

“Head Games”

Ben cut through the ISIS gymnasium with a nearly-identical incubus in tow. Self-defense class was in session, and several ‘cubi were sparring with each other. One particularly well-built armadillo incubus stood a head and shoulders above the rest, letting out a booming laugh after knocking his opponent to the mat. Ben and his companion stopped to look at him.

After a brief moment, Ben turned slightly and said, “Hey, Mike... Who’s the giant?”

The blue-furred fox incubus next to him spoke while still staring at the armadillo. “Hmm...big armadillo incubus... I believe his name is Jesse... Jesse Cin’Thra? I hear he’s not exactly a bully, but he loves to fight and can be a bit overbearing all the same.”

“Cin’Thra? Makes sense. That clan’s affinity is for Pride, and almost *all* of its members are adventurers. And if that guy’s not an adventurer, I’ll eat my iPawd.”

Jesse could clearly be heard over the din of grunts and bodies colliding. “Who’s next? Come on, I need a *real* sparring partner!”

Ben smirked. “Go on ahead to class, Son,” he said, cracking his knuckles. “I feel like trying my luck.”

Michael covered his face with his palm. “Seriously, Dad? I know you were an adventurer, but you’re a *mage*, not a warrior. He’ll wipe the floor with you!”

Ben looked at his son, his trademark sly grin on his face. “My boy, I’ve taught you much. But I haven’t taught you *everything*.” Michael just threw his hands out in exasperation as his father trotted over to the armadillo.

“Hey, Goliath!” Ben called, folding his arms. “I’ll take you on!”

The eight-foot-tall armadillo just put his hands on his hips and snorted as he looked down at Ben. “Hah! *You?* You couldn’t even tickle me, bean pole! But lucky for you, I’m in a sporting mood today. I’ll even let you make the first move. How’s that sound?”

“*Jackpot,*” Ben thought. “You’re on.” Ben stepped onto the mat and began doing some warm-up stretches.

By now a small crowd had gathered around to watch Jesse in action. Michael could swear he overheard a few of them making bets. The armadillo just grinned wickedly and cracked his knuckles. “All right, little boy blue,” he crowed, “it’s your move.”

Ben leaped at Jesse, the tips of his wing-tentacles forming into fists. But before anyone could blink twice, Jesse had surged forward, delivering a jarring punch straight into Ben’s gut. Ben flew backward almost clean off the mat, landing flat on his back.

Feelings of disappointment and pity permeated the air. A few members of the crowd started to leave and Jesse let loose another booming laugh. His laughter was cut short when Ben suddenly jumped back to his feet. In the crowd, only Michael looked unsurprised—he knew when his father was fighting, nothing was necessarily quite as it seemed.

Jesse almost looked surprised for a moment, but his wicked grin quickly returned. “Well well well,” he said, “maybe you *can* entertain me after all! Come on, try again!”

Once again Ben leaped at his opponent, and once again he was handily rebuffed. But, he got back on his feet again. And again. And again. By the time Ben got back on his feet for the twelfth time, Jesse’s grin had disappeared. He started delivering harder and harder blows every time Ben came at him.

Suddenly, a sharp **CRACK** was heard throughout the gym. The air quickly saturated with feelings of horror and confusion. Jesse looked visibly shaken for the first time, his huge wings trembling slightly. Even Michael started to radiate fear.

On Ben's twentieth attempt, Jesse had lost his patience. He had delivered a haymaker that twisted Ben's head around far further than it should have been able to. Ben lay belly-up on the mat, his eyes wide open and his mouth agape. His neck was clearly bent at an unnatural angle.

One of the instructors rushed over to Ben. "S***, someone get the nurse in here, *now!!*" She started to bend over Ben, but suddenly jumped back. The horror in the room spiked even higher. All wings were fluffed out and every eye in the gym was on Ben.

He had risen to feet again, his head dangling limply on his shoulders. His eyes still staring blankly, a smile slowly formed on his muzzle. Then, he began to giggle. Giggling turned to chuckling. Chuckling turned to howling, maddened laughter. After a few moments, Ben finally stopped laughing and spoke. "Ah, it's so *good* to be a 'cubi," he said, his hands reaching up and adjusting his head until it popped back into place. "The fear in this room right now is to *die* for."

Jesse just stood there in abject disbelief. He didn't even notice when Ben's wing-tentacle shot out, knocking him square in the jaw. The armadillo crumpled backwards, not knocked out but definitely stunned.

"Aaand... *CUT!!!* Nice job everyone, that's a wrap!"

Everyone turned toward the voice, and everyone did a double-take. The emotions in the room flipped completely from fear to confusion. Behind the crowd were two more Bens, one standing on a stepladder holding a camcorder and the other sitting in a director's chair with a bullhorn, his headwings shapeshifted into a beret. Then both the fighting Ben and the director been vanished, and the remaining Ben stepped down from the ladder, switching the camcorder off.

...Several minutes later, Ben and Michael walked down the hallway out of the gym. They had been forced to stay in the gym for a few moments as an instructor berated Ben for pulling his little stunt. Fortunately, everyone had been too stunned to stop him and ask questions.

Ben hummed a tune and skipped lightly, grinning from ear to ear. With every bounce Michael looked more and more annoyed until he finally snapped, "Okay, what the heck *was* that back there!?"

Ben turned around and started walking backwards as he spoke. "Oh come on, Son. You know much I *love* messing with peoples' heads."

"Your *illusion*. How the heck did you get Jesse to *feel* it every time he touched your illusion? And how could we *hear* it talk for that matter?"

Ben's smile became sly again. "Magic ventriloquism. I can throw my voice *and* use magic to 'throw' my punches." Michael just glowered at him. "Okay okay, sheesh. I used Mesmer magic."

"Mesmer magic? You mean spells that directly manipulate the five senses?"

"*Bingo!*" Ben fanned out his headwings proudly. "By synchronizing Mesmer spells with the movements of my illusion, I can make it appear that my illusion is solid!"

Michael actually looked impressed for once. "Huh. Why haven't I ever seen you use that trick before?"

Ben sighed and his headwings fell back down. "Because, such synchronization doesn't work under most conditions. Anyone that knows how to read the ebb and flow of magic would be able to follow the Mesmer spells flowing from the real me even if I hid myself. On top of that, '*cubi* can 'see' brain waves and, try as I might, I have yet to figure out how to make my illusions give off brain waves, or even *fake* brain waves. *However*, that gymnasium was chock full of people giving off natural magical auras and brain waves. So, I was able to 'camouflage' my own magic and thoughts."

"Dang. You have *got* to teach me how to do that someday." Michael stopped suddenly. "Wait... teach?....." His wings fluffed out. "**Dangit Dad!!** We are late for class now!"

Ben's wings fluffed out as well. "Oh shoot, we'd better move then. Come on Son, I'll race ya!" he said and dashed to the end of the hall and around the corner.

Michael just rolled his eyes and picked up his pace, but did not run. From around the corner, he heard what could only be the sound of Headmistress Illiath stiff-arming his father to the ground for running in the halls. He just shuffled right past his fallen father and continued down the next hall.

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