

Chapter 1

No need for introductions

When: No time has passed

Where: The Andromeda reality, aboard Ryo-Ohki

Lysanias was still in a bit of a state of shock. The new Rommie decided with her new lease on life she would be called Andrometa or Rommeta for short as she was now a little of Andromeda and a little Meta. She agreed the ship should be destroyed as Lysanias didn't want to carry around, in his *pocket*, any number of Nova Bombs as the next encounter with the avatar could go like this:

"Ah, Lysanias. Is that a Nova Bomb in your *pocket* or are you just happy to see me?"

"Don't you da-"

BOOM

She also didn't want them floating around space, despite the astronomical odds someone would bump into them, know what they were, and try to use them. So she told them where a few more useful components might be on the Andromeda and the group went to go get them while she dressed. When they got back they found her in a red leather outfit, a holster on each leg containing a pair of what she called "force lances" which she had charged by holding them for a few seconds. Rosalina said Rommeta had suggested she try one later as well, as they were much more useful than the wands and they had a whole crate of them. He also noticed she had turned her hair pure white (it had been midnight black) and seemed a little sad. *She really is more advanced than the robot I built, she really looks upset I have to blow "her" up. She looks exactly like a real person trying not to cry. Amazing. Just how much of Andromeda was left, and how much "patching" did Meta have to do? It seems not much, given how broken up about this she looks.* "It's time then," she announced. "I have to let the past go." She stood looking at the wreck of the Andromeda for a moment. "A part of me will always be here, despite what I know as the truth now. At least one version of me made it out of this place alive. I can take some comfort from that fact. Dylan, Trance, Harper, Rev, Beka, even Tyr. I hope your souls can find some rest. Ryo-Ohki, fire when ready." She saluted, and the others followed her example, and one shot from Ryo-Ohki was all it took to blow the thing up.

That was the beginning of the shock. *I mean the thing was badly damaged but Ryo tore it to pieces with one volley. Maybe it's not as tough as mine but come on, how powerful is this bunny?*

He got his answer when Ryo-Ohki followed the trail of the "worldship" that had done the deed. Apparently he could "smell" where it had gone, and as it moved through normal space at slower than light speed, it hadn't actually gotten that far by the time he caught up to it. The battle (if you want to call it that) with the "worldship," which was a number of worlds joined together by thick metal supports with a sun in the middle of it, was short. Fighters launched, and Ryo-Ohki gave a cheerful "meow!" and started to spin. The inside didn't spin, thankfully, but anything that got near him was torn to pieces by his jagged protrusions. He then fired off a million what looked like red lasers, wiping out even more ships, and then simply plunged through the planets, one after another, severing the supports and breaking them up. He then charged up, fired a shot, and raced away as the sun exploded behind them. It engulfed the planets and the viewscreen changed to be forward looking again.

“Wasn’t much of a fight,” Ryoko pouted. “Ah well, maybe whoever took Tenchi will put up a little more resistance so I can work off some of this nervous energy I’ve got. Open a doorway back to my reality and let’s go.”

“Guah,” he managed.

“I’ll do it,” Rommeta told her.

Just what have I gotten myself into? Those were planets! Planets! And she just... That cute rabbit thing... How... If I had this ship against the Th’un? I guess it’s good I didn’t but come on. Just how below the border was I, and you’re telling me there really wasn’t anyone with my abilities that could keep up with this reality? I’m doomed. Doomed!

He was starting to come out of it as they landed, Ryo-Ohki’s speed basically between “try not to think about it” and “that’s clearly impossible” fast. So they reached Earth in very little time and landed in Japan of all places. Ryoko teleported them all to the surface and there was a nice looking house set on a mountainside, and one transformation later a tired looking Ryo-Ohki climbed into Ryoko’s arms. Lysanias had boxed up and put away all the salvage from the Andromeda, so nothing had been left inside, but he still wondered where all that ship had gone. *I mean mass is mass, that tiny thing isn’t making the ground shake when it walks, what gives?*

Several people ran out of the house towards them, and she waved.

“Ryoko’s back!” cried the smallest. She had blue hair, in two tails trailing behind her, and was wearing an apron. There was another lady who resembled her, *possibly an older sister?* who had shorter, purplish hair. And a dark skinned woman in what must be a uniform. Two older men, one looking to be in his late sixties or early seventies and another in his mid forties trailed them. “You made it,” she went on, throwing her arms around Ryoko and looking up at her. “Welcome back!”

Guess I’ll worry about it later. They all seem friendly, though I can’t believe what I’m feeling from some of them.

He shared a look with Rosalina, who nodded. She could feel at least a little bit of what he was feeling too, though the headband.

“Oh, thanks,” she managed, looking a little uncomfortable. “I’m home.”

“And I see you’ve brought some people with you, so I guess this wasn’t a waste of time. I’m sorry to have thought that,” said the woman with the purple hair.

“Allow me to introduce Lysanias, an agent of the Hub like Tenchi, and his two companions; the wand spirit Rosalina, and the android Rommeta.”

“Nice to meet you,” they all said.

“This is Ayeka,” she indicated the taller woman, “and her sister Sasami. Of the galaxy police, Mihoshi, and Tenchi’s grandfather and father, Katsuhito and Nobuyaki, respectively.”

“Nice to meet you all,” he said.

“Oh, and that’s Little Washu.” She pointed to another small woman with a ton of red hair coming out the door, who waved at them.

“Greatest scientist in the universe!” she said cheerfully. “Welcome back, daughter!”

“Yes, well,” she said, clearly uncomfortable for some reason. “I’m back.”

“Whatever you need from me, don’t hesitate to ask,” Washu told them. “I would very much... like to have Tenchi... returned.”

“Can you help?” Sasami asked, looking up at Rosalina.

She went down on one knee. “We’ll do everything we can, little one. Please try not to worry.”

"I'm not sure I can. Anyway, I've been stress baking, so if you're hungry come in and have something. I saw the ship, Ryo you must be starving, I've made lots of carrot dishes for you."

"Meow!"

"We can tell you what happened and you can get to work," Ayeka told them. "I mean, if that's okay with you?"

"It's why we're here," Rommeta told her. "Lead on. But Lysanias here is the one to talk to, he's the one who will do the heavy lifting."

Heading into the house everyone stopped to take their shoes off, and with a shrug Lysanias did the same. "In Japan it's the custom to wear slippers in the home," Rommeta explained. "These will be for guests," she pointed and handed him a pair, then to Rosalina.

"Let's just hope I don't need to do any running then," he joked, putting his Sprint Shoes into his *Pocket* and slipping on the slippers. Heading into the house he found it was a fairly nice place, with a corded telephone sitting on a shelf just past the entryway. *Not cordless? Interesting. And what's this?* Looking in the room he past on the way to the kitchen was a TV, but a chunky thing with a huge back. *Not at all like Clary's or Amelia's reality. So more advanced than Korra but not quite as far along as in some other places.*

The kitchen was full of wonderful smells and as there was food everywhere, he figured he might as well try some.

"How long was I gone?" Ryoko asked, looking around as if not believing what she was seeing.

"Only a few hours. Like I said, stress baking."

"This is delicious," Rosalina said, having taking a bite of something. "I vote Sasami joins the team to cook for us forever!"

"Oh, we're not giving her up," Washu told them with a laugh. "So what was the Hub like?" she asked Ryoko.

"I only saw the one corridor and the meeting room. That guy was right there to meet me. He wasn't mad you figured out how to open a door to his little corner of things, by the way. Given the situation, he said it was the right thing to do, though they would have sent someone to investigate fairly soon had I not gone asking. He doesn't mind visitors that have no hostile intent."

"That's a relief."

This is good. What is it?

Ryoko didn't eat anything, but Ryo-Ohki started scarfing down something with a lot of carrots in it. *Wait what?* He looked again, and where the tiny rabbit had been was a fuzzy toddler, with huge bunny ears and a set of blue clothes. No one else seemed to find this strange so he didn't ask about it. *I guess it has a humanoid form too? I suppose that would be convenient in many ways. Looks about the size of a three year old?* Sasami served them up a variety of things and invited them into the living room where it would be less crowded. Sitting down the talk turned serious again.

"So what do you know of our situation?" Ayeka asked.

"Not much. Three days ago an agent named Tenchi vanished from here, what I assume is his home reality?" he asked. Everyone nodded. "Ryoko and the others have been searching for him, but nothing has come up. So I was sent to help."

"Do you think you'll be able to?" Mihoshi asked. "I put out the word to the GP but he hasn't been spotted off planet anywhere. Yukinojo, that's my ship's computer, also said he

didn't record any ships landing or taking off during the time the abduction occurred, so he still should be around someplace."

"Wow, Mihoshi actually did something right?" Ryoko asked.

"I... I can do things right when... when.. it's important!" she insisted, hands on her hips.

"I wonder."

She looked away haughtily, and what looked like a cotton ball that was attached to her uniform fell off as her hand brushed it, turned into a cube, hit the ground, and suddenly out of nowhere a blanket fluttered down and settled over her head.

"Who turned the light out? What's going on?" her muffled voice came through it.

"Let me help," Ayeka told her, as everyone else rolled their eyes. Sasami picked up the cube and it turned back into a puff ball. She took it and helped get the blanket off Mihoshi.

What in the world was that all about? "So let's assume he is still on the planet. Take me back through what happened," Lysanias requested, yanking the hubPad out of his *pocket*. Washu seemed interested and he opened up a new tab on the "notes" app and titled it "The case of the missing Tenchi."

"He ate breakfast as normal," Sasami told them. "Three days ago, which was the usual rice, fish, and vegetables. Wait, no, let me go further back, this could be important too. Five days ago he returned from several missions for the Hub, where he had been selected as an agent two and a half months ago, local time. He underwent the testing, passed, and immediately set off to start cleansing worlds of the misguided one. Having fulfilled his missions, I do not know how long his personal time there was, he decided to take a few weeks off and came back here. Everything was fine for two days. On the third day he vanished, after leaving to go work in the fields. I was the last one to see him, and the one to discover he had vanished when I took him his lunch in the afternoon."

Lysanias was typing, nodding and jotting down possible leads like heading out to look at the past of this "field" she was talking about. When he was done he looked them over again, and had to admit to being impressed. *She looks young but she's actually quite mature. She knew just what I would want to know, and told me without making a big production out of it or going off on tangents.* "Very succinct, thank you. And he told you about other realities and such?"

"Oh yes, it actually answered quite a few questions we had about the, uh, nature of reality," Washu told him. "Believe me, if we had known this some time ago it might have saved us a lot of hassle. Never mind, not important now."

What? How would... "I see. Did he mention anyone connected to the..." he looked back up at what he had typed, "misguided one that wasn't them directly? Someone that might come looking for revenge? Someone that felt wronged, perhaps, and came looking for revenge?" *Such as a spirit hunter to pick a totally random example? I take it "misguided one" is his name for the shadow avatar. Sounds about right.*

Everyone shook their heads.

"Okay." He noted that down. "Is there anyone here that would wish him harm?"

"I'd be able to find him, if he was still in this galaxy," Washu bragged. "He's not."

He looked up. "That's an awfully big claim to make."

"Take it to be true," Ryoko said. "Believe me, she could do it. But no, everyone loves Tenchi here!" She colored a little and looked away.

He looked over at her and back to Washu, who was just sitting with her legs crossed and slightly smiling. She nodded. "Very well. Let's make sure your memories haven't been altered or anything like that, and you can show me the field." He put the pad away, grabbed up his plate and had a bit more as he walked back into the kitchen. "Just me please," as the others made to crowd in behind him. They backed off, but squished together to try and see

what he was doing. *It's not that exciting. Here we go.* He touched the counter and sent his senses backwards. He wasn't sure if it was some kind of interference from them or what, but he stood there as images played around him, but not far back enough to do any good. Finally he did manage to break through, rolling his eyes and thinking *I really have to get better at the skill that lets me get better at skills. This is stupid, how sometimes I just can't do stuff, and then suddenly I can.* He watched as Tenchi came down, ate breakfast, and left out the side door. He nodded, opening his senses up to make sure there were no hostile feelings lingering, bad energy, magic, or anything else the force wanted to tell him. He didn't get much but how happy everyone usually was to eat Sasami's meals, and turned back to the others.

No hostile feelings at all. No magic, no lingering bad energy. Just positive imprints here.

"It happened just as you said, he left by that door. I feel a lot of contentment here, Sasami, everyone really loves you around here too it seems."

"Oh, that's..." She looked down, scuffing her foot.

"Let's go check out the field." He finished what was on his plate and put it in the sink, and everyone trooped down to the field. "Thanks for that, I didn't recognize a lot of it but it was all great!" Not many cars passed them, they seemed to be out in the country, and despite it being just a normal road Mihoshi somehow tripped and complained she hurt her ankle. Lysanias healed her up, it turned out she had sprained it a little, the others didn't seem surprised.

"Can't you walk in a straight line without falling over?" Ryoko snapped at her. "We could have been there by now if I had just taken him."

"We're all worried about Tenchi," Ayeka told her. "Don't start anything, Ryoko."

"I'm twice as worried as you!"

"No you're not. I'm ten times as worried as you!"

"Girls, please," said Katsuhito. "Not now. Especially not in front of our guests."

Both looked a little sheepish and turned away from the other. *Sensing some hostility. What would Clary have called them? Frenemy?*

The rest of the trip passed uneventfully, and soon carrot fields, rows and rows of carrots, came into view.

"Meow," Ryo-Ohki said sadly, looking out over the dark soil and neat rows. They were back in bunny form, he noted, and were being carried by Sasami.

This little guy eats a lot of carrots if these are all for him. Sheesh, I mean I know it's a spaceship in a compact form but isn't there a little more fuel efficient way of keeping him alive? Still, looks like a well tended field, does Tenchi do all this work himself? I don't see anyone else out here like hired help, if the family helps of course they would be looking for him and letting the field go for the moment.

"We'll get him back," Ryoko assured her.

"Where would he have been?" Lysanias asked.

"I'll show you," Sasami told them, and led them across the field. "This is where I found... his tools."

"Very well," Lysanias told them with a nod. "Let's see what we get here." This time he did it the other way, opening himself up to any impressions the area could give him, and again he felt no magic or lingering dark energy here. With that out of the way he tried to enhance himself and look into the past. This time he got a result right away, either because he knew just "when" to look or just due to random chance, he saw Tenchi near this spot hoeing a row. *It does seem to be just him. Oh, hello?* Into view came a man in white, wearing fancy gauntlets and a cape. Following him were three girls. One was dressed all in black, with black lipstick and hair, and looked tired. The girl next to her was shorter, had bright pink hair, a

barely there skirt with bells all over it the hem, and a tight crop top. She was hopping over the rows of carrots like it was a game of some kind. The third had long yellow hair, and essentially had on jeans and a sweater. She was following a few steps behind the others, walking like she was being extra careful not to step on anything growing. *She's a cute one for sure, not that the others aren't, but there's something about her.*

"There were four of them, three woman, one man, who stopped to talk to Tenchi," he said to the others. "None of the styles look familiar to what you all are wearing." *Ayeka and her sister seem to wear one style, Ryoko another, not Earthlike at all, then the two guys are dressed more in line with what people in Clary's or Amelia's reality would wear. These people all have a completely different style than that.*

The vision continued, with the man stepping up to Tenchi and shaking his hand. The two seemed to discuss something for a moment, and he introduced the three ladies. Then *they* seemed to be pleading with him. He initially resisted, leaning on his hoe, finally relented, set it down, and the man smiled and nodded. He put a hand on Tenchi's shoulder, the ladies all touch him, and all four vanished.

"He went with them of his own free will, it seems to me," he reported after a moment of watching the now empty field. "There was no struggle. They just talked and then they all vanished."

"The spirits agree," Rosalina announced. Lysanias looked over at her, like "what?"

"It's never come up, but I can communicate with spirits," she told him. "As we had some time I thought I would ask. Gave me something to do. The spirits of the land here are quite friendly, given how much attention Tenchi gives them. They seem quite concerned he may be gone, as they have not seen him in days. I sent some Lumias out too, just in case, and they also report no signs of a struggle or other clues. Just carrots."

"Spirits, huh? It seems you can still surprise me, Rosalina."

"But of course," she said with a wink.

"Can you tell where they went?" Sasami asked.

"I can try. But he wasn't pulled into a van or anything, they just teleported away. If they left the planet I probably won't get a result."

"We're the only ones that should have powers on this planet," Ayeka protested. "I suppose a ship could have entered the system, but I thought Jurai had sensor probes all over the place here. Earth being sort of our vacation planet, and all, we don't want it disturbed by space pirates or anything like that." She looked pointedly at Ryoko.

"Hey!"

"Not that I would question Mihoshi, of course, who reported no ships in the area."

"Her AI should be on the ball, I would trust it, at least," Ryoko agreed.

"Hello, I'm standing right here," Mihoshi told them.

"So humans don't have powers here?" Lysanias asked.

They all shook their heads.

I see. Good to know. Wonder what would happen if I pulled a human soul out though? Would I still be able to forge it? I don't see why not. "Anyway, this will take ten minutes or more, so let me concentrate." He sat down in the dirt and sent his question out to the universe.

Where did Tenchi, the boy I saw talk with the four other people in my vision of the past, go after they teleported away from this field?

"Well, that's odd," he announced ten minutes later. "Anyone know of a place called Tokyo around here?"

“What?” everyone exclaimed.

Chapter 2

No need for power

When: A bit later

Where: Back at the house

“But he can’t be in Tokyo!” Ryoko protested for the eighth time since they left the field. Tenchi’s father, Nobuyaki, was getting out a map for Lysanias.

“Tennyo called while you were out,” Washu told them. “I told her progress was being made, hoping I wasn’t lying.”

“Tokyo?”

“If you say Tokyo one more time...” Ayeka threatened.

“Here we are,” Nobuyaki told them, spreading a map on the table.

A paper map. I guess they really are less technologically advanced around here. At least the natives, as people from space must have far better stuff than even I’ve seen with the Th’un. He looked it over, and was pleased to see numbers and letters across the sides. *Ah, I can ask where Tenchi went and get a single letter, digit combo. Then we can just go there. That will save me some time asking direction and distance. Neat.* “Okay, I’ll ask where he went specifically and we can head there. How far away is this place?”

“Less than two hours,” his father told them.

“That’s not so bad.”

“We could be there in seconds if we could use a spaceship,” Ryoko grumbled. “When are these people going to make decent space craft so we can stop hiding ourselves here?”

“Given their rate of progress, I would guess another two hundred years or so,” Katsuhito told them. “I’ve been here a long time, and their pace is increasing. But probably five hundred before they move out of the system at speeds needed to reach other systems.”

“I guess that’s fairly soon,” she admitted.

Two hundred years is ‘fairly soon?’ How long has she lived, and does she expect to live, anyway? “Well, let me get busy with this,” he told them. “We should have it narrowed down to one of these squares in ten to twenty minutes, if things go well.”

“He can’t still be there though,” Washu told them. “I would have found him if he was that close.”

“Even if someone from another reality altogether was hiding him?” Lysanias asked her.

“Well... Normally I would have said even then but I guess you’re right. Even I can’t account for everything that might come from another reality. I have no experience with any but my own, so I suppose types of magic I wasn’t familiar with could hide him.”

Implying there are types of magic you are familiar with?

“So there’s hope he’s still there?” asked Sasami.

“He couldn’t be held captive there,” Ayeka insisted. “This is *Tenchi* we’re talking about.”

“Knock him in the back of the head, and he’s still going to go down,” Katsuhito told them. “He’s still that human, at the moment, right?”

“True,” Washu admitted. “He could be drugged or otherwise kept unconscious. Suspended animation for one.”

“I hope he is there, it would be a fast resolution to all this,” Sasami told them.

“Let’s hope. Can I get some quiet now, please?” He sat down and placed his hands on the map.

Okay, let’s ask the question. “Where on this map did Tenchi, the boy that vanished from the field I was at earlier, go after vanishing?”

Ten minutes later he pointed to a certain square on the map. "That's where we have to go."

"So let's go!" all the girls cried.

In the end the same group went, Mihoshi to arrest those that had done the abducting, Ryoko and Ayeka for firepower. Ayeka had changed into something more armored, and assured Lysanias she could handle herself in a crisis. The group slowly made their way into Tokyo, south past it into Minako. Lysanias figured they would park and he would ask for more specifics, but Ryo-Ohki started meowing like crazy and pointing, so they pulled into a driveway behind some buildings, and parked in a small lot. There were what seemed like headstones there, and she tore past them towards a set of doors leading through a tunnel like corridor into a building. *Clearly a rear entrance. But what will we find inside?*

He didn't have long to wait, as Ryo-Ohki ran for the door. The others followed, leaving his father who said he was only human, if there was a fight he was staying out of it. Lysanias figured they would teleport through the door into the building or Ryoko would simply phase through it and open it from the other side. No chance of that, she simply smashed it out of her way and followed Ryo-Ohki down the hall and then down some stairs.

"Do you have to be so violent?" Ayeka asked her.

Ryoko ignored her. "Tenchi!" she called. "Tenchi!"

So much for the stealth approach.

The group piled into the basement, Lysanias noticing that Ryoko held a glowing energy blade now, and Mihoshi had her pistol out and was sweeping the room with it. *Where did that blade come from? It doesn't look like she holding the hilt of a light saber, she has her hand completely closed. Odd.* It didn't look like anyone used the basement all that much, there was plenty of open space, and machinery, and tanks of some kind, and fenced off portions, but what there wasn't so much of was a Tenchi. Ryo-Ohki was madly hopping around meowing, but soon sort of gave up and lay there, defeated.

"So was he here or not?" Ryoko demanded, opening her hand and making the blade wink out.

"A strange place to come," Mihoshi decided, looking at her watch. "No readings at all."

"You didn't turn it on," Ayeka told her, sounding like she had said that before.

"Ah, right, turn it on." She continued staring at it. Then she looked up at her. "How do I do that again?"

She slapped herself in the face and touched the watch.

"That's so easy! How do I keep forgetting that? Huh, still no readings."

"Are you getting anything?" Lysanias asked Rommeta.

She shook her head. "You would be the better 'sensor' in this case as well."

"Right. Let's see if he did actually come in here." He concentrated on the room after walking over to the door again. He looked inside and tried to gaze through time, to a moment just after he saw Tenchi vanishing from the field. It took him three tries to manage it, but he did finally and saw the figures appear in the room. "They were here." He watched as the group moved off and vanished. He looked around the room. "They... they went..."

"Yes?" Rosalina asked. "They went where?"

"I can't... that's... they were here, then they went..." He continued looking around. "I don't know."

"Which direction were they facing?" Ryoko asked.

"They teleported in facing this direction, and they turned," he replied, acting it out. "But then..."

"Almost sounds like an ignore me ward," Rommeta told them. "But even I'm not seeing anything in the direction you're facing."

"You're right," he admitted. "I've never been on the receiving end of one of those, I don't know how other people perceive things wearing one."

"What's this?" Ayeka asked.

"It's something I can make. A ward, uh a temporary object of power, it can make people overlook things. Like right now I'm wearing a sword, but you never noticed because I keep an *ignore me* ward stuck to it. Your eyes just slip past it."

"So let's not use our eyes," she announced, stepping up beside him. She closed her eyes and marched forward. She was heading for what appeared to be a blank section of wall, but suddenly cried out and tried to jump back. What seemed like electricity was surging around her, and Ryoko wasted no time in teleporting over there and yanking her back.

"You okay?" she asked.

Ayeka was bent over, breathing heavily and the others crowded around her. "You... pulled me out of it."

"Yeah, well don't get used to it. Are you okay or not?"

"I think so." She looked down at herself, rolling her sleeves up to check her arms. They looked a bit red but she wasn't really burned. She let them fall again. "Yeah, thanks. I owe you, I guess. Clearly there's something there."

"I'll take care of it," she announced, making a grabbing motion with her fist. Her blade sprang into existence again and while Lysanias was thinking *oh so that's where it came from. Nowhere. Good to know.* Ayeka was shouting "wait!" Of course she didn't, swinging down with the blade and impacting whatever it was that had given Ayeka the shock. It didn't seem to be an energy barrier made to repel attacks, and she shredded whatever it was, which shimmered and vanished. Some strange looking equipment was sitting there, basically some control panels and a pad on the floor.

"Good thing whatever that field was didn't overload and explode us all," Ayeka said testily. "Which it easily could have done."

"I would have been fine!"

"What about the rest of us!?"

"Oh, right. I guess I should have thought a little further ahead. Anyway," she let the blade go. "It's gone now, and we can see into this space. Think this is some kind of teleporter?"

"We would need Washu to take a look-"

"Oh let me see!" Mihoshi told them, stepping up.

"No!" both girls shouted, basically tackling her to the ground. She smacked her head on a pole that was behind her as she fell, and she cried out. "Ah, my head! Ow, ow, ow, what did you do that for?"

"You know why!" Ryoko shouted at her. "If you wreck that equipment we'll never be able to track Tenchi down!"

"So how come you can swing your sword around and it's fine, but me looking at something is a problem? Ow, ow, this really hurts." Her eyes were tearing up and she put a hand to the back of her head. It came away red and she stared at it. "I'm bleeding. I'm really bleeding! You made me hit my head so hard I'm bleeding."

"Yes," Ayeka agreed, "tell me about how your actions are so much better, Ryoko."

The two girls, ignoring Mihoshi, stood up and stared at each other. "I was very careful!" Ryoko told her.

“How can you claim to be careful when you’re always just smashing through everything? The door, the fence, then simply attacking whatever I ran into without any consideration.”

Lysanias tuned them out and knelt next to Mihoshi. She was crying and looking at her hand, blood running down it. “There, there,” he told her. “Come here, it’s going to be all right.” He hugged her, touching the back of her head and healing her for the second time that day.

“I just wanted to help,” she blubbered. “I want to find Tenchi too, they didn’t have to tackle me like that.”

“No they didn’t,” he agreed.

“I don’t break everything I touch you know. I know I’m a klutz, I can’t help it. And sometimes things go wrong but they act like they never do anything wrong ever. But they do! Just because she’s a princess she thinks she can- oh, that feels a lot better.” She stopped crying and Lysanias pulled back, using blood bending to yank the blood off her hair and then her hand. *Another positive use of it, see it’s not evil at all Korra.* It floated there, and he regarded it moment. *She’s an alien, right? If I just put this someplace and despite the odds of testing random blood someone finds it and run tests on it and finds out it’s not human...* “Hey Rosalina, can you make me a glass vial for this? We’ll have to get rid of it later so her blood isn’t just randomly hanging around. I don’t know how close to human it is and someone finds it, could be a problem.”

“Sure thing.” She gestured and glass went around it.

“Perfect, thanks.” He shoved it into his *pocket* and offered Mihoshi a hand. “Are you okay?”

Her large blue eyes stared up at him. “Yeah, I guess so. You healed me, and before too, huh? Didn’t you? I thought maybe it just wasn’t as bad as I thought, but no, you healed me and didn’t even make a big deal of it. They can’t do that, can they? For all their power, Ryoko and Ayeka can only destroy. Ever since they both arrived here, neither has built anything, or grown anything, or healed anything. So maybe they’re not so superior to me after all, are they?”

The two girls were looking over at her, now a little more sheepishly than before.

“Mihoshi-” they started.

She looked away with a “humph” and took Lysanias’ hand. “Thank you, Lysanias. I joined Galaxy Police because I always knew, in my heart, that I wanted to serve and protect. Maybe one day I can be more like you, and bring comfort to someone. I hope so.”

He helped her up, and she overbalanced and grabbed onto him again.

“I did that one on purpose,” she whispered to him, squeezing him. “You’re a good guy, aren’t you?” And she let him go. “So I guess I’ll just go over here, so I don’t break anything,” she said louder. “While someone who isn’t stupid looks it over.”

“We never said you were stupid!” Ayeka protested.

“I’ve thought it many times, but I’ve never- hey!” Ryoko got smacked in the arm by her. “I mean I don’t think you’re stupid.”

I think I better just get Washu here... He gathered the One Power and opened a gateway back to the house, outside where there was plenty of open space. The arguing stopped as he walked through it, then rang the bell on the house. Sasami answered and went to get Washu, who stepped through the gateway back to the basement.

“Now that’s an interesting power,” she remarked, looking back through. “So what have you got for me?”

Washu looked the equipment over, putting her hands out and having what appeared to be a laptop computer made of energy appear before her. She typed on it and pried open panels and ran beams of light over the equipment from somewhere.

Where is that coming from? Inside her? How would you even have a computer inside yourself? he thought, watching her. *I suppose if you could make it small enough you could hook it right into your brain, then have a small projector for the "display" in your wrist, or some kind of hologram projector nearby that was invisible, so we only thought it was appearing out of nowhere but was just a trick.*

"Right," she said. "Gather around everyone. This system here was some sort of illusion generator, hiding the rest of it and putting out some kind of energy to make people ignore the entire space. I'm surprised you were able to walk into it, Ayeka."

"I had to force myself forward after I closed my eyes," she explained.

"That makes sense. This appears to be a primitive but functional version of what I used to send Ryoko across realities." She pointed to the main unit, and kicked the platform with her foot. "It's odd, the technology used is very distinctive. It has more in common with Ryo-Ohki than circuitry you would find on this planet, or even any planet really. There's almost an energy to it, a living energy. It came from elsewhere, I can tell you that much."

"Can you activate it?" Ryoko asked. "Can we follow them and get Tenchi back?"

"I'm actually not sure if it has enough power, or how to add more if I'm being honest," she admitted. "There isn't a battery in the traditional sense, I would have to study it and that would take time."

"What about coordinates?" Rometta asked. "Are you able to access where it may have opened to? I can just have the Hub open a doorway, I just need a destination."

"As far as I can tell, it's..." She rattled off a series of numbers, letters, and possibly some kind of equation.

"What?" She stepped back, looking alarmed. "No, no, that's got to be a mistake. Give me that again?"

She repeated the whole thing, reading it carefully from her screen.

"I was afraid of that," she told the others. "Tenchi is in real danger. But why come here? It doesn't make sense."

"Who took him? Do you know?" Mihoshi asked.

"I'm afraid I do. That reality? The coordinates? They lead to the Darkbolt universe. That place is bad news, we've lost a lot of agents trying to defeat the avatar there. If the Tenma have come here they've roped Tenchi into trying, and we've basically given up on that place. There's an 86% chance the avatar will consume it no matter who we send there."

All the girls had gone pale, and shared a look. "It can't be that bad," Ryoko finally said, forcing a laugh. "Right?"

Darkbolt? That name sounds familiar somehow. Where have I heard it before?

"I'm afraid it is. The avatar took over a being called Darkbolt there, the literal manifestation of the concept of darkness. The opposite of the angel of light, that was created to oversee light and life when the universe was created. They are essentially an immortal force of nature, with power only matched by the other 'demons' as they are called in that reality. War. Death. Chaos. Destruction. If his innate power was augmented by the power and knowledge of the avatar, which it seems it has, there may be no way to win against him."

"So we go there, grab Tenchi, and get back here," Ayeka told them.

She shook her head. "The Tenma have him. That's the group responsible for unleashing Darkbolt in the first place. Oh, they've regretted it ever since, and they've been doing what they can to fight him off, but do you think they'll just let him go?"

"Come on, what can anyone do against us?" Ryoko asked.

"I don't know how powerful you are... One moment... Accessing..." Rommeta stared into space. "Ryoko. Previously a space pirate, under the mental domination of a man named Kagato. Now free willed. Primary powers include: Teleportation, energy blasts, flight, phasing, possession, increased durability, inhuman strength, personal cloning, environmental adaptation, spirit manifestation, regeneration, Telekinesis, limited matter manipulation. This would make you about on par with a Tenma general. The Tenma army has people even stronger than that within its ranks, or their powers or versatility could negate whatever you could do."

"What?" Ryoko and Washu said together.

"I wanted my daughter to be the strongest around," Washu went on. "Are you saying there's a reality out there she's only *average*?"

"This is the reality on the other side of those coordinates."

"He is in danger," Washu admitted. "He would want to help, and if not told the whole story, or heck even if he was told the whole story, he would still want to try. I mean he may have a chance, don't get me wrong, but there's only one of him."

"Agreed. Your best bet would be a retrieval mission, do not stay there long enough Darkvoid senses your presence and simply destroys you."

"I'm going," Ayeka announced. "We must bring him home."

"If she's going, I'm going!" Ryoko told them.

Lysanias looked to Rommeta, who shook her head. "I do not recommend your involvement here," she told him. "While you have the versatility to survive, you are physically weak and using your powers drains you too quickly. Even in the armor, I would not give you a high survival rating against the inhabitants there."

"What if we could work around that?" Washu asked.

"In what way?"

"I'll get to that. Mihoshi, are you going?"

"Oh, I, uh, don't really have jurisdiction there," she hedged. "I want to, of course. But I don't have any fancy powers. I'm just a person. If you're making a big deal out of a wanderer, Lysanias, not being at Ryoko's level and so he can't go, how would I survive there?"

"Normal? Hardly," she scoffed, "but I see your point. There may be someone there that can counter even you," she muttered.

"Wha- what?"

"Never mind." She waved a hand. "I see the gateway is still open. Ayeka, none of us can touch it, will you retrieve the sword for me?"

"You're not thinking of... You are, aren't you? I suppose it would be an equalizer, wouldn't it? Yes, I'll get it. But I don't like it." She darted back through.

Sword? Don't like what?

Washu turned back to Rommeta. "I can make sure he *doesn't* get tired out using his abilities, what would you rate his chances are then?"

"Substantially higher," she admitted. "That reality would be unfamiliar enough with what he can do, it would be difficult to counter his many techniques. He would have an edge, being seen as a normal human, but could strike with surprise. Yes, with that concern negated I would change my recommendation from 'strongly against' to 'if you absolutely must but be extremely careful.' You would have to stick with the others at all times, of course."

"I would anyway." *I'm their ride back.*

"Good enough for me. I cannot leave, but I can equip you to at least hold your own there long enough to rescue Tenchi. Ah, she's back."

Ayeka returned holding what looked to be the hilt of a sword that was a tree branch, or several twisted together. "I got it. Are you sure about this?"

"I trust my daughter."

"Of course she does!" Ryoko bragged.

"Barely," she qualified. "Now look, I'll have your word on this, Ryoko. I give you a gem, you rescue Tenchi, you come back here, you give the gem up. They belong to Tenchi now and it's *his* call when to give them back to you. Are we clear on that? I will smack you down if you break your word to me, you know I can."

Ryoko seemed to seriously consider this, looking down at the much shorter Washu.

Wait, if she's more powerful than Ryoko, why can't she come with us? Odd.

"Anything, to rescue Tenchi."

"I have your word? Your absolute vow?"

"Yes, I said! You have my word, I'll give them back."

"You'll give it back," she clarified. "Ayeka, one gem please, given to Ryoko."

"For Tenchi's return," she told Ryoko, who nodded. *Who is this guy? That they would risk so much for him?* "Your word might be enough for your mom, but I want more than that."

"What?"

"You and me. Truce. From the time we step through that portal to the other universe to the time we step back here. We *get. Along.* No fighting, no name calling, you fight by my side as though you were my sister. We watch each other's backs, we agree that whatever we have to do to get Tenchi back, we do it carefully, examining the risks before we commit to something. Furthermore I want it clear from the start that Lysanias is in charge. He's the one with the most experience, and we defer to him. No flying off on your own, no thinking you can do it without us. We move as a team, because if what I'm hearing from them is right, basically everyone we meet there could be you, or better than you. Here on this planet you may be top dog, but there we have to be careful. We don't know the customs. We don't know what weird powers people may have. Only by working together do we have a chance. You protect us, we watch your back, we bring Tenchi home."

"Agreed. Truce." She held out a hand.

Ayeka stared at her a moment, then shook it. "Very well. Truce." She closed her eyes and pointed the hilt of the sword at Ryoko, and Lysanias was shocked to see one of the orange gems at the bottom vanish and reappear on her left wrist. Her outfit went red on that side, and she smiled.

"So good to have the power back."

"Just remember why you have it back," Ayeka told her. "But why only one?" she asked Washu.

"The other is for him." She gestured and it flew out, and she put it between her two palms, still just floating there. "I think I can modify it to be compatible with a completely biological organism. One moment." She concentrated, and it started to softly glow.

Wait, those are like a power source? She's going to give me an infinite power source? And Ryoko has two of the things? Just how much did her power jump up anyway? I don't feel more spirit energy inside her, but of course if it's inside the gems I wouldn't. And what exactly is she doing, how can she "modify" this gem? What it is, exactly? And did she just call me a "biological organism?" Does that imply Ryoko isn't? I thought she was her daughter, was she created rather than born?

"I think that should do it," she finally announced. "Kneel before me, Lysanias."

He did so, and looked basically in her eyes as she was now at eye level with him. She was now holding it floating in one hand.

"I will need your promise as well," she cautioned. "I trust the person that trusts you enough to give you Hub access, but I want to hear it from you directly. I will loan you this, but you must give me your word that when this mission is complete you will return it."

This seems like a time for respect and formality. "Lady Washu-"

"Little Washu, please."

"Very well. *Little Washu*, know that I have never sought power for power's sake. Every technique I learn, every skill I practice, it is with the solitary goal of protecting those in realities I travel to. I have said this many times to others, and I will say it here." He pulled the shield out of his *pocket* and set it down. "I am the shield. If I can take a hurt before another, I will take it. Hear now my vow- I will use this gift solely to rescue Tenchi and aid those that go with me, and lay it down upon my return. You have my word."

She considered him. "Can he be trusted?" she asked the two, eyes flicking in their direction.

"Without hesitation," Rosalina told her.

"With a 98% certainty," Rometta agreed. "After all, all things are possible, even if not probable."

"That is good enough for me." She held out her other hand, taking a step back, and suddenly she was holding a sword very much like Ryoko's. "Very well." She touched both his shoulders. "I dub thee *Sir Lysanias*, my personal knight and champion, and give you the title Hopebringer." With that the gem vanished and appeared at his right wrist. "Arise, Hopebringer."

Gee, I was kinda hoping I could stay Lysanias.

Chapter 3

No need for Rescue

When: A few moments later

Where: The other side of the portal

The group looked down at Mihoshi, who had faceplanted the ground on the other side of the doorway a second before it closed. They were now standing on a destroyed planet, with a dark sky full of dust and ash, and hardly any plant life to be found. There was rubble all over, metal, glass, concrete, probably the remains of modern buildings that had been torn apart and never cleaned up. It was a cold, dark, depressing place, and Rosalina stepped close to Lysanias, putting a hand on his shoulder as they looked around.

"I don't like this place," she said softly. "The spirits here, they're very angry."

Having opened a gateway there the others had stepped through, and when Lysanias said it could be closed Mihoshi came tumbling through just as it snapped shut.

"I thought you weren't coming," Ryoko complained.

"I wasn't," she insisted, trying to look up at her. "Washu pushed me!"

"Pushed you?"

"There's a note," Ayeka told them. She bent down and plucked a note that seemed to be taped to Mihoshi's back. "Consider her your good luck charm, she could be the key to victory," she read. "Now what does that mean?"

Lysanias helped her up (again) and she looked around. "Don't ask me," she told them as she brushed herself off. "I've never felt all that lucky. Though there was that time I won the office poker game six weeks in a row. They wouldn't let me play after that."

"Wait you did what?" Ryoko asked her.

"At headquarters. Everyone would get together to play poker once a week. After the third time they started to get suspicious. The fourth time they had all these cameras pointed at me. The fifth time they had cameras and sensors. The sixth time they had someone that could read minds, but she suddenly had to be rushed to the hospital for I'm sure was some unrelated thing and they wouldn't let me play after that."

The two girls shared a look.

"I guess you're coming with us," Ayeka told her, crumpling the note and tossing it. "Ryo-Ohki, any guesses where we should go now?"

"Meow!" She hopped in the direction of some destroyed buildings in the distance. At least one was still standing enough to provide some shelter, and it was the only logical place someone would go after coming here.

"Great. Fearless leader?"

"We'll check it out. I doubt he or his abductors are hanging around here, but there may be clues we can use to pick up the trail. I can look into the past again if need be. Stay alert everyone. Consider this hostile enemy territory."

"Fair enough," she agreed, summoning her blade. Ayeka ignited her sword as well, and Mihoshi was looking around without a care. Rosalina and Rommeta readied their weapons as well.

"There are so many spirits here, and they're all angry," Rosalina repeated. "So angry."

"Shouldn't you get your pistol out?" Ayeka asked Mihoshi.

"I would, but, uh, when I had it out last time I realized I forgot to recharge it after I last used it. It's empty."

"You don't even have a weapon!?" she shrieked.

"Why do you think I didn't want to come?" she protested.

“Here.” Lysanias handed her the lightning gun he had taken back after Amelia had finished figuring out what made it work.

“Ooooo!” she exclaimed, taking it. “This looks nice!”

“I’ll have to get you some official equipment, maybe some armor too, as you’re the least powerful person here. But one thing at a time. Here, this should help protect you.” He pulled an *armor* ward out and slapped it on, using his ability as an artificer to shove more energy into it as he did so. *I guess I don’t have to worry about running out now, so I may as well.*

“Thanks.”

“Meow?”

“Yes, we’re coming,” Ryoko told her.

The group moved closer to the building, and realized that parked behind it (from their perspective at least) was a ship.

“We may have gotten lucky,” Ayeka whispered. “It looks like they haven’t left the planet yet. Building, or ship?”

Lysanias concentrated. “I feel people inside the building, let’s head there first. They won’t leave without everyone inside I’m sure.”

She nodded, and the group crept closer. They headed in past the destroyed glass doors in the front and Lysanias pointed. There was an intact room with a door, and he felt people inside. “Ryoko, can you phase others?”

She nodded.

“Great. Take Ayeka and circle around the side. I’ll give you to a count of ten, surprise them from the side by phasing through the wall. Rosalina, you and I are going to try tearing the wall down on eight. It can’t be that structurally sound at this point, we’ll tear it up and away. Rommeta, you start us off by running in there and zapping anyone you see that isn’t Tenchi.” (He knew the force lance could be switched to basically an “impact” mode instead of a “pierce” mode and thus be more non-lethal) “Mihoshi, you aim for anyone in armor, that will be more effective than the force lance in this case.”

“Got it!” She gave a salute which of course because she was holding a two handed gun made it clatter to the floor with a crash. “Oops.”

“What was that?” someone shouted from inside the room. “Did you hear something?” Everyone froze.

“I’ll check it out,” said another voice, and the door opened.

“Tenchi?” all the girls exclaimed, stunned.

“What in the world?” he asked, stepping out. He looked them over, and they ran and grabbed him up in a hug.

"You're okay!" they were saying, and he was trying to fend them off.

"Of course I'm okay, how are you even here? What's going on?"

Lysanias meanwhile was sharing a look with his part of the team.

"That must have been the easiest rescue ever," Rosalina remarked. "I guess they've got him, let's just book it back outside and open a portal back to his reality."

"Wait, no, we can't leave," he called. "Would you please let me go!?"

"Tenchi! We were worried about you!" Ryoko whined. "Why did you just run off like that?"

"I've been gone, what, ten seconds?" he scoffed. "I assume these others are wanderers?"

"It's been three days!" Ayeka protested. "We've been worried sick about you! We asked them to get us here so we could rescue you."

"Rescue? Three- what? Thabion!" he called over his shoulder. "I thought you said your calculations were solid? Air tight, I think you called them?"

"My calculations are always impeccable," a voice from inside called. "To call them into question is to call my very existence into question."

He sighed. "Why do I get all the crazy ones? Look, thanks for coming, dealing with these three can't have been easy."

"It's fine," Lysanias replied. "You are okay?"

"Yeah, come on, they can explain." He pulled away from the girls and gestured them inside, they followed on his heels and he went in too. Inside were several figures seated around a rickety table, on rickety chairs. Four he recognized, the man he had seen and the three ladies, plus another in the corner he didn't. He was sitting at what must be a computer, a platform similar to the one they had seen next to him. He was fairly small and bald, but with a pointy beard and goggles hung around his neck.

"Look for yourself," he was saying. He swiveled a display towards them. "See, here's the space time curve of your reality, and here's ours. Because this is like this, and this cancels this out, and this is this way," he was pointing to a series of equations that he was scrolling through. "Oh." He stopped and looked at a section.

"What is it?"

"I, uh, somehow got a minus sign right here." He pointed.

"And?"

"It's the, uh, opposite way I thought."

Tenchi closed his eyes like he was trying to remain calm. "So it's faster here than there, not slower?"

"Basically, yes. Ugh, that's always the way, I always miss some mundane detail! Sorry about that man."

"What's going on?" Ayeka asked. "Who are these people, and what are you talking about?"

"Time," he answered. "I was told that I could gone for weeks and only a few minutes would pass at home, plenty of time to help them out. But I guess it's the other way around. As for who they are, may I introduce General Dolands of the Tenma? This is Gabi-" He pointed to the one with bells on her skirt. "Xelena-" He pointed to the one dressed in dark clothes. "And Shyia," who looked like she wanted to hide behind something. "Everyone these are my friends, Ayeka, Ryoko, and Mihoshi."

"Meow!"

"And Ryo-Ohki, of course."

"Meow."

"I'm Lysanias," he said, when everyone looked at him. "These are my companions, Rosalina and Rommeta. We're wanderers, like Tenchi."

"The more the merrier," Dolands told them, rising. He went over and shook their hands. "Nice to meet you all, very nice. I'd offer you seat, but as you can see there aren't many left. Isn't much of anything left on this planet, unfortunately."

"We're fine, we're leaving anyway," Ryoko told him. "Tenchi, let's go."

"I can't go yet!" he protested.

"Yes, you can," she insisted. "I don't know what *these people* have told you, but this place is *super* dangerous. We thought we would have to track you down and rescue you, fighting Tenma every step of the way. As you're just right here it saves us the trouble, but you're coming home just the same."

"I know it's dangerous, that's why it has to be me," he insisted.

"What has to be you?"

"We were just explaining that in detail when you showed up," Dolands told them. "We can start over."

"We know about Darkbolt," Ayeka told him. "What do you expect Tenchi to do about a being like that?"

"Oh, you do? That saves me some time. To answer your question, by himself? Not much. But with a handful or more of Miruku? We expect them to kick the crap out of him and save our reality."

"Wait," Lysanias said slowly. "What power, exactly, do you have that just duplicating it a few times would be enough?"

Tenchi looked a bit embarrassed. "I can call upon an extra-dimensional energy that manifests in various ways. We call it 'light hawk' energy though I have no idea where that name came from. I can use it to create matter, nearly impenetrable shields, armor, fly through space, all sorts of things. I'm really still just learning what I can do."

"The individual 'shards' of this energy are called the 'wings' of the light hawk," Ayeka told them. "Originally only our most powerful ships could utilize it, but Tenchi here can do it on his own."

"So you see?" Dolands asked. "We get a dozen or more Miruku, they borrow that power, and we slam into Darkbolt like never before. It can't fail!"

You want to bet? "And if it's not enough?"

"We run like scared little girls," Xelena told them. "Or we get killed. More likely we get killed."

"Wait a minute, you said 'get' just now," Lysanias protested. "Not 'take,' and you don't seem to know how many you have. Is that just a translation thing or..."

"Well, we don't have many at present. But I think we can spring some more, we were going to get to that, honest."

"How many do you have?" Ryoko asked.

"Er, one. Name of Gogo, nice enough per-"

"Gogo!?" exclaimed Lysanias.

"Yes. Oh, you know them?"

"If they're the same person, yes. Darkbolt, right." He smacked his head. "Gogo, Darkbolt, of course! This is where they came from. I have heard that name before, back with Terra. Man, it seems like six lifetimes ago!"

"So can we trust these people or not?" Ayeka asked.

"Who cares, we're just leaving with Tenchi," Ryoko told her. "Remember?"

"I'm not leaving," Tenchi told them.

"I knew you were going to say that," she grumbled. "You had to go and say it."

"Would he have been the man we fell in love with if he didn't?" Ayeka looked like she wished she could call those words back, and Tenchi just looked uncomfortable.

"I suppose not," she admitted. "You think this will really work?" she asked Tenchi.

"If they really can draw off my power like Dolands says..." He looked over at Lysanias.

"They can. Miruku can use the powers of those around them. They would be the ones you wanted in a fight like this."

"Then there's a chance. We have to take it." He raised his wrist and there was a unit like Lysanias wore. "You think I didn't ask about my chances here? I'm not stupid, you know."

"Ladies, it's up to you," Lysanias told them. "You know he's safe for the moment, I can send you back. Clearly he's made up his mind, and I somewhat agree. I'd need to see his power for myself, and learn more about this Darkbolt, and come up with a *very* good plan to get us in and out but we do have to try. This reality doesn't have many chances left to be saved, by the sounds of it."

"Leave?" Ryoko scoffed. "We just got here, and anyone that wants to hurt Tenchi will have to go through me first."

"And me," said Ayeka.

"And me," echoed Mihoshi.

"Thank you," Tenchi told them. "All of you. And sorry for vanishing like that, they said you wouldn't even realize I was gone. But I guess we know how that worked out."

"Unless you got killed," Ayeka countered.

"If I died it would be in the service of others. Why do I have these powers if not for that."

Hear, hear! I guess he's not such a bad sort after all!

"With that said, let's get going then," Dolands told them. "We can explain more on the way back to base. I don't like being out in the open like this. Even on a planet Darkbolt has destroyed, he could always circle back and check it. He found us here, well, the plan is off before it even gets started."

The group stood up and the one in the corner started putting his stuff into a bag.

"By the way, what planet is this?" Ayeka asked. "And do you have a Jurai here?"

"It's Earth," Gabi told them, stretching. "Ground zero. The last place *he* would think we would come back."

"We have to travel conterminously," Thabion told them. "We don't have the technology to cross the reality barrier *and* wind up in a different place. So to get Tenchi we had to come here. A risk, but one we felt we had to take."

"As for Jurai," Xelena added, "they were one of the first to fall. More dangerous, you know?"

"Oh no!" She put her hands over her mouth. "The whole planet?"

She nodded. "Just like this one." She made an exploding noise and gesture with her hands.

"So how did you even learn about Tenchi?" Lysanias asked as they headed to the ship.

"Certain energies were detected some time ago," he explained. "We tracked them down to that reality. We figured anyone that could do that, and have it be felt in our corner of reality, must be powerful. So we went looking."

The girls were looking at each other knowingly, and nodding.

So they know what he's talking about. What could have happened to this one guy that could be felt across realities? He doesn't seem to have that much spiritual energy, but then, if he's drawing power from elsewhere, like someone from Amelia's reality, who knows what he

could do with it? He already admits he doesn't fully know. Was this 'event' when he got his powers? He feels human, honestly.

He went on. "After Susan basically told us off for stealing energy from places-

"Wait, the Susan? With black eyes, cat companion? Magic user? Transforms sometimes? That Susan?"

"Oh, you know her too? But of course, all you wanderers probably know one another. Yeah, that's the one. We used to gather energy from people to help our people fight better, but when she showed us a Darkbolt like being could be beaten we went in search of friends instead. It was just lucky the event happened and we found someone suitable."

I don't though, I don't know anyone at the Hub, I've never even stayed there overnight. But now these people I know are being mentioned, and stories I heard in the past are in front of me. Some kind of convergence? Is one of the 'admins' manipulating things? Maybe as a last ditch attempt to save this reality? After all, if these people have the technology to leave then the shadow avatar can probably take the Darkbolt body with him when he leaves. Imagine it starting this campaign of destruction in another reality, and then the one after that! He must be stopped, are we really going to be enough to do it? "I guess so." I wonder if she would mind lending a hand here? I could ask her.

"With luck, we can end this and start rebuilding our empire. What's left of it, anyway."

They headed inside the ship and got ready to take off, Dolands explaining it would be several days of travel before they reached their "base." He invited them into a conference room like area with lots of chairs so they could ask more questions. The ship was mostly corridors, just like the Andromeda, but he didn't feel it was as big. There were a lot of strange looking crew, and they stared at him just as much as he stared at them.

"So tell us about the Miruku," Tenchi requested as they sat down. "Only having one on your side is going to make this plan impossible. Are you recruiting more or what?"

"Rescuing is a better term," Dolands replied. "Most of course follow Darkbolt, as their god and creator, but some-"

"Wait a second," Ryoko interrupted. "Darkbolt made them?"

"A whole race, some time ago," he agreed. "Before he was sealed in the orb and dropped out of sight for thousands of years. Our techniques can make short lived creatures, or summon living beings from other places. We can also empower artificial life forms. Darkbolt took it a step further, creating the Miruku race. Why, we don't know. But most are loyal to him, even now. Would you go against your god?"

In a heartbeat, but I'm a special case.

"So wait, when we fight him a bunch of the opposition is going to be able to use my powers as well?" Tenchi asked.

"Er, yes, as well as mine, his, hers," he pointed to everyone in the room. "Clearly we need a plan to separate him from his 'honor guards' when the attack begins."

"So Mihoshi, who has no powers, would be the safest bet for doing that," Ayeka mused. "How about that?"

"I guess that makes sense," she agreed.

"You don't have any powers?" Dolands asked, surprised.

She shook her head.

"Odd. Most everyone in this reality does. But to continue, we know of a prison planet we're pretty sure they use to incarcerate their own. We intend to go there and take as many as we can get, tipping scales. Of course we can go over our exact plans later, this is just an overview."

"Of course," everyone agreed.

“Has Darkbolt made anything else?” Ryoko asked. “More recently? I mean if he can just make a new race...”

“There are rumors he’s been making some kind of shadow creature, but it didn’t go very far. Apparently it was a failure, powerless, according to reports, or nearly so.”

Wait, a shadow creature that’s powerless? I’ve mused in the past about the similarity between Miruku and the Dream creatures Jason brought with him. Could Darkbolt have created them and either knew what he was doing, and just let them go into the multiverse to cause trouble, or were they supposed to be something else? Something like a Dreamer that can always manipulate reality but didn’t manage it? They need a Dreamer around to leach off of, just like a Miruku? The similarities are striking. Is this reality their source as well?

“I just don’t want any surprises when we attack,” she went on.

“I’m sure we’ll have our share of surprises no matter how well we plan.”

“I guess.”

“What else?”

“Why imprison these Miruku?” Ayeka asked. “Darkbolt doesn’t seem like the type to extend mercy.”

“We have no idea. Maybe he does still love ‘his’ children to an extent? Maybe he feels they’ll come around? Maybe he eats them, I don’t know.”

“I see.”

“How far gone is this reality?” Rommeta asked. “I don’t have an up to date estimate.”

“I can show you.” He typed some things and the lights dimmed a bit, and in the center of the table there was a hologram of the galaxy. It looked normal apart from a huge oval of darkness sitting across one portion of it. “As you can see here, this dark part is where Darkbolt’s forces have extinguished life.”

“That’s a sixth of the galaxy!”

“Oh, I know. Why do you think we’re so desperate?”

“Things really have been going badly here, haven’t they? We did try, you know, we’ve sent several teams to try and take Darkbolt down.”

“I believe you. I’ve heard stories.”

“Are we likely to be attacked on the way to your base?” Ryoko asked. “I can provide support if you need another ship. I’d like to see how your ships stack up against mine, as well.”

“We can give you some power output diagrams, but the chances are pretty low. In space, Miruku can’t get close enough to get powers. So it’s just regular old ship against regular old ship. They don’t tend to bother because, well, 50/50 chance they get blown up instead of who they’re attacking. No, they’re focused on planets, mopping up after Darkbolt gets through with anything powerful enough to need his attentions.”

“Okay, just let me know though.”

“Of course! Another ship can always be useful, especially if it can come out of nowhere in a fight.”

“How long will it take to get there?”

“Several days. Our ships are pretty fast, but space is still pretty big.”

“And we started at Earth like I said,” Xelena told them. “We have to get out of the ‘dead zone’ before he notices us.”

“Is that a danger?” asked Tenchi.

“Darkbolt is basically anywhere darkness is,” she sighed. “As we can’t exactly keep lights bright enough to expunge every shadow going all the time we have to accept some risk. Imagine a being that can peek out from any shadow.”

“You don’t have to sound so impressed when you say it,” Gabi scolded her.

"But it's impressive. Even you have to admit it."

"It's scary, not impressive. I go to sleep every night and fear he's going to claw my eyeballs out just for fun."

"He's the manifestation of darkness, not a kitten. Don't worry about your eyeballs. Now the soul on the other hand..."

"Oh, don't start your whole 'darkness of the soul' spiel, they don't want to hear it."

"How do you know? Did you ask them?"

"Nobody wants to hear it!"

"Please don't fight," Shyia said quietly. "You know I hate it when you do."

"Sorry, Shyia," both said immediately. They looked a bit ashamed.

"Hey, they're you two," Mihoshi told Ryoko and Ayeka.

"We're nothing like that!" protested Ayeka.

"Uh huh. Shyia, right? Are they always fighting?"

"Yes," she squeaked.

"Over boys?"

"Constantly," she said a little stronger, now with just the smallest grin.

"Always trying to outdo the other but over the *stupidest* shi- stuff? Like not something useful like who can wash the dishes first or who can make the best cake, but like, who can drink the most booze."

She giggled behind her hand. "Totally."

"Oh yeah," she said. "They're you two."

Both just glowered across the table at their counterparts with narrowed eyes.

"Well, like I said," Dolands said, rising. "It'll be several days. We'll find some quarters for you. Feel free to explore the ship, it's not that big. Any area dangerous to you like the engine room is clearly marked, best not go in there. Talk to the crew, I'll make an announcement as to who you all are in a second. If you have any questions, feel free to ask anyone. We get a little bored on these long journeys so you'll be the center of attention for a while."

Oh goody, just what I love most in the world, being the center of attention.

"Grab a bite to eat whenever, we don't stand on ceremony around here, someone can show you the mess hall. You know, standard ship stuff."

"Fair enough," Ryoko announced, teleporting to the wall and phasing backwards through it as she waved goodbye.

"Use a freaking door for once," Ayeka called after her, rushing to the door and out into the hall. "Have you no decorum at all?"

"Gonna be a long trip," Dolands muttered.

Chapter 4

No need for preparation

When: Not long after

Where: The ship

Lysanias wasted no time in trying to figure out how to keep Mihoshi safe in a reality he had initially been warned away from. His first step, after touring the ship with the others and staking claim to a bed, was to push Rommeta into asking one of the crew for help. She had no problem with it, and discussed various things with them. The primary one being if they could see his mountain spirit, which they could. Next if they could hurt it, and again, they could with various techniques. He came to the conclusion that if an attack seemed even the tiniest bit supernatural or glowed somehow, he could probably be hurt by it and so should probably *dodge*. This ruled out making a ward that simply made her *invulnerable*, so he needed something else. He found that with his newfound ability to use energy without limit that activating an armor ward, or any ward for that matter, and throwing large quantities of energy into it greatly increased the effectiveness of it.

I have to talk to Silverstreak when I get done here, there is a lot to be said for having more energy at one's disposal. Susan's cat seemed to walk around with more energy than I would have expected, she must have gotten it from somewhere. Some technique or skill I could use.

He did find a technique in the hubPad, that of *accumulation*, but wasn't thrilled with it. In theory it would allow him to take energy from the environment around him while spending his own, but there were numerous downsides. For one thing the benefit would be minimal even mastering the technique, and it would slow him down in combat by taking part of his attention away from what he was doing to grab on to this extra energy. It couldn't be practiced on a ship like this where there was very little ambient energy to draw from, and even if he could, his time practicing would be limited because there was no way to recharge himself. (Also he would be unable to really tell if it was working, how does one know if one put "one" extra energy into something? One couldn't that was the point) He made a note to ask about it, and resolved to keep his eyes open in this reality where seemingly everyone had powers. *Maybe I can find something I can have implanted, like this gem, that would help. Or make something on my own, if it comes to that.*

There were two members of the crew with the ability to summon weapons, one a staff and one a whip. He had no interest in those, but did convince Ryoko to spar with them for a bit, ostensibly to see how they stacked up against her, but mainly so he could steal a bit of her sword skill for the first step in his "keep Mihoshi safe" plan. She wasn't terribly practiced at it, but she held her own, and a few hours later he was able to meld with Mihoshi and give her his close combat skills. He told her he could make her some armor later, and to make sure it had taken he had her fight the two as well. As he had given her basically every combat skill he could think of to keep her safe, which included his (now increased) skill with the light saber, martial arts, moving like an air bender, the flame and the void, and his innate "combat sense" she too held her own against both. In fact, as he watched, he started to get the impression even without his borrowed skills, she might be the greatest close combat fighter he had ever witnessed. It wasn't that she was skillful, she was after everything he had put into her brain, but she hadn't become any less clumsy. The thing is, she seemed to be clumsy with purpose. While dodging she might "slip," throw a leg out, and just happen to smack into her opponent's hand making their weapon go wild and hit someone else. She was always apologizing and

didn't seem to realize what she was doing, making Lysanias wonder if Washu didn't have a point.

Am I witnessing the only practitioner of some sort of luck based martial art? One that can never be taught, or passed on, only discovered by the user when fight after fight goes your way despite your having no formal training? She's moving a lot better now, and she's more confident than she was, but she's still herself.

He wasn't completely at ease, given they were not using any techniques such as energy blasts or illusions or mental domination but at least in a straight up, one on one combat he felt she was as prepared as she could be. Having seen her skill increased, at least according to her she had never held a sword before, Ayeka requested the same "treatment," as Tenchi told her to keep the sword hilt. As he could make blades without it now, she would need it. (It was upon hearing this he mentally kicked himself for not thinking of this before, he could have had *Tenchi* and Ryoko spar, and take skill from both of them at the same time, rather than try to ignore the other weapon users he didn't care about. He didn't want Ryoko and Ayeka to spar, it seemed like their truce was holding as they weren't at each other's throats every second but he didn't want to push it.) It was to her chagrin that when the time came for her to take the two on, the sword wouldn't appear. She threw it down in frustration, shouting about how she now remembered the "master key" was there to draw power from Jurian ships, and there were none in this reality to draw on. So, no blade. He gave her a light saber, which she grudgingly admitted was just as good, and also showed she could handle herself at least in a sword fight. So he gave them both two, because if there's something better than a light saber, it's *two* light sabers, and he had a stack of them in his *pocket* and could easily make more that evening. And Ayeka demonstrated she *did* have powers, in the form of flying, an energy barrier, and a "capture field" generated by what looked like small wooden cylinders that appeared out of nowhere. The two fighting her didn't seem the least bit surprised by all this, saying many techniques seemed to generate matter out of nothing as part of the technique itself. They were impressed and seemed to think she had been lying to them in saying she wasn't from their universe originally. Testing her barrier they said it was the equal of any in their dimension, and as she could move around with it active she could slam it into someone as an attack so while she couldn't "throw" energy she had an "energy attack" in that way. They started coaching her to see if they could teach her an energy attack, and she threw herself into it. So he wasn't too concerned about her.

Of course having seen the two ladies increase their skills tremendously in a few minutes caused the other crew members to all request the same treatment, so he cheerfully gave them what he could. They promised to pass these teachings on (if they survived all this) and lamented not thinking of these techniques themselves. "They aren't supernatural at all," said one fellow who looked like a giant frog. "So anyone could have easily done it. As we are sort of in a fight for our lives at the moment, and people all across the universe are focused on combat right now so you would think someone would have." This led him to wonder what other techniques were out there waiting for him to learn or think of that were completely mundane, but yet could improve his effectiveness as a fighter. *I wouldn't think so, but then, had I not seen air bender combat or learned about the meditation, I would have said the same thing.* They traded him tips on what they did know that related to his skills, like the most effective methods of telekinetic attacks, or where best to shoot lightning as he could do that all day long now as well.

As everyone aboard ship was basically on their own schedule (to keep the bridge manned at all times and because they all came from planets with different day/night cycles) he ate dinner when he wanted and told Mihoshi to stay up, he would come and see her in her

room shortly. Tenchi, Ayeka, and Ryoko had all refused his services, saying the armor generating rings from their homeworlds were good enough for them in the case of Tenchi and Ayeka. Ryoko said she had never needed it, and wasn't going to start wearing it now. He didn't press the issue. He went to bed, then after realizing he was dreaming "got up" and stood in the World of Dreams representation of the ship bashing his head into the wall. *I could have just made her some armor out of scrap material they had laying around. It takes me a lot of energy to manipulate matter outside the dream, but that doesn't mean anything to me anymore.* He sighed. *Still, I guess the energy must come from somewhere, right? Even this gem can't be limitless, right?* He looked, and the gem was still a part of his dream body, though he didn't know if it would function in the same way or was just how he saw himself now so it had been included. *So anything I can do to conserve it should be done. Can I spend energy in this form? My energy is tied to my body, which is back in bed. So I'm not even sure I can, now that I think about it. If I want to be stronger or faster I imagine myself being that way in the Dream, not by spending effort on it. I'll have to verify that later, there's still so much I don't know about my own powers...*

He stepped back over to the real world and found Mihoshi in her room.

"Oh, there you are!" she announced, bolting upright from where she had been sitting on the bed. The room was mostly dark, making her hard to see as she had dark skin, but he could make her out. "I was waiting!"

"Yeah, I told you to wait for me," he told her, confused. *Why are the lights off in here? Did she forget and was sleeping and just said she was waiting for me but really forgot?* "I was coming to see you before bed, remember?"

"Right! And here I am!" She gave a nervous laugh. "And here you are!"

"Are you okay?" He felt she was far more nervous about simply getting some armor than she had any right to be, and wondered if he wasn't missing something. He sometimes did, after all. "Let me turn the light on." He hit the switch and lit up the room, making her squint a moment. *She seems fine.*

"Of course! If you prefer it that way. I mean, I've never really done this before, but you did heal me and were working to make sure I would be safe here but I don't know you very well and you seem really nice but I kind of like Tenchi not that I'll ever compete with either Ryoko or Ayeka, or Sasami, or Washu, or Noike so I might as well find someone else and if you wanted, to, you know- eeeeeeeee- I mean we don't know each other very well but people tell me it's really good and-"

"Mihoshi, what are you-" Both stopped to look at the other. He noticed she wasn't wearing very much, which he had initially not cared about and simultaneously filed under "armor fitting" so it hadn't really registered. But this, the lights off, her nervousness, all added up to mean something else, and suddenly he was glad Rosalina had insisted Rommeta help her improve her combat skills and wasn't with him at the moment. Lysanias himself couldn't, because she used methods he wasn't familiar with, this "magic fu" she was developing. Both were still at it, and had drawn a crowd as Rommeta explained what she was doing. The others had said the technique might be able to be adapted to fighting with powers, and Dolands, their best fighter, was exploring the possibility. If he said it was worthwhile Lysanias was going to try hooking them all together and transferring knowledge from Roalina into Dolands. He had never tried giving someone knowledge he didn't have, but was sure it would work. He had just been in so many brains that day he wanted to do it after a bit of rest. (And if Dolands didn't think it would work, save him from having a bunch of useless info shoved into his brain) So she didn't see the mostly naked Mihoshi, or both of their blushes as they stood there.

"Mihoshi I'm here-" he said while at the same time she said "I thought you-"

They both laughed and both said "Go ahead," at the same time.

"I'm here to make you some armor!" he said as fast as he could before it could get any more awkward.

"I thought that was just some kind of cover story," she admitted. "I don't understand what you mean. How are you going to make me armor? You don't have any tools or anything. I mean apart from the one. Oh God why did I say that?"

"I guess I didn't explain," he told her. "When I'm Dreaming I can just wish things into existence. It's complicated, you'll just have to trust me on this one. I'm right now still back in my room, asleep. If you went there with me you would see "both" of me. This is my Dream self, that has stepped out of my Dream back into the world. That gives me certain powers, which I'm going to use now to make your armor."

"So you're not here, uh, for me?" she asked, equal parts relief and hopeful in her voice.

"Look, you're kind, and willing to help rescue Tenchi even though this place may be the worst place for you to be. You could have gone back after Washu shoved you in here, after all, the door could have been opened again. You're nice, and were willing to be the first to meld with me to take my combat skills, so not adverse to trying new things. And beautiful, don't think I'm not thinking that. But I'm dating Rosalina, I mean we've had two dates that's dating, right? And once Tenchi is back home I'm leaving. We shouldn't get involved." Though of course he was wondering what kissing her would be like, and how it would be different from Rosalina.

"Oh." She turned away. "I guess I was just being silly again, huh?"

How do I make this right? This is so not my area of expertise. Is she worried my rejection means no one would ever want to be with her? I guess just reassurance that's not the case, what would I want to hear if I were her? He put a hand on her back, between her shoulders. "You'll find someone, Mihoshi. Maybe not Tenchi, it seems everybody around there is in love with him in one way or another so there's a lot of competition. And getting between *those two*," he didn't need to specify, they both knew who he was talking about, "probably isn't the best idea. But there are other people just as worthy of your love as he is. Believe me. You'll lock eyes with someone, and Zing," he suppressed a laugh, thinking about Mavis, "you'll both know the other is the one."

She sniffled. "You mean it?"

"I do. You will find someone, Mihoshi, I believe that strongly, someone who will love you for exactly who you are. But it's not me, we're from different worlds, literally, and I can't take you with me when I go back to mine." *If I ever do. But she gets the idea, she can't travel realities with me. I mean she could, if she wanted, I guess? And if I hadn't agreed to date Rosalina, would this have gone very differently? I guess I'll never know.*

"Okay." She forced a laugh. "I guess I should put some clothes on, huh?"

"Actually no. I mean, maybe, depending on what kind of armor you want. You'll need a layer under it so it's not rubbing up against you. I'll make that too, like a one piece jumpsuit or something, you didn't exactly come here with much but your uniform, right? That's too bulky to wear under armor."

"There's some stuff in my cube," she admitted. "If I can remember how to get at it, which mostly I don't. Okay." She seemed to come to a decision and nodded, stepping away from him. Slipping off and out of what little she was wearing she turned around. "Let's talk armor."

Of course he looked at her, did you think he wouldn't? "You could have left that on while you decided!"

"Oh, I could have," she admitted with a little smile, hands on her hips. "This is just to let you know what you're missing. And what you might see again if you change your mind." She

winked. "You are going to be a gentleman and not go back on what you said, right? I am completely safe with you, right?"

"You're teasing me because you think I should have explained better beforehand, is that it?"

"Is that what I'm doing?" she asked, so much innocence in her voice it might have been that of an angel. "Like you said you'll have to make me something anyway, so I wouldn't need anything on under that, right? So you would have seen me like this one way or the other. Why not just go with it, now that we're all clear on the situation?"

"Let's just get you fitted before Rosalina comes looking for me."

"Have you seen *her* like this?" she asked, a big grin on her face, spreading her arms wide and then stretching up to the ceiling on her toes with a wiggle. "How does she compare? Come on, you can tell me!"

He looked up at the ceiling, but not before glancing at her. "Now I can make you power armor, or just pieces like boots and a breastplate, though if you're using air bender style..."

"You're no fun," she muttered, putting her hands behind her head.

Mihoshi decided on a fairly simple design, basically just a breastplate and helmet to not be weighed down all that much. She wasn't super strong like the others, and even the lighter "elven" metal would weigh her down. She didn't want anything too hard to get into (and he agreed, for obvious reasons as she struggled a bit just with that) but that was comfortable enough to wear all day. As long as she wasn't outright killed by a single attack there were enough people with healing techniques (including Lysanias himself) she would probably be fine, so protecting her vitals was the most important thing anyway. After he got that fitted and she was happy with it he made her some regular clothes, just so she would have some variety apart from her one uniform, which she enjoyed modeling for him. Now that she understood he could just wish things up he told her to come to him with anything she wanted, and if she changed her mind about boots, or wanted the armor extended to her arms, to not hesitate to tell him. She thanked him and said she would, and with her ideas for clothes exhausted at the moment he bade her good night and stepped back into the World of Dreams to get in some more Dreaming practice that night.

Chapter 5

No need for royalty

When: Several days later

Where: Base?

A sense of hope, one might even say a new hope, was rising in the members of the tiny band of resistance fighters as they made their way across space back to their hideout. Dolands admitted after three days of travel that spirits were lifting, this mission had been seen as a very last ditch effort by the higher-ups, and that had been reflected in spirits aboard ship before they arrived.

“Even in the best case,” he explained, “if Tenchi was willing to come and help us, we thought that’s just what we were getting. One guy with a power we felt could turn the tide here. We would still have work to do, rescuing Miruku and such, before he could be ‘put to use’ if you’ll forgive the phrase. Even then we couldn’t be sure he would be enough to let us win. We didn’t expect a group of fighters who would bring along brand new fighting techniques we could use to make our own soldiers better.”

“Are we on our way there now? To rescue Miruku?” Lysanias asked.

“No, we’re on our way back to our hideout. Gogo wasn’t available to come with us when we detected the energy surge that led us to Tenchi. We’re *pretty* sure others can tap into his power, there’s never been a power they couldn’t tap into, but we have to be sure before we make other plans. So we’re heading back there, see if Gogo can feel his power, and we’ll go from there.”

“Got it. Seems about right.”

“But what you’ve brought us? That android of yours is amazing, by the way. I thought she was human! Had me completely fooled, she acted so like a biological person, I mean she blushes for goodness sake. What android that does?”

And how exactly did you make her blush? Have you been hitting on her? He wasn’t sure how he should feel about that. *I mean she’s her own person, and she can’t help Dolands hitting on her any more than I could have helped Mihoshi ‘offering’ herself to me. If she wants to have a relationship with someone in a reality we’ll have to leave sooner or later, it’s not my business to say she can’t. After all “she’s not my android, she just travels with me.”*

“Oh really?” *And what is that supposed to mean?* “What she’s been showing us about combat strategy, actually firing where you anticipate someone to be and shifting to be where they don’t expect you to be, rather than standing there trading blows with someone? I can’t deny it works. And that wand spirit of yours can do the same thing so it’s not just something artificial beings can do. What a find! It’s good she learned how to do it, allowing the technique to be passed to me and my troops directly instead of us trying to just figure it out ourselves. After you connected us together and gave me her memories of practicing the technique I’ve been thinking of how best to utilize it. I’ve got some ideas, we’ll see what the queen says when we get back. And of course the others are powerful fighters too, we actually are starting to feel like we have a chance again, that all hope isn’t lost for us here.”

“That’s what wanderers do,” he said proudly.

“I almost wish, after this is over, that I could join you in doing what you do. Saving realities from Darkbolt like entities, what a life that would be.”

I don’t deny you’re wrong there. It is an adventure. “You could, of course. I could put in a good word for you, if you wanted to take the test and join. Believe me, there are far more realities to save than people to save them.”

He sadly shook his head. “No, there’s... events... in my past that I’m sure make me ineligible let’s say, to join your group. You, Tenchi, Rosalina, I see what kind of person

becomes a wanderer. Now maybe I could do it on my own, traveling between realities like I used to, stealing energy from people, but I wonder if that help would be welcomed. These beings you've described, Inari and Silverstreak, they seem nice enough but I can't forget what they really are. Beings that basically look down upon all realities like we were bugs. I would have to be very careful not to anger them by meddling in their affairs."

"If you're worried about the energy thing disqualifying you-"

"No, not that, no one was seriously harmed when we did that. I'm sure it could be overlooked, as we did it for the right reason. It's... other things. I don't really want to talk about it." He rubbed his forehead, where the Tenma symbol was, and felt a deep sorrow and regret.

"Very well." *What could he have done that was so terrible?*

So the group, aliens and wanderers alike, trained in the days between stars. Lysanias opened his *personal dimension* so they could let loose a little. (Provided they promised not to blow up his stuff and keep their energy attacks to a minimum as it was more about aim and strategy than making the biggest mess possible anyway) Lysanias and Rosalina spent some time just sitting and talking, watching them train, (two clones were out of course) and of course Lysanias put as many hours as he could into Dreaming practice every night. Ayeka, with the help of both Ryoko and the other Tenma managed to produce an energy blast, further raising spirits. Ryoko grudgingly admitted maybe even she could stand to brush up on her skills, rather than relying on her gems, and could often be seen sparing with one or another of the Tenma. Lysanias was almost disappointed to have it come to an end when the announcement was made they were nearing their destination, but realized this was only a stop. There would be more traveling to do.

On the bridge those flying the ship were calling out readings and performing some sort of important tasks apparently, but on the viewscreen Lysanias and the others, curious what this base looked like, saw only darkness.

"Is it cloaked somehow?" Rommeta finally asked.

"Sort of. You'll see when the door opens in a second," Dolands told them.

Clearly wants to surprise us with something. They continued to stare, readings on various monitors around the bridge changing so they knew something was happening, but really couldn't tell what. Suddenly a great door appeared before them, beams shining out to make sure they were not going to hit anything, and light spilling out from somewhere. This illuminated what appeared to be a flat surface, barely seen at the edges but Dolands pointed to a display that showed some kind of wireframe model of what they were entering. Lysanias still wasn't sure that explained anything, and they slid silently into the bay, the door closing behind them. Inside was a space hanger, with ships of various design parked everywhere. Tiny figures swarmed this way and that around the whole place, and the pilots smoothly brought the ship down into their assigned area.

"Welcome to the hideout," Dolands announced when the crew started powering the ship down for refueling and maintenance. "I have to report to the queen and give my recommendations, you're welcome to join me. I'm sure she'd love to meet travelers from another world."

"And this queen, she's the one bonded to the representation of all evil in this reality?" Tenchi asked.

"Er, yes, Queen Yasha is bonded to the demon of Evil. But she's not going to kill a puppy right in front of you or anything. Believe me, Darkbolt has done far more evil things than she has. I wouldn't say she's turned over a new leaf or anything, and I'm not sure how

things would be if Darkbolt fell over dead tomorrow for no reason, but for now she's got the empire that's the only thing standing between Darkbolt and no more reality in her grip."

"I suppose I should go," he admitted. "I am the catalyst here. I should meet her." The *"so I know who else I might have to kill in this reality to free it from tyranny"* of course remaining unsaid by him.

"Splendid! And the rest of you?"

They all agreed they would love to see the station (or whatever this was) and meet a real queen, so he said he would be glad to explain it on the way there. They had a few thousand kilometers to go, after all.

"How far?" Rommeta asked, clearly not believing this. "We couldn't have parked closer?"

He laughed. "It'll go quickly, believe me. Come on."

He gave orders that no one was to leave the ship, they would probably be taking off again fairly soon once he got back. They saluted and went back to work. The group left the ship down a ramp that extended and headed to an elevator, which took them to a station of some kind where capsules rushed through tubes. Most people he saw looked fairly human, though some had a non-human feature or two like oddly colored hair (which he admitted to himself could just be the style to have crazy colored hair and not their natural color, but there was a war on so would anyone bother?) or pointed ears or oddly colored eyes. No one looked at his red eyes twice, simply nodding in greeting and going about their work. As they boarded their capsule Dolands turned on a display and punched some buttons.

"Here we are," he said, stepping back a bit. "This is where we are." He pointed on the screen to a red dot. "And here's where we're going." He indicated a green one. "We'll head around the surface, for security there are no spaceport doors near the throne room. Obvious why, of course."

"Is that what I think it is?" Rommeta asked, stepping up and peering at the display.

"If you think it's a sun, you're right," he praised her.

"What?" asked everyone else.

"It's a capture sphere," he explained. "Think of it as a shell around a small sun. In this case, a rouge star that has no planets around it, and what we chose as our hideout."

"Impossible," she protested. "Even in my reality, with a civilization that spanned three galaxies, such a project would be unthinkable."

"What about that world ship I destroyed?" asked Ryoko. "That was on the-"

"Meow."

"Sorry, we destroyed."

"Meeeow."

"Okay, that Ryo-Ohki destroyed, all by her little self? Better?"

"Mau!"

She rolled her eyes. "That's got to be engineering on the same level."

"That was done by a being classified in my reality as an angel. A being that had existed since before the birth of the universe. It's a different thing. This was done by just people."

"I guess we're all hallucinating the same thing then, wonder where we really are?" He made a show of looking around and touching the walls. "Feels real..."

"Don't be a jerk," she playfully smacked his arm. "This is really a complete sphere around a star?"

"That's right. We can flood the place with sunlight should it be invaded by Darkbolt, limiting his power. By a little," he clarified. "But every little bit can help. Plus he wouldn't think to look so close to a star, at least he hasn't yet that we know of."

"How can you be so sure?" Tenchi asked.

"Because we're still alive," he explained.

"Ah."

"So we get all the raw power we need, we stay hidden, and in a pinch we could move the whole thing if we absolutely had to."

"How do you handle the heat?" Rommeta asked.

"Dimensional techniques. We can pull vast quantities of cold air from seemingly infinite dimensions of the stuff, and send it back through when it's too hot to absorb any more heat."

"Handy."

"Most of our technology is powers based, that's how we're able to do so much."

Don't remind me. I asked two days ago about how the engine worked to see if I could install one on the next Andromeda I build, should I ever need to build another. But it's mostly powered by powers, in other words like my Dream engine was going to be, if I hadn't made that corridor of "fast space." So I couldn't replicate it. That frog looking guy that keeps it going, Croakter I think his name was, seemed particularly interested in my light saber, as it was an example of technology that wasn't based on powers. Of course, that means it won't hurt those naturally invulnerable, which I guess is a thing here, so it's a trade off.

"May as well have a seat," he told them, folding one down. "Rommeta?" He grinned and patted his lap like she was a kitten he was inviting up. She glared at him and turned to look at the scenery zooming by.

What exactly is going on with those two?

Not long after the capsule came to a stop and he led them through the halls of the base. This area was fairly quiet, with guards every so often that looked made of stone. They were fairly large, and if he looked closely their arms and legs didn't seem to connect with their bodies, but simply were "stuck" there where they should be, and floated next to where they would normally connect. *I guess if this is their level of "android" technology, it's no wonder Rommeta is considered so unique and special.*

He announced who they all were after coming to a door, and the guard, the one on the left, slipped inside. The one on the right continued to glare at them without speaking. A moment later the doors were thrown open, and he gestured them inside. Entering the room he saw several people standing around a table, at the head of which must be the queen. She had on an elaborate headdress, and was wearing a low cut dress that showed she had a purple orb embedded just beneath her throat. One of the people there was grinning a grin ten parsecs wide and gave a little wave at Lysanias. He smiled too, he actually recognized someone here!

"Majesty," Dolands said, coming to her side and dropping to one knee. Most of the rest of the party followed his example, the exception being Ryoko, who seemed unconcerned and was looking around.

"So you have returned, and not empty handed I see," the queen said to him. "Rise, and introduce me."

"Yes my queen." He stood and fluttered his cape. "All, you stand in the presence of her supreme majesty, ruler of the Tenma, known from one end of the galaxy to the other, host of the demon of evil, savior of all, Queen Yasha." A gong went off someone, and he risked a glance. There was someone next to a copper looking gong and had struck it. Then he did a double take as it was Ryoko holding the... Whatever they called the thing you hit a gong with. The gong hitter, he was going to call it.

"Nicely timed," she told her, sounding like she could order them all killed at a moment's notice and just go back to whatever it was she was doing and not give them a second thought. "I keep telling them to get rid of that thing. Dolands?"

“Uh, er, yes, my queen. As I was saying. This is Tenchi Muyo, prince of Jurai, and from his reality are Ryoko, reformed space pirate, Ayeka, princess of Jurai, and Mihoshi, Detective first class in the Galaxy Police. Another wanderer joins us from another reality, this is Lysanias and his two companions, Rosalina the wand spirit and Rommeta, android avatar of and only survivor of a warship which perished in battle.”

She told him about that?

“Our little corner of things is graced with two wanderer parties at once? Arise, if you would.” They got up again and she looked them over coldly. “Splendid, perhaps you will last longer than the last one sent to help us.” She clicked her tongue. “Such a messy end that one had, let me tell you. Quite gruesome, even by my admittedly high standards.”

“I remain quite hopeful my queen.”

“Yes, you would. This little project of yours better pan out, Dolands. Well?” She looked to Gogo, who had been standing there. They looked good, finely dressed now and with long hair gathered into a tail. They gestured, and a shape made of blue energy appeared out of nowhere before them. They grabbed the bottom and it turned into a sword.

“I’m keeping this,” they said with a smile.

“It seems your idea is sound,” she told him, turning away from Gogo. “Tell me the rest of your plan and I will consider approving it.”

“I serve only at your pleasure,” he agreed. “The first stage of my plan, now that we have verified Miruku can draw upon the power of Tenchi is to rescue as many as we can from the prison planet Matraxilous. I have been learning various fighting styles from our new visitors, I propose a raid on Miruku supply depots to attain weapons and armor usually used by them. In talking with Lysanias he has reminded me that techniques are all well and good, but sometimes you wish you had a weapon. Especially as the energies that power our techniques is not limitless, and we are likely to fight a protracted battle with Darkbolt’s forces. As they use ‘conventional’ weapons in case they go up against someone without offensive abilities, we should deprive them of some and bolster our own army. Using the technique I have learned of from Rommeta and Rosalina I believe I can be a far more effective warrior using weapons than relying on only energy based techniques.”

“Do you now?”

“Yes, my queen. I will have someone with a mind nature extract these techniques from my mind so they can be distributed to other soldiers.”

“Go on.”

“We then make Darkbolt come to us. As we have no idea where he might be, we will move ahead of the expanding darkness and set up a defense on a world not yet darkened. When the darkness sweeps that world we will be ready, and defend it. My hope is several attempts will be made, and as long as we can hold it against the Miruku that arrive Darkbolt himself will be forced to take the field. We will then smash him to pieces with the ‘wings of the light hawk’ which you have just seen demonstrated.”

“I suppose it could work,” she decided after a moment. “What resources do you need immediately?” Her tone indicated there were no resources immediately available.

“None at present,” he assured her, with a bow. “My current crew and my new additions will be adequate until we set up a defense of a planet near the dark zone.”

“Very well. I will have someone assemble a suitable force when you give the word. If that is all?”

“May I join Dolands’ force?” Gogo asked. “If we are rescuing some of my people, I should be there after all.”

She considered with a hum, pressing her lips together. “I suppose you should get a feel for what powers you can draw from this person, so that you can tell your people of any quirks

you discover. Very well, your loss will undoubtedly go unnoticed here. You may depart with them.”

“Thank you, my queen.”

“You are dismissed.” She turned and went back to the charts and maps on the table, the group forgotten. Dolands bowed again and backed up, but Lysanias didn’t see the point and just left again, she wasn’t even looking at them.

“Horrible woman,” Gogo spat when they were down the hall. “She wears Evil well, the two were made for each other. Couldn’t wait to get away, her powers are all so dark. But that is you, isn’t it Lysanias? The one that found me? Not just some other one that happens to be wandering around?”

“Only one of me, far as I know. How are you, Gogo? Hasn’t been too long since I saw you, I hope? You’re looking well, better than when we found you, that’s for sure. Oh, everyone, this is Gogo, a friend of mine from this reality. Their pronouns are they/them.”

“You’re still so thoughtful! I’m well, thanks! So you caught up with me, eh? I really didn’t think you would come, but here you are. I’m a little flattered.”

“How did you two meet?” Ayeka asked. “Strange to walk into a room here and discover you know someone, isn’t it?”

“Lysanias rescued me,” Gogo told them. “Some time ago, if what I’m feeling from him is right. I mean you can stop time now? When did that happen? I’m super glad to be near you again.”

Yeah, I have all sorts of delicious powers they can use, and being normally powerless that’s probably a nice treat for them. “Not long ago. We found them in a cave... sort of thing. Apparently they had fallen through a crack in the world or whatever and ended up somewhere I was. We tracked them down and they helped us, I sent them to Inari and they clearly made it back home from there. Not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal he says. It was to me! Anyway, hello everyone, Gogo the mimic here, at your service.”

“As far as my being here, it was a roundabout way, let me tell you. I didn’t even know I would be coming here, I was just supposed to help ‘rescue’ Tenchi here.”

“Rescue him? He’s the most powerful of all of you! What kind of help could he need?”

“It was just a time mix-up. We can give you the whole story on the way. I’m sure we’ll have a few more days of travel, right Dolands?”

“That’s right. Welcome to the group, Gogo, let’s go save some of your people from Darkbolt.”

Chapter 6

No need for intrigue

When: Two hours later

Where: Back aboard the ship and ready to blast off

Dolands, having visited another section of the base to find someone that could extract the techniques Rosalina and Lysanias had given him, had now gathered everyone together outside the ship. This was mainly because no single room aboard was large enough to comfortably host the entire crew, and Lysanias looked them over to see if there was anyone he hadn't seen before due to scheduling. (Dolands having woken up everyone and made sure the whole crew was there because this was important)

The crew consisted of those he had met on the surface, including the three friends; Xeena, Gabi, Shyia, and Thabion, their computer expert. Milling around nearby were the two least human crew members; Croakter, the frog looking engineer and the very furry Ellias. She didn't bother with any clothes, looking like a humanoid dog if Lysanias had to compare her to an Earthly animal. The fur that covered her was mostly white, with some dark patches, and she had poofy ears and even a tail. She did have a variety of holsters though, holding various knives, pistols, and "batteries" for said pistols. She wasn't carrying her big gun at the moment, which she was always polishing or tinkering with. The crew said she had never missed what she shot at, ever, but didn't have any active powers. The ship "medic," Poppop, was scowling at everyone as usual. And as usual he was somehow filthy, smelly, and suddenly became distracted by a woman that was crossing the bay. *How our doctor can show such disregard for his appearance is beyond me. Doctors should be the cleanest, right?* Crytella was as far from him as she could be and still be with the group. She had very catlike ears and eyes, green hair, and wore a one piece jumpsuit most of the time that she barely kept zipped up. She was usually seen at the sensors station and wore a computer display or "HUD" over one eye. The largest one there, sitting now and still almost reaching Crytella's height was Butan, the one with the odd skin. His face was slightly elongated and his skin was almost scales. He had gray hair, wore armor, and despite all the medical treatments available to him, both classically and powers based *and* what Lysanias could do, insisted on wearing an eye-patch to cover his empty eye socket. That made ten crew in total, now eleven as Gogo was going to join them.

Nope, that's everybody. Mostly soldiers, but some specialize in various parts of the ship. What a group though, are there even two people from the same planet here?

"All right everyone, our mission has been approved. We'll be heading to Matraxilous and trying to free some Miruku so that Tenchi's power can be multiplied. This mission is dangerous, and I have no idea what we will find guarding that planet. But as always, if you don't feel you are up to it, now is the time to walk."

Xelena turned and started to walk away, but Gabi grabbed the back of her blouse. She struggled a bit and then slumped, defeated. No one else moved.

"Very well. As we won't know what we're dealing with until we're in system our plans will be very basic. Thabion, when will the ship be ready to launch?"

"The ship is refueled. We've got a lot more mouths to feed though, general. I've requisitioned additional supplies for the journey. They should be delivered within the hour."

"In that case, meet back here in one hour. Dismissed."

Poppop headed off in the direction of the woman he had been leering at, and the others drifted off or headed back into the ship.

"Ah, Dolands?" Lysanias asked.

"What's up?"

"I was just counting people and trying to think ahead for once. How many do you expect to rescue from this planet?"

"Miruku traitors are known only to them, so we have no hard numbers on how many there could be. But it is a planet, not a station, so it could be a lot. I'm hoping at least ten will agree to join us, twenty would be better depending on their range, but fifty would be ideal to account for losses during the attack. Why?"

"Fifty? Where would we put fifty more people aboard your ship?" He gestured to it, and Dolands looked over at it. Then he began to laugh and turned back to Lysanias.

"You really don't know what we can do, do you? No, no, I'll simply open a portal back here once we find some candidates. Of course, most of the station is protected against teleportation but there are a few heavily guarded areas that allow it. We won't be flying them back here, oh no, we would need a much larger ship than that one. We have to go there because I've never seen it, and this approach lets us plan our strategy before we just pop into the place."

"Ah, that's good to know. Wait, you can open a portal from one *star system* to another? How powerful are you?"

"Doesn't have anything to do with how powerful I am," he explained. "Distance isn't a factor for us. We just do it."

"Nice work if you can get it."

He chuckled. "That it is. Anyway, you can look around if you don't go too far. Don't want you getting lost."

"Let's go look at the other ships!" Rosalina suggested, taking his arm.

"There's quite a variety in design, some can be very pleasing to look at." He looked at Rommeta while saying this. "Perhaps you would like to join me—"

"I'll just stick with Lysanias, thanks," she told him.

"Very well," he held up his hands. "Be back soon. We will leave without you."

"He's not bothering you too much, is he?" Lysanias asked after they had moved away.

"Hmm? Oh, Dolands? No, I think he's just that way."

"What, a pushy male who can't take a hint?" Rosalina asked.

"Something like that. What do you think that part of the ship does?"

I guess I'll drop it, she wouldn't lie to me, would she?

"I think it's a sensor array," Gogo told them.

"Oh, that would make- ya!!" Lysanias gave a start. "Oh, Gogo, didn't see you there, sorry." *Didn't realize they had followed me, must be letting my guard down if I didn't feel them there.*

"Only have eyes for Rosalina, huh? You'll have to properly introduce me sometime, you weren't surrounded by beautiful ladies when I last saw you. I mean, you were, Terra and Celest but now I guess you're traveling with them?"

"That's right. I can explain later, we've got a few days of travel ahead I'm sure. Need something to pass the time."

"Sure, sure. These ships are something, aren't they? From all over, as far as I can tell. So many designs, and here comes another, isn't that a beauty?" They pointed, and everyone looked up at it.

Lysanias, don't react, I need to give you something. Inari gave it to me to give to you should you ever appear here. I'm going to use your power and stop time, slip it into your pocket. Didn't want you freaking out over where it came from. Don't look at it if time isn't stopped or you're not in your own dimension or whatever else you can manage. Be as secure as you can be. The queen has people using Seer techniques to check up on all her 'loyal' subjects and you can bet she's added you to the rotation by this point. Figure you're being watched all the time, though it's more like a random check in, they don't have that much manpower to watch everyone all the time. Got it? Here we go. Okay done. "Oh, let me show you this one over here, it's one of my favorites."

What in the world? What did she need to give me that she couldn't give me herself?

But that mystery had to wait, as nearly an hour went by and the group made their way back to the ship. They took off and headed toward the prison planet.

"You two want to go back to training?" Lysanias asked them as the door to the station closed behind them and the stars jumped, showing they were on their way. He had by then passed along the warning to Rosalina, but wasn't sure how to tell Rommeta. She didn't exactly have a mind he could push thoughts into, but figured he could stop time while touching her, using his item so he could hold it long enough to have a conversation. As they hadn't done so naturally yet he hadn't had the chance.

"Actually, if it's okay with you general, I'd like to go through some concerns I have about this mission," Rommeta said.

"I encourage those below me to make suggestions about our future position," he said, totally innocently. "Shall we retire to the meeting room and you can share your concerns?"

She stared at him a moment, then finally agreed "Let's go. Lysanias, Rosalina, you come too, this concerns you all."

They went down there, the small room fitting them just barely, but Rommeta remained standing. "I'm concerned this is a trap," she began.

"What is? A whole prison planet?" he scoffed. "Nonsense."

"Is it? Let's look at the facts. Years ago Darkbolt created the Miruku, right?"

"Many years ago, but essentially correct."

"And then vanished, as I understand it, after being sealed in an orb for some thousands of years."

"Also correct."

"He was released on Earth by a Tenma for who knows what reason, taken over by Darkvoid during the change, destroyed the place, and went in search of his followers. He found them, and began wiping out the life in the galaxy with them as his agents."

"From what we've been able to determine, yes, that's how it happened."

"But some of his people didn't quite like the idea of their god slash creator returning, and rebelled. Those he had exiled to this planet."

"Yesssss," he answered slowly.

"But is either Darkvoid or Darkbolt known for their mercy? Compassion? Second chances? Why keep rebels around? Anyone that doesn't follow his orders would just be killed, right? So much safer that way. He's not stupid, after all. This was mentioned in passing before and you said 'maybe he eats them' but as I'm hurtling towards the place I'd like to have a more in depth discussion about it."

"Oh. You have a point, that's something to consider. He must have millions or billions of Miruku by now, the loss of a few would hardly matter."

"Would it?" asked Lysanias. "I suppose as a fear tactic maybe slicing their heads off or whatever in a public display of 'this is what happens to traitors' could work, for a while. But

unless he's going to execute traitors himself he would be asking his own people to kill his own people. Unless completely fanatical, which I admit is possible, wouldn't some or all of them at some point wonder 'is this the thing I should be doing? Killing my own kind?' That sort of seed can grow quickly."

"His people are rather fanatical, you can count on that," Dolands grumped. "Does making them simply vanish help or hurt him? It must help him somehow, otherwise he wouldn't do it."

"Do they vanish?" Rosalina asked. "What if they are offered the choice? If they are not going to help Darkbolt they can simply go live on this other planet, and everyone can see what a compassionate god they follow. If you're a Miruku, anyway."

"I do wonder what he's telling them," Dolands mused. "Revenge on the universe that spurned them? Or maybe he's just mentally controlling them all somehow, and the ones we're trying to save are just immune to it, so off they go. Maybe there's too many to just kill, it would raise suspicions even among mind controlled people."

"What I'm getting at is," Rommeta went on, "could this be a trap? Could the information that a bunch of Miruku are hanging out somewhere, supposedly not loyal to Darkbolt, be completely false? Made up. A fabrication. We head there and instead of friendly rebels we land or whatever and they immediately turn on us."

Dolands rubbed his chin. "I would actually be more worried about seeming friendly *right* up to the end. They greet us with open arms, right? 'Thanks for coming, we'll help you, etc. etc.' Everybody's smiles and high spirits and booze and parties because they don't have to live on that rock anymore. Maybe we even fight off some 'guards' to really sell the illusion. We portal them into our base, they look around, contact their god, and suddenly the game is over. Shoot, that's a good point." He leaned back and folded his arms, scowling. "But we need them! The whole plan! We've proven we can't fight him directly and win, we need something big! We need a dozen Tenchi at one time."

"Exactly why this is such an effective trap."

"But even Darkbolt couldn't know you would go into another reality for help," protested Lynanias. "Getting Tenchi was mostly an accident, right? Whatever happened to him in his reality that alerted you in this one?"

"It would have alerted Darkbolt too," Dolands cautioned. "But yes, he would have had to plan pretty far ahead. I don't know, they would be useful in any case because they could become immune to his attacks. He's immune to darkness attacks, after all, and all his attacks have the nature of darkness. They could wear him down with other means but it would be a bloody battle."

"So you're willing to have Lysanias check them out before bringing them to your base?" Rommeta asked.

"What's this?"

"I get it," Lysanias agreed, snapping his fingers. "You want me to stand in front of the portal and check the future of everyone about to step through. See if they'll betray us, in the end."

"Exactly. It may not be foolproof-

"It better be," growled Dolands. "Even one traitor telling Darkbolt where we are means our rebellion is over."

"You're really that well hidden?" Rosalina asked.

"We must be," he insisted. "Must be. He wouldn't just leave us, would he? Nahh."

"I can only do what I can do," Lysanias told him. "I can't open portals between planets or whatever. My abilities are skills, and while I can do various things to help," *call on the spirit*

of the dragonfly, I haven't done that in awhile, then try my new ESPer skill, "I can still get it wrong. Do you really not have any similar techniques?"

"Let me think, or better yet check." He tapped on the table and must have gotten into a database of some kind, pictures of the crew appeared and he scrolled through. "You know, Crytella has seeing and mind natures. If you work with her maybe she can come up with a technique either to enhance you, or supplement your check with one of her own. Look into their future, wouldn't have thought of that. Let's go talk to her!" He started to rise. "Unless there's something else, Rommeta?"

"Not at the moment, but any other precautions you can take with these Miruku we're going to 'rescue' you should think about. Or be ready for it to be just one giant trap."

"Noted. Crytella should be on the bridge, let's go talk to her."

The two headed up there, Rosalina and Rommeta went to go train, but she wasn't exactly a stranger at this point so Lysanias was fine talking to her. Crytella was the staff user Ryoko had sparred with, so they had talked before. She was on the bridge, ears twitching as they walked up to her. She swiveled her chair and looked up at them.

"What can I do for you, general?"

Dolands explained what he wanted done, and she looked over at Lysanias. "So it's not a technique in the classical sense," she clarified, "it's just something you learned to do?"

"That's right. I'm not really sure how to explain it to you, though I suppose I could meld with you again, show you my thought process when I do it."

"Actually, I could meld with you now," she told him smugly. "I think I've worked out a technique to accomplish the same thing. Hey, that's a great idea," she realized with a smile. "We can trade. You let me try my technique on you, see if I've got it right, and I help you with your technique."

"I'm willing, but no telling what you'll see up there." He tapped his head.

She laughed. "I'll take the risk. Not much call for sensors when we're traveling, with your permission, general?"

"Granted. You're dismissed."

She stood with a smile. "Come on then, let's go."

The two headed down the elevator and she led Lysanias to the cabin she shared with Shyia. One side seemed fairly neat and the other... "Oh, sorry about this," she said with a laugh. "Didn't know I'd be bringing a guy back here today." She picked up a few things and dumped them in the corner. "We don't have much, I mean there's a war on, right? But somehow I still seem to get clutter all over the place. Drives Shyia crazy, not that she would say anything, poor girl. That's her family there," she pointed at a picture on the wall, showing a much younger version of her in front of two people. "Pictures are precious around here, they remind us what we're fighting for. Humm, can't use the bed." He looked around, and there were many pictures stuck on the walls, on both sides of the room. Strangely there were pictures of young Crytella, and teen Crytella, but then it sort of jumped into present day Crytella posing with crew-mates. *What happened to her that she didn't take pictures from this age to this one?* She was staring at the bunks, which you couldn't really sit on they were too close together. "Floor is just as good, right?" She plopped down in front of him. "Now let's see what I can do." He took the sword off and sat in front of her, and the two looked at each other. Her ears were twitching in what seemed like excitement now, and she felt excited to him. "Okay, so, touch based techniques are easiest so that's what I've gone with," she explained. "I figure it's not a combat technique, why would I try to get into someone's brain in the middle of a fight? Someone else would just smack me from behind, right? So that's out. So I'll just touch you and try the technique, okay?"

“Okay.” Weird to be on the other side of this. But it should be the same thing, she’s just in control instead of me. I’ll have to let her in, which is fine.

She put her hands on the side of Lysanias’ face and she took a deep breath, then relaxed. “Melding,” she intoned. Lysanias felt he could try to resist her, but didn’t, and the room faded.

I guess it worked.

That it did. My goodness I’ve been a lot of places.

I suppose I have.

Now that’s a bit of a surprise. I literally see the future when I use my ability of premonition. Never really thought about what was happening before, am I really looking through time?

I bet a seeing technique, placed on me before I try it, would help. I would call it “future clarity” or something like that.

Yes, making my eyesight better doesn’t require a time technique, though I could use a time technique if I had that nature. I can’t help but see the future when I use the technique, but just like when I ask the universe something, I often don’t catch the answer. Or in this case, see clearly enough. I wonder if holding the One Power would also help?

I understand a lot better now about natures, it seems people here have an affinity for only a few.

Yes, like I’m able to use mind and seeing. That’s why I went to school specializing in sensor systems.

Powers are so varied here, there’s even magic. I never know when I meet someone what sort of weird things they can do.

It’s great, I never realized how amazing my life is, even if I could be killed at any moment by the forces of Darkbolt.

I’m so glad I gave my allegiance to the queen!

When did I do that?

It must have been just after... school, right? When I got out of... when did I?

Why am I so afraid?

I am loyal to Queen Yasha, I do not need to fear her.

But when did I?

What did she?

She... there was a chamber, and they made me...

They made me!

No!

Crytella shoved him, breaking the meld, and scrambled back.

“What? What was that?” she managed.

“I don’t know.” He was just as surprised, thoughts racing. The feeling of being *her* was receding, of knowing what she knew, body and mind, it was all draining away. He looked at her, and the symbol on her forehead, that same symbol all Tenma seemed to have, was seeming to flicker. *What does it mean?* “That was totally different from what I do. Though I can control it to a certain extent.”

“I know. I remember. You went inside someone and found... tiny people? I remember that. Bits and pieces. Earth bending. HP. Angels. Dreaming.”

“I do too. Attending school. Birthdays. You have a brother. Swimming somewhere you shouldn’t have been. Then the Tenma came.”

“Something happened to me, didn’t it?”

“I think so.”

"Your will is so strong. The sword strengthens it, doesn't it? That's why you took it off. I can see it, I shouldn't be able to but I know it's there now. We were connected, and I started to remember. But what? The Tenma? It's all a jumble now." As he watched the symbol brightened, and went steady.

"We were connected. I knew what it was like to be... you."

"Same here."

Both looked away, but then she looked back and grinned at him. "I know what kissing Rosalina feels like! Think she would let me kiss her if I asked? I mean I sort of already have and now I sort of want to some more..."

"I have no idea!"

"You say that, but you want to watch, don't you?"

"No!"

"You say no, but you really mean yes, don't you?"

"I'm not going to dignify that with an answer."

Her laughter was pure delight. "Alright, I'll let up." She got up and offered him a hand, helping him up. "So now what?"

"We did learn your technique works, and we seem to have created a technique to help me use premonition better."

"You're right. Best, uh, not to mention the other. Not until we can learn more."

"If we can. The only way..." He switched to sending thoughts to her directly. *The only way would be to try that again, and not break the contact this time, though it may be painful to us.*

You can hear me?

Yes.

Why are we talking this way?

Yasha does keep tabs on people, so Gogo just told me awhile ago. Hopefully she didn't see what we were just doing. If there's something that's done to people- what?

Crytellia had grabbed and started kissing him, pressing her body close to his. We can't just stand there staring at each other, that would be really suspicious.

And this isn't?

Not really. I am super hot, after all. I know you noticed.

Rosalina's gonna kill me.

You say that, but you know she'll understand. That's why you like her so much.

Besides, let me kiss her and it'll all be even again.

I don't even know where to start with that.

But back to the topic at hand, no, put your hand right there. That's better. Wow, this is weird, hearing your thoughts like this. This is nice. Oh gods, I haven't kissed someone since-Focus!

I'm focused, just on the one thing- right. What were we saying?

...

Yasha, right. If I am under some kind of technique done to me by the Tenma and she sees us trying to break it, it may be trouble. I get it. It's something she wouldn't want known.

Do you want to break it? You reacted fairly badly just now.

If she's doing something to us, I need to know it! Am I not even me anymore? What does she do to us?

I don't know, and I agree, and maybe that's why she's so paranoid. Maybe you aren't loyal to her at all, but she's made you that way. Can she make you that way? It was implied Darkbolt could be controlling Miruku but he's a demon.

Sure, with a mind technique she could change my thoughts. And don't forget, she's a demon too. She walks around looking like us but she's totally in tune with the sealed demon Evil. That's a scary idea. I mean I have mind nature, but I never considered binding someone to my will like that.

Maybe because she stopped you thinking of such a technique, lest you get any ideas. I can stop time, she shouldn't be able to spy on us then. We could try again.

I'm still shaking from the first time. We can't do it now. Let me process everything that just happened, try and sort myself out from you.

Oh, I thought you were trembling with overflowing passion for me.

Now he can joke about it!

Now I'll be serious. Are you going to be okay? Is there anything I can do?

I have to be, don't I? It's fine, and I know you really do want to help. You do want to be the shield that prevents all harm. I... I admire that. I just have to adjust my thinking. You know, only the hardest thing to do in the universe!

I do have to warn you. Your symbol started flickering afterwards. Whatever has been done it must be tied to that? We break it and you may lose that symbol. That's a dead giveaway to anyone that looks at you.

What symbol are you talking about?

The one on your forehead. You must see it looking in a mirror.

I... I don't know.

Great, maybe it makes you forget you see it? This is a lot more complex than I thought.

Maybe we could try it your way? You can explore my memory, rather than us being 'added together' which started to unravel whatever it is. We can go from there.

That sounds reasonable. You still want to wait?

Yes. I can't handle being anyone but myself right now. I almost feel I'm kissing myself. Almost. Hey can't you use clones to kiss more than one- ah never mind. You'll think of it sooner or later.

Yes please, make it ten times worse. Give me some kind of sign when you're ready. I'll be watching.

Maybe I'll just whisper in your ear, 'I need you right now!' and we can sneak off together. Totally innocent, no one would ever suspect.

I think everyone probably would?

You're probably right, I'll think of something. Um. Actually, not that I'm complaining because we can just keep going here, but how are we going to get out of this? If you just leave after us getting all hot and heavy here, it's still going to be suspicious. I mean we could keep it up, no problem on my end, an hour or so and then we reluctantly break it off to go to bed, and I beg you to stay, and you say you want to get to know me better before we go all the way, and...

That's a terrible plan, I'm not an actor. You figure it out! You're the one that grabbed me!

I wish I had protection, then we could-

Protection?

Yeah, a protection nature technique. We could black out the room from Seer techniques. What did you think I meant?

You said it that way on purpose!

Did I?

...

...

...

...

Wait a second, we're on a spaceship.

What does that have to do with it?

We can black out the room without any techniques. I'm silly. Hit the lights. The room will be completely dark, it's not like there's any other source of light in here. You can teleport out, back to your own room. Your lights will be off, so they'll still just see darkness. Most people are terrified of the dark now because of Darkbolt, but in this case it could be justified. No one will bother trying to watch us at that point.

I suppose it's the best we can do.

...

...

...

...

Aren't you going to move to the light switch?

I thought you were, it's your room. Is it even in the same place mine is?

Yeah, all the rooms are identical. Okay, let's back up a little. She gave him a push, bumping him backwards to the door, and snaked a hand out to cut the lights. The room was plunged into darkness, but she just put her arm around him again and squeezed him tighter. Lysanias?

Yes?

Thanks. I really needed this. I guess it isn't just pictures that can remind us why we're fighting. And for, you know, almost breaking my mind or whatever. I'll let you know when I'm ready. Now get out of here, and give Rosalina a kiss from me next time.

He shifted back to his room, as slowly as he could to avoid the inrush of air, and felt his way over to his own bunk. That was... I guess I can't say unpleasant, if I'm being truthful. Rosalina is out of me, so she wouldn't know that happened. Do I tell her? It was quick thinking, we couldn't just stand there and stare at each other, right? Or is that just something I'm telling myself? Crud, I should have just stopped time the second after she- no, wait, I have to say 'pause' and with what she was doing with her tongue... Wow. I was that woman for a minute. And she was me. How do I even feel about that? Something for later I guess. He shook his head and changed gears in his head. Hey Rosalina, something's come up. Stop training and I'm going to turn you back into a wand. Have Rommeta hold onto you for now. I need to get to sleep, Gogo passed me a message from Inari he said to take precautions to listen to. He says she has seers watching people and as it's a technique I would never feel it. We should assume we're under surveillance at all times. Maybe her message is just a joke, it would be like her, but I'm getting worried. I just learned, by accident, that the queen may have done some kind of mind technique to her so called followers, maybe it relates to that? So I'm going to do it in the World of Dreams- I'm going to listen to the message in the world of dreams, is what I meant to say. I'll give you a minute to explain, obviously not the whole thing I don't have to tell you that you're not stupid. I'll get out of your head now. I'll see you tomorrow. Good night!

Yeah, she won't suspect a thing.

Chapter 7

No need for worries

When: Not long after

Where: Dreams

Lysanias certainly wasn't dreaming about a green haired Rosalina asking him how she looked, or being tugged in two directions by horses, or anything like that. But when he realized he was Dreaming and stepped out into the World of Dreams he was trying his best to forget what he had seen.

You know what I haven't done lately? Dream the future. I guess when you're always stepping out of your own dreams into other places you don't get much chance to simply dream. But I have to practice, Nynaeve's reality has to be cleansed of the dream shadows and I'm basically the only one that can do it. I have to be ready for them. So it's a trade off, like anything else. Besides, if I wanted to see someone's future I would just touch them, much less random than happening to dream something. Those warnings were nice though, I would have to touch every person here on the off chance something might happen to them. Oh well, we deal with what we can deal with. Let's see this message of Inari's.

He knew he was laying in bed back in the real world and he knew right where his pants were, that still had whatever it was Gogo had slipped him. *It felt like a marble, that's her MO anyway, right? Let's try bringing the contents of my pants pocket here into the world of dreams.* It worked, or at least he thought it did, as a white marble appeared. He hefted it in his hand, considering. *How do I know this is the one, and not just me Dreaming up a white marble?* He set it on the floor, stepping back a pace. *Ugh, if I have to put spiritual energy into it I can't activate it like this. It would have been nice if they had told me what the activation was. Can I just talk to it?* "I'm alone."

An image of Inari appeared, looking worried. "Lysanias?"

"It worked! Yes, I'm here Inari, what do you-"

"Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you. Can't you hear me?" He waved a hand in front of her.

"Where are you?" She was looking around.

"A dream of a space-"

"Never mind that, this is just a message anyway."

He groaned. *Of course.*

"Gotcha! Now. I just met Gogo, and am about to send them on to their home reality. Strange how they left it in the first place. Well, stranger things have happened let me tell you. Not the point. The point is, you've somehow convinced either myself or Silverstreak to let you tackle the Darkbolt dimension. I really, really hope you know what you're doing. Maybe you've found some kind of new power or something and you're going to need it. That place is awful for you. Don't get me wrong, you've got a lot of promise, and maybe one day you could free it by yourself, but right now you're just not ready for that one. Of course, I record this knowing you could be hearing it fifty local years from now, but I felt I would record it just in case you, you know, leave me for Silverstreak like most others do." She wilted a bit as she said this, ears and tail drooping.

She really is a lonely being. I'll have to go see her when I'm done here. Maybe just hang out if she wants. I'm not by myself now though, I've got people I travel with, and the Tenchi crew. But she's just stuck there all alone.

"But even that's not the point." *Oh.* "The point is what you're going to do while you're there. Darkbolt is a priority, the biggest, don't get me wrong. But that reality has a queen. I

don't often do this, but I'm about to tell you what would have happened if Darkvoid hadn't come to that reality. Basically what nearby offshoots of that main branch have happen. Darkbolt was given to a young woman who eventually broke free of Darkbolt's control, and went on to bond the other demons, War, Death, and Destruction, to friends of hers. They then went on to defeat Yasha, saving that universe from her tyranny. If you are anywhere near her, be completely on guard. She's bonded to the demon of Evil, and she did it willingly. She became evil, the very concept of it. She's in check now because she doesn't want her whole reality to be wiped out, but once that threat is over, she goes back to her old ways. Basically pulling up to a world, wiping out any defenses it has, grabbing up anyone that looks like they would make a good soldier, conditioning them to complete loyalty, and installing a puppet government for the survivors. Not pretty.

"But it's worse. She's *evil*. By that I mean if there's two ways of doing something to get the exact same result, she'll by default pick the more evil of the two. She can't help herself. She'll steal an apple from a starving child, but rather than eating the apple she'll throw it through the window of a car to cause an accident... that kills the child. And she won't even think twice about it. If you truly want to save that reality... she has to go. Only then will that reality be put back on track. But be careful. She tries to watch everything, anticipate everything, control everything. If you can somehow maneuver her into destroying herself through her own evil nature, setting up some evil she can do that backfires on her? Send me the video. I would, like, grant you a straight up wish for that video, it would be hilarious. Otherwise, take her out. I know, I know, you don't like killing, and no true agent of mine does, that's part of the point of you. But this time I'm giving you permission. She's been alive tens of thousands of years and would have died anyway so it's fine. But beware.

"Killing the host, if you don't smash the orb at the exact same time, you'll just release the demon. So you'll wind up fighting her twice. Target the orb in her chest with your most devastating attack. Not your most metro attack- your most destructive technique. It's tough, but not indestructible. Hit it with something sharp and I'm sure you'll do fine. Maybe you've come across something you think would be suitable?" She winked.

Yeah, I can think of one thing.

"So that's it. I've got high hopes for you, Lysanias. And I really, really hope I see you again. Don't let your journey end here, okay?"

I'll do my best. And I'll come visit, I promise.

"Bye for now. Kisses!" Her image winked out.

What? She couldn't have known.

Could she?

He stood staring at the orb for a moment, deciding what to do with it and thinking over her words. *It's one mystery solved. Crytella probably went through this conditioning to make her loyal, and our combined willpower started to break her out of it. Or just because I'm from another reality and it couldn't handle the two of us? Or something. Probably anyone with the symbol did, so I have to be careful.* Lysanias' thoughts were all over the place. Remembering the guards on the queen, trying to get through them, maybe the crew of the *what is this ship called, I never asked* ship attacking him if ordered by the queen during his "betrayal." Even though they seemed friendly now, they may not hesitate if given a direct order. Could he break them all out of it on the sly? How to signal Tenchi and the others this needed to be done without alerting her they were coming for her after Darkbolt. He wanted to move a little and think, but there was no room to pace in his tiny cabin so he hit the button for the door. He

intended to just wander the halls and try to come up with some ideas, but all that went out the window (figuratively, they're still in space) as the door vanished.

Before him was a shadow, a ball of darkness hovering over their "hand" and while the thing was somewhat surprised by the timing of the door opening, (I mean it was hard to tell, but you have to assume that right?) they wasted no time in chucking the ball of darkness at Lysanias.

He didn't have time to do more than get out of the way, willing himself down the hallway as the ball streaked towards him. He felt it almost touch him as he vanished, now looking at the creature from the side. The Dream ship shook as the ball exploded the room beyond, but Lysanias remained standing. *How long was that thing there gathering energy for?*

The shadow reoriented, making a yanking motion towards Lysanias, and the floor went out from under him, dragging him closer to the shadow. As he skidded towards it the figure raised a hand and a dark blade appeared in it.

"You leave him alone!" a voice cried out. Several shots rang out, punching through the darkness, and making it stagger.

"Mihoshi?" he gasped, looking down the hall where the shots had come from. She was standing there, gun in hand, in her police uniform. "How did you-" She vanished.

The thing seemed distracted from being shot so he simply imagined a lightsaber in his hand and sprang up, chopping the thing in half. *It won't kill it, only the light hurts it because I don't want a Dream weapon it'll just become immune to, but it's more damage.*

He managed two swipes before the shadow gave up the blade and jumped back, letting it vanish again. It had tried to parry the strike but it was a laughable attempt, Lysanias saw that now. *Thank you increased skill from Ryoko!*

It didn't seem to do anything but needles of darkness came out of nowhere and streaked towards him, so he simply put up a barrier of light. It kept up the barrage but he didn't really see the attack reaching him, so he shoved the barrier down the hall. The shadow tried something, a barrier of darkness of their own, but it smashed through that, impacted the shadow, and both went screaming down the hallway. When it impacted the end of the hall it vanished, and the shadowy form collapsed into a pile. Lysanias took no chances, simply causing a bright light to fill the hallway until it burned and vanished.

He wasted no time in cutting the light off, and stood trying to feel around. Walking slowly down the corridor he saw the Dreaming representation of his room had already put itself back together. But he didn't feel anything out of the ordinary.

Only one? I don't feel any others nearby. That's not really how they operate, is it? Shadows, here. My theory was right, or at least this is more evidence for it. Maybe this is their home dimension. We have some time, who knows when that one was supposed to report in next? Crud, what if that one was a replacement for one that got off at the station? If they met up and the original one reported, and then makes it back to the main mass, (if that's how they work but I'm pretty sure it is) and then back to Darkbolt, they'll know what's going on. But they can't teleport without a Dreamer, and I'm the only one around here. They would have to... I feel like I'm forgetting something. He stood for a moment looking around. *What could it- Mihoshi!*

He stepped back into the waking world and oriented himself. *She's two doors down from me on the... left.* He strode down that way and didn't bother with the door, simply pulling a Ryoko and phasing through it. The room was bright and Mihoshi was asleep at the desk, slumped over a book of some kind. "Mihoshi! Mihoshi! Wake up!"

"Hum?" she stirred. "Oh, did I fall asleep my desk again? Wait, where am I?" She squinted up at him. "Oh hi! Is it morning?"

"Mihoshi, are you all right? Did that shadow hurt you?"

"What are you talking about?" She stretched. "I'm still tired, what time is it?"

"Look just stand up okay?"

"Okay?" She stood up and he looked her over front to back.

"You seem okay. You don't feel any pain?"

"Are you trying to get me out of my clothes? Not that I'm wearing that many!" She giggled. "You need to work on your technique, but as a beginner I guess it's passable. With the right woman. If I wasn't as willing you would have to be way more convin-"

"I'm serious, you don't remember?" He grabbed her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "You were in the World of Dreams, just a minute ago. How you would go there I have no idea, but you shot a shadow that was trying to chop me in half. It just happened!"

"I did that?"

"Yes! You were in uniform, and you shouted at it to stay away from me, and shot the thing like five times. Then you vanished."

She scratched her head. "I guess maybe that sounds a little familiar. Wait, there's a whole world of dreams?"

"Yes." He let her go and sat down heavily on the desk, concern draining away from him. *She must have just Dreamed herself there. My instructor said that could happen with regular people, they could be seen there for an instant. It was more dangerous for them, if they happened to die, there wasn't much chance they woke up. But as they only touched it for a few seconds it was fine. I thought maybe that shadow retaliated for her shooting it, but it seems she just blinked in and out. At... the exact moment I needed her...*

"You're staring, and I know you've seen me naked so it's not that." She had both her hands clasped in front of her and was moving side to side a little.

She is a good looking- "I'm just glad you're okay. I was attacked by something, it had me in a bad position, and you showed up and distracted it. So thanks. Even if you don't remember it."

"Washu is always saying I'm popping up in unexpected places. I do get lost pretty easily, come to think of it, and then I show up somewhere else. But to find my way to a whole other world..."

"It connects all dreams, in all realities," he explained. "Some can step into it while they're dreaming, and while it's mostly empty it has its uses. A select few can step out of it again back to this world."

"That's how you made my armor!" She announced, pointing to it. He looked and it was in a heap on the floor. Along with the clothes she had taken off that night, and various things probably from her cube if she had been messing with it trying to get something out. *Hey have you met Crytella? You both seem to be fairly messy, I bet you would get on famously.*

"Exactly. If you're okay I'll leave you to it. Sorry to have bothered you but I had to make sure it hadn't done something to you."

"Lame," said a voice above them.

He jerked back and looked up, Ryoko was laying on her back on the top bunk. "Have you been there the whole time?" *Curse this form not having all my senses! It's like I'm blind here!*

"Yeah, it's my room. I wasn't going to bunk up with Ayeka, truce or not. Nice entrance though, very me. Thought for sure I was going to see some action though..." She vanished and appeared next to him, throwing her arms around his neck. She leaned close and whispered to him. "But I did hear something interesting. What was that about seeing her naked?"

"It was during the fitting, the armor fitting!" He looked away, reddening.

“She seemed fairly casual about the whole thing. You giving up on Tenchi there, Mihoshi?”

“What if I am?” she pouted. “You two squabble over him like two dogs over a piece of meat. It’s his choice anyway.”

“Hey, I saw him first. I watched him grow up. If that little princess thinks she can just come here and...” she took a deep breath. “You’re right. It is up to him, and I shouldn’t tease either of them. It’s just so fun!”

“Not for her.”

“I... Huh. Then why does she... No, I think you’re wrong there. Anyway... You leaving or are we turning the lights off and whatever happens in the darkness, happens?” She started reaching for the switch.

“Ryoko!” Mihoshi protested.

“What? You’re not stuck up like Ayeka, are you? The three of us could have a wild time tonight, let me tell you. I picked up a lot of techniques while I was under Kagato’s control, roaming the galaxy looking for archaeological treasures. Some require three people, now that I think of it.”

“I... I...” She pressed her two index fingers together.

“Ladies, I am leaving,” he told them. *Mihoshi is clearly uncomfortable with this, I don’t need my emotional senses to tell that. Best to just make a hasty but measured retreat.* “Mihoshi, thank you for the save, I’m glad you’re okay. I wish you good night, and will see you both in the morning.” He vanished back to the World of Dreams.

Man, how does Tenchi deal with it? Still, if I happened to create two Dream representations of them, and we did what Ryoko was suggesting, would that still be cheating? I mean it’s just a dream, and making Luka showed beings I create don’t have to be under my control. They would be independent people I made only to- Best not to attempt it, Rosalina seems open minded about some things, but that may be a bridge too far. Plus it seems kinda icky now that I think about it. Using their “images” that way? Without their consent? That’s not what my powers are for. Let’s just get back to the issue at hand.

He was back to the original questions and pacing. What to do about the queen, how many dream shadows were around, and what to do about them. Did the shadows and by extension Darkbolt know he was here? If he did, would his plans change? Would he give up taking planets for the moment and focus on tracking him down? The shadow could have heard their conversations, about Tenchi being there and more, if it stayed in the shadows out of the way. He would have to be more careful now, but the place was pretty well lit for the obvious reasons. So there wouldn’t be much shadow to hide in. And what did he tell the others? They couldn’t be harmed by shadows, or hurt them in return, what did they care? Was there another one here, that teleported away before he killed the one? He could go pretty much anywhere in the World of Dreams so it was possible.

I guess I have some time to think about all this. I have to be on my guard anyway, this just solidifies this fact for me. They can only hurt me when I can hurt them back, and as long as it isn’t more than... Uh... Two... I can take them. I clearly recall thinking I could take a bunch of them and getting my butt handed to me. Hard to drop a rock on me in a hallway this low though. Still I haven’t improved that much since then. I’ll just have to pay more attention, when I start Dreaming to feel around and make sure I don’t feel any. He sighed. *Why can’t you just leave me alone!*

But of course he knew the answer. Had he never learned Dreaming, he would have nothing to fear from Shadows, but would be far less powerful. *Couldn't have made the Andromeda, that's for sure.* His expanded set of powers came with a drawback, just like everything else. *This is all Jason's fault. If I hadn't met him I would never even know about Dreaming! But he was part of my test for Hub access- it's all connected, isn't it? Every little thing. But how to use it to my advantage, that's the trick.*

He went back to practicing, now stopping every so often to feel around himself, make sure nothing was sneaking up on him. And the night wore on.

Chapter 8

No need for Office Space

When: Several days later

Where: In orbit around the prison planet

Lysanias took full advantage of having a ship that propelled itself through space instead of needing to do it himself over the course of their journey. He was able to make plenty of wards, practice his skills almost without limit, and then practice his Dreaming skills when we went to sleep at night. He didn't run into any more shadows in the World of Dreams, and always stepped between his own Dreams and the wider World holding an attack ready to launch. That wasn't to say he simply stayed in his room the whole time, he got to know the other members of the crew and their stories. Rommeta and Rosalina practiced their martial art based ranged attacks, and Rosalina learned a new spell. He helped the others with the techniques and skills from his travels, and they were happy to tell him about their adventures trying to stay alive against Darkbolt. He spent a little more time with Crytellia than the others, but she said she wasn't quite ready to attempt breaking her conditioning. (She still had trouble remembering or seeing the Tenma symbol on her forehead, and gentle probes of the others showed they were similarly afflicted) How to get the others on his side without the queen finding out he had no idea, and hoped some spark of inspiration might strike. The others taught him some card games they played, as it wasn't all train-train-train the whole time, they had fun too. He caught Gogo up on his adventures since the two parted ways, and Gogo made themselves some wards, figuring they could come in handy and this was the only time they could be made.

It was Gogo that suggested they stop for half a day on the way to Matraxilous to do some alchemy, and Dolands reluctantly agreed. They explained that if "solid sunlight" could be created that mimicked whatever light was present then imagine what sort of result you could get by parking a spaceship *as close as you could to a star* and setting up your lab next to a window. With no atmosphere to get in the way, and some lenses to further concentrate the light, both made up some batches of solid sunlight that shone far brighter than the pathetic "planet bound" stuff he had made before. Both had to wear some seriously dark eye protection while they worked, but the results were worth it. They could yank the sphere of light out of their respective *pockets* and use it to blind anyone looking in their direction, or light up a huge space.

Now days and days (from his point of view) later he got a call from Dolands to come to the bridge and went up there, finding the crew looking down on a planet much like Earth. There were some land masses but it was mostly water, and the people on duty were pouring over sensor readings, at least that's what he figured they were doing.

"Welcome to Matraxilous," Dolands said to him. "Home of Miruku traitors. Maybe? Not sure at this point."

"Still nothing on scans," Crytellia told them. "Hi Lysanias!"

"Hi there, Crytellia. What do you mean, nothing on scans?"

"Naturally we came into the system very cautiously," Dolands told him. "We stopped far outside it, scanned for any sensor beacons or other deep space probes, and when we found none we headed in. Having made it here we still find no evidence of this being anything but a class M planet that happens to have no sentient life we can detect. No cities, no air pollution, no signs of civilization at all that we can detect. I mean there could be cave men of some kind living there..."

“Happens more than you might think,” Thabion remarked from his station. “Just because a planet can harbor life, doesn’t mean that life will be intelligent. Or maybe it did and wiped itself out, that sort of thing. That, by itself, isn’t suspicious is what I’m trying to say.”

“Ah!”

“Take a look,” Crytellia said, putting some images up on the main viewscreen. “It’s just plant life, and the usual assortment of strange looking animals running around. No evidence of structures at all.”

“So we came here for nothing?” he asked.

“No, they must be here,” Dolands insisted. “I trust my queen’s spy network. If she says they are here, then they are, her word is absolute.”

Oh yeah, that’s going to be a problem when it comes time to murder her. Dolands and the others will willingly give up their lives for her at this point. I have to think of some way to snap them out of it, but not give away that I’ve done it if she checks up on us.

“They must be cloaked somehow. Even we can’t scan every meter of a whole planet in an hour. But I would have thought there would be some sign. A field with a sprawling prison complex, space port or ships coming and going, something!”

“If they’ve captured someone like you, couldn’t they use your teleportal ability to get supplies and move people around?” he asked. “They wouldn’t need ships once they got here, right? So no spaceport would be needed.”

“Eh, I guess.” He frowned. “I’m used to thinking of them as powerless but you’ve got a good point. One captured person could fuel any number of Miruku, it’s safe to assume there’s not just traitors here. Kept apart from them, obviously, but still. And they can buy teleport technology or anything else they like, same as anyone, so they wouldn’t need powers for that. Darn it, this means a lot more work for us.”

Of course, Darkbolt could use mind control techniques as easily as the queen, right? So there could be many powerful people ‘loyal’ to him that hang around and provide powers for the others to use. Even techniques to hide from their sensors, I suppose. Or technology to do it. Naturally as everyone around here has some sort of weird power, technology would be designed to mimic or disrupt it. Just like anti-magic cells at home, because that’s what they generally use there.

“Anyway, think you could narrow it down for us? I understand your way of doing things is different from ours, maybe you can succeed where our methods have failed.”

“Narrow... Oh, where they might be? Humm.” He studied the planet for a moment. “A technique to prevent your gathering information will block me I’m sure. But if I asked about the future maybe, instead of them directly?” *What if I asked about myself directly? Like if I went down there and there were forces of the avatar it would come to a fight. Can I use that somehow?* “Can you bring up a map of the land masses and, I don’t know, put a number on them? I need a one word way to differentiate them.”

“Just a minute,” Thabion said from his station. The view on the screen changed and he quickly traced an outline of the planet’s continents and numbered them in some kind of image editing software. “Like that?”

“That’s perfect. Give me ten minutes and I’ll see what I can come up with.”

He took the offered captain’s chair and relaxed, looking at the numbered continents on the screen. *I ask the universe this question- if I went down to the planet, which of these numbered locations would place me in the most danger?*

“Okay!” He came out of it. Dolands, who had been pacing by the looks of it, turned to him. “That one is the most dangerous for me.” He pointed to the one marked with the four. “Now maybe that’s just because there’s a lot of low hanging branches I can hit my head on but I’ll have to assume the danger comes from being discovered poking around. I can repeat the procedure if you can blow that area up and put a grid onto it.”

“Sure thing,” Thabion announced, doing just that.

Lysanias repeated the question while looking at the new grid, and got a 37 this time.

“That’s a good a place to start as any,” Dolands announced. He went over and hit a button on the command chair. “Attention everyone. We’ve arrived at the planet and are landing shortly. Prepare what you need. The facility here isn’t obvious so we’re going to split up and search. Groups of three, be ready for anything. That is all.” He released the button. “Thanks, Lysanias. I’ll let you get your team ready, you’re dismissed.” He turned away. “Begin landing procedure,” he ordered.

May I remind you I’m not one of your soldiers? But fine, I’ll need time to armor up anyway.

He went to find Rosalina and Rommeta, getting their armor out of his *pocket* and out of the wards they were in for ease of transport, and they suited up. He did as well, figuring they were going to need to fly around if they were going to cover any kind of distance in a reasonable time. He had modified theirs a bit, adding a compartment to hold force lances, now that they had some, but otherwise they were exactly as they had been when he first made them. They headed to the cargo bay to head outside the ship, and found the others checking over some odd looking machines. Basically a small platform with a pole sticking out the front the person standing on could grab hold of. He didn’t see Thabion, Poppop, or Crytella, and wondered if they were staying behind to watch the ship.

I guess someone has to. It can’t turn into a rabbit after all and come with one of us. And Poppop keeps to the medical bay, can’t see him flying around the place.

“Ah, there you are,” Dolands said. “We’ll be setting down shortly. Clearly nothing has attacked us on the way down, either they are not expecting ships and have no planetary defenses hidden anywhere or they are confident enough in their cloak we’ll never find them. Lysanias, I want you and your team to cover an arc east south east from...” he rattled off some numbers that meant nothing to him.

“Er...”

It’s fine, Meta printed inside his helmet. I’ve got it covered.

“Right! Got it, sir.”

“Good man. Obviously if anyone spots something, back off and alert the others. Clearly we’re not going to get much chance to plan anything, they’ll see us coming long before we see them. So we won’t even be able to plan an approach based on the size of the facility or find weak points in their defense grid. We’ll just have to get in, hit them hard, and round up any prisoners. I’ll send them back here, then Lysanias can check them out later before we send them on to the base. Any questions?”

“What if we, uh, suddenly find ourselves, you know, inside the facility?” Mihoshi asked.

“Because you’ve been captured? That’s actually a good point.”

Not exactly what she was asking, but he wouldn’t know about her “getting lost” “power” and the principle is the same I guess.

“Everyone report in every five minutes. You miss your check in, and we’ll head to your last known location. Remember we’re fighting Miruku so they’re the most dangerous close up. Stay away from them if you can and find somewhere to hunker down. We’ll back you up as soon as we can. Anything else?”

Lysanias looked the group over, and noticed something strange. "Are the people from Tenchi's reality not going together?" They were standing apart, each one with two people standing next to one of those odd devices.

"They're all able to fly on their own," Dolands explained. "I requested they accompany two people that can't. Just for maximum group flexibility. Also they're all so powerful grouping them up seems like a waste. I mean, apart from, well." He looked over at Mihoshi, who shrugged. "You have a problem with it?"

"No, just curious. If they've agreed it's fine with me."

"I don't mind," Ayeka told them.

"It's fine," Ryoko agreed.

"So if there's nothing else?" He paused. "Great. Get to it."

The door opened and everyone jumped out, those with the devices switching them on and standing on them. They zoomed into the air. *Ah, they're flying machines. Looks a bit more comfortable than a broomstick, I can tell you that much.*

His group rose off the ground and headed out, an arrow pointing the way in his HUD. A countdown from 5 minutes was off to the side, and a "radar" display of where the other two were came up in the upper right. The group spent more than an hour zipping over the countryside, low over trees that seemed to be the predominant form of life on the planet. He saw many small streams, and the occasional bird like creature in the air, but nothing larger than that. Suddenly they came to an area devoid of trees and almost perfectly circular, and Lysanias suggested they check it out. The three landed, both Rosalina and Rommeta drawing their weapons. He felt around, but didn't feel any danger at the moment.

"This area is statistically unlikely," Rommeta said to them, looking around. "There is growth here, a 'grass' like plant common on many worlds that support life," she nudged the ground with her foot, and yes there was a green leafy plant covering the area, "but to have this kind of clearing is unnatural."

"Maybe a meteorite stuck here many years ago?" Rosalina asked.

"That is a possibility, but the ground here is totally level. An impact crater would not have that characteristic."

"There clearly isn't a hidden base here," Lysanias protested. "We would have bumped into it, if it was invisible in some way."

"Perhaps we have."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean perhaps we're standing on it."

"You think they sunk something into the ground here? Far enough in the past that the grass started to grow back, but not any trees yet?"

"There is a better than 50% chance that is the case. I will call the ship, perhaps it can be flown here and they can use their scanners to-"

Suddenly, everything shifted around them, and the group found themselves in a room staring down a dozen people in armor and helmets who were pointing guns at them. The row in front was kneeling down, the row behind standing over them, and all had what looked like some kind of rifle with a glowing end trained on them.

And we just got teleported.

"Come out of that armor immediately!" one demanded. "Or we'll shoot!"

He took a quick glance around, it seemed this was a chamber with one opening, behind the row of soldiers that were probably not bluffing about shooting if they didn't do something fast. The opening was fairly large, much larger than it would need to be for just a

person, and he briefly wondered why it needed to be so big. He could see the hallway beyond though, the door here going up and down rather than opening in or out. He was standing on a platform and there was a control panel off to the left, another person in armor bringing up a gun behind it. *Probably the operator. They were somewhat foolish for leaving the door open though.* He raised his hands. "We will come out of the armor," he lied, "please don't shoot."

"Hurry it up!"

"Of course, of course. I'll just step back a little bit here." He took a step back to be between his two companions.

"Don't move!"

"I have to move to get the armor off!" He lowered his hands to touch either one.

"Don't touch them, get that armor off!"

"Wait, sir, don't you feel his powers? He can-"

Stop time, Lysanias finished for him, stopping time. He teleported all three of them past the guards, then sent a wave of telekinetic energy at them, hoping to knock them over. They seemed to move forward just a touch, time would catch up with them.

"Come on, time will only be stopped a moment!" he told the others, looking both ways down the hall.

"Ignore me wards!" suggested Rometta.

He shook his head. "They can feel powers, I don't know if it would work. This way I guess."

He triggered the graviton system, flying down the hall and trusting Meta to keep him from crashing into anything at this speed. The two followed him.

"What are we looking for?" Rosalina asked.

"A good place to teleport back here. Like a closet or something. Ah, what's this?" He backed up a bit and glanced through, it was a stairway of all things. "We're switching floors, make it harder to find us." They burst through and headed down, zigzagging down two flights to the bottom floor. This door didn't open so Lysanias simply smashed a fist into it, causing it to burst past the lock and then be opened as he touched it. He felt his hold on time slip, and imagined the soldiers above going flying. "We don't have much- ah, wait a second." Looking around he saw why this door was locked. The bottom level of this place was dedicated to building comforts it seemed like, and was mostly a big empty space. Columns supported the weight above, but he saw what must be pumps and the air system, as there were pipes and air baffles coming out of various pieces of machinery. "Doesn't matter how sophisticated the society, they still need to move water and air around," he remarked. "This is perfect. A big open space we can teleport everyone into to start our attack on this place. Now that I've seen it, I can come back here. Take a picture, Meta, just in case."

Done appeared on the screen, and the armor made a screenshot taking sound.

"Thanks. Come on, we're heading back to the ship for now." He held out his hands and the two grasped them. "And away we go." He *shifted*.

Or at least he tried to. He felt like he was being smashed into a brick wall, and staggered, having gone nowhere.

"What was that?" Rosalina asked, also staggering and blinking.

"I think they've prevented teleportation from here," Rommeta suggested, looking none the worse for wear. "We are in enemy territory, after all." She went over and closed the door, pulling out her force lance and sticking it against the frame. It started to glow red, fusing together. "I heard Dolands say their base was similarly protected, didn't I?"

"I think he said something like that, yes. Darn-right inconsiderate of them!" Lysanias managed, blinking tears out of his eyes. "Are the suits okay?"

"No damage sustained. I don't think we actually went anywhere, despite how you might feel. Are you okay? Your vitals are a bit off." She finished welding the door shut and came back over to him.

"I'll live. Okay, new plan. I doubt they could account for magic, especially channeling, so I'll just use the One Power and make a gateway back to the ship." He swished his hand through the air dramatically, intending to reach into his *pocket* and pull out the bird carving to help with that effort. It looked exactly like someone swishing their hand through the air, as no hole in the universe opened and no bird carving appeared in his hand. "Er..." He stared at his empty hand like "how dare you betray me in this way!"

"I think they've locked off all forms of dimensional movement," Rommeta remarked. "This apparently includes access to your *pocket*, which is actually pretty forthright thinking. Though I suppose Darkbolt would know to protect against wanderers, and tell his followers to do the same. There must be a pretty high level technique on the whole place to account for something so esoteric as that." She was looking around as if she could see it.

"Wait, you're not telling me we have to leave from that same room, are you?" Rosalina asked. "I mean we got in here! Teleportation into the place must work, and they wouldn't trap *themselves* in here, would they?"

"That's why the doors are so big!" Lysanias reasoned. "I bet it's for *cargo* as well as people. They would need a big door if they brought something big into the base, or something big had to leave."

"That stands to reason," Rommeta agreed. "That one room is exempted from the technique, they figured they could bring us there and intimidate us with the number of soldiers in the room. Make us vanish before we could call for help, keep their base a secret and figure out how we knew to come here."

Oh, that's why I could teleport past them, I was still in the room that allowed teleportation. Had I tried to go into the hallway, I bet it wouldn't have worked. Dodged a bullet there.

"We will have to make our way back there to get out of here. Is that your recommendation, Lysanias, or do you have something else in mind at this point?"

Most would have been intimidated, they couldn't have known I could stop time like that when they brought us in here. They know better now, I wonder how they'll react to that? "Well someone just welded the door shut behind us, and we can't teleport past it! So give me a second to think."

"I did do that, didn't I?" She looked down at her force lance. "Sorry. I only considered our current situation, that of needing to secure the door, rather than our future situation, that of needing to use it again. I do have a light saber, and Ragnarok, we can cut our way out."

"Can't you radio for help?" Rosalina asked.

Rommeta shook her head. "Signals are blocked, I've been trying but everything is jammed or absorbed by whatever the base is made of. I'm getting nothing."

"For Christmas?" Rosalina asked with a smirk.

"What?" both asked back.

"Never mind. Look, we better think of something quick, I hear people coming."

"Get away from the doors, let's not give them access to our powers," Lysanias told them, moving back into the gloom. The place wasn't very well lit, it didn't need to be.

"They wouldn't get much from me, just you," Rosalina said. "Thinking about it, sure they could do my type of magic, but they don't have wands. They couldn't channel it."

"I guess."

The door rattled, and someone shouted about the frame being broken and to bring cutting equipment down here. The two figures, at least two could be seen though the small window set in the door, then conversed about something, and their shadows left.

“Wait, why did they leave?” Lysanias asked. “I can’t feel them anymore, they really left.”

“Probably because there’s more than one way down to this level,” Rommeta told them, pointing into the distance. The others looked and she was right. More doors could be seen by the windows, which brought squares of light into the darkness of the room. “They’re probably amassing soldiers near the other ways out of here as we speak.”

“And I couldn’t get any *ignore me* wards out even if I wanted to.” He crossed his arms and looked around. *I could whip some up with the stele, that’s still available to me. There must be some way out of this without just killing anyone that pours into this room. That’s not why we’re here, and not something I would really be comfortable with. For all I know these people are mentally dominated same as the Tenma people are. How can I kill them for simply doing Darkbolt’s bidding? Answer, I can’t. I need another way, let me think...*

There must be...

Something...

His eyes fell on the pipes above.

Now there’s a possibility...

Chapter 9

No need for subtlety

When: Not long after

Where: Basement level of the underground base

“Look, we only have two minutes, fourteen seconds until we miss our check in time,” Lysanias told the others, looking at the countdown on his HUD. “The others will come for us. Doland’s orders were, should we find ourselves in the base, and I quote, hunker down and wait for rescue.”

“That wasn’t a quote of what he said at all,” Rommeta protested.

“Close enough. I’m not just going to have you ladies murder anything that comes through those doors. Not when we can slow them down, keep their focus on us, and trust the others to come to our aid.”

“You want me to wield the other doors shut?” Rommeta asked.

“Actually, no.” He looked back up at the pipes. “Let’s wreck some havoc down here. Find me where all the doors are though, I’ll need to block them all.”

He proceeded to yank the pipes apart and gather up the water that sprayed out, using water bending (and some spirit clones) to slam it into each door into the place and then freeze it. The pipes torn out he found the big tank of water that fed the place and tore that up, bursting the water out and using it to reinforce the ice blocks now jamming each door as well. He then used metal bending to crush all the air vents, hopefully denying them any fresh air above. (*They still wanted fresh air, hence not just smashing the machine to pieces*) Meanwhile Rommeta found there were cameras down there and ran though the place blasting them, while Rosalina used her abilities to jam sections of pipe and metal plates into the ice, further reinforcing it. The doors were being shot at by this time, but their guns weren’t made for melting ice, so it was going to be slow going.

“If there’s anything else down here, I’m gonna wreck it!” Rosalina announced, wand at the ready.

“I think I found their power supply,” Rommeta told them, standing before a piece of machinery with some gauges, switches, and buttons on it. It stuck out of the wall and what looked like cabling snaked out the top of it, disappearing into the ceiling. “The trouble is smashing it leaves us in the dark too.”

“We can fight just as well in the dark,” Rosalina bragged.

“Perhaps. But thinking ahead, how exactly are the others going to find us? Presuming they make it to the cleared area from where they are in less than ten minutes or so, they still must figure out where we are and how to get to us. We do not know how deep we are, and even if they could figure that out, how will they know to teleport to that one section of the base?”

“I figured I could just use telepathy to tell them,” Lysanias told her. “I was going to give it a few minutes and then send a message to Doland’s we were trapped underground. I would know he would be nearby, enough to send the message. *Brain* radio should still work, after all, even if radio radio doesn’t.”

“I wonder,” she wondered, tapping the side of her face with the force lance. “If I was as paranoid as these people, would I lock down other powers as well? For instance seer abilities? Mind abilities? Anything that could track this place down would need to be prevented, after all, and Miruku don’t have any of those powers to worry about blocking anyway.”

"They might just block everything," he admitted. "Just to be safe." He looked up. "No real way to test it either. I mean I guess..." *Rosalina, can you hear me?*

"Can't you just send something to me?" she asked.

"I just did."

"Didn't hear a thing. I think that option is out too."

"So how are we going to contact them?"

"Good question. Could we force them to raise this base somehow?"

"We don't know if it can be raised, given we don't know how it got underground," protested Rommeta. "It could be one way only."

"That would be safer. Let me think." He considered for a moment, while his clones checked the four doors into the place and made sure they were iced over. "I wonder what these walls are made of? Keep those doors closed, I'm going to check." He had Meta unlock his right gauntlet and slipped out of it, putting a hand on the wall. "In fact never mind, I'll just do it this way. Pause." *Here's something I haven't done in awhile.* He stood there, eyes closed, his alchemist senses trying to work out what the wall was made of. He managed it, finding the material to be some kind of composite but that was good enough for the moment. He dropped the pause and separated a ribbon thin section of the material in a square shape. Planting his feet he yanked and the ground on the other side of the wall burst through it. "Come on, I've made our exit." He yanked down enough material to make a hole two meters wide and the clones threw it at the doors, figuring it had to go somewhere, why not make it harder for them? One group was nearly through the ice so the clone near that one melted the dirt and reformed it into a solid block, jamming the door up again. The three could now throw dirt down, fly into that space, collapse more dirt in front of them, and repeat the procedure. They didn't have far to go and burst out of the ground.

"No one's here yet?" Lysanias asked, looking around.

"It hasn't been that long, and we've been searching for more than an hour," Rommeta explained. "So they're probably some distance away yet. I'm updating them on our situation now."

"Fine." He let his two clones go, then created two more. "Let's uncover the base so when they get here we can come up with a plan." The two moved into position in a triangle near the border of trees, and completely wrecked the whole area by yanking every bit of rock and dirt from above the base and tossing it as far as he could. "I really could get used to not having to worry about energy," he remarked.

"You're telling me," the other two agreed at the same time.

Doing all that under normal circumstances probably would have killed me.

"Incoming!" all three shouted, as the force warned them they were about to come under attack. A dozen people with those same guns they saw before appeared atop the uncovered base, but it was a simple matter to step back a pace so they didn't have line of sight anymore.

"Now what?" Rosalina asked.

"I've had a bit of a thought," one of the clones radioed to the others.

"Do tell," said the other and Lysanias.

"Since learning that time stopping ability from the avatar, I feel like I have a better understanding of using the force to move objects around."

"You aren't serious!" said the other clone, figuring where this was going.

"I'm being totally serious," they assured him. "We have unlimited energy," he tapped his wrist, "and the ability to spend copious amounts of it thanks to our training trying to master the spirit step technique. Now normally spending massive amounts of energy is completely stupid for us-"

"Because we could only do it maybe twice," interrupted the other.

"Exactly. But now, not so much. Let's take advantage of it and get this whole base out here. I mean can you even imagine it?"

"It would be interesting to *really* see what we can do, if not limited by our time spent in the cave," Lysanias mused. "If we could have more energy normally..."

"You think as I do," agreed the clone.

"Duh, we're all the same person," chided the other.

"So you in or what?"

"I suppose it would be easier to breach the walls if it was out. But they're going to have line of sight to us."

"Not if Rosalina knocks them around with her telekinesis and Rommeta covers us from the air. She could aim for their guns after all, not for them. That's non-lethal."

"You want to try it?" Lysanias asked. "I'm asking you two, not the clones."

"You do what you want," Rommeta answered. "I'm just here to back you up. I could jump down and distract them while you start lifting."

"I can throw them around and start putting them to sleep. Befuddle them too, with my new spell. We need to do something quick before they start killing the prisoners or something in there. Making the whole thing fly out of the hole would give them something to think about."

"My thoughts exactly," said the clone. "Let's do this!"

"May the force be with us," intoned Lysanias, and leaned over the edge. The three clones concentrated, and Rommeta slammed into the top of the thing, two force lances active and blurring as she put bolts into the foes before her. The ground rumbled as all three clones put maximum energy into their willpower, forcing the entire base to start lifting.

"It's working, keep it up!" shouted a clone.

I can clearly see that for myself.

Telekinetic power was almost a physical force as the base started to clear the hole, and Lysanias noted Rommeta fighting with a staff. He idly wondered where she had pulled it from, as she blasted the guns from the Miruku's hands, then whipped the staff around to smash them in the head, making them drop.

The base continued to lift.

It cleared the hole, and the three held it there, supported by nothing. Out of the ground it was basically just a circular container, 80m wide by 40m tall.

Incredible, we actually did it. What does this even weigh, anyway? My body is really limiting me, if this is the type of thing I can do without those limits. Uh, what are doing with this anyway?

But the clones were ahead of him, hitting the ground with their feet they filled in the hole before them, trees and dirt pouring into the space the base had been as the sides collapsed. With a nod all three let the base go. It smashed into the ground, rattling those inside around no doubt, but it wasn't enough of a fall for anyone to be seriously hurt. Another dozen troops appeared near the sides in a bunch, but the two Lysanias that could see them simply yanked their guns out of their hands and caught them in a mound of earth from every side.

Looking to see how the original group was doing most of the soldiers were lying down, clearly asleep or knocked out. Any others were staggering around confused, and it looked like Rommeta was finishing up blasting the guns they had brought to pieces. *No real threat there.*

The group kept them occupied, and no other forces came out to meet them. When the others started arriving they set Rommeta the task of guarding them, as she was the only one

they couldn't draw power from, and tore into the base by Lysanias making more holes in the walls. It turned out there were only the two dozen guards for the place, the rest of the people there were "scientists" who had been performing all sorts of experiments on the Miruku "traitors" of which there were only fifty seven. They were also performing tests on something Lysanias knew well- Human souls. All the scientists had at least one, if not more, but as they weren't trained fighters and the group knew enough to stay well away from them, they gave up and were escorted out to wait with the others.

"And you're sure these are human souls?" Dolands asked. He was holding a sword and swishing it around, having taken it from a Miruku.

"Positive, there's no mistaking them," Lysanias told him. "One color, sort of glowing, they're composed of spirit energy I can clearly feel that. That's a human soul. Have we found any humans around here?"

"None so far. A few other races, mixed in with the Miruku prisoners, we're getting their story now. But how did you find this place? It looks like it was ripped out of the ground. It couldn't have just been lying there, our scans would have seen it."

"It was ripped out of the ground, by me," he answered nonchalantly. "Just a little experiment to see how powerful I really was in this reality. I'm fairly pleased with the result."

He whistled. "You did that yourself? Remind me not to get you angry! And did I see two other of, uh, you, wandering around? Or can your suits of armor walk around by themselves?"

"My clones. Look, let's clear this place out, check out the prisoners, see if they can be trusted, and send them on their way. I'm sure they're going to be glad to be out of here. Meanwhile we can figure out what to do with the scientists, and maybe grab plus wipe their research so whatever they learned helps us, not them. We can regroup and I'll tell you the whole story later when we're away from here. I don't trust them not to have some plan to escape being discussed right now. Or maybe a distress signal was sent and we're going to be knee deep in Miruku in a few minutes."

He tossed the sword. "I give the orders around here, recruit!" he snapped, but then followed it up with a smile. "But I've decided to clear this place out, check the prisoners, whatever whatever. Get to it."

"Yes sir."

They quickly secured the base and its contents, pulling what they could from the computers and checking all the rooms. It was mostly lab space or cells, with some living quarters for the others, spread across two floors. So it wasn't too large to check out, and finally Lysanias (and his two clones) were standing with the others in front of a group of people willing to go with them back to the base.

"So here's what's going to happen," Dolands shouted at them. "This man, or this similar looking man, or the other similar looking man next to him, is going to check you over briefly, make sure you haven't been infected with something that will kill us all when you get to the base."

You know, that's not a bad thing to check on, now that I think about it, he sent into the other two. Maybe we should do that when we're looking into their futures as well. Harm of any kind done, intentional or not. That's the ticket.

We know, the other two sent back. We're you, we had the same thought.

Just making sure.

"If there's any question you'll be asked to wait so we can check you out further, anyone who is clean can just step through the portal I'll make. Got that?"

They indicated they did indeed 'got that.'

Lysanias looked them over. *Of course this is a lie. I'll just signal him with a sending if they're clean or a traitor, and he'll open a gateway to the appropriate section of the base. They'll either be met with open arms, a sympathetic ear, and an offer to help get back at their captors or the business end of a rifle and orders to put themselves in a cell. Strange how he makes a portal and it starts shrinking right away, but it's good for me. I just have to wait until it's gone to send the next one through.* A mix of male and female aliens stood with the mix of male and female Miruku, though of course all were humanoid so it was hard to tell who was a Miruku and who wasn't. Some of course had an oddly colored skin or horns or something, but the majority seemed "human" and thus were Miruku. No actual humans had been found, though all the human souls (not the animals, they were staying with the Miruku that was hosting them so they didn't sneak away to trouble) had been gathered up and put on the ship. Dolands had already been through a portal back to the base, telling them to get ready to receive potentially hostile Miruku hosting an "odd technique" so guards with non-offensive powers could be brought in to handle them. (And to make sure the halls were clear and no one was in any rooms nearby they could potentially get ahold of)

And so the line began to move. All these people felt relieved to have been rescued, and thanked him many times as he "checked them over." Lysanias was quite embarrassed the entire time, saying it was nothing and he was just doing what any person with the opportunity to do what he could do would have done. He was fairly surprised to find two out of the group that seemed to be planning some kind of violence once on the station, and had Dolands divert them to the cell section. Otherwise the evacuation went super smoothly, and when the last person was though Dolands slapped him on the back.

"Great job, that really worked out well. Now, let's go have a talk with our other 'guests.'"

"So what exactly were you doing here?" Dolands asked them from what he considered was a safe distance. They had to shout, but it was better that then they get his ability to open teleportals and jump through them.

"What?" they all shouted back.

"Oh this is not going to work!" he complained.

"Let me," Gogo offered, walking over. "I'll relay your questions, I'm a Miruku so they can't get anything from me."

"Good idea. Ask them what they were doing there."

"Does it really matter?"

"Sure, we need to know if Miruku have developed any new techniques or technology or powers based on what they were researching. We'll get their data eventually, but I'd rather they tell us. Plus, their willingness to help will show how rough they have to be treated later."

"I guess. Just a minute." They walked over to the group and had a conversation, which didn't seem to be going well at first. Rommeta, Croakter, Crytellia and Ellias were covering them, as they had no active powers the Miruku could draw from. They all raised their weapons a bit once the scientists did their "you'll never get anything out of us" routine so honor was satisfied on both sides, and Gogo came back with the story.

"Much as you would expect," they reported. "Painful and awful experiments done on those deemed as 'expendable' by Darkbolt. Trying to see how far their range could be extended, see if a power from one of the others could be forcibly taken and implanted into a Miruku, or if the Miruku ability to draw powers could be taken and given to someone who was not a Miruku. They tried blood transfusions, organ swapping, cybernetics, and of course this human soul business was very interesting to all of them. The soldiers didn't get them, the scientists here said they were too rare to hand out to 'those offish brutes' their words not mine, so that's why you didn't fight anyone with a soul. They were testing what weapons could

hurt them, what powers could be drawn from them, if a Miruku could draw that power as if it was a person with that power, the list goes on and on. Honestly once they started talking I couldn't get them to shut up about all the 'great works' they had going on here."

"I see. Any real breakthroughs?"

"They said some weapon and armor designs based on what they learned from the souls and their powers were transmitted out. Seemed to think all kinds of equipment would be available to the Miruku pretty soon, they just had to be fabricated. As that was months ago they're probably ready with production versions by now. At least, I would assume the worst case for us and say to expect it."

"Great, that's just what we need. Miruku with our powers and better armor and weapons than ever before. But nothing about them personally?"

They shook their head. "Their great disappointment, they said. They don't really know where powers come from, it doesn't seem to be any one place in the body. Oh, after forcing it the Miruku 'subjects' could lock on to someone faster or hold onto power a greater distance but that may just be practice and desperation, not something the common soldier will be able to replicate."

"Let's hope so. Well, good job that's a nice start. We'll take them back to the base under guard and let the queen decide what to do with them. Lysanias, you want to check them over to make sure they aren't carrying any explosives inside themselves or anything?"

"You want me near them? I can stop time itself you know, it's how I got away from them when they teleported us into the base in the first place. I get near any of them and they can just stop time and then teleport away. Not to another planet or anything," *I don't think, I never really tried any distance greater than the moon*, "but still it could let them hide somewhere if they knew a cave on this world or something to cause us trouble from."

"Ah, yes." He looked Lysanias over. "You do have more powers than the usual Tenma soldier, don't you? In fact you might even be a match for me, and that's saying something!" His eyes flicked over to the base, still laying at an angle under some crushed trees.

"I don't know, your techniques hit a lot harder than my bending does, and you're just as good a martial artist. Maybe with the sword and you unarmed?"

"Let's hope we never have to fight for real and find out. Okay, we'll just have to take our chances then. You stay here, we'll get them squared away and head back to the ship to discuss our next move."

"Right. Actually while you do that I'll make one more sweep of the base, see if there's anything useful we can take."

"Suit yourself. I'll come find you once we're done."

"Great. See you in a bit."

Chapter 10

No need for compromise

When: Some time later

Where: Back on the ship

Having cleared out the base and gotten out of the armor Dolands called a meeting after they lifted off the planet. As they all couldn't fit in any one room they were meeting virtually, his face on the screen in their room. Anyone that wanted to speak could have their camera activated, of course, and sitting there in his captain's chair running his fingers through his purple hair he looked troubled.

"I've gone back and spoken to the queen," he began. "I've given her our report and debriefed the Miruku and others we rescued. The non-Miruku are being given the option to go home, of course, and most of the Miruku have agreed to help us. So they'll be trained in the coming weeks, and hopefully when we attack Darkbolt they can put Tenchi's power to good use. In the meantime she has some missions for us. I of course accepted them, how could I not, but I'm a bit worried I have no idea how to fulfill them. She's worried about this 'human power' because according to the scientists, any one Miruku can support basically as many human souls as they want. But as we know the planet the humans came from, Earth, got wiped out first. She's concerned part of the population was taken prisoner, and are being kept somewhere to provide Darkbolt's Miruku additional powers. She admitted to me Miruku have been seen in skirmishes using odd weapons or items but this was dismissed as some kind of new technology. Now that we know it's actually human souls, yanked out of people and turned into power to use against us, we have to put a stop to it."

Hey, maybe she's not as evil as Inari thinks. That's a non-evil thing to do right?

"She ordered the humans destroyed, but I argued if they could be brought under our control then our Miruku could use these souls, increasing our own odds of taking down Darkbolt when the time came. She reluctantly agreed."

Okay I take it back. It's more self preservation and getting power away from Miruku than helping those people that have been captured.

"The problem there is, I have no idea where to even start looking for a bunch of captive humans. They could be anywhere in the universe, after all. Or outside it, in Darkbolt's pocket dimension for all I know. Finding them may be impossible."

I wonder.

"She's also concerned about these new weapons the scientists spoke of. As of yet any information about them has not been found in the computers at the base, which makes sense. That research was completed, so it was transmitted off planet and destroyed so as not to fall into enemy hands if the place was ever compromised. So good on them, that part of the plan worked perfectly." He barked a laugh. "Those scientists we captured are very confused how you did all that, by the way Lysanias. I'd promote you just for the amusement of watching them try to figure it out between themselves in their cell, but you're not really a part of the armed forces here. They kept asking about you, how you got away from them, locked yourself in the basement, and then got out again. You really did a number on them, they felt their base was pretty much impregnable but you ripped it out of the ground right in front of them. They were horrified about that!"

"It's not something I'd normally be able to do," he explained bashfully, hitting the 'to talk' button. His face went up on the big screen now, with Doland's being in the corner. "But I'm glad it shook their morale a little."

"That it did. But back to our tasks, she also wants us to hit any weapons factories or transports that may have these new weapons or armor. We need to study them, see how

much more advanced they are, and what they can do. *Before we face them in battle. Naturally we have no idea where any of them could be either. You see my dilemma.*"

It is a problem.

"Otherwise, she congratulates you all though of course it was mostly Lysanias and his team that made this victory possible. She gave us a mission, we fulfilled it quickly and with no casualties on our part. That's worthy of praise, and she offers it. I may have downplayed the fact he basically did it single-handedly, and made it seem like more of a group effort. You all deserve it anyway, you're a good team."

Does she? Doesn't sound evil enough. I wonder if she didn't say anything or even said we should have done it faster or something and he's just saying she praised us for our morale.

"Take the night off. If you have any ideas on how to find either of these places, that the queen and her Seers haven't even gotten a whisper of up until now, come see me tomorrow. We'll just cruise around here with no real destination in mind for now until we come up with something. I don't like being this close to a place recently taken out, in case reinforcements do arrive. No training tonight, that's an order! Enjoy yourselves, you've earned it. Dolands out."

"You heard the man," Rosalina said, standing and stretching after the screen went blank. "No training tonight. I think it's high time for another date!"

"On the ship? Or in the soulscape? I haven't meant to ignore you or anything, it's just so rare we're traveling for so long with nothing to do, I wanted to get some real practice in."

"I'm not mad, I was training too so it's fine. The ship is a bit small though..." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Maybe we can play cards with some of the others. I'd rather do something outside the soulscape, but it's your turn to pick so I'll leave it to you."

"Is playing cards a date?"

"It is if we say it is."

"I'll let you two figure that out," Rommeta told them, heading for the door. "Enjoy yourselves." As the door opened the group heard shouting down the hall, and shared a look.

"Sounds like Ryoko and Ayeka," Rosalina suggested. "Should we?"

"Let's go see what's up, before they start killing each other," Lysanias agreed. They headed that way to see both girls, Tenchi off to the side looking embarrassed, arguing in the hallway.

"What's going on?" Rosalina asked, marching up to them. "I thought you two had a truce."

"We do," insisted Ayeka. "But that doesn't mean she can spend all her time with Tenchi. I should get to see him too!"

"It's training!" Ryoko insisted. "*Train. Ing.* We both use a sword, and just because Tenchi can pull a blade out of nowhere or create shields that doesn't mean he can hit or block stuff. We have to train just as much as the others if we're going to have a chance against this Darkbolt."

"Are you really training or just bothering him?"

"I'm really training!" She teleported the three steps it would have taken her to reach the man and grabbed his arm. "Tell her, Tenchi!"

He sighed. "We've been training. I guess since she's not the most powerful person around anymore it pushed her to improve. I can't say I'm not surprised, given it's Ryoko, but she's telling the truth."

"Ha!" She stuck her tongue out at Ayeka, then looked confused. "Wait, are you really that surprised?"

"Back home you just lay around, mostly."

"I do not!"

"You do too," Ayeka insisted.

"Well, not... all the time!"

"No, sometimes you're thinking up pranks to play on me, or trying to get into Tenchi's pa- room. His room."

"I do chores. I helped with the baby didn't I?"

"Until Washu took over, but I guess you did pitch in. As for chores, I suppose if we badger you enough they got done. Eventually."

"Ha! I do them, that's the point."

"Anyway, I am proud of you," Tenchi went on. "You've been focused lately, and that's a different side of you than I've seen before. It's nice to see you passionate about something."

"I'm passionate about you!" she said slyly.

"You had to go ruin it, didn't you?" Ayeka complained.

"Ruin? What?" She seemed genuinely confused.

"Never mind."

"Tenchi? Did I ruin something?"

"Anyway," he answered, shaking her loose, an action he seemed fairly practiced at.

"Look, Ryoko, do you mind if I spend some time with Ayeka tonight?"

"Yes I do, matter of fact." She drew herself up but then deflated a little. "No, she's right I can't have you all to myself. You... I can't force you to... Go and have fun with her, I'll stay out of the way."

Tenchi looked and felt surprised, Ryoko felt a deep longing and sadness. *She really does care for him, doesn't she?*

"No tricks?" Ayeka asked, eyes narrowing.

"What do you take me for?"

"A hardly reformed space pirate that's Tenchi crazy?"

"That was Kagoto! He made me- Oh."

Ayeka was grinning. "I'll trust you, this time. But if you just 'innocently' show up wearing nothing but a towel to invite him to shower with you or something..."

"Oh, that's a good one, gotta write that one down." She pulled a pad of paper from nowhere. "Anyone have a pen?"

"Don't write it down!" she sputtered.

"I guess I can remember it." The paper vanished.

"Actually, Lysanias and I were thinking about a date night, why not make it a double?" Rosalina asked. "There must be something we can do with the four of us even on a ship this small."

Ryoko looked like she was about to say something lewd but her face fell again.

"Around here? I don't know," Ayeka hedged. "This is a warship, not really all that many places to do much more than playing cards, and we do that every night!" The others looked down, thinking it over.

Hey Ryoko, Lysanias sent to her, by doing the right thing here, the harder thing, I think you've won Tenchi over a little more. I felt him feel a bit more pride in you as you said Ayeka and he could have some time together. Like he was again seeing you in a new light. Why not really show there's no hard feelings and offer Ryo-Ohki for the night? He could fly us to some planet or moon to do some sightseeing or something.

"I have an idea," Ryoko told them immediately. "How about I loan you Ryo-Ohki for the night? Take him out in ship form, there must be planets he can get to that are nearby. Walk around, have a picnic or something. I mean if you're that worried about me showing up..."

"Wait, you mean it?" Ayeka asked, stunned.

"Yeah, I wouldn't have offered if I didn't mean it." She turned away, grabbing Ryo-Ohki up off her shoulder. "What do you think, Ryo, do you mind?"

He shook his head with a "Meow!"

"Here, take him." She handed him over without looking. "He can head out the airlock and teleport you inside no problem. I'll go keep Mihoshi company tonight I guess." She started to walk away. "I'll see you in the morning. Don't you fly into any asteroid fields or anything!"

She's really shocked. They both are. And they both feel grateful, so you scored some points with both of them. You did good, Ryoko.

The pair was too busy staring at Ryo-Ohki, who was smiling up at them (as much as a spaceship in animal form can smile) to see her bob her head before she phased through the door of her room and was gone.

"I guess we're doing a double date," Tenchi decided, hand rubbing the back of his head.

"We should file a flight plan with the captain, just in case," Ayeka told them. "Ryo-Ohki, can you talk to their computers or something so Dolands doesn't freak out we've just vanished?"

"Meow!"

"Was that a yes or a no? I can never tell."

Meta buzzed, and Lysanias lifted the watch. It was showing a yes. "Meta says yes," he told her.

"Oh, your watch can translate. Great, let's go!"

So the pair told Dolands they were going to stretch their space legs and found a nearby planet their computers said had lifeforms of some kind but were not yet space aware. He suggested staying away from populated areas so as to not cause any riots, and they agreed. Ryo-Ohki could find them some ocean overlook or something that didn't have any natives and teleport them, and the planet didn't have sophisticated enough sensors to detect him. That done they headed there, which didn't take long at all. On the way the group discussed what to do.

"You can actually change what we look like, right?" Ayeka asked.

"I can," Lysanias told her. "Why?"

"I just thought, why not find an open air market and look around? Ryo-Ohki can show us styles of clothing and what the natives look like, we would blend right in."

"You want to go shopping?" Tenchi asked.

"Quick tip for you," Rosalina told him. "Girls always want to go shopping. And it's a good date, the old farmer's market date. You could do worse."

"I suppose it would be nice, being somewhere that wasn't paranoid about Darkbolt showing up at any second. Where this war has yet to reach. If you think you can match us up enough with the local population, we can try it."

"With some *ignore me* wards at hand in case things get dicey, and with *translate* wards so we can be understood and by we I mean you guys because I don't need them, sure. Be nice to walk around and feel the sun again."

"Weren't you almost burnt to a crisp making those sunlight orbs of yours just recently?" Tenchi asked. "Do you need any more sun?"

"You know what I mean!"

"I guess. All right, Ryo-Ohki, find some natives when we get there and see if you can get us some pictures!"

"Meeow!"

So the group studied the planet and somehow Ryo-Ohki had good enough “sensors” that not only could they see individual aliens in enough detail he could mimic them, (they were mostly human looking, it wasn’t hard) he got them pictures and a material analysis of the coinage they used so Lysanias could get them some actual money as well. He modified some of Rommie’s old clothes to mimic the local style and Ryo-Ohki sent them down outside a town so they would be unobserved popping into existence. The group then wandered down the street (with some communication wards again just in case they got separated) to see the city. It had a sort of “western” feel to it, with no skyscraper type buildings, dirt roads, and no mechanical technology in evidence. Lysanias saw signs for “mage services” so they had magic, and while both wanted to see what sort it was, Lysanias cautioned against it.

“We don’t know how common it is, or what customs here are,” he warned her. “We could walk in, say hello, but saying hello without first saying a quick prayer to the gods blessing the house may be a grievous sin here. We just don’t know.”

“I guess you’re right. Maybe before we leave we can put on some *ignore me* wards and at least check the shop out. We don’t know if they sell magical items or potions or just services, and without a specific need going in would be very suspicious.”

Or it’s all just a hoax and there’s no real magic here at all. “Exactly.”

“I still wanna!”

“I know!” He laughed, pulling her along with him. “Come on, they must have a market or general store or something around here we can browse.”

“I guess it’s better than nothing.”

“Why do these people look basically human?” Rosalina asked, looking at the people going about their lives.

“According to local lore, the angels that helped in the creation of this universe modeled all people after themselves, and this is the basic form that they have,” Meta told them. “Any deviation is thus a shaping by the local environment or the result of genetic modification a species has done to itself when it acquired the means.”

“Local here, this planet, or local this reality?” she asked.

“This reality, I should have been more specific. Apologies. There is no sign of an information network or technologically generated electromagnetic waveform of any kind in the local area.”

“Strange,” she remarked. “To live not knowing what’s possible.”

“I don’t know what’s possible,” Lysanias chided. “Do you? Really? Every reality I’ve visited I’ve expanded my view of what’s possible. You think that won’t continue?”

“I do,” Meta told them. “I know what’s possible.”

“You don’t count!” both said, and laughed.

“I get what you’re saying,” Rosalina told him. “I guess we each just have to live as best we can wherever we find ourselves, whatever technology we have at our disposal.”

“Yup.”

“Oh look at that it’s so cute!”

Finally back on the ship Ayeka gave Ryo-Ohki the vegetable looking things she had bought on the planet as a thank you for riding them around, and Tenchi went to go thank Ryoko directly. Lysanias went to see Dolands.

“Ah, you’re back. Did you have a good time?”

“I did, thank you. Now, about our next move...”

“Yes?”

“There’s a Dreaming technique I can use, it can help find things when you don’t exactly know what you’re looking for. I can shift at random through the universe, and each jump is a step closer to what I’m looking for.”

“Is this dangerous? And doesn’t dreaming imply you would be asleep? How does that work?”

He explained a little about his ability to Dream, and asked it be kept from the others. Dolands agreed, but told him he was glad Lysanias was on their side. *Am I?* he asked himself. *When I make a move on the queen, what side will you be on? Hers, or mine?* But finally he could answer his earlier question. “I could wind up in lava or something, yes. Especially because I would have a universe of possibility to choose from, I would have to concentrate on being as durable as possible before I started. If I was still killed, there’s a good chance I would just wake up anyway, so it’s not too bad. But I think it may be our only way.”

“Humm... I could have the doc watch over you. Try and restart your heart if you died and didn’t wake up.”

“Oh, uh, no, that’s-”

“Really?”

“Your doctor, he’s a bit... uh...”

“Unconventional? I get it, he’s not the friendliest, or the cleanest, fellow. But he has healing powers so he studied medicine. He’s all we’ve got. If you’re going to try this let’s take every precaution. We can tell him you’re doing a deep meditation or something, I doubt he’ll care honestly, I’ll just order him to watch over you and he will.”

“Yes sir.”

“Good! No one has come to me with any other concrete plan to find these humans or the weapons, so if you can randomly stumble across them in a dream so much the better. You can give me the image of that place and I can bring us there with a teleportal. It could work.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for. Let me say goodnight to Rosalina and I’ll head to the medical bay.”

“Good luck.”

And so Lysanias relaxed and went to sleep, stepping into the World of Dreams once he was able. He stepped through to his room, as he knew there would be no one there, though he did wonder what Rommeta did all night. She didn’t have to sleep, after all. With a shrug he closed his eyes and focused on seeing himself able to survive (at least a few seconds) in any environment. Then he sighed, stopped concentrating on that, created a set of unpowered armor like he usually wore but with the addition of some nice metal leggings, and started concentrating on it again. With that done all that remained was his need to find the remaining humans in the universe. *We have to break them out of the Miruku’s possession. They can’t just steal people’s actual souls and use them for war. They have to be stopped. I must find them. Take me, Dreaming, to where I can find them!*

He shifted.

Chapter 11

No need for complications

When: Just after shifting with *need*

Where: Unknown at this time

The good news is, Lysanias thought to himself after a moment, is that I'm not dead. The bad news is I really don't know where I am. Lysanias couldn't tell if he had his eyes open or not, it was so dark, but he didn't seem to be in space. He could feel air around him, and while it was quite warm where he was it wasn't breezy or full of any gas that might knock him out. The floor felt solid, and he could move just fine, though he felt rock in front of him when he raised his arm. He took a step back and a ball of light with what looked like a tiny fairy in the middle appeared above it.

After all, my powers this way depend upon my imagination. A ball of light is all well and good, but making a fake fairy accomplishes the same goal and is more imaginative. That's what I need to cultivate in this form.

With the place illuminated he saw he was standing in front of a rock wall with a low ceiling, with walls only a few paces away. *This place is boring. Where am I? Underground? Wish I had earth bending, I could probably tell how far.* He was going to shift out again when he glanced behind himself and almost fell over.

"Hello, what have we here?" he asked no one. Behind him was a small building, made of stone, it almost looked like a shrine, but looking around he saw no way of getting to it from the outside. *So someone just found a tiny pocket in the ground and stuck a shrine down here? Doesn't make sense.* He went over to it, needing to travel only a few steps, and put his hand on the door. *Feels like stone. Let's see what secrets you hold inside.* He took a few steps back, putting his back on the stone of the wall behind him.

"You might want to watch out," he told the "fairy" and made the light "flutter" behind his shoulder, and imagined an energy barrier around himself just in case there was some kind of trap on the place. "Ready?" He imagined the fairy nodding and yanked the door open with what passed for telekinesis in this form. There was no explosion or anything, and he winked the barrier out and stepped inside. The interior was smooth stone, and the only feature inside was a simple stone column set into the middle of the room, reaching about to his belly button. Floating above the pedestal was an orb. "Oh my." He crossed his arms and stared down at it, hovering there without apparent support. "What in the world are you doing down here, little one?" he asked it. The orb did not answer. He took a step closer and leaned to the side, looking at the whole thing. The orb was about as big as a marble, and yes, it seemed to be floating there. *So according to the stories the crew have told me, and what Inari said about the queen and Evil, this is a sealing orb. Someone sealed someone else away in this orb to get rid of them, but rather than destroy the orb went to the trouble to put it in this hiding spot. Why? Too dangerous to let loose, too useful to get rid of?* He looked back at the cave. *But who could get down here, and who is this that's sealed up? Only the person who put it here would know about it, right? The demons were sealed, but apparently awoken by Darkbolt during the disaster that Daku created trying to destroy Earth himself. Instead they got the avatar, not exactly what he was expecting. Could there be another demon sealed here? Why such an elaborate setup, I mean a shrine? That doesn't seem very "demon" to me. I suppose anyone could use the sealing technique, it's not exclusive to whoever sealed the demons in the first place, so this could be from some ancient disagreement and just be a regular person? But that raises more questions! No, it must be a demon, right? What were they telling me about these demons... Apparently the orb containing the demon Chaos has been fiercely defended, so it isn't out and about yet, but the others; war, death, and destruction all*

are. The crew seems to believe that's all the demons that exist, but what do they know? Only what they've been told, and if this one has been here a long time, maybe they've just forgotten about it. Could you be temptation? Famine? Something else equally horrible? And what do I do now that I've discovered you?

He considered, pacing in and out of the small shrine while the fairy hovered there. If this orb was important for his finding the remaining humans, and he had been brought here as the first step on that journey, he didn't just want to leave it. But if it really did hold a demon, to add to their problems should it ever bond with someone would be his fault if he disturbed it. But on the gripping hand if whatever was in there was powerful enough to justify such treatment and could be brought to their side, he would be a fool to not take the opportunity.

I mean by all rights Evil should join Darkbolt as the other demons have. So we know they can act independently, the others choose to follow Darkbolt either because he's lied to them about his purpose or they just don't care. Terrifying thought, he promised them evacuation and they'll be unleashed on other universes even less equipped to deal with- I've just had a more terrifying thought. Is this chaos? Could the 'chaos orb' people think is real actually be a fake, and this is the real one? Have people given their lives defending a fake orb? Crud, this is tricky. I wonder if I could ask the universe what is bound in this orb? The demons seem to have one word names, I could get an answer. If the queen saw me sitting with an orb though, and she recognized it, and it was an enemy of hers, that could be bad for us.

In the end he decided it was probably worth the risk, four demons out or five, what did it matter? He would simply take precautions and if it turned out badly, deal with it. He walked back over, putting a hand up before it. Imagining a sphere of clear glass around the orb he made it so, and now held a softball sized sphere with the orb in the middle of it. Nothing seemed to prevent him from taking it, and he held it up in the tradition of old school RPGs everywhere. "Easy enough to get out, but it won't bond to the first person that touches it either." *Let's be on our way, and hope I didn't just make a choice I'm going to have to go back in time and smack myself in face for making. Actually...* He took a quick look around the cave, checking the doors (both sides) and the walls of the cave. *No note, so future me hasn't sent back a warning not to take it. Does that mean I'm dead in the future or this was a good choice? Really wish I had my other powers like this!* He formally closed the doors, gripped the orb, put out the fairy light, imagined himself immune to everything he might run into in a shift, and *shifted* again.

This time he was clearly on the surface as he heard the sound of explosions all around him, and opened his eyes. Quickly glancing around he saw he was in the middle of a city of some kind, or what was left of it, anyway. Buildings towered above him, most of them on fire or otherwise with their top portions destroyed, while overhead ships of various sizes buzzed and spat electric death out the fronts.

Did I just land in the middle of a Darkbolt planet invasion? Or is this some kind of civil war that happens to be going on? I suppose this is nearer to where the humans might be, if there are Miruku around, but no one is around except for-

He froze. Before him, not twenty meters away, was a huge furry creature that looked like a wolf. If wolves stood on two legs, had red fur, and were about to kill someone. A struggling person was held in its claws, and its other hand was drawn back, ready to strike. Lysanias didn't hesitate, simply willing the figure to himself because he remembered the last time when he had rushed into combat to save someone while someone *clearly smarter than himself* had just done what he had just done. The strike hit empty air and a crying child appeared next to him, gasping for breath.

“What?” roared the wolf, looking around. Glowing red eyes fixed on Lysanias. “You!”
Oh crap, does this thing know who I am?

“You interfere in the machinations of war, you’re either mighty brave, or mighty stupid. Which are you boy?” it growled, a reddish aura springing up around it.

So it doesn’t know who I am, that’s a relief. Time for some bravado, and a quick retreat I think. I don’t want this kid hit by something as I’ve just saved them. Wait, is this the actual demon of war? “Why don’t you try me and find out?” Wait, why aren’t you just running away? Grab the kid and teleport somewhere. Anywhere! I bet I could still do that!

“Well said!” the figure praised. “If not well reasoned. At least you won’t die alone, kid. Final Steel!” As the wolf said this the red aura vanished and giant metal blades started blasting out of the ground towards the pair.

“No,” Lysanias said simply, raising his free hand as his eyes narrowed. He imagined the ground around him being unchanged, in effect, the attack should not, *did not*, exist anymore.

The blades vanished, and the street went back to being as torn up as it had been earlier. No further blades sprang up, and the wolf clearly looked out of sorts as the two were not slashed to ribbons.

“Impossible,” they sputtered. “That wasn’t metapower or protection. What was that?”

“Contemplate it in darkness,” Lysanias told it, closing his hand. As he did he willed a thick iron box around the figure. The ground trembled as an enormous cube, a hole at the center where the wolf was going to be, shimmered into existence and slammed into the ground.

He turned to the kid, who was still recovering but now looking at where the demon was sealed with eyes as wide as could be. “Look, we need to get out of here,” he said to them. He looked them over, and if they had a similar lifespan to his they were maybe ten? He couldn’t tell if it was a boy or a girl, and didn’t want to assume, not that it mattered in any case. Their clothes were tattered and they seemed to be bleeding and bruised, but didn’t seem in danger of dying at the moment. “I have a feeling it won’t hold that thing for long. Is there someplace we can go, some shelter or something?”

“Shelters? I guess. The Tenma have been saying something like this could happen.”
So it is an invasion then. “So where would the nearest one-”

The same blades sliced the metal into chunks as the red wolf jumped high in the air, howling “You aren’t going anywhere!” The pieces shot in every direction, exploding upwards and outwards from the force of the attack. The wolf locked eyes with his prey and grinned, starting to fall.

Oh crud. Lysanias threw a hand out and simply willed it to go shooting off into the distance as far and as fast as he could imagine it going. As it had nothing to grab onto, being in mid-air, it couldn’t resist and smashed through a building and hopefully kept going out the other side. *Bye.*

“You’re amazing,” the kid said. “You’re not even calling your attacks out, how powerful are you? What was that thing anyway? I hope I get powers like yours one day. Are you with the military? I’ve never seen armor like that.”

“Questions later, shelter now!” *We could still get hit with a bomb or something from those ships up there after all.*

“I don’t know,” they protested, looking around. “Everything is smashed up now, I’m not even sure where I am anymore.”

Lysanias had to agree that much was at least true. *And sensibly, no one else is out here standing in the open like a moron in the middle of an invasion. I don’t have life senses or energy senses, so I can’t tell where people are. Great, just great. And I just started Dreaming,*

even if I asked this kid what their planet was called, woke up, and warned Dolands this attack was about to happen, the queen's forces would never get here in time. This is only happening ten or fifteen minutes in my "future." This attack probably started long before that. "So where would it logically be?" he pressed.

"Underground I guess?"

And I don't have earth bending senses either. Magnificent. Okay, what do I have? Oh, just the ability to bend time and space to my very will, reshape matter, create anything I can imagine, and basically rewrite reality in my local vicinity as though I were a god. All totally useless at the moment, naturally! "Come on," he told the kid, holding his arms out. "We'll head to a building that's survived, figuring if it's built that tough maybe it has a shelter or some people left alive inside."

"I can walk," said the kid.

"Yeah, but can you fly? We have to move!"

"You can fly too? I don't know, my parents told me I shouldn't go with strangers..."

"Kid, it's the middle of an-"

"My name is Irisia."

"Irisia then. It's the middle of an invasion and I've just saved your life *how many times now? If you really want to just stay here-*"

They hopped up into his arms, and he lifted off the ground with gravitons, imagining gravity to be just slightly reversed nearby, and then pulling him down the street above all the rubble.

"You're not flying, this is just gliding," Irisia complained.

"You have seen the ships up there, right?" he asked dryly. "You want to become a target? This is as high as we're going."

"Lame."

"Perhaps you would like to carry me effortlessly through the air away from that creature?"

"No, no, carry on."

Kids these days!

Zippering down the street and taking some side roads to get around rubble and hopefully throw off any red, furry pursuers the pair stopped dead as an intact building loomed before them. High above ships were weaving back and forth pounding it with energy weapons and small bombs dropped from the undersides of the ship, but the building stood firm. As he looked at it the tower wasn't so much a normal building as one would expect, with windows and doors and such, but a big metal box. It was a featureless gray, as if someone had put a protective barrier around the whole place made of iron.

"That looks promising," Irisia told him.

"You think? The only way inside would seem to be straight through the wall though." *I guess I can handle-*

"When you can pass through a wall and see, the path to enlightenment will be clear," they intoned.

"What?"

"What?"

"What was that all about? You said something about passing through the wall!"

"No I didn't, you just did. I just said it looked promising. Did you hit or head or something before I saw you?"

"Fine, whatever. Let's just go." He flew over to the wall and gently let the gravity field go back to normal. Irisia got down and took his hand.

"Are we really going to walk through the wall?"

"That's the plan. Okay, here we go." He imagined them simply becoming ghosts, able to pass through walls without issue, and almost put his hand up as he got near the wall. *No, there is no need. We are ghosts, and we are going to pass through this wall. I control reality, that's just how it's going to go.*

They passed through the wall.

Blinking away the afterimages of his eyeballs being inside metal he looked around. Many pairs of eyes stared back at him as he was inside a regular looking office building entryway filled with dozens of people. Many were lying on the ground or couches or chairs like they were exhausted, while a ring of people had one hand on one man in the center who looked to be concentrating on something. They were lit up with power, and he was looking up past Lysanias. He turned, looking back and saw the building here was a lot of glass, he could see the metal shell around it clearly from this side.

So not exactly a shelter, but it'll do. I can leave Irisia here and... Leave them to die. That's no good. But can I get them out of here somehow?

"If you can phase, you can help us defend this place," one lady in the circle said. "Take someone's place when they exhaust their energy. You know how to share energy right?"

Do what now? Wait, is this not a technological defense by the building itself but rather something this one guy is doing? "Er, no?" he told her, walking over. Irisia pulled away and he let them, standing still by the entrance. "We have to get out of here. There's a war on!"

"You think we hadn't noticed?" said the man. "I was lucky enough to get this technique up in time, and the others are helping me maintain it. If it falls we're all dead!"

"You're losing that battle anyway," he told them. "They can pound on this place all day and night. You're going to falter sooner or later. We have to go."

"Go where? Like you said, there's a war on," said another man from the side, sitting up. "There's nowhere on the planet we can reasonably go to."

Good question. I can't get them there, but I do know of a safe place. At least, safer than here at the moment. But how to get them there? They don't have a distance limitation but I do. But maybe there's a way. "What if the place I had in mind wasn't on the planet? Can someone here teleport or make teleports?"

"I can," answered someone from the stairs nearby. She got up and came over. "But I've never been off planet, that's why we're still just stuck here. We hoped we could hold out here long enough for them to get bored and leave."

"Which?"

"Teleportal."

Whew, that's okay then. "I think this planet is lost, it's pretty bad out there. Look, if I allowed you to see an image of someplace off world could you open a portal to it?"

"I guess? Never tried, really."

Of course you didn't. But these are not soldiers, just people, and just because you have the ability to go places maybe you never felt the need to before because all your family was here or whatever. Still, this should work. I'll show them an illusion of the headquarters, the area that teleporting into functions. They may not want them, but they're about to get a handful of refugees. Don't usually use illusion but I did learn about it from Jason, along with the other mental stuff I can do. Usually more concerned with physical stuff, but this time she'll have to do the heavy lifting. "Let's try something, I'm going to put an image into your head." He moved closer to her and put his hand on her forehead. He concentrated, trying to make her see the base. He had seen it enough times, helping ferry people there before.

"Oh, I see it. It's a room."

"Look around, get a feel for it. Then I'll have you try opening the portal."

She turned in her mind and nodded, so Lysanias broke it off and she opened the portal, which worked just fine. The others started perking up, probably realizing there may be some hope after all. "It worked!"

"Seems that way. Let me head through first so you don't get shot."

"Shot? Where is this?"

"The headquarters of the Tenma resistance." He stepped through, and a guard jumped up out of his chair and raised a rifle. They had on a standard Tenma soldier uniform and eyepiece, and looked past Lysanias to the portal where the woman was poking her head through to look around.

"Stay where you are," they commanded.

"I've got refugees here we need to evacuate," he told the man.

"Wait a second, computer identifies you as... Lysanias? Special liaison to the *queen*?" He snapped the rifle up and saluted. "Sir! How can I help, sir?"

That's more like it. I guess I got added to their database. Maybe Dolands did it. "We need some people that can create teleportals. They can go through, then open some up back here. I've got a planet under attack by Darkbolt and found some people in a shelter. We need to evacuate them before their defenses fall."

"Normal procedure would be to withdraw from a planet under attack by Darkbolt to avoid compromising the base, sir!"

"I realize that. As I said, there should be no Miruku in this group, they basically put a shell around the building they were in when the attack started." *At least I hope that's the case. But it would have taken an inhuman amount of planning to plant a mole in this group, right?*

He hesitated. "I am supposed to offer any assistance to you I can. Very well, sir! But they're going to have to be individually processed before any of them see any further into the base than the waiting room down the hall."

"Understood."

"I'll send for some troops, open the teleportal again in a few minutes, sir."

"Good man. Thank you. I'll see you soon." He stepped back through and it slowly closed, winking out. "Okay, they'll take you in. Some more soldiers will come through if you open it again in a moment, so you don't have to move everyone yourself. Meanwhile, get anyone in the building down here, we're leaving."

"You're with the Tenma?" she asked.

"You just saw me step through to their base."

"I saw you go into a room and there was a soldier there. You don't have the symbol." She tapped her forehead.

"We don't all have the symbol."

"Of course all Tenma have the symbol," she protested. "That's what makes them Tenma!"

"Look, is anywhere in the universe going to be worse than here once that guy is exhausted and his technique goes away?"

"I guess not."

"You must go with him if you want to live," Irisia said in that same tone of voice, having wandered over there. They seemed to come out of a trace. "What am I doing over here?"

"Are you a seer?" asked the woman.

"I don't think so, why?"

"I bet you are. Well, Tenma or not I suppose you're right. We're dead anyway. Come on, everybody get up, we're heading out." She turned and started clapping, getting people's attention. "Get everyone on the higher floors down here, nobody gets left behind."

Having sent others to look around the building for anyone that might be hiding the woman came back and waited a moment, then opened another teleportal. Tenma forces poured through to help, and opened their own portals back to the base, helping the refugees here to safety. Lysanias knelt by Irisia.

"I'll head out again, see if I can find anyone else. But your parents, your friends... I'm sorry, but you may have to accept, you know."

"I know," they said, looking miserable. "We've been warned for months this day would come. I just wish... I just..." They couldn't continue.

"Come here," Lysanias said, hugging them. "I'll make Darkbolt pay for it. You have my word."

"You can do it, can't you?" they asked when Lysanias let go. "The way you knocked that creature around, I felt something. I don't mean a power- I felt hope."

Lysanias nodded. "I can't tell you why, but it's why I'm here. To put a stop to all this."

Suddenly their eyes lost focus again. "The host of souls you seek lie deep in slumber, guarded by death itself. Yet you carry life with you should you dare to unleash it. One among your number can offer reassurance, go no further in your quest until its nature is understood. While their power is weak, their knowledge of what is to come can save you." They blinked. "I did it again, didn't I?"

"You did something." *What was all that about?*

"That's been happening, now that I think about it. Maybe I am a seer. Good luck, okay?" They ran through a portal and were gone.

Lysanias looked down at the orb, still carried in his hand as he had no place to put it. *Life? One among my number? I wonder. But I still have a promise to keep.*

Chapter 11

No need for despair

When: twenty minutes later

Where: the mean streets of wherever this city is, on whatever planet this is

Lysanias tried, after the building was empty and the ships above were gleefully smashing it to pieces, to look for survivors in the surrounding area. The woman, who said her name was Tinorium, came with him to open portals. Neither was feeling all that well at the moment as they flew past ruined buildings and exploded vehicles, because there was death everywhere. He hadn't really noticed, when he first arrived, mostly because he was fighting the wolf thing and then trying to find a shelter, but the ruined bodies of those that used to live here were everywhere. The two were now huddled next to some rubble to try and recover from what they had seen. No one was alive, there was only death and destruction here.

Sorry little one, your parents and everyone else you ever knew are gone. You're going to pay for this avatar. Somehow, I'm going to make you pay for it.

"It's the end of my world," Tinorium managed. "It's over. Done. In a single day. How? Where were the Tenma? Shouldn't they protect us?"

"The thing is, what's happening here is happening all over," he explained. "Planets are going dark one by one. They can't possibly protect them all."

"They could *conquer* them all," she spat. "What's the point of showing up and destroying our government if you're not going to show up again when we're being killed like this? You can't rule ashes and silence!"

"Yes, well," he hedged, hoping the queen wasn't taking this particular time to check up on him. "That's an issue for another time."

"What? You're not really Tenma, are you? No Tenma would say something like that, it's like they're all fanatically loyal to the queen. But you clearly are accepted to get into their base for the evacuation. Who are you?"

"I'm a visitor. I don't have time to get into it. Do we press on or give up? I don't know if I can stand looking at any more... bodies... today."

"Could you stop this? Destroy those ships?" She pointed up, where Miruku ships still could be seen flying overhead, finishing the city off.

The thing is, I pretty easily could. An almost one dimensional ribbon of unbreakable metal created in the air and held fast, right in front of all of them at once? They would be sheared through before they could even react. Mass would be negligible so I could get a lot of them at once. "In theory," he answered.

"So do it!"

"That would kill the pilots!"

"Of course that would kill the pilots, what did you think I was asking? It's obviously a war, if you can do something about it, you have to!"

"While I agree with you in a philosophical sense, I cannot agree in a practical one. The truth is I am doing something about it, just... at a higher level. My being here and saving you all was a happy accident, not my current mission."

"What does that mean? Higher level, what are you going on about?"

"Look, can you prove, beyond a doubt, that those people up there aren't being mentally controlled to do this?"

"Well, no I can't."

"And I will not have innocent blood on my hands. Look, I will mourn for your entire world and all those others that have gone dark up to now but I need to attack with purpose. Killing those people up there changes nothing, I can't bring back those that have been lost.

That's what I mean. My target is the person giving the orders, as them I can be sure of as not being under metal domination. Darkbolt themselves. They will fall before me, of that you can be assured." *If only I could make the avatar experience every death they caused. Really feel it. Not just as a person seeing a dead bird by their window and shrugging it off like 'well bird, should have been more careful I guess huh?' but feeling what that bird felt to hit that window. We may be ants to them but we have lives too.*

"I've heard... I mean there were always rumors that the demons had their opposite but I never believed- are you an angel? Have you returned to fight for us at last?"

Lysanias started to answer but froze as a howl went up around him. Looking out he saw a red wolf, tail tipped with a blade, looking straight at him and howling. *Guess who he's talking to? Right, the big one.* "We're out of time. Look, if you think there is good to be done here fine, I will defend you and we can keep looking. Just know that if who I think they're howling for hears it, the actual demon of war is going to be on us in seconds. But if you've seen enough, get out of here and let me get on with my task so this never has to happen to another world."

"I'll- I'll go," she decided, a portal opening behind her. "It was an honor to have met you, whoever you are." She stepped through and paused. "Are you staying?"

"I'll find my own way, thank you."

"Good luck." The portal vanished.

I'll need it. Lysanias didn't want to hang around so he stepped back into the World of Dreams to plan his next move. *See ya, war! Now, that seer or whatever she was told me to...*

to...

Oh no you've got to be kidding me.

Dotted around the area, which was starting to resemble the scene of destruction he had just left, were shadows. Despite their distance away and not really having eyes, Lysanias knew each and every single one was now focused on him.

So he did the expedient thing and tried to go back to the Dreaming representation of his quarters on the ship. Distance meant nothing in the dream, of course. Feeling himself pulling away he grinned and thought *maybe next time*. Then like a rubber band he snapped back, staying right where we was. *Crapbaskets*.

A car went sailing though the air, headed right for him. He swatted it from the air with a wave of his hand, causing it to smash into a nearby building. He took a quick look around, wondering if there was an opening he could make it to and ninja vanish. The shadows were pretty evenly spaced in this area on all sides, and he figured there were more than five of them, but probably less than ten.

The air around him turned into acid, making him cry out and fling it away. This worked, but he could feel his entire body had started to dissolve. His armor was smoking and pitted, having done nothing to help because acid. They weren't done yet though, as out of nowhere a rain started to fall. This rain burned and stung where it landed, and he knew he wouldn't last long staying here as he was.

I'm in a losing situation here. There's too many of them, and they can cause things to happen from where they are. I'm just reacting, they'll just wear me down and I can't be awoken like this, I need to get this orb back to my body. I need to buy myself some time to get out of here. So this time instead of just trying to fling the attack away, he improved himself, seeing himself as simply immune to attack. *If I can ignore them for a second I can get out of*

here. The acid continued to eat away at his armor and the sphere but there wasn't much he could do about that. He felt it running off himself and figured *as long as they don't dunk me again I should be fine.*

So of course they dunked him again. Acid splashed out of nowhere, as if the air around him had been turned, which of course is exactly what happened.

He gritted his teeth and tried not to breathe it in, choosing this moment to try heading back to the ship as he was now covered with the acid and thus harder to see. He started pulling away again, but felt them resist that action. *Come on, come on!* He broke out of it, appearing in the ship and doing a quick check to make sure there weren't any nearby. *They can't follow, they don't have access to my powers anymore. And there shouldn't be any here, we haven't landed anywhere since I last checked to pick up some. Ow, that hurts.* He imagined his wounds closing, and they started to. *What were they even doing there, apart from making trouble for me? Are they brought to a planet that's being invaded? Why? They can't do anything as far as I know I'm the only Dreamer in this world. The natives here can have all sorts of wacky powers but none that work like that. Are they just around on every world? Are they a consequence of the invasion somehow? There were a bunch of them, and right where I was too. I am so not ready to head back and take care of those on Nynaev's world, am I? If I get caught by surprise like that it's over. Even if my skills were improved, how could I have handled that? I didn't even make a single attack while they drove me to desperation in a few seconds. Even seeing myself as faster that's no help if they just turn the air into acid around me. Why not fire, wouldn't that have worked better- right, fire makes light. They wouldn't want to hurt themselves.*

Fully healed now he looked the orb over. It had survived, the glass pitted and discolored now but intact enough the orb wouldn't rattle loose. *Now what did that person say? One among my number? That would seem to indicate one of the crew. Ryoko, Tenchi, and the rest don't have any sensing skills they've told me about. Luckily the one person I actually trust to help is the one person I think I need. The person with seeing techniques, Crytellia. Let's go get her opinion on the thing.*

He headed to her room, opening and closing the door not that it stayed closed behind him anyway. He was about to step over when he realized that was no good at all, and trudged back to his own room. He stepped back into the waking world, set the orb down, and was about to try and wake himself up when he realized he wasn't there. *My bed is empty, where am I? Oh.* He realized he was about to wake up in the "past" and would need to leave the room so his "future" self, this one in the "present" could come in and drop the orb off. He sighed, figuring at least it wouldn't be long. But he changed the glass to be opaque, but then had a better idea. He dissolved the sphere entirely and created the figure of the queen in its place. *Out of crystal, for Crytellia. Waka-waka!* The orb was still in the center and he embellished it with gold, silver, and other details and when it looked perfect he imagined a box around it wrapped in paper and tied with a bow. He woke up with a grin.

Not long after he collected the orb again and went in search of Crytellia. He found her chatting with Xelena and Butan in the mess area.

"Hi everyone," he greeted. "Doing okay?"

"Not too bad," Butan told him. "What's that you've got there?"

"Just a little something for Crytellia here," he told him, handing her the box.

"What?" she exclaimed. "You got me something? How? You didn't have to do that!"

It's actually something I need you to look at with your powers, he sent to her. *Open it here, but we're heading to your room afterwards.*

She nodded just a bit to show she understood, and attacked the gaudy paper and tossed the wrapping to the floor. "Oh wow," she exclaimed as she lifted it out.

"Hey, that's not bad!" Butan said, looking it over. "The queen herself! Her crown and cape are perfect, how about that?"

"I didn't really know what you liked, but a figure of the queen I thought would be well received."

Is this so I'll have something to smash when she gets overthrown? An effigy?

He suppressed a giggle, remembering from his time "inside" her that she was able to send thoughts as well. *Something like that. It's hiding the thing I want you to look at, as she could be watching.*

I get it. "Well this is really thoughtful of you," she said, not missing a beat. "Why don't... you... come with me?" She stood up, putting the figure back in the box gently. "And we can... pick out a nice place for it... in... my room."

"If you want to tear his clothes off we're not going to say anything about it," Xelena told her. "You're lucky, no one gives me gifts." Lysanias looked over at her, feeling a bit of resentment, loneliness, and jealousy from her. *Note to self, make Xelena a gift too.*

"I'm not... we're just... come on." Cheeks red Crytella dragged Lysanias off by the hand, and he caught a glimpse of Butan throwing him a thumbs up as he passed the door.

Sorry if I started any rumors, he sent to her. But I was told by someone I think is another seer that 'one among my number' could help tell me what this was. I think it's important.

What what is?

The orb inside the figure. I think it's a sealing orb, I need to know what demon it is, and if it could be brought to our side or not.

A what? No, tell me inside.

They made it to her room and she turned the lights off after putting the box down.

Okay, what's this all about? she asked, taking his hand at least so she knew where he was.

I found an orb deep underground while using 'need' to figure out where the humans are being kept. It was the first step toward that goal.

I remember enough about you to know what that all means, go on.

It was clearly placed there, so it must have been important. I took it with me. On the second step I came across a red wolf looking creature I think was the demon of war, and a planet under attack by Darkbolt. I saved some people-

Wait, you tangled with War? And lived?

I threw them through a building and ran away. Are you crazy? I don't know what demons can do here, you guys tell stories about them like they're nearly gods!

They are powerful. Say, you don't think we should actually kiss or something, do you? I mean they could use a technique to see in the dark.

I guess it's up to you.

Nah, I don't want you to get in trouble with your girlfriend. We'll just have to take our chances. I just hope if they were watching they aren't perverts. Or I guess normal males?

Hey!

She snickered. Anyway, go on, you were fighting War.

I was running away from War. We got some people out of the place back to the resistance headquarters but a little kid I rescued said some odd stuff to me while in a trance like state. Not to go on until I understood the orb. As you have seeing powers I hoped you could tell me something about it.

So you hid it, passed it along inside the queen, bringing us up to now. I get it. Clever. Thanks.

If it is an orb I don't want to touch it, but I should be able to tell something about it. She groped for it and got it out of the box again. Okay, give me a minute.

Take all the time you need. I'll just sit here, in the dark. Next to a beautiful lady I'm not kissing.

Stop! Jerk! She playfully shoved him. A moment later he heard her mental voice again. *The orb was buried a long time. Thousands of years? I feel that it had the earth surrounding it for so long. Good news though- as far as I can tell, it's not a demon at all. The opposite, in fact. It's an angel.*

An angel? So they do exist here? That makes sense, something else she said, that I carried life with me. I thought it was just my powers to heal or something but could this be the opposite of the demon of death? The angel of life?

If it is we've got a fantastic opportunity here. But finding someone to bond them with, I mean we Tenma were not above taking planets over before this whole Darkbolt thing happened. Me included. I think that was maybe something the queen did? I've been remembering things about my life before I 'joined' just bits and pieces but enough. That's why I haven't had you back here yet. We break this mental thing that was done to me and I could become a wreck. I've... done some rather un-nice things in service to the queen. It doesn't seem to bother me, though I feel it maybe should? The angel of life wouldn't accept me. Or really any Tenma. But you...

This bonding though, it's permanent? I'm not from around here you know!

I know. It's a puzzle.

But we need what they know. The seer implied it, that death guarded the humans, and I think that means the demon of death. Who better to fight them than the angel of life? Can I just ask them questions without bonding? You said it wouldn't accept you...

I think the demon orbs just forcibly bonded to whoever touched them, because they wanted to be free again. Naturally, right? But an angel? I got the sense they were waiting for someone, and might only bond with that person. It should be safe to touch it, try and communicate with them.

But you aren't 100% sure?

Never am. Sorry.

No, I get it. My technique can get me yes or no and directions and things, but I have to ask the right questions. This was a huge help, thank you.

Of course. Can you get it out?

Yeah, hand it over, I'll pop it out, and you can have the queen back. Sorry it was the first thing that popped into my head and I figured it would arouse the least suspicion.

Oh no, I'll be happy to smash it to pieces if she goes down for the evil things she's done. I mean she's evil, she has the orb and everything. Why do I follow a person who is-

Best not to think about that, he cautioned. Don't strain the technique until we know what we're doing about it. Note to self, figure out what to do about it.

She giggled a little. *Right, right. Here you go.* She passed him the statue, maybe lingering a little bit long as their hands met, but he used alchemy skills to simply move the glass a bit and pop the orb out.

Let's see what- He touched it.

Chapter 12

No need for angels

When: Just after touching the orb

Where: Looks like the soulscape?

Lysanias found himself in the soulscape, at the base of the mountain that served as the anchor point for the spirit.

“Sorry I haven’t called you out lately, everything around here can hurt you, and it’s been mostly training or Dreaming... combat... what I am doing here?” He looked around. *Did I mean to come here? What’s going on?* “Rosalina?” He slowly made his way to her cottage, which was there and intact, and knocked. As he waited for her to answer he looked around. Everything seemed normal but his thoughts seemed disjointed and slow.

“Lysanias, oh thank goodness you’ve showed up,” she said, yanking the door open. “Something strange just appeared in my garden!”

“Strange? Do you know what I’m even doing here? So hard to remember... I was with someone, there was an orb-”

“Just come on, he looks hurt but I don’t trust it!”

“Hurt?”

“Better bring Ragnarok. Ragnarok!” she shouted, and the sword rose off its pedestal and flew over to them.

You bellowed, oh mistress? the blade said to them, floating smoothly into Lysanias’ hand.

“Don’t get cute, you must feel something is wrong.”

Let us all go see what this is about, the mountain spirit told them, also appearing. *And I accept your apology. I realize I let you down before, and that you do not trust me at the moment. But I’m sure you will call upon me again when the time is right. I have been fully healed and I have been practicing with Rosalina in our down time that I might once again be trusted to protect you.*

“I haven’t forgotten you, or anything. And I guess you’re right, I have been hesitant because of what happened, and I shouldn’t take it out on you. I get Rosalina out every day, I could do the same with you.”

She does fit in better, especially among people that can see me. Of course they are used to odd beings walking around, so it would be fine. I wouldn’t mind practicing in the real world as well. I know I can’t get too far away from you but we should be able to be anywhere on the ship, it’s not that large.

“I’ll see what I can do. One thing at a time, let’s check out what’s happened.”

Agreed.

The group moved through the house and into the garden where Lysanias saw the figure. It seemed to have wings of fire, and green armor over a white outfit that covered its arms and legs. A helmet sat upon their head, hiding their eyes, and their arms were outstretched and bound with tattered ribbons. The wings too, fully extended and bound up so they couldn’t be moved. They were floating above the field and hanging limp, clothes torn where there was no armor and even looking injured, bruises on their face and hands.

“The orb, of course, I remember!” Lysanias exclaimed. “How could I forget? Maybe being forced here instead of coming on my own? Never mind- This is the form it’s taken? I guess it is an angel, if you can call it that.”

“Angel?” asked Rosalina.

“We need his help, or so a little seer told me. Is it even still alive?”

"I am a he, and I'm alive," said the figure, perking up just a little. "You stand in the presence of the angel of life. What is left of me, that is. But I admit to being a bit confused. Nice sword."

"Thanks. It seems you've been added to my little group here. Welcome. I suppose it's only natural, I only have the one soul. Do you know what's been going on?"

The figure shook his head. "Since I was trapped in the orb I have known nothing but darkness. It could have been a moment or a thousand years. May I ask how long it has been?"

"According to my friend, thousands of years at least."

He sighed, looking down again. "I see. But apparently I have been found. And by someone that knows my native language as well. Strange to hear a human speaking it."

"Ah, yes. Human. Which is totally what I am. Yes. Moving right along to the reason we're talking! The demons are free, the avatar has been driving them to destroy everything, and if you're the angel of life, you can help me fight the demon of death. Apparently they're guarding some humans I need to rescue."

"So my little humans have flourished, then?"

"Uh, I hate to tell you this, but most of them are dead."

"What?" The angel lifted his face, anger and rage plain there.

"Yeah, it's pretty bad. Look, I don't know if this will work but..." He imagined a step stool before the figure and mounted the steps, letting Ragnarok go as this being was no threat to anyone. It floated nearby, as suspiciously as an inanimate object can. He put a hand on the angel's head and melded with him, saving him hours of questions. When he stepped back the angel looked like he couldn't believe it.

"I know," he said. "Take a minute to process it."

"Other realities? My greatest creation, gone? The demon Darkbolt possessed and systematically wiping out life in the universe? This cannot stand! I have seen into your heart, Lysanias of Pyre, and I would be honored to join with you to help defeat this threat from beyond my realm!"

Rosalina giggled. "Really? What good are you going to do for him, exactly? I mean no offense of course," she added quickly, "but you have seen better days."

"It is true, I am hardly the angel I was in the days of creation so long ago. And I also admit, many of the powers I could bestow upon you Lysanias, you already possess. Fire. Healing. Armor. Flight. Know this, my strength will return in time, allowing me to offer you more in the way of my powers as we become closer. Pay no attention to my current appearance. I look a bit beat up at the moment because that is how I was sealed into the orb. Freeing me from this bondage will restore that much, at least. As to what I have to offer? I have seen into your heart of hearts, Lysanias, and I know what you want. You want to keep that orb."

Lysanias glanced at the orb at his wrist. "More than anything. From what little experimenting I've done, this truly makes me a force to reckon with as I no longer have to worry about exhausting myself. But I won't break my word to Washu, this orb is going away when I return with Tenchi. I don't see what you have to do with it."

He laughed softly, seeming to be in pain as he moved. "I would not ask otherwise, nor would I offer to bond with you if that were not the case. To have your heart's desire at hand, and return it freely, even knowing how much good you would do with it? I count you worthy. No, I speak of *my* offered power. While it is true, I would be of little use to you while you carry that, my knowledge of what you face is invaluable. There would be other benefits as well, as you will discover. And afterwards-

"Wait a second," he cut in. "Afterwords is me leaving this world. You realize that, right? If you bond with me, as I understand it, there's no going back. You would be coming with me to other realities."

"Indeed!"

He and Rosalina shared a look. "You would be okay with that?" she asked.

"Were you not?" he asked.

"That was different."

"Was it?" he asked shrewdly. "It seems our situations are not all that different. You were trapped as a wand in that shop, never to be chosen until Lysanias came along. How am I different? My brethren had many years to seek me out, but by all accounts they have yet to even be seen since this crisis began. Clearly they have given me up for lost. The planet I worked so hard to create, and the people I poured my heart into are gone. Also I am now trapped in this orb. It is against my nature to take over a host as the demons do, so the only influence I will ever exert over the universe now is through another. What is there left for me to do? I cannot trust a Tenma, given what you have discovered about them, and you don't know anyone else. Maybe that child you spoke to?" He shook his head. "No. With the fate of this place so radically changed because of the coming of the avatar, let it be a clean break for me as well. Accept my aid in this crisis, and allow me to be a part of your quest to save others." He laughed softly again. "I promise you'll hardly notice I'm here, maybe I can go live in that tower over there."

"You get your own tower, that one's mine," Rosalina said to him stuffily. "But I'm sure we could come up with something. Wow, gonna get crowded around here."

If I can call out everyone in this place to some degree, and the angel takes up residence here, could I call them out too? Have the angel, the mountain spirit, Rosalina, and the sword active all at once? It would be an interesting experiment to attempt. But what if this is just temporary, because I'm holding the orb? What if they merge with me directly? "If I agree to this. What does it mean for me, exactly?"

"You gain access to what powers I can bestow, and my knowledge. Nothing more. Your will remains your own, and I... probably get to hang out here with the others. I am looking forward to a... kart... race?"

"Can we keep him?" Rosalina asked, smiling now.

Lysanias smacked his forehead.

He knows what to say to a lady, anyway, Ragnarok remarked.

"Oh boy. If you're okay with this, I don't mind adding more powers to my list. What do I have to-"

"There is one thing, Lysanias," Rosalina stopped him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I don't know if it's the circlet enhancing me to feel something odd or what, but this is a turning point for you."

"How do you mean?"

"I think the more power you have, the more dangerous will be the realities you are sent to. Remember how Silverstreak cautioned you against this place? He's going to send agents that can handle worlds to the worlds that need those agents. Do you see what I'm saying? You take up this power, and he's going to expect you to take on more dangerous assignments as well."

He regarded the angel. "Isn't that the point of me," he decided at last. "Aren't I the shield? I was created by a God that seemingly didn't know what He wanted. Angels, then us, then wipe us out, then powerless humans who learned of the powers of technology, then magic showed up so they were knocked back to our level of low technology, but a lot of them gained magical powers in exchange. I doubt He foresaw this, but I have to be the best of us

progenitors. I have to one day stand before my creator and say to Him, look, this is what we could have been if not for your flood. So yes, let me at the hard ones. I have grown so much since I started this journey, that's not going to stop. One day I want the avatar to just plain give up when I enter a reality, because they know they can't win against me. This is another step towards that end. Angel of life, I accept your offer, and humbly ask your assistance now and until my last breath."

"Well said. Cut me down."

Ragnarok sprang into action, expertly slicing the bonds that held the angel aloft, and they fell and burned away. He glided softly to the ground, wings folding behind him. "It is done," he announced, touching Lysanias' forehead with a palm.

Lysanias opened his eyes.

It worked, he sent to Crytella.

I did feel something. So you're part angel now or what?

I'm not sure it works that way. Am I? Can I answer "yes" when people ask "are you an angel" now?

You get asked that a lot?

More than you might think. Just recently too, in fact.

Strange problem to have. How do you feel?

I feel... Good, actually. Energized. He rubbed his chest, where the orb was sitting. He could feel it, but it didn't hurt, it was just a part of him now. *I don't know what he gave me exactly, but I do feel more empowered at least at the moment. I also know about metapower now and have access to techniques in that area, so I can perform a sealing if I had to. I'm sure that'll come in handy.*

So what now?

I'll sort of have to keep all this a secret so experimentation will have- oh.

What?

That's going to be a problem. I have access to the angel's memories too, and I remember his fight with Death.

What happened?

Death isn't physically imposing, not like Destruction. Who can and has destroyed entire planets, by the way. No, Death fights in a very scary way. Either because of a power or a technique he uses during a fight Death simply cannot be touched. He then calls upon various wraith like apparitions that float around and attack for him. If you get hit by one it's over, you simply die. And you can't attack Death himself because everything just passes through him. There is absolutely no way to win against him.

That's a problem!

You're not kidding.

How was he defeated in the end?

I would say he wasn't. The angel cheated, sealing him into the orb. He was never "defeated" in a straight up fight. Just distracted enough he could be sealed.

If it's a technique I think it could be canceled out, right?

From what I know from the angel it could be done, if you could get the timing right. Dispel the technique, and have someone poised to strike before he could get it back up and running again. But this is a demon. They can throw vast quantities of energy into their techniques. It would take a stronger technique to dispel it, and I'm not sure that's achievable by regular people. Privately he thought That's how I should have dealt with the acid before. Just go insubstantial, like the shadows themselves. Acid wouldn't work on them, it would just

pass through. They could throw cars and whatnot and allow me time to think or attack them. Of course once they realized it they would switch tactics but it could buy me time. I'll have to remember that. Also I think I understand what that lady was asking me to do, to help that guy with his protection technique. Power sharing, interesting. Could be a way to overcome Death's technique?

We're going to need a new- Miruku!

What's wrong with our old ones?

Don't make me smack you! I bet he's immune to his own technique, right?

The angel doesn't know. No one ever took control of the technique and attacked Death with it. He does think Darkbolt is immune to darkness attacks, so maybe? Why?

Get Miruku to take that immunity and possibly the technique as well. They could hit him normally.

I suppose that is why we went out of our way to get them. Well, for Tenchi but to help us fight. And they're going to get the most benefit if we can get them some human souls to use. So they should be part of the effort. Yeah, good idea. We have to find them first though. To that end I better get back to it. Hey, thanks for the help, you've really been great since I got here.

You get me my own mind back and we'll call it even.

Deal. See you in the morning.

He felt a light kiss and she pulled away again. Later, angel boy.

He shifted back to his own room and lay down again. His hand went to the orb, and he chided himself and yanked it away again. Get used to it, you're stuck with it, if that's the right word anyway. Hopefully the angel is settling in and getting along with the others. I wonder if they've done a kart race yet, I don't really know how "time" works in my own soul. What did he give me, I wonder? I do feel more energized, the orb from Washu lets me fuel my abilities by drawing from it instead of myself, did he allow me more reserves to start with? And I know if I concentrate I can recover in seconds instead of hours now, which will obviously be a huge benefit once Washu's orb is gone. And I'm pretty sure I can gather energy like War was doing before he attacked, as that is clearly what that was according to the angel. It's going to take some getting used to, having these memories and knowledge floating around my brain. I just hope he doesn't come to regret his decision when the time comes to leave. He laughed. That all implies we survive, anyway. Better get back to it. I'll try and figure out where the humans are, then give that image to Dolands after we get some Miruku volunteers. Even the angel at full strength couldn't touch Death, so let's hope they can do something. Wonder if I sealed one of them and took their orb, if I could do what they could do.

He drifted off to sleep again, ready to take the next step in finding the wayward humans.

Chapter 13

No need for self-recriminations

When: After getting to sleep again

Where: World of Dreams

Before Lysanias did anything he mentally reviewed his notes to himself and walked down the hall to Xelena's quarters. As with the others it was mostly bare, this being a warship, but he poked around and eventually settled on a reversible choker with a large red crystal on a silver hoop attached to the front. One side he left plain black, what she seemed to prefer, while on the other side he created a pattern in silver on black. *I could see this as being worn plain or formal, depending on the rest of her outfit.* He then boxed it up, included a note that read "Xelena, I am certain that one day you'll find a person who loves and accepts you for exactly who you are. Don't ever think you aren't worthy of that, because you most certainly are." He wrapped it up with a thought and another sent it spilling into the waking world for her to find.

Now if only figuring out what to do about this Tenma technique that's on everyone, if Crytella is any indication, was that easy.

With nothing else coming to mind that he needed to do before he left he once again imagined himself immune to everything, then snapped his fingers and rose into the air a bit. Summoning a copy of his armor the display lit up, simply showing the room before him as Meta wasn't there to provide any sort of additional information. Nodding he then made it and himself insubstantial, figuring he would take every precaution because it seemed one couldn't go two steps without tripping over a demon or a shadow or some other horror in this reality. But this way he should be ready for anything, and he closed his eyes, focused on his goal of reaching the humans. He *needed*.

Immediately he could tell that something was different. He felt odd, empty, like there was nothing- he opened his eyes and saw why. He was in space now. He pushed down a bit of rising panic and reminded himself that his body, his true form, his loving cup, his actual envelope where all his precious bits and organs were was safe, warm, and breathing back on the ship. This Dreaming projection didn't *have* to breathe, it didn't have to do anything he didn't want it to. As long as he believed that was true, it would be. His heart rate steadied as he stared into the endless void, shining with stars. Something was happening though, as they seemed to be turning on and off, which couldn't be right.

Let's light the place up! He gave up being insubstantial to focus on believing his body was still back there safe and breathing, and then concentrated on a miniature sun to light the place up above his outstretched hand. Into view come the reason the stars were acting so funny as he looked around. There were rocks everywhere, he seemed to be in the middle of an asteroid field and wondered what he was doing there.

It's actually quite pretty out here. And hey, I'm hanging out in space! Space! Who can say they've done that? Look at all these rocks. They would crush me like a bug if they were hit me, no doubt. Seems pretty stable here though, they're not really going anywhere. We must be pretty far from any star that could exert forces on them. That's why it's so dark here, too. How far out are we? Look at these things! Rocks of every shape and size. Big rocks, little rocks, that huge rock over there with the metal door in the front of it, near rocks, far rocks-hang on. What? He looked over in the direction of the largest rock in view and yes, as he had thought there was a huge metal door sunk into the front of it. *Hello beautiful, can we say "secret base?" Yes we can kids, yes we can.* With a thought he activated the gravity system, gently nudging him in that direction, and turned the light down so he didn't smash into the

thing. It took him a few minutes but he made it, gently bumping up against the door which was large enough for a fairly large starship to enter if his puny form was any yardstick. *Do I have enough mental bandwidth left to concentrate on knowing I'm safe back on the ship, the light, and slipping into this base? Maybe the light can go, I know it's there now...* He closed his hand and the light went out, plunging him back into darkness. *Wait a minute, I'm dumb.* He simply created a spotlight with a magnetic base and slammed it onto the door, which lit up and at least let him see the area he was hanging next to. *Done. As that's just a thing that could exist anyway I don't have to spend mental effort keeping it around. I'm so smart. Okay door, you're going to let me in, aren't you?* He concentrated on the metal of the door simply allowing him to pass through it, and it seemed to have no trouble with that.

You know, I think all this practice is starting to pay off, he thought to himself as he passed through the door. *When I'm not being killed by shadows I'm not bad at this Dreaming stuff. It's those pesky shadows that are the problem. Concentrate, Lysanias, you don't want to get stuck in here.*

He continued forward.

And forward.

And forward.

Uh, I'm through by now, right? I'm still moving, right? The gravity system shows as active. Maybe I need to put some lights on the front of this thing. He reversed course, coming back out of the door where he had put the light, and went into a stop again. Wishing he could smack himself inside the suit he grabbed up the lamp and moved forward again, the effect of the door letting him pass inside still active so he didn't have to change concentration. It wasn't that thick, and he came out of it into a large space the lamp he held in his hand couldn't illuminate the other side of. Thanking the metal he stopped concentrating on it, putting it back to normal, and attached the lamp to the other side of the door. Making a throwing motion with his hand he created a spark of light that grew and grew as it moved away from him. This illuminated a huge bay, large enough for several ships to fit into, but which was currently empty.

Abandoned? But there must be something here for me. He grabbed the lamp a second time and lowered himself to the floor, killing the larger light when he got down there. Moving along the wall he headed for the edges, figuring anyone getting off a ship would need a door to go further into the base (or whatever this was) so that's what he was going to do. As he walked he realized something and started stomping his feet. *Nothing. There's no air in here at all. Great, so I'm stuck making sure my body is breathing... Which it would have to do anyway. Odd that I would need to- focus, anything could be lurking around here.* He proceeded around the perimeter of the area, keeping to the left wall until he came to an opening in the rock leading off into the darkness. *What is this, some kind of track?* Looking down he saw some kind of rail system set into the floor, heading away past the light into the hanger and then down the hallway. The hallway itself wasn't that tall or wide, enough for maybe three people to walk side by side, and just larger than he was tall in the armor. *Some kind of loading system for the ships that land here?*

He carried on, following the tracks as the pathway branched to the right several times. He felt he hadn't gone very far when it opened up again, and the track itself branched left, center, and right. Shining the light into the room he again realized this space was too big to see across and pointed into the darkness. Again, light flooded the place showing him some

kind of cylindrical pods along the walls, hundreds and hundreds of them. But it also showed something else. Standing in the middle of the room was a dark figure. It didn't seem to have the same consistency as a shadow, but it clearly saw him and started over. As it got closer Lysanias could see it was a sort of bird looking creature, upright like War, and had two feathery wings at its back. It was acting like a bird as well, head jerking this way and that as it walked, looking over at him. *Probably trying to decide what the heck I am. Well don't just stand there, act like you own the place!* He waved like this was all totally normal, tore his gaze away and looked up, there was machinery up there like a giant set of hands, several sets of them. *They roll the pods down on the track and the hands set them into place?* He followed a track as it branched left, trying not to glance over at the creature that was getting closer, and went over to the nearest pods. It was human sized, nothing more than a metal coffin shoved against the side of the room. There was one above it, and one above that, and presumably they just kept going, to the right and filling this cavern however big it was. He knelt by the one. It had some kind of readout he didn't understand on the side but shining the light onto it showed a glass panel at the top and inside was a human, or at least a figure that looked human.

I think I found what I was looking for. But that means- He jerked his head to the right and there was the figure, still looking this way and that at him. *Don't freak out. It's just Death. You know, a demon signifying the ultimate end of all things? I have the angel of life on my side, okay not with me right now I mean back with my body where he will do me no good. Don't freak out, don't freak out, don't do it, it's fine, it's fine.* He tapped the glass, gave a thumbs up, and started to walk away. *Don't follow me. Don't follow me. Don't- he followed me.* Death flowed in front of him, holding up a hand and wagging a finger. Then he pointed behind him, and Lysanias turned. Looming above him was a cloaked figure with a bony face, holding a scythe. The scythe came down. Lysanias willed himself back into the cavern where he had come in, the weapon passing through where he had been. *Okay that was scary. If I can I should try to see other parts of this base, so we can attack from more than one place... If that is we can teleport into here at all? Shoot I may need to find their "transporter room" which is probably heavily guarded just like the Tenma one is. So what now? Head back that way, try a different passage? I could ditch the armor, make myself see in the dark and be immune to the vacuum in here-* Lights started coming on in the place, illuminating the entire bay and showing there was no place to hide. There was only the one door, and it had (a horrible) Death behind it someplace so heading that way was not really ideal. *And they've been alerted. Wonderful. Don't need this anymore.* He made the lamp vanish into the nothingness it came from and triggered the gravity system to rise in the air. As he did that he focused on making himself invisible, and watched as he faded from his own view. Just in time as a dozen figures poured out of the tunnel, brandishing guns and the glowing tell-tale signs of human souls. Those in the form of creatures, large and small, scampered about the place clearly looking for him, and the figures set up a blockade at the tunnel entrance.

Looking them over the figures all seemed to be wearing some kind of "uniform" made of all one piece. Those with armor made of souls wore them atop it, but all had the skin-tight suit on and a breathing apparatus on their faces. *So is the whole place airless? Do they not bother keeping it pressurized, maybe as a further deterrent to detection or as a further distraction from the pursuit of taking it over?* There was no way to answer that question at the moment so he simply headed down the tunnel again, passing over those in a row covering the opening. There were people (presumably Miruku) running all over now, clearly they had not expected to be breached and were scrambling to react. *Probably wondering how I'm invisible when they can't feel the power of invisibility inside me. Joke's on you fellows, my body is nowhere near here so you've got nothing to draw from. You don't get my powers in*

this situation. He was able to pass through doors, air locks, and security points just by waiting for someone to come along, and got a pretty good tour of the base. The place was small, or at least the living space wasn't that big, and just like the research station he had recently taken out had living quarters for everyone and a big area for those with powers the Miruku kept around. Some areas were sealed, and had air, while others did not. For example the kitchen and the cells had air, couldn't have the prisoners killing themselves by taking off their masks, now could they? But everything was carved out of the rock making him think they had just found the biggest rock in space they could, scooped part of it out, and were now living in it like ants. He found a "transporter room," or at least a room with a ton of guns pointed towards it all along the hallway, but nothing like a gym, rec room, or the like.

So this is clearly just a holding area for the comatose humans, stacked in those boxes probably in some kind of suspended state so they don't need medical attention. They can just sleep there as their souls are used by the Miruku to attack planets. Guarded by the demon of death, and a handful of Miruku which I have now alerted so they know the Tenma know where they are. Or at least they'll have to assume that. Meaning by the time we get here there's going to be 10x the number of troops and we'll have a real fight on our hands. Great job, Lysanias. Couldn't just sneak around, no, you had to boldly go marching around the place and let Death see you. Stupid, as usual. Well, too late now. I think I've seen enough, time to step back into... My goodness I don't deserve to be a wanderer. He resisted the urge to smack his head on the walls. *I could have just walked around here in the World of Dreams. Death would never had seen me there! I could have gone anywhere, seen the same things, and... Aarg!*

He stepped back over, not realizing, in his frustration at himself, that anywhere related to Darkbolt in this reality probably had *Shadows*. *Why do I do things?*

One shadow was stationed at each end of the hallway he was in and wasted no time in simply trying to crush him with the hallway itself. He pushed it back, willing the hallway to stay where it was, and then decided he had screwed up again. *I'm not carrying anything this time I'll just wake up. I was thinking I had to go back to the ship but I didn't bring Meta for this very reason. A hasty retreat like so.*

He woke up.

Back in his room he wondered if the armor simply vanished as well, or had it just stopped moving without him in it? *The shadows probably would have crushed it in that case, they wouldn't have known. Waking up isn't a dreaming power so they couldn't sense it. Could they? I really have to be more careful.* He swung his legs out of the bed and stood up. *Let's go see Dolands again.*

"Back so soon," Dolands asked him. Rommeta and he had been talking on the bridge, and Lysanias wondered if he didn't have to sleep? And was he wearing her down? *But she's an android, she can't be... Never mind.* "We have a problem."

"An immediate one I should wake the crew for or something longer term?"

"Depends. I can show you where the humans are, but the Miruku guarding the place are on alert. We'll need Miruku of our own because Death is guarding them, and vacuum gear because the place isn't pressurized."

"You found it?" Rometta asked. "I guess your Dream walking was successful."

"In more ways than one, but I can tell you about it later. We need to either go now, before they get more troops there, or a month from now when they figure it was a one time thing and we don't care. But how many planets will die because of waiting?"

“Back it up there cowboy,” Dolands told him.

What’s a cowboy or is that a weird translation thing?

“You need to give me a full report. What exactly did you find?”

Lysanias explained about the asteroid he had found, and drew the layout. He embellished his fight with Death, saying he threw some stuff at him while dodging the “specter” that was trying to hit him, not wanting to tell Dolands he really got that info from the angel of life he was now bonded to. He accepted this, saying it was consistent with what Death’s powers were supposed to be.

“And you can show me the whole place, so I can try putting teleportals everywhere?” he asked.

“Without question,” he agreed. *Though I’ll have to do with light bending, or maybe melding if I think I can keep him away from my brain. Not much use in trying to keep the angel a secret if I immediately meld with him and he sees the whole thing!*

“I agree we should move on this soon. Before they move the humans. Secure the place for ourselves and decide what we’re going to do with them. At least they’re asleep, they won’t get in the way. If only we could take that main chamber- but I doubt it. Okay, I’ll head to the base and see what Miruku forces will volunteer for this, and get them some suits for the vacuum. Meanwhile in a few minutes wake the crew and explain things. We’ll head out when I get back.”

“Yes captain.”

A portal opened behind Dolands. “And Lysanias?”

“Yes?”

“Good work. If you were Tenma you’d have my position in a few months at this rate! If you weren’t from another reality I’d be watching my back!” He laughed and stepped through, then made it vanish.

And work for the demon of evil? Uh, no thanks, hard pass.

“What’s happened to you, by the way?” Rometta asked. “I’m detecting higher than normal energy levels in your body.”

So the angel did increase my natural reserves? By how much I’m dying to know! Is my power level over... nine thousand? “I’m just keyed up,” he told her with a shake of his head. *Don’t pursue this!*

She seemed to get the hint. “I guess after a run in with Death, anyone would be. Okay, I’ll give the crew a few minutes and then trigger the alarm. You want to go in the armor?”

“It can function in vacuum, we proved that on the moon. Amelia knew her stuff, so maybe I better. I’ll go get into it. Sadly Rosalina can’t come, her helmet is open!”

“I doubt she wants to lose her hair for just this one mission. I’ll get suited up as well, if you can give me mine? I don’t need to breathe but I’ll need to be able to move around.”

“Sure thing.” He took the ward out of his *pocket* and ripped it, spilling her armor out. “See you in a few minutes.” *Actually, she would be amazing at fighting Death, she’s not alive. Wouldn’t have to worry about that technique of his. It’s the phasing I’m worried about, she can’t do anything about that, but hopefully the Miruku can do something about it. Better get to it.*

Chapter 14

No need for hugging

When: Twenty minutes or so later

Where: On the ship

“Well I can’t go!” Shyia protested as the crew was milling around the ship waiting for Dolands to come back. “What good am I going to be running around a place like that?”

“But it has to be the three of us!” insisted Gabi. “We always fight together, don’t we?”

“We are always fighting,” Xelena agreed. She, along with the rest of the crew was wearing her “spacesuit” which wasn’t that far off from Lysanias’ own armor, this being a highly advanced civilization. So she couldn’t wear the choker but she had said “thanks” while looking away from Lysanias and “I’ll wear it later.”

“You know what I mean!” Gabi sighed. “Fighting side by side. We’re so good at it!”

“I guess you’re not wrong,” Xelena mused. “Fighting with only you at my side would feel weird.”

“What’s the problem?” asked Lysanias.

“It’s the way I fight,” Shyia told him. “I use a type of possession to take something in the local environment over. When that “body” is destroyed I jump to another one. While Gabi beats things up directly and Xelena covers us while invisible with protection or metapower techniques.”

“But you’ve described a nearly empty base,” Gabi put in, “which I guess means she has a point.”

“Actually, that’s no problem at all, if you can use rock,” Lysanias told her.

“What do you mean?” Shyia asked.

“I can yank a bunch of rock out of the wall once we get there. If you can possess that, there’s no problem right?”

“You can come!” Gabi squealed, clapping her hands together. “This’ll be great!”

“A fight to the death. Yay. Great.” Xelena unenthusiastically cheered.

“It won’t be to the death, it’ll be *with* Death,” Gabi announced dramatically, posing and kicking.

“You can’t wack Death in the face, Gabi.”

“Hey I’m going out like I came in. Kicking and screaming!”

“No, really, the Miruku have to handle Death,” she went on seriously. “You have to promise me you’ll stay far away from him.”

“Xelena... you do care.”

“Obviously.” She looked away.

“Group hug!” Gabi grabbed them both up in a hug.

Xelena was making a futile effort to get out of the hug when Ryoko spoke up. “We have a similar power, Shyia. I can disperse myself into a material and shape it into a body. We should compare notes, see if there’s any differences or techniques we’ve picked up while doing it.”

“You did that against Kagato, right?” Ayeka asked her.

“That’s right.”

“Huh. Wonder what would happen if you both tried taking over the same material. Would you fuse with the other person too?”

“Not in a rush to try it. I’ve been fused with enough people for one lifetime, thanks.”

“What do you mean? You mean what Washu did after we defeated Clay? It’s not the same if you’re just fusing with yourself.”

“I wasn’t fusing with myself, Ayeka. Not in the sense you’re thinking of anyway.”

“Yes, you did! I clearly remember Washu saying she couldn’t control you at your full power and so she split you in two, but it was time to put you back together. There were clearly two of you in that room, so you can’t get out of this one!”

“Yeah, well, here’s a news flash for you. Sometimes, good old mom doesn’t tell the truth about things.”

“What? But then, who did she actually fuse you with? It looked like you, had your powers and everything.”

“Zero.”

“What?”

Ryoko shook her head and sighed. “Clay had an AI assistant named Zero. It could duplicate anyone and I got captured and duplicated. She was supposed to grab Washu but my feelings for Tenchi got duplicated too. So she didn’t get the chance and Zero ultimately betrayed Clay because he ordered her to kill Tenchi. He broke her control ring which should have killed her, but she remained online long enough for the two of us to fuse into one person. Washu lied to you, maybe to protect me or maybe to protect herself, I don’t know. Happy?”

“That’s why you were acting so odd around that time,” she reasoned. “Before it was Zero, not you, that was hanging around. After you were trying to work out who you were as a person. And is that why you seem to have sort of a split personality now?”

“No, not exactly. Yes, my natural inclination is to do things a certain way, Zero didn’t change that. But what they did give me was a different perspective, and the knowledge that I had to become worthy of Tenchi’s affections and let him fall for me naturally, because just throwing myself at him wasn’t going to win him over.”

“Oh.” She seemed thoughtful. “Maybe we should, you know, have a talk about things, when we get back. About Tenchi, and our future.”

She looked away. “Sure, whatever.”

Now it was Ayeka’s turn to hug Ryoko. “I didn’t know you had been through so much. I’m here for you, if you want.”

“Don’t get all mushy on me, I won’t be able to prank you anymore!”

“Oh you’ll find a way, I believe in- I can’t believe I just said that.”

The crew laughed.

There was a moment of silence.

“How many Miruku do you think will come?” Ellias asked. She had been sitting checking her guns over, and had finished putting one back together.

“We rescued almost sixty right?” he remembered. “Even if only one percent show up that’s six. More than enough I would hope given any Miruku on that side are our problem.” *Getting ganged up by those shadows in the city proved that. Even someone arguably more powerful, me, getting overwhelmed it was all I could do to retreat. If they can be immune to his technique and be able to hit him, we should be in good shape because there’s only one of him.*

“Only one problem with that,” Dolands announced, stepping through the door into the meeting room they were crowded into.

“It was less than one percent?” Ellias asked.

“A lot less. Try zero percent.”

“General!” She got up and saluted, as did the others from that reality. “I’m sorry general did you say zero percent?”

“Zero percent.” he verified.

“Zero percent?” echoed Lysanias.

“Zero percent.” echoed Dolands.

“As in no one volunteered?”

“Not a one.”

“We’re all dead,” Xelena said, slumping.

“Not so!” he countered. “Though it has become a bit more challenging to succeed I admit.”

“What happened?” Butan demanded. “They chicken out?”

He sighed. “Butan, not everyone can be a soldier like you. You were actually a soldier before the Tenma came to your world, were you not?”

“I was, sir. Came from a military family, signed up right away...” He got a far away look in his eyes. “I think? I must have, right, here I am.”

Oh dear. Yeah, that’s a little bit more confirmation right there, isn’t it?

“The problem with these Miruku is, they aren’t. Quite the opposite in fact. Remember, when their *actual god* showed up and said “here’s what we’re going to do” most of the Miruku population signed up then and there. I mean, could you imagine the angel of love showing up at your door and commanding you to go get busy with some willing hot young thing from down the street? And you saying ‘nah, I’ve got this life of celibacy worked out pretty well so I’m good.’”

“I’m sorry general, did you just say ‘willing hot young thing’ in reference to a theoretical young woman who is a person in her own right with hopes and dreams and feelings of her own?” Ellias asked, baring her teeth.

“Yeah, the angel of love wouldn’t talk like that!” Gabi agreed.

“And maybe Butan prefers older ladies, the angel of love would know that!” Shiya added.

“Get busy?” Xelena muttered. “Is she getting a say in all this?”

“Wow, okay so not the point!” Dolands plowed ahead, not giving an inch. “The point is, these are the Miruku that stood up and said ‘uh, no?’ when told by their god Darkbolt to go ravage the universe.”

“Ravage?” Xelena muttered.

“You know what I- look I’m going to leave and come in again.”

“You aren’t getting away that easily, sir,” Ellias told him.

“Oh, I’ll be paying for it,” he agreed. “As I keep trying to bring the conversation back to the topic at hand they aren’t cowards. These are the people that stuck to their guns enough that Darkbolt decided to torture them with bizarre experiments. But the thing they are not is *trained*. These are just ordinary people, Butan. Walking down the street, living their lives, normal people. Sure, they can siphon powers from people but on their planet, their only power is that power! Most don’t train in strategy or tactics or hand to hand combat they just go about their lives! Yes, many started to train when Darkbolt returned so they could be of use to him and follow his commands, but a lot of them are still just support on the planet, making food and ships and whatever for those out in space with Darkbolt.”

They’re basically humans, when on their planet. Humans without magic, like Clary humans. You couldn’t take a handful of them at random, give them a blade, and say go kill demons. That’s why the artificers are there. I get what he’s saying. We’re not fighting their entire planet’s population at any one time, they need support just as any army would. Darkbolt probably only took the best of the best for invasions, anyone enthusiastic but less skilled may be on guard duty, like at this base we’re talking about. At least I hope there aren’t any truly skilled people there. Dealing with souls, advanced weapons, and them able to use our powers if they got close enough is going to be enough!

“I suppose they would be more a liability in that case,” Butan allowed. “But that means we have no chance right?”

“Hey, you’ve still got me,” Gogo told him.

“I can provide protection techniques, even against Death,” Xelena told them.

“I get to punch Death after all!” squealed Gabi. “This is gonna be so epic!”

“No! Bad girl!” Xelena barked. “You stay away from him!”

“But Xelena!”

“If it came to that, fine, but I can provide protection from Death’s techniques as well and it’ll probably be myself and Gogo fighting Death to begin with. We’ll have to figure out a plan,” Dolands agreed. “We’ll work out how best to approach and what to do once we’re inside. We have to drive off Death, because I’m not sure we could kill him outright, and take the base over. Lysanias says there are too many humans to move in a short time, or I would just try to do that. Brings up a good point, are you coming with us as you are now?”

The others looked confused as Dolands was looking at Lysanias.

“How else would he come?” Butan asked.

“Come?” Xelena asked.

“Don’t start that again!”

“Never mind, just if you would tell me? I need to know to plan this correctly.”

“I’m coming as I am.”

“Can’t you do more the other way?”

“Maybe? But I felt if Miruku were coming and risking their lives, I could do no differently. Of course now I know none are coming but still, you all are taking a risk. I can not do less.”

“Well said... I think?” Butan told him.

“Plus I have more senses like this, so I can make sure no Miruku remain, and I can possibly counter the soul thing too. There’s no reason I couldn’t grab one and make it my own.” *Or at least lock it down by taking it out of the fight, if I can only control one grabbing it from someone directly. In that case I could probably only hold onto it, but if we ran into something really big, or powerful, that could be enough. Just turn it back into a soul instead of a creature or whatever.*

Something happened to you, didn’t it? Gogo sent to him. I feel new powers inside you.

Yes. I’m keeping it a secret for now. If you get a chance to use them on Death, and you know the one to which I refer, fine, secret out. But for now keep them to yourself okay?

Got it.

He stopped sending to them. *That’s the real reason I don’t go as my Dreaming self. I may be the only one who can seal Death. I was hoping whatever Miruku showed up could actually kill him, keeping the angel’s technique of orb seal as a backup, as it worked once before. Now I have to go like this, I don’t have that power in my other form. We may have no chance to survive, otherwise.*

“Very well,” Dolands went on. “I’ll need to know who can function and move around in space, I may want to do both a base insertion and a rear insertion-”

“Rear insertion?” Xelena muttered.

He sighed. “A space insertion from a hole we create in the side of the base...” He looked over at her, and she looked totally innocently back at him. “To draw off some forces so we can get down that hallway described by Lysanias. Let me come up with a full plan and we’ll head out.”

As for once Lysanias wasn’t being tasked with coming up with the plan he waited with the others as Dolands reviewed what everyone could do and mulled various strategies. He had a three dimensional map created from what Lysanias had described, and turned it this way and that looking for ways to attack. It turned out Ryoko could function in space just fine,

as could Tenchi. (For a little while with the light hawk wings out, anyway) So they were going to lead the charge and attack the doors, hopefully blowing a hole in them the others could get through.

“They’ll then stay outside the base,” Dolands went on, “taking care of anyone that heads out there and pounding the place to keep them off balance. Not too much, of course, we don’t want it totally destroyed.”

“I’ll try and hold back,” Ryoko promised.

“Meanwhile, we’ll head inside and break up into four teams. Rommeta, you’ll lead team one with Crytellia and Ayeka. Once we’ve secured the landing platform you’ll head into the first passageway and secure the living area.”

“Sir.”

“Mihoshi, I’m putting you in charge of securing the control area down the second passageway.”

“You can count on me, sir!” She saluted.

“You’ll go with Butan and Ellias, and be well placed in the middle of the base in case another group needs backup.”

“Are you sure, sir?” Butan asked. “Shouldn’t I be in charge of that group?”

“She’s from a galactic police force in her home reality, she’s had training. I want her to lead because she doesn’t have active powers they can draw off. Same with Ellias, I doubt she’s as good a shot-”

“She’s not,” Ellias assured them.

“But they may need close support and that’s where you come in.”

“Yes general.”

“The third team will be team three star, they’ll secure the prison level using the third passageway.”

“AW, I wanted to punch Death!” Gabi complained. “Still, go team three star!”

“Uh, when did we become team three star?” Shyia asked softly.

“You’ll be the next nearest team to Gogo, Lysanias, and myself, who will be following the tunnel all the way down and facing Death. When you’ve secured those the Miruku draw off send them to the teleport area, which by then Mihoshi should be done securing. Then join us if our fight is still going on.”

If it is, we’re going to be in a lot of trouble.

“Wait, general, how do we do that?” Xelena asked. “It’ll be vacuum right? You want us to carry a dozen oxygen masks with us and hope they’ll fit? We don’t know how many prisoners there are, do we?”

“Oh, we do not, that’s a problem. I don’t know how we’re going to get them out of there. Maybe they used a technique to keep air around them while they moved them there in the first place?”

“Maybe the base can be pressurized they just don’t because it’s easier not to?” Butan suggested. “It is an inconvenience for us, so I can see it being another defense of the place.”

“If it is, we can activate that system,” Ellias noted. “We’ll look around.”

“Either way, secure the area, tell them you’ll be back, and join us then. At least open the cells doors, arm them if you find anything laying around they can use. We can figure out how to get them out of there for good later.”

“Yes general.”

“Tenchi, Ryoko, if you mop up the forces outside the base and have nothing to do, feel free to join us inside, of course. We’ll be in radio contact so if one group meets heavier resistance or has wounded, do what you need to.”

“I can drag them out of the base and teleport back to the ship,” Ryoko agreed.

“Good, that’s a good idea. Our doctor, Croakter, and Thabion are remaining with the ship so you’ll have enough people here to help out should we need them. So that’s the teams, make your final preparations and meet in the cargo bay. We’ll squeeze in there, pump out the atmosphere, and I’ll teleport us near the base. Lysainas, anything else you can think of we should know about this mission?”

He thought a moment. “It’s dark, so bring plenty of lights if you can’t see in the dark. I saw at least a dozen Miruku and they moved like trained soldiers, so be careful. I’ll yank up some cover as we head towards the holding area, use it. Otherwise, stay safe, everybody comes home.”

The crew went back to their quarters to make final adjustments to their suits and put on their masks, and when everyone was packed into the hold Dolands created a large portal in front of them, and everyone jumped or flew or teleported through it.

The operation “save the humans” had begun.

Chapter 15

No need for defenses

When: Moments later

Where: Outside the asteroid base

"This place looks nothing like you described," Dolands remarked as the group took stock of their situation. The base was now a hive of activity, from visible turret mountings along the outer edges, small attack craft zipping back and forth, and figures in glowing power armor floating everywhere. The whole place was lit up from somewhere, lamps set into the nearby rocks Lysanias saw as he looked around, so at least they didn't have to guess where anything was anymore.

"I think maybe the trap just closed," Butan said gravely.

"They purposefully let Lysanias in to scout, and then did all this?" Ellias asked.

"Heck of a lot of stuff to set up in the time he's been gone," Gabi complained.

"It may have just been cloaked or otherwise hidden," Butan told her.

"I guess. Are we calling it off?"

"No," Dolands decided. "The plan is the same. We must get those humans away from Miruku control. Souls are just too dangerous to be allowed to run around."

I think what you mean to say is that allowing them to use humans as living weapons cannot be tolerated, right?

"Anyone that can maneuver in space and attack at range will go forward. Focus on getting past their line and getting the door open. Then we'll head inside and split into our groups."

"What group am I in again?" Mihoshi asked.

"You're securing the second passageway with Ellias and Butan!"

"Oh yeah, that's right."

"Come on." He sped forward along with Ryoko, Tenchi, and Ayeka, and clearly the base knew they were coming because suddenly a green barrier sprang up around the door. "I'll take care of it," Dolands announced. He pointed. "Barrier Breaker!" He waited a beat. "What? Not even a crack? Stop, let's figure this out first." The group stopped.

"Oh no!" Lysanias moaned. "I should have known. I'm so stupid, of course he would give them that!"

"What? What is it?"

"Get behind me!" Tenchi cried, moving in front of them. He raised a hand and blue energy "wings" appeared before him. Energy bolts slammed into it, clearly fired from the base. "I can hold it, but make it quick."

"It's not a technique," Lysanias told them. "It's a *lifestreaming* barrier. Cybernetics designed to channel life energy into barriers or attacks. I never even thought about it, but of course you would have nanotechnology good enough to create it. Darkbolt told them how to make it, just like last time!"

"I'll want a full report later but for now, how do we get through?"

"The old fashioned way, break it down. It can't survive too much abuse."

"Now you're talking my language," Ryoko announced, flying past the edge of the barrier, that was still taking fire. She let off a blast of her own, and the group started forward again.

"Looks like a dozen or more people maintaining it," Dolands announced as the blast impacted and exploded against the barrier. "Keep pounding it. Ayeka and I will go after the guns. Tenchi, cover us as long as you can then help Ryoko."

"Right."

“That was low power, to see how it would react,” Ryoko announced. “I’ve got two gems, let’s see how a medium power blast interacts with it.” She fired off another blast, making the barrier flicker. “I’ll have it down in a second, you better be ready to slip though.”

“Let’s go!” Butan ordered, triggering the controls on his flying device. The rest of the group shot forward, the guns occupied trying to take out Ryoko before she battered the shield down. She was whipping around, an energy barrier of her own active now, though with teleporting and her speed the guns could hardly track her anyway.

Wait, could she make energy barriers before? Maybe something she learned while here? Or maybe the gem is allowing her to do it?

By the time the other group got to the door the complete barrier was down, though individuals still had green barriers around them.

They just stood close together and projected them, forming a greater barrier. That’s one way to do it.

“There’s the hole, let’s go,” shouted Gabi, pointing and heading there.

“Ayeka, break off if you can and join them. Ryoko, Tenchi, you okay out here?”

“Leave it to us!” Tenchi announced. “We’ll keep these out here from joining you in there.”

“Right. Good luck.” They went inside, the hanger area now lit up and showing a lot of opposition in the form of both soldiers and Death standing there. Lysanias could also make out creatures next to each person, and knew they would have souls to deal with as well. Every person was paired up, and Lysanias saw green barriers spring up around them as the other person picked a target. Death was in the center, calmly standing there with that technique of his by his side. The group spread out, flying through the hole and staying well above everyone as they got their bearings and looked for a target. Death was clearly looking for him and pointed up at him.

Oh, did you think Death would just stay back there and let us come to him? Of course not!

“Teams, take out those soldiers and stay away from Death, leave him to us. Get down the hallway in order after some of the pressure is off us.”

“Where is the hallway? I don’t see it!” Crytellia announced.

“It’s right along the left wall!” Lysanias told her. “You shouldn’t be able to miss it!”

Weapons fire started filling the cavern as the soldiers below started their attack. Lysanias saw a green bolt streak by him and another slammed off his helmet but didn’t get through. *Lucky shot? I really hope they aren’t that good! I’m a moving target!*

“Well I don’t see it!”

Lysanias boosted to the side, his gravity system making this possible, and headed for the left wall. “I didn’t go that far it should be- oh.” With the place completely lit he could see where the tunnel *used* to be, anyway.

“What’s oh? What’s going on?” Dolands demanded.

“They collapsed the tunnel it looks like. There’s a pile of rocks where the entrance used to be. I’ll have to clear it.”

“I’m right with you,” Gogo told him. “We’ll do it together.”

“Right.”

They both slammed into the ground by the collapsed tunnel, Lysanias simply landing while Gogo jumped off their flier. They both wasted no time connecting to the rock in the tunnel and doing a bending whoosh, sending tons of debris spewing out and onto the battlefield. They both spread it as far and wide as they could, Lysanias not expecting to break any barriers with it but at least their aim would be thrown off if they couldn’t see as well.

“You know, I really like having you around,” Gogo said.

"Watch the chatter!" Dolands chided.

"Yes sir."

I really love having you around!

I know, Lysanias sent back. I'm a Miruku dream come true. Now help me build some cover before we start getting shot at again!

The pair now focused "up," tearing some "chest high walls" out of the ground and a pile of rubble just in front of the entrance to the tunnel so someone could land behind it and be out of the firefight. He also pulled up some cover down the passageway as far as he could, so if more troops came from that way they would be delayed and his side could take cover. Then considering there was no cover of any kind in the main area he slammed the ground and brought up some slabs, which would serve his group well when not in the air. *Of course, the Miruku can use it too but I can't do anything about that. Now to keep a promise.* "Shyia, heads up!" he called, and tore a large chunk of rock out from the side of the wall and flinging it.

"I see it, thanks," she replied, landing on it and vanishing. It started to take on her features.

Let's make our way to Death, Gogo suggested. We've got this area pretty well cleared and fortified. Man I love earth bending!

Right, can't leave Dolands facing him alone.

The pair burst out of cover, rocks at the ready to serve as a shield as they headed forward, and weapons fire started chewing through them. Most of the group was still flying around, though Mihoshi's group had already landed behind the cover they had made and were shooting back. Ellias much more accurately but Mihoshi wasn't bad. Rommeta he saw had landed with Ayeka, who could smash through a *lifestreaming* barrier fairly quickly, allowing Rommeta and Crytellia to take care of the soldiers inside. Rommeta by shooting them, Crytellia by knocking them around with her staff. She was moving to dodge other fire she couldn't possibly have seen, so he figured she had some kind of Seer technique going.

And there before them was Dolands, surrounded by some kind of energy and with his arms folded, staring at Death. The specter hovered nearby, Lysanias keeping a close eye on it should it start to move. He would have to spirit step or teleport away from it, Dolands had cautioned it would ignore armor because it just targeted the soul. It came at you, run.

"So these are your backup," Death said, as the two screeched to a halt. *How am I hearing him, there's air in here now? Not according to the readings.* "I'll be interested to see what they can do."

I can do this. Lysanias whooshed, and a ring of stone closed Death off from the rest of the melee. He seemed unconcerned, looking briefly around and then back at Lysanias.

"Ah, I wondered if you weren't the one Darkbolt warned me about. Lysanias, is it?"

We at least won't get shot in the back this way, Lysanias sent to the two others.

Dolands must have done some kind of spirit step, he was suddenly next to him, and Lysanias had a gut wrenching second of fear that he had been possessed or mentally controlled but no, Dolands just put a hand on him and that weird energy started flowing around him too.

"You're immune to his spirit techniques," he told them. "Gogo? What's the status?"

It's a dimensional technique all right, he reported. It shifts Death slightly out of phase with our reality. But it's personal, I can't bring you with me. I'll try to take him alone, I don't think there's going to be anything you can do.

"What's this, a rouge Miruku?" Death demanded, looking at Gogo now.

He must have felt him using the same technique?

"How dare you turn away from your god, Darkbolt! In his name, I will punish you!" In Death's hands a scythe appeared, and a similar one appeared for Gogo. The two clashed,

and Lysanias was frantically thinking of something he could do instead of just standing there and watching helplessly. He drew his sword, just in case, and realized now that he was on the ground again, he should get them some more help. *Mountain spirit, think you can help the others outside?*

Of course.

He sent the spirit outside the ring of stone and it set about using bending to burst apart barriers from below. After all, it was hard to concentrate on a barrier when the floor was either collapsing under you or shooting up at you, dumping you to the ground.

“Spirit Clone Technique!” Gogo shouted, dodging away from a strike and appearing at the edge of the ring. Two more of them appeared and started getting into position.

I guess my being here has some use.

“If he can’t let us touch Death I’ll head back out and see what else I can do,” Dolands said. He rose in the air and went over the wall.

Gogo and Death continued to hammer at each other, neither seeming to have the upper hand. Gogo was clearly unfamiliar with using a scythe as a weapon but even if Death scored, they seemed to ignore the blow or simply take a step back, have the clones close in, and they would be healed again a second later. The problem was, Lysanias could feel Gogo’s energy dropping, while Death’s seemed limitless.

“Team one entering the tunnel,” Rommeta announced. “No Miruku forces from that area yet.”

There was a pause.

“What are those things?” Ayeka said.

“What things?”

“You can’t see them? Ow! Scratched me pretty good. Take that! What? My fist went right through it?”

“How do we fight these things? My staff goes right through it too,” Crytellia complained. “I don’t have any offensive technique natures!”

What? Did those Dream shadows somehow step through to here? Of course, why not? They may be somewhat powerless, but they can still attack. “Bright light!” Lysanias called. “It’ll burn them, slowly. That’s about all you’ll be able to do to them!”

“Roger that!”

Meanwhile, Gogo had dropped back again, his clones attacking but he hadn’t taken any blows that Lysanias could see. “Ha!” they shouted, multi-colored light playing around them. Death put a hand up as though protecting their face and backed away a little, allowing the others to do the same.

Their energy is recovering. Maybe it’s not so one sided after all? Still, if neither can hurt the other... How are they doing that? Is that something Death can do?

“Wait, I thought I felt something familiar,” Death announced. “One of you found the angel of life, didn’t you?” All four shrugged. “Yes, you did.” He was looking back and forth between all of them. “Yes, of course. I feel like your power is more of an echo, that means it’s you!” His focus shifted to Lysanias, the three Gogos fell back, the two clones covering the original. “Well? Have anything to say for yourself, angel?”

May I speak to him? Lysanias heard the voice of the angel in his head.

So you can talk to me if you want, good to know. If you can, how do we do this?

Simply allow it. I will not usurp your will, you have my word. I will simply show myself to him and use your voice.

Very well.

A ghostly imprint with wings of fire appeared around Lysanias. “My old friend Death,” Lysanias heard himself saying. “We meet again.”

"Finally clawed your way out of the hole Darkbolt put you in, eh? And you accepted bonding to a wanderer? You're more addled than I thought possible."

"Not so, I gave it due consideration and weighed his soul. He preserves life, and I was doing little good as I was. It is a good match."

"But... But.. You'll leave this reality! An angel, leaving his charges? Tut tut!"

"My job here is largely finished. Life has flourished while I've been... away. But what of you? You have been promised an escape then? We did wonder why you followed Darkbolt."

"Bravo, you worked it out, but then it would be fairly obvious by what I said, wouldn't it? Yes, he asked, and I answered."

"For a moment of safety, you unleash damnation on the stars, then?"

"I couldn't take him. Maybe Destruction could, good luck getting that guy to *not* destroy things though. He was gung-ho for the whole idea, let me tell you. My purposes are achieved in this as well. Never has so much death run free across the cosmos."

"True," the angel sighed. "But you were always a bit misguided. I accepted you as a necessary part of life. Paving the way for advancement, for ideas to change and grow and die out when needed. Why could you never do the same? Without life, new life, eventually there would be no one left to die. Of what use are you, then?"

"That's why, when this reality is done, we'll be leaving it. Realities beyond counting will fall to me."

"You think he will keep his word? Open an escape for you and your fellow demons?"

"Why not? We are useful to him. Powerful agents are hard to find, after all. Especially on our side of things."

"I should hope so. Still, you disappoint me."

"I will try to contain my sorrow over that fact. So, shall it be the two of us, then? Leave the experiment out of it, and settle this as we always did?" He lifted his weapon.

"I'm right here," Gogo announced, dropping the aura. Lysanias felt they were back up to full strength again.

"I was always the better fighter, and I think this host would quite surprise you."

"Yes, Darkbolt has been telling stories about this one. But this is getting us nowhere, and as loathe as I am to admit it, the Miruku is proving a challenge given the powers it has stolen from us."

"They, not it," Gogo corrected.

"Oh no, you misunderstand," Death said, turning his head. "I'm referring to you as a thing, not as a person."

"Lysanias, kill this creature once and for all, will you?"

"Second team entering tunnel system," Mihoshi announced.

What do you say, Lysanias?

He has to be stopped. If he gets away and we have to fight all four demons at once to kill Darkbolt? That could be a disaster no matter how many Miruku or other fighters we have.

Sadly, I must agree. Still, it would be balance if before the angel of life left this reality, the demon of death left it as well.

"My host is willing if you are, Death."

"Then let us see what force drives this universe in the end. Back up, give us some space, Miruku."

He's dropped the technique, you can hit him. Gogo backed up and the angel faded around Lysanias. The two took their stance, Lysanias taking a deep breath and relaxing. Inside his mind burned the flame, inside the void, and everything fell away from him. He was fairly sure he knew how fast and capable Death was, from watching Gogo, but he also couldn't be sure Death wasn't holding back. *He could have known I was carrying the angel of*

life the whole time. Maybe this is all a ruse to strike a blow there. I must end this quickly.

To that end he simply streaked forward and went for the head. Death smacked the strike aside and twirled the scythe, coming in low. It plunged through the armor and scored on his chest, making Lysanias wince, and he was shocked to see it pulled out and swept towards him again without pause. He made an effort to get out of the way this time, as it seemed his armor wasn't going to help him against it. He managed it, the weapon sweeping through the space he had been. But it kept coming, and Lysanias was getting a little annoyed at this and so decided to block it this time, as he knew the weapon was solid enough to block his sword. The two clanged off each other and Lysanias saw his chance. He kept his momentum going and cut into Death, the sword coming to a stop at his neck. Both fighters paused.

"What?"

"Did you think you would take my head clean off with one blow?" Death asked, sounding amused. "Am I being underestimated?"

Lysanias pulled the blade back and went into a guard position.

"He can increase his toughness in an instant," Gogo reported.

Yeah, but my blade is the sharpest thing in existence. You could have warned me.

Apologies, I didn't know, the angel answered. He's never fought for himself before. I had hoped he wouldn't be used to it, but so far he's as fast as you.

"Shall we continue?" Death asked, swinging again.

Yeah, that's enough of that. He focused on the blade, trying to grab it with the force. He could feel it now, the amount of power Death was putting into both himself and his attacks, so he couldn't afford to hold back at this point. He poured power into his will, catching the blade and holding it fast.

"Hey, how is this fair?" Death complained, straining to move it.

"Fair?" Lysanias took a page from Lan's book and made 3 straight jabs into Death's body one after another. Death again seemed quite unharmed.

"Team three entering tunnel system," came over his headset.

"Don't you see how pointless this is? You can't hurt me."

"I'll wear you down eventually. I've got your weapon locked down so you can't attack me either. Stalemate. We take this base and I'm sure we can deal with you somehow. With my energy orb I can stand here and hold you all day."

"Really? You know I can just do this, right?" The weapon vanished from his hand, meaning Lysanias had nothing to grab onto and his telekinesis went away, and appeared in his other. "What were you saying?" The blade came at him again and that's when three blades slammed into Death from behind. He cried out as the blades sliced deep through him, and Gogo sent *NOW!*

"Orb Seal!" all four shouted, and watched as Death crushed into a small black ball and fell slowly to the ground.

What was that? Lysanias asked them.

Tenchi passed overhead, so I thought I would take the opportunity. Seems his blade is a bit sharper than yours. They opened their hands and the blade that was there vanished again.

That's impossible!

The evidence suggests otherwise.

He had to admit he couldn't argue that, Death had been hurt when the light wing sword hit him. At least enough to distract him and use the metapower technique on him again. *Though Gogo said he was making himself tougher, maybe he couldn't do it against an attack from surprise? He didn't think Gogo was a threat after all, and he paid the price.* He switched to sending to Gogo again. *So what now?*

Two things. First this. The orb rose into the air and smashed against Ragnarok's edge, shattering into a million pieces. *Hey, seems your sword is good for something after all!*

You better smile as you say that!

Gogo looked like they were laughing. *Then we see what else needs to be done. We haven't taken this base yet.*

Fair enough, let's get going.

Chapter 16

No need for aftermath

When: An hour later

Where: What used to be the enemy base

Having shoved down the rock “wall” they had been using for cover Lysanias and Gogo went after any remaining soldiers in the main hanger area. Both could take care of the most troublesome things there, the human souls, by touching them and turning them back into energy. They could be absorbed and hidden away, and the team of Tenchi, Ryoko, Dolands, Gogo and Lysanias quickly ended the combat with hardly a scratch on themselves. In fact, Lysanias was rather surprised he didn’t even feel wounded from where Death had cut him, despite not healing himself. He didn’t find a mark on the armor, but was pretty sure he had been hit. He figured that was something to look into later.

The station was now under their control, the prisoners released and any surviving Miruku put in their place. The question now was what to do about the base itself.

“We can’t stay here,” Dolands told them. “We’ll have to get the prisoners out somehow but reinforcements could arrive at any moment. I’ve put a technique on the room that allows teleportation into the base so it won’t work for now, but they could come in the front door just like we did.”

“Couldn’t you move the whole base?” Lysanias asked. “It’s proof against scrying, right? If you moved it they wouldn’t know where it was, and we wouldn’t have to abandon it.”

“How would we do that?”

“You can all share power, right? I saw some people doing it. And your teleportal can be opened pretty wide.” *If what I’m ‘remembering’ from the angel is correct.* “It must be moving through space, just put it in front and let the base glide through. Close the portal after it. There must be a way you could work together and do it.”

“I could gather energy,” he mused. “Throw it into a teleportal that’s super wide. Good idea, Lysanias. I’ll head outside, go back to base, and get some reinforcements of our own that I know have a lot of power to share. Meanwhile, guard the entrance, gather up the weapons they used, that sort of thing.”

“Or,” Crytellia suggested, “we could look for Mihoshi’s team.”

“What?” everyone said at once, looking around. A moment later they realized she was right. Mihoshi, Ellias, and Butan were nowhere to be seen.

“Mihoshi, come in please! Ellias, Butan, please respond,” Dolands sent out.

Silence.

“Fan out, they must be here, when was the last time anyone heard from them?”

“When they headed into the tunnel,” Gabi remembered.

“And you didn’t see them when you went in?”

“No sir. Tunnel was clear. We saw those shadow things but we turned our lights up like Lysanias said and they fell back.”

“You don’t think those creatures *took* them, do you?” he asked Lysanias.

“I really hope not, but as long as they’re okay I can get them.” *Eventually. I didn’t actually get a full night’s sleep before this, as I found it and we rushed off. I could probably get back to sleep pretty easily. Could they be dragged into the World of Dreams? And what would be the point? The shadows wouldn’t be any more powerful without a real Dreamer there as well. Just to reduce our forces?*

“Well, look around, she must be here somewhere.”

The group looked, Dolands heading back like he said and making preparations to

move the whole base. While it was true the inside was proof against teleporting into the place, there was no technique in the universe that could prevent it from being shoved through a portal if they worked hard enough at it. They scoured the base, it wasn't that big, and the team was nowhere to be found, dead or alive.

"I don't understand it," Lysanias exclaimed when they got back together in the "freezer" room. They had checked all around the pods, in case they had been thrown and gotten stuck between boxes nearer the ceiling, but no trace remained. "Where could they have gone?"

"Something is odd here," Rommeta decided, looking around. "I'll be right back." She left, leaving the others just looking around, and waiting for her to come back. She did a moment later. "I knew it, something was bugging me," she announced. "This asteroid is a lot bigger on the outside than the inside."

"Yes, most things are not bigger on the inside," Ayeka told her.

"Ha ha. No, what I mean is, they could have had a lot more living space, but it seems like they stopped carving these tunnels out making them as small as possible, not as big as possible. Why? They weren't heating the place because they weren't pressurizing the place. Why take over this giant rock if they're not going to use the whole thing?"

"Radiation shielding?" Gabi asked.

She shook her head. "No, we're too far from any sun. They weren't keeping the bulk of the stone towards a star."

"Are they hiding something?" Shyia asked, peaking out from behind Xelena.

"Is it a bomb?" Xelena asked nervously.

"If it was they would have blown us up already," Rommeta assured her. "They wouldn't want to lose their human souls anyway."

"I guess."

"But you're right, Shyia, I think they are hiding something. We need to check out the rest of the area of this base." She started looking around. "As would you have to touch the stone to do earth bending, and there's still a vacuum here, we'll have to do it manually. No, let's go from over here. Come on." She led them into the third passageway and told Lysanias and Gogo to use earth bending to create a new passageway branch. Both made some clones and eased the stone out of the way, sending it down the hallway and piling it up outside, in the middle of the hanger. They came to some wires and pipes, making Rommeta quite suspicious, but she said to work around them not destroy them. So they did, and moments later broke into what appeared to be another chamber.

"Told you they would find us," Mihoshi told her team, looking up at them and waving.

After widening the passageway and making a ramp down to their level the group stood in yet another holding area for humans. This one shared similarities with the other, in that humans in boxes were basically stacked along every surface, but this room was different. For one thing it was far larger than the first room, easily three times bigger, and so had three times as many people in it. These humans had tubes and wires and things sticking into them, and where the first room was dark and had little more than the "coffins" this area had electronics of all kinds. It was well lit, and various drones flew around checking things. As they didn't attack and Crytellia said they looked like medical drones, the group left them alone. Everyone was accounted for, having made it in here before seeing any action, so at least *physically* they were fine. Ellias wasn't doing too good, sitting under a table and rocking back and forth saying "it was a straight tunnel. How did we get lost? Straight shot. How can a straight line make a circle? A straight tunnel makes a circle. One and done. Lost? How could we? Nope. Can't get lost, point A to point B. Can't be in here."

"Er, she'll probably be fine?" Butan told them. "Just give her a minute."

"What happened?" Lysanias asked him.

"Not entirely sure," he admitted. "We went down the second passageway as planned. Mihoshi was in the lead. But it kept going and going. We seemed to be going around in circles and we lost communication with the others. Then somehow we stumbled in here."

"But there's no entrance apart from the one we made," Ayeka said. "We looked. And the tunnels aren't that long. *How did you get in here?*"

"I really can't tell you. We tried to call out, use the equipment in here, that sort of thing. It seems dedicated to these humans, nothing that would help us contact you that we were stuck in here. We just had to wait."

"I mean I've heard Washu complain she gets in the lab all the time, but this..."

"It is mysterious," Gogo told them. "I don't really feel any power from her, but this clearly happened. She got in here, into a closed room, somehow."

"What's the big deal?" Mihoshi asked. "We found more people, so that's good right?"

"It is indeed!" Lysanias assured her. "And you should feel good about it!" *After all, this is what Washu's note was saying when she shoved you in here. We did get a victory because of you, a greater one than we anticipated.* "We just don't understand why these people were hidden in here."

"Been thinking about that," Butan told them. "Nothing much else to do, you know? We came to rescue some humans, we rescued some humans. They probably figured we would load them up and leave, not try to take the whole base with us. Either way we wouldn't have dug deeper into this figuring we got them all. This room clearly proofed against even radio waves, they meant it to stay hidden. Meanwhile, in the back room here even more humans are being held, so we have a problem when we meet more humans souls out in the battlefield but have no idea what to do about it!"

"You think the front room was a lure? A sacrifice?"

"Exactly."

"Clearly they don't need all this equipment though, the humans in the front are still alive I could tell that, what's this all for?"

"No idea. They seem to be draining something from them, but what I have no idea. It's not a fluid or anything. We need some experts in here."

"I don't think there are any, how could there be? This is all from Darkbolt."

"Well, medical personnel then, someone that can interpret these readings."

"Ah!"

"Come on, let's get Ellias back to the ship," Shyia told them. "We don't need to be here anymore, right? Come on Ellias, let's get out of here."

"No!"

"Come on. Back at the ship we'll have a nice hot bath--"

"Bath?" She seemed disgusted.

"I said snack, not bath. A nice warm biscuit, you know those ones you really like? Maybe I can brush your fur, get you nice and calmed down." She offered a hand.

Does she not bathe? I guess with all that fur it would be quite an effort to get dry.

"Okay, but keep her away from me!" She crawled out and looked at Mihoshi like she was a terrifying person.

"Mihoshi won't hurt you, it's fine."

"Hurt me? Of course she won't hurt me, she can't shoot worth a darn I could kill her with my eyes closed. We got lost! A straight line made a circle! I follow her again and who knows where we'll end up?"

"Come on, you can tell me all about it."

The two left.

With the place secured and on the move the group stayed long enough to make sure no one else attacked it, and left it in the hands of the Tenma who swarmed it looking for clues to other locations. The group went back to the ship and Lysanias had hardly gotten out of the armor when there was a knock on his door. He had been thinking of going to see how Rosalina and the angel were getting along but when he opened the door, there stood Gogo and Rommeta.

“Hey Gogo, come on in. What’s up?”

“Wanted to talk about what the other Miruku were doing, but Rommeta here said you were the person to talk to, so here I am.”

“Ah, yes, I can see how that would be a draw for you. It would give you your own powers...”

“Tell me more!”

He laughed. “Sure thing. But there’s no guarantee they’ll release it. Look, let’s start at the beginning. Susan found it first, right?” He looked to Rommeta.

“Yes,” she agreed. “It was first seen in the main branch of my old reality, actually, back on the Andromeda. The avatar used it to bolster the abilities of his forces, called the Magog on that world. He gave it to us, which we thought was odd but our engineer, Seamus Harper worked with others to reverse engineer it. Then he injected himself with it. Little did we know it provided a back door into his brain, allowing the avatar to remotely control his actions. We then gave it to the hub, of course Silverstreak knew about life force energy but didn’t take kindly to the fact the avatar had perverted it into a weapon. But it is useful, and so the hub stripped out the control routines and we do make it available to wanderers who we think can benefit from it.”

“I could learn to do most if not all of what it can do in one way or another,” Lysanias put in, “so I was never offered it. Sort of forgot about it, to be truthful.”

“But what is it? You say it, I don’t get it.”

“Basically tiny machines are injected into you,” Rommeta answered. “They create cybernetic systems in your body that allow you to use your life energy in certain ways external to you body. Shields you saw. Energy blasts are possible, as is sensing life and even improving yourself or others. Each person seems to express the abilities a little differently, so it’s not simply a set of tools but a toolbox you can then fill with your own tools. You become a *lifestreamer*, coined by Susan because of the similarity to the green energy of the lifestream she saw on the world she rescued Aerith on.”

“Okay, I get it. Cybernetics aren’t unknown here, we must have the technology to create whatever is needed. So can I get some? For all Rommeta said I should talk to you, she’s doing most of the talking.”

“What is the Hub’s stance in this area?” he asked her. “Can I give it to them?”

“We took many prisoners with the system, dead and alive, so scientists in the Tenma will study it for sure,” she mused. “I could see it being given to those with no active powers, or to someone that lost their powers or were born with odd, useless powers.”

“Oh crud!”

“What?”

“We have to warn them not to exactly duplicate the system, or they’ll get the control code too! Clearly Darkbolt would be using his version that still has it.”

“You’re right, composing a message to Dolands now with that information. Good thinking.”

“And now I’m even more concerned. When I was on the trail of the humans I saw a planet being attacked by Miruku forces. I thought to myself what if they aren’t doing this

willingly? Now I am reminded about a system that can force people to do things. You don't think..."

"Appending to message, remove system from a living individual and see if they are still loyal to Darkbolt."

"So we could have been fighting innocent people?" Gogo asked.

"If Darkbolt worked in secret before announcing they were back and demanding to be worshiped as a god, perhaps. Put into the water or into normal inoculations, over time enough nanotechnology could have accumulated in the Miruku population to turn them into *lifestreamers* and willing slaves."

"Great, as if we didn't have enough to worry about. But what about me?"

"I'm for it, if the Hub will allow it," Lysanias told them.

"The decision is yours," Rommeta told him. "You have the authority to gather whatever forces you need to save a reality, and can arm them as you wish. If you trust Gogo with this, and as I've said the technology will probably spread soon anyway, I can requisition a dose and administer it."

"There's no down side?" Gogo asked, now a bit nervously. "You say this is life energy?"

"You can use it to death," she admitted. "But normally you would pass out long before any danger to yourself. You are not 'using yourself up' if that's your concern. With a rest your energy returns."

"That's good to hear."

"Make no mistake though, it is not a power. Not like powers that people here have normally. You would have to practice it, and figure out what you personally can do with *lifestreaming*. I am familiar with the basics, I can coach you through the beginning lessons."

"Then let's do it! My own powers, this is exciting!"

"Lysanias? I need your verbal confirmation."

He looked Gogo over. "You've been with me some time now, since we met back on Terra's world. You've always been a good person, right there at my side, yes because that's where the yummy powers are..."

They laughed and nodded.

"But I think because you want to help people just as much as I do." He rubbed the orb on his wrist, remembering. *She trusted me, can I do less now, with someone I actually know and have traveled with a bit?* "Can I trust, if I give you this power, that you will use it to the betterment of others?"

"You have my word."

He held a hand up. "Then let's have it."

"Transferring," Rommeta intoned, and in a swirl of light what looked suspiciously like a hypo-spray appeared in his hand.

"Excellent! Now, how do you..." He looked it over.

"Press this to the neck, and press here. Hold it," she explained, "and this along the side will show you how much is transferred. When this is at the bottom it's empty."

"Got it. I have no idea how much this will hurt." He put it up to their neck and injected the bots, the instrument making a hissing noise as it did. When it stopped he pulled it away and it vanished again.

"Give it a few days," Rommeta told them. "I'll provide a dietary list so you get the essential minerals and metals the bots need to construct the system inside you. Then we can begin training."

"Thank you. Both of you." They scooped both up into a hug.

Lysanias felt they really were happy, and excited to try this new ability they had been given.

When I go to kill the queen, if you're there to help, we'll completely call it even. It'll come to that, huh? Figured. Of course, I almost took Death didn't I? Evil should be a piece of cake.

"You're welcome," he said aloud as Gogo backed up. "Hopefully it doesn't turn out lame for you."

"Lame? Ha! I'm Gogo, I've been to other realities! Well, one other one, it counts. Come on Rommeta, let's go talk *lifestreaming*. I want to know everything!"

"See you tomorrow," Rommeta told him. As the door opened though there was Dolands.

"Oh, good timing," he said. "Can I come in?"

I'm never getting back to sleep, am I? "Of course!"

"Thanks. Just wanted a quick word. Now that we've gotten the humans back, and again thanks for all your help there, the queen is asking what I plan to do with them."

"She still wants them dead?"

"That's right. If you have another idea, I need to bring it to her soon."

Right, her being evil and all that. She would solve the problem in the most evil way possible. "I'm not sure I do. Until I see the soul, how can I get it away from the Miruku that has it?" *Reminds me we need to figure out what to do with the souls I gathered in the battle. Gogo too. Do we just keep them for now?*

Meta buzzed, and Lysanias turned the watch. *Please see hubPad* was scrolling across it.

"Wait a second, maybe Meta has an idea!" He got the pad out and when he turned it on, there was an entry showing for a skill to sever the bond between two supernatural occurrences. He smacked his head.

"What was that for?"

"This is something I wanted to practice a long time ago. I asked Inari about it, in fact, as I remember. She suggested I put a light spell on a coin and then try to break it. Why did I not do that? Must have gotten busy with something else in the next reality. Right, learning Dreaming skills, I went and met Nynaeve. Still have to go back there... Anyway, this severing skill should do the trick, and I'll have plenty of subjects to try it on. As they're all unconscious they shouldn't be able to resist, and we can have our Miruku take the souls instead."

"I would have thought you would want them woken up."

Not until the queen is gone. "Maybe some can, humans without a useful soul. I have to consider humans are a dying breed here now. I would rather have them back on Earth if some places can be revived after this is over, or on a similar planet. They're in the same boat as the Miruku, they have no powers or fighting skills. They can't help us now. They would just be a burden on you and the base."

"There is that. Okay, I'll let you get back to sleep and you can see if the technique will work in the morning. She's given me some time to come up with a solution. In the morning I'll want your report on the fight with Death, and anything else you saw in the base out of the ordinary or that you think is relevant."

"Yes general!"

He shook his head and laughed. "Right in the back, that's where the knife would have gone had you been a Tenma." He turned to go.

"Wait, do you mean you knifing me or me knifing you?"

He just ginned and the door closed.

That wasn't disturbing.

Lysanias stopped in to see Rosalina, it was obvious he was fine but he wanted to see

her, and check up on the angel. He had constructed a tower of crystal some distance from the other one, and said he was settling in. He expressed some sorrow his counterpart demon was gone, but said it was probably for the best. What was unexpected was Ragnarok floating up to him when they were outside looking at the tower, as the angel explained this was similar to structures in their version of Heaven where he used to live.

I wanted to apologize, it said as Lysanias looked at it questioningly.

“For what? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

For not cutting Death. Your strikes were true, but again and again I could not pierce him. I am ashamed to be called the greatest sword ever made.

“Don’t worry about it. He was clearly doing something, making himself unable to be harmed just in the opposite way he usually did it. And it’s not like you can *train* to be sharper somehow. You are the sharpest sword, and I am still honored to call you a friend and companion on my journey.”

But the sword of Tenchi-

“Is a blade created, as I understand it, from gathering and concentrating energy from higher dimensions. Plus, maybe Death was distracted trying to kill me, or the technique only works against the person he’s facing. We’ll never know, so don’t worry about it.”

If... If you say so.

My goodness, a sword with some kind of... I don’t know... edge envy? What is the world coming to. “I do. I will carry you tomorrow as proudly as I did today. Even if I do have to ward you so most people can’t see you usually. I suppose I could take that off and redo it later. Yes, yes I will do that. People should see you.”

Thank you.

“Of course. Now I’m going to get some sleep, so I will see you all in the morning.”

Chapter 17

No need for deception

When: The next morning

Where: Lysanias' quarters

Lysanias spent some Dream time practicing and having gotten up the next morning almost immediately heard Crytellia's voice in his head.

Lysanias, are you up yet?

She seems upset about something. Did something happen last night? Yes, I'm up what's going on?

Is Rosalina around?

No, I've hardly gotten dressed, what's the problem?

I'm coming in to see you, the queen is watching, play along.

If you say so. He went back to brushing his hair and admiring his fine beard, wishing his dwarven friend could see him now. *I'll go back to visit for sure, some day.*

The door chime went off and he opened the door, finding a somewhat ruffled looking and exhausted Crytellia standing there. She said not a word but went straight to her work, she swept into his room, no she did not lurk. Setting a hand to each side of his face, guided his head right as her lips she did place.

Uh?

Teleport us into the asteroid base, quick!

I can't! Mine isn't like the power here, that can just go anywhere. I need to be somewhat nearby it and know the direction. And there's that whole pesky breathing I have to do... Well that you do I actually could go without thanks to magic, now that I think about it. Still a vacuum though...

I know all that. Don't worry about it, Dolands used the same technique of opening a huge portal to get the ship back to base so we would be nearby. We've pressurized and heated the whole thing so anyone can just go into it. It's not far from us, draw an imaginary line from the third turret back on our right side and the base is right there.

Got it. He shifted, throwing energy into his will because why not be safe? The pair appeared in the base and she broke it off, grabbing his hand.

"Come on, this area might not be clear for long, we have to go further in."

"Okay?" Did I just kidnap myself? Wait, have I had that thought before, it sounds familiar...

The pair raced through the base, heading from the control area to the living area, and Crytellia pulled them inside and slammed the door. She nearly collapsed with relief, breathing heavily.

"Are you okay? What's going on?"

"It's okay, we should be safe from scrying here. Lysanias, you have to help me!"

"Of course, anything I can do you know that. Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"My conditioning, or whatever you want to call it. It's been acting erratically and last night was the worst. I forced myself to watch my symbol, well watch for yourself. Come here, watch it!" She grabbed him again stood up, almost nose to nose with him. They stood for a moment, and the symbol fizzed. She winced, and it brightened again. *"See! Just then, did you see it!"*

"I saw. So it's breaking down?"

"That's what it seems. I used a seer technique to see if someone was scrying on me, well, the location not me specifically, and there was. But I had to do something. I can't stay

like this. Ever since we got back I was having these horrible dreams, and waking up all night. One minute I'm fine, the next I'm overcome with sadness or guilt over things I hardly remember doing, then I'm convincing myself there's nothing to be concerned about. Over and over. You have to either put it back or take it away. It's getting worse! Please!"

She clearly is terrified, and exhausted, and desperate. I do have to do something, this is partly my fault. Any ideas, oh angel?

Not really my area. If only she had the ability to make illusions, or you did. Still, your concern is her being attacked on sight if she doesn't have the symbol, correct?

That's right.

So take her place for an hour and walk around the base. See how everyone reacts.

"That's brilliant!"

I have my moments.

Thanks.

"What is? My condition getting worse?"

"Huh? Oh, no, sorry, just having a talk with... Anyway! Give me your clothes, I just had the best idea." He started taking his clothes off too.

She looked skeptical, as any person would in that situation. "Which requires us to take our clothes off? I mean usually I wouldn't even hesitate but it seems an odd solution to the current problem... I guess it would be a good distraction but it doesn't solve anything."

"No, no, you've got it all wrong. Look, the main worry is that symbol. You don't seem to consciously notice it, but if it's gone someone that knows it should be there may be conditioned to attack you. We need more information. You're going to hide out here for an hour or two while I walk around *as you*. I'll of course have no symbol. If I get attacked we know you'll have to 'disappear' after we do this. You'll be branded a traitor maybe? But I could carve you out a niche here someplace, bring you food and water every day, and keep you hidden until we figure out what to do."

"Just break it off me and I'll go walk around, I'll have to anyway."

He shook his head. "I won't risk you. If you get attacked on sight who has the better chance of getting away? You or me?"

She deflated a little. "You."

"So get those clothes off. I'll need to see, er, all of you to get your proportions and coloring right. I have to be you down to the coloration of your... Crud."

"I don't have a crud, is that some alien organ you possess?" She grinned a little.

"No, no, my eyes. How do I? Well, if I concentrate on them separately it should work. Honestly, they should be considered my eyes by now, I've had them for how long now?"

"I have no idea."

"Huh? No, you wouldn't that was to- never mind. We'll figure something out. They should change with the rest of me, but they didn't last time. Maybe they will now I've had them longer?"

"If you say so."

So the pair stripped and Lysanias used alchemy to turn himself into her. He walked around her, getting the length of her hair and fingernails right, he wanted this to be perfect. *Any deviation would be picked up on, subconsciously or otherwise. Who knows how good Croaker's vision is, for example? I want the only thing that's different between us to be the symbol. And the- huh.* He looked at his wrist, the orb was gone, almost as if it *knew* somehow he wanted it hidden at the moment. *Odd. I know it's there.* Finally he decided they really did look identical, and Crytellia put up a seeing technique like a mirror in the air before them. They stood side by side, and Crytellia felt impressed.

“So this is what having a twin is like?” she asked. “I always did wonder.” She looked over at him, back at the mirror, then back to him, turning him to face her. “That’s so weird.”

“What is?”

“I look so different from this side. I guess I’m just used to seeing myself reversed. This is how other people see me. Neat.”

“But can I pass as you, that’s the real test.”

“If you can send to me I can send back if you need to know what I would say to someone or they ask about something you don’t know about.”

“Fair enough. I think I’m ready, so I better get dressed.”

“One second.”

“What’s up?”

“I would be kicking myself forever if I didn’t try this when I had the chance.”

“Try-” He was interrupted by getting kissed again. She stayed like that a moment and stepped back, looking thoughtful.

“Well?”

She give him a huge grin. “So that’s what kissing me feels like. Nice to know! You had it good, all that time I was letting you kiss me before.”

“If you’re done fooling around?”

“Hey, that was done for *science*. How many people get the chance to kiss themselves? I’m writing a whole book on the experience.”

“Really?”

“Oh, let me have my fun, I’m certain breaking my conditioning isn’t going to be a barrel of laughs I need some recent good memories to get me through.”

“I don’t deny that could be the case. Shall we get to it?”

“You get to it, you’re in my clothes, remember? I’ve got to hang around here just like this as your stuff doesn’t fit me.”

“I could turn you into me?”

She waved that off. “Get going, I’ll be fine. It’s warm enough here and I can wrap up in the blanket there if need be.”

“Okay.” He got dressed and she looked him over critically.

“Yeah, you’re me. Good luck out there.”

“Thanks.” He turned to go but looked back at her. “Are you sure you’re going to be okay here by yourself? I could leave you Rosalina.”

She barked a laugh. “Sure, leave your wand spirit slash girlfriend with the naked lady who has been kissing you the whole time you’ve been here. That would go well!”

“I’m not exactly sure what she’s aware of when she’s not out. She hasn’t mentioned it... Actually I could leave you a clone of myself if you didn’t want to be alone.” *In fact it’s probably the clone that should go out and talk to people. If ‘she’ is attacked, that’s the easiest way to get away. Just poof!* “Or send the clone out and stay myself.”

“Gee, I don’t know. Now that I know how good a kisser I am, I may not be able to keep my hands off myself if you stay.”

“You feel amused so I’m guessing that’s a joke.”

“Yes, get out of here! I’ll be fine, just... Just hurry back.”

“Okay.” *I’m still sending a clone though.*

Lysanias sensed the way was clear and headed into another room. He made a clone and it headed out, and he sat down to write the report Dolands wanted about his encounter with Death and what he had discovered about the *lifestreaming* system possibly forcing Miruku that had it installed to fight. He then read over the *severing* skill so he could start

practicing that once he was done solving Crytellia's problem.

As I can't imagine the human would be unwilling to get their soul back, it's unlikely they would try to resist if they even could, being unconscious at the moment. So it should be fairly easy to- Man, I've been spending too much time on this ship. "The human." Unbelievable. Am I really starting to think like an angel, or like the aliens on the ship, or am I just becoming a total jerk?

Meanwhile, the clone made their way back to the room they could teleport from and headed to the ship. Figuring Crytellia would probably get something to eat and it would be a good place to be seen he headed to the mess hall, told the computer what he wanted (after a quick consult with Crytellia about what she usually ordered) and sat down.

"Ah Crytellia, there you are," Dolands said coming into the room.

"General!" He stood up, about to do the salute he always saw them doing, but he waved her off.

"Never mind that, don't let me disturb you. I was looking for Lysanias, have you seen him?"

He sat down again. *I can at least tell him most of the truth.* "Yes sir. He's currently writing up that report you wanted about his fight with Death. He... went back to the asteroid base to watch the fight again with his powers. He thought getting an outside perspective, so to speak, would be helpful because it all happened so fast at the time. He didn't want to leave anything out or miss a crucial detail." *Hey, that's a good idea, I'm glad I thought of that. Once he leaves I'll send to myself and suggest it.*

"He should be back soon then."

"I believe so sir."

Dolands stared at her. "You sound different, are you okay?"

Crud, I forgot about that too. I'm not really speaking their language, they just hear me speaking and they can understand it. Of course a general in the Tenma would pick up on it. "I'm fine sir, thank you for asking." *Have to keep my answers shorter but if that's all he's worried about, maybe the symbol vanishing will go unremarked?*

"You also look different, did you do your hair differently this morning or something?"

He shook his head.

"Weird. Well, you look good as always. If you see Lysanias before I do tell him I'll be in a meeting with the queen and he should try to free the human souls from the Miruku immediately. At least this way if she asks I can say he's working on it as far as I know."

"Very good general."

"See you."

One person down, let's see how the rest of the crew reacts.

Lysanias perked up some time later, his clone had spoken to most of the crew and headed into the Tenma headquarters to Crytellia's quarters there, which let her in without issue. He considered that a success and vanished, so Lysanias reviewed those memories and headed back to where he left Crytellia herself. He was about to just open the door but then thought better of it and knocked.

"Come in." The door slid open and she was standing there, staff in hand. "Oh good, it is you. Come in before someone sees! How did it go?" The staff vanished as she stepped back.

"Very well," he reported. "Dolands found me first, didn't bat an eye."

"I have no idea what that means. What's a bat?"

"I mean he didn't react. Neither did anyone else, not about that anyway. No screams,

no being hit over the head with a rock, just a lot of staring. Mostly at my, uh, well, I don't have to tell you I suppose."

"No, you don't. Welcome to being a woman. But they did react, it sounds like? And can I have my clothes back?"

"Oh, right! Sure, of course!" He started to undress. "They all knew something was different, but no one could place it. Everyone thinks you look good though, I heard that a lot for some reason!"

"Well I do, duh. We are different, even looking exactly the same maybe you sit up straighter, or slouch more. I bet we don't walk the same, we're not the same height so we would have a different way of moving."

"And I'm not used to, you know, the weight distribution." He bounced and swished his hips and she laughed.

"That would make a difference too. Your facial expressions, the words you use, it would all add up for someone who was looking for someone that was a duplicate."

"In any case, we proved we can get rid of your symbol in at least in the short term, no one will notice. You go talk to the queen for some reason, and she probably will."

"As if."

"I'm just saying. You want it taken off, and I'll do it right now."

"That's why you're here." She dressed in silence a moment. "Was it fun being me?"

"Fun? I was just trying to interact with as many people as I could to see if they would notice. I guess? It was interesting running around as someone else, under different circumstances it could be fun. When this is all over I can turn you into someone else if you want to try it."

"Might take you up on that." She looked at him slyly. "You were flashing people, weren't you?"

"Doing what?"

"And taking lewd photos you sent to all my friends. And calling the general honey-bunny, and stealing Shyia's stuffed animal friends and setting them on fire. How could you have done that? She *loves* those animals."

"What? I didn't do anything of the sort!"

"Really?"

"Of course not!"

She shrugged. "Seems like a wasted opportunity if you ask me."

"You *wanted* me to do that stuff?"

"I would have been tempted to pull *some* prank. I guess you're just a better person than me."

"It's a military craft! You all take a bit of a lax attitude but that could go really, really wrong. I was nervous enough just walking around thinking guns were going to come out of hidden cubbies and shoot me down. Or that alarms would go off and your life here would be over because of me. Setting fire to animals, who would set fire to them!?" *Not that any of that would have hurt me, but her just vanishing would have raised some eyebrows had I been taken by surprise.*

"So you're saying that I go back out there, I'm not going to find that someone who looked like me drew a mustache on the general while he was asleep, or switched the salt and the sugar, or anything?"

"Nothing like that, I promise."

"Huh." She stared into his eyes. "I believe you. Thanks."

"For not screwing up your life? Sure. We're trying to get you well, you know."

"To that end," she sat down. "Better get on with it."

“Give me a minute to change back and get dressed myself.”

As he dressed an idea started to come to him about what to do about the queen when the time came. Walking around as someone else had clearly worked, so he could impersonate someone if he had to. *It will take some thought, but maybe I could use this technique somehow. This alone wouldn't be enough of course, I have to kill her and break the orb, but maybe with some others powers this could be the start of it. She needs to drop her guard, let me get close, this could do that. I'll keep it in mind, see if anything else comes to me.*

“So what will this entail?” she asked, Lysanias sitting beside her and putting a hand to her head when he has done putting his clothes back on.

“I'll meld with you. If past experience is any indicator I'll meet some tiny people inside your brain that represent your emotions. I'll ask where the block is, and tear it down.”

“Easy as that, huh?”

“I'm getting to be an old pro at this. Done it several times now, for various reasons.”

“Good luck, I guess.”

“Thanks. Try not to resist this.” He relaxed and pushed his brain into hers.

When next he opened his eyes he was looking at a familiar scene, but a disturbing one. The primes were there, and this was a control room, but the primes seemed to be in a cage and standing there at the controls was a robotic looking Crytellia.

“Help, help us!” cried the primes, shaking the cage. It didn't look all that sturdy and shook as they wiggled it, but held.

“You do not belong here,” said the Crytellia figure. “You will be expelled.”

“You don't get to decide- yipes!” Lysanias blocked a flurry of blows as the figure raced over to him. *You know, maybe giving everyone my skill at combat wasn't such a great idea after all.* He attacked her back, wanting to see if she would respond to chi-blocking, but only some of his strikes landed.

“She's using a seer technique to predict your movements!” Joy shouted to him.

He landed more blows, but after a few she didn't even block anymore. She didn't seem slowed down, and from the cage anger shouted “What are you doing? Hit her seriously!”

“Even if I did, without the sword and my other equipment there's no way I can hurt her. I'm just too weak.”

“Do you think the strength of your body matters here?” Disgust asked him dryly, as he blocked another set of punches and kicks.

“Oh yeah, probably not.” *This is after all basically a dream or a soulscape. In either I'm as strong as I believe myself to be, so let's stop trying to hit her and hit her!*

He hit her. She went flying back, crashing into the windows that showed the core islands. She went down on one knee and the primes cheered. “That's the way to do it,” Anger praised him. “Do it again!”

The robot stood up, her staff appearing in her hands, and she again ran for him. He pulled Ragnarok from his memory and was fending off blows as she twirled the staff trying to smack him.

“Uh, is she a prime?” he asked. “If I kill her...”

“She's the conditioning,” Sadness reported. “You can kill her, it's the only way.”

I hope she's right. He went in for the kill, striking again and again only to be blocked. Finally he slipped past her guard on the forth strike, plunging straight into her chest.

“I have failed you, my queen,” gasped the figure as it vanished.

A cheer went up from the primes as he lowered his sword, and heading over there he slashed the prison to pieces. He was being hugged, smacked on the back, and thanked by the primes all at once, but noticed one prime had already headed to the control panel.

“Sadness?” he asked.

“You really know us?” asked Joy. “Wait, Sadness, what’s she- Sadness no!” The primes turned, looking at the panel, which had turned blue. Joy ran over there and tried to tear her away, but sadness remained routed.

“She’s done terrible things,” Sadness told them all. “She has to grieve to heal, you know that Joy.”

“But we’re free! This is a cause for celebration!”

Sadness shook her head. “It’s been a long time coming, Joy. You know that as well as anyone.”

Joy looked annoyed, but Sadness didn’t budge. Joy looked back at him. “Look, I’ll work on her from in here. You get out there and work the other end. And Lysanias? Thank you. Come on,” she said to the others, who joined hands with her. “We’ll get through this. Together.”

“I know you will.”

Lysanias took the sobbing Crytellia in his arms as the meld broke. “I’ve done... horrible things...” she wailed. “Planets. People. All in- the name- of the Tenma.”

“Shhhh, it’s okay,” he told her, stroking her hair. “It’s okay. We’ll get through this. Together.”

Chapter 18

No need for leftovers

When: Five days later

Where: Meeting room on the sphere

It took some time for Crytella to calm down and while it would take weeks or even months to completely come to terms with what she had done, Lysanias offered what words of comfort he could. He felt she didn't exactly believe him that she was without guilt in this matter, now that it was clear the Tenma conditioning didn't change your personality or make you more likely to follow orders. It seemed to simply make you not care about following those orders, bottling up your emotions so you didn't see what you were doing as wrong. The two talked about breaking everyone else in the crew out of it, but Lysanias urged caution.

"For one thing, we don't know the long term effects of it being gone after so long," he argued, "and keep in mind yours was already weakened from your technique earlier. For all I know breaking off the technique when it is at full strength could have detrimental consequences to that person. Look how you reacted, already having some idea what was going to happen because it was weakening on its own. I just yank it off someone, they could go insane then and there. Or try to kill themselves, or just blindly rush the queen in an attempt at revenge. Even worse, they could like being that way and rush to have it redone! Let's just see how you do for now, and feel out the others. Maybe we can do Croaker next, they don't seem to have active powers just better than normal engineering skills. They won't be able to shoot energy blasts or anything else all that dangerous."

She agreed, and after cleaning herself up a bit the two headed back to the ship where they parted ways and Lysanias submitted his report. He then got busy trying to do something about the humans. This took nearly four days, as he had to first figure out how to extend his abilities slightly past his own body because normally the severing technique had to be done by touch. By consulting the hubPad, Rommeta, and working things out he did eventually manage to do it, and proved he could sever the connection between the Miruku and the human without too much trouble. Another Miruku could then come and take that soul. Of course, they had to work out how to do this at a distance as well, which took some time. It took longer, as they had to "pull" "harder" but they managed it.

Another thing that slowed the process was them cataloging each soul and what it did so that useless souls were left alone and useful ones could be given to those that wanted it. Naturally some Miruku were more comfortable being on the front lines and would need attack type souls, while others were more into defense or healing or general support and could be given souls that matched that thinking. Creature types that could act independently were the most sought after, and he was surprised at the range of sizes they could manifest. Some were as small as a cat while others towered over him. Those that were simple weapons were totally shunned, shields were grudgingly accepted, while armor types were more of a "well it's better than nothing isn't it?" Also taking time was melding with every Miruku that came for souls and giving them combat skills. They *clearly* didn't have the months it would take to otherwise ready them for battle, and while he couldn't make them more creative or better able to use other people's powers, at least they wouldn't panic in a combat situation. Gogo was giving impromptu classes in "this is how you Miruku" explaining what sort of powers they might run into and how best to use them, after all just because you knew you could say "icicle barrage" and attack with ice didn't mean you knew when it was best to do that.

What that done Lysanias took a few souls for himself, ending up with a set of glowing wings (chosen mainly because no one else wanted them and they were rather angelic and he thought made him look cooler), a floating energy barrier that could be used as a shield, a

snowflake that could do a large scale ice attack, a goat and a bee like insect. The bee he could send away from himself and see what it was seeing, while the goat simply seemed superbly suited for bashing into things. He did make one important discovery because of it though, and that was that souls could be combined, or at least work together easily. He was imagining how hilarious it would be if instead of him having the wings, the goat did, and quick as a wink it did and was flying around. He wasn't sure how useful this particular combination was, but he made sure to tell the Miruku that came later to spread the word if they thought of any interesting ways to combine what they took.

It was now the fifth day after they returned and the crew was sitting in a meeting room about to be briefed by Dolands. No one had attacked Crytellia or even seemed to look at her twice, though it was clear she was still feeling the effects of having her full emotions back. She tried her best to act normal and keep joking around with everyone, but he could feel the strain she was under. In the room were examples of what they had taken from the Miruku base, and there was a diagram being shown on the screen at the end of the room that looked like a body with wiring in it.

"Everyone here? Good, I'll get started," Dolands told them, walking into the room. "We've been working on the weapons and armor recovered during the raid and what they were doing with the humans in the 'secret chamber' or as some are calling it 'the chamber of secrets.' We've got some ideas which I'll go over with you now." He walked over and picked up the rifle. "This weapon is a strange combination of things starting with a conventional energy weapon, then layering on top of that various energies. We've found from the various 'batteries' the Miruku had on them it can utilize and combine these energies when fired. We found traces of life energy, the spirit energy we used to collect from other worlds, and soul energy somehow. Additionally, those with the *lifestreaming* augmentation you can see here could interface with the weapon and use their own life energy to further augment its destructive power." The screen showed an arrow pointing to the arm. "The conduits here running along the arm from the chest interact with a receiver in the grip that accept the energy. Luckily we had plenty of cover thanks to Lysanias and we are fairly practiced at this so no one got seriously hit by the combined beam. I don't think I need to tell you it could have been pretty devastating."

No, you don't. Four different types of energy being fired from one weapon at once? Would it be like being hit by four beams from four different sources normally? That'll kill ya! And now I see why the cover was so torn up when I went back there. Any thinner and those weapons probably could have gone right through the rock like it wasn't there.

"So that's what they were doing with the humans in the chamber; drawing off their energy, allowing them to recover, and repeating the process. Clearly they hoped these humans wouldn't be found and the energy drain could continue, along with the souls they could use from the sleeping humans. It was a good thing Mihoshi stumbled into it, though our scientists are still, as yet, unable to figure out how she did it. The protective techniques on the room were fairly complete."

Mihoshi gave a nervous laugh and said it was no big deal.

"As it doesn't seem to be hurting them we've let it continue for now, so we can arm our Miruku with the same weapons. We didn't recover many, not enough for our forces, but we'll deal with that in a minute."

I'm sensing more of that evil...

"Meanwhile," he set the weapon down, "the armor doesn't seem to be all that special. Of course it was customized, so if someone had a soul that was an arm piece the armor didn't need that part. It does seem like it can channel soul energy in some way, maybe augment whatever the soul could do? Most souls do seem to have some kind of special ability, perhaps

that can be augmented with *lifestreaming*? We're still looking into it, the armor was our lowest priority."

It makes sense. Both are life based, so there's no reason a soul couldn't be empowered that way.

"We're also studying the *lifestream* system itself, both in Miruku living and dead. Gogo?"

They stood up. "Thank you general. Yesterday my own *lifestream* cybernetics were completed, and I have a tenuous grasp of the fundamentals. I can make a weak barrier, gather life energy to improve myself, or form it into a beam or an explosive force. The beam seems to target other life, ignoring armor, while the explosive 'packet' seems to be an analog to a conventional explosive." They brightened. "Perhaps the armor augmentation you found is to try and protect from the beam, as they figured we may work out *lifestreaming* for ourselves and attack with it?"

"It's very possible that's the case. If you don't mind we can run some tests later."

"Be happy to. Where was I? Ah, the packet! It can be put into any object, turning that object into a bomb, so be very careful moving even the most innocuous looking object when in enemy territory. Lysanias rightly refused our request for additional doses saying a request for a trusted ally is a different thing than fifty or a hundred for an army. So it's up to us to reverse engineer the system if we want our Miruku or really anyone else for that matter to use it." They sat down again.

"Thank you. To that end we have figured out most of the pieces that make up the system. The difficult part is programming nanobots to create it inside the body without doing any harm to the subject. As you might suspect such a system is extremely complex, and something built in the wrong place or in the wrong way would be fatal. Sure if you want to lay in a bed immobilized for three days maybe it would be easier, but Gogo moved around and did things, so this was being built inside them on the fly. That's a pretty sophisticated system! To that end we're planning a raid on whatever factory or research lab is creating these weapons and getting a hold of the code and raw materials. Lysanias believes the original system allows external control of the nervous system when installed, so we would have to go over it quite carefully and take that part out. But it would still be easier than coming up with it from scratch. Lysanias, as you found the humans, would you be willing to try finding such a facility for us using the same technique?"

"You can count on me, general."

"Very good. Hopefully we can move out in the next two days, so everyone stay sharp. Any questions?"

"You said the guns used spirit energy?" Croaker asked. "I'd like to look them over, if possible."

"That's right. We would simply draw off the energy that was stored in various crystals to replenish ourselves, but they found a way to weaponize it directly. By turning that energy into physical force, they don't have to deplete their own to add to the attack."

"But we've stopped them collecting it, right?"

He shook his head. "We don't know if there are other humans being held captive out there, and Darkbolt knows about other worlds, of course. They could have Miruku out collecting just like we used to in other realities. As for taking one apart, I'll clear you for it, you can go to lab 14 later, they've got them in various states of disassembly. Anything else?"

"General?" Crytellia spoke up.

"Yes?"

"You said nervous system control? What does that mean exactly?"

"It means just that. While someone's mind might be their own, their body is controlled

externally. Their muscles told to move, basically making them into puppets.”

“Could that be why our forces were as effective as they were? These Miruku didn’t want to be there and fight us, but something was making them? That couldn’t be as effective as them wanting to shoot us, right? Their aim would always be a little off, their reflexes a little slow as whatever controlled them tried to keep up. Or they could have been fighting the control, right?”

“We can’t discount that possibility, I admit. Naturally until we know for sure we would prefer them simply incapacitated not killed, in case they are innocent. But it would be impossible to determine the one from the other. Don’t put yourself in danger trying to hold back.”

“Yes sir,” she agreed glumly.

“Have the ones we captured said anything?” Butan asked. “I mean if that was a possibility and I was captured by enemy forces I would be falling all over myself to assure my captors I had been doing this because I was forced to. Even if it was a lie, it might mean better treatment.”

“Nothing one way or the other. Which is in itself suspicious, now that I think about it. We’ve blocked signal in or out because we don’t want the base discovered, but maybe they got some kind of ‘kill code’ and they simply *can’t* talk to us. We’ll have some seers look into it, as well as the scientists studying the system to try and turn that part off. Good point.” He looked around the room, it seemed there were no more questions. “Very well. You’re dismissed for now, but be ready to go at any time.”

“Sir, yes sir!” they all chorused.

And so Lysanias went to bed early the next “morning” once again planning to use need to travel around and get close to somewhere they could easily steal from, hopefully not too well guarded. Or if they moved faster this time, or he didn’t screw up and show himself, they could raid it before it was placed on alert and take it out easier. He waited until the others got some sleep, so if he found something they could be up and take care of it right away. (He could always pause time and get as much sleep as he wanted after he found something, after all.) Rosalina, who had been out and doing her usual training all this time, wasn’t keen on him again just throwing himself into the void but they had no other choice.

“I understand it, but I don’t like it. You have all these protections, the mountain spirit, me, Ragnarok, and now human souls and even an angel! But none of that matters if you die in a dream.”

“I’ll be careful, don’t worry. I learned to be intangible from the shadows, nothing should be able to hurt me when I do the step.”

“Just wake up again, okay?”

“As my princess commands.” He gave a deep bow.

She gave a “humph” and stared down at him. “I am your *queen*.” But she couldn’t help but giggle as she turned back into a wand.

When he realized he was dreaming he stepped from his dream to the World of Dreams in his cabin and steeled himself for what needed to be done. Focusing on knowing his body was “there” in the real world and nothing could hurt him, he closed his eyes and threw his request into the universe.

We need to find where they are making these weapons and the lifestreaming system.

He stepped.

Pressure fell away from him and he thought *I’m in space again aren’t I?* as he opened his eyes. He was, and this time near enough to a star he could see at least something in the

distance. Looking around a planet hung beneath him, and before him seemed to be a shipyard of some kind. *It's fine, my body doesn't even need to breathe but it is, back on the ship. I'm perfectly safe there, and this body can hang around here for a moment. If this is the first step to finding the factory or lab I should understand why.* He looked around and there were a dozen ships, platforms, and possibly supply craft flying around this area. With a shrug he stepped over into the real world to get the whole picture, and saw nothing really had changed so these ships had been here long enough to have a reflection in the other world. He wasn't close enough to see much detail on the ships themselves, but he knew what it felt like to have his perceptions sharpened with the One Power so he just did that. Without moving he could now see people working around the outsides of the ships, always in pairs. They were tethered together in some way and as he watched they were clearly doing something to the outsides of the incomplete vessels. They were clearly being built as many of them were only half there, and those had the most workers swarming around them. Carrying parts and in some cases simply creating parts out of nowhere as he watched.

Probably some kind of creation based power. And they work in pairs because space is pretty dangerous so you would want backup to be right there if something went wrong with your suit. Sensible. But I'm still not seeing why this particular place. Maybe it'll become clear to me later, I can always come back here. He closed his eyes and focused on need. When he opened his eyes again he was looking at the same scene, this time through glass. *A different shipyard or have I just gone onto one of the ships that- hello.*

He turned as he heard someone's hacking cough from nearby, and it did not sound good at all. The hallway was empty as far as he could see, and completely bare as the metal walls here didn't even seem painted. He walked toward the sound of the coughing and came to a door which he knocked on after a moment of thought. *I should help, that sounds pretty bad.* No one answered so he looked the door over, and there was a control panel of some kind there which he touched. He couldn't make heads or tails of the display and with a sigh simply stepped through the door into the room.

Wait what?

Looking around at the surprised faces that noticed him coming in he realized something was very wrong here. The room was dimly lit and basically stuffed full of beings of every description, from human looking to alien looking. They were all laying or sitting as best they could on the floor, as there was no furniture in the room either. To his right was the person still coughing away, another nearby holding their shoulders to try and steady them. Everyone looked at him like they wanted to murder him, but none got up or said anything.

Suits me fine, I don't want to talk to them anyway! He instead carefully picked his way across them to the person who literally had blue skin, was bald, and hadn't stopped coughing. *This is my dream, and this being is going to be fine in it!* Lysanias knelt and put his hand on their chest, believing this being to be fine physically and able to breathe normally. The coughing immediately stopped, and the being took a deep breath.

"I feel better," they announced, feeling amazed. "Hey, if one of you had the power to cure me all along, you could have just used it! Honestly, what is wrong with you people?" He looked them over, everyone looked back with a confused look on their faces. "I won't say thank you," he said to Lysanias. "Your buddies watching the cameras probably got tired of listening to me, huh? Well tell them I would rather have died than accept your help!"

"Rickshar, you probably would have died tomorrow or the next day," the being that was beside them said. "Whatever you had picked up was killing you. I'll say thank you for him. Thank you."

"Of course. But I think you mistake me. What cameras are you talking about? Why are you all in here?"

"Very funny," said Rickshar sarcastically, which of course they had there too. "You've cured me, get out of here and let me get some sleep. I've gotten precious little of that lately and we only get five hours a rotation anyway."

"You have to forgive him, great master, he's just cranky because of the lack of sleep. Which you graciously allow us, of course! You are indeed a wise and beneficent race."

"What are you talking about?" Lysanias pressed. "Are you some kind of prisoners?"

"You're telling me you're not a Miruku?"

"No, I'm not! Why would I be?"

"Then how did you get here? We're in the middle of a Miruku factory port, there's no way they would let a ship anywhere near here."

"I go where I'm needed," he hedged. "I just don't always know the situation when I arrive."

"How did you cure him?" asked another, as now everyone was sitting up and paying attention. "You didn't call out a technique and I didn't even feel any healing power at all for that matter. Just who are you?"

Great, how much do I tell these people? I couldn't just walk away from him or I guess this, now, but what will they- "It is enough for you to know that I am currently bonded to the angel of life. I am Lysanias, working to break the grip of Darkbolt across the cosmos." Yes, *that sounded appropriately like something an angel would say, right? And it's true, even if I'm not using that power at the moment. It's something they can accept and what do they know what the angel of life can do?*

"What? Angels haven't been heard from in thousands of years. Prove it!" shouted someone.

"Very well." Lysanias remembered what the angel looked like from his soulscape so he simply rose into the air and gave himself wings and the same armor the angel had been wearing. He had to concentrate on the wings, as they were technically made of fire, but he wasn't concentrating on surviving space anymore so it was fine. "Have I banished all doubt?"

"The angel!" "Save us!" "He told the truth!" "The angels have returned!" Everyone in the room was now talking at once and trying to press forward to touch him.

"What's going on in here?" a voice demanded, and everyone turned. At the door was a figure in armor with a weapon trained on the room, and his eyes went wide. "An angel?" He raised the gun and Lysanias couldn't have that so he held up a hand and created a metal wall between the guard and the others. He extended it across the entire room and of course it was made of primordial metal and he heard gunshots on the other side.

"They won't get through that for a while," he promised. *I tried to wield it into the wall as best I could so it wouldn't be moved either.* "Look, I'm in the middle of something here..." *And I can't really take you all with me through the world of dreams, now can I? And I can't teleport you in the real world back to headquarters I don't even know where it is in relation to here. Could be light years away.* "...but I'll be back for you. You have my word. What are you all doing here, though?"

"We're forced to build those ships out there," someone said. "We all have creation or technology type powers. And they're working us to death!"

"It's true," Rickshar admitted. "Look, sorry for before. I... didn't know. Couldn't have even suspected. I was sure you were just another Miru-"

He held up a hand. "It's fine. So you're building warships? For the invasion effort?"

"No. Mining ships. For some reason the Miruku can't get enough mining ships. They have enough personnel to have constant progress, and we only get a few hours of rest every rotation. They don't care if they use us up, there's always more people to draw off of. This is just a small fraction of us, the others are in other rooms or are out in space working. Please,

help us all!"

"I see." *I actually do. My guess is after Darkbolt destroys a world the Miruku roll up and take whatever resources it has. After all, why not? Anyone that would complain is dead. But why would I need these people or mining ships when I'm looking for a factory? Does one of them know the location or something?* "And I will, I promise." *This must be part of what I need, for some reason, I just have to figure out what. I know just how to get back here, too. Ah, that's why two man teams. Not out of concern for the people forced to work here, but to double the effort as the Miruku can take their power and help in construction.* "I'll return with backup soon. I'm working with the Tenma-"

"The Tenma?" The people in the room grumbled.

"That's the kind of help we don't need!" Rickshar told him.

"Look, I know there's been some... history, and the Tenma aren't exactly, er, angels, but right now they're all I've got. We have to solve one problem at a time. They are currently fighting for their survival as much as yours, are you really in any position to turn them down?"

"I guess not."

"I'll tell them where you are and have a force sent to get you." *I can get Dolands and whoever else here like he moved the previous base, so we can appear right in the middle of them rather than coming from the side and warning them.* "They shouldn't be able to cut through that material, but if they find a way just shore it up as best you can. You do have creation powers, right?"

"We'll manage, somehow. But you better not take too long."

"I'll be back as soon as I can."

With that he dropped the wings and the armor and closed his eyes again. Thinking about what he needed to find, he vanished.

Chapter 19

No need for mining

When: No time has passed

Where: The next location guided by need

“Get out of the road, stupid!” yelled a voice. Lysanias opened his eyes again and looked into the face of a man in a vehicle shouting at him through a window on the side. Looking around quickly he saw he was in a city and currently partway between two sidewalks on either side. The man went on. “Teleporting into the middle of the road like that, you want to get killed?”

“Sorry!” he shouted back and picked a direction. Sprinting to the other side he reached it and slowed, moving like he knew where he was going. Traffic behind him resumed, and he tried not to gawk as he moved along with the flow of people he had joined.

So where am I now? Do I need something here? Where is this? They don't seem to be under attack like the last time when I saw War, and I'm not close enough to any one thing for it to be a clue. I was in the middle of the street. If I was supposed to go left instead of right, I'm not going to find what – what?

He noticed that hanging everywhere where banners and flags in blue, with a dark figure printed on them. “Darkness will reign supreme?” he read.

Everyone around him suddenly stopped walking and turned to face him.

Uh, did I just do a no-no?

“Darkness will reign supreme!” they yelled, breaking into smiles, pumping their fists in the air looking to make sure everyone had the same level of enthusiasm they did.

“Darn right!” he agreed, and everyone seemed satisfied. They went back to walking, leaving him standing there a moment until he snapped out of it and headed down the street themselves. *Okay that wasn't freaky. Happens all the time. Nothing to get upset over. Did my need take me directly into the heart of enemy territory? Is that a picture of Darkbolt, creator of the Miruku and current avatar of darkness? As he walked he noticed that no one flew, they drove or walked. No teleporting, no one had power auras around them or walked beside summoned creatures. In fact this could be any city back on Earth in other realities because the people all looked completely human. Is this the Miruku homeworld? Is the factory I'm looking for not out in space, but instead here? I needed to get here and then I'll get closer the next time I blink out? Hello, what's this?* He headed towards what looked like a huge display set in a great intersection and was in time to hear the person on the screen saying “...despite this setback, our brave young men and women on the front lines battle on, following the orders of our great lord and creator, Darkbolt. They have doubled their efforts to insure his will is carried out, that all other races pay for the way we have been treated over the years. Under his great leadership, we will destroy the Tenma and all others who stand in our way, and darkness will reign supreme!”

“Darkness will reign supreme!” everyone within earshot yelled.

Yeah, that wouldn't get old fast. Also, good luck growing food when darkness is reigning supreme and all that. But of course the avatar doesn't care if you starve after you're used up. The announcer went on, talking about the great victories and number of planets that had been destroyed, and Lysanias wondered where he had seen this all before. *Because it seems a tiny bit familiar.* Standing and reading more than listening to the broadcast, along the bottom of the screen scrolled “weapons and armor vanish, scientists baffled at scope of technique.” *Wait, is the 'setback' this guy was just talking about our capture of the asteroid with all the humans in it? They would have vanished because I spent days breaking the connection between the human and the Miruku who stole the soul of that human. That could*

be the weapons and armor they're talking about, the exact nature of them may be a military secret the public doesn't have a need to know, and so doesn't. Wow, I must be public enemy number-

He jumped in fright as a hand clamped down on his shoulder. "What?" he managed.

"Good day sir," said the figure to his right. The man was wearing some kind of uniform by the looks of it, he recalled seeing several people dressed like that as he had gotten closer to the intersection, and they had a pistol like weapon trained on him. "Wonder if you might just come with me if I asked politely?"

"If you're asking politely there's no need for that, is there?" he asked.

"Oh, I think there might be," replied the man. "I see you're not one of us, so I need to take you down to the station so you can explain how you got here and what you're doing. You have no problem with that, do you?"

"One of you?" He looked around and down at himself. He wasn't dressed that outrageously based on what he had seen, having appeared in the dream wearing clothes similar to what the crew he was traveling with wore. He didn't feel he would seem that out of place, especially given the fact these people looked, from what he could tell, 100% human. *Is there some subtle thing like slightly pointed ears or something I've overlooked?*

"Exactly. From what I can tell, you don't have any powers, and you know what that means?"

"No I don't, given neither do you. None of us do, unless we're near someone that does!" *Good comeback, that's true enough right? That's what a Miruku would say.*

"That's what an outsider would think," he agreed, saying the word outsider like one might refer to something partly digested that just flew out of a cat's mouth onto a brand new shag carpet. "But we do have a power. The power to use other people's powers. Oh, we didn't know what we were feeling from each other at first, because we didn't have anything to compare it to. That's all true. But if you turned your power off with metapower thinking it would disguise you, you're sadly mistaken. I can feel the power to use other people's powers in every person on the street here. Except for you. You I don't feel anything from. Ergo, you are not one of us, ergo you are a spy and are coming with me."

Seriously? That's how I got caught? Not because I screwed up and sneezed or something they never do, but because some overly ambitious law officer decided I must not be a Miruku because of what he felt about me?

"Now, if you could just cooperate this doesn't have to get ugly." Another officer holding a restraint approached from the left, while another approached from the front also with his weapon drawn.

They coordinated this, no doubt about it. I wasn't here that long they must have been nearby. Figures they would be paranoid about it, I mean people can teleport long distances in this reality. They would have to be.

"There's a lot of woman and kids around here, you don't want anyone innocent to get hurt, do you?"

"Taking an awful risk I don't," he told the man. "If you're right, and I do turn my powers that you say I have back on, a lot of people could get hurt as I tried to escape. If, as you say, I'm a spy. Why would someone like that care about some innocent lives being lost? You a gambling man?"

"You turn them back on, everyone here will be able to use them," he countered. "And every one of them will. Are you?"

Would they? Are they that fanatical every day people on the street would attack me if they felt I had powers? Or is it more than that, and they would just want to experience using powers when they had the chance? "I guess you got me there," Lysanias seemed to admit,

lying. *I could turn you all into water vapor if I wanted and none of these people would feel a thing.* "I'll come with you, but there is one thing I need to do before I go."

"Oh yeah? If it's not put on those restraints I think you'll be disappointed."

"Think so? What if it was doing *this*?" He closed his eyes and focused on need.

The feeling of the man's hand fell away and he opened his eyes again. He was still on a planet, the same planet if the sky was any indication. *Wonder what they'll think about that? Someone vanishing like that and they didn't feel it happen. Will they report the incident, make themselves look like fools for letting me get away, or bring this incident to someone's attention because it's odd enough to warrant more investigation into who I am? Who knows what cameras recorded that, if it gets back to Darkbolt I'm here... I really should have changed what I looked like physically before starting this need journey. It might not fool the avatar for long, but it would at least throw them off my scent a little. Better move fast. Where am I anyway?*

Lysanias found himself staring through an energy barrier of some kind at a series of buildings. A ship was taking off from beyond it, and as far as he could tell the whole compound was fairly huge. He could see a lot of it because there was an empty field between the energy barrier and the first building, almost as if someone wanted a lot of opportunity to see someone breaching it and reaching the safety of cover on the other side. So they could, you know, shoot that person or whatever. *Or maybe it's a minefield, love me a good minefield right? I could tell if I could earth bend like this but-*

"Move along," said a voice, causing him to jump again. *What is with these jump scares anyway? Who said that?* He looked around, not seeing anyone.

"Up here. Move along," said the voice again.

He looked up and there was some kind of drone hovering there, what must be weapons pointed down at him.

"Uh... Is this where they make the weapons for the war effort?" he asked lamely. *They'll never answer that, don't be stupid. I'm so stupid!*

"If you wish employment at the factory you must make the request through normal channels. Visit mgn.supportthewareeffort.com to learn more. Move along."

Or they will. How about that? "I'll do that!" he assured the drone. "I'm moving along now."

"You are lying. You are still standing motionless."

Take it literally much? "I'm moving along *now*," he clarified, again picking a direction which happened to be away from the energy barrier, by sheer coincidence. "See? Here I go!"

"Now you are being truthful," agreed the drone. "Keep moving."

"I'm going!"

He kept moving until the drone seemed to lose interest in him, which took a few minutes as he kept looking over his shoulder to see it still hovering there. Finally it took off again. *Whoosh! Now to get inside.* He concentrated on being invisible and intangible, then teleported back through the energy barrier and across the field. Nothing swooped down to shoot him so he simply made his way into the building by stepping through the side of the building. He took a walk through for probably half an hour at least and was sure this was the right place. It was mostly automated, as robots of all shapes and sizes put together weapons and armor, boxed them up, and loaded them into crates where they were stacked for later pickup. Living people were few, but present, making sure things ran smoothly. He found an area with more people in it, watching over huge vats of material that was being squirted into tiny ampules a dozen at a time. These were checked, apparently for "nanobot density" meaning this was where they made the *lifestreaming* injectors, and he followed the tubes

back to a lab where more gel was being made and programmed. He left again, heading back outside through the wall deep in thought. (To be clear he was deep in thought, not the wall, though with advances in technology the wall could be part of a computer system that was indeed deep in thought- you get the idea.)

This place is huge, and in the middle of Miruku territory, their home planet. Or at the very least a colony of some kind where there are lots of them. There's drones everywhere for security, from the smaller flying ones to the larger ground based ones prowling everywhere both inside and outside the building as I walked around. At least we don't have to attack different places, it was nice of them to make everything for the war effort in this one place. I guess it's not up to me to come up with a plan, but how exactly are we going to take this place? We can't seize it, they would just bomb it into oblivion and build a new factory on the ashes. I was really hoping it would be a ship or something movable like last time, that we could just steal. But not so much. Mining ships. Prisoners to build them. The Miruku planet. How does it all fit together? Guess I'll head back, finish up the rest of my time here practicing a few hours, stop time, get the rest of my normal hours of sleep and talk to Dolands in ten minutes.

He stepped back into the World of Dreams, still invisible and intangible in case there were shadows around here, and willed himself back to his own Dream. *Things may be easier here, but practice is still practice.*

With his normal amount of sleep gained in the timeless space of his pause talisman completed he went to talk to Dolands, who nodded thoughtfully and told him the plan was quite simple if you thought about it. "Super easy," he insisted. "Barely an inconvenience."

"Oh really?"

"Yeah. We're going to free the people building the ships at that shipyard you found. They'll pilot the ships through a gateway I make to the Miruku homeworld to where you show me, right above the factory. They can't prevent us from teleporting in somewhere near there, after all. We'll then use the mining beams on the mining ships to just tear the factory out of the ground and before their defense forces arrive, hop back through a portal. We'll clear the place out in vacuum so there's no enemy forces to report our position, and slide it through *another* portal back to our base. There we'll set it up and start making weapons for our side."

"I was with you up until mining beam."

"It's how the mining ships work. They mostly function in groups, mining rocks in space. Four or five surround a floating chunk of something and lock an 'attractor' beam onto a section of it. Then they reverse engines and it gets pulled apart from the stress of trying to move in so many directions at once. The chunks are then either pulled apart again if too large, or brought to a processing plant if correctly sized. We'll just do the same thing to the ground the factory is sitting on. From the number of ships you said were there it should be no problem."

"By all working in one direction they'll just rip it out of the ground? Then carry it away?"

"That's right. So yeah, good work, you did get everything you needed."

He wasn't quite convinced. "And that'll work? Without tearing it apart? We shift it and the place falls apart and we've got nothing to show for our efforts."

"Trust me. We'll link them all up so all the ships move as one, believe me we won't even spill their coffee."

Of course it's not exactly coffee but their closest analog to it and my translation ability filled that in for me. "If you say so."

"I do say, 'make it so.' Let's get everyone here and come up with the real plan."

So Ryo-Ohki led the charge through the teleportal that was created by Dolands and others working together, drawing the initial fire and destroying attack craft with abandon. As this location wasn't considered a high risk target there were few ships and personnel guarding the workers, only enough to keep them in line. Lysanias, Rosalina, Rommeta, and a group of soul wielding Miruku easily freed the prisoners and took the prison ship over for their own use. Those out in space gave up without much of a fight given the people they were with didn't have many offensive style powers, just powers to create ships. The people in charge didn't want them to be able to fight back, just put ships together, so this now worked against the Miruku 'handlers' as they had no way to fight back. (also they were bright enough to realize they had nowhere to go now that the support craft were destroyed, so they would soon die in space without being able to refresh their air supply or, you know, get something to eat) They were collected and as long as no one got too close, or someone like Croakter herded them, they were helpless. The former prisoners agreed to help deal a blow against the Miruku and got to work making the required number of ships spaceworthy. As they didn't need niceties like bedrooms or even floors as long as the mining beams could be activated, the ships could fly in formation, and they had engines, they were considered ret-2-go. Meanwhile Dolands and his team had been recharging themselves and opened another portal to the factory building, which they tore out of the ground just as Dolands had predicted. One more portal back to the original location of the human holding asteroid and everyone celebrated, imagining the looks on Miruku faces as they all wondered what the heck just happened.

At least the news people will have a new story to report on?

"Now that was a raid," Dolands said, a grin on his face. It was now hours later, the factory having been dragged to headquarters. The ships were lowering the factory area "down" into the sphere, having been thoroughly swept for bugs, tracking devices, explosives, and the like. Anyone alive at the time had been killed due to decompression and the computers were all offline because all their power lines had been cut. But the Tenma were confident they could get everything working safely again and start producing their own version of the *lifestreaming* system, along with the advanced weaponry. Or at the very least, the Miruku couldn't do that, not without rebuilding the whole place.

If this is the only factory, which I doubt. "I have to admit, it did go quite smoothly," Lysanias told him. They were on the bridge of Doland's ship, watching the factory sink into the base. It was being "lowered" sideways through a huge hole that had opened in the side, they were going to put it on the inner wall somewhere after hacking the bottom part off so it was straight and could be set down level.

"All thanks to you. We wouldn't have found it or had the tools to deal with it once we did if it wasn't for you. I must admit, I'm feeling a bit of hope right now. We could actually win this. Free our reality from Darkbolt. I spent so long believing that was impossible, but yet, here we are."

"What's our next move?"

"Now we wait. Stick close to the base. If they can get that place up and running again in a short amount of time, we make enough weapons for our teams and Gogo shows them the fundamentals of *lifestreaming*. Meanwhile we come up with some plan to draw Darkbolt out. We have to make him come to us, as we have no idea where he's directing this all from."

"I guess I could use need to find him, like I did these last two times."

He shook his head. "Oh, don't get me wrong, you could. And in the end you may have to. Don't much like that option though, it still gives him the home advantage. We need to control this battle. Somehow get him alone, or at least away from his other forces. Death may be dead but there's still Destruction and War out there. Imagine facing all three at once, with Miruku on the other side to take their power and use it on us as well. I don't want to face thirty

demons of Destruction, even if the Miruku can't throw as much power into their techniques as the demon can, it would still be troublesome."

"You're talking about baiting a trap."

"Exactly."

"But all he wants is your destruction. Is there something you could offer him he would want badly enough to face you on your terms to try and get it?"

He sighed. "No. That's the problem."

"So barely a convenience, is that it?"

"Er, something like that, I think it was lost in translation. Honestly I have no idea at this point how we're going to draw him out. I told the queen about my plan to guard a planet, I think you were there for that? That was more to buy time, come up with a better plan. I have no idea if it would work, and I haven't come up with anything better in the meantime. Would you be willing to offer a personal challenge? Call him out?"

"Sure, I guess. Facing me means maybe losing, after all the avatar has lost every time I've showed up. And we've got two wanderers in this reality at this point, plus his powerful friends. It's a risk. But you know what isn't a risk? Ignoring me. Space is really big, I can't just stand in front of him and impede his progress. Even using myself as the bait, he would probably just laugh and go on attacking worlds. He won't fly into a rage just because I call him a stupid head."

"Not with that attitude you won't. You have to call him a stupid head and an ugly face if you want to make him fly into a rage."

They both laughed.

"Seriously though, I have no idea how we're going to find him. But it looks like the factory is inside, so that's a job for another day. Right now we need to brief everyone we rescued and see what they want to do now. So I'll see you later." A portal opened in front of him, showing the area he could teleport into.

"See you later general."

He stepped through and it closed.

Maybe we should have kept the factory elsewhere, used that as the bait in the trap. Would Darkbolt come himself if he loses forces trying to retake it? But I suppose it could be moved after we get everything we need out of it. Guess it's back to training for now, let's go find the others and see what they're up to at the moment. We still have the bulk of the work ahead of us, I think, so I hope they come up with something good.

Chapter 20

No need for planets

When: Several weeks later

Where: Resistance Headquarters

“We haven’t come up with something good.” Those words were spoken by Dolands and played around the station during an all hands meeting several weeks later. Lysanias had used his time at the base well, both awake and asleep. Of course training took precedence, but he still found time to go on two dates with Rosalina, mainly just walking around the station and visiting various parts of it. The entire place was of course enormous, it would take them years to see all of it, and while the non-essential parts of it had been shut down (it seemed to feature many amusement park like areas making him think it had originally been built for another purpose) some parts were thriving despite it. The station had many gardens, parks, and trails that had largely been abandoned. In most cases automated systems kept watering and regulating sunlight so they were simply growing wild, but in others failures had been mounting and the plant life was dying. The two worked together to repair what they could, getting pipes patched, water tanks full, and power restored to areas that had lost it. The station computer, once it realized what they were doing, announced itself to them and facilitated this effort as best it could. It could tell them what was wrong and where, and directed them to the areas that needed the most help first.

“Of course I’ve been sending regular reports about these breakdowns since this place was converted into the resistance headquarters,” it told them. “But if it’s not station critical, it seems those reports are ignored. The war effort takes priority.”

So they rode the station transport tubes, sitting and talking between stops, and worked together at each location to see what they could do for it. She could tell how something broke just as easily as he could, just by touching it, and could intuit how to fix things now as well using her headband. But all too soon Dolands announced they had no better “plan” but at least the Miruku were armed and ready to assist. The crew and Miruku were now all meeting in an auditorium, with Dolands at the front in front of a screen that served as a display. This was currently just in “screen saver” mode showing images of planets.

How many of those planets don’t even exist any more?

“As you know,” and here the display shifted to the map of the galaxy, “Darkbolt has been systematically wiping out planets in an ever increasing radius. He drains the inhabitants of power, and his Miruku forces swoop in and through a combination of bombing and ground troops wipe the planet’s population out. I’ve suggested to the queen we try to put a halt to that and force Darkbolt himself to come to the planet and take charge personally. It’s a risk, but at least a lesser one than attacking head on, even assuming we knew where he was hiding. To that end we’ve chosen this planet, near where our intel shows is next in line for invasion. We’ll head there and remain in orbit until the darkness engulfs the planet. When it leaves the Miruku will be brought in, but what’s different about this time is we’ll be there to meet them. We’ll drive them back, as many times as we have to, in order to get Darkbolt’s attention. When he shows up we’ll have our Miruku draw on Tenchi’s power and hopefully put an end to this reign of terror once and for all.

“Anyone that wants to volunteer for this mission should report to their superior officer and sign up. We’ll leave in twenty four hours. May the angels be with us.”

One will be, I guess. In spirit if not exactly in body.

“It’ll never work,” Ryoko said later, as the group lounged in the meeting area of their ship. She and Gogo were “stuck” to the ceiling, to make more room for the others. So the

crew was packed into the room, Dolands in the center.

"What would you suggest?" he asked her. "I've thought about it for months, and this was all I came up with. We have to do something. And you never know, it could work."

"Yeah, don't be such a downer, Ryoko," Mihoshi told her. "Even if you're up at the moment."

"I only see disappointment when I look into the future," Crytellia admitted. "But he's right, I don't have any better plan."

"I guess I have a skewed perspective," she allowed. "All the enemies I faced, like Ayeka here, Kagato, Dr Clay-"

"Excuse me? I'm on that list?" Ayeka blurted.

"Uh, yeah? Who shot first when you got to Earth? Oh, that's right, you did. Did you ever pay those people back for the giant explosion you caused? The bridge you wrecked? You were really lucky no one died there, princess or not they would have been screaming for your head. Wonder how Jurian law would have handled that one..."

"I wrecked? You were the one that forced my ship down! I don't blame you, Ryo-Ohki you were just doing what your awful master told you to do."

"Meow?"

"Was I? You still shot first."

"I... Gurrrrr."

"See, knows I'm right. Where was I? Oh yeah, that Z fellow, they all attacked us right off. Oh, Z was messing with us I guess according to Washu but ultimately he blew up Earth and forced Tenchi's hand. We didn't even know he was an enemy until he showed himself. Didn't have to go looking for any of these people is what I'm saying."

"Wait if this Z person could blow up a planet why didn't we bring them? Or can Tenchi do the same thing?" Butan asked. "Not that you're not a great guy and all that, no offense, but if it's a glowing sword versus blowing up a planet..."

"I have no idea how he did that, actually," Tenchi admitted. "And I've never tried, because I don't want to know that I can blow up planets."

"Eh, that's fair."

"Hey, what if we blew up planets before Darkbolt could?" asked Mihoshi. "That would show him! He might come and stop us... in that..." Everyone looked at her like she was nuts. "Oh, right, bad idea. Sorry!" She giggled.

"Anyway," Dolands told them. "That's the plan. We'll head in with the rest of the fleet, head to the ground, and do our best to repel the Miruku forces that arrive. If and when we force them to retreat we'll leave the place again in case Darkbolt tries draining our power. Then we wait. Fight off any return forces, and repeat until Darkbolt shows up or we decide he's not going to show up and have to come up with something else."

"Can't he drain us wherever we are?" Ayeka asked. "Especially if we're just nearby."

"You would think so," he agreed, "but practically he doesn't. We think it's because it's easier to target a whole planet than a tiny ship. He's powerful, and guided by the avatar of darkness, but even he can't see individual people walking around on the street. That's why he zaps the planet and lets his Miruku do the rest instead of going himself."

"But be aware that War could show up," Lysanias told them. "Or Destruction, for that matter."

Everyone looked grim but Dolands was nodded. "Hey, that would be good for us," he countered. "Get another demon or two out of the way! We don't want to fight them all at once, right?"

They agreed this could be one way of looking at it. In any case they had their orders, and the meeting broke up to get the ship ready for departure.

The trip to the planet took several days, and Lysanias got the bright idea to go talk to Croaker and show him the armor.

"I wondered if you had any ideas," he told the amphibious crew member as he presented all three versions of the armor he and his companions wore. "There must be advanced technology from this reality I could incorporate that's not based on powers. If you can show me enough about how it would work and integrate, I can make those changes."

"I'd be happy to take a look," Croaker agreed, seeming eager for something to do. "With nothing to fix and no active powers of my own I'm just left tinkering with systems to make sure they're operating at peak efficiency. Not the most fun I could have, believe you me. Hey, this is pretty nice!" He was looking it over top to bottom and running some kind of tool over the whole thing.

"Thanks. If you wanted I could make you one. Our proportions are a bit different and I'd need to style the helmet differently but that's easy enough to take care of the way I do it."

"Really? I'd often dream of building my own combat android, like your Rommeta, but when this whole war with Darkbolt situation came up, that was put on the back burner. My people have always valued artistic and technological expression, and something like her would fulfill both needs at once. Forget sculpture, she's beautiful and capable. But with this I could actually contribute to the war effort directly. Flight, energy weapons, AI assistance, boosted strength, it's more than a Miruku could boast if they weren't near someone with those powers. Yeah, I can see room for some upgrades especially in how you must get it on and off. We can do better. Let me bring up the schematic my scanner created and I can make some suggestions. Then if you can incorporate those changes into an armor for me, that would be great!"

"You got it!"

So the pair created Lysanias' new armor by Croaker using the onboard fabrication devices to make example parts of it, and explained some new electronics he could incorporate. Croaker couldn't believe the power supply had been made by someone in a world of Amelia's technological advancement and wondered if she wasn't some kind of alien in disguise or something, but their equipment could duplicate it as easily as the rest of the armor. The whole ship had of course heard about their efforts and most of the crew wanted their own armor as well, which he was glad to provide.

"But I don't understand," he said to Ellias three nights later. Her helmet as well had to be custom fitted, as her head was more like a dog's head than a humans. She didn't need an undersuit because of her fur, but she was mostly human shaped so the rest was no problem. "If you wanted a set of power armor before this, your fabrication machines could make you one. I mean your space suits are most of the way there already, aren't they?"

"Sort of," Croaker hedged, who was helping.

"I saw it make the various pieces, Croaker, and I've seen you all in your spacesuits."

"Exactly, it can make the pieces. But there's still a lot of work to do after that. Hooking everything up, getting it to run as a whole unit. This way is fine because you're creating the whole thing out of nothing. I can scan the whole system, see how everything has been put together by your power. Then if part of it is damaged that part can be removed and replaced, I'll know how it should fit back together. Unless the armor is a total loss, in which case the person inside," he knocked on it, "in this case Ellias would probably be dead anyway. But believe me, even with our advanced manufacturing capability it would still take some time and effort to create a whole suit like this. That's why you don't see them more in operation despite our having the technological means to create them. The spacesuits are just that, pressurized

suits. As everyone around here has powers, adding 'powers' if you will to the armor itself was never a priority for us. We just made them to survive a vacuum. But now knowing this kind of thing is possible, I would be willing to put the work in. It's just a hassle to get all the various pieces I would need to fabricate working together."

"Then you just need to build bigger and better fabrication machines, to do the whole thing at once!"

He got a thoughtful expression. "Yeah, maybe."

"But maintenance is a problem too right?" Ellias spoke up. "Not talking about damage, I just mean parts wearing out because that's what things do. No matter how well made, something as sophisticated as this has a lot of things that can go wrong. I would have to have someone that could repair it. Right now," she bumped against Croaker playfully, "that's this guy here. But if we hadn't been assigned such a great engineer if I had an armor like this and one of the arms froze up for some reason, I couldn't fix it. You seemingly wish a new set of armor out of nothing so it's always brand new for you, Lysanias. The rest of us have to make do with degrading matter in an uncaring universe that will one day run out."

"When did you start channeling Xelena?" Croaker asked her.

"She has a point," Ellias said with a shrug.

Having arrived at the planet the group had more than a week of hanging around in orbit waiting for something to happen before it did. Their patience was rewarded as Thabion sounded the alarm.

"I'm detecting Darkbolt's signature," he alerted the crew. "The planet is- By the angels, look at that!"

Everyone rushed to a viewing window to look out at the planet below them and watched in horror as it was swallowed by darkness. The planet seemed to simply vanish, as though a dark curtain had been pulled over it, and Lysanias couldn't begin to imagine how fast that darkness traveled to cover the planet so quickly. Where there had been a planet of water and life and light now was a blank spot in space, but this was quickly reversed as the darkness went away from it again.

"It's over," Thabion said shakily. "Everyone on the planet will be drained of energy and vulnerable. The Miruku will arrive at any second to start destroying the place."

"We got some good scans though right?" Dolands asked.

"Yes sir. I mean I knew that's how he was doing it, but to see it with my own eyes. The scope of that power, it's incredible. We know more about how it works now, though I doubt we can come up with any defense against something like that."

"Leave that to the scientists back home. For now, we have a job to do. Everyone, suit up and head to the planet. Ryoko, take Ryo-ohki out and deal with the larger ships. Don't blow them all up, just enough to get them to back off. We want them to get away to tell their master we were here. They come back a second time, that's when we want to send back the pieces."

"I know the plan," she grumbled. "Come on Ryo."

"Meow!"

Plus these people could be innocent. Controlled by the lifestreaming system just like the others.

To that end the others were also under orders to fight somewhat conservatively. Where they could, just exhaust any Miruku they came across, and get their weapons away from them. That too would force them to retreat. Lysanias had his own plan, one that involved Rosalina.

"You remember what we're going to do right?" he asked her as they made their way to the surface.

"Of course!" She swished her wand. "You and Rommeta are going to distract them, I'm going to put them to sleep. They might feel me coming, but they can't use my type of magic because they don't have a wand."

"And they can't keep up with me because I don't have powers for them to draw off of," Rommeta reminded them. "So really, you're the weakest link here, Lysanias."

"Most powerful person on the ship," he grumbled, "and I'm the weakest link."

As it turned out, Lysanias simply showing up was enough to sometimes make the nearest Miruku stare in disbelief for a second, long enough for Rosalina to cast her sleep spell on them. Some of course recovered more quickly and didn't waste time trying to claim all of Lysania's powers for themselves and just raised their guns to shoot him. Lysanias stayed on the defensive, ripping up the ground or simply yanking their guns away from them depending on how many they came across. Rommeta targeted their guns as well, more often than not beating him to the punch, and one by one they fell and he tied them up. This worked fairly well, given the Miruku were not expecting any kind of resistance from the people on the ground, and were so spread out the small groups that were together couldn't get backup in time.

"So, what?" Rosalina asked angrily as the latest group was secured. "They expected to just land, then start shooting people dead?" She indicated the natives that were scattered about the streets. For the most part they would be fine, those knocked unconscious while driving vehicles of course were in bad shape, and there were many fires starting to rage out of control. It was simply the shock of the darkness overtaking their world and their energy being drained all at once that knocked them out, they were swiftly coming around again. They wouldn't be using any powers that consumed energy any time soon, but they could walk around and get off the streets and into any shelters they had. (Some people had the power to recover energy in seconds instead of hours, those people were already up and helping the others and would have been the first targets as far as Lysanias could tell)

"That would explain their tactics," Rommeta agreed. "Small groups, spread out over a large area with a high population density like cities. They have been doing this for some time, so they're probably very efficient at it. But to think even people under the control of the avatar would be unable to resist gunning down innocent people as they lay unconscious in the streets..."

"Why not just bomb the place from orbit? Why make it so personal?"

"They would need trillions of bombs for the number of planets we're talking about," she explained. "Even here, with the kind of energies they could bring to bear, they couldn't possibly manufacture enough. Besides, consider our opponent. They have all the time in the world, and the thing they want is the potential energy of this reality. That would go to waste if they just made bombs. You think the avatar couldn't make nova bombs and just destroy system after system? But then that energy is lost, diffused so it's not useful anymore. This is the most energy efficient way of doing things. And don't forget the Miruku come in and steal all the resources afterwards. Bombs might make that harder, contamination by nuclear power if that's the most powerful type of bomb even here, would make it impossible."

"Plus they probably mark those with useful powers to take with them," Lysanias figured. "They may get teleported away, we know they can use technology, not powers, to do that."

"I guess. And we have to carefully not hurt them!"

"In all likelihood they are being controlled," Rommeta reminded her.

"I know. But they're still trying to kill Lysan- us. They're still trying to kill us."

“Come on, the drones are showing movement over there.” She pointed.
“Let’s go.”

The initial operation was a complete success, the Miruku fleet recalling their ground troops after only an hour of being beaten up by Ryo-Ohki and the Tenma, and leaving the system. Croakter and the others said their armor operated fine, and few Tenma had been hurt or killed so once the fleet was gone the Tenma got out of there as well. They were all now back in orbit to avoid any retaliation from Darkbolt, and waiting for a larger force to arrive once word got back to him they were there.

What they didn’t expect, however, was for the whole planet to blow up.

Chapter 21

No need for despair

When: Not half an hour after repelling the invading Miruku force

Where: Doland's ship

"Sir, you're going to want to see this!" Crytellia announced from the bridge.

"On my way." He got up from the table in the mess hall and indicated Lysanias should follow, and the two made their way to the bridge. Lysanias was still in the armor, it was faster to take off and put back on but he wanted to be ready in case more ships appeared right away. *Maybe they can do the same portal trick and be back here in minutes now that they've seen it. Better to not take the chance.*

"Report."

"Reading a massive power build up nearby," she informed him. "Putting it onscreen."

The display changed to show what seemed to be empty space, but zooming in showed a brilliant golden light hanging there.

"Dolands to every ship in the fleet, get away from the planet. I repeat, move away from the planet *now!*" he ordered. "Get us moving too! Any heading, maximum speed."

"Yes sir," Thabion acknowledged, punching buttons on his control panel. The planet dropped away from them, and a moment later tore itself to pieces. There was a stunned silence as huge pieces of rock sped into the blackness of space. Then suddenly the speakers rang out. "It's Destruction! He's here on the- wait he's gone again!"

"He's here- no he's gone."

"Now he's-"

"He's-"

"Wait now he's-"

And suddenly a strange looking creature was standing on the bridge, surrounded by a nimbus of golden light. It stood on four legs, and looked more like a dinosaur than anything else, with a long neck and tail. The aura faded as Thabion and Crytellia jumped out of their seats and scrambled behind Dolands and Lysanias.

"Ah, here you are," it said. "The famous General Dolands, and the wanderer I've heard so much about."

This could be bad. That's the demon of destruction? Yes, the angel remembers him as well.

"Destruction," Dolands said tightly.

"Did you like the show? I take it your presence here was trying to send a message? Tell me, which of us did it better?"

"If it's a fight you want..." He raised his hands.

Destruction laughed. "Oh, eventually. I'm quite interested in what Lysanias is going to do when we fight for real later. But trying to fight here would just tear this little ship apart, and I like having room to move around. Most of your crew can't survive in space, I take it? No, best to meet *elsewhere* for our big showdown. I just wanted to say hello, I'll be on my way."

Did he just put a slight emphasis on that word? Why not just say outright where we can battle if he's so interested?

"You're scared!" Dolands blurted.

Dolands, what are you doing? Don't antagonize the guy that can blow up planets!

"Excuse me?" Destruction growled, voice hard.

"You've already lost Death to Lysanias, you're scared he'll kill you too. Smash your orb, put an end to you. Admit it."

"I admit nothing! Maybe I will just destroy this ship after all." He raised his tail and a

glowing orb of energy flickered to life atop it.

"Yes, go ahead! Tear it apart, I'm sure it would be easy for a demon such as yourself." He paused, seeming to think with a finger on his chin. "Remind me how fast you are? How much damage can you regenerate at once?"

Destruction actually looked taken aback, looking around in what Lysanias decided what must be a nervous way. It was hard to tell. "You've rigged this ship to blow, is that what you're implying? With something you think can destroy me? If I destroy it, the bomb goes off?"

"Would be awfully stupid of me to imply that if I had though," he reasoned. "Easiest just to keep my mouth shut and hope you blow up one of our ships. I mean I couldn't *possibly* have anticipated your presence here, could I?"

Suddenly Destruction chuckled. "Psychological warfare, is it? Can't win any other way? I admit, you had me for a second there. But it won't change anything. Lysanias, if you can find where Darkbolt is, in the great big black, we'll meet again." There was a flash, and Destruction was gone.

Is he hinting something? Big black, that's just space, not really helpful is it?

"Whew," Dolands breathed a sigh of relief. "He really left."

"Uh, sir?" Thabion asked timidly, returning to his seat. "Do we have some kind of chaos bomb on board? That's the only thing I could see putting a dent in Destruction. Is that why you goaded him?"

"Maybe," he admitted with a grin. "Would our lives be worth getting rid of the being that could do that?" He indicated the now blank space where the planet was. "Come on, let's head back to base." His face fell again. "There's nothing left for us here."

"He did what?" Rosalina yelled when they learned what had happened.

"Blew up the planet," Lysanias told her sadly. He was taking the armor off back in his room, and his two companions were there. "I guess the avatar isn't fooling around here."

"The place we just spent almost two weeks heading towards, and days in orbit, and then hours running around knocking Miruku around is just *gone*?"

"It's gone. Apparently Destruction was sent to send us a message. Defending planets won't work, he'll just cut his losses and blow it up rather than attempt a second invasion. I'm sorry."

"I know, I can feel it through the headband. You're frustrated there was nothing you could do, no warning that was coming so you could have saved a few people. You would think, something like that, you would have dreamed about it."

He shook his head. "I don't dream the future that much now that I realize I'm dreaming all the time and go lucid to practice my Dreaming skills. Better that, I thought, because it's more useful than maybe getting a vague hint about something I'll have to deal with anyway. Besides, even if I had gotten some kind of warning, what could I have done about it? Met him in space I guess, but he could have just poked his head through a portal and used his technique to blow up the planet. He might not have even been here."

"I don't know, I just feel so helpless. All those people, gone."

"Hopefully not too many more. We're ending this, and soon. I'll walk the Dream and find out where Darkbolt is. The Miruku are as ready as they'll ever be, it's time to stop this madness before any more planets are lost."

"You better take extra precautions, that's like swimming with sharks, trying to find him. He may be surrounded by shadows! In either world."

"Agreed. I just don't quite understand why Destruction let us go. He was right, fighting on the bridge of the ship would have been terrible, but he probably could have teleported us into space with him. Darkbolt may want me to find him, to kill me himself. We need some way

to deal with the other demons, even our force of Miruku will be hard pressed to fight three at once.”

“There is a way,” Rommeta told him. “It even comes from this universe, though Darkbolt has suppressed all knowledge of them from what I’ve been able to learn.” She held out a hand and a box appeared in it, which she reached into. She pulled out a device that almost looked like Tenchi’s sword hilt, wooden as if several branches were woven together, and handed it over. “It’s an extractor. It’ll pull an orb out of someone, if you can get close enough.”

“That’s a big if!” He took it and looked it over. One end did have a sort of pincer on it, where the orb could be grabbed. “I don’t recall seeing an orb on either demon though.”

“No, you would have to get them back into their human forms.”

“Oh, it gets better?” Rosalina asked. “How is he supposed to do that? Ask nicely?”

“Not exactly. In the original timeline, the host for Darkbolt did eventually overcome him and take control. The others she bonded the orbs to, which may I remind you were a bunch of high school kids at the time, she ordered control be turned over. But they still managed to keep control of the demons which was no easy feat. My guess is they haven’t taken control back despite all the awful things the demons are doing because they simply believe they can never win. The demons have shown them all sorts of things from their long existence, and they never really tried. If you can get in there, show them it is possible, or beat up the demon long enough for them to take control back, you could grab the orb.”

“Meld with the demon itself? It could work. I would have to go without the armor, I have to touch someone to meld with them.”

“Do you?” Rosalina asked. “You didn’t have to touch someone to pull those souls out.”

“Oh yeah. Forgot about them.” He got the wings out and looked them over as they appeared behind him. “I was just the distraction that last time anyway, they wouldn’t have been all that useful.”

“You could use the same method right?”

“Probably. I’d like to practice it, I bet Crytellia would let me.”

“You’ll have plenty of time,” she grumped.

“Not exactly. Dolands said he was going to use the energy sharing technique and get us back to base right now. He doesn’t want to waste a minute reporting what happened, and getting new orders.”

“New orders?” she scoffed. “They haven’t found him by this time, what orders will change that? He’s admitted the planet defense plan has been his only idea since we got here, and that turned out to be a bust. It’s all up to you.”

“True. In a few hours I’ll start my search. No one else but the people on this ship know I can do what I can do. He has to at least *pretend* to get new orders, and the queen would expect him to report in after such an event.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Rommeta asked.

“I don’t think so. I’ll go practice melding without touching the person and then tonight go looking for Darkbolt.” He handed the extractor back. “Get out of the armor, at least it held up well with the new changes Croaker help me implement. I’ll be back in a few hours to get some sleep, take it easy until then.”

“I guess if we haven’t practiced enough by now a little more won’t do very much,” Rosalina admitted. “Maybe I’ll just go back to being a wand for now.”

“Up to you.”

“I just don’t think I can deal with seeing anyone, everyone’s probably miserable after the planet blew up and I’d feel every bit of it. I’ll see you all tomorrow.” She vanished, and Lysanias was holding the wand again.

"This had better work," Rommeta told him as he set her down on the desk in the room. "The Hub can't afford to lose any more wanderers, especially not you."

"Thanks. We'll think of something, don't worry. See you later."

Lysanias had no trouble melding with Crytellia at a distance, and the two practiced without any other subterfuge needed. It was a technique he wanted to use against the demons, there was no point hiding it from any of the queen's spies that might be watching. *But why am I left with a vague sense of disappointment?* He was still concerned the demon's willpower would be able to overpower his own, this wasn't a skill he really practiced. He just relied on the sword, which he would have to carry into battle while wearing the armor, augmenting him and making it possible. *But she said a bunch of teenagers got control back so their will can't be that much greater than a normal human's, right? I can throw energy into my willpower as well, so maybe it'll be fine.*

With that done he told Dolands about the extractors and his plan to use them, so he was prepared to go looking for Darkbolt's location. Dolands told him to go ahead. "The queen is disappointed this plan didn't work, and is also surprised Destruction would blow up a planet and not us. She thinks maybe the host is exerting some kind of influence, however minor."

Hopefully we can save the other two hosts, instead of just sealing them both back into an orb and smashing it like we did for Death. Is that why the dropped little hints? The host making that much effort, possibly undetected, to desperately try and get us a message? I'll have to think carefully on what they said.

"You're our only hope at this point. Given your success at finding other things like this, the queen is ready to commit a large portion of our forces to the eventual location. Those that can create portals are being shown how to open some large ones, so we can just appear in whatever system he's hiding in. We've got people that can regenerate energy backing them up, and they're practicing the syncing technique allowing them to share that power. All we need is for you to give them all a picture of where they need to go."

"And then our final battle will begin."

"That's right. Good luck. They may not know it, but countless planets and the Tenma resistance are all counting on you."

"Thanks."

And so Lysanias waited to be taken into the Dreaming world, and once there he made his now usual precautions for this sort of thing. He focused on being both invisible and intangible, hoping that would protect him from the majority of dangers he might run into while blindly stepping from place to place looking for Darkbolt. *After all, if light is passing through me because I'm invisible, no part of me is in darkness, and so Darkbolt wouldn't be able to sense me nearby.* He paused. *Wait, if I'm invisible how am I seeing anything? Duh, because it's a dream, silly. Let's go. I need to find Darkbolt. Where is he hiding?* He closed his eyes. *Need. Darkbolt. Take me to how I can find him. Need to find Darkbolt.* He stepped.

When he opened his eyes again he seemed to be in a classroom, empty seats in rows facing forward. There didn't seem to be anything obvious here that would lead to Darkbolt, but just to be sure he made certain his invisibility was in place and stepped over into the waking world. Here there was some activity, the classroom it seemed was just filling up, young looking kids filling into the room talking and laughing. *Wouldn't it make more sense to have one person, the teacher, move from room to room than hundreds of students? Huh.*

"All right class," said the teacher, or at least the person at the front of the room. "Let's begin today's discussion."

Why am I here? He walked to the windows and looked out, not seeing anything but a parking lot for strangely styled vehicles out there. *These are just kids, none of them is going to know where Darkbolt is. Right? Or is it something close by? Strange how human they look, though of course there are some differences if you look at the- Wait what are they talking about?*

“That’s right,” said the teacher. “A dimensional technique is used. What I want to talk to you about today is the danger of letting someone into your pocket dimension. If that person can teleport, you’ve just let them in *forever*, unless you take everything out, destroy it, create a new one that looks totally different, and put everything back. Now can someone tell me why this is?” They pointed to a raised hand.

“Because you’re a bad judge of character?”

Everyone laughed.

“No,” said the teacher. “I mean why would you have to relocate your possessions?” They pointed.

“Because if you don’t, and you destroy your dimension, everything inside is destroyed too?”

“Still not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about letting someone in who can teleport. Let’s say you discover two years from that point they’re a terrible person. You don’t want them coming into your dimension unannounced. Why do you have to essentially create a new pocket dimension?”

“Because people who can teleport can go anywhere they’ve seen?” answered the next person.

“Correct! As they’ve seen your dimension, they can go in whenever they want. So make sure you trust whoever you invite into your dimension not to steal your stuff.”

Wait, what sort of school is this? I guess if you have kids you know are going to have powers, and everyone but humans seems to in this reality, it makes sense to have classes in them.

“Now what sorts of things can be in a personal dimension when it’s made?”

“Weather!” one person answered.

“That’s right. Whatever kind of environment you want, be it hot or cold.”

As fascinating as this is, I already have a personal dimension and my holding dimension from wandering. And my soulscape. I’m pretty sure I’m set knowledge wise about them. Thanks for the lesson and everything but I’m looking for the tyrant of the universe who wants to kill you all. Wish me luck. He closed his eyes again and focused on what he needed. To find Darkbolt. When he opened his eyes again the scene had greatly changed.

Looks like the bridge of a starship. It was, with people scurrying from the elevator with reports to talk to what must be the captain, and then away again. Just like on Doland’s ship there were several stations in front of a viewscreen, though he couldn’t make heads or tails of what it was showing. *What am I supposed to learn here, I wonder?* He stood around waiting, wondering if something was going to happen, and the captain got a message from somewhere in the ship.

“Sir, someone just teleported onto the ship,” said a voice after the captain said to go ahead with the message. “Said they’ve come directly from Darkbolt with the latest orders.”

“You checked their credentials?”

“Password matched, and they have the right documentation.”

“Very well. Send them up.”

“Yes sir.”

Lysanias waited and a moment later the door behind the captain’s chair opened, and a

man in uniform stepped out.

“Sir!” They saluted and the captain barked an order to report.

“I have the name, time, and coordinates of the next planet that will be drained by Lord Darkbolt.” He handed over a device and the captain punched a code into it, and it unlocked and showed him something.

“So you do. Very well. I will wait until you’ve teleported back to the surface before moving out. Can you find your way back?”

“Yes sir.”

“Dismissed.”

They saluted again and the man left.

The captain waited until he got confirmation the man had left, and ordered the fleet moved to the new coordinates. The ships started moving.

Okay, what? Darkbolt is sending just random people to give orders to his fleet? How does that make sense? Is he just too busy to hand that message over himself? Can't he just teleport wherever, then they wouldn't need all this password business? I mean it would take two seconds to appear on the bridge, give his orders, and go back to wherever he was. This guy came from Darkbolt but was heading 'back to the surface?' Why wouldn't he go back to see Darkbolt directly if he's clearly the one going between the big guy and himself? First I go to a classroom talking about personal dimensions, now this. How does it tie together? Or is there something else I should do here? Why not just take me to where Darkbolt is from the beginning? I know this technique is supposed to get you closer and closer with each step but come on, I just need to find the guy. I guess I better see what the world has to show me next, these guys will be traveling for some time according to them, so nothing else interesting will probably happen here. He closed his eyes again and focused on need.

This is clearly a prison, he thought to himself when he opened his eyes again. Not where Darkbolt is likely to be. Almost seems like I'm getting further away from him rather than closer. Weird. He looked around, and he was standing in a hallway that had cells on one side, and a drop of several meters on the other. Looking over the railing he saw he was only three floors up, and there were several floors above him. He looked into the cell he was in front of and saw a young girl laying there in the bed, staring at the ceiling. *Is she important or was my landing here completely random? Seems strange to lock up a girl that young.* He looked left and right, and there were guards here but that didn't stop him, he walked a bit down the hall and looked in the cells going left, and then back going right. It seemed people here were of every shape, size, and age, from the clearly inhuman like the fellow that seemed to be some kind of floating jellyfish to those that looked completely human. Again he went back to the cell he had appeared before, and looked over the occupant. She was wearing a standard prison uniform, basically a one piece covering with no pockets, in orange. She had dark skin and hair, and was probably half his height if he was estimating correctly. A commotion down the hall drew his attention, as several guards were approaching. The girl didn't seem to care but some were cat-calling and insulting the guards, who walked on. They seemed to be escorting two others, and stopped three cells down and raised their guns, unlocking the door.

“Me again? Don't you have anyone else that can do this?” the man inside whined.

“If we did, we would use them,” said the one man. “You know how rare your ability is? You should be thankful, it's why you're still alive unlike the rest of your planet. Now come out of there nice and slow, past the bars.”

Planet? These are Miruku, aren't they? Just how large is the war machine that is the Miruku race?

“I have done this before you know.” He put his hands behind his head and turned

around, backing out of the cell to just past the door. They stopped him, then all the guards paused a moment and held out a hand. "Soul Blade!" they all cried, and as he watched blades came into existence in their hands. He walked over as they pushed the guy back into the cell and started exclaiming over their new weapons. They were daggers at best, but rather than being made of metal they seemed to be a transparent energy.

"Man, it really worked!" one was saying. "Let's see if they stay when we're away from him though." They moved down the corridor again, pushing the prisoners ahead of them, and were delighted to find they did.

"Remember, you have to keep them hidden," one of the guards said. "We can't tell anyone we're doing this sort of thing."

"Oh yes," another said sarcastically, "wouldn't want the lowlifes in here to be *abused* or anything, now would we? We're just borrowing their power for a second, who cares?"

"To make stuff you're going to take home. You think the higher ups would see it as so innocent as to not care?"

"Maybe. I can't wait to test it!"

"Just don't fall on it and kill yourself."

They laughed and carefully tucked the knives away into a bag the guard that did most of the talking got out. "You can grab one on the way out," he reminded them. "Don't let anyone see it."

"We know, we know," the others told him.

While they were busy putting the other two people back in their cells Lysanias stopped concentrating on being phased and simply wished one into his hand from around the corner. The one holding the bag didn't seem to notice, and he snickered as he walked back down the hallway, becoming phased again. He had to pass through several doors to get back to the man, and he passed into the cell. The man was up, looking angrily out through the bars, and again Lysanias dropped his phasing and tapped the man on the shoulder. Naturally he jumped and spun, but saw nothing.

"Sorry for startling you," he told the man. "I just wanted to know if you knew what the heck they were doing and what this knife is?" He held it up and the man flattened himself against the bars.

"Watch where you point that thing! Who is that anyway?" he hissed. "How did you get in here? Can you get me out?"

"Possibly. I know some people, if you're important to the war effort a case could be made to mount a rescue."

"How can you still be invisible, and how did you get in here? The cells should prevent all powers from being used!"

"Let's just say you shouldn't believe everything a Miruku tells you. The knife?"

"It's my power," he explained, relaxing a little against the bars. "I can tie two people's powers together. The one guy- you saw the whole thing?"

"I did."

"Who are you? The guards should have sensed you... Anyway, the one guy had soul nature. The other guy had the fairly common creation nature, and must have a technique to create those knives you saw. When those Miruku were near me, they used me to tie the two powers together to create a blade but instead of being made of normal matter, like it normally would be, my power allowed it to be made of soul. Normally the one with the creation nature would have to do it, I don't get the powers being tied together, but as Miruku can take my power and both of theirs they can, which as you can see works just fine."

"What does that even mean?" He looked the blade over, and he could see the man right through it, but it was clearly there.

“Probably that it will kill someone without leaving a mark. Who knows, until someone tries it. Those guys are always exploiting us, using our unique powers for their own gain. They’re always bringing people to see how my power can tie them together. Probably sell those knives on the black market for a huge amount of cash. Makes you wonder who should be locked up.”

“They may not be in total control of themselves. But never mind.” *How does this tie in with what I saw before? That was a class about personal dimensions, and then someone coming from Darkbolt with orders. But wait I appeared in the next cell so maybe this was just a coincidence?* “I don’t suppose you have any abilities related to personal dimensions?”

“No, not me. You mean Bumper? She’s in the next cell over, so you were close if that’s what you’re looking for. Hey Bumper!”

“Yeah?” a voice said from the next cell over.

“Some invisible guy wants to talk to you. Says we might get a rescue if we’re important to the war effort.”

“What invisible guy? How am I going to be important to the war effort?”

“I’m here researching powers that might help us defeat Darkbolt. Never mind my name, what can you do?” he asked her.

“I can enter people’s personal dimensions without seeing them beforehand. I sort of ‘bump’ across them, like they were just stacked next to each other.”

“Interesting. Does everyone in this place have a unique ability?”

“From what we can tell, yes,” answered the man. “It seems the Miruku aren’t one for waste. They’ll tear a planet apart to kill every last person, but leave anyone they deem useful alive.” He indicated the cell. “If you call this living.”

“Very nice of them to put you all together like this. The reason you haven’t escaped using these abilities is because of the cell?”

“You think I would be hanging around here if I could get out?” the girl replied.

“Just checking, I didn’t know if they put other techniques on you or something.”

“Nah. I get out of here for even a second and I’m gone, into someone’s pocket dimension at random. That’s why they never let me out. You think that’s useful enough to spring me?”

“Personally I don’t want to leave any of you in Miruku hands for even another minute. But strangely, yes, I’m getting an idea you both may be useful. I would need your word though, if we do come back to get you out of here, you have to help us beat Darkbolt. I’m not asking you to be a front line fighter or anything,” he hastily added. “But if your abilities can help, you can’t just go running off.”

“If it gets me out of here, deal.”

“Same,” said the man.

“Same!” said a voice from the other side.

“Aw, shut up Xinabino,” the man called.

“What, I want to get out of here too, and you’re not exactly being subtle about it.”

“Look, if I can convince the Tenma to attack this place and free you, everybody goes. You have my word.”

“What’s that worth if you won’t even give us your name?” Bumper asked.

“Just call me the angel of life,” he decided, and stepped back into the World of Dreams. With that he headed out of the place, not wanting to take any chances running into someone if he lost concentration, and went outside to see where he was. Passing out of the prison and then past the wall around the prison he looked around, fixing the image in his mind. The planet looked different but he couldn’t be sure if the Miruku homeworld just happened to look different at different points or this was a different world altogether.

In the end it doesn't matter. Let's head back to base and find Dolands. They can't protect everywhere out here so he should be able to open a teleportal back to this place so we can attack it. Then I think you're mine, Darkbolt!

Chapter 22

No need for boss battles

When: After he woke up the next morning

Where: Doland's ship

"So you say that you think Darkbolt is hiding out in his own personal dimension?" Dolands asked, looking the knife over.

"That's right. It all fits together. The lesson in dimensional techniques, the ship with the guy that gave the orders, then finding a person that can go into other people's dimensions without seeing them. You've never found where they're hiding, and them wanting to stay secure while others do their dirty work explains that man I saw giving the orders to the captian. It's the perfect hiding place!"

"It really is, that's true," he admitted. "How does the other guy tie into it?"

"My thought was, if a seer type like Crytellia targeted Darkbolt and the other guy I met in the prison tied them together, Bumper could slip into it despite never having seen it. Alternately, Bumper's power could augment Crytellia so she could see into the dimension and then give that image to you so you could go into it, if normally you can't see into other people's dimensions."

"I would be interested to try that! Could be useful, if tying powers together could create something like this knife, that shouldn't even exist. How long do you think those guards squabbled when they realized one was missing?"

Lysanias laughed. "I hope they were terrified one slipped out of the bag and spent hours looking for it. I hope they're still paranoid about it, like someone is going to stab somebody and it'll be their fault."

"Me too. We'll do the same thing as before, take some Miruku of our own, and hit the place. We can open some portals back here and sort everyone out." He held out a hand. "Give me the image and I'll give the orders."

"You got it." He melded with Dolands who nodded and said he could get there for sure, and went to go put a team together.

The team, consisting of Tenchi, Lysanias, Rosalina, Dolands, Gogo and a few other Miruku hit the prison and tore through it. The Miruku covered all angles with Tenchi's shields, allowing the others to be safe in the center, allowing Lysanias to yank guns away from people while Rosalina put them to sleep. Had any of the others gone the Miruku in the prison could have drawn off their power and caused more trouble, but with the majority of the team Miruku anyway, that wasn't a problem. They moved quickly, leaving guards lying where they fell as Lysanias tore open cells and let people out, who moved to let more people out, until the whole place was free. Dolands then led them outside where authorities were gathering to respond to the prison's distress call. Again the Miruku simply put up Light Hawk Wing barriers while Dolands' teleportal swallowed them all up, and quick as a wink the place was empty.

"We need to move fast," Dolands announced as everyone was milling around. "If word gets back to Darkbolt about this breakout they may figure out what we're planning and take steps. Is there a Bumper here? And someone that can tie powers together?"

"That's me," said the man, making his way through the crowd. "Tomsaya, at your service. Which one of you was my invisible friend, I want to thank them, as they seem to have come through for me."

"That's me," Lysanias said, feeling more shy now that he was visible again. *Strange how that works.*

"And I'm Bumper," she announced, also making her way there. "You got me out like

you promised so I'm yours. Huh, expected you to be taller. What's the plan?"

"Come with me and I'll explain on the way." He left the others with some resistance members to get them squared away and took the Miruku on the tube system. "We'll meet up with the rest of the volunteers for this mission. We can't take a ton of people, we'll just get in each other's way." He barked a laugh. "I say that, but we're bringing about fifty Miruku and some others with useful powers so we won't lack for things to throw at him. We should have space to spread out, at least I hope he doesn't have a whole army with him in his pocket dimension. If that's even where he is."

Fifty is nearly all the Miruku we rescued. This had better work, we won't get a second chance if it doesn't. "It would make sense though, as that's why you couldn't track him down," Lysanias figured.

"I guess we'll know soon." When the car arrived he introduced Tomsaya and Bumper to Crytellia and they got to work. The volunteers were just in a large auditorium like space and Lysanias saw every Miruku surrounded by souls, wearing armor, and carrying at least two guns. *Hopefully that force will give even Darkbolt pause.* Dolands called for quiet and the Miruku all looked over at him. "Here's the plan. You're going to form a ring around Tenchi here and when we arrive you're going to put up a layered barrier while we see what the situation is. Expect the three demons to be there. If not immediately then soon after, Darkbolt will summon them to his defense I'm sure. If this Light Hawk stuff is as good as we hope it should buy us time, whatever they throw at us should be deflected. Lysanias here will use that time to mentally attack the two demons War and Destruction, hopefully transforming them back into humans we can pull the orbs out of. Then we go after Darkbolt himself."

I'll go for Destruction first, he seems like the biggest threat. If he charges up his planet killer attack and uses it on us, I doubt even layered barriers would stop it.

"Why not try to turn them back too?" asked a Miruku.

"It's complicated, don't worry about it. They must be killed and the orb smashed. Once Lysanias is clear break off the defense and switch to offense. Cut Darkbolt to pieces with Tenchi's light blade and the threat of the demons is gone forever. Any other questions?"

Well, there is one more, Evil, but that's up to me. Then the threat will be gone, but you don't think like that, do you Dolands? I suppose Chaos is out there too but that's your problem, as it's not active in the universe at the moment.

There were none.

"Fine. Bumper, how's it going?"

"I think I can get us there. Everyone join hands!" The people feeding her power stepped back and left the room, they were useless now as they had given all their energy to her, and everyone joined hands. Rommeta was there, but she wasn't going, and saluted them all. They had decided it was unlikely conventional weapons, even the energy based ones, would do much to the demons so she had agreed the night before to remain behind. Ryoko, Tenchi, and Ayeka had insisted on coming, Ryo-Ohki left with Mihoshi and Rometta. Most of the people under Dolands were of course coming, and Gogo stood with the other Miruku.

"You better come back," she said to Lysanias though his helmet, and he nodded.

"Last chance, you sure you want to come?" he asked Rosalina, taking her hand.

"I can do healing if nothing else," she reminded him. "And I have my own shields, and glimpsing the future. I should be fine. What have I been practicing for if not this?"

"Okay. I have to focus on my part so take care of yourself."

"Back at you."

"Everyone ready?" Bumper shouted.

No one said they were not, and so she scrunched up her face and concentrated.

Nothing happened.

“In your own time,” Dolands told her. “But quickly, if you would?”

“I’m trying!” she protested. “My power wants to take us where Crytellia is showing me, I’m sure it would work, but something is blocking me. Or someone. I don’t know, I’ve never done something like this before, it’s just random usually. I’ve never had trouble like this before.”

Performance anxiety. Happens to the best of us.

“Do you need more power? We can have more people sync with you.”

“It’s not that,” she shook her head. “It’s a block, like a wall of darkness. I can’t push through it.”

“Is this plan going to fail after all?” Tenchi asked, lowering his blade.

“It looks that way,” Tomsaya told him. “I guess there’s only so much we can do against a demon even trying two people’s powers together.”

“So let’s tie three people’s powers together!” Ryoko announced, teleporting away.

“Uh, I don’t think-” he started to say, but she teleported back with Mihoshi.

“Tie her into it too!” she insisted, pushing the protesting Mihoshi forward. “I bet you’ll be able to get in that way!”

That actually makes a good deal of sense, given what we’ve seen of her ‘power.’ Did Washu really foresee this event or did she just figure getting into places was a good power to have around?

“I can’t do three people,” he insisted, holding his hands out. “I can only do two. It won’t work!”

“Can you do it without Crytellia’s power?” she asked. “Now that you’ve seen it?”

“I think I have to see it at the time. I still haven’t seen it, seen it, if you get what I’m saying.”

“Wait a minute,” Gogo told them, pushing their way into the group. “Are we Miruku or are we Miruku? You say you can only tie two people’s powers together? Then there’s a super easy solution. You tie Crytellia and Bumper together, while at the same time I tie Bumper and Mihoshi together. Done.”

“Wait,” insisted Tomsaya, “what are you saying? That with enough Miruku, we could tie dozens of people’s powers together into one person? Do you know what kind of result that could enable?”

You could create weapons made of all the elements at once. That’s a terrifying thought and it’s just the one I’ve seen done by a bunch of low life ‘guards.’ What could you really do with that power with some time to think and a desire to actually help the universe instead of profit off it?

“Nope!” they said cheerfully. “But I’m certainly looking forward to experimenting with it when this is all over.”

“Yeah,” he said, sounding very uncertain. “I guess it would work though, there’s nothing that says a person can’t be tied to another person by someone else, just that my limit is two people.”

“I don’t want to go where the demon is,” Mihoshi protested. “I have a gun, not fancy powers like you all.”

“We’ll protect you,” Ayeka promised her, laying a hand on her shoulder. “That’s our job, right Ryoko? Let Techni and the Miruku fight Darkbolt, we’ll see that Mihoshi stays safe.”

“Ugh, fine,” Ryoko agreed. “I wanted to see how I stacked up against a so called ‘demon’ in this reality but whatever.”

“Stupid!!” she said to Ryoko. “The plan was to protect Bumper and Crytellia, did you

forget? I just told you that on the way down here! They don't have a lot of combat powers either. We were staying behind to protect them, remember? I'm just reassuring Mihoshi she's part of that group and should be safe with us."

"I did forget," she admitted. "Or maybe I wasn't listening. Fine, Mihoshi, you have my personal word I won't leave your side. Nothing gets by me, you know that." She made a fist and her glowing sword came into being.

"Oh," Mihoshi softly moaned. "I guess in that case..."

"Splendid!" Gogo told them. "I've already tied them together, let's get going."

"I do feel different," Bumper told them. "Being connected to so many people, it's odd. Everyone get ready again!"

Once again everyone prepared to face the demon, and Bumper concentrated. This time they vanished.

Immediately Lysanias took a look around, they seemed to be in utter blackness, and the blue light of the Light Hawk barrier sprang up around the group. It was a good thing, as darkness slammed into it, a beam somehow blacker than the surrounding space. All eyes turned towards it, and there was Darkbolt.

"You dare to invade my domain? I'll destroy you all!" They gestured and two more demons appeared, the dinosaur and the wolf. "Destroy them!" they ordered.

"With pleasure!" both cried, auras springing up around them.

Hoped to at least get a second of stunned disbelief, or a minute of monologing, but no he just threw an attack at us. Good thing we planned defense first. They must have expected we would find them sooner or later? In any case, thanks for making it easy to see where you are. Lysanias threw energy into his willpower, stopping time to freeze the action. *Still have you to thank for that one, he smirked at Darkbolt. But this may still run out before I finish inside. Not sure how long this might take.* Wasting no time he *shifted* to behind Destruction and put a hand on the now frozen aura. *Let's see what you're hiding in that brain of yours.* Extending his power he gripped the sword in his other and sent his consciousness into that of the demon.

He found himself in a deep hole, a young boy sitting dejected on the dirt floor with his head between his knees. He was dressed in what looked like a school uniform, dirty and torn but intact. The walls were rough stone, and high above was the entrance, shining tantalizingly.

"Not sure what I was expecting," he remarked. "But this wasn't it. Hey kid, you okay there?"

The boy blearily raised his eyes and squinted up at him, then did a double take and scrambled to his feet. "How did you- who are you?" he demanded.

"I'm Lysanias. I'm here to get you out. You need to take control again, force the demon back into the orb so we can remove it."

"Remove it?" said a voice. "So that's your plan. Did you actually find the extractors?"

Both looked over to see Destruction standing there.

"Having access to a place with nearly unlimited fabrication capacity helps, we didn't have to find some, we made some. Now do you mind?" Lysanias asked them. "I'm trying to have a conversation with..."

"Ikkou."

"Ikkou here. Run along."

"Oh I think not." The demon raised their tail again and the glowing energy sprang to life at the tip of it.

"Right back 'atcha, big guy." He concentrated on the ball of energy *not* being there, figuring all those hours of practicing Dreaming skills would probably carry over here, and he

was somewhat unsurprised when it winked out. Destruction, on the other hand, was more than a bit shocked and roared forward, about to take a swipe at him. So he simply went intangible, now that he was sure it would work, and the attack passed through him. "Care to try that again? I'm sure Ikkou here would get some small amusement out of your flailing around uselessly. I doubt you can hurt him without hurting yourself, given you imprisoned him instead of killing him, so we might not want to fight in this little hole."

Destruction backed off, eyeing him warily. "What are you? Darkbolt warned me against you but he did not say anything about being able to come to this place. And to exert such control..."

"Honestly, I was hoping for his mind, to try and shore up his willpower as I've done with others in the past. To think I got to come here and talk to you directly, well, maybe it's due to my own soulscape being similar so I was drawn here, or some interaction with the angel of life when I tried this? Who knows. Anyway, Ikkou, snap out of it. Take control back and you're out of here."

"How am I supposed to do that?" he countered. "Look how high the opening is! Do you know how many times I've tried climbing out of here?"

Lysanias shook his head. "You don't get it. This isn't just a prison for you created by the demon, it's a part of you too, and created by you. Just like I decided that energy attack didn't exist, and I was untouchable, what you believe about this place becomes its reality. Orby here believes this is a deep hole for now."

"Orby?" Destruction asked dryly.

"You're in an orb, aren't you? You're buying into that belief. But this is a test of wills, not of physical prowess. He's in an orb, he couldn't even thumb wrestle you into submission. The only weapon he has is the one you allow him to have; power over your inner space. Believe you can reach the top, and you'll be able to. It's your body anyway, the demon has just taken it over because you've let it happen."

"You're right," Ikkou decided, standing and looking above him. "It's time I put an end to this."

"You already know you can't," Destruction taunted. "You said yourself you've tried many times."

"I don't think you get it," Ikkou countered, still looking up at the opening. Then he sucker punched Destruction in his smug face.

"Wha, wha, what are you doing?" Destruction shrank back, clearly unprepared for this.

"It's a trap in more than one way, isn't it?" Ikkou told him, rubbing his fist. "I don't need to tediously climb way up there. You made me think I needed to, but that's a lie. I just need to take control, and you're already down here with me. So I'm taking control. I'm not stuck in here with you, it's you who is stuck in here with me." He took a step forward.

"You think you can beat me? I've destroyed worlds!"

"You're an orb, in my chest, and I'm calling the rent due. Get out of my body!" He punched Destruction again.

"No human will beat me, I'll take care of you!" He pounced, and the two smacked against the walls, passing through Lysanias who was staying out of it.

This is his fight, if I interfere now he won't have done it himself and he'll never trust himself again. But he did feel as though the meld was strengthening Ikkou's will, allowing him to smack the demon around. He was melded, whatever form it took, and he fed Ikkou some of his combat skill because it was clear Ikkou was not a fighter. This seemed to help, and moments later he stood above the fallen form of the demon.

"Impossible!" groaned the demon.

"Everything I believe here is real, right?" Ikkou asked. Lysanias nodded and suddenly

chains went around his prone form. "So now what?"

"Look around," Lysanias told him. "We're out."

He did, and they were clearly out of the hole, standing in a barren landscape.

"Is this really what you prefer?" Ikkou asked. "Just emptiness? No life, no movement? What happens when there's nothing left to destroy, huh? You just going to sit there on a dark rock forever with nothing to do, no one to talk to, for the rest of eternity? You're on the way to making your own Hell."

"Never really thought that far ahead..." Destruction admitted. "Wow, to have destroyed *everything* that is. In that moment, to know the job was done..."

"Stupid." He shook his head sadly. "What's next?"

"If you've taken control back hopefully your normal form has returned," Lysanias explained. "Rosalina, that's a friend of mine, should be nearby to use the extractor and-"

As if on cue a bright light started filling the sky, and Destruction started squirming. "Yes, that's your way out," he told them. "Go, leave me behind inside the orb if you want. I'll find someone else, believe me."

"Why don't I trust him?" Ikkou asked. "He seems awfully eager for me to head towards the light."

"Ha, I've tricked you!" Destruction crowed. "I want to go into the light. You've trusted me up, toss me in there and your revenge on me is complete! Do it! Do it now!"

"Now I'm confused. Any ideas?"

"Actually, no," Lysanias admitted. "I wasn't told what it would look like from this side. Do you stay or go?"

"I don't really have a strong feeling one way or the other."

"Better make up your mind, it's getting closer!" Destruction cautioned them. "It's fifty/fifty, who gets the body? Him or me? Does that light destroy or save? Tick tock!" He laughed.

"His first inclination was to have me go into the light," Ikkou reasoned. "But this is my body, I would want to stay, right? He would have tried to trick me first, then confuse me."

"That's... reasonable," Lysanias allowed. "But I could almost see it going either way."

"I guess we'll toss him in. If it's wrong I think the worst that could happen is I get sucked into the orb, you put me back, and we try this all over again. I know I can beat him now though."

"You're making a mistake, I want to go into the light!" insisted Destruction. "Quickly, before it fades, throw me in there!"

Ikkou looked back and forth between the light and him, unsure of himself. "He's right about it being equal chances, it has to take one of us. Help me with him."

They grabbed him up and started swinging him back and forth.

"Don't say I didn't warn you!" Destruction cackled. "I'll be seeing you soon!" They launched him up into the light, which faded as he was pulled into it. Both men stood there.

"I guess that's it?" Ikkou asked.

"Looks like it. I still have one demon to deal with. I'm breaking the meld, you're going to be in a combat situation. Keep your head down and look for a guy with a white cape on. He's our ticket out of here."

"White cape. Got it. And thanks." He stuck out a hand and Lysanias shook it.

Both opened their eyes and it seemed time was running again. Those with shield like souls were battling nearby, seeming to keep War at bay. *Took too long. What happened to Tenchi? Did he get killed? No, wait, I see him there. Focus, just do your part.* Ikkou was looking around confused, Lysanias wondered how much of what he just experienced he

would remember, but some Miruku moved in to guard him and lead him over to Ryoko and the others who needed it. *And if I stop War's attack he won't be in danger anymore. Simple.* He *shifted* to behind War and reached out, extending his power again but not bothering with stopping time. *He's too focused on attacking them, he won't notice me.*

The meld clicked into place, and Lysanias again found himself inside what must be some kind of soulscape. Again it was a rather barren landscape, but this one had a metal tower rising from it, directly before him. Smaller red wolves with blades in their tails prowled around the base, but he knew how to deal with them. He just went intangible, and let them zip back and forth through him as he made his way to the base of the tower. Stepping through the gleaming metal wall he saw a figure high above, and noted some stairs that spiraled up along the wall. They seemed to go all the way up so he took them, sprinting up as quickly as he could to minimize the time the Miruku had to hold off War. Blades and other metal designed to cut him, tangle him or push him off the stairs shot out as he made his way upwards, but he ignored all of it. *Being intangible is really the best. I can see why the shadows would choose this state, if choose it they did. I'll have to see them as solid from now on, maybe I can just squish them if things don't just pass through them. I'll have to try it.* He got to the top and saw the young woman suspended there, hanging in the center of the tower. Barbed wire was wrapped around her, and her clothes were torn and bloody. Saw blades, knives, and other bladed instruments shot back and forth, seemingly millimeters from her skin. Her eyes were closed and she looked to be in pain. *She moves even a little, and those blades cut her on the way across. She's been cut multiple times, by the looks, is she still sane?*

"Quite the puzzle, isn't it?" War asked, seeming to appear by his side. "How are you going to get her down without her falling? Or getting cut to shreds?"

"I'll think of something. Ikkou handled Destruction easily enough. I think we can make her handle you as well."

"Handle me? You'll *handle me*? I am the very essence of war! I don't know how you have come here but you won't leave this place alive!"

"Oh, be quiet. Remember how I threw you around last time we met? Don't give me an excuse to do it again." Lysanias turned away from him, leaving him sputtering. "Hey! Young woman! Are you awake?" he shouted to the figure.

Slowly, as if she was trying not to move, the woman in the center of the tower looked up and opened her eyes. Her eyes widened as she took in Lysanias and War, who was watching to see what he would do.

"Good! Don't move yet. I'm going to show you something. I want you to copy it exactly. This is your world, not his, and he's played here long enough."

"What are you up to? Showing her? What are you showing her?"

"This." Lysanias envisioned the armor around himself, and floated into the air. He had to stay fairly far back to avoid the flying metal all around her, but at least he didn't have to shout as loud. "See? It's armor!" He tapped his arm, sending knowledge of his armor through their link and into her brain. "Imagine armor like this around yourself, that lets you fly. The blades will bounce off, and you can fight evenly with War. You can do it, don't believe what War has told you. *You have power here, this is your mind not his.*" *Or soulscape, or whatever this place is.*

The girl smiled, understanding coming into her eyes, and she closed them again.

Come on, come on, you can do it. Take the knowledge of my armor, make your own in your mind. If you believe it'll protect you, it will. You know how tough the metal is I use to make it, nothing can break it. You beat him once, in another time, you can do it now again!

The cables snapped as her armor appeared, and she was encased. The blades scraped off, and she wasted no time in flying towards War, slamming him into the wall.

"No, impossible!" War cried.

"You've been in control of me long enough!" he heard the girl shout as she punched him. The wall buckled behind them, and he started clawing at her. "You can't hurt me anymore!" Again and again she punched him, driving him through the wall and out the other side, where he started falling. She jumped after him, landing on him and slamming both fists down. "Die, monster!"

Lysanias followed, he knew if the pattern held in just a second- *There*. "Toss him into the light," he called. "And you'll be rid of him forever!"

"No!" cried War weakly. "Let's make a deal! I'll give you my power, don't force me back into the orb again! We can become as one, you could have the power of war for all time!"

"No deals," the woman decided. She grabbed him by the tail and tossed him into the light, which vanished. His howl was cut off as he was consumed by it. "Did I just win?" she asked.

"You did. Look, you're going to be disoriented when we snap out of this. I'll be right there, follow me and we'll get you out of this battle."

"Battle?"

"You're in a battle right now, it's not safe and time is running. We have to go!"

"Lead the way."

Lysanias broke the meld and looked around. *Tenchi and the others should be attacking Darkbolt by now, right? What's Dolands yelling about?*

"Retreat!" he was screaming.

Chapter 23

No need for darkness

When: A few minutes later

Where: The Queen's throne room

"This is not good news, general Dolands," the queen told him icily. She was sitting on a throne with the fingers of her right hand tapping the armrest.

"You think I don't know that?" he shouted. He had been pacing back and forth telling the story.

"Is that any way to speak to your queen?" she asked quietly.

Dolands got a horrified look and dropped to one knee. "Forgive me, my queen. I forgot myself in my frustration."

"I will overlook it, given how distraught you must be. Start over from the beginning, and spare no detail."

"Yes, my queen. The battle, if you wish to call it that, lasted only moments. We arrived in Darkbolt's pocket dimension as planned, using the combined power of a girl named Bumper and some others, including Gogo. We came under immediate attack by Darkbolt and as planned his attack was held off by the Miruku drawing off Tenchi's power. Lysanias did exactly what he claimed he could do, taking care of the demons War and Destruction." He indicated the extractors, hanging in midair with the orbs at the top of them. "Once they were in human form his companion Rosalina used an extractor and removed the orb, rendering them harmless. They are currently being treated in our medical facility. Meanwhile, dozens if not hundreds of shadows surrounded Darkbolt. In the dimension of darkness we found ourselves it was impossible to tell their numbers. We may still have won, Lysanias told me of such creatures and we knew how to handle them. Light will burn them, nothing else, we found that out when rescuing the humans. I instructed the others to use light based attacks while the main group attacked Darkbolt with Tenchi. But Darkbolt had one final surprise for us. Something we should have suspected, given he created the race, but we never considered it or planned for it.

"It seems he can turn off the Miruku's ability to draw off the powers of others. This left them only with their human souls and conventional weapons, neither of which were effective as you can guess. With their power severely limited and reeling from the shock of having their abilities turned off, the shadows fell upon them. Tenchi tried valiantly to battle Darkbolt alone, but the demon, the way it moved, I understand now what trying to fight darkness itself really means. Miruku were falling left and right. These shadows, they cannot be touched but they can tear at us with their claws. Burning them is slow, I calculated we would be long dead before they all were. I ordered the retreat to protect those like Mihoshi, the orbs we had recovered, and the hosts. We made it back through my teleportal, and I rushed to your throne room."

"Can this technique of Darkbolt's be reversed?"

"We're studying that now, my queen."

"And how many of the Miruku did we lose?"

"Half the force we brought, about thirty I believe."

"This is a most distressing development," the queen told him. "Though I suppose we should take our victories where we can get them. My brethren can no longer aid Darkbolt against us, removing a grave threat to us all. Lysanias, it seems your part in this was carried out without error, and the Tenma empire thanks you. I thank you. From reports all our recent victories over Darkbolt are your doing, and you should know the crown rewards those that are deserving. I will think of a suitable reward for your service to us."

"Thank you, majesty." He bowed.

"For now, the element of surprise is gone. Perhaps Darkbolt will destroy his pocket dimension, perhaps he thinks himself still invincible and will not bother. Dolands, your long history of service grants you one more chance to turn this around. You know what you are facing this time, come up with another plan and destroy Darkbolt before he finds us here and destroys us!"

"At once, my queen!" He rose and backed away a few steps, then turned and walked out.

Is that my cue to leave as well? He started to turn as well, but the queen spoke again.

"A moment, Lysainas. What would you have me do with my two brothers?"

Should I tell her what I really think or what I think she wants me to say? I feel from the angel of life there could be repercussions for what I really think, if she carried it through. On the other hand, what's the worst that could happen? She seems genuinely curious. He decided on the truth. "Destroy them. Even if you found someone willing to play host to them, and secured them should they be unwilling to listen to you, I wouldn't trust they would stay locked up. Clearly there is still death in the universe without the demon of death, so the loss of the others will not mean war simply cannot happen, or that nothing can be destroyed. I spoke with Death before they were destroyed. They said the others signed up immediately, were happy to follow the avatar if it meant they could leave here and spread their destructive ways to other realities. Even if you have feelings for them," *which I doubt but who knows?* And here he decided on a little nudge because it was evil he was talking to, "giving them bodies again is just a risk for you. If not in the short term, in the long. You convince them to help you today, but now it's say thirty years later. What if War wanted your empire for himself, to wage war on the universe as he wished? Could you stop him?"

"Oh, I'm fairly sure I could," she decided. "But you raise a good point. Darkbolt must be destroyed, with these two gone as well there would be few who could challenge me. My rule would be supreme forever. Can I secure their orbs well enough that no one could ever find them? There are those that would gladly bond with either, for the power they represent."

She did bond with Evil, after all. So I can't say that's a lie.

"No, I cannot be certain of that. The only way to insure my reign is supreme is to destroy them now, when I have the chance. I will think on this. Thank you. You may go."

"Yes, majesty." He bowed and turned, walking out.

Lysainas moved past the guards and headed back in what he thought was the direction back to the ship, but had to ask the station AI to guide him. As he walked back through the hanger he was struck by how large some of the ships were, compared to the one Dolands had. *He's supposed to be a general, right? Why such a small ship? And so few crew, it's odd. He reports to the queen, he is a general, but maybe he's not so favored as he thinks? I'm not going to ask him, but it would be interesting to know the reason.*

"How did it go?" Dolands asked. He was leaning against the side of the ship, apparently waiting.

"She just wanted to know what I thought she should do with the orbs."

"Ah," he sighed. "Good thing you did manage that, I might not have made it out of there a general at all if it wasn't for you. But she was right, he'll be expecting us. What are we going to do?"

"I don't know. Your crew made it out okay?"

He nodded. "Darkbolt seemed to be more interested ordering his shadows to destroy 'the traitor Miruku' than attacking them. Probably felt they were beneath him. Don't get me wrong he would have turned on us all, had Tenchi not been there distracting him. He did

seem to be on the defensive where his sword was concerned, so maybe it is a threat to him? Guess we should discuss our next plan, if there is one." He turned and went into the ship, and Lysanias followed.

"So give me the specifics of what happened," Lysanias requested when everyone was together, virtually or otherwise. "He's just one demon, even with the shadows around how did Tenchi not just slice right through him?"

"I did," Tenchi told them. "Repeatedly. The wounds just healed up immediately. Then he started holding me off, shields of darkness, and then pressing the attack when he got a feel for my style. It was like he could hit me from any angle. My light hawk wing can become armor, and I put that in place before we left, but my face isn't armored."

"What I didn't account for was that Darkbolt is darkness," Dolands told them, "in a way the others demons aren't their respective domains. War is just a scary wolf creature, and while Destruction has some devastating attacks to be sure, he still follows the rules. He can't just snap his fingers and destroy anything he wants, he has to charge up his attacks same as we do. Darkness seems different. He can attack from wherever darkness is. He can use darkness to hide, to misdirect- Tenchi I wouldn't be surprised if you were actually fighting an illusion and that's why you couldn't hurt him. Or one of those shadows that happened to look like him, and he was just nearby."

"I didn't think of that," he admitted.

"You got all that from watching him that short time?" Lysanias asked.

"Analyzing opponents and developing strategies is my specialty. This one has me a bit stumped though."

"You'll think of something, general," Gabi told him. "You always have in the past."

"I hope so. He'll probably step up attacks in retaliation. We do need to move fast."

"If you need to bounce ideas off us, we're here for you, general," Ellias said.

"Yeah, you are. We're not leaving this room until we've got some solid strategies in mind!"

Everyone groaned.

The meeting went for hours before Dolands relented and let them get some rest. They had ideas ranging from bringing in huge lights to deal with the shadows to bringing in a whole bunch of people with a light based nature to try and light the whole dimension up. But Dolands wasn't sure it would work, how the lights would be protected when Darkbolt could just attack from *behind* them. "The brighter the light, the darker the shadow after all," he told them.

"I'm not sure that's true," Thabion countered.

The group had some ideas, but weren't getting anywhere and so Dolands said to keep thinking about it for the next day. As they were walking back to their quarters Rommeta spoke up.

"Could you open up your personal dimension?" she asked. "I forgot something in there the last time, need to go get it."

"You forgot something?" he asked. "Is that... Have you even been inside-"

"Even I can forget things," she talked over him. "I'm not perfect, despite what Harper would tell you. So can you just do it? Won't take a minute."

"Sure." *What's going on? Wish I could read her mind and find out.* When the three got into his quarters he spent the time opening his personal dimension, then stepping through and looking around. *Haven't been here in awhile. Hi ship! Hi airship!*

"Close the door," Rommeta told him.

"But if it's just going to take a minute--"

"Close. The. Door." she insisted.

"Okay, okay, what's gotten into you?" He let the spell go and the door closed.

She seemed to relax. "Finally. It's called taking a hint, did you really think I could forget something? Here." She handed him two extractors with the orbs on top. Which he dropped in surprise.

"What is this?" he demanded, jumping away from them. "What? How? What did you?"

She put her hands on her hips. "You didn't think I would let them out of our sight, did you?"

"I switched them," Rosalina told him, with a giggle. "I made exact copies and handed the originals over to her, and she had them brought to the Hub. I figured they might get taken away so we should have control over them."

"We couldn't risk you knowing, sorry about the deception," Rommeta apologized. "I feel better knowing I don't have to lie to you any more."

"You weren't lying to me," he nudged them with his foot, "just not telling me something."

"It felt the same to me."

"As you wish. I guess I can't back down now, I just hope the queen does destroy them, if she tries to use them somehow she's going to be in for a bit of a shock. Then she'll want answers from me."

"Deal with that when the time comes."

"I guess. And this won't mess up the universe? The angel of life has reservations about doing this."

"Only Chaos survived in the original timeline," she explained. "And they were fine. It's fine. They're just creatures, no offense to the angel, they aren't the infinity stones or anything."

"The what?"

"Never mind. Though they turned out to be disposable in the end as well, and time didn't stop in that universe, despite what the ancient one said about them. Huh."

"Whatever. Stand back." He grabbed the first extractor with the force and slid Ragnarok out. *This sword hits what I want, or at least it's supposed to. Something that can't dodge should be easy enough, even with how small it is.* He held the extractor fast in the air and smashed the orb with the blade, exploding it into tiny shards. Then he did the same with the other.

"Done," she said with a nod. "Too bad the original hosts won't be able to keep that power, but they can always learn to use their soul power, I guess? Remember to pull it out for them sometime so they get used to it, and they'll be able to use it. Let's head back."

"Right."

That night, in the dream, there was a light bulb. Lysanias stayed passive, his dream self looking around. The night before he figured if there was a time the universe might try to contact him in a dream about what to do, it would be in his next dream. So he went to bed concentrating on a solution to the Darkbolt problem, and resolved to not take control so the dream could show him what it wanted. The bulb hung on a chain and the bulb was off, leaving the room in darkness. Then the light went on, bathing the room in light. Off. On. Off. On. The bulb stopped flickering, Lysanias saw himself pick up Ragnarok, concentrate, and whack butter that was sitting in a stick on the table. The sword bounced off. He picked up the butter, concentrated, and slammed it into the blade with his left hand. The blade shattered. He threw the butter and the broken sword down. A bird flew up to him, and he held out a hand. He concentrated. The bird tried to fly away but it just flopped to the table. He realized how to beat Darkbolt and woke up.

"I know how to beat Darkbolt," he announced to the empty room.

"You know how to beat Darkbolt?" Dolands asked him. He had ran to his room and pounded on the door, and the general had answered a moment later.

"I know how to beat Darkbolt," he agreed.

"And you want to leave right now?"

"After a bit of prep work, yes."

"And it's just going to be the two of us?"

"That's all that's needed. I only need you to get me there, if his dimension still exists."

"And you couldn't have thought of this earlier? Like, the first time we tried this, and had a small army to help?"

"Wasn't my job. You brought *Tenchi* here to kill Darkbolt. I did my thing with the demons." *Three of them, I might add, so it's Lysanias three, Dolands zero.* "But a dream showed me what I had to do, it's one of my lesser used abilities so I wouldn't have thought of it otherwise. But it'll work."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Look, you open a portal there and we step through. I stop time, race over to where Darkbolt is, and touch him. It's over or its not. With luck time won't even be running again by the time I make it back to the portal and we step through again. Easy."

"Easy, the man says. All right, go get ready, I'll get dressed. I'm putting a lot of trust in you, Lysanias. You better not get us both killed."

"Be back soon!" *Good thing he's backed into a corner, he needs a victory or he's afraid the queen will get of him. He might not have agreed to such an insane plan otherwise. But this will work, I'm sure of it.*

"And you're sure about this?" Rommeta asked him as he dressed and put the sword on.

"Absolutely. I'll augment my skill with magic, even a demon won't be able to resist the technique. And I'll take other precautions." *Armor wards to start. But I meant what I said to Dolands, it'll be in and out, no room to allow him to attack or cut off our retreat.*

"And we can't come?"

"Best not. I'm not even getting Rosalina out, hopefully she isn't too mad later. I need to do this now, I feel the dream was very insistent." *Maybe his defenses will be down as he won't be expecting an attack so soon, or by so few as two when a small army, like Dolands said, wasn't enough.*

"Okay. As always I'll carry news of your demise to the Hub. Just remember you made a promise to return that orb."

"It'll work, I promise. It's because of the orb I can do all this in rapid succession. Let my skill be augmented!"

Now prepared, Lysanias went back to Dolands, and the pair went to the base that couldn't be scryed on to open the portal. "Of course he could have seen through the portal I made for our retreat, but he's not attacked this place so I guess he didn't," Dolands admitted. "This is a lot more dangerous, so I feel we should take every precaution."

"I have, don't worry, it'll be over in a minute."

"You promise?"

"90% sure. You'll be back in the queen's good graces again in the morning. You can have the credit, I don't want it honestly."

"Can I get that in writing?"

He laughed nervously. "Sure!" *This will work, I'm sure of it. My dream wouldn't have led me astray.*

Moments later the portal opened and the pair darted through it. Lysanias threw all the energy he could into stopping time, and the action froze. Darkbolt was there, there was enough light to see that, as the person he was no doubt giving orders to needed to see him. He looked to be looking up at something, and it looked to be the same guy he had seen on the bridge of the ship before. He spirit stepped over there, trying not to count the seconds. He reached Darkbolt, who he could barely see now that he was this close, and lay a hand on him. "Bye avatar," he said, concentrating. He then grabbed a contain ward out of his *pocket* and slapped it on the man next to Darkbolt. Then he spirit stepped back to the portal. As time started again Darkbolt burst into light, crying out and thrashing around and no doubt wondering what the heck had just happened. His body tore itself apart, and the dimension seemed to tremble around them.

"Back through, it worked!" Lysanias shoved Dolands through, and the portal winked shut again.

"What did I just see?" Dolands asked, dazed.

Hopefully the collapsing dimension killed a bunch of those shadow things as well. "One second. Meta?"

"Avatar has been forced to withdraw from this reality," the watch reported. "Dimensional encryption has begun. Well done."

"Thank goodness. That couldn't have gone better!"

"What couldn't have? How did you do that?"

"It's an alchemy skill I really need to practice more, I guess. It's called intrinsic alteration in the hubPad, basically it changes someone's fundamental nature into the opposite. A bird can't fly, a sword can't cut. In this case, Darkbolt became light."

"But because Darkbolt was darkness, like I said before, it destroyed him!" Dolands breathed. "He could not live as light. I wonder if I could have done the same with Metapower?"

"Don't know, but you're right. Never thought I would use the technique like that, but hey, that's what you get for cramming yourself into a box, figuratively speaking. He wanted to be darkness, he was darkness. But he had nowhere to go once the box wasn't so hospitable anymore."

"So it's over?"

"Well... not quite. The Miruku may still advance. They'll face tougher opposition now, with him gone. They won't be able to drain a whole planet of energy at once. Does that mean they'll give up? Only time will tell."

He waved that away. "We can handle one planet. We know where *it* is. We can just blockade the place if we have to. We never did before because we felt the other demons would just tear any fleet we sent to pieces." He fell to his knees. "The war is over. It's really over."

"You're welcome. Now let's find a comfortable place to release our new guest he can't take power from."

Chapter 24

No need for celebration

When: Several days later

Where: The resistance base

At Lysanias' insistence Dolands waited several days to announce Darkbolt had been destroyed and the Miruku planet should be blockaded. He of course had wanted to announce it right away, but Lysanias said that was a bit premature.

"We know he's gone because the Hub tracks the movement of the avatar. When the body they've chosen dies the connection the avatar has with the reality is broken. But everyone is going to ask 'how do you know?' when we announce it. With a few days of no planet being attacked by Darkbolt everyone will have an easier time believing us. After all, how long between attacks usually?"

"They have multiple fleets, once a planet's population has been destroyed by Darkbolt they move on. So usually one every day or so."

"And when that doesn't happen?"

"There will be less doubt. Very well."

And so they concocted a story that Dolands used Tomsaya's power in conjunction with the energy sharing technique and a person with a light based nature to use Metapower to change Darkbolt's nature to light instead of darkness. Everyone could basically understand how that worked, so they didn't have to reveal the real reason, and Tomsaya told them it probably would have worked the same way anyway. So he was hailed as a hero, Dolands got forgiven by the queen, and the Miruku gave up their souls so the humans could start waking up again. (Lysanias did as well, of course)

Meanwhile Lysanias spoke to the two hosts, who were saddened by the loss of their friends who had been killed while demons, and hopeless upon learning their planet had basically been destroyed. He at least showed them how to use their soul power, Ikkou getting what he called a Wakizashi while the host of War, Mariko, got a tower shield. He told them not to despair, nature based techniques existed that could regrow plants in a wide area, wider still if the technique was buffed by several people's worth of energy. And he himself could simply create plant life, possibly even animals, for hours and hours every night to help speed things along. The humans were sticking around the base, learning to use their new powers and helping out where they could while it was decided what to do with them. The majority wanted to return to Earth, try to get their planet and their culture going again, which most there applauded. (Of course the queen wanted them to swear allegiance to her, which they were against, but she rationalized this rejection as being too few people to bring into the empire as a "nation" anyway. So she didn't press the issue and it was fine for the moment.)

After the celebration marking the end of the war Tenchi and his friends headed back home, and Lysanias said he would be along shortly, given how time ran between realities.

"You're not coming back with us?" Ayeka asked. "Washu is going to want to know what happened to her orb."

"I haven't forgotten, don't worry. I'll stop there and return it, I promise. But I need to help people here, get the humans back on their feet at any rate. That's going to take some time." *And I still have to take care of one more demon to put things back on track in this reality. But I can't exactly say that out loud, now can I?*

"Very well. I'll see you soon, then."

"Sorry I wasn't as helpful as I should have been," Tenchi told him.

"I'm just glad you all get to go home safely. And it wasn't like you didn't do anything. I

just happened to have a power the body of the avatar couldn't tolerate, that's all. It's no reflection on you." *Thinking about it, an allergy killed him, if it came right down to it. A light allergy.*

"Thanks."

"I have something for you," Ryoko told him. "I've talked it over with him, and he said we could try it."

"Meow!"

"Talked it over?"

"You ready, Ryo-Ohki?"

"Meow."

"Okay." She took Ryo-Ohki's ears and basically ripped him in half.

"What are you- what?" Lysanias started to say. Instead of having half a rabbit creature that could turn into a spaceship in each hand she had two whole rabbit creatures, one in each hand.

"Meow!" Ryo-Ohki grumbled, obviously not enjoying the experience.

"Here." Ryoko handed one of them over.

"Oh. Thanks." *I didn't know he could do that.* Lysanias was somewhat shocked, but took the little creature in both hands. Ryo-Ohki licked his hand, clearly trying to show he was none the worse for wear after the procedure.

"Sure. He wanted to travel with you, but of course I couldn't give him up, so... Take good care of him."

"I will. Plenty of carrots."

"Meow!"

"That was a very nice thing you did," Ayeka told her as she walked back to the group.

"Whatever."

She sighed. "I guess if we're going back our truce is off, huh?"

"I guess. Means giving up my other power source too. Hardly got to use it, all things considered."

"Tenchi to Hub, we're ready for transport back home," he said, the wrist unit raised.

"Stand by." A door of light opened and with a bow or wave the three walked back through to home.

"See you soon," he called after them, and the door closed.

Now to decide what to do with the queen.

Lysanias had been thinking for weeks now about what to do about her, taking into account Inari's suggestion (as that's clearly what it is in his mind) to make her do something evil and destroy herself. He thought he had an idea, and his newfound status as one of the saviors of the galaxy made at least the first part easier. He visited Crytellia and mentally told her the plan while they "said goodbye" and she agreed to keep Dolands and the crew busy. He could step back in an instant, of course, but if he had no reason to he probably wouldn't. Lysanias said he would issue orders that kept them fairly far away as early as he could, and to keep an eye out that they didn't start heading back for a couple of weeks.

Lysanias was accepted around the Tenma base, which the queen left as her headquarters because really, how much more grand a structure can one rule from than something that covers a whole star? He was given permission to come and go as he pleased, and he attended strategy meetings with the other high ranking officials to learn her habits. She was quite warm with him, asking his advice and assigning him to places he could make a difference. He always remembered who he was talking to, coaching any answer to her

questions in a way that seemed at least a little bit evil, making it seem he really wanted to be in her good graces. Which for now, of course, he did.

As for his first assignment he requested Earth, of course, and portals were used to take the remaining humans back there with enough equipment and people with nature techniques to start rebuilding the place. He helped, usually while asleep, and the place started to green up again. There was plenty of work to do all over the galaxy and he always made it a point to stop in and see what the latest situation was. She seemed to be on the way to completely trusting him, even showing him her chambers and implying one day soon they could be his chambers as well. She was always touching his shoulders, requesting they “dine” together, and putting an arm around his waist at meetings. Lysanias of course felt no romantic feelings from her, and knew it was all a ploy to keep someone powerful at her side. Being able to know what she was feeling made this all a lot easier, as he could, in real time, know if she was getting annoyed or really liked what he was doing at any given moment. He had never realized it before, but knowing how someone was really feeling moment to moment made manipulating them much easier. Even a queen that had ruled for thousands of years still craved acceptance and validation. Having seen where she slept and learning her schedule and mannerisms it was time to put his plan into action.

Six weeks after Tenchi and the others had left Lysanias stepped from the world of dreams into the waking world, having made sure the coast was clear. He headed to the throne room and pushed the doors aside.

“Majesty?” asked one of the guards. “You are unaccompanied?”

“The threat of Darkbolt is gone, do you really think I, queen of the universe, need to be guarded like an infant?” Lysanias asked him, not looking at the man. “In the very halls of the place I rule from?”

“Of course not, my queen.” He stood up straighter.

“Good. Do not question me in any way again. I must give new orders, have the following people brought before me.” He rattled off some names of people he knew would be around.

“At once my queen!” The guard rushed off, and Lysanias waited, sitting on the throne. He knew Queen Yasha would be asleep at this time, and so far the plan was going well. Moments later the people he had called for filed into the room.

“I have new orders for you,” he told them. “Attend me.”

“Of course, my queen,” they all intoned, kneeling as well they should in the presence of royalty.

He gave them orders he knew would cause problems, and made sure to have one of them tell Dolands his new orders, sending him to the furthest away mission he reasonably could, and while he saw confusion on their faces his orders were absolute, and they rushed off, bowing on the way out. “I am returning to bed,” he told the guards at the door. “You will remain at your posts, I do not need an escort.”

“Yes, my queen,” agreed the confused guards, and he went back down the corridor, not hurrying but moving as Yasha would. He saw several people in the halls who bowed and greeted him with deference, until finally he was in the clear and no one was there to see him vanish back into the World of Dreams.

He let out a huge sigh of relief, changing his features back from Yasha to himself, and he knew the first seeds of his plan had just been planted. *My practicing this, if you will, with Crytella is paying off now. I could actually pull this off!*

He stayed away from the place for nearly four days, arriving back there on Ryo-Ohki as

normal, and as usual was allowed to see the queen. Coming into the meeting room he looked around. He didn't see any of the people he had called to the throne room that night, and hoped they were still alive. "Majesty," he greeted Yasha, bowing.

"Lysanias, welcome back," she said. Oddly, she did feel a little glad to see him, and he went over to her.

"I see a lot of new faces here, majesty, have I come to the wrong meeting?"

She laughed. "No. I uncovered some kind of plot to disrupt minor operations several days ago. Those involved have been relieved of their command."

"A plot? It wasn't against you, was it majesty? I know you can take care of yourself, of course, but you weren't harmed were you?"

She laughed. "No, nothing like that. Honestly I don't know what they were thinking. All of them maintained they were acting on *my* orders, a flimsy story at best. It's hardly worth looking into, but we're checking their story now. Come, be at my side and tell me what you think of this situation."

"Of course, majesty. I hope these conspirators were subjected to hours of agony before they died." He moved to stand by her side.

"Oh Lysanias, I didn't have them *killed*. Maybe they were just confused about my orders, as I say we'll get to the bottom of it. Now think no more about it. Have a look at this map..."

Thank goodness.

He stayed for a day at the queen's side, then left on Ryo-Ohki for his next mission of mercy for the empire. Of course he headed back immediately, this time appearing and calling those same people back to contradict the queen's earlier orders "after due consideration" and then appearing in a completely different part of the station to give orders that all the low priority requests by the AI such as dying plant life due to empty water tanks were now considered high priority. *That should make it happy at least. It didn't like seeing how run down places in the station were getting. It's a dangerous game I'm playing here, and I don't want people getting killed because Yasha thinks they're turning against her. It's a balancing act, but those orders seem harmless enough.*

He completed his mission for the queen, then headed back and this time three nights in a row he walked around as her, spreading what chaos he could. Security now seemed to be heightened, but he could make it look like he was coming out of the queen's chambers if he wanted, which he did, and even give "her" the appropriate escort by dreaming up a couple of fake people to walk around with him. He reviewed her daily orders, changed at least a few of them, promoted some while demoting others, and generally stirred up trouble. By the time he got back to make his report the place was on high alert, and he made sure to augment his skill at acting before stepping off the ship. He was met by armed guards and escorted to the throne room, looking the proper amount of disgruntled for what he was being put through.

"Lysanias, oh, I'm glad you're back," Yasha told him, coming down the steps to embrace him.

She's never been this blatant before. Also she does feel worried, but worried enough? I'm not sure yet. "My queen, what's going on? Why am I being treated this way by your guards? I see only suspicion in the halls, am I being accused of something?"

"Oh I'm so sorry about that, of course you haven't heard what's been going on around here."

"More plots against you?"

"Not against me, exactly. Come and sit, I'll tell you everything." They sat on the stairs

and Yasha waved her guards away. "You remember those initial people I thought had gotten some of my orders wrong?"

"Several days ago? What about them?"

"They were not acting against me, similar things have been happening all over the station. It seems someone is impersonating me and trying to disrupt my rule. Can you imagine it?"

He snorted. "Hardly, majesty. I'm surprised you didn't catch the scum doing this immediately. Are your guards not up to the task?" He looked pointedly over at them at the door and they bristled a little.

"It seems they are not," she admitted. "But of course how do they tell the fake from me? None would dare lay a hand on me if even the slightest doubt remained making catching this impostor almost impossible."

Oh, is your evil nature coming back to bite you? You rule with an iron fist, making everyone afraid of you, then something like this happens and you have no way around it. "But how are they escaping? Even if they were simply to detain your double or you to ascertain if there is only one of you, not even you can teleport into or out of this place because of all the protection techniques. Are they making it to the teleportation area?"

"That's the most distressing part of all this. They seem to simply vanish. Security footage shows them turning a corner and then not being there anymore."

"Perhaps they simply get very small? Is that a power people have here?"

"Ah!" She brightened. "Maybe that's it. If they could fly and become minuscule they might simply do so, returning to normal size elsewhere."

"It's a possibility. Still, who would dare to impersonate you? To even consider the idea..."

"It is dangerous. Much safer to impersonate a general or other high ranking official. Simply abduct them and take their place. Who would suspect?"

"What have they been doing, anyway?"

"Contradicting my orders, moving resources around. It's almost random."

"Odd, it doesn't sound that serious. Why take such a risk for so little? That just makes you look bad, it doesn't seem a threat to the empire or you."

"I believe they are simply testing the waters, so to speak. These sightings have been increasing, and the impostor's orders are growing bolder as well."

He nodded. "To see how much they can really get away with. Yes. Playing the queen, well, who wouldn't want to be you?"

She smiled. "Naturally. But it isn't easy running this empire, especially now with so much of the universe still reeling from Darkbolt. Will you stay? Put your talents to tracking down this impostor and putting an end to it?"

He stood. "My queen it would be an honor!" *Here I am!*

She actually blushed a little and looked away. "You've never called me that before. Am I really your queen?"

Sorry, Rosalina beat you to that spot. And as I can tell you're totally acting, as your feelings didn't change, I have no qualms about lying right back at you. "I have no other but you, my queen."

"Then stay. Find this impostor and bring them to me!"

"As you command. I'll need access to all the footage of them, everything you've learned like what their orders were to see if I can come up with some kind of pattern."

"Everything you ask for, of course."

And so for the next week Lysanias led "himself" on a merry chase. As he could Dream

himself onto the station when it was nearly time to get up anyway and have that Dream last hours, he could walk around impersonating Yasha, wake up, know exactly what was coming, and know where to go to “almost” catch himself. He suggested some kind of keycard or other method of proving she was the real Yasha she could carry around and secure at night, which he promptly stole and used. So that was discarded, though of course now everyone involved in making it was suspect. Yasha got more and more desperate to catch this “intruder” but Lysanias could honestly say he was doing everything he could. The footage showed him even entering the room with the fake before they vanished, leaving no trace. Everyone was at a loss how they were doing it, given Dolands wasn’t around to casually mention his Dreaming powers. They checked for invisibility, phasing, shrinking, dimensional travel, but of course it wasn’t any of those things so nothing showed up. *But I better wrap this up before he gets back. I think she’s desperate enough at this point, it’s time to finish this.*

Lysanias stood in the Queen’s bedchamber, looking through a window from the World of Dreams at her sleeping form. *I really wish I didn’t have to do this. But I’ve been here long enough to see the Tenma empire must be stopped, as it was in the original timeline. I can’t remove the orb with an extractor, that still leaves you as Queen just a bit less powerful. You have to die, and the demon Evil along with you. I shouldn’t hesitate, I know what you built up this empire to do, but the loss of any life, even yours, must be given the weight of thought necessary for such an act. Let’s do this.* He closed the window and stepped into her chamber, dragging them forward in time about six hours. He knew Yasha would be at her morning meeting at that time, she always was, and the alarms that would have gone off had someone entered her chamber unannounced fell into the past. Those alarms were now off in the “present”, as she wasn’t in the room anymore. But she must have heard at least a tiny bit of them as she stirred.

“What?” she said, coming awake with a knife in her hand.

“It’s just me, my queen!” Lysanias said, standing by her bed and holding his hands up. “Just me.”

“Lysanias?” she asked, confused. Suddenly her eyes widened. “Oh! Have you finally given in to my- how did you get in here?”

“The guards let me in. Quickly, my queen, your double has been spotted again.” He held out a hand, beckoning to her.

“And?” she asked, letting the sheets around her fall away. She wore nothing to bed, and Lysanias had to concentrate on his mission. “They will simply vanish again. Join me, forget them for now.”

He shook his head. “I would, Yasha, but I have a new idea. Confront them yourself. If you go now, attack them before they have a chance to respond, they may not have the time to get away. I’ve seen you practice, you can overwhelm them and put an end to this!”

“Yes,” she breathed. “It would be fitting to destroy this pretender with my own hands.” She took his hand and he pulled her out of the bed. “Help me with my armor, quickly, then lead on. But when this is over, you *will* join me here.”

“With pleasure, Yasha!” *No chance.*

He helped her dress and put on her armor, and she indicated she was ready. They burst past the doors, which Lysanias had been thinking about and made some fake guards as there would be some at “this time.” They raced through the corridors and into the transit system, which they took to the meeting room. Lysanias drew his sword.

“Together,” Yasha told him.

“Together,” he agreed.

They burst into the meeting room and Yasha saw the “impostor” there with a shocked look on their face.

“Of course,” she said, realizing now what was happening. “It’s a trick, you have to-”

But of course Yasha didn’t give her double any time to speak, she simply attacked. The other defended herself, and of course the two would be evenly matched, had Lysanias not seen “his” Yasha as moving so much faster than her counterpart and tripping the “older” her up in little ways. They slammed each other around the room, the guards and generals in the room simply trying to stay out of the way as the two titans battled. He had to admit, thousands of years of training had honed Yasha’s fighting skills to a fine edge, and their battle may have gone on for some time had one of them not had an unnatural advantage. Finally “his” Yasha held the other up by the throat, triumphant. “Now we will see who you really are!” she crowed, feeling victory in her grasp. That’s when Lysanias smashed into her with Ragnarok, believing himself to be as strong as he normally was, splintering the orb and ending her life. “What?” roared the queen. “What have you done? I needed to interrogate her, find out what she thought she was doing!”

“I’m sorry,” he told her, meaning it. With a thought he collected the hubPad he knew would be hidden in the room, yanked out the blade, and saw the body as simply burning away. It did, and she threw it down, horrified.

“What is the meaning of all this?”

“I can explain. But first...” He brought them both back to her quarters, causing her to look around wildly.

“You can teleport within the base?”

“Of course not, my queen. This is all simply a dream.”

“What are you talking about? Explain yourself!” she demanded. “This is no simple dream, you have-”

“Go back to sleep.”

“Wha- what?”

“Sleep.” He saw her as getting incredibly sleepy, and she swayed on her feet.

“What are you doing to me?” she mumbled. He sent his sword and the hubPad to his quarters with a thought and concentrated on making her fall asleep.

“It will all be over soon,” he told her, taking her in his arms. “Sleep now. Sleep.”

“Okay. I trust...” Her eyes drooped closed and she went limp. He put her armor back where it was and held her in both arms, and she snuggled against him. *Why did you have to be evil? You did so much, it could have been for the good of everyone! Why?*

Taking them back into the “past” he believed the alarms would not go off under any circumstance and made both of them invisible. He watched the still in bed Yasha sleeping for a moment, then saw himself briefly appear and vanish with her again. *Now they’re in the future, and I can replace her here.* He nodded, put her back into the bed, and before covering her looked her over. There were several wounds she had taken he touched and healed, and as a final act touched her head briefly and believed she would believe, when she awoke, that she had a vivid dream that night and to think nothing more of it. He almost reached out to stroke her hair, but shook his head and drew back, covering her up. “I’m sorry you have to die,” he told her sadly. “If only you hadn’t taken up Evil with your own hand, and worked with the Demon to bring all this about. But you did, and this is one empire that *must* fall.” Taking a deep breath he woke up.

He waited for Ragnarok and the hubPad to appear in the room, then gathered up anything strewn about and slapped an *ignore me* ward onto himself. He made his way unseen

to the landing bay and guided Ryo-Ohki out into space. "Let's head to see Dolands, at least those are people I care about in this dimension," he told him.

"Meow!" he agreed, and the stars blurred around them.

"Is it done?" Rommeta asked seriously.

He nodded, getting the wand out too so Rosalina could hear this as well. Once she was out she put her arms around him, knowing he was feeling low. "It's done," he told them. "In a few hours the queen of the Tenma will be no more. Defeated by her younger self and her own rage at the "impostor" I had created. And my sword though her orb, of course."

"It had to be done," Rommeta told him. "After rebuilding her empire here, Yasha would have been twice as terrible a tyrant as before. Now this reality has a real chance for peace. Yes, there will be a time of uncertainty, as those who realize she's gone scramble to protect themselves, but ultimately you have done good here."

"It's still killing someone who is not the avatar. I don't have to feel good about it."

"I know."

And there was silence, and a shared understanding on the bridge for some time after that.

Chapter 25

No need for epilogues

When: Not long after

Where: Doland's ship

Ryo-Ohki reached the crew with plenty of time, and they welcomed him back. They were on a mission to seek out far flung Miruku outposts and shut them down, but nothing had turned up yet.

"How did you even find us?" Dolands asked.

"The queen keeps track of her people," he hedged. *Because I was the one who ordered you here, of course.*

"That she does. Well, glad to have you back. Can you stay long?"

"A day or so. I have a feeling something big is going to happen today." *And then I can be on my way.*

"Then we'll be glad to have you along. Rommeta, you've been well I hope?"

Did he never give up on her?

The day passed, and suddenly everyone on board cried out. All their symbols vanished, and everyone got horrified looks on their faces as they realized what they had done, and what feeling this way about it meant. Crytellia and he gave what comfort they could, and Lysanias suggested they head back. He was on the bridge with Dolands and Crytellia, the others had gone to their quarters to think about what the future held for them.

"If she's really dead, someone is going to have to keep order there," he reasoned. *I mean I know she is, but let them come to their own conclusions.* "It might as well be you. You seem capable enough."

"But I killed my love, Anaria," Dolands protested. "I'm not fit to lead. I've done such horrible things!"

"We all have," Crytellia told him. "But take it from me, you can work past them. You can atone for what we've done, and start making the universe a place not ruled by the incarnation of evil. We owe it to everyone we wronged to start making it right. It's a clean break for all of us. We can't look backwards now, that life is gone."

"You knew?"

"We both did. We found the conditioning quite by accident, but we knew it had to go. I've been free of it for some time."

"I mean that the queen would be killed. That's why you came to see us."

"Yes," he said simply, still feeling bad about it. "I dreamed it," he went on, not entirely the truth but not a lie either.

"He felt he should be here for you, when it happened. We are friends after all," Crytellia added. "He knew what a shock it would be, from when I went through it. We're the people he knows best here, not anyone on the station."

"I see. Had it been two hours ago I would have been furious and done my best to kill you. If you knew you could have done something, helped prevent it. Now I just feel empty, knowing whatever happened to her was probably for the best, given what she had done to all of us."

Prevent it? I caused it! But I'm not telling you that. "That is something you must come to grips with," he said. "I can't help you there."

"I know."

Lysanias stood. "About time for me to be on my way," he announced. "You have to take it from here. I wish you luck. This reality has a lot of potential, and now maybe you have a

chance to realize it.”

“We do, don’t we?” Dolands agreed. He held out a hand and Lysanias shook it.

“Thanks, for everything.”

“Of course.”

Crytellia hugged him. “Come back any time, lover,” she whispered to him.

“I heard that!” Rommeta told them, and they jumped back away from each other, embarrassed.

“Heard what?” Rosalina asked. “What did she say?”

“I’ll tell you, but blackmail material must be doled out carefully,” Rommeta mused.

“What should I demand for my silence, I wonder?”

“Blackmail? What did she say? Tell me!”

She just laughed.

“If you’re done messing around?” Lysanias asked a bit crossly. “Did we forget anything?”

Rommeta looked around. “We’ve got Ryo-Ohki, everything from our quarters was put away, I don’t think so.” A doorway of light opened behind her. “Ready to go?”

The other two nodded. *I’ll watch over them, Crytellia put into his brain. Go on now. Leave the rest to us.*

He nodded, and the group stepped through back to Tenchi’s reality, where they met with the others there and Lysanias told the story of what had happened after they left. Tenchi had of course filled her in about events there up to that point, so they knew how the demons and powers worked there.

“I suppose it was for the best,” Washu finally said into the silence after his story was finished. “She was evil, after all. I mean she had a demon living inside her! The person she had been before may have even thanked you.”

“That’s what everyone tells me,” Lysanias agreed. “I suppose I could ask Inari or Silverstreak to check up on them in the future. Make sure what I did wasn’t the catalyst for greater chaos. Anyway, that’s what happened. Here.” He knelt down, turning his wrist up towards her. *May as well get this over with.* “Allow my promise to you to be fulfilled. I return the orb you lent me of my own free will.” *And with more than great reluctance.*

“It stands fulfilled,” she agreed, the orb detaching itself from him and floating over to Ayeka. It went back into the sword hilt she held up, and he noticed it had the twin already there.

“You could stay for dinner,” Sasami offered.

He shook his head. “No, but I thank you for the offer. I’m heading to Inari’s place, show her what I did so I can put this whole thing behind me. Everyone, thanks for the help back there. Tenchi, I’ll probably see you around the Hub, so until then.”

“Until then.”

Another door opened behind them and the group stepped through it to Inari’s corner of the universe. He knocked on her door and she answered, looking expectantly up at him.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“Take a look for yourself,” he told her, handing the pad over. It had the movie ready to play, and she watched the queen be surprised by the other queen, and Lysanias stabbing her.

“What exactly am I watching though?” she asked.

“The Yasha that was there was six hours in the future. I had pretended to be her for weeks, issuing bizarre orders and getting her more and more worked up. When I said I had found the ‘double’ she wasted no time in going to attack her. Little did she know I had taken

us both six hours forward, so she was simply attacking a slightly older version of herself. Younger her didn't give older her a chance to explain, and the two came to blows. Then all I had to do was wait, and the next day my dream self and she took care of the Tenma empire. I didn't even have to be there."

"Very nice," she admitted. "But you did the killing blow, so I wonder if it counts..."

"It doesn't matter," he told her sadly. "I just thought you would like to see it. Maybe we can all laugh about it in twenty years or something."

"No, no, I offered you a wish and a wish you will get," she decided. "You did use her against herself so I guess it counts. In fact, you look like you could use some cheering up. How would you like to mess with the avatar a bit? Really tweak his nose and mess up his plans somewhere?"

"How does that relate to the wish?"

"I'll send you someplace there's a thing called a Dreamstone. Honestly don't know why it isn't called a Wishstone but there you have it. There's no doubt in my mind the avatar's plot there will involve it. You get it, make a wish before anyone else does, foil their plan, smash the stone, and Bob's your uncle."

"Why wouldn't I just bring it along? That sounds incredibly useful!"

"Eh, couple of reasons," she told him, handing the pad back. "It's only useful there because it doesn't do anything but inform the trickster god behind it what the wish was. They grant the wish, not the rock. Out of that reality it would just be the rock. Secondly the wish takes something from you. Like your health or a friend of yours or something."

"And you were going to mention this when? That doesn't seem safe to use at all!"

"It's fine," she told him. "I can protect you from that. That's my contribution to the whole wish thing. What do you say?"

"Sure," he agreed unenthusiastically. "Why not."

"Don't be so glum, chum! You did good, everything there worked out. I'll set you down near the person who will find the stone and make the first, no second, wish. Prevent it from ever being used. Make your own and smash the thing. We'll see who shows up sputtering about it and that's the avatar."

"Who I will then have to run through on the spot. Got it."

"Nah, they'll probably just leave. I'll talk to them. Believe me, it'll be an epic prank!"

"I guess if you say so."

"I've loaded some files onto the pad." *When did you do that?* "Review them so you know who you're meeting, and you can be off. Come on in and sit down. Rosalina, can I interest you in some mead?"

"Mead? Oh that would be wonderful I haven't had any in ages! Rommeta doesn't drink because she's an android, but I wouldn't mind a glass!"

"Meow?" Ryo-Ohki asked from Lysanias' shoulder.

"Oh, who is this little cutie?" She stroked under his chin.

"This is Ryo-Ohki, as if you didn't know. I'll take a look at the files."

An hour later he knew who he was going to meet, and enough about her childhood she wouldn't try bashing his head in on the spot. *At least if I show her part of her own past she's liable to listen to me and not simply attack right away. She's not the kind of person to do that anyway, so with the right approach it should go fine.* She was some kind of demigod, with superhuman strength and speed he didn't want to have to deal with as she did good in the world with her powers. But he knew Inari, and had to be prepared for anything.

"Why don't the others just stay here?" she asked. "You won't be gone long, and I'd love to show Rosalina my garden. There's carrots!"

“Meow!”

He chuckled. *She is lonely.* “That’s up to them. If we can be apart across realities?”

“It’s fine,” she told them. “Here all things are possible.”

“I don’t mind,” Rosilina told him. “Go get your wish. Do you know what it’s going to be yet?”

“Not really. I have some time though, right?”

“You do. Heck, you can stop time and think about it all you want when you find the stone.”

“True. Very well, send me-”

He found himself sitting across from the woman he was to meet, and a voice to his right said “Are you ready to order?” He looked down to see a menu in his hand with a line highlighted, and he politely waited for the woman to speak. She did a double take as he calmly ordered what was selected, which the waiter said was an excellent choice, and took the menu. She glared at him as he left.

“You can’t just sit down at someone’s table,” she told him curtly. “How did you even do that? You weren’t there a second ago.”

“Diana Prince?” he asked.

She looked confused. “Yes?” she answered hesitantly.

“Born of Zues and Hippolyta, or possibly sculpted from clay by Hippolyta and simply given a life to live? Reports are muddled in that area according to what I read.”

“Who are you?” she hissed. “Your eyes! If you’re here to make trouble...” She left it hanging.

Ah, we’re back to red not being a normal color, wonderful. “Here to help you avoid some, actually,” he told her. “One other thing I didn’t understand. This contest you were in when you were very young.” He pulled the hubPad from his *pocket* and got the movie out he had watched.

“What is that?” she asked as he put it down on the table. “That’s some kind of computer, isn’t it? I saw the apple on the back, they make computers right? I’ve never seen one so small! And it’s in color too!”

Apple? Maybe part of the camouflage system? “Yes, yes, I’ll explain that later. Here, this is the part.” They watched as an older woman accused tiny Diana of cheating in the contest, and her eyes got wider and wider the longer she watched.

“So this woman here,” he tapped the screen, “she was watching the race from possibly miles away. She assumes, correctly but for the wrong reason, that you had trouble along the way because you didn’t hit a target with an arrow, releasing your color of smoke. Rather than asking you what the deal was after the race, she tackles you as you are seconds from winning, and accuses you of cheating. Which I’m not even sure you were, given your horse kept going and you got back on it, so it covered the distance. So you would have been on it had that branch not hit you, and won just the same. So what’s the difference? But back to this woman, shouldn’t she have just assumed you missed the target? I mean did you have a history of cheating? What was her deal?”

“How did you even record this?” she breathed. “What is this device?” She picked it up and spun it around and around, like a record, baby.

“Before I answer that, I need to know something. Do I have your attention?” he asked quietly.

She gulped. “Yes?”

He smiled a warm smile at her. “Great! Then my story will be believed and we can get on with it without a lot of fuss. Ah, bread-sticks!”

The waiter left a basket and drinks, and moved away again. Lysanias looked around, they were outside, and it was a fairly modern city they were in. Cars zoomed by, there were planes in the sky, he felt he had a handle on it. It was getting dark, and electric lights hung from the tables and lit the restaurant within. *No drones, probably no magic done out in the open if there is any around. Clary's world would be a close analog I bet.* He grabbed some bread and bit into it. *Not bad.*

"What do I call you?" she asked, handing the pad back. He brought up the home screen and put it back in his *pocket* again.

"I'm Lysanias. Oh relax, I can feel how tense you are from here. We're on the same side. I'm sorry about how I appeared, it's just been a lousy day and I'm still a bit upset about something I had to do recently. I know all about your... saving people thing. I approve. I'd do the same in your situation. Heck I have done! I'm here to save you some trouble like I said, we're not at odds."

"You are clearly powerful, and knowledgeable beyond my experience. What do you want from me?"

"Simply let me hang around a day or two. Reports are that you will soon find a stone that can grant wishes. I'm here to use it, then see it gets destroyed before any harm can come of others doing so."

"Grant wishes?" she breathed. "Truly?"

"Sort of. Oh don't get me wrong it works, but it takes something in exchange. Like if you brought your dog back to life a relative would die, that sort of thing."

"Oh." She scrunched up her nose cutely at the thought of that.

"Exactly. I can use it safely because I'm protected by the admin of magic, and she promised me a wish for certain video footage. This is how she's paying me back, by giving me work to do." He chuckled a little as he thought of it and shook his head. "I would have done it anyway, but still..."

"What's your wish going to be?" she asked, eyes narrowing.

"Not sure yet. I'm already pretty powerful," *and I need to figure out exactly what the angel is giving me before long, now that I don't have Washu's energy orb anymore. Wonder if I could wish for something similar?* "so I don't need anything like that. I can make pretty much anything I want given enough time."

"Like that computer?"

"Exactly. Magical artifacts, technology, I'll show you my armor sometime."

"Then I'll show you mine," she challenged, then reddened a little. "I mean..."

Wow, another cute one. At least I won't have to kill this one because she's evil. "I get it," he assured her. "If you really do have armor I'd love to see it."

"I do. I'll think about it."

"So what would you have wished for?"

Her face fell. "I would have wished for my love's return. He's... past on."

"Really? Wonder if I could do anything about that..." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Seriously?"

"I'm part angel of life. Heck, even without that petitioning a soul is hardly a problem, it's the easiest type of celestial to get, though I'm out of practice in the technique." He got out the hubPad again and started paging through the skills section. "I'm sure I saw a technique in here to rebuild a body from a soul. I call it back, grab it up so it's in soul form, and recreate his body. Let me search for soul... Ah here it is. Yes, an advanced technique for sure, referred to unironically as Soul Reconstituting. Shouldn't it be Body Reconstituting? That's what you're never mind. The skill is probably beyond me, another thing to practice I guess." *Though how I would do so is another thing.* "Still! I think the angel and I could come up with something, I

would make the body another way and just bind the two together again. I don't feel he would take issue to that, given who you are. Take maybe an hour and he'd be alive-" He looked up at her. Her mouth had dropped open. "What?"

"Who are you?"

He sighed. "I suspect you're going to be saying that a lot in the next few days. Like I said, I don't lack for power. You help me find this stone, I'll do what I can to grant your wish, the right way."

"Anything!"

Anything? Without my girlfriend here? But no, the angel would never approve of me taking advantage of that offer, no matter how willing you seemed. "It's fine," he waved that away. "According to Inari you would have found it anyway so it's just putting up with me for a day or two until you run across it naturally. You don't owe me anything."

"Can you... tell me about yourself?" she asked hesitantly.

"Have you got a couple of hours?"

So the pair ate and he gave her a rundown of his past, and what he had been doing since leaving home. Any demonstration would have to wait, of course, but she seemed to believe him. When they had eaten dinner Diana (reluctantly) took him to her apartment.

"You'll have to sleep on the couch," she told him. She had showed him around, including the armor she kept wrapped up in a room full of monitors. It was worked to look like solid gold, and included wings though it looked way too heavy to fly. He could feel supernatural energy coming from it though so he figured it must move that way.

"It'll be hours before I'm ready for bed," he mused. "It was mid-morning for me when I left. Curse of traveling between realities, I'm afraid. Time jumps around."

"Is that going to be a problem?"

He shrugged. "No. I'll review the procedure for calling a soul back, and talk to the angel of life about how to reanimate a body with it. Make some wards, I'll keep myself busy it's fine." *I'll have to go to sleep at some point, so I can make the body, but I'll have to know what he looks like before that. Hopefully she has some pictures of this guy. I suppose I could always ask the Hub, if Inari has footage of Diana as a little girl they should be able to get me some pictures of her boyfriend.* "I can get some sleep in a bubble of stopped time, if you tell me what time you'll be up tomorrow I'll time it correctly."

"Stopped... time? Right."

He grinned. "Yup."

So he did just as he said, and the angel agreed he could probably create a *soul* technique to implant a soul he had at hand into a body. "But of course," he said, "this is all speculation. While in my prime I could create worlds full of souls, what you're doing is completely different. Calling a soul that has migrated with a technique from one world, grabbing hold of it with a technique from another, then putting it into a body created in a Dreaming state, finally using a technique with my power; it's taking four different realities to make this possible."

"That actually seems about right," he admitted. "If it was easy, and every reality could do it, death would be meaningless."

"True."

The angel also told him about what powers he was bestowing upon Lysanias, and how to use them. Most were automatic, like his ability to regenerate both his energy very quickly and any wounds he took. But he could also concentrate and regenerate either even more

quickly than that, though this created an aura of energy around him that could damage things. He could also “change” into techniques, or the angel figured his other skills as well, to increase their effectiveness.

So I could charge energy into myself and use it to activate a ward, such as the armor ward, and have it be super effective? Then just wait a moment and I would be completely recovered? Very nice.

The next morning Diana took him to her workplace, where she helped put papers back into a case that had been dropped by a woman that introduced herself as a new hire, Barbara Minerva.

As in Minerva McGonagall, the transfiguration teacher back in Susan's home reality? I suppose lots of people can share the same name but oddly, they don't seem to.

They both perked up at the mention of the FBI coming to deliver some items for identification, apparently one they needed her help with, as she was a “gemologist and geologist.” Lysanias perked up at their perking up, thinking this may be over before he knew it.

He hung around in her office for about two hours, while he considered his wish and she poked around. Finally they headed downstairs to see Barbara. She was just pulling out the stone. It was bigger than a fist, with three jagged protrusions from around the base. The bottom had some kind of ring on it with writing but he would have to yank it out of her hand to read it. He didn't want to freak her out but got ready to stop time so that he could if he heard the words “I wish” come out of someone. *But who is just going to walk by, touch the stone, and say that? It's not going to happen.*

“Is that it?” Diana asked.

“If that isn't a ‘dreamstone’ I don't know what is.”

“Dream what?” Barbara asked. “Hey, Diana, right?”

“Yes. Do you mind if I take a look at that?”

“Sure, I guess. Don't run off with it!” she joked, handing it over.

Lysanias felt it out while she scraped at the words and turned the rock in her hands.

“Place upon the object held but one great wish.” She shared a look with Lysanias.

“Yeah, it's supernaturally active. And here we come to the great *pause*.”

Time stopped, and he stared at it. *So, the question remains, what do I wish for? He paced around, considering it. Had I not gotten the angel's assistance, I would have wished for more spiritual energy reserves. I could wish for mastery of every skill I know, but I do okay for myself and if I mastered everything in an instant what would I do with my time wandering? I like practicing things, or at the very least I don't mind it.*

Hold everything! Wait just a second, of course what I should wish for is obvious!

He let the time suspension go and held his hand out for the stone.

“Are you sure? Have you decided?” Diana asked.

He grinned. “It's obvious, when you think about it. Don't know why I didn't think of it before, really. Let's get this over with before something bad happens.”

“What bad thing would happen?” asked Barbara. “And who are you again? What are you talking about?”

“This,” Lysanias said, taking the stone and holding it up. “I wish my borrowed eyes no longer pained me when I used them, in effect having been part of me from the beginning of

my life.” *As those that have them at birth can use them freely, and being blind for a couple of hours afterwards is really annoying. I haven’t used them lately, for that reason, but I feel that’s a good solid not too greedy wish to have.*

He felt a power surround him, and he knew it had worked as the feeling subsided. As the stone was of the earth it was then a simple matter to use earth bending and tear it apart. The stone shattered, making Barbara scream and jump back.

“I have to account for that!” she scolded him as he handed the ring back to her. “How did you even do that?”

“Yes, I’d like to know what you’re playing at as well,” a voice behind him said.

He turned, and there was a dark figure standing there. He couldn’t really make out any details, but he had a guess as to who this was. “The avatar of darkness himself,” he greeted the figure, giving a deep bow. “Without even a puppet host on strings. What an honor after all this time to see you for what you really-”

“Don’t give me that. What are you doing here, messing up my plans like this? This is not how the game is played!”

“Messing up your plans?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Talk to the lady, it was her suggestion.”

“Inari!”

“You rang?” Inari’s voice was heard and she was there, sitting on a file cabinet kicking her legs.

“What is happening?” Barbara asked, eyes darting about. “What’s going on, who are these... uh...”

“Yes, what are you playing at, Inari? This isn’t our agreement!”

They have some kind of agreement?

“Oh, posh,” she said, jumping down. Her tails were twitching behind her so she was clearly enjoying this. “Even you need to be pranked now and again.”

“Prank? Is that what-” He paused and then started to laugh. “Oh it is, isn’t it? You little rascal.”

“The look on your face, though Lysanias doesn’t seem as amused as I hoped he would be. He did so need cheering up after the last world.”

Have I just been used? What’s going on here?

“Darkbolt, yes, I really had them on the ropes there. What did you do to me, anyway?”

“I turned that body you were in into light.”

He smacked his face with his hand. “Oh, stupid of me, of course. That’s why you sent him, huh? Honestly, a stupid *alchemy* technique did me in? A reality where people can blow up planets, well, I say people you know what I mean, and it’s a stupid little alchemy technique? I’m going to be living with the shame of that for eons now. Maybe I’ll just blow you all up right now.” He held up a hand with a ball of darkness in it, but Inari was there without Lysanias even knowing she moved. She put her hand over it.

“You better not,” she warned.

He sighed. “Fine. You get a free pass, this time. But it better not happen again. Honestly, when that guy took over the Wishstone I was going to have so much fun tearing this place apart.” He looked over at Diana. “And I wouldn’t have been as stupid as he was, so you would never have stopped me, my dear.” The figure vanished.

There was a moment of silence.

“Explain. Now.” Lysanias told Inari.

“We have a deal,” she admitted. “The avatar, as you call him, chooses a champion to try and destroy a reality. Usually they do that directly, taking them over, because they don’t

trust anyone but themselves to do the job. 'How is that working out for you?' I would ask if the were still here. Meanwhile we get to send our own champion or champions to stop them because Silverstreak and I do have faith in people. You think with our ability to look through time and space, move people and things around, either side couldn't just win if there wasn't something in place to prevent that? It's the best we could do, and gives realities the best chance to survive."

"And those that don't?"

She shrugged. "Probably wouldn't have lasted anyway. Believe me, they've had few victories, thanks to people like you. Look, I can't stay. We can discuss this later if you want." She vanished.

"She's too 'big' to remain in such a limited dimension for long," he explained. "It's difficult for her. She does the cosmic equivalent of a sneeze and we're all toast. That's why the avatar works through possession, and the 'admins' don't just come down here to stop him themselves."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Diana told him. "But I take it your mission here was a success?"

"Completely over," he promised, then turned to Barbara. "I'll make you up a replacement crystal you can give back to the FBI, it was FBI right?"

"Yes," Barbara agreed, feeling relieved to have a question she could answer.

"Fine. I'll make it tonight. That box there, I'll put it in there, you can find it in the morning. Diana, I think we should let her get back to work."

"But that was my work," she protested weakly. "You blew it up."

"It's better this way, believe me," he told her.

"But you blew it up."

Diana looked at him.

"She'll be fine in a few minutes, no problems."

"Let's go."

Epilogue (for real this time)

As good as his word, having seen some pictures of Diana's boyfriend, that night he went to the lab and made a new stone for Barbara, then back to create a body for Steve. Of course he made the man ripped, why wouldn't he? He then petitioned the soul, resulting in a tearful reunion, and worked with the angel of life to join the two together. (The body and soul, not Steve and Diana. He figured they could take care of that themselves after he was gone.)

He showed them his armor, and told them what he could about Inari and the struggle between the beings that had sent them here.

"If I hadn't just been reunited with my love, I might have asked to be considered for a role in this," Diana had told him. "It seems a worthwhile cause, and better than just beating up robbers in a mall."

"Keep doing what you're doing," he had replied. "They may contact you, if and when the time is right. We can always use more help."

He then went back to see Inari, resolving to stay there if she wanted because no one, even an admin of magic, should be alone if they didn't want to be. There was time to save worlds, they would always be there.

Now it was time to do a different kind of saving.