage got up first but it was obvious Eqis just wasn't interested in beating him. Eqis had grown very distant in the months following the announcement that she was going to be made the Supreme Matriarch of all Casid.

Or at least placed in the running...

Kaya felt like she would never achieve her goal of fighting Eqis and making her fight back. Still she trained and studied harder than all but a few students and is very nearly a *'kamikaze'* fighter in even relatively easy bouts. She acknowledged Sage with a calm but assertive nod before turning her eyes on Clio, who jumped back a bit.

Gigju-Tusa stepped firmly between the girls and looked to both, "This is the final bout. Kaya has outperformed all other fighters in terms of ability, drive, technique, and temperament. Truly an awesome young warrior. Clio has successfully demonstrated the effective application of sheer power and force to secure victory. A goddess in the making if ever one is to be seen here today." His voice was as if loathing the girls, and there was far too much sarcasm in his voice. Coarse and sinister, he didn't want either girl being proud of his words of them. He looked to Kaya, who nodded her head sharply, and then to Clio, who bowed at the waist quickly and deeply. "Stand ready..." He stepped to the edge of the arena, his hand, and those grizzly, darkly swirled, talons, raised, "Fight!" his hand chopped down with a chilling whistling of those claws that shamelessly maimed and killed in his youth some one hundred years ago.

Clio hunched into her fighting stance as Kaya stood there relaxed. The tigress froze with confusion. *Hasn't the fight started yet? Why isn't she getting ready?*

Kaya skipped sideways to orbit Clio who turned quickly to stay face-to-face with the smaller, leaner, more frightening, lioness. She was gorgeous by all measures and Clio, often too humble for her own good, felt plain and unworthy around her. She heard how guys compared her to a younger Eqis and the not so flattering things that guys will say about girls they'd like to *'engage'* with...

The swift but simple orbiting continued for several minutes as both girls were looking for an opening. Clio would need to cripple Kaya quickly or the lioness would pound her into the ground. Kaya couldn't hope to withstand more than a few bursts of *'storm'* from the white tigress but if she went in and started beating on her the match would end in a one-sided victory... Not the most satisfying or useful in her training. Clio still had sheer strength on her side along with incredible power, but lacked confidence.

Kaya stopped her orbit directly between Clio and Sage. Seeing that Weretiger, who could and would smash down an opponent like a poorly made practice dummy, over that lethal lioness' shoulder was like looking at a monster from Clio's worst nightmares. Seeing the tigress freeze again and tremble slightly, Kaya spoke firmly, "Don't be afraid. You have advantages and you know my shortfalls. You can find a way. Just don't be afraid."

What? Why is she helping me...? Clio stopped moving seeing in her mind Kaya's likely maneuvers. All of them were too quick to hit her with lightning and strong to catch her in a tornado. The wind whipped up. *I hope I can stop her with a few good hits...* she flexed her palms.

Kaya smiled warmly, "This is going to be a good fight."

"Is this some kind of initiation into your team, Kaya?" Clio's wings raised as her ears folded. She knew Kina was a hard teacher and one who didn't take weak students except as examples of weak students. Clio herself had even smashed Kina into the ground, nearly killing her when Kina pushed her to far. Clio wasn't to keen on winding up underneath her again. "I won't join if it is..."

"That's okay. I just want to be strong enough to make Equis fight me." Kaya dove into a rapid roll toward Clio. Clio pulled back into a block amazed at how fast her opponent could move from a 'dead' posture. The roll quickly expanded into a rising hand spring kicking Clio in the gut, launching her, winded, into the air. Kaya quickly followed and battered Clio with invisibly fast kicks and punches for several seconds buffeting the larger stronger Tigress about like a rag doll, drawing blood and cracking bones.

Clio falls with a thud and a scream of pain as one of her arms shatters as she lands on it. She looked terrified at Kaya.

"Get up. I believe in you," Kaya said waiting still in easy attack reach, which Kaya had later revealed was nearly a quarter mile but was shown as roughly forty feet away. She resumed her relaxed stance not giving up any of her potential.

Clio rose slowly and weakly, deathly afraid, to her feet. Kaya was mocking her. Not taking a proper stance. Inflicting grievous harm and then cheering her on. That fear was small but that simbiant within her fed on it growing stronger excreting it as rage that slowly pushed Clio forward. Clio's gaze darkened as the skies ripped with distant thunder and lightning, her claws drew as she bared her white fangs. She swung her claws wide, clearly yards short of hitting Kaya. Rabid arcs of lightning lashed out to strike Kaya, who slid under it and rose with a flying uppercut flipping Clio over like a flapjack to land face down in the dirt.

"You can do better. C'mon I know you can." Kaya jumped back. This was too easy for her. Clio was not fighting at all. Not like those times when Kina was training her. She put up an effort then. Why not now? "I still have some respect for you. I've seen you fight. We've trained together. Please don't disappoint us all..."

"**STOP MOCKING ME!!!**" Clio roared, rising to her knees, a massive hail stone the size of a large television set crashed into the ground narrowly missing Kaya by inches.

"Sloppy aim..." Kaya returned grabbing the hailstone and throwing it at Clio, nailing her shoulder breaking it, just as her broken arm healed, "Mine's better..."

"**SHUT UP!!!**" Clio wailed as lightning rained down on Kaya. Ramming her hand into the ground, Clio followed up with a shockwave punch that sent lightning ripping through the ground toward Kaya who jumped up, curling into a ball. The attacks completely overturned the field, sending debris everywhere with the force of a hurricane focused on the tiny plot of land, scattering the students. "Why are you making fun of me...?" Clio sank as Kaya opened up landing unharmed.

"I care about you. Kina teaches a lot of things and the most important is never let a friend fall. You are falling... Stand up and fight."

Clio was quiet as she trembled. Tears ran down her face. She looked at Kaya, who smiled to her. She stood up to her feet. Her shoulder was sore but useful again. "I won't lose to you, Kaya..." She said slowly before charging head long at Kaya who braced for the tackle which never came as the tigress slipped to the side as a torrid wind whipped up dust and dirt blinding the lioness. The sudden switch in strategies caught Kaya off guard but not long enough to keep her from blocking several powerful punches and kicks. But all those punches and kicks backed her up into the perfect place for Clio, right where she planned a lightning strike, and Kaya was caught perfectly by over a gigawatt of electrical power.

Kaya, screaming, responded with a force wave of chi ripping into Clio who was in turn blown down. She rolled back and up to her feet lashing back with a shock of ball lightning not realizing Kaya was far to the side and rushing to strike her.

The symbiant that was Clio's partner caught her instinct and forced a reaction. Almost casually, Clio extended a fist into Kaya's face sending her back like a shot into the now loose gathering of students.

By chance, Kaya lands next to Mayia who looks down on Kaya with some haughty disdain. Kaya stands up looking down on the bunny, "If you had half her courage you might have stood a stance." Kaya ran back to the fight leaving the bunny to tremble in outrage which quickly abated when Sage turned his eye to his best student. She looked down.

Kaya ran into the arena again just as a powerful wind stopped her cold. Freezing cold. The kind of cold that forced Casid to wear clothes and sent them into instant hypothermic shock, but the type of cold in which Clio's people found their homes. Kaya shuddered, her body suddenly ceasing up as a massive paw slapped her head down with a sickening cracking of bone. Suddenly Clio was in control and she was going to be brutal.

Hoisting the smaller lioness up, Clio smashed her down with a series of blood letting punches to the body and face. Kaya tried to rise on her own before Clio ruthlessly lifted her up over her head and began to hold her over head with more devastating punches. Kaya didn't once whimper or cry out. As she fell to the ground again, her formidable beauty lost under brutal injuries.

Clio lifted Kaya up again, the symbiant raved for more, and to be made a clear master over this one. Clio's tears ran again looking at her mangled friend. The friend who wanted her to succeed and help her succeed.

Under that mashed face one swollen eye opened slightly and suddenly, "Fuck you for crying!" Kaya's fist smashed Clio's sending her flying back like a shot into Sage's arms. The tigress collapsed half dead. Kaya was not much better off as she sat down, breathing hard through a slowly healing and battered face. "Kina's favorite line in a fight..." Her

head slacked over to the side as she focused on just staying awake and alive...

Gigju-Tusa looked at his watch and waited a few seconds then stepped forward, "Time over. Judgment."

The judges took a long time on this bout. Neither girl fought very well. But they were the most powerful ones still in the contest so a complete breakdown in fighting skills was bound to happen. Kaya won two to one on the merits of her early performance and the fact she was still under her own power.

Sage scooped up Clio as she labored to breath through her destroyed face. Kaya was carried by Salba and Kah-Leah, who was still nursing a few bad bruises, not far behind. The old Weretiger shuddered to his thoughts of fighting one of these girls when they were actually grown. One never gave up and would kill or die to win... The other would one day be a true goddess and utterly unstoppable... *What does Kina do to get such fanatical students? How did such a woman tame them? She's more a wandering badass than a teacher or trainer.*

Questions he would have to ask later. For now he had two girls to put back together and a very large lioness to prepare for. *Feh... another all-nighter...*

Thirty One

Clio opened her eyes with a gasp, and then groaned as she felt one of her ribs crack. "Ow..." she groaned, and palmed her side.

Her eyes squeezed shut to ward off the hurt, but then she felt her hand being moved out of the way, as a much larger one replaced it.

She gasped again and turned to see who was touching her nude body, and jerked backward as she saw Sage there.

"Oh no... Not you..." she groaned.

Sage looked sadly down at Clio, and then redirected his attention back to his hand, and a soft blue glow suffused it and the whole of Clio's side. When he retracted his gentle touch, Clio was surprised to find the pain gone and the bones set.

"Please forgive me, Clio..." he said quietly as he turned away, and began fitting a bio-chemical concoction into a hypo-spray.

"What for? Touching me?!" she gasped, and then groaned again at a new pain.

"For making you afraid."

Clio blinked, and then sat up - Sage's medical beds were usually at a slant – confusion

etched its way into her face.

"Something that I am has frightened you, Clio." he said in a soft voice, and walked over to Kaya. "Living in fear is never something anyone wishes to do, and most of all, it is not something I wish to be the cause of. I know that you've been counting down the seconds till you can return back to the Mystic League."

Clio nodded mutely, and Sage turned back to Kaya and was about to inject the drugs when she slapped his hand away.

"No pain killers!" she growled through clenched teeth. Her jaw was broken still.

Sage merely placed a pin in her shoulder, Kaya clenched, and he injected the serum anyways. "There," he finished, removing the pin and allowing Kaya to move her arm again. "That should help your blood dissolve the developing brain clot stuck in your cerebellum which would've caused a stroke in a few hours and paralyzed your right side... But if its no painkillers you want, then perhaps I can remove this..." his hand reached for a pin in Kaya's neck and he twisted it. Clio watched Kaya's whole body spasm and she gritted off a snarl of pain before scratching at Sage's arm.

Clio hopped back as the deep gashes healed and even the blood retracted and fur grew back within a matter of seconds. That was one of the things that unnerved her about him.

And five fingers! What kind of creature had five digits on their hands and feet?

"Now lie there and allow my assistant to help you." Sage finished, and Mayia approached, her body completely healed under her own power now, and her form now enclosed in a soft pair of baggy martial arts pants and a white sleeveless jerkin made to display off her growing assets. Her ears were even tied back and her hair braided over them. With her, however, was her usual collection of lethal jewelry that only enhanced her beauty.

"Ah, Great Maker," she gritted as Mayia moved forward, her jaw set firmly.

Mayia was tight-lipped, but worked on Kaya quietly as Sage moved back to Clio.

"I will need to touch you Clio. Is that all right?"

Clio nodded weakly, and lay back again. She tried not to flinch as Sage touched her, Sage's left hand helping her to close her eyes as he cupped the hollow of her forehead with one clawed finger.

This was another thing about him that unnerved her. He was a demon inside, through and through, a level of darkness that would rival Gehnohn's! Quite possibly even dwarf it, she had heard Sanari mention once. But his exterior was like a warrior of light. The two blended so superbly, that he himself had become a paradox.

'How can anything like him exist?' she wondered, feeling his fingers press against her ribs gently. Sage removed his hands then, allowing her to open her eyes.

The final thing that unnerved her about him was that she was so much like him already.

A purple jewel in her chest, matched the likeness of his green. Her reverse eyes – purple in the center and black on the edges, were like unto his solid greens: unnatural. Both were tigers, but his stripe system was more elaborate and elegant; narrower lines with a darker color.

And like him, she absorbed every new skill she came against. The Mystic League, the Demon League, the Powered League, and now the Shadow League.

"I feel at a loss, Clio." he said quietly as he shined a glowlight into her eyes to check for any sort of dilation. It was difficult to see the details of the eyes underneath her purple and black, but they were there. "I feel the unhappiness of those around me, and I seek to remove that happiness, but, for all I try to do, you still remain afraid of me." he lowered the flashlight and allowed her to refocus. "Why is that?"

"B-because you are so unnatural." she whispered in a hiss. "Everything about you is just... Just... Wrong! A-and it... It..."

"Frightens you that you may be just like me..." Sage finished, reading Clio's thoughts. She too was a telepath, but an unpracticed one. Those were skills that Noxi, her mentor here at the Mystic League, never was able to finish.

Clio felt her breath catch and her heart stop. Her simbiant coiled around her heart to soothe her. Sage reached up to cup her face, and she was surprised that he wiped away a tear from her face.

"Heaven forbid you should ever become like me," He admitted in a sorrowful voice. There was even a quaver in his voice. He lost control of that unwavering temperament of his... Clio stared at him in disbelief.

"I... admittedly am very lonely, Clio. And if there is one thing that I hope to instill in you in your time here, even if your original purpose here is never fulfilled, is that if you love, love unconditionally, and if you fight, fight with honor. Surround yourself with friends and family, and be apart of their lives instead of them just being apart of yours.

"Not everyone is an immortal." he finished, and caressed her brow with a thumb.

"What a load of rot!" Kaya said from nearby, and Clio and Sage both turned to look at her. "If you fight, fight to WIN!" Clio noted that she said nothing about Sage's words of *'if you love, love unconditionally.'* "That's why this school is doomed to Failure Sage. You fill your students' heads with all this hogwash of... *Gurk*"

Whatever Kaya's words would end with, were never spoken. Mayia's finger had poked a point at the base of Kaya's throat, just a bit off center, and Kaya's whole body spasmed, every muscle in her body contracted.

"You... Will... *NEVER*... Insult Lord Sage in front of me again." she gritted, a little humorously because of her oversized bicuspid giving her a buck-toothed look. "And remember this in the future, I will not be so simple to beat in the future you oversexed bitch..."

Kaya's eyes wavered inside her skull, and she slowly spasmed to unconsciousness.

"Temper, Mayia," Sage cautioned as he viewed his lovely student growling at the lioness and muttering underneath her breath, and Mayia stopped suddenly to look to Sage, and then Sage smiled at her. "And thank you. You may be dismissed; I believe her natural regenerative abilities will suffice from this point forward. Your healing skills are truly developing."

"Thank you, Lord Sage." she said bending heavily at the waist – revealing the curved dagger tucked into the back of her sash at the small of her back – before she excused herself; placing a comforting hand on Clio's knee before leaving.

"Mmfph." Clio managed as she looked away from Kaya, again, not knowing what to think of her present situation as she hugged herself, her ample endowments, and slight demonic mutations making themselves ever more apparent as they slid over her heavily muscled arms.

"I am not a monster, Clio." Sage managed and then helped her to lie down before covering her with a moistened silk cloth to help her stay cool, "And neither are you. Anyone who says differently in my presence will have a stern talking to."

He then moved toward the door, and paused at its edge.

"Oh... And one more thing," he gestured, and immediately two individuals – Kirn and Karn, Ki'arn's male and female halves – entered the chamber and surged toward Clio. Clio gasped as she rose a bit, but Kirn forced her to lie back down as Karn cooed at her and tried to sooth her with his touch.

"Eriruka was kind enough to excuse them from their studies for a day or two." Sage smiled. "I shall leave you all alone for the time being. Daedalus will show you to your rooms once the timer on your bed has expired."

With that, Sage ducked out and disappeared into his lair.

Thirty Two

Sage's Quarters were a nigh identical version of the ones he maintained at the Mystic

League, but now with the addition of upper and lower levels, giving off the impression of a well-created mansion. In the Towering Tree that served as the Shadow Leagues home, his quarters were located right in the center of the tree, nestled in its branches high above along with all the other student dormitories. Directly below him by several stories was The Celestial Garden, or the hub of his school.

He rests in one of the recliners in his massive and elaborate study, dressed only in his usual loose-fitting trousers, holding a book in one hand, and a hand bowl filled with green tea laced with honey in the other; a pair of reading glasses on the end of his nose.

He is currently reading *'Les Miserables.'*

At his side, Daedalus arrived; his principal drone form having evolved over the years here as Sage discovered new ways to enhance it, and now he had hair overlapping the head band attached to his head. This white-grey hair, a few shades darker than Sage's, was drawn backward at the end between his shoulders into a pony tail.

Daedalus, dressed in a servant's garb by choice, poured Sage more tea.

"Thank you." Sage said, looking up from the screenplay. "Please. My friend. You busy yourself far too much. Please sit down."

Sage indicated an equally large chair opposite his before a massive fire place with a bonfire roaring inside it.

Dallas placed his tea kettle on the table beside Sage and sat down, all proper on the edge of the seat. Dallas was always at the ready around his master.

"A little light reading, sir?" he asked, his normal looking eyes focusing on the massive white Weretiger.

"A little..." Sage admitted and then lifted his green-eyed gaze to his friend.

"A wonderful day, at the least, Dallas, do you not think?"

"That it was sir. And a victory for the school. Three wins, one draw and two losses. I have taken the opportunity of conveying this to the Imperium, sir." Sage closed his book and set it beside the table. "Emperor Jaikard's response a few minutes ago stated that he is now ready to sanction your chapter after your successful trial ending. Shall I forward his Highness's sanction to Meniko?"

Sage ran a hand through his now unbound mane, letting a few strands fall before his eyes. "No, I shall deliver it myself. She'd prefer it that way, I hope. Or if she doesn't, then she can't call me a coward or lazy or both for delivering it myself."

"The lesser of evils, sir?" Dallas asked, and Sage nodded before rising to his feet to go

stand before the fire.

"My meditations have been increasing my psyche far faster than I had even hoped it would, Dallas, and much faster than I was prepared for... I've... Been receiving impressions on an alarming rate that don't come from the same direction as spiritual inspiration. I feel... A presence over the Mystic League that seems to have Meniko gripped within its malicious claws. She is being manipulated and her darker desires are being drawn out."

Dallas sat there, watching his master.

"Dallas, in the morning I need you to do a favor for me..."

"Yes, Master Sage?"

"I want you to step up the hive growth of your matrix and launch your satellite network. I need a full spectrum scan of this world, focused on The Mystic League. You will need to be discrete, so attach a full cloaking package on those satellites. Launch them via Electromagnetic Rail as well. Meniko may become violent if she believes we are spying on her..."

"But isn't this spying on her sir?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes, unfortunately, this is why we must have the utmost secrecy. Start with the spectral scans, I am already aware of one Ley Nexus," he turned to Dallas and grinned. His school, after all, was built on the largest Ley Nexus on the planet. The only reason why Meniko and the Mystic League weren't here was due to the fact that they didn't want to build it on an active volcano. Something that earned Sage some envy was that he actually *'tamed'* the volcano with the Millennium Tree his school was built within.

In turn, the Millennium Tree had all the nourishment that it needed to grow into a full sized World Tree.

"You have a hunch about something sir?"

Sage lifted his hand and rubbed his fingers together. "An inkling, really. The presence is nearly... Tangible here. It must be a massive and quite potent spiritual force to cause that sort of feeling. Thankfully The Tree and the planet's might are keeping it at bay."

"Certainly sir. Satellite array has been theorized, launch packages processed... Manufacturing plant online... Manufacturing. Time to complete array, fourteen hours, twenty three minutes, six seconds."

"Launch them at the four a.m. the night after their completion. Warn me thirty minutes before launch."

"Yes sir." He responded, and then his head clicked sideways. "Sir... Incoming message

from the Circle of Sages. Your brother Patch's security encoding is on it."

Sage turned, blinking at his friend. "Play."

And a nearby table, oaken and seeming antique in design, unfolded, flipping upside down to reveal a holographic display, which materialized in the full fledged image of Sage's half brother. Patch.

The image was perfect, three-dimensional. It looked as if his brother was actually there. That was Patch's technology though. Anything involving computers... Quite undignified for a high priest to also be a hacker... and a gunman, but Patch played it off well.

Patch, a blind Arctic Werewolf, and the Aspect of the Priest among the Circle of Sages, he stood in white robes, with the only color on him being a golden collar, a blue scarf, and a blue blind fold with a white eye in the center. The reason why he was called '*Patch*,' was because of a natural patch of black that showed itself covering over his right eye.

"Greetings '*little*' brother." he greeted with a genuine smile, looking down slightly while his ears twitched. The wolf could hear a flea walking on a twig a mile away, but unlike his half brother, Patch was not an immortal. He was showing his age. "I've come to miss our usual interactions, and please forgive me, but I had to hack your systems to find out where you've gone. Dallas, your security is vulnerable in block three, section c-two."

Dallas smiled, and was already underway patching the security hole.

"I have brought your whereabouts and actions to the attention of the Council, and we are quite proud of your interactions and your growth. Lord Drake's choice in you as his successor is justified.

"Cheetan, your own successor, though a little shaky at first, is fulfilling his role splendidly.

"Now down to brass tacks." Patch uncoiled himself and took a serious tone. "The gold were-clan wishes to send you a student to learn of your ways. A Naga will be approaching your school via an IR transport shortly. She is known as '*Big Joanna*.' Likewise, the Azure Clan will be also sending their own Naga, a brutish fellow they simply call KA." Patch's image grinned toothily. Having a land snake and a water snake in the same place usually meant constant fighting. "Likewise, a rouge Ka-Tao seeks your aide in training. She is a Royal." Patch grinned toothily again, knowing that Sage would give anything to be able to full scan a Royal Ka-Tao. "Apparently her sisters thought she was too '*weak*' to remain where she was.

"And do not worry, I have made sure that Inter Realm is not aware of her, and the Dragon Council with Aysyx's help has been very useful in that nature in controlling the global information.

"Lastly, Mélange and Matee have returned from their Marital sabbatical, and wish to

re-enter your service. They await your reply patiently.

"You need to come visit more often little brother. Stop being the missionary and come home now and again. But regardless... Take care of yourself. You're in the wolves' den now..."

"Peace be with you... Patch out."

The image glinted out, and the table reset itself.

Sage chuckled.

"This universe thought *I* was strange. Wait till they get a good look at two Naga, a Ka-Tao, and my own personal brand of Frankenstein."

"Sir, M elange and Matee are not Frankenstein."

Sage chuckled. "I know. Best to think of them as super-hybrids. I will deliver this news to Meniko on the morrow, Dallas."

"Yes sir, I would definitely suggest you offer that on the morrow."

Again, Sage chuckled. "Do I look that tired?"

"Yes."

"One final act, Dallas, and I will turn in. Yes sleep this time, no meditation. Please download the application as an authorized researcher to the assembly."

"I already have it sir. It was downloaded when I copied their public library database. It is located in Government > Organizations > Research and Development > Research > Forms. I will have it downloaded on your wrist-comp by morning. It is quite extensive, Master Sage. But I'll have all of your history and personal info filled into all the blanks spots as well. They do require a one-thousand word essay on why you wish to join their organization and a requirement of a thesis paper on a theoretical science.

"Let's give them something they should have difficulty understanding. I'll make the selection of my stored theses later."

"Would you like a response sent to your brother, sir?"

"Yes, take image..."

"Ready."

"Patch, thank you. I will visit soon. Send what applicants you can through my lair

entrance in the Shangri-La valley. I know the snakes and the saurian will not like the cold there, but that is unavoidable at the Prime Universe's entrance to my lair. Dallas will lead them to me.

"Peace be with you. Sage out..."

Thirty Three

That evening, In the Shadow League, Equis emerged from the doorway into the medical ward. She was dressed in a traditional bodycloth that was only a transparent azure blue with an assortment of fine jewels and settings. She was quiet as she came to stand over Kaya who had just awakened with a sharp ache in her jaw. Though healed now, the jaw still sharply registered the previous trauma of the wound.

"Equis..." Kaya whispered in reverence to her true idol. She wanted to sit up but the guardian fighter goddess, as Equis had been come to be known, placed one hand over her chest to hold the young lioness down. It was as if an immovable restraint had been placed over the girl. At once frightening and comforting, Kaya stopped resisting and lay still. The hand was removed slowly.

Equis had been something of a recluse for some time. She was either away on a mission or, as most thought, off learning how to rule as a queen, a queen she didn't want to be but the Casid desperately needed. Either way she had a much reduced presence in the school. More of a legend or rumor now, Equis was never really seen in the school except by the *'favored'* graduates and the school masters and mistresses.

Equis sat side-saddle on the edge of Kaya's bed, one massive arm propping her up reaching over the girl. The bodycloth draped away from her naked body, exclaimed by two grand mammary globes. Gargantuan bracers punctuated her already large and mighty paw-like hands. Those sea-green eyes glowed with the power of a high-level student or graduate of the Mystic League.

For a few awkward, uneasy, moments Equis did not speak. Kaya reached up to touch her idol absently sending a hand to the larger lioness's breast. The slight brush on the nipple caught Equis's attention prompting her to speak, "I saw that bout you had with Clio over there." Kaya's hand dropped slowly back to the bed. "I also heard what you said during and after the battle... You are forgetting yourself, cub."

Kaya's jaw slackened and her eyes widened. Tears formed in their corners. She didn't want to cry. Kina had taught her not to. But Equis made little issue of it. The greater lioness cried quite often over the events that shaped her life, the brutal and callous violence, the murder of her cousin, Yunerru, and much more. Equis was no stranger to the cleansing power of crying. *How is it that such a sensitive girl like Kaya has forgotten?*

"It's alright if you need to let it out. Kina is only teaching you not to grow weak in the face of pain and suffering... not to hide your feelings. But what I saw happening would infuriate

Kina and break her heart at the same time, as it did me and mine. You were arrogant and cruel... and ultimately far more reckless than you should have been... change that... normally are."

"I just want to stand a chance against you when I finally, really, fight you..." Kaya's voice cracked slightly. She was ashamed of her behavior, "I just want to be stronger... So I can... I..." Equis, with her free hand, placed a gentle finger over the lioness cub's quivering lips. Equis knew that Kaya was sent on a fool's errand to fight and defeat her thinking she'd kill the cub. Instead, she made a sister of her and got all the love and hero-worship that went with it... much to the goddess's chagrin.

"You are already the strongest student in your class by such a wide margin that the older students and recent graduates steer clear of you..." Equis mused, "Then again maybe Kina punishes all of those who have a *'Lolita Complex'* on you and the kittens."

"*Lolita complex?*"

"It's something Sage mentioned to me before. When an older individual goes for... has an *'interest'* in... A much younger person – a child – usually of the opposite sex. It's based on a taboo his people have and many others share."

Kaya blushed. She had been rather showy with her outfits but still refused to wear the bodycloth. She looked to Equis quietly as the gold lioness sat more firmly on the bed. "I have to get stronger..."

"No..." Equis murmured firmly, "You have to stop fighting like Kina fights or that you expect her to want you to fight. You could defeat anyone in this school – except Rae, Sage and a few others – if you learn to fight smarter. I don't want anyone killing themselves because of me... I... couldn't bare it..." Equis trembled a bit at the thought of having to lean over the little lioness to see her dead. "We have no pride here but ourselves, kitten. I am your sister now and I don't want you risking your life needlessly. Do you understand?"

Kaya nodded quietly. The slight sparkle of tears in Equis's eye told Kaya all she had to know. She had been hauled back from a very steep drop into self-destruction. She tried not to cry but she would soon enough over this revelation.

"You are a sweet girl with a kind heart and gentle wit. When you get out of here I want you to take a few days off from fighting. No combat. No armor. Not even clothes. Just you and me okay? We'll have a few days of peace and maybe we can remember how to be happy again..."

Kaya was speechless as Equis scooped her up and hugged her warmly, firmly. The younger lioness's heart raced as she endeavored to return the embrace around the far more muscular lioness. She failed but the effort got her a soft kiss on the cheek, a firm touch of the nose followed by a soft lick.

Putting Kaya back down, who sweetly pawed those huge breasts and bulging arms, "Mind those hands, kitten... Now get some sleep. I've been away too long and Kina needs a sound talking to."

Kaya's eyelids grew heavy as she fell asleep, placed under her *'big sister's'* spell. She curled up softly as Equis stood up and walked out, disappearing from the medical ward and the island. Clio never knew what happened just a few feet away.

Thirty Four

Morning came and the campus was a bustle with new activity as students scurried to their various classes and activities. Most noticed was the pack of cubs, not one of them was over ten years old, dashed almost awkwardly through the avenues of the campus grounds. Leading them was a little, mighty male red fox cub whose muscular build was utterly incredible. He was bright eyed and apparently clueless, but his eyes scanned about for a familiar face or two. He was wearing the traditional Terre, a heavy skirt of fabric armor with fine and expensive details, and nothing else. His platinum mane fluttered as he dashed ahead then back to the group spotting landmarks on the way.

Following was an equally impressive but somewhat smaller girl skunk with the most annoyed look on her face. Her short pants and sport top were a stand out orange color against her pitch black and lightning white fur. Holding on to her tail, a small blissful child in a pale blue sundress followed. Her species was not all that obvious but she was clearly a mammal. Then came an Oggremaran Zhumal, a lean predatory looking creature dressed in small red trunks a leather shirt. Heavy bands on his ankles offset the massive leather gloves he wore.

"Hey, Dork!" shot the girl skunk catching fox off guard, "I thought Aphkei had a good sense of direction."

"They do, Isera," the fox turned looking brightly, "But I still have to know where we're going."

"We're lost?" came the little creature clinging to the skunk's tail.

"~Yeses," Isera hissed annoyed as usual. She tensed her thick arms, measured at a staggering, for her age, 38 inches around.

"Yay!!! Nuu got us lost!!!" The girl cheered.

"Idiot..." Isera moaned.

"We could ask directions," The Zhumal whispered trying not to anger the skunk. Her tantrums were terrors but manageable if you could keep her calm.

"Awww! But that would end our adventure, Cahfu." Nuu moaned walking back to the

group. His mighty arms, measuring over 40 inches around, sagged.

"We could ask Cahfu for directions. He's lived here for years." Isera sneered at Nuu, who only smiled, some would say stupidly. Grabbing Nuu by the ear, she looked to Cahfu and politely, if firmly, asked, "Could you please show us the way to the docks, Cahfu?"

"Sure, Sure..." the Zhumal scampered ahead a bit to get his bearings. Pointing in a direction he spoke, "That way..."

The children followed.

Thirty Five

Elsewhere, Sage looked in on Menikomenqolui in her lair. She had assumed her avian form and was barely six feet tall but was still a radiant creature as Rae tended to her mother. She was slow to respond being ill or still thoroughly exhausted. Rae half carried her to a small bed of deep cushions and set her down.

Rae, one ear half perking to acknowledge the visitor, turned to look, "Sage..." Her voice projected softly over the etherscape. Psychic defense could do nothing to retaliate but then again he didn't want to. Besides the methods of communication and attack across the etherscape were so different that it was impossible to mask one for the other. "Come in but be short. Mother is still very weak."

Sage entered softly his hand had been over the message from the Emperor's scribes, but seeing Meniko barely aware of her surroundings, he made no mention of it. "How long have you been here helping your mother, Rae?"

"Since late last night," Rae was not the least bit tired or bothered by her being there, "She was having nightmares and I saw them. I came as quickly as I could. Mother Sanari will be looking after her for the rest of the day while I tend to the cubs..."

"Not just Teal and Yuum?" Sage half forgot that the Mystic League had dozens of young cubs, too young to be taught the more advanced magics, and Rae would be charged with a half dozen in addition to her own pups.

"I'm to look after Eriruka's brood until Mother can return to her duties. That would include Xu-Mei and... Jhan..." She trailed off in almost as if she had said something improper. She looked at Sage betraying her concern for the cub.

Sage lowered his head solemnly, "He is fine, but I still have the task of having him shown to his mother this afternoon."

"You look worried. You didn't beat the boy into putty, did you?" Rae gently placed a blanket over Meniko as she went to sleep.

As Rae sat down along side her mother, Sage knelt down placing a hand on Meniko's forehead. A slight glow between his hand and her head appeared. His shoulders rose a bit and his face brightened slightly, "She's doing much better... Unfortunately, the intricacies of Dragaseir medicine confound me when they are not in their true state or I'd be more help..."

"A Dragaseir physician is coming this evening to tend to Mother until she is well. Until then, I'm just trying to keep her comfortable." Rae fell silent as she looked to her mother almost helplessly but firmly hopeful.

Such faith and hope. Only the most convicted of clergy hold up to what is in her heart, Sage thought to himself. "Jhan is well enough, considering who cracked his bell," Sage smirked a bit guilty looking, "It's Eriruka... She yells..."

"A lot," Rae gave a very consoling expression as the chamber door opened. Mother Sanari entered softly followed by her retinue of pupils.

Sage turned and gazed in her direction, and Rae saw the hint of a smile cross his black lips as he watched her approach as if she were gliding over the ground in her robes.

"We have come to look after the Headmistress until the proper physician arrives," Spoke a young D'nyrii Aphkian girl, Yusuma, "With your permission we will remain here to serve as part of our training and indoctrination." She was Mother Sanari's premier student, her best. The wolffess, lacking a tail as all D'nyrii do, wore the long pink gowns, decorated with heavy gold and bejeweled trim that accentuated the figure and bosom greatly. Her gown was patterned with a beautiful field and flowering vines as a show of distinction, much like Mother Sanari's. The deep violet chastity belt was a bold statement for the young priestess whose breed was known and sometimes reviled for their sexual customs. But she was a devout follower of Sanari's teachings and was as chaste as any female could hope to be.

Rae bowed almost letting her bosom fall out of her blouse, "Of course. But don't feed her. Only water. She needs to cleanse her body completely before she can really start to rest." She blushed softly for her scarcely avoided display.

"Of course," Yusuma bowed her head deeply and humbly. Such graceful respect was a part of their training and instruction. It also allowed them to use *'other powers'* that made them seem completely untouchable by mortal hands.

"Mister Preypacer," Mother Sanari looked to Sage, "We still have a meeting today..."

"...and I have cubs to... They're not on the island..." Rae's voice filled with dread. As she ran for the door, Sanari raised her hand to stop the pooh, "Gedkou, a spirit friend of mine of one of this world's natives, watches the seas around the school and it's chapters... They have gotten a ride to the Shadow League. They are discussing Jhan Wan and about seeing him."

"Swell." Sage moaned, "Now the kids as well?"

"Remember you did nothing wrong," Rae said as she, Sage, and Sanari left the young Grace Leaguers to their work.

"I just did not intend for them to see him until he was fully up and around, which will not happen for another week at the least."

"Very well," Sanari closed her eyes, "Gedkou... Please bring them home." She opens her eyes, "Let's go meet them." she turns down the hall walking away lightly and very confidently.

Sage and Rae smirk at each other as they follow.

Thirty Six

Along the way there, they pick up Xu-Mei and the Iksaki pups, Teal and Yuum, on the way to the dock. The young tigress eyed Sage angrily which didn't last when he looked to her with concern. She would quickly position Rae, who was only a few inches taller, between herself and the Weretiger and stick her tongue out at him. Rae rolled her eyes, acknowledging the absurdity of it all, trying to stifle a laugh.

"There you all are," Rae said as if nothing was wrong. If these were regular students they'd be grounded for the semester. "You had us worried. What were you doing out there anyway?"

"Trying to see Jhan," Nuu spoke up immediately, "I just wanted to check in on my buddy... even if does always try to beat me up."

"How can he be a buddy if he tries to hurt you?" Sanari asked sweetly, motherly.

"Jhan doesn't mean it," Nuu said with a smile.

The delusions of children, Sage thought, Then again, children do see some things better than adults... "No, he didn't mean it, but he is training right now and won't be ready to be seen for a week or so," Sage glanced to Xu-Mei, whose expression softened and was clearly relieved. Sage had guessed that the tigress didn't want her brother humiliated by being seen beaten down and helpless. It was a reasonable thing to discern as Eriuka likely spoke to Xu-Mei about Jhan being in Sage's keeping. He gave a soft sigh of relief that only Sanari caught as Rae was gathering up the children like a happy sheepdog herding sheep.

"Figures we'd be going for nothing," Isera looked away, "I want to go to class now..." All eyes fall on the girl skunk "What? I'm mad and I only calm down when I'm learning something or lifting weights."

"That sounds like the daughter of the hardest working adventurer I ever met," bellowed a familiar voice.

Sage half cringed as Eriruka, still a dozen yards away loomed in the distance like the great mountain on her body tapestry, "Vice-Headmistress. Greetings."

The children all waved to her saying in unison, "Hello teacher!!"

"Children, Mrs. Iksaki, Great Mother Sanari, Mister Preypacer," Eriruka said loudly, though in the open air her voice was not a blast but seemed omnipresent and penetrating.

"I think we should be going, children." Rae said knowing what would happen next. Mother Sanari bowed to the great lioness as they left Sage alone.

A sinking sensation came over the tiger as the lioness approached. "Let us be on our way."

"What of the meeting?"

"Cancelled. Since tomorrow will be better anyway. The whole faculty will be available then and Eqs wanted to see me today with something of importance."

"I see," Sage looked toward his island, "Let us be on our way."

Thirty Seven

The medical wards of the Shadow League are spacious but were still no match for Eriruka's enormous frame. A little more than sixteen feet tall, she filled the corridors and rooms; some tightly, others just enough to know she was simply huge. Sage apologized for every bump she took and she apologized for every doorway she widened to pass through. It was a truly awkward visit for both.

Finally, after several damages to repair were inflicted, damages Dallas was already repairing through the strange biological metal the lair was made up of, Eriruka stood up straight in the ward holding her son, Jhan Wan. He was half-asleep in the tube of healing solution. His fine, heavily muscled, body floated neutrally in the compound as the gigantic lioness slowly approached. Deep bruises were still healing as he opened his eyes completely to look onto his mother.

While reasonably wide, the fit of the tube chamber was still tight enough that he had some trouble moving his arms to reach up to her. He smiled wryly as the lioness, clearly hiding her own emotional pain at this sight, smiled back. Neither realized that Sage had stepped out of the room to give them a few moments to talk.

"Momma..." Jhan sounded tired or just groggy. Either way he was clearly done with staying in that tube. "I miss you and sister..." Xu-Mei wanted to come but Rae thought it better that she join the others in class and discuss things fully first before seeing her brother.

She did know she had 'a few daggers' for the Weretiger over her brother. It simply wasn't time yet.

"I can imagine," A tear moistened the corner of one of her eyes. It was not a thing she wanted to display but it hurt to know she wanted this for her son, "Do you know why I sent you to Sage? Why he put you in here?"

"Because..." the young tiger's eyes took a look of hard consideration, "I fight a lot..."

"Yes, Jhan. You fight too much. You are a lot stronger than you should be for your age and much more violent as well. You look up to Sage as a male role-model... someone you want to be like... I told him to show you how wrong it is to want to fight all the time. I wanted him to put you on the bad end of a fist to show you part of it... I... don't want you to be like your real parents..."

"What happened to them?" Jhan leaned forward a bit in the tube. The monitors lit up as his pulse picked you.

Eriruka knelt down, leaning forward on the tube, not looking at her son. Her immense hand covering a huge section of the container. "They were warriors and murderers. They killed for sport and wanted to add me to their collection. I couldn't make them run away and I killed them. I found you and your sister not long after... They fought for fun and for the pleasure of killing. I don't want that for you and Xu-Mei... I'm sorry..." She wiped away a 'speck' from her eye before looking her son in the eye again.

"Momma. I don't wanna kill. I wanna be strong like you. But I'm weak against Nuu and Teal. Nuu's got huge muscles that felt like rock and Teal can do real magic. All I have is my fists..."

"Sage will show you how to use them best. I just don't want you to misunderstand... I love you. I love you too much to let you run around hurting people who might turn around and hurt you... or worse..." She looked away, "Like I did your real parents..."

There was a silence for a few moments...

"I'm glad you are my momma, momma." Jhan bumped his comparatively tiny head on the tube getting her to look back, "I'll make you proud of me. You'll see. I'll be as strong as you or maybe stronger one day..." His eyes beamed as he pushed forward on the tube.

"You already are..." Eriruka smiled leaning her own forehead on the tube.

Thirty Eight

Outside, Sage passively leaned his back and head on the door, listening casually to the conversation inside. His eyes scanned over to the figure not there a few seconds ago, "Eqis. Long time, no see." He lifted himself off the door noting her rather stern expression.

"I have to speak to you on two matters. One, a student of yours. The other, an instructor..." the Lioness was quickly becoming like him, coming and going at will but not as refined in her actions... yet. It was a natural evolution from the headstrong girl who did her own thing he first met. Events in her life turned her to that direction.

"I'll guess you mean Mayia... and the Instructor?"

"Kina..."

Sage was already putting together his mental notes. His gaze turned from attentive to contemplative then back again, "Go on..."

"Mayia is attempting to bite off far more than she can hope to chew. How she managed to get it into her head that she can take any Casid of fighting condition is beyond me..." Equis's expression was not of anger or upset, but concern.

"Mayia can handle any opponent with the training she has received. That and she's determined to defeat Kaya..."

"Kaya will break that bunny in two on the first blow. She was holding back entirely..."

"So was Mayia," Sage said raising a hand to halt Equis from responding, "I would rather let those two settle this themselves. But I will consider what you have said..."

"Casid Pressure points are not vulnerabilities, Sage. Unlike Humans, Casid pressure points can only be affected by consent or if the subject is unconscious. If Mayia tries to use her pressure point attacks on Kaya, they will not do a thing. Mayia will lose again and much worse because Kaya will not hold back until the damage is done."

"How little you know of how Chi magic can work." Sage said under his breath, his brows beetling a little. "But again, they will have to settle it for themselves. But you have warned us." Sage's expression blinked a moment of grim shock, knowing Mayia was not going to fair well against Kaya without considerable expansions in her training. His face returned to its placid state, "Now what about Kina?"

"The students under her charge have been slipping in their academic studies and have begun to display behavior contrary to their proper selves. They are becoming thugs and bullies, Kaya's becoming a violent, manipulative, sex fiend – the look but don't touch or else variety – and I cannot see where Kina is doing anything about it. Several of the faculty has stated Kina isn't even really teaching anything just letting her pupils beat each other bloody. I want her discharged from her duties as instructor..."

"...and just who will take over her classes?"

"I will." Equis said with such authoritarian finality that Sage unconsciously straightened, "I

want your support in this or else we may have to wait until Sato Hima gets back to make our case."

"Again this Sato Hima. Who is he exactly?"

"The one person everyone will listen to over Meniko if the need arises."

Thirty Nine

Later that day, Eriruka sat on the beach with Sage at her side. It was a *'lazy'* day. The sound of exercises in the background only made things more placid in her mind.

"I was worried for a while that you would be upset at the extent of my efforts so far with Jhan," Sage spoke plainly but looking at the lioness she did not expect an answer.

"You're off to a good start," She finally said after several minutes, "He respects you immediately and not because you can break his bones. You have the stuff to be a good father. Just don't try to make him everything you are... but everything he wants to be."

"The trick is making him want the right things..."

"The meeting's tomorrow at ninth bell. Meniko will not be attending due to illness." Eriruka said standing up. As she strolled off toward the sea she faded from sight like a goddess returning to Heaven or some such. Even Sage had to take a moment at that image.

Turning back toward the school, the Weretiger took a cleansing breath and strolled toward his school...

Forty

Mayia studied the pressure points of Casid for hours, determined to find a combination to put Kaya out of the fight in a hurry and humiliate that *'oversexed'* lioness. But as she ran down the sequences of possible attacks over and over again her heart sank, "This isn't possible. None of these will work. It's like punching at stone. None of these pressure points will do anything except... make her instantly counter-attack me? That can't be right..."

"It is." Came a dark voice.

Mayia turns to see Siklohn and Caliban standing by her dorm room door. She was too wrapped up in her studies to have noticed them opening her door and fumed. "What do you two want?" As time went, Siklohn was quickly catching up to Mayia and made it a firm fact that the bunny was going to have to work very hard to stay on top. Mayia looked on him as some unworthy upstart and sometimes forgot just what he was being groomed for: the Lordship over a major warrior clan in the Aphkian Imperium.

"To see that smug look knocked off your dumb face," Caliban barked.

She had a falling out with Mayia and was thoroughly beaten by her. Still Caliban had been on the bad end of the stick that week and Mayia didn't help matters at all seemingly piling more grief on the vixen until that bout. The vixen never deliberately came near the bunny without some back-up.

Today it was Siklohn.

"Calmness, Caliban." Siklohn spoke soothingly to the vixen, "Casid evolution has produced a being built for battle. The only way to defeat one in combat is to be stronger or good enough to make what strength you do have work for you."

"I'm not a first year wannabe, your *worship*," Mayia stood up facing the white wolf sternly, "I don't need your help, oh he who can't fight without armor."

Siklohn did not hesitate grabbing the bunny's throat, with nigh blinding speed, squeezing pressure points freezing her body as he lifted her like a small toy, "Care to test that, oh she who is too big for her britches? Oliverians are prey animals. Your best bet is to survive long enough to do damage not poke at her and hope she kills over. That will not happen. You have replaced over-caution with an obvious lack of respect. Both will defeat you before either of you face the other." Siklohn tosses the bunny back to her chair by her desk and turns to leave, "I still await an answer. Do you wish to test my ability to fight without armor?"

Mayia gathered herself with a very dark look on her face as she stood up, "Have it your way. I'll lay you up worse than Sage did Jhan."

"I will make the arrangements," Siklohn said walking out as if it were all nothing. Caliban gave a wicked smirk as she closed the door loudly.

"I really need to speak to Master Sage," the bunny girl slumped back in her chair. The feeling of being helpless in the legendary grip of a Dousaka warrior was not something she wanted to experience again. "This is like before, but this time I can do something about it... So why don't I?"

Forty One

Sage stood in the hub of the Shadow League. It was a massive chamber formed at the very center of the Caldera of aged volcano nestled right at the base of the great Millennial Tree. It was a pool of still water, pure, still water teeming with many species of fish. Several islands of wood formed bowls of dirt here or islands, with arching bridges connecting the islands to the entrance points. There were few artificial light points in this place. One didn't need much extra light, being that the Will-o-wisps and the natural glow here kept everything like a warm, tranquil autumn night. Hard to believe that his lair is built right over the cinder cone to a geological hotspot, similar to geological events that created

Hawaii on his homeworld.

Thanks to the power of his biotechnology, and the Millennium Tree feeding off the warm energy, a surprising tranquility occurs here. It is only the occasional low grade earthquake that needs to be worried about. The sub basement power grid and the thermal generators there to supply endless and abundant power for the technological aspects of his Lair were able to help minimize those problems.

'Besides, a good quake now and again keeps everyone on their toes. Wished they'd believe me when I told them they were in no danger.'

Sage paused, looking over the tranquility that the Millennium Tree created inside its bowels. Like a loving mother with Daedalus as the loving father. Nothing inside this lair escapes his notice, and he has kept Sage up on situations that he was unaware of.

Like the impending battle between Dousaka and Mayia.

"She is coming now, Master Sage." Daedalus said as he refilled Sage's tea bowl, whispering into his ear before making his way off the central island.

Sage cannot be everywhere at once, but Daedalus *IS* everywhere inside this lair at once. Billions of micro-bots, bioroids – far more advanced than the simple robots and androids like the people here keep calling them – and all of it spanning across five separate universes.

A hub.

Sage, however, was loving this most recent wing of his lair in particular. It was so... tranquil here. Perhaps that is because of the wonderment that is a Millennium tree, but there's something about this world that brought about so much peace. How odd in such a chaotic universe. Sage drank from his hand bowl of green tea and honey, watching the Will-o-wisps that the Millennium tree had created to tend to itself. Somehow, they got along with Dallas's bioroids.

Both of which had informed him of a secret fight about to happen.

"Do not be bashful, Mayia. Please approach. I am never busy enough not to see my favored student."

He smiled as he turned to her, a great cat, more massive than nearly any Casid, alien in all his shape and form in comparison to the denizens of this universe as he looked upon Mayia. She was dressed in a pair of loose-fitting trousers and a belly shirt that compressed her recent endowments. Her *'body programming'* training was undergoing quite well. She was attaining the form she so desired.

Where many of the denizens of the leagues magically altered their bodies,

"What is on your mind?" he prompted, and sat back on the railing, balancing himself with his feet holding a lower support bar.

"Sir... I have something I must admit. I have accepted a challenge from one of my fellow students, Siklohn."

"Truly?" Sage said, trying to sound surprised, but his eyes betrayed what he truly knew. Thanks to Dallas, Sage's reputation within his own lair was that he was everywhere. The students learned not to keep secrets from him, or otherwise feel intense and mind numbing pain for doing so.

"I... Feel afraid, Master... I do not wish to hurt him." Sage was silent while he focused his kind green eyes on her, those eyes that were absent of either iris or pupil. "But, there has been recent... Talk... About my abilities. I held back with my battle the other day, and it cost me much."

Sage watched her as she held her head down, her ears again bound at the back of her head. "I feel as if I've let this League down. As its top student, I should've been able to destroy Kaya. But... My skills don't seem to be working against her. The pressure points on a Casid are deep, and by your own command, I am not allowed to attack that deep. If I do..."

"You'll do just fine, Mayia." Sage finished, and Mayia's head lifted. "There has been a miss-ordering of Pride around me, Mayia. Those who should be searching for humility have been trying to show that they are superior than others. Those who should be seeking things to be prideful about have instead been limiting themselves and casting their own successes down as if they were meaningless.

"The latter finds examples in the young goddess Clio... And yourself. Mayia, young Dousaka respects you. Did you know that?"

"He-he doesn't show it very well."

"No... As such, he is just like his father. The man gives nothing you do not take from him. Even his own son must wrestle love from him..."

"Now comes your upcoming fight with him. I must apologize to you, Mayia, I rarely have such a talented student, that I believe I may have been holding you back, or rather onto you." Sage sat and thought for a moment. "Come here..." He said at last, and Mayia approached the towering Weretiger.

She gasped a little as Sage's claws extended from the backs of his fingers, for a moment hooking completely around toward the palm – a truly devastating slashing capability there, but instead, several of those claws retracted, leaving only the needle-sharpened ends on his index and middle fingers.

Mayia trusted Sage, but that didn't keep her from being scared as he reached up underneath her shirt, before she felt a pair of his claws sink into her flesh there. And then she gasped, but not from the fact that her sternum ridge plate had just been pierced, but of the wave of warmth flowing over her from her heart and radiating outward. She felt... Different. She looked at her hands as Sage retracted his touch, and then she looked to him.

"I release you from your First Limiter, Mayia."

"B-but sir," she protested. "I... I don't think I..."

"Yes you can, Mayia." Sage said simply, and slid off the bar he was on, his tail twitching lightly at his backside. "I believe in you. I also require help bestowing the proper amount of pride and humility in your fellow students. A balance must be achieved, and I've let it go far too long.

"I now pronounce upon you a trial, Mayia. You are to destroy Siklohn Dousaka, but without killing him, and without taking pride in the action.

"As of yet, your fellow students believe that I am not aware of your fight with him, and I shall allow them to maintain that belief.

"Furthermore, you are hereby released from your vow as to not to use your advanced skills. In fact, you are hereby required to use them.

"I shall be in the Medical wing looking over Jhan. I'll expect to see Dousaka delivered to me on a stretcher."

Forty Two

Mayia stood there while Sage walked away. He sounded... annoyed. She'd never heard him sound like that. He was even angry, perhaps.

It was dangerous for a creature like him to be in such a state. She looked down at her hands, feeling the new flow of her inner forces, as if a dam had just been torn down and the lake behind it had just poured into her.

Her eyes looked up to the retreating form of her master.

"Sir... I will not disappoint you."

Sage's ears twitched and he smiled as he heard her words. He paused for only a moment at the landing across from the main island on the way to the medical wing, then stepping forward he disappeared into the shadows as if he never was.

Forty Three

Kaya had removed herself from the Medical bay after waking up. She was lost.

"Why in the Great Wide Universe does Sage have such a labyrinth for a school when he has so few students?" she muttered aloud, and turned a corner.

She could've sworn that this was the way out! But she also felt as if she were going around in circles, and getting turned around for some reason. Looking to the biological metal halls of Sage's Lair, she swore that this place was shifting around her.

It was then that she saw several of Sage's students sneaking off. They were slinking off, looking every which way, trying to avoid detection it seemed, and were traveling in pairs.

She stood there for a moment, watching this display, unaware that the hallway section she was traveling through was even now sealing itself like a normal wall. But she decided, and walked forward.

Forty Four

"Kaya is on her way to the gathering place sir." Daedalus reported. "My redirections will ensure that she will be arriving just on time to view the battle in its entirety."

"Thank you Dallas." Sage said out into the open air, speaking to him in general despite that his principal drone was not here at the moment.

Sage stood in his medical gown, a deep flowing white thing that fell about his ankles, while he manipulated a holographic keyboard arrayed in the air before him.

Jhan, in an induced sleep inside his tank, was currently being *'processed,'* as Sage called it.

He thought for a moment how Namah would kill to have access to this full spectrum bio-scan. Her bio-scan only worked on three levels: Biological, Brain Wave and Potential Psychic Energy. Sage's method calculated Level of Ethereal Connection – not much used here – mapped Power Centers, Chakra Concentration and Chi-lines, and copied their current mental record on top of breaking down Biological, Brainwave and PPE into finer points of interest and calculated them with less of a degree of error.

Already, what he had witnessed from Jhan was remarkable. He was a product of engineering, breeding, and remarkable happenstance. So far he had such records for Rae, Equis, Makahn, Clio, and a few select others aside from all of his students.

"Sir, the *'Crown of Thorns'* satellite network has completed construction, is loaded and is now ready for launch."

"Good. Wait till the League has quieted down. Cloak the satellites prior to launch. I don't want them detected."

"Yes sir. I shall give you a five minute warning before they launch.

"Also, sir, I believe the fight is about to start."

"Give me a screen." Dallas obliged by making a full sixteen-by-nine screen available for his view right before him.

Forty Five

Siklohn was a being of utmost ability. Everyone knew of his father, and his abilities, and Siklohn was very much like his father.

"Where is she?" he asked calmly as Caliban tied his hands and forearms up with tape.

"Probably in her room..." Caliban said stately. "She's too afraid to be here, Siklohn. Too afraid to fight you."

Siklohn said nothing to that.

Caliban, however, did not even register her situation at the moment as she bandaged her close friend's arms. She'd hoped that eventually, he could be much more than a friend.

Once being a large and rather accomplished *MALE* in the Mystic League, she was punished by Meniko herself for his actions against women in general. Some young men that he had been with at the time were apart of a rape gang here at the League, a gang that that he'd nearly been pulled completely into.

How ironic that he, now as a she, was nearly raped by said minions. All three of them were sentenced to death by imperial decree when they were caught. Clio had a hand in that... How odd also that Clio had been one of the young women that she had abused at the time.

Now, lately, Caliban has had to deal with many of the things that troubled women. She has been insulted, had her ass pinched, had to experience the problems of menstruation, and has experienced a heat; in which she'd become very, very close to deflowering Siklohn had he not been a perfect gentleman

Damn it, she thought.

She was thankfully subdued with that, but her earlier contempt for women, has seriously waned. She now felt for them.

The other students of the Shadow League had gathered one after the other here, and were hanging situated around the corners of the training ring built in the lowest level of The Lair. It was a place that Sage did not use, though it was very grand and forthcoming. It was also at the farthest reaches of Sage's Lair, and in a place where the walls weren't covered in Daedalus's bio-organic network.

Yet.

Much to their unawares, Dallas was everywhere here too.

There were murmurings and such here now, and this darkened room lit by a red haze and warmed by the Earth's warmth now saw more interaction that it's ever seen since its formation.

At that moment, Kaya entered, and looked about her, seeing the air of a competition, and seeing Siklohn down there, she knew it was going to be good. Eager to see a fight, she went to go sit, nudging a few people out of the way but not really mugging them into the dirt. Eqis's words did touch her in some way after all...

She sat, and wondered who Siklohn would be fighting.

Then down one of the corridors, a figure strode in, and she felt her jaw fall a little as Mayia stepped in. Disappointed in what she was seeing, she crossed her arms fully beneath her bosom and pouted.

Mayia was already prepared. She was wearing her silk cloth alright, but was wearing her usual clothes over it, the same she wore when she'd talked to Sage a few hours ago. The only addition was that her hands and forearms were now bandaged, just like Siklohn's were.

Geevo, now dressed in his now *'required'* Gi, smiled at her and gave her a wave of encouragement from the sidelines.

As one, Mayia and Siklohn moved to the center of the ring. There was no ref, no rules. Simply beat the other person into submission.

Siklohn began by pushing his fist into his palm, cracking his fingers before turning his head firstly to one side, and then the other, cracking that both ways with a dry crunch. This display was atypical for the noble youth who worshipped the propriety and form. Mayia missed this and dismissed it as arrogance.

"Bow." he said simply.

Mayia looked sternly at him, and settled backward into her fighting stance, arms dangling at her side as her master did as she simply stared at Siklohn.

In the Shadow League, to bow first meant to state that the person you were facing was the better opponent. Mayia would not give Siklohn that affront. He was rapidly trying to make himself out as the top student, and being that she held that position, she was not about to let it go.

"You have not earned the right, Siklohn. Now face me, or run away to daddy with your tail between your legs."

Siklohn's jaw set and he settled into his own fighting stance that was reminiscent of his sword fighting style, one fist cocked up beside his head, with his other hand braced down by his thigh for a guard. Mayia saw his form immediately, just like Sage had taught her, and she immediately calculated all of his first set of moves and countermoves. Her eyes narrowed, she saw the pinpoints of his weaknesses as if they glowed out for her to strike them.

They faced one another, and Sage, watching this while Jhan's scan continued, muttered: "Chinese standoff."

The silence became impenetrable. No one dared say a word as they stared at one another; Mayia and Siklohn's iron wills combating one another in something the Japanese call the 'Psychic Duel.' The attempt to get the other to back down first.

Siklohn, however, was the son of a powerful warlord, an Aphkian, and a phenomenal combatant.

Mayia was tall, but only because she stood on her toes, and despite that, was still gave up more than two feet to Siklohn. She was an Oliverian, a '*prey species*' to so many of the '*predator species*' like the Aphkian and the Casid. In the face of such a combatant, she had very little to show for. But she was Sage's favorite, and his most well trained, and damn it! Her fellow students will respect her from now on!

Even, the insurmountable Siklohn.

A muscle in her cheek flinched, her shoulders arching but not tensing as she waited for him to move first, waited, tested, and while he scowled at her, she smiled knowingly at him.

'Do not ever show a lack of confidence.' Sage's words echoed in her head. *'A trained soldier, a warrior of any stock, will pick up on it, and will turn it to their advantage.'*

That was one of his many rules of combat that most of the others had yet to hear. Perhaps her lack of confidence with Kaya had left her in her previous state.

She watched Siklohn tense, and she smiled, and her hands opened up even as he moved forward silently.

Mayia did not move however, she simply waited for his strike, and took it, her head turning just as he contacted for his fist to slide off her face with little more pain than a mild slap.

She laughed, and Siklohn struck again and her hand moved and deflected his strike into her shoulder. When the strike came, she rolled with it, just slow enough where his punch really did little more than push her around. But as she turned, her powerful leg, rose in a rising

crescent, and came down onto Siklohn.

He raised his hand to block; his other hand retracting to counter, but the force of her tremendous leg strength came down on top of him and drove him straight to his knee. She needed nothing more than to move forward and raise her free leg as the other landed, and her body moved into motion, every possible muscle turning, twisting extending and moving to add rising power to her blow. But again Siklohn blocked, avoiding the damage to his face, but he used her momentum in return to leap to his feet backward away from her.

Siklohn raised his hands immediately, and tensed one hand to crack its knuckles. His jaw was set, but his body was loose.

He showed disgust... disgust that his father would choose to send him away to learn the style of another master, disgust that he had a lesser master than his father, disgust that said master didn't favor him, but instead a small Oliverian girl! The emotion showed faintly, but already it was building up to a level of aggravation, and at that moment, he let some of his feelings loose as the corners of his eyes twitched.

Siklohn was – it seemed – a poor student. He refused to give up his ways and be trained as Sage deemed it. He refused to consider that his training that he *HAD* received from his father was somehow less superior in Sage's eyes. But despite that, Siklohn had learned much of the Shadow League, of how they fought, and how to fight... and how to use it to his advantage.

He surged forward again, Mayia waiting for him to come to her, and he began to kick and punch at her, twisting his body this way and that to catch her, but Mayia simply slid out of the way, gone before his strike ever came.

'Opportunity. You must be patient for it to arrive, but when it does, do not hesitate.' she thought in her mind, echoing her beloved master's lessons, and as she dodged, and Siklohn attacked, all of the gathered students were cheering on their favorite. She did not care that nearly all of them were cheering for Siklohn.

An elaborate acrobatic routine of strikes and kicks; dodges and deflections occurred between them, and while Siklohn's powerful and precise moves, with such imaginable skill were executed perfectly, he was becoming angered that this bunny was not fighting him.

"Coward!" he growled so that only she and he could hear as he swiped through barely vacated air with his claws. "Fight me!"

Mayia's strikes were barely anything of his notice, and she remained silent as she focused, tried to gain that strange vision it took her hours of meditation to achieve. She struck and connected, but her blows were like baby taps against Siklohn's body.

"Your Style... Sage's Style... Is inefficient. You're expecting me to keel over. You're

expecting me to just fall any moment now. But I'll show you how weak you are!"

His strike connected with her as he rose with her in an uppercut, her body seeming to bend over his rising fist. But then he saw her smile at him in a split second at the end of his strike, and her body opened up, and he saw that she had caught his hand, hopped up on it, and had been carried unharmed up by its force.

"I'll show you the meaning of the word '*weak!*'" she hissed, and uncoiling pulled him up by his arm, the nails on her fingers tightening into the hollow points of his forearm beside either bone, latching on as she descended, and Siklohn, despite the body of the small bunny – less than half his mass – was hauled up into the air, and brought back down with enough force that one of the marble blocks of the arena floor was shattered.

Siklohn felt his shoulder dislocate as he landed, and he rolled, hugging himself immediately as he reset it with a lurch. The gathered students winced as the loud crunch of the bone resetting echoed through the arena. He rolled again at the sound of another gasp, and looked up just as Mayia's thick feet landed on his face and drove him into the hard floor.

"Grr... Geroffme!" he muttered, grabbing her feet as he kipped up, throwing her to the ground, but Mayia's nimble body landed on her hands, and lurched back upward to kick at Siklohn's chest. He caught her feet again, shoved her off and spun her at the same time before lunging forward and brought his fist down at her body level to knock her to the floor, but she twisted again, moved out of his strike, and as she landed, her twisting motion tripped his legs.

Again an acrobatic motion erupted between the two combatants, either now sharing blows. Mayia's delicate touches did little to even harm Siklohn, and his powerful arching strikes stuck her many times with enough force to break things, but she simply looked back at him, her face set in determination, while he watched her wounds reset themselves and heal themselves rapidly.

The other students were betting amongst themselves in total disregard for the rules now, wagering on the outcome, disobeying another of Sage's rules about gambling on school premises.

"What are you waiting for?!" Siklohn laughed, truly outside of his usually calm demeanor. He was winning after all. "Too weak to strike me?"

Another of his blasting fists raked across her jaw, but his eyes widened as she shrugged it off and looked back at him, gritting her teeth comically with that large overbite of hers.

'Wait for it... Wait for it...' she thought, ducking and tapping his body in several more locations with the tips of her fingers.

"Stop playing around, and *FIGHT ME!*" Siklohn raged, and struck at her with a knife hand

in her shoulder, his claws piercing her chest, but she bent away from it, and stuck her own body with a quick jab with her thumb, and setting herself, she twisted the strike point forward, and Siklohn was shoved straight out of her, and the force of her chi powers actually setting him off balance for the barest of seconds.

'OPPORTUNITY!' she cried in her mind and acted, her mind working in instinct as she lurched forward past all his defenses.

"HAAAAAAAAAAAA!" she cried and began wailing on him. Such speed, such power, such precision, the crowd gasped as Mayia looked as if she had six arms that struck at Siklohn, blocking his arms and legs while at the same time delivering one blow after the other to his midsection. Her hand arched backward then, quite suddenly, her second and third finger extending together, while thumb and third finger coiled into the palm. *"DRAGON'S TOUCH!"*

Her chi coiled from its source in her navel, from her sixth Chakra, blasted up her bodice and into her arm, strengthening all the muscles there, super defining them, the veins sticking out like webbing, before the blow arched forward and merely touched Siklohn in the chest.

Sage, who was watching, felt his eyes flinch as he watched for where she touched him with that finishing move, but Mayia's touch was at the hollow of the chest below the sternum... Well away from the point of the Kabana Hoko Touch point on Siklohn; the point of The Touch of Endless sleep, or rather, Eternal Sleep.

Siklohn felt something erupt against the hollow point of his midsection, and he bellowed out with the strike. "ORG!" he managed, the air getting knocked out of him as he was sent flailing backward.

He landed finally, squarely on the peak of his back before bouncing, flipping over and landing on his chest. Immediately he clawed at the ground with hands and feet, taking a deep gasp to fill his lungs as he snarled at her, lunging to his feet while Mayia stood at the center of the ring, grasping tightly onto her wrist.

'Too late Mayia. You've already unlocked it.' Sage thought as she tried to stop the repercussions of utilizing one of the Dragon Arts, and he rose to leave the medical bay.

All gathered watched in awe as her body lurched, and even Siklohn watched as her muscles all creased, and the view of her sinuous six pack of her navel suddenly intensified into eighths, and then into tenths, her muscles bulging, her chest lunging forward.

She battled against the power of the chi fluxing through her, her shoulders flaring, tearing off her sleeves from her shirt while her biceps flared and swelled to break open the sleeves. Her neck broadened, her body lengthened as her thighs and calves swelled, filling in her pants tightly now as it was drawn up close against her crotch.

Her back swelled as her chest thrust out, her breasts bulging as she cried out one last time, all the arteries in her body swelling as her chi lines all flared brightly. She then coiled over herself, and looking to her hands in disbelief, she thought that *THIS* was the effect of having a seal broken... Not what Master Sage did. But she felt stronger, more powerful, and there was now a furnace in her navel from her stoking it by using one of the Dragon Arts successfully.

She looked stronger, more pleasing, unlike few Oliverians ever had before.

Her mentor in the Mystic League – Noxi – would be proud to see her like this... Finally...

"Think that whatever that is you just did will save you?" Siklohn growled, straightening. He was still having difficulty breathing, but he could feel his body more alive than ever before. He felt adrenaline flowing through his body, and he felt far stronger than perhaps even Sage!

"No." she said, for all to hear, and Siklohn stood straighter, feeling triumphant. But then she turned her back on him, and flipped her hair and ears over her shoulder before continuing. "I didn't need this transformation to defeat you, Siklohn. You don't know it yet, but you are already defeated."

All eyes turned to Siklohn as he began to breathe heavily, and with a roar, he set himself to all fours, and ran for her on all paws. He surged to his feet right beside her, and hauled backward with his arm cocked to smash her skull down into the floor, but his muscles stopped him, and his body froze just then.

"Ah!" he gasped, and looked at his arm as it began to tense harder and harder, and he heard his tendons clenching, and his bones groaning underneath the tightness.

"All those little touches I've placed upon you during our fight, is a preset program Siklohn. A spell of sorts that is enacted inside your own body, carried out by your own mind against your will."

Siklohn's hand tightened and he cried out in surprise as his fist crushed itself, and with that keystone gone, following that was his wrist, and then his twin forearm bones. Bone fragments thrust themselves through his arm, as the flesh beneath his fur bunched and broke as the tensing muscles tore from their moorings.

Then, as if that were a chain reaction, the other points on his body began to tense, and his other hand and arm shattered in like fashion as his last. Mayia turned to focus her red eyes with tiny black pupils on his, her eyes shining with an inner light as she looked him in the eye.

"The spell programs your mind to destroy its own body, crushing it under its own strength. The stronger you are, the quicker this happens."

Kaya, in the crowds, knowing that she was far stronger than Siklohn, gulped as she watched the son of the mighty warlord shatter slowly before her eyes. The sight disgusted her as she instantly began analyzing the bunny's every movement before and since this display. *'Letting me see this was a mistake,'* she thought dead set now defeating Mayia for good, *'One you'll never recover from...'*

Siklohn was forced to the ground as his Achilles tendon snapped in one leg, and his thigh muscles shattered his thigh bone. "Ahhhh!" he cried out, bending over himself, his wasted arms doing little to catch himself as he bent over himself.

"The average Aphkian has, on average, one hundred surface pressure point nodes on their bodies, but these are large weak points which can be defended easily... Which you were doing quite well through the fight. But what you are as of yet unaware of, Siklohn, is that they also have over two thousand sub surface nodes, which require more precision to touch."

Siklohn gritted his teeth, and gasped a sob as his leg finally shattered, and his flesh ripped open and bubbled as the muscles tore free, spilling at least a pint of blood from the shredding bone. He fell onto his side groaning, just before his other leg shattered. "And they have over one hundred thousand interruption points no larger than a pinprick scattered in between those. A point that one must train themselves with pins... Or claw tips," she opened her hand to him, and he gasped half in pain, half in surprise to her sharpened nails painted red to match her eyes. "In order to puncture."

Siklohn writhed, and now a loud creaking of wringing dry reeds and balloons being rubbed the wrong way centered itself on his chest, and his neck swelled.

"You have little more than forty five seconds left to live, Siklohn." she said quietly, folding her hands behind her as she looked down at him in her new feminine glory. Loud cracking announced several of Siklohn's ribs beginning to break. "First your chest will collapse, and then slowly burst your heart, before a few seconds later as you begin to suffocate, your head will collapse."

The crowd gasped, and several surged to their feet. Several more were crying.

"I can see in your eyes that you fear death, Siklohn. You are not a true warrior if you still fear it. I can stop it from coming, Siklohn... But you must agree to swear fealty to the school, your superiors, and to Sage. You must also admit that you are the lesser student, and apologize before this school for attacking your head student.

"A simple yes will suffice..."

Siklohn's pelvis fractured, his body scrunching on itself just as his collar bone broke.

He looked left, and then right, and then at Mayia, and closing his eyes, a single tear escaped the corner of his eye.

"Y-yes." he said.

"So that they can hear you."

"YES!"

Mayia bent downward, and watched as several thick veins were surging toward Siklohn's crown and temples. She watched them converge as she gently cradled his head with one hand, and then she lifted her finger, pointing with her sharpened nail, and then jabbed directly into his forehead.

Siklohn's body relaxed immediately and he passed out as all the blood that was being kept inside him from tensing muscles suddenly relaxed, and flooded straight out of his brain.

She stood up, and immediately, as if it were planned, several of Daedalus's drones surged into the chamber, all of them medical drones, speaking to one another in high-speed binary, as they attacked Siklohn, stabilized him, and settled him into a bio-tank within seconds. And as they carted him off, there was loud clapping sound, and all turned to see Sage stepping out of the shadows.

"ATTENTION!" Mayia called, and all the students rose in unison, even Kaya had to obey the instinct. Mayia herself stood with legs tightly together, and hands clasped at her back as her chin rose.

"Bravo." Sage intoned. "Bravo... Now Apologize." He said, folding his arms.

Mayia looked at him for a moment, and then blinked as she realized what it was he wanted her to do.

"Fellow Classmates." she called, relaxing as she addressed both sides of the chamber, and the dozens of students arrayed around it. "I apologize to the school for my actions this day. Both for having to teach such a cruel lesson and also for shaming my school for abandoning my lessons in the face of an adversary."

Kaya blanched, and several of the students around her turned to look at her instead, and even moved out of the way. *'Wow. I sooo believe you are sorry,'* she gave a very unimpressed expression as Mayia went on. Her concern fell on Siklohn and looking about she knew she wasn't the only one. *'Thank the gods, Yarunnii can't feel pain. But he sure can act...'*

Despite that there was little light here, Kaya felt as if she was suddenly in the center of a spotlight.

"Never again shall I surrender to my emotions in a battle, and I shall only defeat those that challenge the honor of the Shadow League. And to my opponent... I apologize for not

giving you my all. Though it may have caused you great pain and suffering, I did not want to hurt you. You wanted my best, and I did not give it." Kaya felt her jaw quiver. "To my fellow students and to my opponents... I apologize." she bowed low, lowering her head in humility, staying as such till Sage moved over to her and laid a hand on her shoulder and bid her to rise.

"Your Head Student has displayed her capabilities today," Sage stated. She represents all that I hope to see in all of you. Honor, discipline, and above all, humility. It is therefore that I am proud to make her an Apprentice Master."

Sage then opened his arms, and revealed a set of white and red robes hanging over his arm, and unfurling it, he handed a pair of forearm and foreleg bracers to Mayia, and then dressed her in a fine white with red trim robe, before pulling its hood over her head.

She bowed; her face shining as she accepted the uniform of a priestess of the order.

Sage bowed to her, and she returned it, before he stepped back and began clapping his hands.

It took some time, but others joined in the applause, and even, eventually... So did Kaya. Immediately, she realized the hurt she must've done to that girl in her muscle stretcher move, and began to cry because of it. The hateful creature that Kina had been forcing into her dying in the pit of her stomach at that moment. Sage then whirled around, and took a position of attention, Mayia followed suit, and he waited for the applause to die down.

"As a final point. This is an illegal competition inside my school, in a forbidden area. On top of it all, there has been much exchanging of money here. All moneys shall be confiscated that have been brought into this room and donated to Mother Sanari's Grace League. Furthermore, you are all hereby grounded, and shall take one hundred demerits each. Including your Apprentice Master Mayia," she didn't bat an eye. "And your new head of Students Siklohn Dousaka... As soon as he recovers. They, instead, shall take one hundred and fifty demerits each. In addition to the one hundred." there was some muffled laughter at this, but Mayia was still smiling grandly. "My servant Daedalus will take your donations for this fight tonight." and Sage gestured just as Dallas arrived, flanked by the mechanized bioroid war machines Wild Kat and Nemesis.

Dallas was holding a rather large satchel.

"Dismissed! And be sure to get a lot of rest tonight... For it shall be your last good night of sleep in a long... Time."

Forty Six

"Master! Thank you master!" Mayia jumped with glee onto Sage's shoulders, the massive cat not even faltering in his step as she hung off his neck.

"I thought it fitting with your triumph over yourself, Mayia. I am quite proud."

"If not for you unlocking me, this would've never been possible!"

Only then did Sage falter, pressing a hand to his forehead as he began to snicker, and then chuckle, and then he laughed grandly aloud; which drew many an eye from his students who'd not yet left the arena.

"Mayia, your first lesson as an Apprentice master is that Limits are not removed... They are broken. And not by any external force, it can only be done by your own actions. The only thing a master do is to nudge you in the correct direction."

Mayia stopped breathing, and stared around Sage's shoulder at his face.

"But master... I-I don't understand. I felt... I felt something... when you..."

"What you felt was the warmth wave. A very simple pinprick maneuver done over the heart. It's used to warm the body instantly and stave off hypothermia. I've used it many a night on my homeworld where I lived on the roof of the world. Very cold in those mountains..." he chuckled at the joke.

"But... But I thought one of the requirements to become an Apprentice Master was to break your first limiter..."

"It is."

"But... If you didn't break it... Then... I..."

"Look at your body, Mayia. You are stronger, more lithe, wiser, and – judging by the increased bulge in Geevo's trousers – far more voluptuous, feminine and sexy."

Mayia blushed.

"But there is one final errand I have for you, Mayia." Sage intoned.

"Yes master?"

"I said for you to apologize to the whole school for your actions, Mayia."

"But, didn't I just..."

"That includes Siklohn..."

Mayia was silent for a moment, and then smiled as she nuzzled her master's massive shoulder. "Yes, Master Sage..."

The last of the students were done filing out as Sage moved forward, only to be stopped by a pair of metallic hands by both Nemesis and Wild Kat. Sage looked at them, and then at Daedalus as he held up a bulging sack filled with metallic bars, strips, and bank notes. He chuckled, and then reaching into his satchel hanging before him, removed his own money for the Grace League.

Mayia gasped as he deposited three bars, seven strips, and thirty odd coins, all in platinum...

Forty Seven

Sage stood later that evening, past the twelfth bell ending the day, on the beach of the Mystic League. Few have ever seen him in his human form, a creature of exotic features and slanting eyes, with a firm, athletic build that truly betrayed all the power that was inside him. At six and a half feet, however, he still displayed a formidable level of presence.

Egis, leaving Rae's home after a visit, stopped, seeing him standing there on the beach throwing stones into the waves. She'd seen his human form – once – and only because of that was she able to recognize him.

She stepped lithely down the wooden steps to the beach, her bodycloth trailing away off her naked body in the wind like two sides of a cloak revealing her nude form in all its glory briefly before the cloth settled down over her again.

"Kaya came to see me." she said, folding her arms beneath her bosom even as the wind returned, unsnapped her bodycloth and carried it away. She didn't care and let it go. Sage threw another stone in the water.

"Did she..." he said quietly, and this time skipped his stone half a dozen times, not looking at her virile nakedness. She towered over Sage's human form, with her bosom rising just over his head level.

"She told me of a fight she witnessed at your league after she was discharged from your medical bay.

"That is correct. All present were punished for the illegal competition."

"I've also just come from Rae's. She had to tell me that you strode right up to Kina, in front of her students, and destroyed her. Beating her within an inch of her life."

"That is also correct." Sage answered, and tossed another stone into the water.

"Why? I said I would be deposing her!"

"Because you are too weak." Sage answered simply, and Egis eyes grew wide in shock and

anger for the insult.

"Weak?! You humans are so arrogant." she began even as Sage picked up another stone, but he did not throw it. "You un-evolved, simpleton! Nothing more than a hairless monkey, you rattle around through the universe, claiming that you are evolved, noble creatures. And you! You are such an unfounded, pontificating old bastard, with not a single wit in your head. Your tiny body and your simplistic martial skills are a joke! No WONDER Rae beat you."

"Some would say that I beat her..." Sage answered quietly, his hand gripping tightly about the rock.

"Name ONE!" Equis was almost screaming.

"Rae..." And Equis stopped completely, staring at him like a wild-eyed lion. "But I tend by the judgment of the Emperor... A tie is far more deserving for both she and myself."

"You are a very stupid person!" she hissed, tears of loneliness and sorrow coming from her eyes as her ears flattened against her head. "You are a weak... Stupid... Un-evolved... *PUSSY!*"

"I must warn you Equis. Watch what you say to me." Sage said with a warning growl in his throat despite his human form. "I have had a very trying day, and I am not in the mood to be insulted."

Equis growled deeper, the sound seeming to come from deep inside her chest, the action vibrating her bodice as it issued straight out of her throat, bypassing her lips. "Your fighting art is inferior, your students are inferior, and you are a tiny.... Insignificant... *BUG!* Should you ever come near me! Or any of my *FRIENDS!* I will *KILL YOU!*"

She bared her fangs, lost to the feelings that had been roiling in her bosom for so long. She was pent up, and angry, and she bared her fangs, and lifted a hand before Sage's face, her claws extending as if to tear his face straight off his skull.

But what she failed to notice, is that with every insult, Sage's '*weak human hand*' was clenching tighter and tighter about the rock in his hand, his jaw setting as he took Equis's spittle in his face as she hissed out some of her words. And with the last threat on his life, his grip tightened completely and the rock crushed in his fist into fragments. His body then seemed to teleport into another stance because he was so quick, one hand lacing his five fingers with Equis's four, and the other pushing straight into the hollow of her chest, right between both of her breasts.

Equis felt her hand crunch as Sage's grip somehow tightened like a vice, his fingers digging into her knuckles and she collapsed straight to the ground as Sage's body began to shine from the inside. Sparks of green lightning arched down her arm as his grip tightened, and her hand strained.

But where Sage had touched her in her chest, she felt all of her impressive power diminish, and her body was no longer strong enough to lift its own weight.

"Ever since I've come to this place," Sage said in a clear tone, his eyes sparking lightning as he glared down at her. "I've been insulted, demeaned, diminished, and my actions and my school are considered a joke and a byword."

His hand clenched, and Equis called out, feebly lifting her other hands to try to pry Sage's fingers off.

"You have mocked my art *TWICE* today. You think the mere touching of a scant few power nodes are the *ONLY* martial weapons allotted to me? You think the race of the Casid are so well evolved that they are completely *BEYOND* it? Even the ones that you have '*bred out*' are still present, and are still accessible, along with two hundred thousand other points on your body I can use to kill you in horribly malicious ways. "And you *DARE* to call it *INFERIOR?!!*"

And his fingers crushed her hand, her hand so much larger than his, he was holding only onto the edge of her palm by the fingers.

"My art is over one hundred thousand years old. It was developed by the dragons of my world, they who's species predates the both your own *AND* my universe! Next to the Greater Dragons, your Dragaseir are a *JOKE!* Even this creature that the Dragaseir fear, whatever the fuck her name is, is a child in comparison to Draco and Leviathan.

"One hundred thousand *YEARS!* It's older than the race of man, and the race of Casid.

"And as a Casid, you think that *YOU* are so superior to *US?* That is laughable! I have it thrown in my face every time I appear. Weak human, weak human, un-evolved human with an infectious disease. Hairless monkey!

"Look at you! You're still governed by your instincts; you've yet to lose your fur! Humans have long ago replaced their fur and instincts with logic and nobility, and a capacity for adaptation that no other race in the whole fucking multiverse possesses!"

Equis, for the first time in a long time, looked at Sage in fear as she watched his hackles rise, watched his glowing green eyes change to red, and she alone witnessed nothing no other being in this universe has ever witnessed!

She watched as those eyes turned black.... Punctuated by only a pinpoint of red demonic light. She feared for herself as if she were a child afraid of monsters.

"Even the Dragons themselves were broken before us.

"Aphkians, Casid, and all the fucking denizens of this fucking universe all are the

un-evolved beings by millions of years. Governed by instinct, dependant on claws and teeth," he gritted his pearly white teeth, and Equis watched his features clench into a vicious snarl as his fingers clenched about her broken hand. "Our evolutionary background is several million years ahead of yours, and unlike yours, ours is completely natural. We haven't had any outside help...

"Our society is older than any other race in this universe with *FEW* exceptions. I can count how few on a single hand!" his fingers clenched again, and Equis cried out, and tried to pull her broken hand free as her arm was attacked by the angry bolts of Sage's Aura Magic.

She'd never felt so helpless.

Above her, she saw the clouds gather, and within seconds a lightning storm was raging akin to the kinds that Clio summons, and a torrential downpour assailed them both then.

"We advance so quickly, that we have already created societies that have left the cradle of our home world far faster than absolutely *ANY* known race in the Multiverse. That includes the Dragaseir *AND* the Dragons. And not only that, we've not done that just once. Oh no. And not twice either. *THREE TIMES!*"

A crash of lightning broke above them, and the air around them rumbled with the force of Sage's unbelievable power. "Atlanteans, Egyptians, and now Inter-Realm... We've done thrice already in the same amount of time it took Aphka to do it *ONCE!* One hundred Thousand years old and already we rival your most powerful empires.

"Dragons respect us, Dragaseir fear us.

"I... Have become so... Tired... Of acting the fool and the puppet. I am so... Tired... Of having to hold back my true level of skills because of my desire not to interfere. I am tired of loosing battles to inferior warriors for political reasons. I am tired of trying to save them face, and I am tired of having to deal with the infuriating dishonor I've dealt with on a day to day basis.

"I shall no longer be a scratching post, I shall no longer be a byword, nor shall anything I represent."

Though this last was spoken softly, there was still a rumbling of thunder to punctuate it.

"And you dear Equis, who came inside my home, and belittled me, touting yourself as the superior being, have you little knowledge inside your mind that I am a match for Rae, and you are not?"

"You think yourself free of my Dhim Mach because it has been bred out of you? How little and small of a mind you are not to realize that every last square centimeter of your very, very large body is a target for my skill. The power node I've just numbed in you has shut down the greatest portion of your strength."

"H-how?!" she managed at last, trying vainly again to remove her broken fingers from Sage's iron grip.

'How is he so strong?! That is his weakest form! He should be so limited.' Eqis thought. Then she opened her eyes and thought, and then turned to look up at him. *'What if he IS limited? Great maker, I've angered a demigod!'*

"By erupting a mote of dark chi inside your body like a bee sting. It pierces your flesh and interrupts one of your chi lines. A *SPIRITUAL* chi line. One that cannot be bred out of you, and one that is enhanced in size the stronger in spiritual power you are.

"And Mystic Leaguers are all *VERY* powerful in spiritual energies..."

"D-dark chi?! You *MONSTER!* Demon!"

"MONSTER?!!" Sage bellowed, and his hand clenched even more, and crushed Eqis's fingers so that they stuck out at odd ends between his own as he surged forward, and she cried out in the pain of it as she fell backward. "You *DARE* to call *ME* a monster? You sick perversion of your race? You have been given the wonderful blessing by a race of billions to be their mother, their leader! You've been given the opportunity to right all the wrongs in your life; you've been given the opportunity to be their protector.

"And you gave it up..." Sage's eyes suddenly changed to red and returned to green, and she saw tears in his eyes. Large and heavy, and the feelings from his heart forced hers to lurch in her chest. "You turned it down! *WHY?!!*"

"I-I..."

"WHY?!" he screamed, straddling her girth to push his face closer to hers.

"B-because... Because I..."

"Why damn you! Why?!"

"BECAUSE I HATE THEM!" she sobbed, rising immediately to pound with all her returning strength against Sage's chest.

"I HATE THEM! I HATE THEM ALL! THEY KILLED EVERYONE I EVER LOVED THERE. TO HELL WITH THEM!"

She began to sob against his chest, pounding weakly against him with her fist, her broken hand quivering as it rested on his shoulder.

"I hate them..." she whispered, and quivered against Sage's body as he pulled her to him.

"This darkness in your heart has poisoned you from the inside..." he whispered, laying a hand on her back, now comforting her instead of harming her, his other rising to her broken hand as a soft blue glow suffused his touch, and her fingers and hand healed effortlessly. "...You must let it out."

Eqis's sobs continued, and after a moment, she began to bawl.

"I'm sorry..." he whispered. "I am so sorry." he cried with her, his growing empathy through his third eye allowing him to share this with her, whether he wanted to or not.

Off in the distance, a dozen low pops could be heard coming from Sage's Lair, as Daedalus finished his task of launching his satellite array in secrecy.

Forty Eight

Rae watched this happening with her friends and cried with them from the view on her porch.

"Great Father, Blessed Father," she prayed, gathering her hands together as her heart ached for Eqis and thankfulness for Sage. "Bless Eqis in her search for herself, and bless Sage, whether or not he worships you. Guard this creature of infinite light, as he guards us and watches over us, and shows us that your love indeed is spread by others."

Later that evening, she was glad to allow Eqis sleep in one of her spare beds. Sage didn't sleep at all that night. He waited in a chair by her door, bowed over himself, and waited for her to awake.

That following morning, Rae kissed him lightly relieving his troubled mind. Eqis left without a word to Sage. Her face showing indignity and some remaining shock. He could barely bring himself to look at her knowing how much his words must have hurt her.

He felt the ire in Eqis's heart over that night's outburst and could not feel some shame at his loss of control. His heart still weighed heavy on him as he bid Rae and her family "Good morning and good day" before leaving.

Forty Nine

Eqis, in her quarters, held the gold feathered headdress of her future reign. Her hold on it was light, even timid. She removed her usual headdress putting on her crown. "I hate this thing..." She said while looking at her reflection in the mirror. "Yunerru... What should I do?" A sense of great sorrow fell over her looking at that heavy thing over her brow glittering in the finest hues of royalty.

"I can help you with that, child," someone said then, the voice sweet and giving. The lioness turned intently to find Mother Sanari standing there. She stood calmly as Eqis approached. "I'd come to see if you wanted to talk about what Sage had done to you. It

was perhaps unforgivable..."

"I would rather not talk about him..." her face was dim of life. A strongly suppressed anger dwelled behind her eyes as she struggled to reason it away. She had been taught well in this school. "Why didn't I fight back? I could have easily thrown him off... No matter what he was doing to me..."

"You assign a power to yourself that you do not yet have, youth," Mother Sanari sat on the padded bench at the foot of the lion sized bed.

Devoid of sheets and having only a fine wooly blanket, the bed looked like an enormous padded platform a yard off the floor.

Egis followed, moving to the round window looking out to sea in the general direction of Sage's island. She scowled as she heard Sanari speak softly enough to draw her attention. "The power of spiritual sovereignty, which will give you the power to command any force entering your mind, body, and/or soul is rarely achieved by one as young as yourself. I have only seen it in Rae... Even Sage is without this skill... or he hides it well. Without it, such disruptions of your energies will always be a problem. But you can attain a power of resistance. But I can not teach that... Only a Casid master can teach you how a Casid must resist. But you have many of the same potentials as Rae does so you may be able to learn Sovereignty as well."

Egis's ears perked leaning toward the immortal priestess, "Do you know who might teach it?" Her own voice was low, stifling anger and despair. "She was beaten and raped as a child, it was not something she wanted to relive, but Sage brought that to the surface... She hated him and, at the very least, he would have to really work to hold her down again..."

"An old pupil of mine, Neraga the Steel."

"One of the seven masters?" Egis turned in shock. The Seven Casid Masters turned their backs on their people when the dominion came to power and their dark age began. With them they took the knowledge of their ancient fighting arts that made modern weapons pointless and the Casid all but invincible in battle. The Fang and the Claw secured half a galaxy for them and they had the masters to thank for that.

Then they left but not before slaughtering their students to safeguard their secrets from corrupt Dominion leaders. They are legendary and some believe wholly immortal.

Egis looked at the much smaller Cersile woman, her eyes wide, "Do you know where they are?"

"If they want to see you they will find you." Sanari lowered her head closing the subject. She raised it again looking at Egis consolingly, "I can call to Yunerru's spirit so you may speak with him... That is what you desire more at this moment, correct?"

Egis's eyes flowed as she knelt down before the priestess, "...please..."

Fifty

Mayia and Siklohn stood apart from each other as a strange collapse was occurring. Mayia's presence seemed somehow to drive the students away as Siklohn drew the students to him. As Mayia worked hard to assert her place as the Apprentice Master, Siklohn seemingly did nothing but provide the students with guidance, revealing his true powers as a leader.

Frustration led to anger as Mayia challenged Siklohn, to which he only said, "Fighting would prove nothing." Having nearly murdered him so callously, whether she'd known what she was doing or not, frightened more of the students than inspired the rest.

It was true she defeated the *'Dousaka Monster,'* but that monster was really a courageous leader who led the students by example. Sage looked to his apprentice knowing what she was lacking compared to this young lord in training.

Even if he was at once dissident and rebellious, he worked for the good of the group... of the Shadow League.

"You swore your fealty to Sage and this school," Mayia stood next to the door of Siklohn's forge, built by his own hands, as he pounded out the beautiful faceplate to another helmet, this one, obviously meant for a female warrior, "I know that Aphkians keep their word..."

A few ringing strikes on the metal followed by soft *'tings'* and taps later, "The reformed Dousaka as a clan swore their fealty to the Imperium. I am bequeathed to the Imperium and can have no other fealty greater than that. My family comes second to that. My *'fealty'* to this school was secured by force on threat of death. As such, I am free to disregard it as non-consensual and will fight against its enforcement."

"We'll see what Master Sage has to say," A quick shove and Caliban and Geevo enter the forge past Mayia, "Hey!"

"Sorry," Caliban overplaying the girlish charm on purpose, "We just had to butt in..."

"Maybe you didn't know that Siklohn here aced all the admission exams in record time." Geevo offering the nearly irate bunny a seat. "Sage could dismiss him but only Meniko can expel him from the Mystic League and she likely won't just so she won't have to listen to Archmagess Hoss Ahlo..."

Caliban jumped in smirking with the same haughty expression that the *'Imperial Witch'* gives everyone, "...brag how our Headmistress lost the War Master's son to her and the ISA. Plus, you came here a loser, he's only pretending."

"Bitch! I am no loser! You're the loser! I am the Apprentice Master and I earned it! What

about you?" She jumped out of the chair leaning toward Caliban, her new height giving her ability to tower over the vixen. Her mind already racing through the ways she could inflict some mild to severe aches and pains on the vixen that'd cringed visibly.

"You are who you are and no one else, Mayia," Siklohn said half-absently, gently turning Caliban to try the faceplate. The ornate design was gorgeous and so precise as to be master-worked plate. This only served to upset the bunny further but his words, a paraphrase of the answer he gave during his admissions interview silenced her. "So just who are you? Would you hurt Caliban just to get your way or to get what you want?"

"I'd have to say," Geevo looked at Mayia whose stance was softening, "That we aren't the only ones asking that question to ourselves."

"No. I..." Mayia stopped mid-thought her mouth slacked.

"You're the one most of the students are afraid of now," Siklohn said rubbing some smut off of Caliban's face, "And you did it to yourself. It's been a month and all you do is push people around punching a nerve cluster here or a node there, nothing more than shocks but it's not helping..."

"Her team broke up not long after her promotion," Caliban tried on a fine plate gauntlet. The fine details looked like green vines and leaves in chrome as she admired her team leader's handiwork. "I didn't ask why but they definitely didn't want to be around *'the monster bunny.'*"

Mayia looked at the threesome, Siklohn lavishing Caliban with fine armor that would cost a fortune to have made like a prince courting a maiden. Geevo, the fellow she couldn't go a whole day without thinking about at least once generally avoiding her, and sank in her seat. Her uniform, a symbol of pride and hard won achievement, weighed on her heavily. In the back of her mind, she knew what she had lost when she gained this new power and, with it, new responsibility. "I am not a monster... I'm... not..." She trembled trying not to cry seeing everything she was doing and was ashamed.

"You shouldn't be crying," Siklohn said coldly, "Its a waste of water. The Imperial Survival Manual under water rationing. You should be proud of yourself and what you've accomplished..."

"What? I thought you declared war on me after I put the *'Dragon Touch'* on you. Why are you saying this to me?"

"Because you are no good to the Shadow League as a pariah," Siklohn pointed a mallet at her, "Plus, you are a victim of a trap I set so I wasn't the monster around here anymore. The trap worked too well and you keep falling right back in and damaging your own reputation further each time. If I were a typical recruit for this school I'd be enjoying this but I am thoroughly dismayed that you are so weak as to blame me for something you could fix yourself... or are the combat and healing aspects of Sage's training the only things you are

thinking of?"

Mayia was silent for a moment. A hard but distant look on her face. "How did you get so smart anyway, Dousaka?"

"Breeding, education, and faithful duty. How did you get so strong yet remain so stupid?"

A long pause came and went before Mayia stood up and left without a word.

Outside, she gave Reos, Siklohn's massive pet and mount, a soft stroke under the chin getting a sloppy lick over the side of her head, messing up her mane badly. Normally she'd be amused but it barely registered as she went on.

Goath'El, a Yamachi giant, practiced with his armored gauntlets the variety of punches and maneuvers he would use in team combat. With truly gargantuan size and power, his speed was unprecedented. Most students refused to even spar with him because he'd overwhelm them like a landslide. He was far too large for the forge but was nearby if needed.

Verdance had become mostly nocturnal, always sleeping during the day, and was studying by moonlight on a cliff. His demeanor at night was radically different at night. No longer the *'sleeping slacker,'* Verdance was a serious student who had turned his grades and training completely around thanks to his team's leader, who was quickly growing into a real leader.

She sniffled quietly, "I'm just a nobody again... I just have powers now..." She entered her quarters and undressed, careful not to ruin her new uniform and went to bed.

Fifty One

As Sage had promised the students were all working hard on the campus expansion. First came the outer wall for the new arena... It was to be modeled on the old Celtic arenas of his native Earth under roman rule. Somehow it seemed to fit...

For weeks, organized into groups, the students hewed and shaped stone, made the mortar, set the foundation, and much more. All with their bare hands, without use of tools.

Sage had given Mayia and Siklohn their own groups to lead. It was of little surprise to him that Siklohn's group was working far faster and more efficiently than Mayia's who worked like they were under an executioner's sword. But what caught Sage's attention most was how often Caliban would deliver messages to Mayia from Siklohn, little tips on getting her team in gear and regaining their trust.

It wasn't long before her team had gotten into a pace nearly equal to Siklohn's... But subtle mistakes, the obvious fault of inexperience, started showing, even in Siklohn's immaculate area.

At times the taskmaster would stand out and bellow, "I said make sure that wall is level! A degree off, and I'll make you all tear the whole thing down and put it back up again, properly!" or some variation. While a perfectionist, Sage had the mercy not to be quite so anal since this was a thousand year structure being built. A little fault in the structure could be expected as well from the amateur builders.

Still Siklohn took it far more seriously; actually digging his way down to the rock below. He ordered new pilings to hold the walls when one section of his wall was *'floating on soil.'* Mayia did the same, cutting new stone with her bare hands though ruining her manicure doing it. She was determined to learn from her master and her *'enemy'* and Sage reveled in it.

This was, of course, his plan all along, and there were no two better subjects in the school better at it than Siklohn and Mayia.

"How goes it?" Rae appeared next to Sage. He felt her coming like watching a bright star in the heavens move suddenly. He turned to her not expecting who was next to her, Siklohn's mother, Enaqora of Dousaka.

Barely a whole six feet tall, she is a female D'nyrrii Aphkian, of comely stature, dressed in a fine Imperial gown and robes. The small wolffess, with no tail, as her breed did not have them, scanned about the *'work camp'* her ears batted down in abject horror.

"What is this, a prison labor camp?!" Enaqora shouted as she pressed past Sage.

"Madam Dousaka..." Sage started as she peered out over the area calling out for her son.

"Siklohn! My Son! Where are you?" She immediately turned around, "He wrote home saying that one of your students turned him into braided grass, you fiend!"

"Please Lady Dousaka," Rae putting two firm calming hands on her shoulders to get her attention, "I wasn't happy to hear it either but it worked out... is working out."

"How can you say that? My son was nearly killed..."

"He is Yarunnii Aphkei," Sage reminded her humbly, noting the small mother's concern, "He is far from delicate. In fact, he seems nearly indestructible. Virtually every bone in his body was crushed yet he fully recovered in less than three days."

"Plus, mother," Siklohn said as he arrived dirty from his work, and knelt to his mother, something he rarely did for Sage or even his own Father, "It has done wonders for my station here. I'm no longer the class monster..."

"He's a very successful team leader," Sage comments, "The students look up to him. Even My Apprentice Master, Mayia, seeks out his council now and then. Despite their differences. He was raised very well. Thank you..."

Enaqora was quiet as Siklohn stood up to take position next to his mother. She blinked a few moments feeling both confused that her son was doing such '*grunt work*' yet proud that he was. "I'm... I apologize, Lord Preypacer. I was..."

"Concerned for you son," Sage interrupted bowing to kiss her hand like a gentleman, "He is a credit to his clan and to this school." A quick glance and a nod to Siklohn to state that he was dismissed, and the young wolf clicked his heels and went back to work.

"They will be having dinner in a few hours," Rae said looking at the work being done.

"I can have my ship's galley prepare the meals. Besides..." Enaqora said curling a rather stout bicep, "I'm no meek lay about. I'll change and help out. I haven't done any heavy lifting in months."

Sage smirked as his guests left sure to return in short order. The sounds of hard work filled the air and a large starship hung in the distance.

"Mister Sage?" came a heavy but young and very innocent voice. It was Jhan Wan, dressed in work clothes a good distance back.

"Come on over, cub," Sage said looking to him with a father's eyes. It was hard to not do so. The tiger cub was getting attached to him. As the boy jogged up, Sage smiled lightly, "What are you doing up here?"

"My friends just got here and they want to help too," Jhan started then gave a rather annoyed look, "Isera wants to be in charge..."

"...and your Mother?" Sage reached into his jerkin for the earplugs.

"She's arguing with mister Daedalus about a lot of stuff. Like when I get to go home to visit..."

"I'm going to go talk to her... there they are..." Sage said walking away from the work site with the cub in tow, his hands lifting to insert the plugs.

Fifty Two

Eqis sat in her quarters, naked as the day of her birth. It was a relaxing state, and her room was one of the few places she could openly do it and not disobey the rules. But unlike the day of her birth, she'd been wholly changed from that day so long ago.

The war-magic and the techniques that now reside in her body have slowed her aging process and have given her a body that most societies attribute to the *MALE* portion of their Pantheon.

Though a few degrees below her good friend, Rae, Equis was not that far behind.

Resting in her hands was the ornate headdress in which she'd perhaps soon don on a more permanent basis.

Then there was a soft chime coming from the house computer, indicating that a new electronic mail had arrived. She wanted to avoid looking at it, wanting to be alone with her thoughts, but with a deep sigh that heaved her great bosom, she spoke aloud.

"Receive." she said softly, and cleared her throat as her voice got caught in it. Her meeting with her cousin's ghost was quite a lot for her to absorb.

But then the message opened, and her ears perked up immediately upon hearing a familiar voice.

"I am sorry." the voice of Sage Preypacer opened up in her ears, and she turned to see his form in miniature standing above the holo-emitter of her house computer on its desk. "I have hurt you, Equis. I sincerely apologize to you, Equis, my pride blinded me.

"I have no valid excuse for the hurt I caused you personally, and to Kina. With Kina, I had thought to... I had thought only to help you Equis. I had misunderstood our conversation here, in my lair, and when I saw – and felt – how hurt you seemed, I wanted to somehow ease the hurt.

"I have done the unforgivable, and seemed to have caused more damage than I hoped to correct. Our... encounter the other night, had been done in anger. Yours was justified... mine was not.

"Please, again, forgive this old fool and his pride."

"I shall understand if you do not ever wish to see me again, Equis. I shall not pry.

"I pray, perhaps, that you may forgive me... Good day, Equis. I wish you hope in your endeavors."

<<End of Line>> the computer chimed, and Equis, felt her eyes quivering as her vision blurred.

"The other night?" She thought to herself, blinking suddenly. "Computer... What is the date that this mail was sent?"

<<Precisely Thirty days, five hours and twenty seconds ago.>>

"Query: Why has it taken so long for this email to reach me?"

<<Unknown. Hypothesis, Computer glitch or incompatible software. An error log has

been submitted to IT-department for maintenance.>>

She pressed my lips together, and for the second time, rose to stare off at the direction of Sage's Lair that night, and to the home of the Shadow League.

"Damn you, Sage..." she said, and replaced her crown on the table before seeking one of her gowns.

Fifty Three

It was late evening, and Madam Dousaka has once again returned to her ship, leaving her son behind. Sage's lair was located right on the equator of this world, and so had generally the same amount of sunlight each day, and the sun was amidst descending below the horizon for the night.

Sage arrived at last, clapping his hands to get all of his students attentions, and dropping what they were doing, all of Sage's students arrayed themselves by ranking before him, first putting a hand on the shoulder of the person before them for spacing, and then on the shoulder of the person to the left of them to make firm even ranks.

"Thank you, all of you. You've done some incredible work today. Tomorrow will be a rest day." there was a gathering of excitement from all of Sage's students, who were all developing firm, wiry bodies of developed tendons, instead of the firm packs of muscle that the Mystic Leaguers immediately focused on. For his school, that came later... "You are all dismissed, except for the upperclassmen. Good evening."

"Good evening, Master Preypacer." They all intoned and bowed, before the lower classmen all left for their quarters. Leaving a long line of a dozen members of Sage's most accomplished students.

He stepped closer to them and waited till the last of the other students disappeared, and the doorway to The Lair closed itself.

"You've all proven yourselves to be of the utmost caliber of my students. So Therefore, I shall be breaking you up from your prescribed teams."

There was muttering, and several protests, especially from Siklohn's team. Six on a side, Mayia's team, and Siklohn's team.

"You've done so well this past month, come quite far in your studies, I feel as if you are all ready for the next level of training. Instead of teams, you will instead be paired off... You shall eat together, shower together, train together, and sleep together."

There were more muttering, and more protests, more audible this time and Sage raised his hands to stop them.

"I know you will not like this at first, but you twelve have been chosen to advance in the school. Your tasks will be harder, your training fiercer, your responsibility greater. But also, so are the rewards. First off, is the fact that you all, with the exception of Mayia, now have the titles of head students.

"I know you have all been disappointed at how slowly you seem to be advancing in comparison to the students at the core school, but a sound foundation must be laid for even the tallest of edifices to be raised. And now that you've all laid the ground work, now is time to start work on the lion's share of your training."

"But master... We don't wish to..." Geevo began, but Sage held up another hand.

"I know you don't, but this must happen. Preparations have already been completed. I will be naming your pairs, and as soon as you are named, you are to go immediately to your quarters, collect your things, and then report to the great hall. Dallas shall show you to your new shared quarters inside the inner sanctum."

Again the students looked at one another. The inner sanctum was where Sage himself trained each day, and the quarters that Dallas, his house computer had created there, were quite lavish in comparison to all the others.

Sage then began to list off the pairs. Twice, members of the same team were paired with one another, but all the rest of the pairings were between the teams, and two by two, some of them glaring at each other... Like with Caliban and Geevo... They left to pack.

Sage did not read off the last pairing, which would have dismissed them, and instead, he lowered his sheet, and looked at the final pair he wished to speak with.

Siklohn and Mayia.

He stepped forward again, and brought himself so that he was standing directly before the pair.

"Through obvious process of elimination, I am sure the two of you have already guessed who you shall be paired with.

"B-but Master," Mayia began, but Sage's hand jerked up to silence it immediately. Siklohn hadn't moved, but Sage could see the gears grinding behind his eyes.

"Enough. I have many reasons for pairing the two of you together, primarily because you are both opposite sides of the same coin, and are inadvertently attempting to learn from one another, and at the same time trying to hide the fact from one another.

"Mayia, Siklohn will teach you how to be a leader, to reason, to stay your emotions better. I have viewed your actions to your fellow students, and I wish for you to understand that you are turning into a hateful bully to them.

"I don't like bullies.

"I have far too many reports of your fellow students complaining about your '*lessons*' in the hallways and other facilities."

"Yes... Master Sage."

"Siklohn, Mayia is far more intuitive, fluid in body and mind, and far less stubborn. Her skills are greater than yours, and she is advancing at an exponential rate, whereas yours are still quite linear. You will learn much from her, that which has escaped your grasp until now."

"Yes Master Sage." he said, in perfect parade rest.

"Also... The two of you now have a task in which you will accomplish tomorrow. No one else may help you. *BOTH* of you, will *DISMANTLE* that forge of yours." he said, to which Mayia lifted her chin and looked smug at Siklohn. He wouldn't dare disobey a direct order. But then Sage continued. "And then reassemble it inside the Lair." And Mayia's expression went blank. "I have need of the space your forge is currently occupying... And if you are to continue in your work of the artificer, Siklohn, then best you have proper facilities and tools."

Siklohn blinked at him, but otherwise did not move.

"Also, if you so desire, I can provide some additional instruction and help you perfect that art. You are also to teach this art to Mayia.

"Finally, Siklohn, you are no longer allowed to don your armor under training conditions."

"B-but, Sir!" Siklohn began to protest immediately, and again Sage lifted a hand to silence him.

"A warrior must learn to fight inside and outside their armor. They must also learn to fight without a weapon. You've gone right to utilizing the tools of advanced students, and it has stunted your growth here. You will learn the arts just like everyone else.

"I know you hold your traditions of the utmost level in your honor system, Siklohn, and if I cannot get you to stop them at least temporarily, then I will work with them. But I will require that you give me at least some leeway. Sometimes even the master must bend."

"Yes sir..." Siklohn answered, retaking up his parade rest.

"One final thing, Siklohn. I name you top student. You are in no way greater than an apprentice, but I want the two of you to lead together. But that also gives you the choice of learning how to wield a second weapon with your form, Siklohn. Tomorrow, I shall also

have you look at the store house and..."

"The hammer, sir." Siklohn answered immediately.

Sage raised an eyebrow. "Planned that out already?" Sage's eyes lower to Siklohn's belt, to where his heavy smith mallet resided. "Very well. You are both dismissed.

Fifty Four

Sage sat on one of the major radial roots supporting the Millennium tree in which his lair had been built within. One of the tree's will-o-wisps hovered over him as he read from a book.

The Dousaka clan handbook... Written in native Aphkian in a dialect removed by over a thousand years of its modern variation. Sage struggled to understand it even with an active translation matrix at his service. *It's like reading old English or Welsh for the first time*, he thought.

A pair of reading glasses was balanced on the end of his nose, and he smoked idly from his pipe, fingering the bowl with one hand while he holds the book with the other. Then his ears twitch, and he removes the pipe before exhaling sharply.

"I... had almost lost hope." he said quietly as if to no one, and Equis slid out of practically nowhere to stand before Sage. She had to look up at him from where he was perched, but he gave her all of his attention.

"How did you detect me? I was even masking myself magically."

Sage took a short puff from his pipe and regarded her. "You... Still displace air." Sage closed the book and tapped his pipe out, before he slid off the root. "I'm glad you came."

Equis folded her arms, her large bosom rising above her meaty arms as she regarded the venerable Weretiger. Then she watched as he lowered his head and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry."

Equis huffed, exhaling sharply through her nostrils as she regarded this creature.

"You attacked my Pryde," she said in an undertone. "Then you attacked me. In other circles, you would've received the ire of my whole Pryde, and forced to face a personal war. If I were a Queen at the time, all of Casid would seek your head. It'd've taken a considerable amount of time and effort for me to keep them from seeking you. In the meantime, you might well be forced to take many lives to protect your own or you might be killed before I could stop them..."

"I've been made aware of that." Sage whispered, looking down at his five-fingered hand, clawed on its ends with hooking ebon claws. Equis considered that was so strange to have

five fingers. And so useless. But then again, humans had five fingers and toes too. "Would you mind walking with me Equis?" He said then, and then stowed the book and his pipe into his satchel.

"I..." she began, and then looked into his eyes, those solid glowing eyes that stood out like beacons in this shadowy landscape. Her own eyes were beginning to gain that same sheen, but were a far ways off. She wondered why Rae didn't have that same sheen. Perhaps it was just limited to cats... "I guess." she gave in at last.

Sage gestured for her in one direction, and the pair walked together, but apart from one another.

"Why did you do what you did?" Equis asked finally as they found themselves climbing out of the caldera and up to the peak of the volcano.

Less than a year ago, this place was nothing but an island of barren rock. Now tropical life grew everywhere, right up to the peak of the caldera, peaking over it, and then sloping back down toward the protected compound below.

"I... Stuck my nose where it didn't belong. As one of the heads of the many chapters of the school, I... considered it my responsibility to intercede. I saw you in incredible distress; so much that it brought out an ache in my heart. Rae has been remarkably concerned for you. I knew also that Kina would not relinquish her position lightly, and it'd be better if she were to be ejected by me, than by someone she considered a friend. If you were to do it, there was too large of a chance that you'd lose one of your many *'sisters.'*"

Equis exhaled in annoyance. "But how *COULD* you know that, Sage? How could you've possibly known what would've happened?"

"The same way I know we are about to have an earthquake." he answered, and he reset his feet, rising up onto the balls of his toes while his tail flicked.

"But how can you possibly know or predict tha..." but she stopped as the island began to rumble and then shake, and Equis quickly reset her footing as the island shook violently for a few seconds. Behind her, the millennium tree suddenly shone with light, stemming off the quake almost as soon as it began, but she didn't have enough time to react, her body was too tense, and she fell forward into Sage, who caught her gently.

He was quite sure not to touch her in any way she might not like.

"How?!" she demanded then, straightening herself as soon as the quake ended, annoyed that she didn't keep her footing under such a little tremor.

"I'm a Temporal Mage, Equis. Among my many other talents. I have a level of pre-cognizance that outweighs even Rae's. In my meditation, while I searched the outcome of these actions, I watched as time after time, Kina reacted to you. Some were favorable..."

Most weren't. The one that destroyed you was an instance where she simply lowered her head, gathered her things, and left."

"But... She didn't fight. That would've been far better than you destroying her."

"But she never returned. You never saw her again."

He turned and looked over the ocean surrounding his Lair. In every possible direction was nothing but water. The Mystic League itself was so far away that it was beyond the horizon. There was a remarkable degree of solitude here.

"Would you've preferred that, Equis?"

"No..." she breathed, and holds herself tightly as the salty sea air blows against her, chilling her quickly with the moisture.

She couldn't believe Sage couldn't feel such intense cold. She suddenly felt something lowering onto her shoulders, and she looked up to see Sage settling his jerkin across her shoulders.

"When I first came here, you were one of the few individuals who didn't hate me, or fear me, who didn't treat me with loathing. I was sorry to see you leave, because it was one less friend I had here. When you came back, I was overjoyed, though a little hurt that you hadn't come to say hi, despite that you were inside my very lair.

"Daedalus alerted me to your presence, and when he showed you to me, it was at the moment that you were having your words with Kaya.

"I couldn't help but watch the whole thing, though I knew it was invading your privacy." His hands squeezed her shoulders comfortingly.

"I saw in your eyes, saw the hurt you had from seeing Kina's influence on Kaya. You hated it..."

Equis bit the black rim of her lower lip.

"I... Interceded, because I wanted to see you saved from hurt.

"Later, when you and I finally met, I... Felt hurt and quite abandoned at the time. It had been a very trying day. And my aggravation mingled with my latent instincts... and I snapped.

"It took a considerable amount of will to pull myself back, and now my anger has been replaced by fear. Fear that I've hurt you irreparably; fear that I've inadvertently destroyed your family, fear that I am losing my self control..."

"I'm sorry about your hand." he said finally and stepped away from her, turning away. "I'm sorry."

Egis was still biting her lower lip as she looked at Sage watching the last sliver the sun set. She sighed then, and pulled Sage's jerkin off her shoulders.

"The damage has been done, Lord Sage. All that is left is to heal. I... cannot forgive you just yet." she folded the Jerkin, and handed back to him. "But I will thank you... For considering me when no one else has." she stepped up and kissed him on his right cheek.

"That was for thinking of me." she said, and then she watched Sage close his eyes and brace himself a moment before she slapped him across the face with her other hand. *He expected it!* She thought in wonder. "And that was for what you did to Kina."

Sage slowly brought his head back, looked her straight in the eye, and then nodded. "It's a start." he said. "Thank you for coming Egis. I'm glad you came." He smiled at her even as a big puffy black eye formed, but then rapidly healed again.

"I'm sorry that it took so long, Sage," she said as she turned to leave, bracing herself at the edge of the caldera. "Your message was only delivered to me this morning. I came as soon as I heard."

Sage exhaled in a heavy smile, and she saw his green eyes shimmer with happiness. "Thank you for coming so quickly then." he said, and she heard his voice crack. She nodded, and pitched off into the air before streaking off across the sky as fast as she could.

Fifty Five

Siklohn and Mayia didn't look at one another as they were ushered down the hallway by Daedalus's principal drone. When they were brought into the inner sanctum, they did stop for a moment to admire the construction. It was peaceful here, with lots of room, with a central living area including a kitchenette, with the rooms of everyone who had been selected today arrayed around this central area, and all of this contained within a pod perched amongst the branches of the tree.

Dallas stopped beside one door and it opened without him having to touch the access panel before it. Hence was one of the privileges of being the Lair's house computer.

"Master Sage has deemed this as your quarters from now on." Daedalus stated with a short bow. "Goodnight young masters. I shall see you in the morning."

Mayia and Siklohn walked forward simultaneously, and got caught in the door, and both stared at one another before wrestling past the doorway into the room.

It was a dual room, split right down the middle and was quite large. In comparison to those used by the other students, this was comfort galore.

Two beds, two dressers, two sections of blank wall, and one other door, which led to a single bathroom.

What is Master Sage THINKING? Mayia thought, and looked over her shoulder at Siklohn, even as he began unpacking his things. Books, swords from their cases, manuals... Everything was being placed specifically in certain places.

Mayia shrugged off her duffel and began to undress immediately. Her uniform was removed and placed on a stand that had been placed beside her bed, and she was careful not to wrinkle it. Then she stripped of her weapon, a bolt of long blue silk ten meters long. This was delicately folded and then wrapped around the top with her uniform. Sitting back, she peeled off her pasties and took a glance over at Siklohn and her jaw set hard as she continued strip down to her sexy thong underpants before she flopped down on top of her covers.

"Aren't you going to unpack?"

Mayia didn't even bother opening her eyes, leaving an arm across her face. She didn't care if Siklohn could see her boobs.

"No." she answered curtly.

"It will be easier to find things in the morning. We'll have to wake up early..."

"...Which is precisely why I am going to sleep now! Now shut that light off."

"It is a poor thing that you don't take more pride in yourself, Mayia. Pride brings confidence, confidence brings followers."

Mayia's eyes squeezed shut before she unfolded and sat up, her developing mammaries, already pert D-cups, quite large for any Oliverian. Sage had taught her how to be sexy, and she loved him for that. It was a skill that she had longed for every day before she came here. He'd also made her strong, virile and feminine. And anyone who would insult him or belittle him in front of her was trash, or chastise his methods deserved her ire.

In her mind, Siklohn did that far too much.

"Siklohn." she said sternly, waiting for him to turn toward her. "I truly forbid your nagging this late at night."

Siklohn gave her a bit of a half smile, the muscles in one side of his cheek tweaking further upward. "So who's nagging? I am merely making a suggestion."

Mayia pressed her lips together and exhaled sharply through her nose. Then her mind remembered that Sage said that she and Siklohn must cooperate, and if it meant that she

had to take his suggestion, then so be it. But she'd be damned if she'd do it his way.

Slapping her thighs, she got to her feet and emptied her duffle out on her bed, and placed all her things where she wanted them. Holo portraits of pop-singers and bands she liked were placed on the wall, while on Siklohn's side was an assortment of swords and blades arrayed before him.

Make up cases, pictures of her family and her mentor at the Mystic League – Noxi – the only other person who deemed it necessary to believe in her other than Sage, were paralleled by Siklohn's bedside reading material. There were no pictures of family, friends or loved ones. The only picture he had was of his graduating class at the Imperial Military Academy, he was the small boy near the end of the first row amongst young adults.

The only similarity between Siklohn and Mayia was that their uniforms were crisp, cut and clean, and their wardrobes were quite neat and tidy, with their clothing folded well.

Mayia stood back and regarded her side of the room. Some of it was haphazard, but a little disarray was good. She looked over her shoulder to see Siklohn adjusting a couple of his books so that their spines were flush. Snerking, she crawled into bed and tapped the bedside light.

"Great Maker... Who guides and protects, grant me wisdom..." Mayia heard from Siklohn and she grit her teeth immediately.

Great Maker, just make him SHUT UP! She sat up sharply, her four fingered hand gripping tightly on her pillow to throw it at him, but she stopped, seeing him on one knee beside his bed.

"Grant me the strength to lead, the bravery of my fathers, and the spirit to forgive my enemies.

"Watch over me, and watch over my partner Mayia," Mayia blinked, and her fingers unclenched. "And grant us understanding."

He bowed his head deeper, kissed his index finger, and then unfolded one corner of his bedding and then slipped into it. Mayia's adapted night vision allowed her to stare at Siklohn as he crawled under the covers and went to sleep.

Fifty Six

On the Mystic League main island, just before dawn, a new arrival comes. A young fire maned lion with a smile on his face and a gleeful spring in his step approaches the main visitor's gate; Naked save for a long flowing loincloth.

"How can I help you?" asked a polished brass droid with a polite inflection.

"I'm, like, looking for this totally strong fighter. A Casid-looking tiger whose, like, radically strong! He around here, dude?"

To Be Continued...