

## Two Fighters Storm

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\*Special note: This is number 3 of 4 stories of a short series.

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Evening in the Grace League Temple is one of peace and utter tranquility. The groves of flowering fruit trees sprinkle the air with their fragrant pollen. The sounds of the ocean can be heard, though faintly, from atop the hill on which the temple rests. The clay bricks of the hillside road leading there glistened in the aftermath of a recent seasonal rain as the grasses and now dormant flowering planets were like crystal speckled rods of green under the half moons.

Mother Sanari sat on the steps of her temple looking out into the woods along side the temple walls. She had left the gate completely open that night and every night waiting for someone. At her side on the steps, was a bowl of warm food, covered to ward off the hungry insects native to the island. The singing of nocturnal insects filled the air with an ambience of innocent mystery. She missed feeling the kind of wonder children felt in the night seeing and hearing things not known in the daylight.

She remained motionless even as Sage appeared to her senses in a shadow. Little more than a flick of her ear signed her awareness of him. A sign the were-tiger nearly missed until she folded her ears down. He did not move from that shadow, the soft glow of his green eyes faded to hide further.

There was a slight rustling of shrubs within the walls surrounding the temple. This had caught Sage by surprise before, when he first experienced this but not now. Still it was amazing that the perpetrator of this visitation was able to remain utterly invisible, even to his trained eyes. There was nothing to see except the stirring of leaves which he might have dismissed as the wind.

From under the brush, a small nose, a fuzzy muzzle purple in color, poked out sniffing the air. Two aqua blue eyes, embedded in a face of purple, blinked from behind the veil of leaves catching and returning so much of the late evening light as to appear lit by light bulbs. The tawny hands were small but attached to arms of ropey muscle and many deep and visible scars. His lean body was a product of his life in the woods about the island. Were he larger this little zhumal could be a deadly predator of invisible stealth, blinding speed, and cruel strength.

With timid steps, this little creature, naked save for a loincloth, emerged looking to the unmoving Mother Sanari. He looked about searching for any sign of danger, actually looking at Sage a moment, before making his way to the cersile priestess. It was then that she moved slowly to greet this Zhumal cub.

A happy prance entered his steps as he seemed to gallop on all fours, the long tassels of his ear tips and that huge, squirrel-like, tail trailing like banners, to the motherly catwoman.

Into her arms he leaped nuzzling her neck. Sage noticed the single, heavy, earring dangling on a worn out bit of metal. Sanari took the earring off as the little boy whimpered softly.

Clapping it in her hands, the earring was restored and she put it back on its perch in his very large ear. She gently kissed his cheek as she presented the food to him.

"It's alright, Eakjo. Eat," She whispered giving Sage a look of biddance allowing him to move out of the shadow with as unthreatening a movement as he could. Eakjo, like a small pet, continued to eat almost oblivious to Sage's appearance. But then, the cub had seen him there before.

"One of my rare successes here it seems," Sage sighed watching Eakjo gobble the bowl of warm meats and steamed vegetables, greedily, "He doesn't fear me quite like others here do."

"He is a trusting innocent, Sage. He wants to be loved even if he is afraid of us," Sanari slowly reached over inviting Sage to come closer and kneel by her side. He felt a slight blush in his cheeks as if Sanari were his wife... He banished the thought after some moments of indulgence. She was one of the few people to harbor no fear of him. She might have been the first had she been present at his arrival. "He seems to like your cooking. I admit I have a rather over-developed pallet and could never prepare a dish like this. Thank you."

Eakjo looked at Sage and immediately leaped on him like a kitten on a couch purring like a cat. He climbed over the mountains of his muscles to perch on the tigerman's shoulders and yawn. "Oh no. You aren't going to sleep up there again, are you?" Sage smirked not at all upset but feigning it comically. Mother Sanari scratched the boy's head lightly as he kisses Sage's cheek with a light lick.

Zhumal so young, as Eakjo, can not speak. It is assumed that this is a natural adaptation so they do not give away their location when hiding from predators. However, now in the greater community of the Great Wide Universe,

this is a liability as these cubs can not speak to others when they need to. However most Zhumal children do not stray far from attending parents. Those that do rarely survive. Eakjo and Cahfu, an older Zhumal cub who just gained his ability to talk, are exceptions.

As Eakjo nodded off, Sanari turned completely looking at Sage marveling at the gentleness he held as the boy grew limp on his shoulders with sleep. "Its rare for him to be so comfortable even with us here," Sanari said softly, "His bath is drawn so we should get him to it."

"He will sleep right through it," Sage noted a slight tone hinted that he was more interested in another subject.

As they go inside, Sage being much more mindful of his steps than usual as he is walking for two, Sanari looks to the were-tiger, "What in you school troubles you this evening?"

"Mayia took up Fatima's challenge again..."

"Why is this troubling? I would think you would want Mayia to challenge the strongest opponents to improve herself." Sanari already knew what he would say but always spoke as to demand disclosure if for no other cause than clarity.

"Mayia has grown tremendously. Her skills and knowledge have expanded greatly for her fight with Kaya. But even so, she is no match for Fatima. She has almost all of Rae's powers and skills and is so far out of Mayia's reach that it's like an ant reaching to the sun it the sky..."

"Why haven't you ordered her to stand down for the challenge?" she says opening the door to the bath chambers. A luxurious bath of sculpted marbles lit with numerous candles. The water warmed by a low fire, was perfumed with soft oils as to keep Eakjo near the temple, unable to hunt until the oils wore off a few days later. For his own safety and that Sanari missed seeing him around.

"Mayia is too anxious to reach her next level, as it were. She wants to be me... I honestly believe that she needs to learn not to take the challenge simply because it's there. She must learn to respect not only the strengths and failings of others but of her own.

"You run the risk of her being broken. Fatima's ...what did you call it... 'gameface' is quite intimidating and her change in demeanor makes her almost as severe as you yourself in combat..."

Sage was quiet thinking on the times he trained and instructed Fatima.

She projected the presences of a goddess, her powers constantly growing seemingly out of control, until she looks at the people around her and that small girl he first met shows through. Loving and care-free, just like Rae was at that age... then there are times when she was a firm minded and even harsh person who was not above crushing an opponent utterly. She was never like this before... Luna. He would hunt her down and bring her to justice. If not for the crimes she commits to survive, then for the pain she leaves behind.

"Mayia's only saving grace is that Fatima sorely hates to fight..." Sage sighed, carefully lowering Eakjo into the bath as Sanari stripped and replaced her robes with a tradition bather's gown, a dress worn by cersile servants to aid their masters or mistresses in bathing.

The sheer white gown clung to her revealing every detail of her fine physique. Sage looked on with indifference as she took Eakjo, gently scrubbing out the dirt of the last week or so. The sight made him imagine that this was his wife bathing his son. A vision that brought a smile and a painful squeeze of sorrow to his heart at the same time.

"Mayia is also desperate to rebuild her team after the break up of her last. Fatima would be an most formidable member..." Sanari's hands were below the water scrubbing Eakjo's body as he slept. She was ever the loving mother in her movements and behavior. Only a mother could be so untempted in the handling of her default ward. It was at once an uncomfortable and most brilliant show of maternal grace. Lesser people would remain uncomfortable and objectionable.

"If Fatima even liked Mayia..."

"It is likely the bunny's attitude is to blame. She has skills and abilities no one student in the Shadow League can match making her extremely powerful and without suitable peers. She feels both above them and alone. The loneliness causes her a great deal of strife. For relief, I would tend to think, she wants to believe she is on par with Fatima Iksaki..."

"I think I'll let Mayia learn just how limited she is. My teachings are potent but it took me many decades to reach the levels that Fatima was all but born with and I would have been poor competition with the experience I had then. Some things are just out of reach... at the time..." Sage handed Sanari a bar of soap as he reached over to clean the sleeping boy's ear tassels. "We should brush his teeth as well," getting a whiff of his breath.

Sanari giggled lightly.

## **Fatima's Cold Will**

Mayia stretched lightly not trying to look too anxious before the strongest and most powerful student the whole Mystic League had ever seen since Rae herself. She was grateful to have a few friends that didn't up and leave her after her promotion and the "beatdown" she gave Siklohn. In fact, it was Siklohn and Geevo who were in her corner as the supremely venerated Imperial Armsmaster, Master Rulsty took his place as referee.

The old master was set to retire his post as Armsmaster and chief bodyguard to the Emperor, Jaikard Sarvic. He was old, over 300 years, and wanted to spend his final decades, which could add up to another whole century, teaching his craft and the ethics of combat. His own successor, a young female Aphkian named Capucha, stood by him. When asked why she was with her teacher she would only say, "The Emperor needs no other protectors for now."

Fatima was chatting away with friends on her end of the field, a wide grassy space dotted with huge boulders landed there by violent eruptions from the island the Shadow League now called home perhaps centuries before. The smallest of these huge rocks was the size of a small house. At her side were the early picks for her team, Riikoa, Re'en, with whom a new friendship was formed, and Rovina, plus her boyfriend, Light. She looked at him with such playful yet loving eyes it didn't look quite natural.

Mayia popped a few joints in her stretches as she wanted so bad to be in that "clique". The strongest, smartest, most powerful students in the whole Mystic League and she knew she was worthy of that distinction. She was enjoying Geevo's careful wrapping of her silken sash, knowing full well that it would be totally useless against Fatima who could tear the strongest materials known like wet tissue paper.

"So Mr. strategy," referred to Siklohn as she stood up ready to go, "What do you recommend? A quick nerve pinch to knock her out fast? Maybe a painful series of chi knots through her whole body? How about..."

"...you hope Master Rulsty knows a mismatch when he sees one and saves you from a beating," Siklohn's gaze was fixed on the old wolf as he conversed with a teacher nearby. It was clear that he was longing to learn from the master who trained the Emperor himself.

"I can beat her!" Mayia groaned at the young wolf, wise to his tricks of manipulating people into doing things they would normally not do. She assumed a meditative pose, hands together as if praying and fiery aura rose up around her.

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One their side of the field, Fatima kissed her boyfriend holding him close. Far less muscular, even a touch girlish in appearance, Light was dwarfed by his girlfriend as she half buried him in absolutely solid muscle. It was clear that she missed her lover but her training as a proper warrior took priority. She didn't want to lose her temper and maim or kill anyone...especially those she loved.

"You really should have just declined her challenge, Fatso," Re'en stared down the field, "She's just a kid..." She didn't like her friend being taken away from her studies and training to butt heads with everyone who thought they could go a bump or two. It was just a waste of time to her.

"I made a challenge on my honor that anyone can challenge me once a month three times in a school year, Re'en," Fatima adjusted her hand guards, each weighing tons, Light checked her armored spats before re-tucking her breasts into her sport top for a better fit. "Stop that, Light..."

"Sorry. I just wanted you to be comfortable out there," he said with a cozy cupping of a large tit under the dark blue top with yellow trim.

Fatima shoos his hand away giggling a bit, "Silly, boy. You'll get yours." Then she turned to gaze toward Mayia. Her eyes narrowed as her demeanor changed sharply, "You're right Re'en. This is a waste of my time. Even Sage's best isn't holding up well..."

"That's because she believes knowledge is enough." Rovina, a corulian ursine and one of the smartest people in the school - about dead even with Riikoa - spoke with a sense of agreement and harsh criticism. "It doesn't matter if you know were to hit if you can't do the damage."

"My body is no keyboard for just anyone to push the buttons," She groaned knowing Sage will likely find out she said so, "I worked too hard to control how my body works and no one is getting by my defenses without paying a hefty sum first. She doesn't have enough for a ticket..."

"Fatima, love..." Light sounded worried as he cringed a bit, "You're letting your drive control you... Please don't let it."

Fatima snaps to looking at her boyfriend. Her face becomes soft and happy again, "Sorry... I don't mean to scare you like that."

"Just get this over quickly," Riikoa said checking her watch with a worried face, "We have to go study..." If it weren't for Riikoa and Rovina, Fatima would be failing most of her subjects, like Rae would have without Noxi. Riikoa had

learned to control her powers well enough not to explode but still didn't look comfortable being out there.

"Right..." Fatima teleported to the middle of the field and her starting mark.

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Mayia ran with incredible speed and grace seeming to fly over the ground. She hadn't quite mastered flying yet, forget using high level spells like teleport on cue. She took her start mark with an attentive stance. Not the usual laid back stance she used in practice with the other students. Her hands were up and ready to attack or defend. Her legs were set lightly as she bounced slightly. If she were facing a normal opponent she would look most formidable.

"Are you ready?" Mayia smirked, her buckteeth showing cutely which might serve to unnerve an opponent. Fatima barely seemed to notice or care.

Fatima stood still a moment casually assuming a ready stance that was rock solid and did little to hide or defend weakpoints that Sage's art made Mayia a weapon for exploiting. But to Mayia's dismay, those points were dead to her senses. They didn't seem to exist at all in Fatima. Yet it was those same points Sage used to neutralize Fatima when she first lost control of her rage. I'll just have to do this from rote, the bunny thought her eyes growing serious losing what little jubilation they had before.

Fatima's eyes narrowed sharply, "This makes twice this year and I don't see were you're making any improvement. When I watch you practice, your form doesn't improve much, if at all. You don't do anything new. You aren't getting any stronger or better. Me ready? I should be asking you: What makes you think you're ready?"

In the distance, Siklohn drooped his head noting that she stopped her enthusiastic bouncing, "She got shut up again."

"Bad sign?" Geevo absently asked eyeing some of the female students not too far away. That wondering eye of his made certain that Mayia's dreams of having him all to herself would go completely unfulfilled.

"Kaya shut her up and broke her back," Siklohn started watching how quickly Mayia's calm resolve was degenerating into anger again, "Tuck did so and cracked her skull. I also did so and got her grounded for a month with hard labor detail... It's just... Why am I talking to myself?" Realizing the Geevo had run off with another girl for his fun...and her's, he shrugged his shoulders and

focused on the fight, Just stay away from Caliban, Pervo-Puff...

Though more than twenty feet away, Mayia had to look upwardly toward Fatima. Those huge muscles of her's pulsed lightly ready to strike. Fatima had never lost a fight to any student. But she never challenged anyone. Everyone was the challenger. Even master warriors and some of the strongest beings from across creation came to challenge Fatima. Not one of them, of the hundreds or maybe thousands who came, managed to even knock her down except Rae and Lord Sage.

"Calmness in a storm is wisest," Mayia remembered Sage saying as she swallowed her anger before this titan of a girl.

"Well?" Fatima snapped at the bunny almost frightening her, "What makes you think you're ready?"

Mayia stared into Fatima's eyes. Eyes that should belong to a wild beast ready to pounce once released. The ease of how easily the pooch commanded her power. The utterly immeasurable strength and invulnerability.

The feeling of doom fell over her as she looked at Fatima. In the pit of her stomach, the weight of this bout, a sense of hopelessness filled her gut. Like some greedy leech sucking away at her courage and confidence, the bunny was unable to draw up the nerve to continue. Mayia dropped to her knees arms limp at her sides, her head down, she whispered about to cry or scream, "I don't... I'm not ready for you... I just..."

Fatima's face softens again as she walked over and knelt down to the much smaller bunny, "Don't even think about it..."

"I want..." Mayia looked at Fatima with desperate, wanting eyes, "I need to be on your team, Miss Iksaki. I want to beat Siklohn's team... Please..."

Fatima stood her up, "You've got one last shot this school year to fight me. If you don't hit me ten times in the first two minutes you can't join my team... ever." She teleported away to her teammates without another word. Every member of Fatima's Mystic Challenge Team had past that test.

But they all have a huge array of god-like powers to narrow the gap between them and their Captain. Mayia had incredible skills but what good will they do her if she can't make ten hits in the first two minutes. She was merely an "impressive mortal" in comparison. To be honest, Fatima was being nice, her teammates had one minute to land the ten hits... and only Riikoa needed more than 30 seconds... and she nearly knocked Fatima unconscious doing it.

Mayia gathered herself up looking at Master Rulsty who looked at her. His gaze was distant but respectful. The eyes that recognized failure. Failure to see her own weakness and limitations. The same eyes she had worked so hard not to see from her master and teacher, Sage. A stranger gave her those eyes. A stranger who was recognized as one of the greatest martial artists alive.

"So what will you tell Master Sage?" Siklohn was cold but not expecting an answer as Mayia walked past like a rudely rejected try-out for a team... Though that was exactly what happened.

"That I need to train harder. A lot harder. If I'm gonna make Fatima's team I have to achieve a measure of their god-like power..."

Siklohn had mentioned that Mayia was getting too powerful too quickly and wielding that power too callously to Sage. He dismissed him after trying to dissuade his concerns. Siklohn wanted to believe that Mayia was not going to go down as a mistake like he saw Mau as such, but the more he saw of Mayia's development the more he guarded himself and quietly prepared for mortal combat with her.

### **Fresh start...**

Kaya groaned as she rubbed out the aches and pains of six hours of Runidah, Casid Mediation not at all unlike Yoga in concept. Her flexibility had improved greatly but each new exercise was torture to her as new muscles were stretched further than natural had originally intended. As it was she could summon many times the natural strength she had before without using the amplifying effects of her mystical training. She could nearly match Mayia in terms of flexibility, able to twist nearly a full 180 degrees at the waist as a small demonstration of her new ability.

The Lioness' signature ropey hard muscles had gained new pliability and softness and beauty. But that was just in rest. Those stealy cables of sinew swelled readily with power when she called on them... as they were now...

Eqis had taken position as Lead combat instructor of the Mystic League's core school and was standing directly inbetween the four young cat, Salba, Kah-Leah, Clio, and Kaya. She was testing their progress as each girl steadily failed their mediation exercises.

First was Kah-Leah who ran off screaming due to her own wandering mind dredging up old childhood nightmares. She wasn't in danger or deeply hurt by those dreams, just scared out of her mind.

Next came Clio, by far the largest and strongest of the four girls, actually nearly as large as Eqis now. She simply snapped out of her trance unable to continue. Something in her just called her back. She chased Kah-Leah as she ran about screaming something about creepy guys tweaking her butt ,swinging the various pieces of training equipment, with unnatural strength, not clearly aware of what she was doing.

Kaya stood up rubbing her thighs and butt after nearly six hours of her Runidah position. It was exquisitely comfortable, even sexually arousing to her for a while but then grew to being unbearable in fairly short order. She watched Clio chase Kah-Leah like some crazy cartoon for nearly ten minutes before joining to help.

But Salba sat still, even as the three girls were chasing each other. She was completely unaware of the commotion. Then as Kah-Leah fell, butt first toward her, she slapped the kitten's bum waking her up...

"Ow!!" Kah-Leah screamed rubbing the hand shaped welt rising off the naked buttcheek. She let a few cute tears as she bent over slightly to better reach her arse, "That hurt... myaahh..."

"Salba passes," Eqis sighs hoping for a better end to the exercise. The three girls look at Eqis as she walks away disappointed. "You girls need to work harder to improve. I'm not running a school of hard knock anymore... When Salba comes out of her trance let me know. I'm going for a walk."

"What did we do wrong?" Kah-Leah mews.

"I think we screwed up." Kaya drops down to her knees sitting disappointed with herself.

"It's because we're too used to just fighting all the time," Salba opened her eyes. "Kina didn't do us any favors letting us fight all day long. Without proper meditative skills our powers will not grow. In fact, mine are dying off. I need to re-learn my technique." Looking at Kah-Leah, "You need a technique."

"What about me?" Clio spoke softly as if ashamed, "I just kinda' snapped out of it..."

"You just need practice... But Kaya..." Salba looked at Clio happily then to Kaya who stroked her thigh in a manner that would excite any male who happened by.

"Yeah?"

"Your powers are growing even though your meditation sucks. My guardian spirit is amazed by your growth." Salba stood up straightening her gi.

"I just focus better when I'm fighting..." Kaya shrugged looking at the others. It had always felt like Kina was training Kaya specifically. It was no surprise to Salba that Kaya was the only one who thrived under those conditions.

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Eqis leaned under the statue of Roari, a great Casid hero of her people's antiquity, her mood was dour as she watched other teachers and their students. They were making such great progress and yet she had to take this challenge, Four kittens who worked well together but were not the well-rounded students they needed to be.

A strong but friendly male voice found her as she turned knowing who it was. What she saw was the tall formal presence of the Chief advisor of students, Sato Hima.

The young lion is Kina's lovmate and hopefully future mate. The way he thought was on par with Menikomenqolui and Mother Sanari. He was a mystery of logic and intuition that was as enthralling and arousing to females as Mother Sanari and Meniko were to males.

"Problems?" He said warmly as he took a place next to Eqis.

"I think I am a bit over my head with those four," she looked at the field where Rae was putting the cubs through their paces. Isera and Nuu were easily outpacing the others around the field but no one gave in as they slowly caught up as Isera started bickering with the playfully obtuse Nuu.

"How so? They want to learn. They are strong of body and mind. They look up to you and would do all manner of crazy stunts for your favor... and if you are holding yourself up to Sage's benchmark, then don't. Imitation negates innovation."

"I..." Eqis looked at Sato with a look of deep thought, "...need to get these girls to start over again. Salba is the best student by far. Sometimes I think she would be better served under Sage's tutelage. Her core skills and abilities are much like what he teaches... Kah-Leah needs the most help. She simply lacks the mindset to be a serious contender or student here... Clio is still shaky but I can get her firmed up and going on her own. Kaya is a story all her own..." Eqis takes a deep breath and smiles wryly, "She doesn't need me to train her. Her powers and skills are growing at a pace similar to mine at that age... I

almost cringe to think that I should ask Meniko to direct her training as she did mine and Rae's..."

"I think I see," Sato watched on as Isera, the muscle bound skunk girl, pounced on Nuu, wrestling him to the ground. She was screaming as her frustration at his "boneheaded" comments finally got to her. Rae wasted no time peeling the girl off Nuu who was still laughing gleefully. A few words were exchanged before Rae teleported Isera back to her room. She gathered up her class and went back inside for a short discussion. "Isera has such a high opinion of herself she keeps treating others poorly. Did you know she's actually stronger than most of the middle and upperclassmen?"

Egis's jaw slackens slightly in shock. She knew the girl was insanely buff for a ten year old but still that was a shock, "She's that strong?"

"Her mother is a professional powerbuilder, model, and adventurer. She instilled good training habits on the girl but she's taken them to the same extremes as Nuu does training with his Father..."

"Family rivalry?"

"Not quite... Kaya is a good girl and your little sister, by way of association. She and the other girls will look up to you and learn what you teach. If you want them to start fresh, then they will. Just have the confidence in yourself that they do in you, if not themselves."

Egis was quiet thinking about Sato's words. She didn't notice him leave but guessed he went off to speak to Isera about her attitude problem. Then four young presences caught her attention from behind. This surprised her as they came so timidly as if expecting the worse. "What is it girls?"

Kah-Leah stood forward first looking about ready to cry, "We're sorry we don't live up to your expectations. We can do better."

Salba comforted the kitten, careful not to touch the partially exposed buttocks or bosom, "She got it in her head you were giving up on us..."

"...You aren't, are you?" Clio muttered from behind the group. She just returned a couple of weeks before and didn't want to see this happen.

Kaya was quiet her head down, "we let you down, sister... I... we are so sorry..."

"No..." Egis approached them kneeling to hug Kah-Leah who sniffled

weakly, "I should be apologizing to you. I'm sorry for walking out like that. Can we start again tomorrow? I mean really start again? We need to re-sort everything you've learned so you can really start to grow again..."

The girls were silent for a few moments before they looked to each other nodding.

Kaya stood firmly bowing her head, "Whatever you wish we will do our best to deliver, sis...uh...teacher..." Salba and Clio both bowed lightly as Kah-Leah, still in Eqis's arms kissed her cheek.

"First light tomorrow we'll start. Bring no notes or books and dress for a hard day of work..." Eqis released Kah-leah standing up. She faded away like a dream.

The girls scatter after a moment's jubilation to get ready for other classes.

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Kaya and Salba were the first one's in class. They had dressed lightly. For Kaya that meant a small two piece bikini in snow white with her usual white headdress with grass green trim and single small red jewel. She looked like a princess. Salba wore a silken body suit that did little to hide any of her anatomical details. It was the one time she would wear a thong as normal panties showed too much under the sheer outfit.

Kah-Leah ran up next wearing utterly nothing at all. Only a set of body patches to cover her nipples and sex prevented complete nudity. It was a clear violation of dress code but Meniko had lightened her hand on the subject for now. She was followed by Pahjo, Salba and Kah-Leah's mutual love interest, who was himself dress in a pair of tight shorts allowing his considerable "package" to be clearly expressed.

Clio, arrived last, a bit bashfully as she didn't have a full wardrobe yet. She felt oddly over dress wearing a typical body cloth and leggings. she had left the armwraps and bracers off. Otherwise underneath she was completely naked as was Casid custom though she did wonder why Kaya never did appear so dressed in public. The tigress' own massive physique dwarfed everyone there.

"I guess we're early," Pahjo gave a suppressed yawn as Kah-Leah and Salba leaned against him purring. He didn't mind the attention as Aqedian Ferrelline males often took more than one mate as the male to female ratio was almost as female dominate as Casid Lions, at around one male to every four females. Casid Lions ratio at one male to every seven females. His only

complaints came when the two girls would fight with him in the middle.

"Miss Eqis is maybe late..?" Clio murmured as if she thought to blaspheme one of her favorite personal idols. She missed Kirn and Karn, having been separated for only a few days as they still had some work to do in the Shadow League.

Kaya was quiet thinking. To her mind she was clearly aware of the world around her... unnaturally so. She could swear that she could feel the heartbeats of her classmates with her. Know the every detail in their odors and the sounds they made. It was like she was them... She stood quietly looking blankly into the distance...

"Kaya... Kaya?" Kah-Leah wondered up to her friend poking her solid abs. A belated response was all the smaller catgirl got.

"Sorry... I guess I was just daydreaming..." Kaya smirked apologetically.

"About what?" Eqis appeared out of thin air dressed in a normal red body cloth. Save a set of very heavy ankle and wrist bracers, she had nothing else on. Noting Pahjo, she nodded to him greetingly, "So nice to her the original fourth kitten with us..."

"You mean I'm the fifth?" Clio sulked.

Eqis, placing a hand on her shoulder with a friendly stroke, "You have no idea just how many young ladies and males wanted to be in Kina's combat class. You were fortunate... to... get in..." The lioness trailed off as she again realized that she missed her friend and sister. She took a quick and deep breath as she stood firmly, "Well let's get to it... We are going to start with the basics. Like Kina I won't emphasize a particular form but we will go over how to throw a punch, a kick, how to throw an opponent, and so on. As we go through the day we are going to review and reinforce these basics until I am confident you are all ready to re-learn the more advanced techniques. You will all be responsible for aiding your groupmates to complete these exercises. This will let me see what you all can do and what you all need work on as far as technique. I want you all to grow and succeed. I'm told today will get rather warm so I have set up a space in the northern island area. The northern winds should help with the heat."

"The Northern area? That's over 200 miles from here," Kah-Leah mewed protestantly.

"Clio is the only one who can fly but everyone is going to run there. Full

gait. Non-stop all the way. Including me. At your best, we should get there in about three hours." Eqis waved a hand and the body cloth that sheathed her muscled goddess frame blow off and dissipated in the wind like red smoke leaving her enviably nude. "Let's go." She pointed the way as the students raced out as fast as the best of racecars in pace. Eqis smiled as she followed briskly. The pace was barely more than walking to her but the students would get a meaningful workout from it.

### **Storms come...**

Siklohn is ever the industrious person. Even after moving his forge into Sage's Lair he still built a new one elsewhere on the Island. Actually in a cave buried in the woods that sprang up with the Millennium tree. It was a wondrous little place that the white wolf would go to do his best work. There were no prying eyes, none of Daedaleus's sensors to ply his behavior. He was alone there as he finished a remarkable bastard sword. It was as gorgeous as any collectors blade but striking plain. None of the runes that marked tradition Aphkian weapons were there. This was not to be a spell forged weapon. Such weapons were not suitable for students as yet, Sage had pointed out.

Truthfully, he never spent much time in the primary forge except when demonstrating how to repair weapons as part of his position as "Top Student". He was expected to teach some of what he knew. What Sage often pretended not to be surprised at was just how much he knew. Even going so far as to show Sage a better way to maintain his blades that could easily be integrated into traditional practices.

The Second Forge, or as most of the students called it "the retreat forge", was a place of solitude. The ringing of the hammer and anvil and the slight tings and taps of the detailing work would fill the island. Heat was provided by a lava river some thirty scant feet under the cave. Siklohn never wore his armor except to test it's fit. His master piece was still being made and it was, as Verdance noted from one of his nighttime strolls, a dozy. Sage would look in on him when he missed dinner to find him almost blindly working on a piece of armor or a weapon he had promised.

In Aphkian tradition, a student of means was expected to pay tribute to his teacher once a year as long as he lived under his roof. He had spent over three months perfecting a horseman's spear for his tribute. Despite all the effort made and its perfect edge and balance, Sage refused the tribute. As a result, Siklohn did not return from the Second Forge for almost a week, whereas Mayia had to drag him back unconscious. She got a severe concussion for her efforts.

Mayia walked up to Siklohn, who was laying on the ground apparently

counting leaves in the tree, "Still sulking?"

"I quit sulking the moment Sage grounded me." Siklohn didn't look at the bunny who was on her way to the beach. She and most of the students were enjoying a week's recess. She was taking a day to rest up before training more. She still wanted on Fatima's Team.

"Good. I just wanted to say sorry for..." She sat next to him.

"Doing what was asked of you. Do not apologize." Sikohn still did not look at her.

"I really wanted to break your neck... then I looked at the spear. It was beautiful. I just couldn't understand why Master Sage would refuse it."

It was then the young wolf looked at Mayia, "It is not unusual for a first tribute no matter how perfect and/or well-meant to be rejected. I imagine that it was because I made the spear in the Second Forge and he also wanted to make sure I knew what rejection was like..."

"You know it's hard to trust you knowing what I do about you. How many times have you played me for a fool? Don't answer that!" She poked him harmlessly. He had turned back to the leaves. A few stray leaves fell aimlessly. "You are a manipulating sneak, Dousaka..."

"I am what I am." Siklohn said dismissively.

"Bastard. Why do you insist on making your life so miserable?"

"What makes you think I know what happiness is?"

"Because I met your mother and she is so happy. Gods I thought she was our age she's so playful. You have to have even a remote idea what joy looks like with a mother like that."

"I wish such a memory were strong enough to recall. My life has been spent in training. You've been here only five years and have quite a bit to show for it. Apprentice Master to a teacher who is one of the mightiest beings known, learning one of the most exotic and possibly lethal arts this side of the Absolute fist..."

"The arts Master Sage teaches are not what makes me learn..."

"Then why? What possible end could there be for a fighting art apparently

derived to fight Armageddon?"

"I guess I don't understand a warrior noble's mind. I keep thinking you would see Sage's teachings with clearer eyes than mine since you can reason your way out of dying of old age. Maybe you should stop leaning so hard on what your going to be and what you can be now. Do you look at a lump of metal and get mad..."

"I don't get mad. I do fake it very well though," Siklohn not looking smirks rudely. Mayia stabs him in a nerve on his side causing it the spasm but gets no other response from the wolf. She could remember how she "punished" him and the apparent agony he displayed. It was still hard for her to believe it was all a ruse. "I don't feel pain remember?"

Mayia groans with frustration, "...anyway you have a lump of metal and you make something out of it. I would think that the process was at least as much fun as showing off you work."

"It is... interesting..."

"Interesting? That's all you have to say?"

"It is interesting. I just don't feel anything. I'm a machine whose end function has been determined. I don't fell it because it ultimately means nothing..."

"What about your feelings for Caliban?" Mayia was trying to hide her shock at his statement, "She loves you... and I see how you lavish her with gifts to the point it makes me ill. You hold her when she cries, when she's hurt or afraid and the way you exchange looks... You two have something there..."

"Go on to the beach and have your fun," Siklohn closed his eyes, "In ten years knowing you will never have mattered so..."

Mayia jumped to her feet a kicked Siklohn in the head sending him flying several yards,"ASSHOLE!!!"

Where he landed, he laid back down looking at the leaves in the tree. She saw the tears in his eyes. He'd given up a long time ago. He saw no future but the one he was told waited for him. "You're just going through the motions, aren't you?" Mayia sat down muttering where she had kicked him.

"In ten years you won't exist to me... So go away." Siklohn whispered.

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Sage had taken some time to visit Mother Sanari in her shrine. She had been invited to visit his shrine before but has not yet come to that. When he was in her presence, he could feel that she was in a prison of guilt and woe. Somehow he knew he had to find a way to free her someday.

Today Eakjo was scampering around the garden. The child was able to see some of the spirits their and was playing with them. It was rare that he'd spend more than a few minutes near the temple nevermind in the garden, within the temple's walls. But he had a sense of the weather and as if he had been told a tropical storm, nearly a hurricane, was coming.

Clio had been instructed to let it blow through, though the tigress wasn't altogether expected to let it without weakening it at least.

Sage entered the garden, his weapons, even his fearsome bio-blades, sealed by the temple guardian, a ghost who was Sanari's protector. Sage had tested himself against the ghost and was soundly defeated by his powers of the dead. Sage's swordsmanship was far better but even with his magics the ghost over powered Sage bringing primal fear to his body if not his mind slowing him and weakening him. It was unsettling to face such power that robbed control of his own body from him yet he resolved to overcome this, somehow... He didn't even understand quite how it was done.

Eakjo scurried up to Sage, sitting squat to the ground like a small dog happy to see a friend. His long fluffy tail shook gleefully as Sage looked down with a smile, half bracing for the little boy to jump on him like a tree to be climbed. He had expressed disapproval at that behavior but it didn't stop. In fact, it only got worse for a while until Sanari took the boy off with a rather firm look in her eyes. The subtleties of that glare were lost in the moment but it was clear she was exerting some motherly authority over the boy. Still Eakjo was a mischevious, if mistrusting of most, cub and Sage still found it amusing if somewhat undignified and, when he used his claws to climb, a bit painful.

Offering his arm, Sage allowed Eakjo to climb up were he came to rest on his broad shoulder. He still smelled of the fine oils that he had been bathed in and looked much healthier. So like a happy son I could long for one day, the were-tiger reflecting on Sanari and his own growing feelings for her.

"Good afternoon, Lord Sage ," Mother Sanari, dressed in rather sturdy and plain clothes for gardening as she was preparing her groves for the coming storm. Her pupils, similarly dressed, all aided in this task.

"I came to see if I might be able to help," He was fond of the garden for its tranquility and splendor. Many a time he had come to sit and think where his own island didn't feel peaceful enough and to occasionally gather herbs for his pipe. The garden was no small plot. It covered hundreds of acres and had not only the students but a small army of droids, designed for various tasks or sets of tasks, to maintain it. The high sturdy trees provided much protection but did not seem they were not going to be adequate when the storm blows over. "You have chosen not to deploy a shield?"

"The garden is adequately prepared for this storm. But some precautions are always in order. Besides if a few limbs break in the storm they will be removed. Damaged plants will grow back. The weaknesses of the garden will be revealed so they can be corrected. But above all we must have faith that we have done the best we can to provide for the survival of it all. Otherwise, I would have sent for a shield generator..."

"I see." Sage scratched Eakjo's little head as he purred flicking his large ears, which lightly batted Sage's head. "What other work must be done?"

"Sadly there is an old tree, a native of this island, whose time has past. His old roots are shallow now and his wood is dry and brittle. I had hoped to grow his descendants over his stomp... but sadly as he clings madly to life, he robs his children of the moisture and nutrients they need to grow. He must be removed entirely. If you could be so helpful as to pull up the old tree and break down the wood for fires and kindling, I will show the one."

"I think I know which one you speak of. But please show me the way. There are some corners of this wondrous place I still do not know well." Sage followed Sanari as Eakjo jumped down to play and help, digging up plants to be moved or removed until after the storm.

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The old tree, which some students called "the creepy old man", loomed like an angry old man whose dislike of the world was a shadow of his proud self ages before. Even trees grow old and die, a fact Sage was still wrestling with as a young immortal. Its gnarled limbs held few green leaves now and its bark was tattered and worn from the weather and countless storms it had survived. The twisted and broken and healed sections of the old tree made for an ugly thing that until now had been pitied and served by Sanari herself. But now came the time to be laid to rest for this old tree.

Standing before it, Sage could feel that the roots were indeed shallow, like an enormous weed just waiting to be pulled. This old tree, the size of a

great oak, seemed to glare at Sage and Sanari. It was no surprise then why Eakjo wasn't anywhere near this old monstrosity. It was a bitter, old, and hateful weed now.

"...We are sorry old tree but you will not be able to weather this storm. Your time has past," She said apologetically and prayed touching the old tree, "Forgive us..." She stood, hand to the tree a moment then looked up at it, "You want to try one last time? To weather one last storm? But those young trees... I see..."

Sage would have dismissed this as some insanity if he had not met numerous ecomancers, mages of nature whose powers allow them to communicate with all manner of life, even plants, among other things. Sanari seemed to have powers of nearly all types of mage and wizard. He was astounded all the same. "He intends to protect his saplings?"

"He respects that I have never raised a shield over the garden since it was built to fend off the worst storms. That I had taken such care to give the trees such responsibility as to protect those beneath them and placed such great faith in them. He wants to make one last stand before passing on..."

"Will you allow it?" Sage looked at the immortal catwoman as she looked about at the tiny saplings. "He may fall and crush the saplings or wound the other trees."

"Yes...I will." Sanari kissed two fingers and touched them to the old tree stepping away, "May those who made this world grant you strength to fulfill your task, Haumus."

The tree has a name... Only a true ecomancer or shaman could ever divine the name of a tree, Sage thought as they left the tree.

"Mother Sanari," Sage stopped head bowed deeply.

"Yes."

"I have a favor to ask of you..."

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Eqis arrived last to the northern island area making sure no stragglers were left behind. The Five young cats all arrived partly winded except Kaya and Salba. Both were definitely at the top in their class as physical conditioning went. The rest had to take a few minutes to caught their breath.

"When you are ready there's going to be one last stretch to this journey," Eqis said rubbing Kah-Leah's back to sooth her a bit as she took deep regular breaths to settle herself. The little girl had lost both pasties over her breasts on the way and yet it didn't matter. Eqis had expected her students not to care about what they were wearing or not wearing.

She saw how stupidly most females would behave if they accidentally exposed a breast or showed their panties. Such taboos and the conscious or unconscious adherence to them was a weakness to be crushed or exploited. But she wasn't going to force nudity on them. Even Kaya, who should be quite happy to be naked as a newborn, was not given to that custom. But if they were comfortable with being unclothed then they wouldn't care if they lost their clothes in a fight or just because.

"We are going to swim to the reef atoll twelve marks North or here... or... we can stay here. Your choice."

The kittens all looked about at each other. Pahjo stepped forward, "I think we'd like to swim to the atoll, Miss Eqis..."

"Very good then," Eqis pointed the way, "Last one in the water has to tow me to the atoll..."

They all ran full speed to the water swimming off like fish, or as close to it as they could. Clio was the last on in the ocean but Eqis didn't force her to tow her. Instead she swam along side her the whole way.

Tigers, even Casid tigers, are excellent swimmers but being land locked for most of her young life, Clio never learned to swim very well. She struggled to keep pace but the discipline and coordination of muscle to swim even slowly in the southernly current was not there. Like speedboats races a sailing ship, the others left her behind.

"Clio..." Eqis called over the rush of the surf, "Do as I do..." The lioness raised an arm and Clio did the same. "Put your head under the waves and watch my body."

"Yes, Ma'am," Clio did as she was told and saw Eqis's muscular frame, in a perfect concert of movement and might, press forward nearly one hundred feet in one stroke. She quickly came back and repeated the process moving forward only a little this time and continued to repeat the movement several times.

Eqis drifted to Clio as she came to the surface, "Now you try."

Clio was unsteady but she copied the form. Eqis pressed her under the waves so she could observe and copy her movements. Pushing with more force each time until they had become feline torpedoes shooting through the surf toward the school of cat swimmers. Soon Clio wasn't holding up the rear she was leading, natural instincts to swim guiding her ever impulse now and she was a faster swimmer than Eqis.

Like a porpoise, the tigress leaped out of the waves cheering gleefully, "Yeah!!!" Eqis fell back to make sure the others didn't get lost.

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"Liar!!!" Caliban wailed at Mayia. For the first time in a long time she wasn't cringing from the Apprentice Master. This vixen was smitten to the core by the ghost furred wolf.

"He is doing what he feels is expected for his future, Caliban, not because he loves..."

"You sleep in the same room with him and now you want him all to yourself!" She turned to her pack in the black sand of the beach and drew out her short sword. Her grip tight with rage. Tears ran freely as she brandished the blade. Many of the other students gathered ready to stop Caliban and Mayia, if need be, from killing each other.

"You love him. He wants to love you..." Mayia ducks a wild swing of the sword. She could shatter the weapon easily but that would make matters far worse. That was a weapon made in the second Forge and was as much a gorgeous piece of art as a deadly tool of death. "Please... Stop! He said those things himself... Ask him and he won't deny it. He's an Imperial..."

"He was my first real friend. The first person I loved. You hate him and me..."

Suddenly two giant hands reach out and cocoon the vixen, gently restraining her. She screamed out bawling loudly. "That's enough!" Goath'El boomed glaring at Mayia. Geevo rounded the giant to see to the vixen.

"We should..." Mayia started seeing Goath'El glaring harder at her like an all-consuming fear of another's rage she grew quiet.

"You need to think before you talk, Dumbass..." the giant hissed pressing Caliban closer to his chest where she continued to cry, "Geevo. Talk to her." He walked away as another bold student reached in between his hands to remove

the short sword.

"Real smooth." Geevo wearing a simple and distractingly small fuchsia loincloth to the beach, his black fur seeming to melt into the black sand, "Maybe you should ask Sage for more lessons in emotional sensitivity."

"I did what I thought was best." She scowled resenting being lectured by a 'lesser' student.

"You did it the worst possible way and from the worst possible position." Geevo scowled back. He was, like it or not, the resident relationship expert. He could make sense of anyone and their needs almost at a glance. Some needed study, but most were fairly easy fixes. Mayia wondered, quite often, what he really thought of her but never asked. "You have no sense of what being in love is like. Add to that you have no idea just how intense a Cenu's emotions can be. If you did you wouldn't have just jumped at Caliban like that. She fears and hates you and you go giving her a new reason to hate you more with every word you say."

"I didn't want her to be hurt when he finally revealed himself to her. I have a duty to..."

"To what? Ruin a beautiful relationship that was growing to blossom?" Geevo whipped out his fan, a second weapon he picked up as a simple affectation, with a magicians flare and pointed it at her rudely, "You had no right to butt in like that."

Mayia looked at the other students who all seemed to agree. Many of them were jealous of Caliban's good fortunes to gain the attention of a Lord and retainer of the Emperor. But they still respected her for it. The whispers started again. Those voices among the students who didn't dare voice their concerns directly to Mayia... out of fear of her.

"Two-bit hussy..."

"She can't land a guy so she makes the happiest girl miserable..."

"Mayia can't do anything but ruin stuff..."

"...other people's stuff..."

The bunny sulked as the voices echoed every possible perspective and she could do nothing but listen. Especially as these students surrounded her, their voices rising menacingly. They liked what they saw in Siklohn and Caliban.

It was something they needed to see, a future they could imagine. A young Lord and his future bride... Something Mayia was bringing to a crashing end.

She watched Geevo walk away. The one guy she wanted and with every misstep got further away from, never looked back at her as she tried to keep her strength as the students then scattered. It was like they had pieced off some of her being and walked off with it leaving her a shell.

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Kaya rose out of the waves with such grace and beauty as to still everyone at the atoll. The tiny white bikini stood out emphasizing her feminine features and form. The students could only stare at this vision of lioness perfection.

"What? Did I lose my top?" she exclaimed grabbing her chest, "It's there so stop staring!" a deep blush was visible in her ears as she glared at her classmates and Eqis, who was taken by how radiant the girl really was.

"Sorry..." Eqis grinned embarrassed at her gawking. She straightened her head and looked at her students. "We know what we're here for so let's get to it."

"Yes, ma'am!" they all called out in unison.

### **Moments of thought...**

Daedaleus, the living computer of Sage's lair across multiple dimensions, had sent out an avatar, a nearly chrome shining humanoid automaton, to meet his master and his guest, Mother Sanari, as they stepped through a portal threshold. She held his forearm as he led her through.

"Master..." with a nod to Sage then to Sanari, "...Mother Sanari. I am pleased you have come. If you need anything, please ask."

"Thank you, Daedaleus," Mother Sanari said with proper address typical of dealing with droids, "I will call you if needed."

Sage looked to his bio-mechanical friend seeing the subtle cue that there had been an incident among the students. He turned to look at Sanari who said nothing. He shrugged minutely as he looked to the avatar, "Show us in my study, please."

"Of course." the silvery avatar walked with a deliberately calm pace.

"I am sorry that this must take priority."

"Think nothing of it. I would be disappointed if nothing went awry here or anywhere." Sanari observed the organic shapes and forms, "It does not seem to fit you... I think I feel..."

"This is... No it doesn't. It is the majesty of the nature of my home and the Millennium Tree it resides in." He was usually so quick to justify himself or his work but with her it was not needed. She needed no explanation or justification for another's ways. It was refreshing not to be judged or tested.

In the study, Sanari looked to the elevated platform on the fine rug where she sat, leaning on a cushion. In the center of the rug was a fine wood table with a few thick books. She noted them and smiled to see he was capable of being typically male, a touch of clutter here and there. She could not read the text in the books as she simply did not know the language. Perhaps he will teach me this language sometime...

Sage reviewed the logs and the report and lowered his head. His face was masked with concern and a hint of frustration.

"A student troubles you?" Sanari taking a cup of hot tea from the avatar. She could seemingly read minds and/or body language as clearly as spoken words. It was a skill Sage had, first as a fighter and later as a priest, but lacked the sheer sophistication and complete understanding that Sanari possessed.

"A small grouping of them... Mayia, my apprentice, and Sikohn are at the center of it. Siklohn is a story that refuses to be read, hiding details that are critical to decoding him as a person. Mayia is my greatest student and yet she constantly stumbles and falls short of the goals set before her..."

"I have heard from the spirits about this island that Mayia is still a rather small person. That is, she is... uhm... rubbing her accomplishments in the faces of others. That and she has no adequate peers. I have found that a singular apprentice is only a good thing if that student has faced off against many worthy candidates..." She pauses to sip her tea nodding approvingly to the avatar who bows compliantly.

Sage looked at her a moment and approaches to sit next to Sanari who he dwarfed completely in his battle form, "Such a thing was not possible as she simply outshone the others until Siklohn appeared. In him, I see a wholly superior individual but one lacking the drive to use his potential. Mayia has the drive but lacks the experience and temperament to use what she has learned and what she will learn fully..."

"Perhaps you should re-examine Mayia as your apprentice and make it very clear that you are. This will force her to re-examine herself and refine and if necessary redefine her character. Make her doubt herself and continuously earn her place as your Apprentice..."

Sage took a deep breath and looked to her again, "What are your thoughts on Siklohn?"

"You have a very interesting take on our universe. After uncounted eons of wars and conflicts we have achieved a measure of peace rarely dreamed of in the minds of the most optimistic mortals. You see the soldiers and you envision warring factions vying endlessly for power. You see the Imperial banner and see oppression and despotic rulers with endless armies to command. I know that your home realm is one torn and still horribly scarred by conflict. It attracts all manner of evil... I know I helped expel some of it long ago. But now you have a cub before you who wants to be a cub but millennia of tradition, evolving from the experiences of his clan, forces him to forego his youth for a life he dreads more than an early death itself. He feels himself as dead and seeks only to leave memories so when his interment into the Lordship of his clan is done he will have made some form of a life... He sees it as his death and this is just the funeral..." She wipes a 'speck' from her eye.

Sage looked at her thinking of how detailed her view of others must be. The vast arrays of knowledge these Spirits hold for her about everything. Then he saw Siklohn, that difficult cub who could have been his apprentice if he had arrived when Mayia did. "He is quite the actor then..."

"Let him shine. Ask nothing more of him than his best. I asked Meniko to build this school to cultivate those who would grow and set them in the right way of being. She has sought no indoctrination into an order. No uniform style of combat or discipline. Only that the students follow the understanding that comes from the teachings of the Home of Dragaseir, when paradise was the whole universe and fear was not yet born. A legend, I'm sure, but an ideal."

"Seeking Eden..." Sage started cut off by a slight raise of a petite finger.

"Seeking to be worthy of Eden."

"In this I have much to consider I think. But for now I must address Caliban's attacking Mayia directly."

"Do you? Mayia is able to protect herself and no harm was done. Caliban is hurting more than she could have hurt anyone. It is best that you allow things to play out... without your watching. I would also imagine Siklohn resists you, in

part, because he knows you are watching."

Sage closes his eyes and breathes softly. Opening them he smiles, "Very well, Mother of Songs. I will defer to your wisdom."

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"Cali..." Goath'El nudges her cheek lightly as she lays sleeping under a tree. He had taken her away from the beach to rest. He had been a fairly gruff person but having Silklohn and the rest as friends, softened him quite a bit. He was still capable of frightening shifts in demeanor, but was usually very level-headed.

He strokes the vixen's mane. She was wearing a rather conservative one-piece bathing suit as she was still not comfortable showing off her body. She still wore, quite regularly, baggy pants and tunic top shirts...

"...huh..?" Caliban opens her eyes slowly sitting up. She hoped that what had happened, what was said, was just a dream. Mayia was many things to her, a fiend, a braggart, a loser and a punk, but one thing she definitely was not was a liar. She looks up to the horned giant, "Tell me she did not say what I think she did, Goath..."

"Sorry," he leaned back his hands half raised to catch her or protect himself, "She did..."

"Reavers take me... Why did she have to do it. What did I do to deserve this? I just wanted to be happy for a while at least..." she balls up tightly still sitting under that tree. Tears running freely, "Why is everyone always punishing me?"

The giant picked her up and cradled her near his chest. "I think she wanted to do good by it. She's just a bit clueless is all."

"let me down, Goath... please..." She murmurs and he did so. She straightened her swimisuit and walked away, "I'm going to see Siklohn...alone."

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Frustration pushed her fists and feet faster more forcefully as Mayia battered the force field target wall. It was infinitely preferable to a regular punching bag or a person. It didn't break or cry for mercy. At her current levels of skill and power there was no danger of her destroying it either.

How could I have been so wrong? I knew Caliban would not be happy but she actually wanted to kill me... Geevo hates me more than ever... What am I doing wrong? the musclebound bunny girl battered the pale blue-white targets like machine-gun fire, hitting each one dead square.

"What are you doing wrong?" came a faint voice. Mayia turned to see the pale silk adorned form of the one person everyone should be afraid of in the Mystic League, Aauie. Though most of her mental powers were being restrained and diffused by Menikomenqolui's, Aauie was still too dangerous a person to take lightly. Too often did this psychic ghost girl left students in terror or worse. Even Sage and the physically deaf, not able to send or receive any form of empathic or telepathic signals, Rae steered clear of her at times. Mayia was barely a "blip" on Aauie's danger meter.

Mayia, as if seeing the end of the universe, gawked terrified, "...you..."

"...me..." Aauie walked forward to stand next to the bunny, "You make stupid mistakes..."

"If you do anything wrong..." Mayia's mouth snaps shut. She vainly wrestled to open it. She quickly surrendered to being silenced.

"You keep making people feel small. Students hate you when you try to be bigger than they are. You are good student. Still student... not master. I not master, still student. Students fear me but I never give them cause to. Try to be friend to all...like Rae Iksaki. You act like you better than everyone. You and Fatima. Only Fatima still stand. You and Kaya. Kaya stand up first. You and Caliban... You no more... Become wiser by being small. Big not need to learn. Small learn at all time. See whole world from mountain top but never see people. See people will know people." Aauie's words were broken. She was still, after years of training, unable to speak without her telepathy but she tried here to keep from scaring Mayia. The invisible clamp over the bunny's mouth dissipated, "Speak..."

"You can see the future? I was going to fight Fatima. I knew I can't beat her but if I can meet her challenge I don't have to..." Mayia stopped as the eerie cat-like elf turned slowly.

"Pass her challenge? Maybe. I see only truth... not maybe's. Fatima will hurt you..."

"I'm no practice dummy. You'll see. What about Kaya. Master Sage made her one of my big tests..."

"Kaya get stronger too. Faster than you. More sure of herself. She will defeat you. Close though. Strength of teacher mean nothing if student is weak in body or spirit. Kaya beat you. Close though..."

"Kaya's crazy. She would attack an emigott head long..."

"Kaya spirit stronger than your's. She never give up. She want to fight to end. Want to win real win..."

Mayia was quiet. She fumed to herself about Kaya being stronger. Not only did most of the school think she was The Creator's gift of beauty to the universe, but most people think she is stronger than she is or ever will be. Stronger than Sage's teachings... She didn't want to try to start a shouting match with Aauie. She looked down feeling the stomach slash that never connected, "What about Caliban?"

"She hate you. She hate herself. She love Siklohn. Only good feeling in her heart... love of Siklohn. She fix. No more you."

"Does she kill me? Do I die?"

"I see no future. Only see truth. People think different things. I see thoughts as whole. I see people as whole. I see what they will do. Never seen how they will do what they do." Aauie fades from sight.

"What about me and Geevo...?"

An echo in her mind came like a half remembered dream in a squinting mind's eye, "He come when you are already his..."

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Kah-Leah's fully extended high kick was quite a sight. Her expression was glib as she pushed her left feet straight into the air above her. Her last body patch over her sex strained to cover the sweet bulge of her cunt and clit. She deliberately turned her pose to show Pahjo all she had for him. It was getting a rise out of him for sure and a stern glare from Eqis. She still, however, smirked as she wanted to have more males in the class. It was important that males learn not to lose composure in the face of nudity, be it their own or another's.

"Myah..." Kah-Leah swooned as she lowered her leg finishing her exposition of basic maneuvers. Her pert breasts bounded lightly as she slinked up to Pahjo wrapping her arms around his. There she rubbed her naked bosom around his ropey arm.

"You have a good set of movements," Eqis started after a deep cleansing breath to ward off a hint of frustration at having such a sexually self-motivated kitten in her class, "But nothing that can help you against a swift opponent. A lot of power punches and kicks meant to expound your sexual development. With a full set of moves you can be much hotter and a better fighter. Pahjo... You're next... after your woody dies down."

Pahjo blushes as the girls laugh aloud. "Yes, Ma'am." He stood still a moment as his considerable phallis, nearly peeking out of the waistband of his shorts visibly shrank down to a more manageable size. His moves were as clean comprehensive and precise as Salba's but seemed much quicker and more arcobatic. Overall, a masterful collection of maneuvers that worked for him. Like Salba, he just needed to learn new concepts to derive newer and better techniques.

"Clio, honey. Your turn..." Eqis saw how unsure she was. Even after having some worthwhile wins in student bouts, she was still nervous. She took her position and began. Each punch and kick was slow, full of torque that would make them hard to block or counter. They were deliberate, if unsteady. But seeing the other students at awe by her display made her more certain and confidence followed. She finished her set with the muscular finality that would send the mightiest mortals away discouraged.

Salba had set a very high mark for speed and precision. With gunshot fast strikes that could shatter a body in one hit, Salba's attacks were not to be taken lightly... Then it was Kaya's turn.

She adjusted her headdress and before proceeding. Slowly through simple punches and kicks speeding up into more advanced maneuvers copying some moves she'd seen throughout her life. Some looked like Sage's form, certainly some Mayia used, other's copied her friends and teachers, especially Kina and Eqis's own refined "primal" style using claws and raking fangs. All this was arranged into a perfect set of studied and adapted moves for her own style. In a few years, it could be a most accomplished style. But it still needed a binding set of core concepts and principles. Still she was ahead of the class in combat skills. She had everyone's skills, after all.

"That was impressive, Kaya..." Eqis giving a slight smile.

Kaya bowed quickly, in the Casid form, half kneeling with head lowered a moment. The back was stright and ready. "Thank you. But it feels so sloppy and weak..."

"You're still learning but I do agree that you need a foundation to put

your house on, cub. Is there a style you favor most?"

A moment's silence fell on her and the group as she thought about it. First came a face of hard calculation and consideration. Then came a face of emotion and intuition. Then she looked at her teacher and sister, "Etma Mkakshyn, the cyborg's war form..."

All eyes fell on her. Etma Makashyn was developed by a conclave of sentient machines to protect themselves and eventually wage war on the beings who made them. But those beings built cyborg bodies to use this devastating art and prevail over their rogue machines. The art saw vast improvement with total disregard to advances in technology. It made machines stronger than people ever could be. But this art was eventually sealed as being too strong and dangerous in an age of universal peace. The art is practiced and studied by advanced bio-physicists to see how it can work for "all-meat" beings not just cyborgs and machines.

Kaya had read about the art and studied it. But the core principles, "the Methods", were sealed. Without those she could never hope to unlock her true potential in that craft.

Eqis walked up to her pupil and adopted sister. Leaning forward down to her, Eqis looked her in the eye, "Are you crazy? Suicidal? That art will tear you apart. Flesh and bone were never meant to move so violently..." She stepped back, standing straight, "Are you sure that is what you want?"

Kaya looked her sister in the eye smiling with wickedly gleeful determination, "I want it because everyone else says I can't. I have a strong body. I can learn it. If I learn Makashyn, then my body will follow getting stronger. Runidah will give me the ability to withstand the forces I have to put on myself to use Makashyn..."

"Etma Makashyn is an art purely of war and destruction. Meniko may not allow you to pursue it..." Eqis lowered her head sighing, "But I will tell her that you desire this art... Who knows? if she allows it, you might be the first person to master it without a single bit of machinery powering you."

Kaya closed her eyes smiling basking in the glow of the possible. Eqis had her doubts. She saw how Mayaia was reacting to Sage's teaching. It had all the earmarks of Mau. Kaya could be far worse. She had that thrillseeking, suicidal streak that made her do things. Scary things... like learning to fight like an overpowered machine.

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"Do you love me? Yes or no?" Caliban whispered as Siklohn sat next to his forge quietly.

"I want to say yes, Caliban..."

"Then why don't you?" She held firm but her voice cracked. "Mayia said you didn't love me. That you were faking it... Everything."

"I wanted... to make a few... memories. I won't have much of a life after this is done with... I don't want to love you because it..." he was quiet unable to continue. His face showing the pain of emotions he had no words for.

"Why?" Caliban knelt down beside him looking in to his black oil eyes, "...why?" She was lost. Being female was hard enough but giving into her new emotions for male companionship and a deeper sense of bonding made her fear for someone she would never had given a thought about as a he.

"...because I can't see you with me in my future. You aren't there. I'm alone... completely alone," he looked at her. The frame of his eyes warped by grief, "I understand if you hate me now. I have been terrible..."

A moment of shock passed into silence. The vixen's eyes watered as understanding filtered in. Seemingly all emotion was washed away as she settled down. "A ghost has a home in the hearts of those who love him," Caliban placing her head on his lap looking toward the firepit. "The ghost doesn't need to be sad and alone..."

"I'm sorry. I never realized I had a home..."

"It has much room for comfort," She turns looking up at him as he slid down to the floor, "Care to see?"

Placing a hand over her breast reaching into her tunic, Siklohn never smiled but it was evident he was happier now...

## **Storm Warnings**

Mother Sanari looked to the Millenium Tree. It was almost as vast as a young Aphkian Mountain Tree, a single plant could grow to cover an entire mountain range. Most didn't. She felt its root and smiled...

"Such a big baby. It's still so young it has no name." Then her face dims from its previous bliss and warmth, "I imagine this is what you meant to have

me see? A dark presence. It is not a spirit as I know it."

"Do you know what it could be? It is depriving the tree of its nourishment."

"My first guess... would be that it is the planet. Like rejecting a strange babe trying to suckle, the planet is trying to reject your tree. Then again. I am also aware that Dragaseir souls do not go on to the next life unless that soul so wishes it. Such is their mastery of life and death."

Sage looked to Sanari, "Meniko did vanquish the previous guardian, a Dragaseir..."

"We will keep this to ourselves for now. Not even Meniko is to know..."

Raising an eyebrow, "Why?"

"It is for her own good until she is put to the fire..." Sanari looked at Sage almost as if begging, "You have no idea what kind of danger she is in. Until she is a proper adult Phoenix Dragoness she is extremely vulnerable and if she even thinks of fighting back she will be destroyed. She is my final penance, Sage, and I dare not fail her."

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The great feathered Dragoness, Menikomenqolui, looked down on Eqis with a sense of consternation that left one of her best students to date, now a promising combat and music instructor, feeling guilty. From high above in her great height, the dragoness sighed deeply periodically, not speaking. Then she lowered her head before uttering a word...

"I am not happy to have to make this decision. Etma Makashyn is a horrible art even for purpose built cyborgs and machines to learn and practice. Why does Kaya want to learn this art?"

Eqis swallowed hard before speaking. She wanted her little sister to have to chance to decide whether or not to go through with it but that didn't settle the knot in her gut over possibly seeing the young lioness crippled or dead by this form. "She is.. thoroughly convinced she can withstand to learning process and the training to become proficient in it to help her put all the skills she has together into one comprehensive whole..."

Meniko's stare stopped Eqis before she spoke a few moments later, "You are not convinced? She is one of the mightiest students I have ever seen. She reminds me of you to a point."

"...of me?"

"You however do think before you act much more often." the Dragoness mused smiling warmly just as a break in the clouds allowed a burst of sun. Still the clouds were gathering for a storm. "I will open my personal library to reveal the methods of Etma Makashyn, but only if Kaya is truly ready. I want her to fight the rest of her classmates tonight. None of them are to hold back..."

Eqis's heart jumped in shock and horror, "Headmistress! Please reconsider..."

"Quiet, girl!" Meniko shot loudly then held her tongue a moment feeling unhappy to berate a favorite student like that. She took a deep breath and ruffled her feathers slightly, "This must be to test her commitment to learn and her fitness. Salba and Pahjo will test her speed and precision. Kah-Leah will test her patience and guile. Clio will be a test of sheer brute force and power. That and the melee conditions will make for a burly test for the lioness. I will judge it. It is my deeper archives that I will share, after all."

Eqis, her ears laying down in abject dejection, looked up at her headmistress. She didn't want to agree but if Kaya failed then all this would end... That horrible art would never see the light of day for years if Kaya fails. But if she succeeds...

Meniko lowered her head again looking the lioness in the eye very serenely, "Have faith in the kitten. Kina does."

Eqis bowed shallowly before walking out at a pace just short of running. She was afraid for the cub again. Deathly afraid.

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Mayia rounded the corner of the dorms to catch Geevo, bent over tying the laces of his pink high-heeled calf boots. His legs were straight and draw together giving the clear impression, from behind that it was a girl, but everyone was familiar with the beguiling presence of this black bunny boy. He wore pink lycra speedo-like swim trunks the left very little to the imagination and furthered the illusion of a female.

Mayia envied his proportions. Even with her finely honed and muscled frame, she barely seemed to hold a candle to his attractiveness as she caught a few males staring a his bum pointed in the air, slightly rocking this way and that as he continued to tie his boots.

The Apprentice master quietly as a gentle breeze approached Geevo and lightly tickled the black puffy spade that was his tail. It wagged lightly, playfully, as he started to right himself. His long, elegant, and taut back arched up smoothly with a cant that was both arousing and aroused.

As he turned , she could see his face with a warm alluring expression which dimmed as he caught sight of her. Mayia's heart cracked a little again seeing this. She wasn't clear yet, but she was sure she was in love with Geevo. That simply made looking at his sincerely annoyed face all the more painful for her.

"What is it now?" Geevo sounded more than a little annoyed. Mayia had approached him several times in a week trying to get close. But today Mayia was miffed at his attitude.

"What now? How about 'Hello, Mayia' or 'You look nice today'? Every time I come near you, you back away or outright berate me. Why the devil do you act like that to me? You don't even act like that with Caliban and she hates you..."

Geevo tilted his hips like a young female and was enviously more lovely than Mayia was in that pose. His face was actually a subdued angry that threatened to raise the apprentice's ire. "One... I have to share a dorm with her. Even so Siklohn and I have this understanding: I don't touch her unless she falls down and needs help getting up. Two...I don't go for domination. You act like I'm supposed to kiss your butt while you kick mine and enjoy it..."

The sting of being humiliated, however unintentionally, by Mayia in a sparring match, set Geevo's mood about her. She tied him with his own sash, hence why he is gravitating toward the bladed steel fans, and laid him out like some gimp for an S&M show. It was to first time Geevo actually cried in the school. But Mayia had missed this basking in her triumph. She was still missing the point.

"No I don't!" The hackles of her neck stand up. She unconsciously was thinking of ways to hurt him and swallowed that thought visibly, closing her eyes as she backed away. Geevo hadn't moved an inch nor changed his expression. "I just want the respect I earned... am earning"

Geevo turns leaving, his taut bum bounced lightly as he left, "That's another thing. You got Sage's respect but not ours. Face it, you're actually stepping on people and no one likes that." With an illusionists flick of the wrist, he reveals a small music player and clips it to his ear humming the song it played directly into his ear.

Mayia stood there trying to think of why he would be so cross and more importantly why she only made things worse. She slowly recalled her practice bout with him and how she all but raped him... She terrified him. She humiliated him. She made him into a thing all because she could and didn't have the good sense not to. As strong as she was and she wasn't using it fairly. Not like Sage or Rae. She was a brute...

The bunny watched Geevo round a corner and leave her sight. She wanted to have him so badly but she seemed repulsive to him now. She suppressed her desire to shed a tear as she went the other way.

### **A few raindrops...**

The hurricane was coming much closer and Meniko had left for a few hours to tend to the planet as one of her charges. After defeating the previous guardian, at the cost of her original school, the Phoenix Dragoness would, from time to time, make certain that the fledgling race of people, still living their neolithic age, would fair well in the troubles the natural world still held for them.

"I will protect this world from harm. But I can only do so if you all live rightly by each other. I will not reverse natural death and may only undo murders if the reason is right. You must rely on yourselves. Yet I will watch over you." Meniko said to these people across this tiny world. She spoke at length with their elders and made the pact that made her a goddess to them. She was to be obeyed and respected yet she never asked for anything from them -not even respect or obedience.

Meniko was a shepardess over a loose flock and all she wanted was for their lives to long, peaceful, and fruitful.

On rare occasion, a few seafaring natives would find the island on which her school resided. Only once did they manage landfall before being sent back home. On that day, Meniko hid the school from their eyes leaving only a few trinkets and supplies for the voyage. When they returned home, the sailors could no more recall the island or where it was than a dream lost in light sleep.

Meniko would appear atop a mountain peak and survey the land before flying away on mile wide wings. It was the stuff of myth and legend. No doubt Meniko would have to address this some day fading into their stories like Dragaseir had in so many other cultures.

"When a people is young, they will accept the strange a fantastic like common fact. But take well to the fact that they can never learn, by us, what is beyond the dome of their sky. Such knowledge will collapse their world. They are

the center of their universe. Let them have that for a few eons more..." Meniko whispered to Rae when they visited the Elder's council of these people, known as the Bayll.

Rae was their goddess of young motherhood, and protection. A figure whose boundless strength and compassion inspired many stories, none of them true but easily could have been, and youth to be strong and protective of their homes and loved ones. Her own modesty and compassion made her an example to them all.

The Bayll loved their new pantheon of gods and goddesses.

Menikomenqolui was the queen-mother of them all and Rae, her daughter, according to the carefully crafted legend was lost among fierce beasts until the goddess of sky and fire, Meniko, snatched her from death and took her home.

Details about their lives were never revealed but somehow they imagined most of it very accurately. Including how Rae returned to those same wild beasts as a maiden woman and found her "twin" sister who was frozen in stone at the base of a great pillar and raised her sister like daughter. How she married a great hunter, Makahn, but was also courted by the lord of days and nights, Sage.

Meniko would return as soon as she was sure that the coastal peoples were safe and no doubt sew the seeds of new stories.

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Eqis saw the storm in the distance and felt like a terrible mistake was about to be made. Kaya was going to fight the group she'd put together. Kaya was likely the strongest fighter of the group but she'd be no match for everyone at once.

She stood firmly on the cliff side naked as her first day of life. She pressed her powers to expand feeling her muscles grow and her breasts swell. She could feel the force of the hurricane and drew strength from it. That was a basic skill she was taught as a girl new to the Mystic League. Everything could be a source of power and the more massive or focused that source, the easier it was.

That practice was slowly being replaced by a version of Rae's internal cultivation, a skill she developed as her mastery of the older skills was draining away the energies of the whole universe and several others. Still one needed to accumulate a vast sum of power before growing their power within themselves

to achieve even a fraction of the godlike power most of the graduate and master students had.

Eqis relaxed pushing the extra power into a tiny point in her gut where it stayed. She had added several decades to her life now easily measures in tens of thousands of years. She felt a small tremble of in the energies about her and looked behind her seeing Kaya looking if not scared certainly concerned.

"Kitten?" Eqis turned completely about to face her adopted little sister. Kaya was herself totally nude save her headdress. She looked so tiny standing there as the distant storm lashed out with strong gales snapping the little lioness' headdress like a bandana whip.

"Big sister..." Kaya leaned into the wind slightly, "What did the headmistress say?"

"She wants you to fight the other kittens. I am sorry." Eqis looked straight at Kaya and admired the fact that she was so beautiful and matured. So many lions would give an arm or leg... and a few would give a testicle to see Kaya like this. So vulnerable and yet one of the strongest lionesses alive.

Kaya's shoulders sank. Then rose as she took a deep breath and smiled, "I won't let you down, big sister. I'll show everyone I am worthy..." Then she took a long look at Eqis, whose gaze fell away. "big sister?"

"You saw what a little bit of power did to Mayia. You know what it did to Mau and is doing to Pleeyo. I'm scared that you'll look down that path a just run down it and not look back... When a sister goes rogue, she is hunted and slain..." Eqis let tears but they were swept away in the blustering gale, "I don't want you to die..."

Kaya walked up to her mentor and sister as best she could in the wind. she laid her head on the larger lioness' bosom and reached to hug her, "I won't go the wrong way. I swear it or I'll kill myself so I don't go further. I just want you to be proud of me. I want to be strong enough to be at your side... not behind you. I want to be strong enough to choose my own mate like you can. I want to be your sister... I don't want to die. I want to be strong enough to live forever at your side..."

Eqis curled her own massive arms around the cub kissing her forehead, "Shut up... I love you, too."

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Mayia finished helping secure the outer piers where the small boats kept for swimming beyond the reefs. It was barely a task for her now. Her strength seemed to grow a little more every few minutes. She saw the other students clear the way for her, trying not to look straight at her. A few tumbled after seeing the bunny hoist several heavy dugout boats, a couple large enough for Goath'El, like small styrofoam toys, out of the water putting them ashore.

She saw their reactions as she stood utterly unaffected by the gale winds, even her ears didn't flutter in the wind strong enough to carry off some of the mice who couldn't come out to help for their own safety. Mayia moved slowly toward a few students who were having difficulty with a bundle of supplies. They instantly hurried to finish as if she might "punish" them for not being quick enough. They did so and scurried away.

'This isn't respect...' she thought. 'this is fear.'

Finally, later that night, she traced her steps through the corridors and into the inner sanctum, coming finally to a blank section of wall.

She brought herself up, cleared her throat, and looked up at the crystalline node in the ceiling.

"I'd... I'd like to see Master Sage, if I may Daedaleus."

She waited for a moment, and then the optic blinked at her, pushed out slightly and then twisted briefly before setting back into the wall again. Then right before her, the strange organic steel of Sage's lair melted apart, revealing a stairway leading up. Setting herself forward, she slowly began to ascend to the upper parts of the Lair.

Like a small town nestled within the massive tree, Sage's Lair formed a nest of sorts made up of large clusters, hidden inside the tree's heavy layer of leaves.

She'd only been up this way a couple of times, but she was amazed at the secret things that were kept here in the core of the tree.

Water spontaneously poured out of a nook as she passed by it, and a pair of tree shrews were playing in the water as it poured over into several overlapping natural basins, then into a large pool, before spilling over the side of the tree to supply the Garden that was in the center of the tree in the form of a towering water fall.

Moonsingers nested in the trees, and though she could not see them,

their music could nonetheless be heard, and here and there, the bright blue-green glow of will-o-whisps, the tree's caretakers, tended to the tree while feeding off its stray life sparks.

Furthur up past Sage's Zen Meditation Garden, and finally to the great disk of his home near the peak of the tree. All about her she could see the various pods that housed the students' classrooms and living quarters. She picked out her own pod easily.

Then taking a deep breath, she lifted her hand and was about to knock when the clutter of branches acting as a doorway untangled themselves and moved out of the way, inviting her to enter. Taking another calming breath, she stepped upward into Sage's room, a replica of the one he'd created for himself within the space of a tiny dorm room when he'd first arrived here. Though this one, had many more rooms and facilities.

She removed her slippers and then stepped forward, aware that Dallas was no where to be seen, but she simply moved in the direction Sage could be found.

He was in his human form, an exotic looking furless humanoid with bright angling eyes, as he pruned the trees and bushes of the small garden on its small island surrounded by bright colored fish.

"Good evening, Mayia." he said, still concentrating on his work. "Daedaleus says you wish to speak with me."

Mayia bowed her head and knelt quickly, bowing even deeper. "Master... I-I want you to seal me."

There was one final snip of Sage's sheers that echoed in her ears.

"Why? Have you decided to leave this school?"

"No! Never Master Sage," she practicaly cried, and lifted herself, gasping at the implication, saw him standing there, glowing eyes watching her kindly as he stood with hands clasped behind his back.

"Then why?" he repeated his question, and she pushed herself to the floor again, trembling.

"I'm becoming a horrible monster!" she sobbed and began crying.

"Mayia..." Sage intoned, and she controlled her crying enough to look up

at him.

"Stand up, Mayia." he said then, and slowly, slower than she'd ever done anything in her life, she rose to her feet, keeping her eyes lowered. "Now... Look at me." The slowness at which she did this, rivaled that of her last action, but she finally did look up at Sage's human form. "Now... That is much better. I will not have a student who cannot look me in the eye. You will forever be bumping into things otherwise.

"Now... I want you to ask your question again."

"M-master Sage..." she began, but he held up a finger and looked sternly at her as her eyes began to lower her gaze lifted immediately. "Master Sage, I want to have my powers sealed... Until I can become worthy of them again." she blinked away the last of her tears.

"Why?"

"I-I'm becoming a hateful monster, Lord Sage. Giving pain and humiliation to my fellow students instead of help and advice."

"So I've noticed." he said, and went back to pruning his plants, petting the head of his faithful moon singer companion here at the League.

Mayia blanched, and her lips pressed together as she swallowed hard at Sage's comments. But then Sage continued.

"I am glad that you've come here, Mayia. I've put off 'humbling' you because I knew you'd realize what you were doing eventually. What brought this revelation to you?"

"A little black rabbit told me." she admitted.

Sage nodded. "You realize, that you are giving many of the other students power over you now." she nodded, and Sage clipped a few more times before lowering his sheers to a small black lacquered table nearby. "Very well... But I have a requirement for granting this."

"Yes, master, anything!" she half laughed.

"You cannot tell anyone WHY you have suddenly lost so much strength and power."

"B-but master, why would..."

"So that you do not draw pride off of it. The students may taunt and perhaps even abuse you, Mayia, but it will be nothing in comparison if you take pride in your trail, that you were of great enough consciousness to ask for humility. It destroys the lesson that needs to be learned."

"Yes master," she bowed her head, and lifted it again, and immediately Sage began to move his arms and fingers. Trails of light etched themselves off of his finger tips as he weaved ribbons of light into Seven Glyphs, each a different color, each a different configuration. She tried to pay attention to such advanced magic, but he was moving too fast.

"Spell weaving!" she thought, even as each of those glyphs pushed into the seven Chakra points of her body. Then Sage formed another glyph, this time far more complicated, and in the form of a magic circle. When he released it, it flew over her head, and then lowered about her neck, before it closed snugly about her thick throat, just before the glyph began folding, solidifying into a thick collar of gold, and at its front, a Scarab.

Then suddenly she felt winded and weak, and sank to one knee as her body immediately diminished, and she heard seven audible clicks as her seven 'Sources' and all their advanced power was locked. Her muscles diminished, her increased size lessened, her form became more virile instead of robust, and more lithe instead of powerful.

Her clothing all felt very loose on her now, when it was just so recently tight. A strange difference, however, was that her breasts seemed to be much larger, but that was perhaps because there was less expanse behind them.

"It is done, Mayia. You shall live this way until in your own mind, you feel worthy of the powers you've gained."

"Yes master," she bowed herself out, and then left. Sage watching her go.

"God bless," he whispered, and then returned to his pruning.

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Noxi spent very little time visiting the Shadow League grounds but when she did it was usually to see how Mayia was doing. The great hare wore her usual skintight bodysuit but had on a pink and white trench coat with her mane completely tied back and tucked under her coat.

Noxi was hoping to put a few of the amateur sensor kits her student built

on a point on the island. She was quick, scarcely a pink chrome blur slipping through the air. Landing just short of the doors to the lair, Noxi parctically landed on Mayia as she emerged through the doors.

"Sorry..." Noxi started before realizing who see was looking at, "Mayia? What happened to you?"

"I... got my powers sealed..." Mayia almost seemed to sulk, "I... was not... I was a thug..."

"I think you made a good choice... But it may end up being a permanent one. If you can't handle the power now you probably never will. Just don't dwell on it or you may never be ready..."

"Mentor?" Mayia looked about ready to cry or scream. She trembled looking and the ground, "Can I come and visit your family soon?"

"If Sage doesn't have anything for his top student to do after the storm," Noxi was surprised stroking Mayia's shoulder, "I need to speak with Sage for a bit. So before you go could you show me in?"

Mayia smiled leading Noxi in, "This way, mentor..."

### **Thunder rolls...**

The hurricane was still a day away now and Eqis wanted to get this bout over with. Meniko hung in the air in her true form filling the sky. She was not showing off but rather was just trying to get some needed exercise. Hovering in a sheering winds of a storm gails was far more difficult that gliding on them or pushing through.

Salba, Kah-leah, Pahjo, and Clio all stood on one end of the field and Kaya waited on the other. Her gaze was soft but alert. She wanted to win this fight or at least be found worthy. But that could mean almost anything in her young mind but everything she was taught was sifting to the surface into conscious memory.

"Obviously, fighting to the point of maiming my friends isn't going to make the point... neither is letting them beat me bloody. Salba and Pahjo are too tough for me to beat without hurting either one alone and together I don't stand a chance without being ugly. 'Kah' is gonna be the trap they're gonna rely on to catch and cripple me. She's still too slow but if she touches me I'm done. Clio... Fatima would have been safer for me. She's just too strong. I couldn't really beat her on my best day..." Kaya's mind raced trying to decide a best

course of action. She loved her friends and this fight felt so unfair. Not for herself but her friends and adopted sisters. There's almost no way she could win without hurting someone. Her gaze ran over the faces of the four she would fight.

Salba was cool but tense. So was Kah-Leah and Clio, who actually had the least to fear from the lioness. Pahjo, however, limbered up wearing little more than a pair of trunks with only adequate room for his manhood. He grinned to the three girls giving them more confidence to go through with what was sure to be a gang mauling.

Eqis sat on an immense boulder perched like a warchief in her outfit. The massive bracers on her wrist and ankles glittered with fine detailing and jewels. Her face was filled with dread as if she were being punished for asking for "forbidden knowledge". Etma Makashyn certainly qualified as such. Eqis shuttered.

"Kaya, dear?" Meniko's voice was clear over the roaring winds and sporadic heavy rain. The great deep red bird dragoness hung like some cheap special effect in the wind, effortlessly holding her position looking down on the field from almost 300 feet up.

Kaya's voice was small and from 300 feet even the most powerful ears might not hear her clearly. Still she spoke, "Yes, ma'am..."

"This is a test and not a punishment. You already know that not all tests are fair but are meant to test for other attributes. Not always strength or skill. You will meet your friends who know your style and skills best and will force you to reveal your true self in combat. This is the test. I will stop things if they get out of hand but I expect everyone to fight at their fullest or the test will be useless." the great creature looked to both ends of the field. All the students bowed.

"Begin..."

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Mayia was so much smaller than Noxi was now. She actually missed looking up to her mentor. Noxi was so bright, brilliant was a better word, and was like a beloved aunt to her. Mayia's fighting skills made her a force but without the power she had before she felt so small and almost helpless.

Siklohn walked up to the twosome bowing politely to Noxi but only slightly to Mayia. He glared at her and she jumped slightly.

"Hello young lord Dousaka," Noxi returned firmly regaining his attention. the young white wolf stepped back to regain his composure. She was far stronger than Mayia could imagine but more over she had addressed him correctly with due authority demanding his courtesy. One must be of proper form to gain proper respect. It is never actually given nor can it be demanded...

"Instructor Noxi," he looked at the larger bunny, "I need to speak with Mayia a moment..."

"I'm sure you will be a gentleman." Noxi continued on her way.

"Siklohn I'm sorry... I had to speak to Master Sage about a personal matter."

"I want an answer from you. What did you say to Caliban? I had to find out that she tried to kill you, knowing full well that you would have killed her first, form Verdance of all people. What did you say to her to anger her so?"

"I... said you didn't love her..." She lowered her head in shame, "I'm your roommate and nothing more. I shouldn't have gotten involved..."

"No." Siklohn grasped her throat with crushing force and drove his fist into her face sending her flying. She landed and bounced several times before rolling up against a tall root of the Millennium tree. "You should not have."

He walked away without another word snarling the whole while. Mayia shuttered in pain and fear. Siklohn was far stronger than she was now and he was always just a fast... maybe faster.

Noxi appeared next to Mayia, who sat up curled into a ball against the root. The greater rabbit knelt down to look at the bad briuse and swelling already forming over nearly half the bunny's face. She put her hand just over the injury and whispered a few words of focus and the bruise and swelling dissipated. "Aphkians can be wildly emotional. Incredible discipline and focus is needed for most cenu to control themselves enough to tolerate each other so you can imagine what is must be like having to deal with someone he must view as an inferior, remember he is Dousaka. Some things are hardwired like a low opinion of anything not Aphkei."

Mayia rubbed her cheek relieved that the injury did not hold, "Thank you, mentor..."

"Maybe you should bunk with a friend..." Noxi noted the deepening sorrow on the girl's face.

"I... don't have any friends here..."

"That's hard to imagine..."

"Everyone hates me. When I had powers I hurt everyone..."

"Then maybe you should sleep over at my residence for a while. At least until you feel safe sleeping next to 'Mr.Sprinkle'," She poked out her own buck teeth getting a small giggle from the girl. "Let's go speak to Mister Preypacer."

Mayia got up slowly and followed Noxi back once more into the lair...

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Kaya screamed as Clio stretched the smaller lioness' back again using enough force to uproot a large tree. Her lovely features swollen and discolored beyond recognition. Kaya struggled to slip free tears pouring from her eyes.

Clio, herself, was crying knowing what she was doing to her friend as she tossed Kaya into easy reach of Kah-Leah who instantly twisted the larger girl into a painful rack over her shoulders and slowly pumped squeezing the spine and tearing the abs more and more.

After a few moments, she was dropped on the ground like a spent and broken toy. She crawled to find something to prop herself up on barely able to breath.

Salba and Pahjo sat back watching like two vultures waiting for Kaya to die. They knew that this form of brutality was normal for Casid Lions though it could also include sodomy and rape. They looked sick of the sight of Kaya always getting up for more.

From the start, it was Clio blasting with lightning and hail stones followed by liberal beatings and Kah-Leah weakening or breaking bones and major muscle groups. Salba and Pahjo barely had a chance to get involved.

Kaya stood up again defiantly looking back at the two torturers. She was in no shape to fight back but she managed, with all her remaining strength, to assume a fighting stance. "I will not give up! If I can stand, I can continue..."

"Our turn." Pahjo said grimly charging at Kaya dropping into a body roll as Salba jumped over him to strike from above.

Kaya's face grew dim as new tears flowed, mixing with blood, mud, and

grass. But the attacks never connected...

Egis had wrapped herself around to cub taking the hits, that were no more effective on her as they would have been on a mountain. She held on to the cub suffusing her with healing energies. "I'm sorry. I'm sooo sorry..."

"Congratulations..." Meniko said softly, "Egis..."

Egis looked up at the dragoness and grew slack holding the cub who had past out. "What? What do you mean?"

"I was testing you Egis not Kaya. She would have past any kind of combat test easily. But you needed to a test of your commitment to your 'little sister'. You almost failed..." Meniko drifting a bit as the winds changed. "I am sorry to put Kaya through that and the others kittens as well..."

"..." Egis's mouth fell open unable to speak.

"You will not let Kaya progress too far too quickly killing herself and you will not allow her to stray down the dark road killing others. You have passed. Take her to the hospital for a once over and let her rest. You still have some precautions for the storm to complete." Meniko faded from sight.

Egis found the other kittens surrounding Kaya all of them smiling and crying at the same time. They were proud to have such a caring teacher in Egis and such a strong peer in Kaya. They all put on a quick but loving embrace as the lioness lifted into the air, soaring away with Kaya.

"Make sure you are all set for the storm... and Clio..." Egis said drifting away.

"Teacher?"

"Report to Meniko's lair. If the storm gets too bad she may want you to tone it down."

"Yes, ma'am..." Clio sounded almost afraid. Meniko was still so much more powerful than she could imagine. Then there is the time the dragoness sealed her powers using a lie and painful force to do so. Still the headmistress was a loving being and not so quick as to do so again.

## **In the Eye of Fury**

The first bands of the Hurricane had meet the Mystic Archipelago. The

seas grew rough and waterspouts, tornadoes over the water, spun up everywhere as the tropic superstorm mixed with the cooler waters from the north. Surf swelled violently. Winds blew with unyielding might.

Kaya wobbled a bit, still healing on a huge spot of stone just short of the Shadow League beach. It was as far as she was willing to go. She was not invited nor did she ask permission to go. It was something that had to be done. The lioness sat there on the cold rock in the pounding surf, driving rains, and brutal winds.

In the storm fringe, she began to sing. Her voice was soft and carried on the winds such that she could not hear herself beyond her own head but somewhere, somehow, Maya heard the lioness. The song was in the native Casid and was both peaceful and strong.

The bunny never heard its like before... I was a sung prayer of challenge.

"Who would be singing it?" She thought looking out sensing it was coming from the sea, "That's not possible... No one in their right mind..." She breathed heavily grabbing her rain cape after shedding her uniform for more casual clothes. Carefully placing her uniform on the bed, along with a week's worth of clothes, she ran out.

Just as she got to the base of the Millennium Tree, around which the Shadow League was built and held Sage's Lair, Maya saw her master and teacher looking directly toward the source of the song. He did not move as she stood there actually surprised to see him there simply listening.

"It's like she is daring the storm and you to meet her." Sage murmured as not to interfere with the meager lyrics and melodies carried on the violent wind.

"Kaya?" Maya took a step closer, "I don't understand..."

"I think that is why she is singing out there. To call you out for something. I don't know the exact meaning of this song and Dallas hasn't been able to do any deep research because of Mother Sanari's gremlins..." Sage sighed raising and drooping his wide shoulders before looking at the bunny. Sanari had been very unhappy about Dallas extending his surveillance into her temple and decided on this course of action to deal with the living computer. It wasn't something she took pride or pleasure in doing but it was important to maintain privacy. Plus gremlins are unpredictable and, instead of only interfering, they were actually attacking Daedalus's systems. Sanari was wrestling with them for weeks until recently when they started to give up. "Be careful. The hurricane's eye will pass directly over the Mystic League Island and we will get to

worse of it's edge."

"Yes, Master," Mayia bowed dashing into the storm.

"One day," Sage said to himself quietly, "I will need to ask that little lioness as to why she adores being so foolish..." He turned away to look in on Siklohn and the tribute due.

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Siklohn read the errand order carefully, considering every word for loop holes so he might exact to uttermost from it. Caliban leaned next to him breathing softly into his back.

"I wish I could go with you," she murmured wrapping her arms around him from behind.

"I would prefer you to Mayia..."

"Pardon my intrusion," Sage spoke frankly but politely. Caliban had completely given up returning to being male and was obviously enjoying being a female courting this young prince. Caliban expectedly almost jumped off Siklohn, who barely budged as they both looked at the were-tiger. "Why not Mayia?"

"While you paired us to learn from each other," Siklohn half waved the errand order on the holopad, a slim stick of light gray plastic and clear plastic film for a screen, "But your apprentice is too intent on doing things on her own. She does things from rote instead of thinking first believing she is so superior that she requires no support, second opinion, or logic. Ultimately, I have had to watch her destroy more often than was called for by any normal stretch of good sense. Luckily there were no fatalities due to her incompetence." The word "luckily" brought a sour look to his face and a whiff of poison in his voice. It was a very subdued outrage that such things even exist.

Caliban looked at her obvious boyfriend, "You hate luck don't you?"

"There is no such thing as luck. All lives are threads in the tapestry of creation. How they cross and what crosses them determine what happens. Controlling those interactions is key to what some people would call 'good luck'."

"I never pegged you for a fatalist, Siklohn," Sage looked at the new spear made for his tribute. The carvings were incomplete but were clearly beautiful and equal to any master armsmith he'd ever seen.

"I have no sense of fate. I am to be a master of my own life. Fate is a word with no meaning in my life."

"What about meeting Caliban? You can not plan for these things..." Sage knew what would be the most likely answer but wanted to hear it anyway. This wolf had such a clear view of himself it was eerie even to him.

"I do not plan to find a fine gem in road. I simply take it when I come to it." He said and Caliban gave him a warm hug in response.

Not what I expected to hear. He's letting his heart talk for him this time, Sage thought then he spoke, "About Mayia being incompetent. If she is not following your example to look before leaping then that will have to be addressed... between the two of you. You are as much her teacher as she is your's... Though you are learning far more quickly than she is from what you say."

"It will be addressed on this next away mission, sir." Siklohn said firmly with that military emphasis that made Sage almost want to salute. Aphkians didn't salute. They did however did 'present', standing at attention addressing, or clicking, their heels.

"Very good... and the tribute?"

"It is not finished, sir."

"Take all the time you need. This one has more... heart." Sage finally gave in with a casual salute before leaving.

"Told'ja. He could tell." Caliban kissed his cheek. She was very determined to have him and it drove her crazy to know he really would make her wait until they were both at least 25 before giving up his virginity to her. It was one cennuffii custom she hated. Egas, he makes me sooo horny!!!!

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Mother Sanari sat under one of the younger trees watching the grove elder as it's old limbs creaked and cracked in the violent winds. She felt the slightest change in the winds and patted the grass beside her and a great white tiger lay down beside her.

She scratched his chin and the enormous cat, easily the size of a rhinoceros, almost purred, more a pleasant half growl, "The gremlins will be out of Dallas's core after the storm. They were not supposed to start deleting files or

scrambling synapses..."

The Tiger morphed smoothly into the tigerman she had grown to adore as he spoke, black lacquer spilled over his nude form to provide some clothing, a skintight bodysuit, "I would think my own defenses would be sufficient. Even the most powerful of my shields and wards have failed..."

"It is the manner in which sorcery works in this universe. There are both rules and no rules here... It is often better to cure than to prevent. I am sorry."

"Just tell me they won't wreck Dallas."

"They will try but the worst they can do now is forcible disconnect him from outbound connections."

Sage was quiet for what felt like an hour but as he started to speak Sanari looked at the old tree, "I apologize. I have been getting ahead of myself... I have interfered with your school and now your friend. Please forgive me..."

"I... forgive you," he said drawing her close, "But I did find learning about this universe from the people a bit more inviting than Dallas hunting down the information for me. That and... Some of my most challenging students have made remarkable progress without my monitoring them..."

The rain beats down harder. With a wave of Sanari's hand a small dome forms over the twosome. "Mayia is moving in with Noxi for a few days or so?"

Sage's raises an eyebrow looking at the immortal catwoman. He was hit by the same "how did you know?" feeling that he hit others with so often. It was a touch unsettling but not threatening. "Noxi seems to feel that maybe getting some distance on my school will help her a bit."

"Why not? She has no family to turn to except this school and Noxi is like an aunt to her."

Sage was still looking at the old tree doing it's best to shield the saplings under it from the storm.

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Mayia finally found Kaya on the rocks, shivering in the freezing sea. Knowing Casid had a remarkably poor level of resistance to cold, Mayia wasted little time to reach the lioness before she passed out.

"You suicidal boob! Just hold on. I'm on my way!" The bunny bounced easily from rain slicked ledge to the next.

Kaya is much taller than Mayia ever was, sealed and unsealed, but still the lioness seemed very light to the bunny who easily climbed back out of the waves and carried her indoors out of the storm.

Once out of the rain and in the girls locker room, one of the few relatively private settings available to Mayia, the lioness quickly warmed up, especially with a hot bowl of booth in her stomach.

Mayia still resented having the girl who nearly crippled her right there. It was probably a major reason why she became so abusive with the abilities Sage had unlocked and so recently resealed. She wanted revenge so badly she didn't think who she was lashing out at.

Kaya smiled warmly, not feigning her gratitude though the bunny missed it.

"Thank you," Kaya spoke softly wrapped in a dry body towel stripping out of her tiny white outfit, "I knew you'd hear me." The towel slightly spread at her hips but her legs are closed together revealing nothing. Still a male student passing by got an instant woody from the very image.

Mayia heard that voice, that sweet innocent voice that was used before to berate her, as she saw it, and others. It was true that this lioness was probably the strongest girl in her power grouping. Mayia was sure she was stronger unsealed but it was easy power... The kind of power that made it easy to abuse her would-be friends and peers... In fact, she was sure she didn't have peers while unsealed.

Siklohn was a much smarter person, more like a military officer of the highest caliber. Kaya was stronger and faster, though not actually quicker or more evasive, but just as flexible in a fight and more willing to sacrifice herself for victory. She fell neatly between them but could not ultimately defeat either one until she had become a better student overall.

"I'm sorry... for what I did to you," Kaya looked at Mayia then lowered her gaze in shame, "I..." She didn't cry but the remorse was genuine and Mayia felt even less vindicated. She came out here uninvited, braved a violent storm and freezing seas, with the northern current turning for the season, all to give an apology. If nothing else this girl was shaming Sage's apprentice again with her sheer humility.

"You wanted to challenge me?" Mayia didn't want to focus on how much stronger Kaya's character was. How confident she was. How beautiful and unbearably sexy... It wasn't fair. Why is she doing this to me?

"I wanted to get your attention." Kaya stood up as the towel fell off. Mayia's eyes followed unconsciously the lattice work of finely honed and taut muscles. The lioness caught the towel and held it over her sex with a glib innocence that would definitely not hurt imitating if she were to get Geevo's attention. He is bigger than she is now and still about the cutest bunny boy she'd ever met.

Mayia absently cupped her much smaller but actually cuter bosom staring at the lioness'. Kaya's were large and firm, very sexy, but the bunny actually was glad her's looked so cute. A little more than a handful each, they were attention getting. "uh.. why? It couldn't solely for an apology? Could it?"

"I'm going to start training in Etma Makashyn tomorrow. I also know you want to but stronger so you'll be training harder, too, to beat me," Kaya knelt down head bowed so submissively, again her humility was boundless, "Please. Let's fight as we are now one last time. This time no holding back. No excuses and no more talking."

"Before we're too strong to do anything but kill each other?" Mayia half mused seeing the serious look in the eyes of her rival. A cold chill ran down her back followed by a surge of adrenaline. She knelt down before the lioness nodding, "If Master Sage will allow it, then I'm game."

Kaya leaned forward quickly and hugged the bunny and kissed her... rather hotly mouth to mouth. Mayia nearly faints with that going limp for a moment in Kaya's arms.

"Yow..." Mayia breathed straightening up. She was thoroughly aroused by that gesture and felt herself surge as a strong warmth and wetness filled her loins. She had heard stories of how Jasa Kese had taught a few girls in the Mystic league to derive incredible strength and vitality through sexual fulfillment... without actual intercourse. She never thought that it was altogether true. Demon Leaguers often kept their secrets to themselves. But thus was when Jasa was still "good". Kaya smirked as the scent of the bunny's pheromones filled the room. "What did you just do?"

"Lighten the mood a bit..."

"Can you show me how to do that. There's this guy..." she giggled at the joke that didn't need to be finished.

Kaya laughed as well removing her rival's top pointing to several chi points, chakara, "The trick is getting your 'victim' to excite himself..."

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Sage was amazed at how quickly and easily Sanari entered a meditative state just watching the old tree struggle in the wind. He entered at exited such a state in the storm the wait it out but found his attention drawn back to his island. He could feel a change happening there.

He looked at Sanari with his calm green eyes catching her blink but once in the last ten minutes or so. He felt a subtle arousal watching her. The intrigue she represented and the fullest favor of feminine mystique kept his attention. How they had grown so close... It was too close...

Mentally he recoiled and looked away. After a few moments he shifted back into the tiger and left; half ashamed, half heartbroken...

Sanari did not move murmuring softly into the roaring winds, "When you are ready I will be waiting for you." The tiger never heard those words over the storm as he stalked away in to the forest beyond the temple

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In the woods Sage found Eakjo huddled in the knothole of a large tree. The tiny boy shivered, frightened of the storm. The great white beast, sat calmly in clear view seeing him stare with fear of the unfamiliar form Sage displayed.

The were-tiger morphed into his hybrid form and the black ooze forming his suit again. Eakjo did not move, too afraid to do so alone. Seeing this, Sage slowly but surely moved closer to the boy.

"How did you get out here?" He whispered letting the Zhumal cub climb into his arms. "Poor thing. You're soaked..." Sage knew the Millennium tree on his island would be far safer than these woods right now. He thought about Sanari's feelings on the matter, "Would you prefer the temple?"

Eakjo, however, exhausted from his ordeal feel asleep in his arms and the were-tiger only sighed before disappearing with the boy into the woods.

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Mayia nearly cried out in pleasure as Kaya gently leaned over the reclining bunny. Both were nude now and gathering a crowd.

A light lick on the nape of the neck sent spasms of ecstasy through the bunny as she failed to suppress a wild squeal of delight. Kaya was well aware of the students gathered to see this display and stopped her touching. Mayia was not, too lost in the lovemaking to realize she was becoming a spectacle. Kaya backed off as the crowd became a bit too involved.

"That's enough," Kaya groaned at the crowd. "This is something private. so beat it before I beat you."

Mayia heaved enjoying the multiple climaxes she experienced. Her own powers seemed to expand a bit with that. When she looked about to see several students staring with Kaya, snarling at them, she stood up with authority. "What are you looking at?" In her nudity, she felt a great surge of confidence... Of course, the draft between her legs aroused her further.

The students backed away and a few left, though not as quickly as when they heard a distant, "Master Sage." Like ninja in retreat they vanished without a trace or sound.

Turning back, she saw Kaya sitting up on her knees as if waiting for punishment and said with some sense of disappointment having been so interrupted, "We'd better get dressed..."

"You aren't upset? I was... I mean I never let it hang out quite so easily..."

"A bodyshy Casid?" Mayia poked fun wiping her loins clean with a towel, "I think I have one last thing to see before I've seen it all now..."

Kaya laughed a bit as she too wiped away much of the lovejuices they let during the "lesson". "I guess it's a little silly..."

"It's what makes you you." Mayia fitted her top feeling the slight growth of her bosom. It was like the start of a new puberty. One that might be more beneficial than the last. "I think it's cute..."

"I would be hard pressed to disagree," Sage spoke surprising Kaya as she quickly covered up blushing. One erect nipple peeked out from behind the pungent towel. "I trust I wasn't interrupting anything."

"No,sir," Kaya looked away bashfully. Sage could see her infatuation in her eyes. It was much stronger than Fatima's ever was.

"We were just finishing up a few... uh... lessons..." Mayia impishly spun

her words getting a grin from the tigerman then her face straightened, "Sir, We would like your permission to have a bout..."

"When?" Sage gently rubbed the shivering Eakjo's body for warmth.

"When the eye passes over, sir," Kaya said meekly but surely. She never made eye-contact with him.

"Look at me cub," Sage leaned down a bit. Kaya did so swooning a bit to see Eakjo.

"You look like a daddy," Kaya blurted immediately covering her mouth. Mayia nearly fell over laughing as Sage chuckled himself.

"I feel like one sometimes," he said wrapping a clean towel around Eakjo, "You can have your fight in the eye, when it passes over the Mystic Island." Then he looks straight at the blushing lioness cub, "Does Eqis know you're here?"

Kaya's shoulders sink shaking her head, "...no,sir...she doesn't..."

"She's about to find out." Sage said firmly, "but first clean up this room. And the next time you two decide to 'get it on' do it in a more private room. Not the girl's locker room."

Both girls blush visibly as Sage walks off, Eakjo in his arms, chuckling. Some things wouldn't be right to show her myself...

### **Where calm things are...**

Eqis, handling Kaya like a disobedient child, that is, very roughly, examines the adolescent's injuries. They had healed enough not to be a problem but Eqis was still worried. Eqis had a very good idea what one of Sage's students could do, after he 'demonstrated' his skills to her, and Mayia was his best.

The sky was clear for miles but the ring of clouds in the distance were bidding only a half hour at most. Clio was still forbidden from interfering with the storm.

A few droids hovered and slid across the field picking up debris as others arrived to transmit and record the fight. None of the other students were allowed to attend for their own safety. Even now, the Shadow League Island was being battered by the edge of the eye of the hurricane.

Eqis stroked the head of her adopted little sister and straightened her headdress, "Be careful, will you? Mayia might be a bit... green, like you, but she..."

Kaya put a confident hand on the larger lioness' shoulder, "Don't even make me think you're afraid of Sage or his arts. If you are you'll never get to know him well. He's not the one I'm fighting full out anyway. Besides, I can't win playing it safe..." Kaya smiled brightly before taking a deep breath and turning away.

"Afraid?" Eqis muttered. She was afraid. She hated that feeling. Fear of being killed for the smallest failure or infraction of constantly changing rules. She ran away from that. That night she was afraid Sage would kill her. It never occurred to her that it could end any other way...

Yet there went Kaya, bouncing lightly like a dream on her toes, completely unafraid. She was totally secure that she could win or that her defeat would be extraordinarily costly. She was known as the "Little Princess" for being so close to the future queen, but she deserved the title "Brave Soldier" more for her willingness to fight to the end and take incredible chances for victory.

On the other end of the field, Sage handed a still sleeping Eakjo off to Sanari before inspecting his apprentice.

Mayia actually looked nervous watching Kaya stretch waiting for her. Kaya could quickly overwhelm her and use any move she's seen once or twice. The day she fought Siklohn haunted her like no other. Is she going to use the Dragon Touch on me?

"You are hesitating." Sage chided her and she jumped. Her fear was almost tangible. Still she wanted to show what she was capable of before she went into her advanced training.

Mayia remembered that finishing move and quietly resolved never to end a bout like that again. She would train just as hard as Kaya did. She would fight to regain her powers and be truly worthy of them, to know she did earn them, to have them and not need them. "That is what a real master of his or her technique longed for, isn't it?" she asked herself heading into the center of the field.

Looking Kaya face to face she was afraid to be the one to bow. She was after all the one in fear. Kaya never gave up. She'd be relentless this time and Mayia would have to be as while.

"Ready?" Kaya asked not having assumed a stance at all. She stood calmly and casually not hinting to any starting strategy or decision.

Mayia snapped into a stance. Light and defensive, it would be easy to evade an opening attack. She hoped. After a moment to settle herself down the bunny finally spoke, "Ye..."

Kaya opened with a vicious kick to the head sending her flying to the side. Before the bunny even knew what was happening several damaging punches cracked her ribs and nearly broke an arm as she belatedly tried to block.

Mayia forced herself to roll clear and regain some footing. Touching several nerves to deaden the pain of her cracked ribs, she was thankful for all the training that made her limber enough to ride most of the hits like a piece of cloth against a club. She landed just in time to have Kaya standing over her reaching out to grab her for a violent hold, throw, or slam. Mayia slipped under the lioness' grip and kicked upward into a full handstand launching Kaya up and back.

But before the bunny could capitalize on the solid hit. Kaya recovered flipping herself upright and, before she landed, actually leaped higher into the sky. Mayia's mouth gaped as a barrage of shockwave slashkicks and punches smashed into the ground around her.

Mayia dodges the barrage to see Kaya flying straight at her out of another 'air jump'. The bunny, jumping just over the flying lioness, throws out a well timed kick into the lioness' back slamming her into the ground.

Without the same powers Kaya possessed, the bunny was at a dreadful reach advantage and was unable to strike at Kaya before she dashed away clear from a massive drop fist leaving a deep hole up to her elbow in the soft soil.

Kaya flipped over from her retreating dash and leaped at the bunny in a vicious tackle. Mayia panicked for all of one instant and opened her hand still in the ground. The ground exploded, freeing her and blinding Kaya, with mud, dirt and rocks, who tumbled end over end for several yards, landing just a few feet from Sage.

The lioness girl stood up wiping the dirt from her face and eyes as Mayia dashed in to strike her while she had a good chance.

With her back turned, Kaya bent down hard kicking upward into an incomplete backflip smashing Mayia back. Kaya sat up digging a small stone out of her nose. Mayia, holding a rock from the ground blast throws it.

Kaya catches the rock without looking. She turns to see exactly where the bunny would be and spins violently until she releases the rock at supersonic speed. Mayia's balls up and the rock bounces off her 'iron shirt' defense, still leaving a deep bruise.

"too fast," Mayia said watching Kaya start for her again, "She keeps countering everything and I still can't get close enough to start pressing points..."

Kaya slides into a rising elbow punch and misses. She follows with a spinning kick but Mayia has her chance and quickly punches, not merely touches, several abdominal points on the larger lioness. The force of the punches sends shockwaves across the ground around them.

Kaya squeals with panic grabbing the bunny by the ears and tossing her into the air where she instantly moves to kick out. But the pressure points violently clinch her tight eight pack balling her up hard.

Kaya shrieks as Mayia rushes in for a quick knock out blow. But the lioness rolls clear as she struggles to relax the muscles and stand again. Mayia dashes again scarcely able to grab the thick long tail. But the Casid back kicks the bunny in the chest breaking already cracked ribs and launches her back a dozen yards or more.

Both girls were down. But Kaya was not actually hurt, just balled up and in pain, Mayia crying out in pain as her ribs needed to be set before healing them. She focused what healing energies she had on repairing her wounds.

Kaya, flopped over and kicks a shockwave at Mayia who is struck dead square with the blow re-breaking her half healed ribs. The bunny screams trying to find cover as yet another wave tears pasts her. That could have killed me!

Eqis saw Sage, his hand clinched in a desperate fist, and felt for him. His pride here, his apprentice, was cowering behind a low rise, struggling to fight back against a fighter who had no malice, or guile, just a sheer will to win. She, beneath her breath, begged for mercy for them both. Eqis watched Kaya grasp her abs and massage them vigorously and they did relax slowly.

Mayia set her shattered ribs and healed them but that left her weak and slowed as Kaya, dashed after her one last time.

Visions of the "Wonder Stretch" blinded her and she suddenly reached out just as Kaya grabbed her, smashing her hand into the lioness's neck with a loud crack. But Kaya's arms snapped shut around the bunny with a similar sound

from her ribs.

Creator, no!! Aauie's prediction is coming true! Please don't let it end like this. I have to get up first! I have to or there was no point at all to this match!

Mayia struggled to breath but now her ribs were collapsed and Kaya was coming too. The sound of bones in Kaya's neck reforming frightening the bunny as the lioness slowly began to squeeze the remaining air out of the bunny.

With what little strength she had left she tried to reach points to make the lioness release her and could not. She tried to scream in agony, or for help, and could not. It seemed all she could do was cry as it all went black.

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Kaya was the first face Mayia saw as she woke up in the school hospital. She was upset to loss like that, afraid and broken, and to never actually do any meaningful damage. The bunny didn't want to look at what, it seemed, was the better student...

"I got lucky several times," Kaya said softly as she sat down by the medical bed, "If you were a bit larger you could have won."

Mayia scoffed, "Stop trying to make me feel better. A strong sedative will do fine."

"Really. You are better. Just not quite big enough or maybe fast enough to really lay it on. Thank you." Kaya bowed her head deeply. "I think this is the right way, yeah?"

Mayia sat there stunned as she saw Noxi and Sage walk in. Sage without much fanfare activated a screen where the Shadow League students all cheered for her. Siklohn gave a very conservative thumbs up. But no where did she see Geevo. I'd think he'd be happy, at least, to see me get beat up...

"Mayia," Sage smiled fully, not showing teeth for Kaya's benefit as baring clinched teeth -even in a smile- was an aggressive display, "You did wonderfully. I was amazed that you held out as long as you did..."

"Triple gold star effort, charmer," Noxi leaned in with a hug. Then while still holding Mayia, she looked over toward the little lioness, "Eqis is at Meniko's archive. She's waiting for you there..."

"Thank you!" Kaya beamed as she quickly kissed Sage and hugged both

Noxi and Mayia before running out.

"She didn't even bother getting healed did she?" Noxi was puzzled. It was like the fight never happened for the girl. Both Sage and Mayia sensed a nervous shiver down Mayia's spine but never spoke of it.

"She's a tough girl. So's Mayia. But next time luck won't be a factor, Right?" Sage looked to the bunny in the bed. "That and you will show Fatima just what you can do."

A moments reflection passed before she spoke, "Yes, Master Sage..."

"Is she in here?" came a familiar voice. Geevo poked his head in the doorway led by two thick hefty ears carrying two heavy earrings. He wore a short pink skirt with a draping loincloth underneath and a thin, white, cut-length, shirt.

Mayia's eyes watered as she saw him standing in the doorway, "Geevo?"

"Hi... I kinda' begged to come along to see you." Geevo sounded sincere and that made Mayia's heart skip a beat. He almost shyly took the seat Kaya had sat in next to Mayia. "I'm sorry if I've been rude to you. But I saw you fight Kaya and I sorta' thought about all those times you wanted to be with me... You did some things you had no right to. But I can forgive you. I know that part of your training involves certain deeds but I won't pick that flower yet... but I wouldn't be averse to having you as a friend."

Somehow Geevo and Mayia missed the camera droid floating in a corner until a loud swoon came over the comm as they hugged each other and she kissed him.

"They didn't just..?" Geevo moaned his happy face went dim like a switch was thrown.

"The whole school..." Noxi mused.

Sage looked at his apprentice, seeing her happy at last after all these weeks, and felt good, "I'll expect in class in two days Mayia. Get some rest. Geevo. Be back by the end of tomorrow and keep her company until then.

"Yes, sir..."

Sage stepped out quietly as Noxi looked at Mayia, who wore nothing more than her patient's gown. "Get dressed so I can get you to my warren. Geevo..."

"Yes, Ma'am," Geevo sat cutely but as he noticed how Noxi glared at his skirt, his own gaze fell on it.

"I have small children at home. I want you to wear pants or a knee-length kilt or something... and underwear..."

"Awww, Jinx it all!" Geevo shot hearing the laughter of his peers. The black bunny grabbed a cup, from the nightstand, and threw it at the droid. "Switch off already!!!"

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Kaya returned to her dorm carrying several disks of motion data and technical information, the complete guide for Etma Makashyn, plus addition scrolls on Runidah, a Casid equivalent of Yoga. Salba and Kah-leah both hugged their follow kitten and 'sister by association'.

"Great fight," Salba chimed, "Too bad it wasn't perfect. She got away too many times."

"Myah," Kah-Leah mewed laying on her bed butt naked covering up for an early bedtime, "You're just so big to her. She slips by sooo fast." Kah-leah was tiny for any felis-type she was only a few inches taller than Mayia. She yawned before covering her head to block out the light, "Night-night..."

"So you're gonna study now?" Salba in a pair of tight gym shorts and a loose polyester sports shirt ready for bed herself. Her gi was hung neatly on the wall and her head headband on the nightstand. In comparison, Kah-leah was a slob with panty thongs and clothes thrown all over, and Kaya's space was as spartan as one could imagine. Her bed and one trunk were all she apparently owned.

"I'm just gonna scan through this stuff then take a shower then bed." Kaya smiled giddy with delight. She knew there was hard work ahead but she wanted it. She stripped off her clothes for comfort as Salba dimmed the lights knowing any of them could see in almost complete darkness. "Nighty, all..."

"Nighty, Kaya... Kah..." Salba said going to sleep listening the the storm outside.

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Mayia arrived with Geevo to Noxi's home. A cozy hole in the ground, finely built and decorated. Noxi opened the door to be beset by her child and

beleaguered husband, Yo-Kamban, a much larger rabbit and former Power'd Leaguer.

"Momma!" all seven bunnies cheered at once. Tuuno, her oldest son, barely 12, smiled widely, "She looks like cousin Maques but smaller."

"Maques?" Mayia looked at Noxi who pointed gladly to the stunning bunny who played with a few of the babies.

"Oh... hi..." her voice trailed off instantly enraptured by the black bunny who looked back with a charming smile. He looked uncomfortable in appropriate clothing but at least he got to see Noxi's home and meet the family.

"I'm Geevo," he said as she approached putting a hand over his chest to feel his heart.

Mayia cleared her throat rudely, "I'm Mayia..." Maques removed her hand.

Maques smirked, "Glad to meet'cha both. I finally got back here. My mom, Linxi, Noxi's older twin sister, decided that the military would have to wait a few more years for me. So I'm back."

"She's never missed a lesson I sent her... She's going to be one of only two older students Rae is going to teach herself. " Noxi said proudly. "I wish I had the time but I think she's going to teach both Maques and Waterlove. When Teal and Tuuno are older they'll learn from her as well."

At some point, Noxi's words fell on deaf ears as Mayia and Maques glared at each other. Geevo was playing with the baby bunnies with Tuuno. A new rival just fell into Mayia's lap.

Why can't anything be easy?

**End...**

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