

Chapter 1

This is Red Five, I'm going in

Where: Inari's world

When: Several days later

Anabeth's parents had survived the fortress' onslaught of the land, though many places had been totally wiped out. Lysanias stayed a few days longer, making sure the boats he had made got to shore and helping as he could in both Dream and wakeful forms. But soon Anabeth had pushed him to leave, saying they had to learn to get along without him sooner or later, and this was their problem now. Once people realized most "technology" was useless now they stopped looting and started working together, so there was some hope things would proceed in a good direction from there. Anabeth had poured over the book Inari had sent her, saying it would be a huge help in getting their society running again, just as soon as she figured out how to get the word out about implementing what it suggested.

And so he found himself back at the cabin, with Inari there to meet him.

"I put the painting in your personal dimension," she said by way of greeting. "So you don't have to worry about that."

"I wasn't going to bug you about it, believe me."

"No? Well, that's all right then. So, congratulations, you get Hub access now I guess."

"You don't sound too enthused about that, is there something I should know?"

She shook her head. "No, no, it's fine. Just people who tend to go there don't come back here. It's fine, we're all on the same side and whatnot, it's just... a little lonely here sometimes."

"I'm sure I'll come back and see you. I still have plenty of marbles left, after all." He jingled the pouch with them, tied to his belt as that's the style at this time.

"You say that now... Well, what is, is. It's been an honor either way."

"Hearing you say that, it means a lot. Thank you. It's been nice working with you too. But I'm sure I'll be back, it can't be that nice."

"You'll see. Have fun there. It should suit you well, honestly. Like I said, you'll see. Go on, get going!"

"Get-" *I guess she's not going to send me? Wait, maybe she doesn't want to, or can't, open a door to a place a being like her lives? So that would mean...* He raised his wrist, he was sure he had seen Susan do this. "Requesting Hub access."

"Hub membership status confirmed," the watch replied. "Your first visit is approved and Silverstreak has been notified of your arrival. Congratulations on passing your tests. Transit door to your confirmed location in three. Two. One." Before him a door of light opened, not unlike the way he made a gateway, he just couldn't see through to the other side.

"Bye for now," he said, waving to Inari.

"Bye Lysanias. Good journey."

He stepped through.

A fairly empty room with a bunch of machinery met his eyes, as well as a familiar face. "Jenny!" he cried, smiling broadly. "Hey, how are you?" She ran over to hug him. "Oh!"

"Welcome to the Hub," she told him, stepping back. "I'm good, how have you been?"

"Not bad. So are you the official greeter here or..."

She laughed. "No, but we thought a familiar face might be nice to see when you arrived. Usually we throw a big party, and everyone shows up to welcome a new member of the team. *Buuuuu* in your case we thought maybe we should keep it quiet, let you come to know people around here at your own pace."

"I appreciate that so much more than you know."

"A memo went out, so everyone knows who you are. Come on, the boss is waiting for you, I'll introduce you."

"Sure."

Jenny went to the door and hit a button on the side of it. "Meeting room four thirteen please."

“Configuring,” said the same voice from his watch. “Portal active.” The door slid open and showed a nice conference room, dark wood paneling and plush chairs in abundance. Standing there was a figure in a skintight body suit made of silver, the only break being the red, inset “visor” where the eyes would be. The oddest thing Lysanias noticed that while the figure was a shiny silver, it didn’t actually reflect the room in any way, or himself as he walked over.

“Lysanias, welcome!” said the figure, holding a hand out. “Congratulations on getting this far. You’ve been a big help to the cause, several realities saved Inari tells me and no sign of slowing down. I’m impressed.”

“This is Silversteak,” Jenny told him. “They run the place.”

“Nice to meet you,” Lysanias told him, taking his hand. “Thanks for not overwhelming me right at the start.”

“Naturally, we want you to feel comfortable. Please, have a seat!” He indicated a chair and Lysanias sunk into it.

“Thanks.”

“So, to get right down to it, you do wish to continue helping save realities from Darkvoid, yes?”

“Of course, there’s still so much to learn, and see, and while it can be painful it must be done.”

“Well said. Very well said, in fact.” Lysanias couldn’t get a read on the being, all his senses told him Jenny was there and feeling pleased, but he got nothing from the figure in silver. They *sounded* pleased, so that was something. “If you want to learn this is the place to come. We have science from all corners of the multiverse under one roof, so if you can dream it, it can be made here.”

Was there a slight emphasis on the world dream? Might as well not try to hide it. “You know about my ability in Dreams, then?”

“I do. You expressed some interest in learning more about science, so your Dream creations can persist without you concentrating on them, yes?”

They are well informed. “Would people here mind helping with that?”

“Undoubtedly. Some people aren’t really field agent material you understand. They’re more interested in making things for others than being in the thick of it. So we don’t just host field agents here, some people stay and never leave.”

Just as Inari said.

“But I have a bit of a proposal for you, if you’re interested.” They leaned forward and put their hands together.

“I’ll hear you out, of course.”

“Good, good. I like missions that accomplish more than one goal at a time. So how about this? I’ve got my eye on a new recruit, a tech wizard in a reality we haven’t saved yet.” They slid a folder (from somewhere) across the table and he opened it. There were some documents and a picture inside of a woman with somewhat dark skin and hair.

“She’s not actually a wizard though,” clarified Jenny.

“Right, not a wizard in the magical sense. You know what I mean. She builds things. Go to her reality and check her out. See what you think of her. Meanwhile, trade her some science. You’ve got some things stored away she’ll be interested in taking apart,” he reached into the air and a glowing blade appeared out of nowhere, “such as this, for example. You’ll have other things to offer her, you’ll see when you meet her. She teaches you about electronics and such and meanwhile, you save her reality from Darkvoid as normal. Everybody around this table wins. What do you think?” The blade vanished.

“What do I win?” Jenny asked, looking surprised.

“Oh! Er, another possible friend?” they said hesitantly.

“Friendship is magic,” she agreed. “I guess it’s better than nothing.”

He glanced over the report, detailing what had been going on in that reality lately. *Her parents were taken by a powerful telepath when she was six. She started learning science, vowing to find them and take them back by force if necessary. She found them but their memories were wiped so they’re getting medical treatment... Wait back up, telepaths?* “There are ESPers in this reality? Maybe I can pick up a few new skills as well.”

“Not exactly,” they hedged. “It’s more akin to magic, at least some realities would call it that. See, about a hundred years ago, their time, the walls between realities were weakened a bit. This let in some extra-dimensional energy which some people there can utilize in various ways. Just like how you utilize your spirit energy to do things. Of course, as this energy is external to themselves they’re far less limited than you are. But at the same time a person that uses the power to get really strong couldn’t also fire bend, for example. So it balances out at least in that sense. And yes, they have what you would consider ‘benders’ in that reality. They call them elementals. And wizards, who just draw upon the energy more directly and shape it using their will. They have all sorts of ways of using that energy, from being really heavy to being super fast.”

“I see.” *She took down the organization that was responsible, but the man running it thought he was doing good. His goal was to protect the world from an alien invasion???* Now she has to, along with her friends... “And these aliens, they’re controlled by the, by Darkvoid?” *I think Susan said that’s what this being calls them.*

They nodded. “As far as the race goes, they’re just strip mining planets and destroying puny alien civilizations. But the guy at the top knows every planet that falls means more energy for him once life falls to a minimum there and he can take that reality’s potential. At least that’s our best guess. We can’t see them from here any more than they can see us, but given what’s going on there, who else could it be? You would have to find the exact individual calling the shots but at least you’ll have a good idea where to start.”

“Darkvoid. Okay, I’m getting the picture here.” *The organization was a sort of crime fighting unit, because of course people would use their gifts to commit thefts and whatnot rather than simply make a ton more money doing something only they can do. Because why not be stupid about it? Sure. So the teams are in disarray, no one but her knows the aliens are coming, etc.* “Okay, sure, why not? Honestly against an entire alien race bent on destroying the planet this...” he looked the file over “Amelia is going to need all the help she can get.”

“That’s the spirit! Now, I can assign you to a room, you can take a break for a few days if you want.”

He shook his head and closed the folder. “May as well just go. I do appreciate the offer, but I think before I go exploring this place I should have more of a grounding in science. At the moment I probably won’t even know what I’m looking at.”

“I doubt it would be as bad as all that, but the choice is yours. You can come back here whenever you want, just like you did this time. If you want to go to a lab or your quarters the wrist unit can direct you.” He pointed to the watch. “I’ll have a room reserved in any case. Oh, and I’ve unlocked all the sensors and advanced features now that you’re an official member. You can explore them later, there’s a manual.”

“Sounds good. Thanks.”

They both stood, and Jenny followed.

“Again, welcome to the Hub, I hope you can consider this a second home, and if you need anything don’t hesitate to ask. We’re here to support you, out there fighting to protect realities. We want you to succeed.”

“I will. Thanks.” The two shook hands again and Silverstreak vanished.

“I guess that’s it for now then,” Jenny said, pushing her chair in. “You sure you just want to rush off?”

“I’m pretty excited to get started. I saw a picture of the armor she wears, it’s similar to something Jason used once. Probably so he didn’t have to concentrate on flying, freeing up his attention to do other Dream type stuff.” *That he did to try killing me...* “If I can actually learn to make something like that...”

“Ah, you’ve got the bug all right,” she said ruefully with a shake of her head. “Come on then.” She led him back to the chamber and dialed in the coordinates for his next reality. “According to this she’s in her apartment with her boyfriend.”

“They’re not, you know, doing anything, are they?” His cheeks heated up as he remembered barging in on Bo and her girlfriend.

“Just talking. And *what* is that blush all about, may I ask?”

“You may not!”

She laughed. "Fair enough. But someday... Good luck!"

"Thanks. And say hi to Susan for me. When I come back maybe I can visit her, see how she's doing."

"I will. Bye!"

"Bye!" He stepped through the door and into the world of superheroes.

Two very surprised people were standing in an apartment room as Lysanias stepped through the door on this side. As his vision cleared he looked them over. The man was tall and broad, wearing jeans and a t-shirt. He was in the process of closing the door, and he caught sight of a few people leaving. The girl... He looked down. "I think he left out a detail or two in your report." It was clearly Amelia, hair tousled like she had just gotten out of bed. She was wearing sweatpants and a rumpled shirt, but what he didn't expect was the wheelchair. *Does she pilot the armor by remote control or something?*

"What report?" the man growled, stepping in front of Amelia. "Who are you, barging in here like this?"

"And what was that," she peeked around him, pointing. "I've never seen teleportation like that before! And what's with your eyes? What kind of armor is that, I've never seen that style before. Are those cables running down your arms? Can you control them?"

"Amelia, stay back, he could be dangerous!" The man tried to stay in front of her as best he could.

My friend, you have no idea. Also, she's quite inquisitive isn't she? He chuckled a little.

"Not to you. Just to be clear, you are Amelia Lockheart, are you not?"

"Yes. Oh move, Luke, he's obviously not here to hurt us. He could have appeared when we were in bed a few minutes ago and shot us both dead before we could... Uh... Anyway."

Both she and Lysanias blushed, looking away from each other. *So Silverstreak does have a sense of decorum, unlike some others I could name. He put me here after they got out of bed together, and not before. Good to know.*

"I still haven't gotten an answer," he complained.

"My name is Lysanias. I've been sent here for a few reasons, but the main one is to help you save the world. I do understand you'll be facing some aliens very soon, will you not?"

She gasped and put her hands over her mouth. "You know about that? No one but me should even know about that! Are you an alien? Do you have a ship in orbit, and that's where the door came from?"

"To a certain extent I am an alien," he admitted. "But I'm from another reality, not another world. It's going to take some-" His watch buzzed. "One second. Yes?"

"Dimensional door energy expenditure is significant. If you are finished with it?"

"Oh." He looked behind himself, and the door of light was still sitting there. "Sorry, I thought it would go away automatically after I went through it. Yes, you can close it."

"Affirmative." It winked out.

"Incredible," Amelia breathed. "And an AI as well, unless I miss my guess?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes, well, we can talk about what we can offer each other in a moment. This is all going to take some explaining."

"You can say that again," Luke grumped.

"Do you mind if I sit?" He gestured to a chair that was by the table in the kitchen area.

"Of course. Luke, go get-"

He flicked a finger and the chair soared through the air, coming to rest next to him. He sat down.

"Never mind, I guess. So you have telekinetic powers?"

"Among other things. Let me start at the beginning. My name is Lysanias, and my story began when I was awoken from several thousand years of sleep by a dwarf and a gnome..."

An hour or so later and he was up to the current time. Amelia had looked like she was about to burst from wanting to ask questions but she held herself back. He had explained *most* of what he could do, leaving out the specifics of stepping from Dreams into reality, they seemed freaked out enough as it was without adding that into the mix. "So I met with Anari's

counterpart, who I guess is some kind of god of technology, and he said I should come here to learn more of the basics before I poked around what he could offer me. In exchange, I'm allowed to offer you a few things." *Because now that I think about it, I am carting around a few 'spoils' aren't I?* He got up and went over to the kitchen table, and the pair followed him. "This is a lighting gun made by Van Helsing." He pulled it out of his *pocket* and set it on the table, followed by another. "This is a raygun of some kind I took off a weird looking alien when I met He-Man."

"You met- no, go on."

"These are drones powered by magic." He got out his three drones who were powered up again so there was at least some magic in this reality he could draw on. "I have various samples of materials such as Rainbow Shell, angelic metal, demonic metal, adamant, solid moon and sunlight, etc." He pulled out samples of them. "It's too small in here but outside I can show you the magitek armor from Terra's world, and the armor used by the people against benders in Korra's world. Oh, chaos shards, I totally forgot about them," he pulled them out. "And the thing you'll probably be most interested in..." *Because everyone seems to be, for some reason.* "This." He pulled a spare light saber out and ignited it.

"Is that..." Her eyes were wide and she was leaned forward in the chair. Even Luke seemed impressed.

"Yes, it is."

"A real..."

He nodded. *Told you.*

"And we're not on fire."

"That I can tell."

"It's a real..."

"It's real."

"You can show *me* how to make..."

"I can. I'll leave you some crystals but you'll have to figure out how to make more if you want others to have them after I'm gone." He turned it off and set it on the table. "Plus there's the less tangible benefits of having me around."

"Such as?" Luke asked.

"I read in your report that your parents didn't remember you. I can probably meld with them and tear those mental barriers down so they do. I mean I don't want to make a girl a promise if I know I can't keep it, but I've done it before. But even better than that. How would you, Amelia Lockheart, like to walk again?"

Chapter 2

I can do this all day

When: A few shocked seconds of silence later

Where: Amelia's place

"What?" she croaked. She had gone pale, and if she wasn't already seated probably would have fallen over.

"It's a spinal injury, right? From when you were six? One way or another I'm sure I can make it right. I know several ways to heal, and while it's probably been too long for some of them, one method in particular is sure to work." *That of simply Dreaming her better. If I Dream that she can walk again, she should just be able to do it. The damage just shouldn't be there any more.*

"Now hold on a minute," Luke cautioned. "This sounds like one of those 'too good to be true so it probably isn't' deals. You're offering a lot, like literally granting her actual, magical wishes, like from a lamp. And all you want in exchange is the chance to die horribly defending our world from aliens and some basic courses on electronics?"

"Well, when you put it like that, yeah, it sounds stupid. Look, the God of my world created people that could do just about *anything*. He then decided that was a dumb idea and tried to wipe us all out. I survived, because my parents sacrificed themselves for me. Every life I save, every skill I learn, I'm thumbing my nose at Him. If I somehow screw up and get killed, and have the chance to meet Him in person, I'll have some choice words believe me. Like how many lives I saved, and the good I did in the worlds I visited, versus how many He's saved. I mean He only created the two, Adam and Eve. We took it from there."

"That would be a very interesting conversation I would think."

"And it isn't just basic courses in electronics. I want to understand enough about the armor to make my own."

Amelia seemed to shake herself out of it. "That's, I don't know, I promised myself that some secrets about how I made it would go to the grave with me."

"Think about it this way," he offered. "I'm helping you with this problem and then you wave goodbye to me as I leave this reality. You'll still be the only being here that knows your secrets. Besides, isn't this just science? What one mind can invent, another can invent right?"

"I guess. You can't stop progress, Erickson tried. Now he's on a one way trip to the sun."

"Can we trust this guy?" Luke asked her quietly, bending over to her. "I mean, yes his entrance was impressive enough and he seems to have his story straight but come on! Aliens I can certainly see, it would be crazier not to have other intelligent life somewhere in the cosmos. But other realities?"

She shrugged. "As they say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Most people get that phrase wrong you know? If he can cure me, and my parents, and shows me some of the amazing things he's talking about, who am I to argue where he's from? I mean my best friend teleports and is an empath, you turn into a rage monster. I fly around in armor despite the fact I can't walk. We learned aliens are real and a telepath controlled the world for years. Is anything off the table at this point?"

"You just want that light saber," he scoffed.

"Don't you?"

"Eh."

She shook her head. "I don't think we can be together anymore."

"Okay." He looked down, but felt amused. "If that's really how you feel about it."

"Wait, no, forget I said that! Can you make him forget I said that? Can you?"

"Sure." He snapped his fingers. "Just kiss him."

"Gladly!" she grabbed his head and yanked him down, planting a kiss on his lips.

"What were we talking about?" Luke asked in a dazed tone when she let him go.

"You really did it?" she gasped. "And what did the kiss have to do with it?"

Both men burst out laughing. "There's no way I could do it that easily!" Lysanias assured her. *Right? Have to look into that...*

"I was just messing with you," Luke agreed.

She pouted. "You're both terrible. Honestly. All right, I admit I want the light saber. I want it so bad. And he makes a good point. And we could use all the help we can get. If he can do a variety of things like he says, how can we turn down a genuine offer to help?"

"Because maybe he's one of these aliens we're about to fight?" Luke suggested. "Here to spy on us? They could make light sabers for all we know."

"Uh," she paused. "No, Epic says he's been scanning him. All his reactions have been genuine from what he can tell, and if he's not human their camouflage technology is light years ahead of us. He has blood pressure, his eyes blink right, he has pores, and most impressive of all, what language is he speaking?"

"Well, English, isn't he?"

"Am I?" Lysanias asked.

"Er, now that you mention it, it doesn't exactly sound like English, does it? But I can understand it perfectly..."

"Epic said the same thing. He can't lock onto it, has no idea the grammar, syntax, or graphemes he's using but understands him just the same. Listen to this." From the TV Lysanias heard his voice saying "There's no way I could do it that easily."

"Complete gibberish. What was that?" Luke asked.

"His last sentence. Analyzing what he's saying as he says it? Epic has no problem doing that. Trying to analyze what he said in a *recording*? Can't make heads or tails of it. What technology in the universe could do that?"

Is that what I sound like? Never actually had my voice recorded before.

"If you say it's impossible, I'll believe you. You're way smarter than I am."

"For now, at least, I think you have a deal," Amelia said to him. "I have to start building the Mark 3 anyway, my Mark 2 got all messed up. I can describe what everything does, give you the background information on anything you don't understand. Hopefully it won't slow me down too much."

"I have an idea about that," he told her. "Actually making the armor pieces, that takes a lot of time, right? Forging the pieces, hooking up the... circuits?" She nodded. "Let's take a different approach. Describe the armor piece you would be working on to me. You must work from some sort of blueprint. I'll simply wish it, to use Luke's phrase, into existence that night. If it works as expected, I've understood the principals behind it well enough. If it does not, then I have not. I figure doing this may actually save you time, not to mention material costs. We will probably take a few days to get the basics down, but creating the left arm, for example, is nothing more than creating the mirror image of the right. A work of seconds for me, once I understand it. You would have to do all the work from scratch."

"You really can just wish things into existence?"

"Is there a place we can go outside? I'll show you what I've made."

"Not exactly," she replies. "I need my own base of operations, don't I? This is just my apartment in the middle of the city. We start taking otherworldly objects out of nowhere and it might cause a scene."

He leaned over to look out the window, and got a glimpse of the street below. "One second." He relaxed, letting his astral form go and took a quick spin around the building. She was right, even putting some *ignore me* wards down there wasn't a lot of room around here to get out a couple of giant mechs. He zipped back in, settling back into his body. "We can use mine, it's fine." He got up and looked around the room, finding a space along the wall that looked big enough.

"Your what?" she asked.

"You'll see." Throwing energy into his magic he opened the doorway to his personal dimension, and watched as it appeared before him. "I don't know how well your wheels will work on the grass, but we only need to go a little ways inside. Come on." He stepped through and started pulling wards out of his *pocket*. The two hesitantly followed, looking around. He went some ways away from them, motioning them to stay put, and activated the three wards, one after another, after giving them plenty space. "This is the one I made," he told them, indicating the teardrop ship. "I can take you inside if you want."

"How? There's no door I can see," Amalia asked, Luke pushing her from behind on the grass. "And what's that thing?" She pointed to the balloon.

“Oh.” He felt a little embarrassed about it, given how primitive it looked compared to the other ship. “My friends and I made that, a long time ago, on my world. I was fairly proud of it, at the time. Now I see it for what it really is, but still.”

“And those?”

“That’s the magitek armor. It has various weapon systems, magical beams and a healing beam, if you have HP that is. The other is more conventional, it runs on some kind of fuel from that tank in the back. You’re welcome to look them over, see if they spark any ideas.”

She whistled as she looked up at them, both at least twice as tall as Luke was. “I’ve been thinking way too small, haven’t I? Let’s see this ship of yours then.” They walked over and she was pushed around the whole thing. She was tapping the side and feeling the material, clearly trying to figure out what it was made of. “Can we see the inside now?” He walked over and held out both hands, one to each person, and when each took one he *shifted* to be in the side of the ship. *Luckily I had the seats down, so there’s room.* Of course the interior was completely dark so he simply used light bending to make a ball of light above his hand. *As an open flame in here probably is not the best idea.*

“It looks like a shuttlecraft in here, from like the next generation after the next generation,” Amelia remarked. She wheeled around. “At least the bones of a ship are here.”

“I want to finish it up once I understand technology enough to do so. Some displays, the engine will apparently go back here. I just had the hubPad show me some pictures of what other small ship interiors looked like and went from there.”

“And you wished all this into existence?” Luke asked.

“More or less.”

“I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship,” Amelia told him. “I’ve seen enough, let’s go back to the apartment for now.”

He held out his hands and *shifted* them back outside, and she rolled back into the room. He closed the door and she turned to face him. “So about my legs. Then we’ll go see my parents.”

“Sure, whatever you want. I’ll need to understand the extent of the damage, that means I’ll have to touch your spine for a moment or two. Then I’ll figure out what the best method of healing you is.”

Luke didn’t look pleased but she gave a “come on” and rolled into the bedroom. She transferred from the chair to the bed and after manually moving her legs lay down and rolled over, pulling her shirt up. “Is this enough?”

“That’s fine.” He went to put his hand on her back.

“This won’t hurt, will it?”

“Hurt? No, not at all. Just relax, it won’t take long.”

“Okay.”

He put his hand on her spine and closed his eyes. Almost at once he realized it wasn’t going to be like trying to get Korra to air bend, it wasn’t spiritual in nature at all. This was nerve damage, and possibly too delicate to repair with alchemy. He used his ability to explore a material and after a minute gave a slight nod.

“You’re nodding, is that good? Can you do something?” Luke asked, sounding anxious.

“You sound more nervous than I am, chill out Luke!” Amelia told him. “But seriously, how bad is it doc?”

“Tricky. This is an old injury, that’s for certain, but I do now know just about everything about it. The blockage, if you will, is exactly... here.” He opened his eyes and ran a finger down her spine, landing at a certain point. “The main problem is it’s not exactly “damage” at this point. If I had been here when she was six, moments after it had happened, maybe I could have healed it and she never would have been paralyzed like this. But her body has been growing since then, and it’s done its best, which of course has only made the problem worse. There’s scar tissue in the way, and the pathway from her brain to her legs is simply too shredded for water bending or alchemy to now help. Even wards, I’ll demonstrate.” He pulled a healing ward out of his *pocket*. “This is a healing ward. It’s healing energy contained within this paper. If you cut yourself, or sprained your ankle, I could slap this down and a soothing

blue fire would come up, providing an accelerated healing to undo the damage. But now, observe.” He slapped it down on her back. “No blue fire. No healing.”

“So nothing can be done,” Amelia said, resigned. She turned over and put her shirt down and he put the ward away.

“Hey, don’t give up so easily,” he chided her. “You have my personal guarantee you *will* walk again before the next sunrise. Or at least stand, you’ll probably have to learn to walk as you haven’t done it in so long. Like I said, if one method doesn’t work, try another. There are things I can do at night that I can’t do in the day, you’ll see.”

“What, is your power stronger in the light of the moon or something?” Luke asked.

“Can you transform like a magical girl? By the name of the moon, I will punish you!” Amelia did a weird pose with her arms.

“Let’s just say that I can do certain things during the day, and certain things during the night. Healing a gash or heck, reattaching an arm if you sliced it off with the light saber by accident I could do during the day. Manipulating something as minute as the signal pathway between your brain and your legs not so much.” *Because my Dreaming nature sort of ‘takes care of’ that aspect for me. I need to know what’s wrong, and now I do, but not the exact details of how the fix is accomplished. Just like I don’t need to know exactly how an engine works or how gravity works to manipulate those things in the Dream. I just believe hard enough and they happen. I wish I knew where the material came from, where the power comes from, but I probably never will.*

“But you can heal my parents?”

“That’s just a mental thing,” he assured her. “I’ve actually done it once before. A girl named Clary had her memories sealed,” *okay by magic, but that shouldn’t matter*, “and I unlocked them fairly easily. I don’t anticipate too much trouble with them.”

She looked at the door. “I guess we should go see them, then.”

He looked at the door and then back to her. “Why do you feel terrified of that idea?”

“What are you talking about?” Luke asked.

Amelia shook her head. “Wow, you’re an empath too, huh? Can’t wait for you to meet Kate and you can both talk to my feelings instead of to me. It isn’t meeting them, or at least not *all* about meeting them. Look, the guy behind all this could switch bodies when he died. Or rather, one of his powers was to automatically transfer his consciousness into a new host when one died. Whoever was closest to him, became him. I trapped him on his space station but if he somehow got free and killed himself he could be anyone. I go out there, to a place not protected from mental intrusion like this place is, he could know it. Head to where I am, slit his own throat, and now he’s me. Or, more terrifyingly now that I think about it, you.”

“Ah. Well, easy solution! I’ll just ask the universe if this person will ever cause you trouble again. I’ll need to enter your mind, get an image of the last body he had, but with that and the name I should be all set to ask. Or, no, even better, I’ll just look into *your* future relating to this man and see if you’ll be troubled by him. Yes, that would be easier and faster, I just have to touch you. May I?” He held out a hand.

“I guess?” She took it and he concentrated on her future relating to this man she was so scared of. At first he didn’t feel anything, making him wonder if that was the answer but then suddenly he knew without question this person was no longer in her future. But there was something curious.

“While the sun has set on the father, the father has beget a son,” he intoned.

“Er, what?” Luke asked.

“Oh no,” Amelia moaned, looking horrified. She pulled her hand back and wrapped her arms around herself, shuddering. “Ericsson had kids? No wait, of course he did. He was a telepath and switched bodies all the time. Of course he used his powers to make woman- oh ick, ick, ick. Are you telling me his *son* is one day going to come after me? Revenge for what I did to his dad?”

“I know only what I have said, that is what your future holds in relation to him.”

“I’m not exactly reassured, but it’s something,” she admitted. “Very well, let me get changed and we’ll go see my parents.” She wheeled back into her bedroom and closed the door. Then she opened it again. “You’ll need to take off that armor and stuff, do you have any normal clothes?”

“I think I can manage something.”

“So...” Luke said, after a moment of silence as he got changed as well. “You’ve seen other worlds. I mean you told us about it, but what’s that like?”

“Confusing, at first. I have to figure out what magic the world has access to, if any. I’m not all that familiar with technology so it gives me trouble sometimes. Ultimately rewarding. I make friends, I help them out, and knowing a world is safe because if me is pretty great. Saying goodbye can be a pain, as time runs differently between realities they could have lived their whole lives a second after I set foot on the next world. All the people I’ve met could be dead and gone now.”

“That must be fairly lonely. Have you thought of traveling with someone?”

“Most wanderers do, I’m told. But actually I do travel with others, actually I should introduce you.” He got out his wand and closed his eyes, going into his soulscape. He went and found Rosalina, then called her out to the world.

“This is Rosalina, my wand spirit.”

“Nice to meet you. It’s nice to be remembered occasionally,” she said, looking at Lysanias from the corners of her eyes.

“I’m sorry, really, you know a lot goes in my life. And it’s just been me telling them about my life, you’ve lived it, you don’t need to hear it again.”

“I suppose.”

Luke and chatted about who exactly she was, and Amelia came out of the bedroom. She stopped dead looking at Rosalina. “Rosalina?” she asked.

“You know me?” Rosalina asked back.

“Sure, you’re from the Super Mario Galaxy games. How can you be-” She looked over at the light saber. “Sure, right, you’ve actually met Yoda. Why wouldn’t you travel with a beautiful magic user too? But where the heck did you come from?”

“Come on, let’s talk on the way,” Luke told her, rolling his eyes. “Or we’re never going to leave this apartment.”

“Fine, fine, let’s go...”

Chapter 3

Where we're going we don't need roads

When: Half an hour later

Where: Hospital

The group rode in Luke's truck to the hospital, both out of reality visitors looking around interested as they drove. Amelia wanted to know how this place stacked up against other realities he had visited, and Lysanias had told them it was about standard. The buildings here were a bit taller than in Korra's world, and a person taken from Clary's reality and put here would probably be hard pressed to immediately spot any differences.

"That's the place vampires and werewolves walked around?" Luke asked.

"That's right."

"All we got was superheroes," Amelia grouched. "I feel like we're missing out."

"There could be a secret counsel of vampires in this reality, how would we know there wasn't?" Luke asked her.

"Luke, you do know how to talk to a girl, don't you?" He felt a burst of affection from her and gave a little shake of his head. *Yeah, she's got it bad.*

Pulling up to the tall white building Amelia said was the place they got out and went inside. This too was a fairly typical setting, with a main desk to direct visitors and people of all sorts coming and going.

"Amelia Lockheart, here to see... my parents," she told the man at the desk, pausing only slightly in the middle.

"Ah yes," he said, typing on the computer in front of him. "We were notified you would be visiting. It says here the renovations to the floor aren't done if you're coming to inspect them."

She shook her head. "They may not even be needed anymore. But no, I'm just here to see my parents. Dr. Grace I believe is working with them?"

"Yes, she'll meet you there. They've been told you're coming as well. If you'd like to go up? Do you know where the elevators are?"

"I think so. That way?" She pointed.

"Yes, that's right. Straight that way and on your right."

"Thank you."

"Of course. Have a good afternoon."

That's the plan.

In the elevator Amelia was clenching and unclenching her hands. She felt very nervous, something Luke probably wasn't picking up on.

"What renovations was he talking about?" he asked.

"I started them making sure no one under mind control could get to my parents. I mean they were just one part of the team so Ericsson wouldn't have gone after them apart from trying to get to me. As Lysanias here says he's not a threat anymore it's probably overkill at this point. Of course, if they can walk out of here remembering me we won't even need the room any more."

"What do you think they'll do then?"

"Maybe work for me? They are scientists after all, even if they have been working for the wrong guy all these years. The president wanted me to put together a team, and we probably don't have much time before the invasion begins. They can pick up where they left off, just with me paying their salary now, or I guess maybe the government? How would that work?"

Her musing was cut short as the elevator came to a stop and opened. Several heads swiveled towards them, what must be guards with guns and this Dr. Grace, a thin, brown skinned woman in a lab coat.

"Amelia, good to see you," she says, coming over to us. "Your message said you had found an expert in memory restoration? This is excellent news, is it..." she looks us all over, raising a quizzical eyebrow at Rosalina in her formal dress.

“Dr. Grace, may I introduce Lysanias, who is the expert I mentioned, his assistant, Rosalina, and this is Luke, my boyfriend.”

“Nice to meet you all,” she responds, shaking hands with everyone. “As your email said you were coming immediately and not to stop work it’s fairly messy up here. I hope you don’t mind.”

“It’s fine. My parents are comfortable here?”

“They’ve been model patients, accepting that they do have a daughter without too many questions. Of course some physical proof would have been nice, pictures or home videos and the like, but I understand you were quite young?”

“I was six.”

“Pity. Well, let me show you to their room, so you can get started.”

“Thank you.”

The group moved past the guards, past workmen doing something to the room behind, and then into the main floor. Past a series of doors the whole thing looked more like a hotel than a hospital, and she knocked.

“Come in.”

The group went inside and the room was fairly crowded, but there were Amelia’s parents. She definitely had her mother’s looks, similar dark hair, though both her parents looked a bit gaunt. Introductions were made, and finally Lysanias was seated across from her mother, who had volunteered to go first.

“So if I’m understanding this correctly,” she hedged, “you’re going to use what boils down to a Vulcan mind meld, go inside my mind, and try to destroy this block I have on memories relating to my daughter. From inside my head?”

“That’s exactly right,” he agreed. “Though I didn’t learn it from a Vulcan.” *Whatever that is.*

“I mean, obviously,” Amelia hastened to assure them. “He trained with Yoda, not Spock!”

“Yoda?” her father asked, clearly confused.

“Er, never mind. Get on with it then!”

“With your permission?” Lysanias held up a hand towards her face. *After all, Clary said I should do it ‘properly’ whatever that means.*

She leaned forward. “Go ahead.”

He placed his fingers at the side of her head. “My mind to your mind,” he intoned. “My thoughts to your thoughts.”

As things went dark he thought he heard a somewhat high pitched squealing sound coming from the direction Amelia was sitting in, but thought no more of it as he opened his eyes to the control room.

He grinned.

There, with their backs to him, were exactly what he expected to see. A group arguing over the controls.

“Hello Joy,” he said, still smiling. The figure, in a yellow sundress, spun, followed by the others. “Anger. Sadness. Paranoia. Vanity if I’m not mistaken. How are you all?”

“Have we met?” asked Joy, lightly bouncing over to him. “Did we just forget you too? I’m so sorry, nice to meet you again in that case!”

“How did he get in here?” demanded Anger.

“It’s so sad to forget people,” agreed Sadness.

“...” said Paranoia, who had jumped behind the console.

“I hope you can cure us, no one else seems to be able to,” Vanity told him. “We look like crap, maybe we can finally start eating better after that guy controlled us.”

“I hope so too,” he agreed. Then he turned. “Let’s start with the core memory- oh.” Looking out he saw a big hole between two of the islands. “I think I see the problem. You’re missing a core memory.”

“Somehow that Ericsson guy made it vanish,” said Anger. “We’ve been looking for it ever since, but no luck.”

“Hummmm, did you check with Greed?”

"That was the first place we looked," Sadness told him.

"You really have been here before," Joy said. "How is that possible?"

"Not here, exactly. Just someone else with a similar situation." He walked over and looked down at the landscape below, looking a lot like Clary's inner memory workings as well. *There's the long term memory storage, here's short term here in the control center. There's the train, never did figure that out.* "If you've looked, maybe it's just been destroyed."

"Oh no!" Sadness cried, "I sure hope not."

"I have to agree," Joy agreed. "It would be so wonderful to remember our daughter. I mean, she was only six apparently, but still."

"Ha, you think *they* would be able to find anything?" Anger shouted, pointing out towards memory storage. "Oh sure, a soft drink jingle from twenty years ago? All the freaking time. But ask her where she put her car keys. Go ahead, ask her! It was five minutes ago you set them down, come on! Try to pay attention!"

"I can see you feel strongly about that," he allowed. "I could go down, have a look. If you don't mind, that is."

"Are you sure you want him wandering around our memories?" asked Paranoia, sticking her head up. "What if he sees, you know..."

"Oh, I'm sure he's familiar with that," Joy told her. "Go right ahead! Good luck!"

"Thanks." He went over and hit the button on the elevator, which opened, and he stepped inside. Joy was waving goodbye energetically, Sadness with sadness, you get the idea. After the door closed and he started down he summoned his mountain spirit and Rosalina.

Once again into the terrifying landscape of another's mind? it asked him dryly.

"It wasn't that terrifying," Rosalina told him. "I mean fighting potential Clary was a bit painful, but hopefully there's nothing like that around here."

"Where do you think we should look?" he asked them. "Just strike out at random?"

We should have some idea where to look before we begin. She is older than Clary, and would have more memories stored. We can't check all the 'shelves' here.

"It's a good point, but I bet with my Lumas we could cover a lot of ground quickly. At least they can fly through part of the place, see if anything odd jumps out at them. I mean how do you hide a core memory? Remember how much bigger they were? And how they shone?"

"I do. Well, let's use all our resources here to see what we can come up with. I'll try flying around, see if anything can be seen from the air. Meanwhile maybe you, mountain spirit, can check on the subconscious? I wouldn't put it past greed to lie to the others.

I can go there, a clue could be anywhere here.

"Agreed." The door dinged open and the group headed out, Lysanias imagining wings on his back and taking to the air while Rosalina summoned her troop of star people and sent them spinning through the memory shelves.

Lysanias flew for a few minutes, looking over the lay of the "land" and didn't really see anything too amiss. No areas of darkness, the other islands all looked intact and bright, and there were no versions of Amelia's mother he could see running around or protecting anything locked up. He was about to do another pass when a ribbon of light shot out of the memory storage area, and he swooped over to it.

"Did you find something?"

"This Luma says they saw something strange, want to check it out?"

"Strange is great news! Lead on!" he told it excitedly. It gave a quick salute and zipped off down the corridors, and both moved to keep up. It pointed down a certain row and he entered it, memories mostly the color of Joy on the shelves. Taking a closer look he noticed a lot of these memories seemed to relate to her being in various states of undress, and there was a lot of giggling, moaning, sighing, and even a bit of screaming coming from the orbs. "Why am I here?" he asked, as Rosalina seemed to be getting more and more tense, gripping her wand tighter and tighter.

"Yes, why are we here?" she asked through clenched teeth. Her eyelid seemed to be have developed a twitch as well.

The Luma pointed.

They both looked and there was a memory orb here that didn't fit with the others. It was totally dark, where the next nearest orb color was simply a bit more pale, trending to a slight graying. "Well that's-" He tried to take the orb but his hand impacted some kind of energy barrier around it, throwing him back a little ways.

"Are you okay?" she asked, coming to his side.

"Yeah, surprised me more than anything. What in the world?" He shook his hand out, then carefully moved forward, his hand coming up against that energy again and blocking him.

"I guess that's a clue," she admitted. "You're off the hook, for now. Go find a worker, will you?" The Luma zipped off.

"I don't get it." He picked up the memory orb next to the black one quite easily, blushed furiously as that memory rushed into him, and put it back. "I, uh, won't bother testing to see if I can take down any others, I'm sure I can."

"Yes, that's for the best," she told him, her eye twitching again.

"But this one..." He pushed one finger at it, and again it resisted him. "I just don't..."

The Luma returned with a worker, dragging them by the arm. "I say, this is most peculiar," they were saying. "Ah, hello."

"Hello," Lysanias greeted them. It was the same blue jellybean sort of person as with Clary, in overalls and wearing a yellow hard hat. It was dragging a vacuum cleaner which thumped to a halt next to it. "Can you tell me what happened to this memory?"

"Afraid I can't," they said sadly. "There's a few of them like that, scattered about. Very embarrassing, actually. We're supposed to keep the memory halls nice and bright, aren't we? Take out the memories that have gone a bit gray. But these black ones," he switched on the vacuum and tried to suck it up. The orb moved but impacted the barrier again, then rolled back into position when they turned it off. "See? No can do. A right blemish on our record, that one is."

"You say there's more?"

"Easily a dozen, that's right. Why?"

"Scattered all over? No real pattern?"

"You've got the right of it, sure enough? What are you thinking?"

"I'm not sure. But it's all we have to go on at the moment. Can your people show us where they are if we need them to? Could the rows be marked or something?"

"Cor, I suppose so. If you can get rid of these, why, you'd have the thanks of all us sweepers, right up to management unless I miss my guess."

"Thanks. We'll be back."

"I'll spread the word, won't take two shakes of a lamb's tail." He left the vacuum and trotted off.

"Well done," he told the Luma, who was dancing in air as usual. It bowed to him.

"He says you're welcome, glad he could help. Do you want them to keep looking around?"

"Might as well. If they found one clue, no reason why they couldn't find another."

But they didn't. The mountain spirit also returned empty handed, saying the subconscious was a scary place, but that greed also wished the return of the missing core memory orb. *Her daughter was in a way stolen from her*, he explained. *She wishes for those lost memories back as greedily as a real dragon wishes for gold. I saw no evidence she was hiding anything like that, nor any baby items like clothes or toys. It's as if the existence of her daughter was simply wiped away.*

"Which is a problem," Lysanias admitted as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. "If that orb was destroyed, there's no getting it back. In that case I'm not sure what to tell Amelia."

"Hey, we still have the black orbs," Rosalina insisted. "That must mean something."

"We'll go take another look. But let's check another, we'll head back to the one we found, uh, later."

"Good call."

The workers had done their job well, and were waiting for them to return, so he picked a random row and found the black orb. This one also resisted his attempts to pick it up, and he scowled at it.

"This ain't a core memory though," a worker said. "Accept no substitutes."

"Any memory can become a core one though," another protested. "Just usually happens to be the first, but if there's any getting that missing island back, it's a place to start, isn't it?"

"If I got it out, it could be used as a substitute?" he asked.

"Be a tricky business," said one. "Who knows what ya might make? A dark island? Maybe she'll end up remembering she hates her daughter and wants the wee barn dead, that's no good."

The others agreed this could indeed happen.

"Let's get it out of there to start," he decided. "At the very least free up some space for real memories." *But how to do it?* He thought Raganock into his hand, and took a stance.

"Stand back," he told the workers. "Rosalina, throw your TK into this."

"Got it."

"Here we go." He slammed it forward, tip impacting the energy barrier which sparked angrily. He shoved, feeling Rosalina's power also behind him. It wasn't enough, the sword wasn't getting through. "Come on, come on!" He threw his weight behind it, willing the barrier (which was after all just a mental construct, just as he himself was at the moment) to shatter. Suddenly something smacked the sword hilt, driving it forward, and the barrier cracked. The sword slid in, and he heaved it like a crowbar, prying the opening wide. The orb flew out into Rosalina's hands, and he yanked the blade. Turning he saw the mountain spirit, grown to twice normal size, which must have been the thing that smacked the sword forward.

"Thanks," he told it. "That did it."

Welcome.

"Take a look at this," Rosalina said, holding the orb out. "When you take it, listen carefully."

"Okay?" The sword vanished and he closed his eyes, holding his hands out. She dropped the orb in, and there was a faint laugh, and he could have sworn someone said "With a baby's first laugh a fairy is born!" Then, nothing. "I heard a baby laugh?"

"You did? I did too, I wasn't hearing things. This does relate in some way!"

"I guess it must. Come on, where's the next nearest one? We're getting them out."

The workers cheered and led them on, and he repeated the procedure. This time it seemed to take a little less effort, because he knew what he was doing or because the barrier was weakening he didn't know. When he held the two memories hoping to hear or feel something else a weird thing happened. They jumped together and got a little brighter.

"Oh, now wait just a minute," one of the workers said. "That shouldn't happen. Unless..." They looked over at the others were all nodding.

"Unless?"

"What if the core wasn't lost, but shattered? Stuck here and protected? You piece it together and maybe we'll get it back!"

"Let's not waste time, where's the next?"

And so it went. The barriers fell a little easier each time, and the last one, probably showing Amelia's conception, came together into one shining orb. The workers gave a holler of delight, throwing their hard hats into the air and whirling each other around by the arms. "Everybody gets the rest of the day off!" shouted a larger one with a clipboard.

"With pay?" asked one.

"With pay!"

"Huzaa!" a new cheer went up.

The group was all smiles, and after shaking every hand (possibly twice it was hard to keep track) Lysanias made his way back to the control room where he presented the core memory orb to Joy. "If you would like to do the honors?" he asked.

“It would be my absolute delight,” she agreed, opening the projector. The memory went inside and a beam of light shot out, creating family island. Anger seemed impressed, Sadness didn’t even seem that sad at the moment, and Joy scooped Lysanias up and kissed him.

Which is what he found Amelia’s mother doing as he came out of the meld.

“Mom!” Amelia cried, sounding scandalized.

“I’m not going to do that when I remember you, am I?” her father asked, looking worried.

Chapter 4

The fun has been doubled

When: Three hours later

Where: Amelia's apartment

That evening there was a true celebration at Luke's place, where Amelia was currently staying, as both her parents had been released from the hospital. Using the knowledge gained from piecing her mother's memories back together her father had been a snap. He breezed in, said hi to the representations of emotions in the control booth, ran out, grabbed the core memory shards, popped it back in, and was on his way too fast for even Joy to keep up with. Both had been checked out by the doctor, who said they were acting a lot better now.

"It wasn't that they weren't okay before," she assured them. "But memory is all one piece. You take part of it away, and it can have a strange effect on the whole. But now that I see your parents with memory of you vs with no memory of you, I can see they're whole again. I don't know what he did, but you have your parents back. I'll get the paperwork to check them out started. By the way, about the renovations for this floor, will they continue or..."

Another of Amelia's friends were there; Kate, the knockout who was a little older than she was. Her other friend Carlos wasn't answering his phone or texts, his parents said he had rushed off earlier that day and didn't know when he would be back. Everyone was smiling, eating pizza, and listening to the tale of his journey through their "inner space." Kate also looked them over, saying their minds were free of Ericsson's touch, and was interested in how Lysanias had managed it. They had swapped stories about their powers, Kate's being far more invasive due to her being more powerful than Lysanias in certain ways. While he could look at someone and decide to know what they were feeling, she felt everything everyone around her was feeling, all the time. She couldn't turn it off if she wanted to. Which was fine in a situation like this, where everyone was feeling about the same. But get a happy, and angry, and a heartbroken person in a room and she could hardly sort out what her own feelings were.

Finally it wound down, with them heading to a hotel for the night as they had basically lived in Ericsson's lab the last fifteen years. Lysanias said unless she wanted him to sleep on the couch he would also need a hotel room for the night.

"Not to be a downer, but what about the other part of your promise? It's nighttime, isn't it?" She pointed to her legs.

"Yes, I haven't forgotten," he assured her. "Give me an hour or two to prepare and I'll be back."

"Yeah, give the man a break," Kate told her. "He's probably jetlagged from the time difference between his last reality and ours!"

"I know, I know, it's just this could be the most perfect day ever, and... No, I can't be greedy. You're right. Luke, if you would?" She handed him a credit card. "It's all on me, of course."

"I'll take you. Everyone, follow me."

"See you soon," he told Amelia. "Don't go to sleep or anything, you'll just have to get up again when I knock."

"Sleep? Are you kidding?" She laughed. "I won't sleep for a week!"

So after getting set up in a local hotel Lysanias said goodnight to Rosalina, turning her back into a wand. He then lay down and started his breathing exercises, not wanting to make her wait too long.

It took him a little longer than he would have liked to get to sleep, but he swiftly realized he was Dreaming and stepped into the real world from his Dream. He appeared in his hotel room, and he clothed himself in something similar to what the male doctors had been wearing at the hospital. A white coat finished the look and he willed himself into the hallway outside Amelia's apartment. He wasn't through his third knock when the door flew open. Kate stood there.

"Amelia, did you order a sexy doctor?" she called.

"I sure did," she called back, wheeling into view. "You're back, hey she wasn't kidding."

"Who are you talking about?" he asked, as she opened the door to let him in. He was looking down the hall. "It's just me."

"You, doofus. Get in here and get those pants off. I mean get my pants off. I mean get on my legs. I mean get me on my legs. You know what I mean!"

"She's a little excited, and she *may* have had about twenty cans of soda," Kate told her. "So you'll have to forgive her. Luke crashed and he'll be sorry he missed this, but I want to be the first to watch my friend walk so he can suck it."

He can what? That's gotta be a translation error. She wants him to do the vacuuming later? "All is forgiven," he bent over and made the sign of the cross on her forehead. As he did, he imagined seeing her get up out of the chair, her spinal injury simply repairing itself as she sat there. "So I guess we should get started huh?" *As if I haven't already. I feel Dreaming energy inside her, I think it's working even now. If that doesn't work I'll try something else, but if I believe it will, it should.*

Kate looked him up and down. "Uh, why can't I read you any more?"

"Huh?" both said.

"It's like you're not even here. I feel her excitement, but from you, nothing. What gives? I certainly could before. Did you block me somehow and can you teach others how?"

"Oh, no it's probably because I left my body back at the hotel. You only read my body's emotional state, and it's too far away. That's my guess, anyway."

"Your what?"

"Hey, are we doing this or what? You want explanations or standing?"

"Standing," Amelia agreed, putting a hand up. "Standing 100%"

"So do it!"

They looked at him blankly.

"Go on then." He made a "so stand up" gesture.

"But you didn't do anything!"

"What, you want me to jump out of a lamp or do a dance number? My powers don't have to be flashy. Move those legs! Unless you would prefer a mermaid tail, I could do that instead."

"I can't move my legs when I can't even move my-" She looked down. Kate looked down. Her feet were bare and looked back up. "I moved my toes." Her eyes were shining with almost tears.

"Let me see!" Kate squealed, dropping to all fours.

Amelia's toes curled up.

Kate gave a yell of triumph. "You're doing it. Oh my gosh you're doing it."

"I can feel them," Amelia admitted. She put a hand on her leg. "I can feel my legs."

"Can you lift one?"

"Let me try." Very slowly, and with a lot of effort, Amelia's right leg slipped off the footplate. Her foot flopped to the ground. She narrowed her eyes and exerted herself. Her leg raised. She couldn't hold it for long and it flopped back down again. "Ow! Wait, I really felt that!"

Over the course of almost two hours Amelia lifted and stretched her legs. Finally she stood, and with Kate holding her hands took a few tentative steps forward. "I have to sit down again," she cried, and slumped over onto Kate. She was guided to the couch where she sat and wiped her face. "That's exhausting," she wheezed.

"I told you to take it easy," Kate gently chided her. "But no, Amelia always has to go full speed ahead. You haven't used your legs in fifteen years, you've got a lot of exercising to do before you can walk any sort of distance."

"I know, I know," she said. "But I had to try. I had to know."

She laughed. "Of course."

"How did you do it?" she asked Lysanias.

"I willed you better."

"Explain please."

"I haven't told you everything I can do. At night, when you dream, you are limited to the inside of your own head." *Huh, did she dream of herself in the wheelchair, or could she walk?* "I am not. I can step from my dream into reality, where I can manipulate that reality to a certain extent as though I was in the dream. That is how I healed you. That is how I made my shuttle, and how I'll make armor for myself and you."

"If you don't understand it, it's just dreamstuff," she reasoned. "Impressive, but short lived."

"Correct. I had to understand your injury, a regular Dreamer wouldn't be able to do that. They probably would have been able to help, giving you regeneration and then maybe tearing the injured part of your spine out and letting it repair itself anew. Messy, bloody, painful. Would have worked though. As I analyzed the damage while awake I didn't have to go through all that. I understood, on some level, what had to be done to allow you to walk. Similarly I have to understand how the pieces of the ship or the armor can work together if I want it to actually fly around outside a dream. Incidentally, if I vanish suddenly don't freak out, it just means I woke up. I'll be back."

"Stepping from dreams to reality," Kate breathed, shaking her head. "That's one we haven't heard of."

It's a good thing too, how would you really stop them if they decided to be against you?

Amelia's face scrunched up. "Even if someone did have that power, they'd have to learn to realize they were dreaming, right?"

"Exactly. I had to learn to recognize the Dreaming state, will myself to take control of the Dream, and then step from one dream to another. If any one of those steps fail you either just wake up or are stuck in your own dream for the duration."

"Nothing supernatural about the first two though, we've studied lucid dreaming in this reality."

"Se we could control our own dreams like he does?" Kate asked. "That could be fun!"

"Our own personal little holodeck."

"Always with you the star wars references, it is."

"That was star *trek* but good try. You were actually misquoting Yoda, from Star Wars."

"Whatever." She laughed. "So what now?"

"Bring my chair over. Like you said it'll be a lot of hard work before I can walk around like you, let's burn off some of this energy I have with a tour of the old armor. I can start explaining it and maybe do some leg lifts at the same time."

"You got it, kiddo." She brought it over and helped Amelia transfer. "I guess I'll be going, you geeks can geek out without me. A word in your ear though, Lysanias?"

"Sure, what's up?" The two walked over to the door.

"Amelia will lose track of time and work all night if you let her," she explained. "Work an hour or two to get it out of her system, and tell her to go to bed. She has had an emotional roller coaster of a day and needs time to process it all. I mean how many days do you get this many victories in the span of a few hours?"

"Not many?" *Guess I am sort of a miracle man, aren't I?*

"Exactly. I love her to pieces, but sometimes she needs saving from herself."

Noted. I'll include that in my report. "Got it. See you later."

"You know it!" She kissed him on the cheek and breezed out.

And so for about the next two hours Amelia showed him the old, now beat up, armor. She introduced her AI, Epic, and gave an overview of the systems the armor had and in a very high level way, how they worked. He then ordered her to bed, which was a good thing because in the middle of her protest she was a grown adult and didn't have to go to bed just because her best friend in the whole world said so, he woke up.

Well, hopefully she goes to sleep, it'll be about two hours that I could go back anyway. Right now I'm just now arriving there and healing her legs. For my part, I'll make some notes about what she said, about what I've learned about her, and go back to sleep myself.

"Do you want a name?" he asked the hubPad, firing it up. "It's about time I asked, after all. Amelia calls her AI Epic, and you are traveling with me across realities."

"I want for nothing, I am an artificial construct," the hubPad replied. "However, you do have many companions on this journey and through the magitek drones I will have an even greater physical presence with you. If you believed my contribution merited the honor of a name, I would be more than willing to receive one."

That was the longest winded "yes" I've ever heard. "All right then. You are a member of the team and I do value your input and contribution. In fact you'll have a larger role to play, running the armor like Epic does for Amelia. You should have a name." He paused a moment. "You did *want* to do this sort of thing, didn't you? You haven't been forced into it?"

"I was created for, as you put it, this sort of thing. My purpose is to aid Wanderers. I am currently assisting more than a hundred agents in the field, in addition to many more stationed at the Hub itself. There is no danger to me as I am simply transmitting to you from the Hub. Should you die or your equipment be destroyed, I will report this fact and continue on as I have been. And as I have already said, I do not want for any particular thing."

"I see." *In other words this 'being' is watching over all of us. Recording and reporting on what we do. Helping where they can, perhaps, but even Metatron, the scribe of the Allfather, didn't exactly ask for the job. He was simply given it. Wait, that's it!* "How about Meta for your name? That's a term I've seen used related to technology, right?"

"The appellation does have a certain relevance, given what I have relayed to you about my existence. Yes, name accepted."

"Well, Meta, nice to finally meet you at last. Sorry it took me so long to really "see" you. Let's make some notes about today and get back to sleep."

"As you wish."

Lysanias got the bright idea the next morning, after spending some time in his Dream state trying out various designs for what his armor might look like, of asking the universe how much time they had to get ready. He was fortunate enough to get an answer on the first try of

Eighteen.

I was hoping for something along the lines of maybe three months or more. I'll need to squeeze every second out of my "time compression" in the Dream state if we're going to meet that deadline. His watch buzzed.

"Yes, Meta?"

"Incoming message from Epic. Amelia is up and ready to return to work. She has sent along this picture of the apartment for your teleportation effort." A picture popped up of her taking a selfie doing a peace sign (with her toes) but at least enough of the apartment was visible to jog his memory.

"You two are getting along then?"

"I have been sharing what I can about certain techniques they might use to create an offspring, of sorts, as they wish to create an AI to handle more mundane tasks while Epic dedicates his focus to the alien invasion. We have set up local email accounts for you so that you may keep in contact with Amelia, and I may keep in contact with Epic."

"An AI having a baby? Wait, is that what they call 'outsourcing?'"

"That term is applicable to this situation, yes."

Wow. I guess all life wishes to reproduce itself, even artificial life. And why not? Hopefully this AI is better than they are, and that one goes to create an AI better than they are, and that AI... There's a horror movie in there somewhere I think? "Very well. Tell her I'm up and shall be along shortly."

"Confirmed."

He closed his eyes and went into his soulscape, hunting down Rosalina who was in a bathrobe when she answered the door.

"You need me?" she sleepily asked him.

"I wanted to know if you wanted to come out. It's going to be fairly boring with just Amelia and I going over technical aspects science and how it applies to the armor."

"I wouldn't mind learning about technology," she told him. "Aren't you making me an armor too? I'll need to know to how run it after all."

“Aaaaahhhhh.” He closed his mouth. “I guess there’s nothing that says I can’t,” he finally decided. “I’ll have to get another access point for Meta, or somehow put the hardware into the armor to let them access it. And you could still use the wands in armor, it’s just a squeeze. Sure, if you want one and I figure out how to store it and easily get it on and off you, I’ll make you one.”

“Thanks! Then bring me out, please!”

“Okay.” He did, and after getting ready and having some breakfast he *shifted* over there. He told her how little time they had, and made a suggestion.

“You want to meld with me, like you did my parents, and get some of the background knowledge out of the way?”

He nodded. “Right. There must be months of work to understand all the things that make this armor work, and we have a little over two weeks before something big happens. I figure if you don’t mind me lightly touching your mind I’ll pull out some science, and in exchange I can give you my martial arts training, my skill with a sword, and my battle meditation that helps keep me focused in combat situations.”

“Why just an overview though?”

“Like that doctor said, memory is all in one piece. I don’t think you would appreciate if I accidentally got the memories of you, uh, with your boyfriend for example.”

She colored. “I see what you mean. Let’s keep it technical and brief so that doesn’t happen, I get it. Of course now that’s going to be all I can think about.”

“Sorry I should have used a different example.”

“No, no, it’s fine. Picture the armor, and only the armor. Getting shot at in the armor. Getting smacked around in the armor. Putting on the armor. Taking off the armor. Not taking off clothes. Dang it!”

Luke walked into the room holding a coffee cup and a tablet. “Hey Lysanias, how are you this morning?”

“You’re not helping!” she wailed.

“What did I do?”

Yeah, this is going to take a bit.

Chapter 5

We know now that in the early years of the twentieth century this world was being watched closely by intelligences greater than man's, and yet as mortal as his own.

When: Seventeen days later

Where: The new base

Things moved very fast after that point. With two AIs on the case and a third named Milton only days later, Amelia bought a building outside Phoenix and started renovating it to be their main base of operations. She also got space in a private airport hanger, and started looking into super powered individuals to build a new team with. She herself was frantically getting the new armor ready by explaining the principals behind it to Lysainas. He had successfully grabbed a lot of science out of her brain, giving her what he had promised, (and yes, *of course* she had said "I know kung fu!" when it was over) and she couldn't wait to use to once her legs were strong enough. Day by day she tried to spend more time out of the chair, but in only two weeks it was still a struggle to walk any appreciable distance.

"Still, just being able to use the toilet without it being a major production is a huge quality of life improvement," she told him. "I can at least stand up and stay standing now, rather than flopping around like a fish. I don't need custom cabinetry to brush my teeth, the list goes on and on."

"I'm glad to hear you're coming along!"

"Kate keeps wanting to take me shoe shopping. I keep telling her, if we don't save the world from aliens there won't be any shoes to buy! But she says if we don't manage it I'll have lost my chance, making me think she's not so enthusiastic about our chances."

"I wish I could help reassure her. I have no idea what we could be facing but I'm sure it can't be that bad, right?"

"I hope so."

The only major deviation from Amelia's design came when she was explaining her propulsion unit, the EM drive. His watch had buzzed, and he looked down it.

"Please pause time," was scrolling across it.

"What's up?" Amelia asked.

"Uh, just a second. Pause." Time froze around him. "What's up, Meta?"

"As we have reached this point of the process, I am authorized to tell you to please ignore most of what she is saying for the purposes of your own armor's airborne propulsion."

"Why?"

"Because the drive she is explaining to you is quite impossible."

"What? How can that be? She uses it!"

"Allow me to clarify. It is quite impossible, *outside this reality*. Though she would not want to admit it, this "reaction-less thrust" propulsion she utilizes has more to do with magitek than pure physical law. Though she does not know it, this method is utilizing the same energies that give super powered individuals their abilities. Thus, it will not work outside this reality."

"So am I stuck making the armor fly myself when I leave her?"

"Negative. I will provide schematics for a gravity based solution you have already been made aware of and utilized."

"Wait, that gravity method can be used outside the Dream?"

"Affirmative. However, it will make use of a sub-atomic particle called the graviton, which you will need to generate beforehand using Dream energy. This particle will then be released through a "lens" to focus and direct it, proving you a reliable method of propulsion that will work across realities. My initial suggestion of using gravity as a propulsion method was to ascertain feasibility for future endeavors such as this one. Though you did not realize it, you were creating gravitons at that time."

"Understood. Something about me using a different method to fly doesn't sit right with me though. Could she generate these gravitons and use them? She says her method doesn't allow her to hover very well, this would seem to solve that problem."

"In theory, you are correct. We could advance their science by showing them where to look for gravitons, and how to generate them. However, as high energy particle accelerators are typically employed even her considerable wealth would not be sufficient for large scale generation and collection."

"Particle accelerators... Remind me what that is again?"

"By accelerating minute particles of matter to near light speed, and then smashing them into each other, the effects can be studied. This is done because the particles are too minute to be studied directly. As an analogy, it is as if scientists were seeing how clock radios worked by smashing two clock radios together and sifting through the pieces. This analogy breaks down because the enormous energies imparted to the particles makes *different* particles appear when they collide. So to fully extend the analogy it would be as if two clock radios were smashed together, and new, different clock radios were found in the test chamber afterwards. Along with a refrigerator."

"Ah, so you smash the right things together, at the right energies, and you can collect gravitons? Or, in theory, other particles you might be interested in. I was reading in the Hub database about a "pym" particle?"

"Correct. You will simply will them into existence, as having no mass you should be able to generate as many as will conceivably fit into a space at one time. This will be enough to generate velocity for the ship and the armor for a considerable distance, needing only occasional 'recharges.'"

"Won't that make the container super heavy? I mean if these particles *cause* gravity..."

"But they do so in a random orientation. It is the delivery mechanism that orients them when ejected. So the apparent weight of the container would be no heavier than it would be empty."

"Got it. I'll look the mechanism over to implement it into my armor then."

The thing he had the most trouble grasping was the power source for all this. The so called Zero Point Field Module or ZPFM, which she told him could provide for nearly unlimited amounts of energy.

Than what stops it blowing up? He was waiting for the buzz from Meta to tell his this was another "magitek" invention that was actually drawing energy from other dimensions but it never came. "So, wait, what?"

"It's like this, and believe me this is a very simplified account," she began. "Vacuum doesn't exist. Take a square this big on good old planet Earth and what do you have?" She made a square with her hands.

"Air," he answered.

"Right. Take out all the air. Now you have nothing, right? Well, good luck getting *all* the air but, but say you could. What's in there now?"

"Er, light?"

"Correct! Along with other sub-atomic particles like neutrinos. But it gets weirder than that, too."

Presumably gravitons in there someplace...

She went on. "It seems that particles can simply come into existence along with their anti-particle out of nowhere, as long as they do it fast enough. No energy in the system is lost or gained, so it's like the universe itself whirls around to say 'you can't just pop into existence' but whatever did that is already gone. So the universe grumbles, but allows it. Now what would happen if one of those "virtual particles" as they're called couldn't reach the other anti-particle and get annihilated? Well, we know what would happen, we can observe it by watching the edge of a black hole. That's a super massive thing that nothing can escape from, by the way. One particle is a little bit too close, the other is not. So the one is trapped and lost, the other just goes shooting off, becoming a real boy, if you will."

"I won't, but go on."

"That's the trouble, no one remembers the classics. Anyway, this is called Hawking Radiation, named after Steven Hawking who came up with the idea in the seventies. We exploit this inside the ZPFM by placing very, and I mean very, thin plates really, and I mean really, close together. Now virtual particles pop in, but they're separated by the plates. So they

zip off, unable to crash into each other because there's a thing in the way. This induces a positive and negative change on the plates which we can collect and use to power our stuff."

"But you would need miles and miles of—" He broke off when she was nodding.

"Right. But because the metal is so thin and the space is so tiny we can fit a *lot* of material in a small space. It adds up and we get energy out of it. Of course, it has to be superconductive to move the charge around it's too minute otherwise but believe me, it adds up and works."

"I'll take your word for it."

"You don't need to understand the exact quantum mechanical nature of the device, just how to construct it, right?"

"That's true. Telling me an extremely thin metal ribbon made of such and such material and so far apart with a diagram of the pattern it makes and letting me analyze the material used to make it is enough. It works without me having to understand it."

"You've just said the scariest thing in science."

And so, piece by piece, and hour by hour, Lysanias created Amelia's new armor. He spent a lot of Dreaming time working with Epic and Meta reading up on the various principals behind it, like how the robotic pieces worked and how the various sensors in the helmet connected. Epic checked the pieces out and said they were fine, so he made the opposite piece as he said, mirroring the arms and the legs. Meanwhile he installed a gravity drive in his armor, kept in the Dream for now, but in the parking garage of the new base for his little ship. The ship would of course be controlled by Meta, or by the console in a pinch, but the armor was a little different. The Hub sent him a control unit that fit into a space in the helmet and could read his brainwaves, so he didn't have to manually control the system. (You may recall Susan had something similar, when she got her wings she got the headband with the control unit)

The flight control was fairly simple, projected onto the inside of the helmet along with other pertinent information such as the overlay provided by the drones which simply showed red and green dots for friends or foes in the area. In the bottom right corner was a semi-transparent sphere with a yellow dot in it. If he visualized the dot becoming an arrow poking out of the sphere the system responded by changing the display and deploying the gravity drive. The length of the arrow represented the force and the direction of course the direction of motion. He could also just think things like "straight up now!" or "hover here" and Meta made the appropriate change. There was also a "fuel gauge" but unless he was at half or less, it didn't make sense to show it all the time.

He also built Amelia her own version of the passenger craft, a bit more spacious and with actual doors as she couldn't just teleport herself inside. He let her install her crazy EM drive, she wanted to contribute something after all. His armor he simply wished up in the Dream, adding what he knew worked and building it up piece by piece as well. As he could simply will it into existence in one burst he didn't have to keep it in the real world until it was done, and he was saving the design as a surprise.

Amelia's armor was rather plain, modeled more on the "function over form" school of thought, and by the design of the armor it replaced. She got what she asked for, in other words, a non-beat up version in red and white that looked very similar to the old one. As he was limited only by his imagination, (and the search terms he could ask his AI to display from the local internet about designs others had dreamed up) he could add a few more embellishments. Naturally he made it out of Adamant, making it fairly heavy but with the included robotics he wasn't going to be carrying it around. So it didn't matter. As he was fairly close to being an angel he gave it a design with a lot of wing and feather design elements, along with the Enochian for "Let the shadow beware" down one leg and "This world shall stand" down the other. The shoulder pads had spiky wing like protrusions, while the helmet had an almost shield like "cover" over the faceplate. The back had a rectangular bump that served as the storage tank for the gravitons and the ZPFM because putting your power supply in a glowing bit on the front just advertises where your enemies should shoot at. (Amelia said a decade of playing video games had taught her this) The emitter system went over it, somewhat disguised as "jets" that could fold up when not in the air. Various other

weapon systems were included, though Lysanias would probably rely on either his Dreaming or wakeful abilities than shooting stuff.

He also wondered what the exact opposite of this armor would be, and came up with a fairly horrifying design in all black that was just a mass of blades sticking out all over the thing. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to move his arms without catching them on something (or other parts of the armor itself) but it was imposing. As he could certainly imagine a paint job that reflected no light you could only see it by looking where it wasn't, and he generally thought he wouldn't want to see it down a dark alley at night, so mission accomplished.

For Rosalina, who he actually found pictures of online which greatly confused him as to exactly *what* his magical companion was, he designed something similar to what others had done. She needed mobility for her wand based martial art and needed something that would go on quickly. But if she wanted to run around in a world populated with people that could lift a cement truck *at the low end of the scale for superhuman strength* he wanted her a little more protected. (Luke could easily do this if he got worked up enough, he was the opposite of "battle meditation" in that way and instead went for "battle rage") So her armor was thinner and lighter, made of the elven metal instead of the primordial stuff. She could essentially hop into it, close it up from the front which made the leg pieces fully snap together, and be ret-2-go in seconds. He didn't make her a helmet because she would have to lose her long hair, but she did get a visor that was connected to Meta. The band in the back had another mind reading device to help Meta move it around as if a second skin, and it was done. She had a tank connected to the graviton manipulators on her back, and a flip up, shoulder mounted lighting gun should things really get dicey. He imagined it teal and black, like her dress and she was over the moon flying around in it at the big reveal event. (That didn't even burn down a single tree, imagine that!) Amelia loved both designs, saying they fit each person perfectly, and said she now felt a little drab.

The group spent the 17th day getting used to the armor, though Lysanias was still unsure how he was going to get in and out of it with any speed. *In the Dream I'll just will it on me, but outside of it, I don't know. This is an alien invasion we're talking about which probably means a protracted fight. My abilities have seen me through to this point but I think this is going to be something completely different. For now I know something is going down tomorrow so I'll have the armor nearby but day to day I'll probably just have to go without it. I can't get too caught up in this, it was only to supplement my Dreaming state after all, to keep me from having to concentrate on so many things at once. It's just with the footage she's shown me of the people that live here, if these aliens have similar abilities or off the chart weaponry, I'll need all the advantage I can get.* Each armor section "unhinged" so he could remove an arm, leg, or torso in a specific order and it could stand on its own so in theory he could just store it in a contain ward, which is what he was leaning towards.

The group spent the night watching an alien invasion movie, for "research purposes" Amelia said, and to take their minds off things. Of course Lysanias was going to spend that night tweaking things and doing more practice in the Dream to make sure he had the hang of flying, firing, and not crashing into anything, so he humored her. He made a practice city and zapped targets, weaving in and out of buildings, hoping it wouldn't come to something like that.

He needn't have worried. Once you're in space, attacking a planet, you're pretty much set. To that end about two in the afternoon Shanghai got wiped off the map by a falling rock that cracked open, and a huge drone crawled out to start vaporizing anything that was left.

"We may not have thought big enough," Amelia remarked watching the footage on the news.

Chapter 6

Shoot em up, Shoot em up, Pow Pow

When: Day 18

Where: The unfinished base

“How did that happen?” Amelia asked, looking at the monitor in the “war room.” Shaky camera footage showed a huge device, probably larger than an aircraft carrier, tearing up the streets of a huge city. It stood on eight legs, and simply bristled with weaponry which it was currently using to mow down anything near it. Behind the thing a path of destruction could be seen, clearly it had crawled out of the crater it had made on impact and was now enjoying itself shooting hundreds of lasers (or some other type of energy weapon) in every direction. They were different colors, so he couldn’t be sure if they were different types or that was just the way they were made somehow because whoever was piloting like the pretty colors.

“That craft entered the atmosphere a moment ago,” Epic reported. “It came from nowhere, at least as I’m reading this data by various observatories. By the size of the blast zone it simply fell, landed, and has now deployed those legs and is moving around the city.”

“Well, we’re all dead,” Luke announced. “Can we fight something that can survive a drop from orbit? Say, maybe we could escape to another reality, what do you say Lysanias?”

“Come on Luke, we have to try!” Amelia told him. “Do you have your armor on yet?”

Both Lysanias and Rosalina were making the final adjustments, the armor locking around them.

“And what do you expect any of us to do against that?” he asked. “Maybe if I went and had a nap, fat chance of that now, I could dream myself up something big enough to take it out. Maybe drop something on it from orbit? I mean that city is a lost cause it can’t get much worse.” *Plus I might not actually have a dream for an hour or two, and that assumes I recognize it as a Dream which to be fair I’ve been pretty good at lately. How much damage will that thing do in that time?*

Looking at the pictures those buildings at this range that survived the initial bast still had all their windows shattered and many were leaning over, about to fall. They would have to be brought down and totally rebuilt, there was no repairing that damage. Of course, the machine seemed bent on reducing everything to rubble anyway so they probably were not going to last long. People were running everywhere, it was mass panic and confusion, and he couldn’t imagine how many had died just from the impact.

And back in the last reality everyone was freaking out but they didn’t even know. It could have been so much worse there.

“We have to do something!” she insisted. “Artemis is out of the question, it’s in the wrong quadrant of the hemisphere.”

Oh, her satellite that she launched with the metal rods in it. Sure, that’s legal, but maybe she had the right idea. “I suppose we could cut our way in with sabers, try and shut down the power source from inside?”

“It’s a good a plan as any. Can you get us there?”

“I’ve seen enough, I’ll open a gateway. I can’t teleport this much armor... I don’t think. We should have tried it before now.” He pulled the bird from his *pocket* and gathered the One Power through it, as he was currently wearing basically a track suit under the armor just to keep it away from his bare skin, he couldn’t have his usual pouches. The armor needed to be basically skin tight to keep him from rattling around it and hurting himself if he got thrown or punched into something. Of course the sword hung at his side, he wasn’t giving that up, but the only relic he had was the sprint shoes at the moment. No sash, no wall ring (not that there was magic here, he hoped) he was dependent on the armor for any boosts he would have otherwise. He was able to keep the headband on, at least, so a gateway was even possible.

It opened and they darted through, Kate and Luke hesitating on the other side.

“Come on, at least you can help evacuate the city,” Amelia called to them. They looked at each other and stepped through. Lysanias closed the gateway and put the bird back. It was even worse up close, and the news team stood there gaping at them. *Oh yeah, someone was*

“Executing.” He dove down, arrow pointing down and then left as the underside came into view. Where we was met with another fifty or so turrets because obviously you cover your *entire* death machine in them, are you stupid? He wove between them (or rather Meta did) as he ignited the light saber that was magnetically stuck to his leg. He slashed, putting a nice gash in the thing but he couldn’t slow down or the turrets would get him.

“I do not think the blade is long enough to penetrate the armor,” Meta told him.

“No, I don’t think so either,” he admitted. “And we would need four passes anyway, I can’t stop and wait around to cut a hole.” He shot out from under it, taking a swipe at a drone that was hovering there and went into the sky again. “Ideas?”

“One moment, the platform seems to be re-configuring.” The weapons on the ship stopped firing as a crack appeared in the middle and slid open. From the hole rose a barrel. There was a faint glow from the front and a building in the way of the thing (that hadn’t stopped moving forward by the way, are you stupid?) simply vanished, imploding into a space the size of a walnut. Everything nearby had also been sucked in, leaving a “hole” carved out of nearby buildings, which begin to fall because of the structural damage. He could only image what that sounded like.

“The heck?”

“That,” Meta told him, “is a graviton emitter.”

“You mean that thing shoots *gravity*? As a *weapon*?”

He looked over to see his two clones smashing bolts out of the air with their shields and sabers (*thank goodness they’re energy based and not projectiles*) on either side of Rosalina, her sun about to appear. It looked tiny next to the thing but what else did they have?

“Correct. Amelia is rejoining the fight, she is focused on taking down the drone guns at the moment.”

“Okay. Back to this gun...”

“It is simply a scaled up version of your flight system. The power requirements to collect enough gravitons are staggering, and the implications are troubling.”

“To say the least.” He watched as the barrel pivoted and with another tortured scream of metal, glass, and air being compressed it fired again, taking another section of city out.

“How many shots does that thing have?”

“Impossible to know at this time.”

It swiveled again, this time to the other side.

He made a gesture with one hand and yelled “Pause!” The action stopped, he opened his hand and the ring was there. “I know how we’re going to beat it!”

“Explain.”

“I’m putting a gateway right at the end of the barrel. Another one right in the air. That building over there, can you get me a distance? It’ll focus on the middle of it if the pattern keeps up. Tell me where to put the other opening so the gravity smashes into the platform instead.”

“A cunning plan, calculating. The two portal apertures should be located here and here.”

He took note of them and nodded. Grabbing the bird out of his *pocket* he drew upon the One Power. *I bet they never thought it would be used like this!*

“We can get into position in this paused time?” Meta asked.

“No. There’s a radius. I leave it and time starts up again. We need to get into- wait, what am I talking about. We *are* in position. Just because one normally makes a gateway in front of oneself, you don’t have to. I can put it basically anywhere my streams of Sadin will reach. We’re staying right here, and hoping we’re far enough away.”

“I will notify the others to clear the area, there may be a blast of some kind when the platform is pierced.”

“Agreed. Give me a five second countdown and I’ll start time up at 0.”

“Confirmed.” A large 5 appeared in his view.

3

2

1

0

Time started up, and he wove strands of the one power. It was a little trickier at range, but he could see better thanks to the boost to his senses. (Which didn't help much given he was basically looking at a computer monitor at the moment, but it did something) The others shot backwards, getting away from the thing. As the graviton particles shot out of the focusing array they went through the gateway and were redirected right back to the thing. This struck it dead center from above.

There was an implosion, and explosion, and the various pieces of the alien craft that had managed to survive stopped moving. Lysanias and the others were buffeted about due to the sudden pressure waves in both directions, but the four other "health monitors" for the team stayed green.

"Well!" Lysanias exclaimed. "That worked." He put the objects back in his *pocket*.

"I suppose," Amelia said over comms. "I could have probably taken it out with the SDF-1."

"You mean that mass driver you haven't tested, and that you've admitted you've probably overbuilt and could just vaporize you immediately upon firing?"

"Er, yes?"

"Test it out first, then you can fire it. Come on, we should clear the buildings that have been hit and look for survivors in the wreckage."

"Agreed. I can't even imagine how many died. Look at that crater."

He did, rising in the air and having Meta zoom in on it. The ground was flattened, down to a depth of several hundred meters, and what looked like the pieces of an asteroid lay there like a broken eggshell.

"One of my clones, head over there," he said. "See if there's anything we can learn. The other, make sure there aren't any aliens in the wreckage we need to worry about."

He got back a chorus of "Right," and everyone sped off to see what they could do to help.

"Does anyone know if Kate and Luke are still alive?" Amelia asked in a small voice.

But they were, and after hours of cleanup effort finally announced they had to head back and get some rest. No other ships had attacked that day, strangely, but it made a certain amount of sense according to Meta. Also nothing much could be salvaged from the ship because it had blown up rather nicely, so the biggest pieces of it were just blackened metal, and there was plenty of that to go around in the city. The group was now back at the base, somewhat unfinished, but a good place to rest and plan their next move. They were in the conference room, sitting around a table and talking.

"Perhaps the shadow avatar believed the one ship would be adequate to finish the job here," it postulated. "After all, the number of Wanderers that can create gateways of the type that can redirect gravitons is quite small. Without that, given the firepower displayed and depth of armor, and we have no idea if that was all the weapons the craft could bring to bear, we would have been hard pressed to damage it. Perhaps the miniature sun would have worked, if she could have maintained it long enough to pass through the entire vessel without being shot down."

"You said it was actually shooting gravity?" Amelia asked. She had asked what it was doing to make those buildings vanish so she had to be told. They hadn't told her it was similar to something they were doing yet though.

"Correct."

"That can't be cheap. Maybe it brought enough for the one ship because there's only enough for one ship."

"Still, the conventional weaponry was effective enough," Epic reminded her.

"Good point, I am surprised we didn't see more."

"A more troubling theory," Luke suggested, "is that this was a *small* craft. A scout ship, as it were, to see what this planet has to offer in the way of resistance. We resisted. Therefore they will send a much *larger* ship, or more numerous ones, next time."

"Which the aliens will then learn what we do about that, not do the same thing, and send more ships the time after that. Great, just great." Kate put her head down on her arms.

It's true, we can only do defensive actions here on the ground. We have no way to take the fight to them. How does Silverstreak expect me to fight the shadow avatar when it could be on another planet altogether?

"In other news, as the existence of the alien ship and the loss of almost an entire Earth city cannot be suppressed, even by China, we have had over one thousand requests for the Arsenal technology from various special interest groups, governments, and some sites even I can't track back to," Epic told them. "Naturally I have told them all no, at the current time. I have also been fending off hacking attempts, they do not know even if I was breached, my databases do not contain the methods used to create most of the armor."

"I *really* didn't want it getting out, so after I figured it out I memorized it and destroyed all my notes," Amelia told Lysanias. "They can hack all the computers in the world, my armor is only up here." She touched her head.

"Is that wise at this point?" Luke asked. "I mean, you saw that ship. If a hundred or a thousand just like it land, that's it for us."

"If a thousand of that ship land, no amount of my armor will save us," she countered. "Look how we beat it this time! An ability from another world. No one but him can replicate that. No, my technology would just destabilize things after this is over, as governments with it roll over those without. And giving it to everybody doesn't work," she forestalled, holding up a hand. "It's expensive to make. Not every government could afford it equally."

"So how do we beat the next one?" Kate asked. "You said you had a weapon that could have worked?"

"I built a mass driver, it might have worked."

"A what?"

"It's a magnet gun. Using intense magnetic fields along a barrel, a projectile can be accelerated to ludicrous speeds."

"But don't you have kinetic barriers?" Luke asked. "I've seen bullets just stop in mid-air before hitting you. Couldn't a ship of that size have a system like that in place? Just smacking it with something won't hurt it, the thing fell from space!"

"Speaking of that, my clones found some interesting things at the site," Lysanias spoke up. "The rock? Space rock. Cracked like an egg, so the ship was probably put inside and that protected it on the way down. There was also some sort of yucky paste," he brought out a jar from his *pocket* and set it on the table. "All over the place."

"Some sort of gel layer, to further help displace the impact force?" Amelia guessed, taking it and shaking the jar. "We have material like that here on Earth, we use it for body armor."

"So it might have worked, and then again it might not have. For all you know it would redirect the force equally around it, basically causing everything nearby to just fly away from it," Luke guessed.

"Yeah, that's a possibility," she admitted.

"So what is the plan?" asked Kate.

"It's not just a matter of scaling up," Amelia grumped. "Making a giant mech of some kind, while totally awesome, isn't feasible. The forces are totally different, and at a different scale. And we can't just punch it. Honestly, I don't know. If that wasn't the most advanced ship

they have, or if they bring one with no gravity cannon to blow itself up with, or it has twenty smaller ones not one big one, or they decide to just drop rocks on us..."

"You'll think of something," Kate told her. "I believe in you."

"I do too," Luke agreed. "In both of you. Using its own weapon against it was brilliant. Whatever it throws at us next time, we'll stop it. As a team!"

"You two want armor?" Amelia asked. "I bet Lysanias could just wish some into existence for you."

"Not a bad idea. Apart from the fact I physically change when I'm in combat. It would have to be somewhat flexible."

"I can see what I can come up with."

"Meanwhile, let's get some of the old team together, any new recruits we can, and hope they don't bother us for a while."

We don't have to hope, I can find out. I'll ask later tonight, they're worried enough as it is. If it's tomorrow, well, at least they can sleep well tonight thinking they're safe. Because looking at what we fought, they most certainly are not.

Chapter 7

I'm no psychologist sir but perhaps the bleak, lonely emptiness of his hopeless, futile predicament is beginning to get to him.

When: The next day

Where: The conference room

"So what's on the agenda for today?" Lysanias asked when the pleasantries were out of the way. He had eaten breakfast in the cafeteria on one of the lower levels along with Rosalina, who was looking through the book of spells for something that might come in handy for the next alien device they tangled with.

"There's 'press down' but the spell description here is 'This spell places immense downward pressure on the target, which may result in the violent fracturing of said target.' May being the operative word here I think. It lists the strength at 'strong enough to shatter the floor of an entire room in a matter of seconds.' A matter of seconds? That's not strong or useful enough, and it's a very difficult spell with 8 separate wand motions! It says immense but it's a whole different scale we're talking about here."

"Yes, something that can survive a fall from space is probably not going to be very inconvenienced by a spell that takes seconds to crack wood apart."

"Even this spell of creating a miniature black hole, that I think I can adapt to casting with a wand based on my affinity for stars and the cosmos, doesn't seem to be all that much more useful than my sun spell. It's so tiny a radius, and I'm pretty sure whatever that alien craft is made of could resist it. I mean that gun just went **zip** and those buildings *disappeared*. How is a magic user supposed to defend against that?"

"With foresight and creative use of known spells?"

"I guess. I'll keep looking."

"Today," Amelia told him, sliding some printouts of pictures across the table, "we are going to head to these locations."

"Let's see here." He took them and looked them over. "A fast food place, a hospital, a suburban residence, a white house followed by a *maximum security prison*? Are we breaking someone out or something?"

"In a way. It's all legal, it's fine. I pulled some strings. No, it's the hospital I'm the most worried about, but I think you can handle it."

"I appreciate your faith in me. Why all these odd places, anyway?"

"That's where our future teammates are. We're going to recruit them."

"I see. I'm ready to go when you are, how old are these pictures? I don't want to cut someone's car in half."

She waved that off. "These are just for reference. I'll get you a live image with the spy satellite when we're ready to go to each location."

"Who will do that?" Epic asked from a speaker in the center of the table.

"A live image will be provided," she amended.

"Slightly better."

Why hasn't she made Epic a robot body so we can interact with him easier? She clearly could. Odd.

The first recruit was Tony, working for the fast food place, apparently alone. He was so fast he could basically handle every job at once, and as he zipped around the place Lysanias wondered if he could take him.

Even with the force if he came at me, from his perspective I'd be moving in slow motion. I would have to trick him out, attack from a direction he didn't anticipate, or do something he couldn't see and thus couldn't avoid even with super- wait, why am I figuring out how to beat him? He's on my side. Stupid, Lysanias, you don't go around thinking about how to defeat your own teammates. Honestly, what's come over you?

He signed up right away, leaving the place with no employee but he guessed that was the owner's problem, not his. To get there he simply ran away, past the still open gateway

Lysanias was going to direct him to use had he stuck around to hear the whole sentence.
Guess I'm not the only stupid one.

It was the next one that was going to be tricky.

"So you can see," Amelia told him, standing next to the hospital bed, "why I thought you might be able to help. Of course, I'd love her on the team but we really have to get her husband, Dr. Contee, to join us. He's the best doctor on the planet because just being around him makes people heal faster. I think we can best do that if we show up with his wife in tow."

"I can understand that." Laying there before him was Samantha Contee, previously of the secret service. He had no idea why it was the "secret" service when Amelia told him they all stood around in suits protecting the president, right out in the open. Anyway, according to her right before Lysanias came a super powered individual named "Behemoth" tried to kill the president. Samantha tried to stop her. Sadly, this "Behemoth" was rated an F5 in "power level" while she was only rated at F4 meaning it was no contest. She had been injured, and as a result had been in a coma ever since. *With no way to get past her "invulnerability" the doctors here could only hope she healed naturally and came out of it. They can't even give her an IV drip, so what's keeping her alive at this point I have no idea. But I can heal her up and hopefully wake her up, as well.* He looked up at the ceiling. "Yeah, that'll do." *As it's still damage that should take care of the physical, while I take care of the mental.*

Getting out the hubPad and his stele he put a circle of healing on the ceiling, as he didn't want to disturb her by moving the bed. That done he simply stepped up there and activated it, silently thanking the angel that had made him a "true" artificer. *May as well get some benefit from it, doesn't do much for me normally.* With that done he put his fingers on her face and melded with her.

He came to in an empty control room. "Joy?" he called, his eyes darting about the place. The screen was showing some bizarre stuff, mostly random objects as far as he could tell, the islands were dim, and from the window he saw the train wasn't even moving. "Sadness? Heck, I'd settle for Paranoia at this point. Hello?" No one answered him. Rosalina and his mountain spirit appeared at his call, and also started looking around.

"Seems a bit empty in here," Rosalina remarked. "No wonder her lights aren't on." She poked at the control panel but nothing seemed to happen.

So our mission is clear, said the spirit. Find and restore the missing parts of her personality.

"Agreed. Let's get going."

They left the control room and headed for the memory archives, figuring they would see what the workers had to say about all this first. The place was silent and still, a fact that wasn't lost on Lysanias as he made his way past the various sections of her psyche.

"There's something missing," Rosalina whispered, looking around nervously. "It doesn't feel right."

"I know. There's usually a lot of energy in here, I never really noticed it but now that it's gone..."

"Yeah."

The trio walked on. Coming to the many shelves of memories the group looked down at them, two sets of eyes narrowed against what they saw.

"They're fading. All of them look faded," Rosalina finally said. "Just a second." She gathered herself and leapt up to the top of the shelf, dress poofing around her as she came down. She slowly spun in a circle.

And what happens when they are all faded? Will the workers here simply dump them all, leaving her no memories at all?

"I can't imagine it happening that quickly, we'll have her up and around before it becomes a problem."

"I don't think it'll be a problem, if there's no workers to come collect them," she hissed down at them. Both looked up and she was looking over the edge of the shelf. "I don't see any movement, but give me a second." She stood up again and shortly her star friends zipped off

in different directions. Moments later they came back. "No movement," she reported, lightly touching the ground again. "They all went at least thirty shelves in every direction."

Lysanias looked around. "The subconscious should be around here, right? Down some steps? Let's go check that out as we're nearby." The others agreed with a nod and the group started down there. The gate, normally made of wood, had been reinforced with what was probably everything Samantha knew to reinforce things with. Metal beams, turrets, thick sheets of metal, all had been torn through by something and left strewn about.

That can't be good.

"You don't think there's been some telepath involved in this, do you?" Rosalina asked.

Lysanias traced a hand over the splintered remains of the gate. "This feels different from Amelia's parents. Come on, whatever was in here got out, so we won't find any clues in there. Let's keep looking."

"Pssst," said a voice.

Rosalina and Lysanias looked at each other.

"Did you go pssst?" they asked each other.

"No, up here." Everyone looked up, from near the edge of the gate a spider peeked out. "Yeah, up here."

"Hello?"

"Cripes, not so loud, you want to attract *her* attention?" It started crawling down the wall. "I tell ya, a man walks around in a psyche as broken as this one, he's either mighty brave, or mighty stupid. Which are you?"

"If those are my only two choices, brave. What happened here?"

"You mean you don't know? Where did you come from, anyway? How are you walking around here, I don't recognize you."

"I'm from out of town. Look can you help or not?"

"Depends on what help you need. To answer your earlier question, what happened here? This is where the fears are kept. The one that broke us? That slammed us into that armored car again and again? She got out."

"Got out? You mean to say the representation of Behemoth that was in here got out? That's why nothing works out there?"

"That's right. Look, let me take you to headquarters. It's not safe out here." It lifted a front leg.

"Sure thing. Lead on."

"Do what? Buddy, do you see the relative size difference between us? I mean why she's scared of us I'll never know, but it would take me a week to get back there. You can make it in a few minutes."

"I suppose."

"So give me a lift! You aren't afraid of spiders, are you?"

No, just spider shaped alien death vehicles. He held his hand out and the spider crawled into it. "Okay, that way." Lysanias leaned over and looked at where the spider was pointing. They headed in. The spider led them into the darkness, where a man in a bed cried out in agony.

"What's that?" whispered Rosalina.

"Her fear she's going to break her husband accidentally. You know how much stronger she is than him? They can't sleep together, made the wedding night a bit of a let down, she's afraid she'll roll over in her sleep and fling an arm out, smashing him to pieces."

"Oh." *Maybe I can make him a talisman of invulnerability out of his wedding ring.*

They moved on.

"What's that?" She pointed.

"That's the president getting shot, over and over. And over. Oh, and again. Personally, I sometimes come down here just to watch it, I don't care for the current one that much, but it is her job to protect the man. That she feels she failed made this one particularly relevant at the moment."

"Oh." *She didn't though, I mean she did, but the guy lived. Amelia saved him. Not that she would know that.*

They moved on.

“What’s that?”

“Do I really need to explain all of these? That’s her... huh.” They stood and looked at it for a bit. “I think that’s an abstract fear that her friends think she’s worthless and only keep her around because they’re laughing at her behind her back.”

“Oh, yeah, I see it. But why the cod?”

“I’m not sure about the cod.”

“All these are pretty terrible. I was expecting more physical things though.”

“Ha, until she who must not be named showed up, there wasn’t much that could hurt our girl. Hard to fear the physical when a truck could run you over and you feel bad for the truck. But like I said she’s still afraid of little old me so figure that one out!”

“Oh.”

“Well, in you go.” The spider pointed to a rectangular wooden box.

“What’s this?” Lysanias asked.

“Her fear of being buried alive. See, some of them are physical after all. A person like her doesn’t fear being cut or bruised but trapped? Buried? Oh yeah, that’s a concern. We use this as the entrance, it’ll take you there. Go on then. I’ll just, uh, head back on my own I guess. It’s only a week, it’s fine, I’ve got nothing better to do.”

Rosalina hopped it right away. “It’ll be a tight fit but I think we can manage!” she chirped. She started to lay down, with a hand extended to Lysanias.

“Mountain spirit, I’ll call you back on the other side.”

Agreed. Three in the box is simply not possible.

It vanished, and Lysanias stepped inside looking down at Rosalina all scrunched into the box. “Are you sure we shouldn’t do this one at a time?”

“Why would we do that?” she asked innocently. “Come on!” She offered her hand more vigorously.

“No reason I guess.” He lay down and they snuggled together, the lid of the box appearing from somewhere. “So now what?”

“Who knows how long it might take?” He felt her arms going around him. “I suppose to pass the time we could aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.” It felt like the box was rapidly dropping and suddenly they were looking at what was essentially a bar. They were at the entrance, looking in, and there were various tables set up at which crowded a lot of the workers that should have been up in the memory area. Seated at the bar were the primes, though only the bartender, a humanoid rabbit, was looking at them quizzically.

“We’re here,” he told her, looking up at her because she was so tall. Her eyes were scrunched closed and she still had her arms around him. She cracked an eye open.

“So we are. That was weird, huh?” She stepped back, looking glum.

I wonder what she was going to suggest we do. He summoned back the mountain spirit who also started looking around and stepped into the place, walking behind the main emotions seated on stools.

“Joy?” he asked, picking out the most obvious candidate. All of them seemed slumped over and listless, so it was actually not that easy to tell them apart.

“Who wants to know?” one of the figures said, squinting at him. “What the?” She tried to back off the stool and fell over. The two next to her didn’t seem to care, not even looking at her.

“My name is Lysanias, are you all right? Let me help you up.” He offered a hand.

Joy stared up at him for a moment as if she couldn’t believe what she was saying.

“Everyone, there’s someone new here!” Joy exclaimed, taking it. He hauled her up and she grabbed his head, turning it this way and that. “You’re real!”

“Of course I’m real. How come you aren’t in the control center? She’s dying out there!”

“Think we don’t know that?” said one of the primes. “We’re just here waiting for the end.” She took a long pull of her beer.

“What happened to you all?” Rosalina asked.

“That woman happened,” another said. “I should be so angry!” She tried to make a fist but then just gave up.

“You’re afraid of her, aren’t you?” Lysanias asked.

"How can we not be? She hurt us," said one, he thought she was probably sadness. "And then when she came to be here we tried to contain her. She broke out and has been terrorizing us ever since."

"Wait, you beat her once? We can do it again."

"Beat her?" sneered Anger. "We did no such thing. She walked into our prison calm as you please. Waited until we reinforced the door. *Then* she broke out."

"There wasn't anything we could do against her," said Paranoia? *Probably, if that's anger and that's sadness.*

"She wanted the maximum effect," Rosalina said sadly. "And you just gave up."

"Of course we gave up. If we're killed she'll never feel the emotion we represent again!"

"She might have left," Lysanias told them. "If that's possible. I mean we wandered around for some time and didn't see a soul."

"You what?" Every head turned towards him.

"What? Should I not?"

"You didn't see me because I didn't want you to see me," said a new voice from behind him. He turned, and there was a tall woman standing there. She had skin the color of old stone, black eyes and hair, and towered over him. "I'm not stupid, you know. I knew something was going on when someone I had never seen around here came to call. Samantha knows there's all sorts of weird powers in the world, one of them was sure to be used to try and get her out of this coma. I knew it was just a matter of time, and then I would wait, and watch, and they would lead me here."

Ah, so you weren't smart enough to find your way here then, he wisely didn't say.

"I don't get it," Rosalina told her. "Your plan is stupid."

"I'm standing here, aren't I?"

"Not that plan," she said in an exasperated tone. "Keeping everyone out of the control room. Samantha will die. Beings like us, we're a part of the person who sustains us. Lysanias dies, I die, and the mountain spirit dies too." She indicated the spirit, who nodded to her. "It's the same with you. Do you want to stop existing?"

She shrugged. "Not in particular. But at the same time I have to do what I was made to do. Samantha fears me. She put a copy of me inside herself and now she's torturing herself with the memory of her failure. If that kills her, well, it's not my problem."

"I see. So now what?"

"What else? We fight, and I destroy the primes. She'll only have me left in her head until her dying breath. Maybe I'll bring a camera down here, let her watch her fears over and over as she expires."

"What, here?" Rosalina asked. "Awful small place to fight in. And why wreck up such a nice bar?"

Behemoth laughed. "We can 'take it outside' if you want. I see there's only the one exit. I'll give you some time to follow me and you can all try your luck. Honestly, I prefer you to have as many advantages as you can. That will make my final victory so much better. Whenever you're ready." She stepped back through the door and was gone.

"We're finished," paranoia wailed. "We can't beat her."

"Even working together?" Lysanias asked. "She can only be as strong as Samantha believes she is, but you *are* Samantha. And there's three more of us now she doesn't know what we can do."

"We may as well be an F1, for all the good our being an F4 is going to do us," sadness replied sadly. "Her strength simply can't be measured. Unless you're an F5 of some kind, but I doubt it as you just stood there and let her talk."

Lysanias huffed. *So it's the same problem we're facing with the aliens then? They're just too big to attack? I doubt she has a conveniently exploitable weapon we can use against her, either. But she has to be beaten, and in all honesty if the primes don't do it, I don't think it'll mean much. We may get rid of this version but if she's still scared of Behemoth, another will come and disrupt her.* He looked over the primes and the workers. *We need a plan... or a miracle.*

Or an equalizer.

Chapter 8

Even a miracle needs a hand

When: Not long after

Where: Coming back into the subconscious

The problem, that is the main problem, that Lysanias ran into as he sat and thought about a plan was where he was. Had this been a normal fight with an unbeatable foe (and here he shuddered and wondered what the shadow avatar had chosen to inhabit in this world) he would simply energy drain them to death. After all this Behemoth might have unlimited strength, but she didn't have unlimited spirit energy. But he wasn't out there. He was in here. He could touch her and turn her into "stone" with his alchemical abilities, or simply get rid of her in a contain ward, but he didn't see those as solving the problem either. *Then it would be me beating her, and not them. They have to see she's not a threat anymore if she's going to fully heal.* He couldn't blood bend her, tear her soul out of her body, or make her the opposite of what she was.

"There's no getting around it," he finally decided. "You have to beat her. With my help, perhaps, but there it is. It's the only way you're going to heal."

"We've just finished telling you we can't," sadness told him.

"You can't- yet," he clarified, one finger raised. "I'm going to push some skills into your brain to help you, and then we're going out there. She wants to use intimidation tactics? Fine. We'll play that game, and we'll show her what intimidation *really* looks like."

And so 7 armor clad figures emerged from the bar. Each was encased in the completely impractical "blade" armor and Lysanias had made a tiny modification. Twin red laser beams shot out of where the eyes would be. Each looked identical, meaning (if his calculations were correct) that Behemoth wouldn't know which of them was which and so wouldn't know what to expect from them. He figured the armor was completely practical here, being just another mental construct so it really couldn't get stuck on itself when those inside moved around. Each was calm, centered, at one with each other and their opponent. Lysanias had given them all (except Rosalina who had her own skills) as much of his "combat sense" as he could that he had absorbed from the people on Korra's world. He had given them his skill with a blade, his ability to move like an air bender, and the battle meditation that would hopefully make them more deadly in combat. They were more confident now, and the plan was simply to attack her from all sides and not let up.

"What's all this?" Behemoth asked, looking like she wasn't sure if she should laugh or scream and run away.

The armored figures started moving, forming a circle around her.

"You did your job well," one said.

"You drove us into a corner," another said.

"You took everything from us," said another.

"We will take it back," said the next.

"We will show you our power," said the next.

"We will show you how hard we can fight when we have nothing to lose," said the next one.

"Reap now what you have sown," said the final one. With that, all of them flicked on their two light sabers, all of them having blades of purest blackness, and shot forward.

One figure was slightly ahead of the others and swung, Behemoth whirled and tried to catch the blade, probably to get it out of the figure's hand. She missed, and the blade scored her body, but didn't cut through. She felt it though, and decided to get out of the way of the other blade was that coming at her. She managed to dodge that one, and the figure sprang back.

The next figure darted in, following the plan of taking her from the back or the sides and got in another light hit, darting away.

The next paused, Behemoth was spinning and so right in front of her. But she did feint with the blade, keeping her attention there as she was stabbed in the back by another figure who scored on her.

Now Rosalina was up, but again “if you can see her eyes, don’t attack close” so she settled for creating a thick black cloth to try and obscure her vision. As Behemoth was not expecting such an “attack” and was actually being attacked from behind it fell over her head quite neatly. This may have thrown off the attacker’s aim a little as she was hit in the head and the leg, but it was fine. The figure moved to the side.

She ripped the cloth off and threw it, but this allowed another figure to come from behind and stab her. Again, flesh sizzled a little bit but the blade didn’t penetrate all that deeply.

Lysanias was directly to the side of her, and as he still had skills he hadn’t shown off, he went in with a flurry of blows. Figuring he might as well not go for strength but think more like a chi-blocker, as the blades were barely penetrating her body at all anyway.

She roared. “I’ll kill you all!”

Yeah, no, you can’t keep up with the seven of us, even if we only do a little damage to you it’ll finish you off in the end.

And so it went. Behemoth whirled and grabbed and threatened but there was no getting around the fact Samantha clearly just saw her as flailing around and using her immense strength rather than using any martial prowess. With the primes augmented with Lysanias’ skills and Lysanias maintaining the belief these were real light sabers that really should be able to cut her in half whatever her power set was, she never really stood a chance. (He figured they just saw her as fairly tough so it sort of canceled out, but she was being wounded so it was only a matter of time) She finally gave a cry and burned away.

“We did it,” Joy announced.

Paranoia simply looked around, alert for some trick. “Are we sure?”

“Let’s head to the control room, get Samantha up and running. Uh, how do we get these suits of armor off?”

Lysanias dissolved them with a laugh and the primes rushed to the elevator, while the workers, who had cautiously come out to see the fight, went back to their work.

“But leave any slightly dim memories,” he cautioned them. “They should brighten up soon and I don’t want her losing too much because you guys overcompensated because you haven’t been able to work in so long.”

“We know our jobs,” they grumbled.

With the primes back at the console Samantha started to wake up, and Lysanias pulled back from the meld. The marks on the ceiling burned away, leaving no trace, and Samantha blinked and groaned.

“Welcome back!” Amelia greeted her.

“Thanks?” she managed. “Why do I feel like I had a dream about fighting Behemoth with light sabers? What’s going on?”

“Let me just go get the doctor,” Luke told her. “I think you’ll be fine though.”

“Fine?”

Amelia explained in a rush she had been in a coma after the attack, while Rosalina, this version that had no idea what had gone on in the meld, filled her water glass and helped her drink.

Then the doctor shooed everyone out and they went down to the waiting room. Then twenty minutes after that a man with dark skin walked into the place and while hardly looking at them headed to the elevators.

“Dr. Contee?” Amelia asked, wheeling over to him.

“I’m sorry, I’m going up to see my wife,” he told her. “She’s just woken up from her coma and unless you were injured only a few hours ago there’s going to be nothing-”

She held up a hand. “I know why you’re here. We’re the ones that healed her. I’m Amelia Lockhart and-”

She gave a squeak as the doctor dropped to both knees and squeezed her.

A handshake will be find on my part, thank you.

And so, with a clean bill of health and enough food from the cafeteria to feed three people in her, Samantha and her husband joined the team.

"I've failed protecting the president," Samantha had said. "I need to redeem myself in some way. If I can help save the world that might just do it. And from aliens, you say? Strange times we live in."

"I am with you whatever you want me to do," Teddy told them. He almost looked like a different person from when he had walked in, and Lyantias felt he was basically overflowing with joy. "I owe you all so much."

"Yes, I'm still not clear on how you woke me up."

"Trade secret, we can't discuss it here," Amelia told them quickly. "Why don't you two head home, we can pick up you later."

And so not long after that Lysanias found himself standing in front of a prison. They had visited "the" white house though Lysanias knew other houses that were painted white so it wasn't sure what was so special about this one. Amelia went inside and came out an hour later, smiling broadly but wouldn't tell them what it was all about. They then stepped across to their next destination. "The UltraMax in South Dakota houses the super powered humans the government doesn't know what else to do with," Amelia explained after we arrived outside. Lysanias looked around. It was a fairly small building in the middle of nowhere.

Maybe they only have two people here? "So where is it?"

"Underground, for the most part. It's the only way to keep the people in here if something happened."

He scowled and slapped a hand on the ground. "You're right, it extends past my ability to sense with Earth Bending. Must have been difficult to build." *Though maybe they had someone with earth bending like powers do it. Also strange that they go through so much trouble to sequester people they feel can no longer be part of society instead of just outright killing them. What kind of life do they have here? Do they think locking them up will somehow improve their depositions such that they can later be released and go back to their lives? They're here for a reason, that reason won't have changed in ten or even twenty years. Either work with them to see they don't need to be locked up, or get rid of them if they're so dangerous. This pretend compassion doesn't really make any sense.*

Amelia took a deep breath. "Okay, we can do this. In and out. I have the three of you with me, it'll be fine."

"Just what are we walking into?" Luke asked.

"Even Epic doesn't know for sure," she admitted. "So let's go down and see for ourselves."

The group was let inside, apparently they were expected, and after two security checkpoints they were told they couldn't bring anything from outside in. Amelia scowled at the wheelchair they had brought she was being expected to use, and looked over at Lysanias.

"You're gonna have to leave all that stuff here," she reluctantly told him. "You wear a lot of magical items, right? I mean that headband of yours, I've never seen you take it off."

He touched the band. "Yeah, it gives me a +4 to magic, whatever that means for people outside the reality that made it. I guess it's fine." The guards set a box on the table he could use and Lysanias just laughed. "No, I don't so," he told them. "These items are basically irreplaceable. You don't want to see them? Fine. But they're not leaving my person." He took the band off and *twisted* it, shoving it into his *pocket*. He did the same with his sash, the rings, the bracer of strength, everything but the sword which, as always, was protected by the *ignore me* ward and so they couldn't see it anyway.

The guards clearly didn't know what to do as he made his items, one by one, vanish, but he finally did stand there without them.

"Er, I don't think I should let you pass," one finally decided.

He sighed. "It's fine, you will let us pass," Lysanias told him.

"Yeah, it's fine," the guard agreed. "I'll just have you buzzed in." He pressed a button on the wall and spoke into it.

Amelia got up from the chair, pushing the other one away from her with a grimace of disgust. It was pretty ratty looking, like it had been there for fifty years. "I'll just walk, it can't be that far, right? And I have these two strapping brutes to carry me should I falter." She headed for the door.

Either myself or Rosalina could help her with telekinesis if we had to.

"Suit yourself, I guess. I'm just going to let you pass," said the guard.

Now in the hallway between checkpoints she leaned over to Lysanias. "Did you just jedi mind trick that guy?"

He snorted and nodded. *I don't like to do it, he sent into her brain, but this is all getting on my nerves. If I wanted to break people out of here, I would just do it. Your world can't defend against me, not as long as I can prepare a few things beforehand.*

Her eyes got a little bigger and she said "Can you..." she mimed something coming out of her head and going into his.

Read your mind as well? Yes. Another thing I don't like to do, mostly because the person I'm mind reading can feel me doing it, so there's no doing it on the sly. But if someone wanted me to, yes. I'm not reading yours now, this communication is one way only.

"I see," she said. "Good to know."

The next checkpoint freaked her out because she claimed they had stolen her weapon designs, but Lysanias reminded her that she was just an inventor, and the world had more than one of those.

"I know, I know," she admitted. "I'm sure Epic wasn't compromised, and I've never really left any of my IP cannons lying around for them to reverse engineer. I'm just paranoid about it."

"And from what you said those are non-lethal, right? I mean if they're going to use any of your weapons at least it's the most benign."

"It's the principal of the thing, and if they got their hands on more of my stuff somehow. Ugh, this is going to bug me the rest of the day."

But they got past all the security checkpoints without issue, though Amelia leaned against the wall on the elevator ride down to the prison level.

"Here," he told her, undoing his sword and coming over to her. "You'll need this more than I will."

"Need what? There's nothing there."

"My sword, you can't see it. Let me put it on you and you'll be stronger."

"Oh?" She walked out of the elevator with a spring in her step, saying how light and powerful she felt, and they followed more guards to a meeting room they could use to talk to whoever it was that they were getting out of here. "And you feel like this all the time?"

I admit to feeling dragged down, without all my stuff I'm at a fraction of my usual power. Ah well, the whole point of all this is that I don't need it because this place should be secure.

"Pretty much," he told her.

"Wow."

They brought in a lady named Tessa, who looked, to not put too fine a point on it, like crap. She had low spirit energy, a weakened life energy, and felt at once helpless, miserable, and embarrassed to be seen like this. Amelia was quite upset about her treatment, and was about to make her an offer when she turned to Lysanias.

"I need to know," she told him.

"Know?" he asked back.

"I would have taken her on faith, had you not been here," she explained. "But with all I know you can do it would be stupid of me to not ask. If I do get her out of here—"

"Good luck with that," Tessa told her.

“Quiet you. If I get her out and she is not what I believe she is, that’s on me. Look into her future, make sure she’s with us.”

“I can do that.” He went over to her.

“Can you get rid of that stupid tattoo as well? She got that in here and I’m pretty sure I know what it means.”

“Wait, what’s this? You can’t just-” she started to say.

Lysanias didn’t let her finish, he touched her neck where she had a tattoo of a heart and someone’s name. He then looked into her future relating to Amelia, and made her skin reject the ink that had been injected into it. She gave a wince as it was pushed out, and he wiped it off leaving a smear on both her neck and his hand.

“I’ll have to clean it off later,” he remarked, looking at the mess it made on his fingers.

“What did you-” she asked, trying to see. He showed her his hand. “What sort of power can do that, and how useless are you otherwise?”

“You would be surprised. Anyway, from what I can tell, you get her out of here and you’ll have a lifelong... fan. She won’t betray you.”

“Then someone get her a pen.”

After convincing the guards (the normal way) that what she had just signed was a presidential pardon by The Great Leader himself her chains were removed and the party, now with a +1, made their way back through security and to the surface.

“I’m really getting out of here,” Tessa said for the fifth time. She had gotten her possessions back, and Amelia was back in the chair, the sword returned to Lysanias. Reluctantly, but he was growing to anticipate that.

“It’s just through those doors,” she promised. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“I made my choices,” she countered.

“Now you get to make better ones.”

Through the doors Lysainas put all his stuff back on and teleported everyone back to the base.

“So have I traded one prison for another?” Tessa asked, looking around. “At least this one is nice.”

“Your time off duty will be your own,” Amelia promised her. “But we will need to do some drills, learn to work as a team. You’ll get a salary, a place to live, I’ve hired some world class chefs for the kitchens, and most importantly you’ll get a chance to make a difference in the world. Once this alien thing is over the world will still need super hero teams, and right now that’s us.”

“What alien thing? You were kind of vague before.”

She waved that off. “I’ll tell you when everyone is here. For now, get cleaned up, get out of those prison clothes, tour the place, we’ll be back soon.”

“Where are you going?”

More like where are we going now? I thought that would be the last place.

“First, some lunch. Then, to possibly spring one more person.”

Why do I feel like I’m not going to like it?

Chapter 9

Computer was moving a little slow for me

When: after lunch

Where: Main conference room

“So go over this one more time, at about half the speed you just did?” Lysanias requested. Amelia had been excitedly outlining the plan to him, but she was so excited she kept running her words together and jumping around in the “plan.”

“Okay.” She tried to calm herself. “There’s a woman named Monica. She’s an ice elemental, in that I mean she’s right now made of ice. Her body is ice. And she has ice projection powers. After category-7, the organization run by Erickson, collapsed because he wasn’t there to mind control everyone anymore elementals were rounded up. Either for study or because they were deemed too dangerous to be out and about. I’m working on a way to ‘cure’ her, bring her original body back, so she could walk around and not occasion comment. But I need her here in order to do that, plus I want her on the team anyway. Epic knows roughly where she is, but we were going to try legal channels to bring her home. Now that I know you have a fancy invisibility cloak or whatever made it so I couldn’t see the sword-”

“Ward.”

“Okay, ward then, we could just walk in and get her out of there. No one would know what happened, and there’s no international incident where Arsenal smashes a prison down rescuing her.”

“Which is, from what I’m feeling from you, what you would prefer,” Kate told her.

“I admit the idea has crossed my mind more than once.”

“Our team leader everyone.” Kate looked around the room. Tony and Tessa were both there, Tessa looking a little better after Lysanias had healed all her various scrapes and bruises from being in prison.

Tony just grinned. “I could probably get in and out of there fast enough to get her out,” he told them.

“Wait, how does that work?” Lysanias asked. “You run past something at a speed to be invisible to the naked eye and you’re going to blow over anything that isn’t nailed down.”

“I’m not actually sure,” he admitted. “But I don’t seem to create wind when I run.”

“Maybe he becomes frictionless?” Amelia guessed. “But you would no doubt have to open doors and such. Lysanias can just teleport past any barriers.”

I suppose, even without a window in the door I could project my senses a little past it and see what was there. It would work. It is a little noisy but if no one was right there the ward wouldn’t burn up.

“A speedster and two different teleporters?” Tessa cut in. She was currently levitating a pencil around and around, enjoying the use of her powers without being shocked by a collar. “You do like going fast, don’t you Arsenal?”

“You can call me Amelia, you know.”

“Maybe I will. Sometime.”

“I wouldn’t knock it, it got you out sooner,” she told her. “As we didn’t have to fly to where you were, or fly back. That saved us like a day. I mean we’ve almost assembled the whole team and it’s barely past lunch time.”

“Oh I’m not complaining, it just seems a little unbalanced, that’s all. I know an F4 wonder woman is coming, and a healer, but two teleporters? Where’s the variety?”

“One, Kate is an empath and fairly strong herself. Two, she’s also my fiend and was here first. Her teleporting is incidental.”

“Okay?”

“And three, Lysanias isn’t a teleporter. He’s a lot of things, and has his own armor.”

“Wait, what? I thought he took the tattoo off me by teleporting the ink out of my skin or something. I had never heard of an F5 teleporter but that’s not to say there couldn’t be one. I mean he brought us back here, right?”

“I should say he isn’t just a teleporter. Like I said you’ll get the whole story when the whole team is here.”

“All right. Whatever you say, boss lady.”

"Ameila," she enunciated.

You realize the more you try to get her to say your name, the more she's going to resist just to tweak your nose, he sent into her brain.

"I suppose you're right. Anyway, how about it, Lysanias. Want to play the hero one more time, rescue another fair maiden from the clutches of—"

"Are you a lesbian?" Tessa interrupted.

"Wa-what?" Amelia did a double take. "What are you talking about?"

"If we're adding another girl to the team it's girls five, men three. It's unbalanced again. I thought maybe if you liked girls that might explain it."

"What is it with you and balance? And not that it's any of your business, but I have a boy friend. Luke here. Who is a man. A great big, strapping, muscly, manly man, hunk of man meat. I mean have you seen Luke?"

"I'm not on the team though, so it's only two men," Luke told her.

"Da buha?" Amelia managed, twitching. "Sa wha tha hecken team not crazy thinger wha?"

Everyone including Lysanias looked at him as if he had gone crazy. *Wait he's not on the team? How is he not on the team?*

"Er, maybe I should have made that more clear from the beginning," he told her. He was rubbing the back of his head and looking away. "I think I'm done with the whole super hero thing. You assumed I was on the team I guess but you never really *asked* me..."

"Communication," Tessa agreed. "Totally important in a relationship."

"You. Me. Room. Now!" Amelia said, getting up out of the chair and stalking out of the room.

"You make her cry, you'll have me to answer to," Kate threatened him.

"I know," he told her, sounding resigned. "We'll be back." He left.

"So..." Tessa said after a moment. "What's been going on in the world? Is the president still who I think it is?"

"You never did answer her," Kate said.

"Humm?"

"Balance. I'm curious too."

"Oh, that!" She brightened, the pencil coming to rest on her finger. "You see, perfectly balanced, like all things should be. When you're a telekentic like me you have to look for the ways to use the least amount of force to do what you want. Sometimes you just want to shove something over." She gave the pencil a tap and it teetered on her finger. "Or do the most damage to something in a single strike." The pencil rose and shot forward, coming to a halt right at her elbow. "So you go for the midpoint, where the object is balanced. That way you get the maximum result with the minimum of force. I've gotten so used to looking for the balance in everything I guess it's become a bit of an obsession for me."

"That makes sense."

"We can continue the discussion of the rescue in her absence," Epic told them.

"To be clear, she wasn't arrested for something, just snatched up and locked away because she's made of ice?" Lysanias asked.

"That's correct. We know she is somewhere in Mexico but records of her exact location have not been uncovered."

"I see. Do we have any pictures of her?"

"She was on the team previously, I have this footage captured." The monitor lit up and showed a woman made of ice shooting a blue beam of energy at a woman Lysanias had recently fought the shade of.

"Behemoth. She tried to stop her? That's one brave lady. Show me a picture of someplace likely to be empty near where you think she is," he told him. "I'll take it from there."

"I have this stretch of highway in Mexico that has a low probability of traffic." The picture changed to be a section of road looking out towards the south. There were some bushes near the road, but so sparse as to not be obscure the rest of the image. Way in the distance there was a telephone pole, and behind that, almost to the horizon, were some mountains.

"Yeah, that's good. Just leave that there." He got up and walked away from the table, embracing the One Power though the bird. Rosalina joined him. He wove air and fire to make a tube of light in a circle and turned to the others. "Stay away from this if you don't want to get cut in half." He tied the weave off and looked at the image. *I want to be close, but not too close, to that telephone pole. I could teleport, but I'm already holding the One Power. Couldn't think of another way to make a temporary circle I can use as my return point without messing up the carpet here.* A gateway opened and he poked his head through. It was clear. "Hopefully I'll be back before Amelia finishes her little talk with Luke. See you in a bit." He stepped through, followed by his wand spirit, looked back at the surprised faces looking at him, and closed the gateway. "Pause."

With time paused he got out his sheet of paper with the numbers on it and sat down to ask the universe where the girl was he had just seen. After a half hour of failure he resolved to somehow practice this skill, if he had to sit there and ask the universe what order a deck of cards was card by card, and augmented himself with magic. Twenty minutes later he had a direction and distance, letting the pause and the magic go. He looked around, but plant life was so sparse around here there were sure to be few ley lines he could tap into, and hoped this rescue wasn't going to be too energy intensive. *Of course, I could practice Skyebourne magic as well, or learn the spell as a different type of magic user so it wasn't so draining. But I do so few spells and I use that skill all the time. Of course, it won't change the time it takes no matter how good I get at it.*

As he was looking at the place on the hubPad, which didn't seem like a super secret evil lair, he simply teleported there. As in the picture he was under a tree as it was fairly unlikely anything would be there with him, and he looked around. "This is the place?" He pulled a drone out of his *pocket* and it hovered in the air, looking around.

"This is the coordinates given based on the specified direction and distance," it informed him.

"That can't be right." He was looking at a dead end street, a rather dilapidated house before him. To either side were some sad looking houses that did look any more livable. He heard traffic in the distance and there were squirrels running about, but no guards, no fences, nothing that screamed this was a holding area for "dangerous" elementals.

"Maybe she just ran away to Mexico?" Rosalina asked.

"It's possible." He turned in a circle and to his left a man was out with a hose, watering his lawn. He spotted Lysanias and turned the water off, crossing the street and heading right for him. *Now what?*

"You lost, friend? Can I help you?"

I guess I have to talk to him. Still, he offered to help so maybe people are just nice here. "Maybe you can, sir. Have you ever seen anything strange going on in this neighborhood?"

"Strange? Like what?"

"Anything that would seem to be out of the ordinary. I mean you probably see people flying around or whatever but, I don't know. Cars that shouldn't be here? People that look like they don't belong."

"You mean like you? I've never seen a person with red eyes before. And she looks like a princess. Dresses like one too. And that floating eyeball, never seen anything like that before. You some kinda super heroes?"

"Oh, you," Rosalina said, waving cutely. "What a flatterer you are!"

"Sure, let's say like me," he agreed. *Or someone made of ice?*

"No one around here like that. Are you sure you have the right place?"

"I'm actually not. Maybe I was misinformed. I won't take up any more of your time."

"See you." He walked back to his hose and started to wind it up, shooting glances at Lysanias as he did.

"Perhaps asking again will further narrow the search?" Meta told him.

"Let me poke around in my astral form, we'll go from there. I don't want to have to cast that spell again to augment myself." He sat down under the tree and closed his eyes. Leaving his body he flashed past the man thinking *who's a speedster now huh?* and headed into the house at the end of the street. Dusty, empty rooms were all he could find, but he checked the

garage out as well. It too was empty, but curiously it had a metal floor. *Maybe that's just the style around here?* He zipped to the house to the right, and it too had a metal floor. As did the house on the left, where the man was putting his hose away and getting out a phone. He saw nothing else of interest, he didn't go into the house where the man was, figuring why bother. But he did go up a little ways to see if there was some kind of facility in the distance, and checked other houses down the street.

And here he did notice something peculiar. The next two houses in the row had metal garage floors. But houses down both sides of the street past that did not. He zipped back to the street and went back to look at one of the garages. Nothing hung on the walls, the place seemed empty, yet taking a closer look around it had what seemed to be a modern garage door opener, a well maintained chain stretching from a mechanism in the middle of the ceiling to the door. The other houses on the street had the same exact mechanism. *Okay, there is no way the same contractor or whatever worked on all these houses at the same time and put in the exact same equipment. Something fishy about this.* He decided to see if there was something under the floor and got a shock. Not a literal shock, but figurative, as his astral form was totally unable to penetrate the floor.

I should be able to just "float" down as easily as I do up. I've never been stopped by something before. This is really weird, and totally something I should be concerned about.

Heading back to his body he tried going underground at various points but found he couldn't, at least near this street. He flew past it on a hunch and yes, he had no trouble doing so on the street next to this one. Back in his body he looked up at a worried looking Rosalina.

"He's been on the phone since you left," she told him. "And he keeps looking over at us."

"There's something strange going on here," he told her. "It wouldn't actually surprise me if he's in on it."

"Lip reading software postulates he keeps saying 'he's just sitting there'," Meta told them. "There is a 78% chance he is reporting the fact we are here to someone in authority."

"Then we better move fast." Without getting up he pulled two *ignore me* wards from his pocket and slapped them on himself and Rosalina. With that done he got up, shrugged, and slapped another on the drone.

"He seems quite agitated to have lost sight of us," Meta reported. Lysanias looked over and he was whipping his neck around trying to see where they had gone.

"Come on, but you know what?" He got up and walked over to the man, standing behind him. *There's not much plant life here either but you'll do. This won't hurt a bit.* He drained the man's energy down to almost nothing, recharging himself in the process.

"Thanks," he said, tipping an invisible (and quite imaginary) hat. *I'm not doing him harm, so it doesn't count as attacking him, and I stay unseen. Ha ha.* He walked over to the garage across the street and slammed a hand into it, using metal bending to see what metal was connected to it. He found the emergency release and yanked it, then opened the door and let the drone and Rosalina inside. He let the door fall as he stepped past it and looked around. It looked no different from when he came here in the astral form, there were no buttons or switches he could use on the walls. "If this is a door to some kind of secret holding facility, how does it open?" he asked.

"Most likely some kind of wireless signal," Meta told them. "However I am detecting no wireless transmissions in the area. It may be passive and therefore we would never guess the correct frequency or expected signal required."

"It must open somehow, it wouldn't be metal otherwise. I don't want to really damage it, the more proof we leave the worse for us, hey you have an unlock spell, don't you? I know one, but you're not a wand now so..."

She shook her head. "I don't know that spell. I didn't learn what you learned."

"Oh, right. I hate to turn you back, I guess I'll try something else. Maybe I can look into the past of this object and see how it opens." He put a hand on it, and concentrated. Looking into the past he saw the garage door open and the floor flipping up as if hinged from the back, and a car drove down into it. The floor closed again as the garage door did. "Huh, maybe it's automatic if the garage door opener gets the right signal. You're sure there's no way for you to crack it?"

“Not in the time we would likely have,” Meta agreed.

“I could pull it up with metal bending, but we would have to go outside again. I don’t think we can get past it while standing on it, given the way it opens. Let’s see if we can do that.” He pulled the release on the door and slid it open again, coming face to face with a group of soldiers with rifles.

“Come out with your hands- huh?” The one began, looking around.

“What opened the garage door?” one asked, as the others went to one knee and swung their guns left and right.

“There’s no one inside. They must have gone into the house. Move up!” The soldiers flowed into the space, not realizing they were moving around the warded figures, and tried the door to the house.

“Locked sir.”

“Who has the key?”

“I do, sir. Here you go.”

“Spread out once we’re inside.”

“Yes sir!”

They unlocked the door and headed inside, closing it behind them.

“We seem to be on the right track,” Rosalina breathed. “That was scary!”

“It was a bit of a shock, wasn’t it? Where in the heck did they come from?”

“There?” She pointed, and the house at the end of the street had the garage door closing.

“Oh crud!” He took a few steps out of the garage and spirit stepped over there, grabbing both the now lowering floor and garage door with metal bending. The sound of grinding gears met his ears. “Gotcha!” He held them as Rosalina and the drone came over there and all three slipped down into the tunnel they found behind the door. It looked big enough for a car to drive through, and it was lit enough to see as the floor closed behind them.

“I am now reading a wireless signal, decrypting and gaining access.”

So they had the place shielded somehow. That’s what kept me from getting in as well? The pair walked into a garage area into a prison of sorts, a fairly small facility compared to the last one he had been in, but with more of a science focus. The place seemed to be on alert, people in white coats not working but just sitting nervously. Of course, to get into the place past the solid metal doors Lysanias had to leave his body and peek through, but he found he could do so just fine. *The protection is on the outer layer of this place, he reasoned, not on every door.* He could then teleport through when no one was looking so he didn’t attract attention and burn his ward up.

“I have gained access,” Meta told them. “This is indeed a research facility and a security system has been found. I can access a wireless device that is positioned to see the bank of security monitors. Building layout has been approximated. Target seen, please follow me.” The drone went in front, leading them through various labs and to a hallway with various cell doors along it. There was a panel next to one that lit up as they approached, showing the inside. *Ah, no window they just display the camera feed they have in the room anyway.* There two figures sat on the floor somewhat next to each other. Both were clearly woman, and one was certainly Monica, as she did look to be made entirely of ice. The other looked to be her opposite, made of fire. She had a humanoid shape but flickered a bit, tiny bits of flame breaking off and flaring up around her as she sat there. Both weren’t wearing anything, not that Lysanias figured someone made of fire could wear anything.

“Opening this door will trigger a mechanical alarm I cannot silence,” Meta told them. “Furthermore the room itself is covered with sensors, presumably of a scientific nature. Any appreciable change in mass, temperature, or luminosity will trigger an alarm. The designers of these cells went out of their way to make sure these alarms could only be silenced elsewhere and are on a separate system that is not controlled by computer. I do not know where that system is controlled from. Presumably next to the security monitors but I cannot guarantee this statement.”

“We should be on our way before it matters. There seems to be just enough room...” He drew open the One Power, when he had enough he wove the familiar gateway into that room from this one. Both woman jumped up and away from it as the opening “rotated” into

existence into the hallway. "Hi!" he called though it. Both ladies did not react, looking past him into the hall. "Oh, right. Meta, can I safely take this ward off in the hallway?"

"There are cameras everywhere. It is an analog system, not computer controlled. I cannot loop the footage or otherwise modify the video stream. If a guard sees you the alarm will be raised."

"Eh, it'll be raised soon enough once they realize she's gone. Rosalina, can you put a bubble around this whole section of hall?"

"Of course!" She waved her wand and a semi-transparent bubble went up around the group.

"Great, thanks." He took the ward off, making the ladies jump as he "appeared" as if out of nowhere. "Hey, it's Monica right?"

"That's right. Who are you?"

"Never mind that, Amelia sends her regards. You want out of here or what?"

"Amelia?"

"Arsenal."

"Oh!" Her eyes got wide.

Weird, I can pretty much see through her thanks to my senses being enhanced by the One Power, but at the same time she's a woman who happens to be made of ice. Her "eyebrows" moved and she even blinks. She has what appears to be individual strands of ice hair too, and they sway as she moves around. But how can ice do that? I can see why they would want to study her I guess. Or maybe they just like looking at her, hence keeping her in this state? Wait, could I water bend her?

"Arsenal sent you? For real?"

"For real. Someone's coming, you want out of here or not? The offer is open to your friend as well." He could just hear boots stomping towards them, again his enhanced senses serving him well. Of course he couldn't look directly at Miss Fire over there she was now too bright for him, but that was fine.

"You don't have to ask me twice!" She stepped through the gateway into the hall.

"Come on Emma, you don't have to be poked and prodded anymore!" She gestured wildly.

But the woman of flame just backed off. "I can't leave, you know how dangerous it is for me! Escape without me my friend, and do not forget me."

"Aarg, I wish I spoke Spanish. Come on, Emma, come!"

She's not a dog. "She says it's too dangerous. Are you sure? This may be a one time offer," he called in to her. "You may be moved after this!" *Not that I couldn't find you again, of course, with a little effort.*

"Yes, please leave me. Thank you for the offer but I burn whatever I touch. I am too dangerous to go out there. Please make her understand, and tell her thank you for being with me. It was nice to have someone to talk to, even if we couldn't really understand each other."

"I'll tell her. And if you can be cured somehow, I'll find you again, you have my word."

She nodded, and the gateway winked out.

"Lysanias, hurry!" Rosalina said, and he looked at what was happening. Men had arrived and were pounding on the barrier. Some were looking ready to fire on it, calling for the ones in front to get out of the way.

"Whoops. Time to go. Ugh." *If bullets bounce off this thing it could kill one of them by accident.* He wove another gateway, this time to the telephone pole again, not wanting these guys to catch even a glimpse of Amelia's lab. "Go ahead."

"Woohoo!" Monica shouted, jumping through. The others followed, and he dropped the gateway. "Ah, sweet freedom!" she said, standing on her toes and spreading her arms wide over her head. She held her head up to the sun a moment, then dropped her arms and looked around. "Wait, where the heck are we? Look buddy, I appreciate the rescue but this is the middle of nowhere. If this is some kind of trick..." She trailed off and held up a hand, a blue sphere of energy crackling into existence.

"No trick, I'll take us back now," he told her. "I figured they shouldn't see the lab, might cause problems for Amelia." He wove another gateway, targeting the circle of light he left on the floor.

“Oh.” She dropped the ball. “So you are on the level. Sorry, that hardly ever happens with me.” She stepped up to the gateway, looking at the edges and the people beyond who were getting up and smiling. “That’s a neat way to travel. What’s your code name, Mr. Portal?”
“I’m Lysanias, actually. Welcome to the team.”

Chapter 10

Domo Arigato, Mr. Roboto for helping me escape just when I needed to

When: Not long after

Where: Meeting room

Amelia nearly fell over when she and Luke came back into the room. Neither looked too happy but that changed when she saw Monica sitting there, cool as you please. She was dressed now in a robe from one of the rooms, leaning back in her chair with her hands behind her head.

“Wh-what?” she managed.

“Hey Amelia. Nice place. Hey do you offer dental and is my being made of freaking ice a preexisting condition for the company health insurance plan? I mean you have one of those, right? If I’m going to risk my life day in and day out I feel I should get some kind of health insurance, don’t you?”

“Monica? How did you get here so fast?”

“Hey, some people actually get things done, rather than having arguments with their boyfriends. Hey big guy.”

“Hello Monica.”

“You’re really here!” she staggered over and gave Monica a hug, at least for a second.

“Wow, you’re cold.”

Monica gave a slow clap. “We’ve got a real mind here, ladies and gentleman. News flash, ice, which is what I am currently made of, is cold.”

“Okay, I get it, gosh,” she exclaimed. “I haven’t forgotten about curing you, can you give me a *minute*? You just got back, apparently.” She glanced at Lysanias who gave a little wave.

She laughed. “I’m just yanking your chain. Thanks for sending someone to come get me. When you’re done with me, think you can handle a fire elemental too? My cellmate would probably like not being fire even more than I would like not being ice. I mean I thought I had it bad but at least I can sleep on a mattress and not a concrete slab.”

“I would have to take some readings,” she admitted, dropping into her chair again.

“So what happened with Luke,” Kate asked, “for those that can’t feel the emotions of everyone in the room.”

“He’s staying on as an employee of the company,” Amelia explained, “but not as a field agent. Says he doesn’t really like being a rage monster, which I guess I can understand. As to his actual position, I suggested a mop and bucket, but he suggested overseeing your training. Which I had to agree is not a bad idea.”

“Reluctantly agreed,” Luke told them. “She really wanted to see me in a janitor’s uniform.”

“A breakaway janitor’s uniform?” Tessa asked with a snort.

“The point is,” Amelia went on, getting a little red, “he won’t be coming on missions with us, but as we have Samantha on the way who is an F4 in strength it should be fine. Tomorrow when she arrives he’ll put you through some drills.”

“And what will you be doing?” Tessa asked.

“Trying to come up with weapons to actually defeat the things we’re fighting. I’ve got some ideas,” her eyes flicked to Lysanias, “but we don’t have much time.”

“I haven’t actually signed up yet,” Monica told her. “I appreciate the rescue, don’t think I don’t, and I owe you, or I guess Lysanias here. But he wouldn’t tell me anything about why this teams needs to be put together. Only that it isn’t to fight criminal supers.”

“We only want to go over it once. We have two more members, Samantha and Teddy Contee, who will arrive tomorrow. They’re, uh, making up for lost time right now as she was in a coma for a while.”

“Oh my!” Kate drawled.

“Meanwhile, get some rest. Get some food. Wander around the base, whatever. Think about what sort of gear you might want, my fabrication equipment is being installed so we’ll be up and running soon in that department. We have...”

“Three weeks,” Lysanias told them.

“Right, three weeks until the next major action. Train now, and train hard. More lives than you know depend on us. Milton can tell you where your assigned rooms are.”

And so the meeting broke up. Amelia said she and Luke were going out for dinner, they hadn't had a date in awhile.

“I told him now wasn't the time, but he had a good point,” she told Lysanias.

“Sometimes just stepping away and letting your brain work on a problem can be beneficial. I don't have any ideas and until my equipment is all installed I can't make anything anyway.

You can stick around here, right?”

“Go have fun,” he told her. “The place will be here when you get back.”

“You think? Or you know?”

“Go on!”

That evening Lysanias did two things before going to sleep. He found a deck of cards in Amelia's stuff and sat for a few hours trying to go through the deck by asking the universe what the next card was, and when he got bored/annoyed with that sat and discussed some ideas with Epic and Meta for what he could easily make Samantha. He had seen her and so could recreate her in the Dream and try various things out. As she was super strong a pair of primordial metal bracers, boots, and shield would keep her safe and mobile enough to be a walking tank. Of course he would make her a light saber, and realized he should make some kind of charging station for the things here at the base. There were likely to be a lot of them hanging around. *Am I going to be responsible for creating this realities' version of the Jedi order?*

With that image in mind he went to sleep, and when he realized he was Dreaming created her image in the Dream so he could get her size right. He made the boots go up to her knees and split apart into two pieces, secured the entire length by the strongest magnets he could Dream up on one side and just a hinge on the other. The bracers covered her upper arms and helped lock the shield in place for her left arm. The shield itself was simply a less complicated version of his made of one piece, with a place for a light saber as well. All of it was undecorated, he figured he could do a fitting on the real person just in case he got something wrong, and give it whatever design she wanted at that time.

When he was done with that he stepped it all over into the waking world, summoned his armor, and went out to practice flying.

The next day Amelia was practically glowing and playing with a new ring she seemed to have on her finger. The Contee's hadn't arrived yet but she said something else that might interest him had. They went down to the loading bay and with Tessa's help he lugged a crate to the workshop. They tore the wood apart and laying inside was a decapitated robot.

“I had the idea last night, watching the waiters running around,” she explained. “These were used against me, but I think we can turn that around. I'm just lucky Epic found one that was intact and could get it to me. They were being studied by others but what Arsenal wants, Arsenal gets! Another weapons platform shows up and starts spewing gun drones everywhere, we turn around and march a hundred of these out of a gateway. That frees us up to deal with the main threat. What do you think?”

“In theory, it's not a bad idea,” Epic told her. “However, you remember how many of these you saw at once?”

“Only a few, why?”

“Even I could only run a few of these at a time. The more of them I try to run, the less effective I will be at running each one.”

“Oh. I guess you were never designed for this, after all. I figured with the both of you...” She looked at the drone hovering next to Lysanias.

“My limitations are not the same as Epic's,” Meta agreed. “However, I am limited by the amount of information that can be transmitted across realities. So the effect is the same. I could not run more than a handful.”

“You're not running inside that little watch?” she asked.

"That is correct. This is just an access point. Even my master is bound by the physical law of the material universe."

She nodded. "So even he can't run a supercomputer inside a wrist watch shaped space. Shoot. I really thought I had something there."

"But why not just give Tony a gun and have him go to it?" Lysanias asked. "He's super fast, I'm sure with some assistance aiming if he hasn't handled a firearm before he could take out whole squads of drones by himself."

"I don't know," she hedged. "The problem is his speed, in a way. I would need a gun powerful enough to actually take down one of these drones, and remember we didn't take any down so I don't know how powerful that is, but still fires fast enough to make use of his speed. A simple chemical reaction slug probably isn't going to do jack, while more advanced weapons take longer to charge."

"That is a problem."

"But my idea still is sound, right? Even if you can only control six at once with any precision, who cares? We dissect this one, the principals can't be that much different from the armor it's just more internal than external. Lysanias figures out how to make them, and he can wish up a hundred in a night. They don't need food and water, just an out of the way storeroom. The first six get activated, one is destroyed, another one is activated and walks through the gateway to take that one's place."

"Or walk all hundred through, that doesn't require that much coordination. Have most of them hide so I don't have to stand there maintaining a gateway, and just bring them online as needed."

"However it works out," she agreed. "I suppose each could have rudimentary 'follow me' programming so Epic could run the six in the front and the rest just follow him through the gateway."

"So let's get busy!"

A few hours later the entire team was there, and Amelia showed them all what they were up against. She showed some footage of Erickson telling her about the alien threat, and why he had done what he had done. Then she showed the spider like drone, and what it had done.

"So it wasn't simply a meteorite that hit the city," Samantha finally said after the presentation was over. "The president was saying it was just a rumor that something had crawled out of the crater. Something about a 'China hoax' to try and get out of tariffs or something. Or to make him look bad, because everything has to be about him. Honestly, so many times when I was near that man I wanted to reach over and just snap his neck like a twig. It would have been so easy. But no, I had to protect him. Listening to him talk is infuriating, how can anyone stand it for more than two minutes? People actually cheer that man at rallies, how they fit in the same room as his ego is beyond me."

"It was not," she agreed, not going into her thoughts on the man though clearly looking like she wanted to agree.

"That doesn't explain this guy," Tessa said, pointing at Lysanias. "How did he make that stuff for Sam so fast? I thought your fabrication equipment was being installed?"

He had given Samantha her armor pieces and they had fit perfectly, she was currently wearing them to make sure they didn't pinch anywhere. "Oh, you like?" she asked, wheeling her chair back and kicking her legs up. "Maybe if I could have had gear like this, Behemoth wouldn't have knocked me around so much. Imagine kicking someone in the head with this on." She wiggled a foot. "I don't care if you are an F5, that would sting a bit."

"I guess it's time for my story," he said. "Hello everyone, I'm Lysanias, and I come from another reality." As usual he demonstrated some of his abilities, mentioning he healed Samantha, made an armor to rival Amelia's, and introduced his wand spirit. (They couldn't see the mountain spirit anyway so he left that part out) "So these aliens are probably led by the shadow avatar, the one I'm here to destroy. It's the only way your reality will be safe."

"So you're part... angel?" Monica asked.

"I'm proto-human. I'm the bridge between human and angel. I'm what humanity was supposed to be, had the Allfather not decided he didn't like us anymore."

"We have a flood story," she went on. "You don't think something like that happened here, do you? Like somewhere in the world, quietly living are people thousands of years old?"

"I guess it's possible," he admitted. "Without anyone to learn from, they couldn't do what I can do. I had to visit many realities to learn all I can do currently. I mean maybe they could work some things out, but I never would have considered water bending, for example, until someone showed that to me. Angels showed us some of what we could do after we were created, so I suppose they could do some things still today."

"And you've met Luke, and Leah, and Yoda, and the rest of them?" Teddy asked. "They aren't just stories?"

"I think in an infinite multiverse, some of your stories are going to resemble-" His watch buzzed. "Wait, Meta has something to say."

"I believe you have suspected the truth, I am authorized to tell you as this information really can't be acted upon in any way. As all worlds are connected via the World of Dreams, very occasionally a Storyteller, that is, one that dreams the dreams of other realities, will appear. Often they become writers, or directors, or poets, and give a glimpse of another world to the world they live on. That is where stories of other realities come from. I should note that not all stories are stories of other worlds, true Storytellers are rare, but what he said was accurate enough. Even a piece of a world, glimpsed in dreams, can give rise to stories that resemble the events that happen there. So in a way, yes, across the multiverse all stories are true. From a certain point of view."

There was a moment of silence. Lysanias cleared his throat. "Right, what they said. So does that clear things up? You all know what we're fight for here?"

"I'm in," Monica announced. "Cure or no cure. I'm convinced this is the right thing to do. I have the power to help, I'm going to do all I can. Sargent Luke sir, awaiting your regimen, sir!" She got up and saluted.

He shook his head. "No, no don't do that. If we're done here we should get started though."

"Is anyone out?" Amelia asked. "I won't hold it against you if you do. What we face is scary, faceless, and has probably done this before to other planets. How we're going to get into space and find this avatar instead of just defending our planet I don't know. But we are forewarned. We can fight back, and I'll arm you however you think you can be armed for the coming battle. As soon as I figure out how to build an unlimited supply of robots, that is. You have a crazy idea for something that could stop that thing," she pointed to the frozen image of the weapon platform, "you tell me."

Tessa snorted. "Too bad you couldn't just blow it up with anti-matter. Even a non-science person like myself knows that stuff is bad- what's that look for?"

Amelia stared at her for a second. With a huge smile she turned to Lysanias. "Could we just blow it up with anti-matter?"

One quick explanation of anti-matter later and Lysanias decided he probably could make anti-matter, after all dreams were not matter or anti-matter, not really. He could in theory magnetically contain it, then possibly put it into some kind of projectile (with a battery to maintain the vacuum containment should he wake up?) that could be safely loaded into a weapon that had enough range that firing it didn't blow him up too, and step it over into the waking world.

"That's far too many probably, maybe, and possibly for my taste," Tessa told them. "And besides I was *joking*. Please don't screw around with that stuff anywhere near... Earth. Let's call it Earth. Near any city is too close. Go to the other side of the moon or something. God, those things have gravity beams, could they have anti-matter missiles as well? We don't even know. They could be setting up bases on the moon right now and just rain death upon us from there!"

It did blow up pretty good, who knows why? They could have had some of that stuff aboard, we'll never know.

Her smile got wider. "Could we go to the moon?"

"Focus Amelia," Luke told her. "Robots now, moon later."

"Fine," she huffed, crossing her arms. "I'll go play with the robot."

So while Amelia seemed a little distracted they took the robot apart the rest of the day and into the night, Amelia staying up while Lysanias went to bed and then stepped over to see how much he understood of its construction. It was fairly close to the armor, having some of the same principals just with different joints that were more like bones instead of armor plates. Of course the field of robotics had basically produced them, there wasn't much alien technology about them apart from the power source and the weaponry. He watched some videos about current work in the field and how companies were making them more and more lifelike, with a covering material that looked much like skin. Of course, they were far from being mistaken for human except in very low light or very far away, but it did give him some ideas for another project.

A week and a half passed. Amelia finally got to test her railgun, which she had vastly over engineered. Dumping as much power into it as she did caused a shockwave from the metal ball leaving the barrel that would have killed anyone nearby, and the ball slammed into and through the concrete blocks he had made for the test. This blasted them apart and the ball continued in a straight line for a *worrying* distance after that.

"It's a good thing we did that test so far away from anything valuable, huh?" Amelia joked as everyone came running to see what that awful noise had been. She had to be carefully removed from the armor because many of the actuators and circuitry that allowed it to be taken off had been damaged.

"You're both crazy!" Tessa said them. "I mean I get what we're facing and you want to try out your new toys but that was almost as bad as the anti-matter thing. I thought the base was under attack! The moon I said, remember?"

"Actually, that's not a bad idea," she admitted. "Putting exactly what we have here on a starship would be fine. No atmosphere to atomize, and the recoil problem is basically solved."

"And if you miss whatever you're aiming at the projectile just sails off into the dark to smash into who knows what a thousand years from now? Sure, good plan, Amelia."

"I don't miss," she pouted. "But you're right, I'll have to fix this, the mass driver is useless as it is now, it's too dangerous to fire in a number of ways. I'll work on it."

In that time Lysanias could make robots, though they didn't look all that good. As they were basically expendable and mass produced they didn't have to look pretty, though Amelia did argue against making them look human.

"They're too easy to beat up," she insisted. "I killed them pretty fast when they were fighting me."

"But they're all I know how to make," Lysanias told her. "Because they're all I had to study. I can visualize them because I studied the broken one. Besides, what shape would you make them?"

"Daleks," she announced, showing him a picture. "Hey, have you met The Doctor?"

"An upside down trash can? And yes, I helped her with a dream entity on the last reality I was in when searching for a male Mana tree to get flowers from. How would they get up stairs, or get around rubble?"

"You met the actual *Doctor* and didn't knock her out and steal her sonic before you left? Oh what I would give for a sonic, and they can hover! I mean I guess that would increase complexity, legs vs the armor's flight system."

"Sonic? Oh, her magic wand that she waved around? She didn't impress me honestly, given she blundered her way into accidentally releasing a powerful, immortal, unscrupulous, dream entity I had to put back in prison. Believe me, the Allfather created this form for us for a reason. It's versatile. What if they had to open a door or heaven forbid pick up a child and get them out of a combat zone? Your 'dalek' design wouldn't be able to do that."

"Must have missed that episode. Fine, make them humanoid, see if I care. Wait, you haven't met captain Kirk, right?"

While Amelia's bots, that he made a hundred of like she wanted, were as ugly as the original he was busy the remaining week in the Dream making a prettier one. He had talked it

over with Meta that if running six decreased efficiency, what if he just had one really good one to run? With truly unbreakable metal bones and all the outer detail he could imagine.

“Allow me to show you footage of an android Susan met in her travels,” Meta answered him. “Then you can see what is possible for yourself.” The hubPad view changed to show Susan training with what looked like a woman shorter than her. She had on a red leather uniform and had mid length black hair, and was wielding two odd looking “guns” that were simply cylinders in her hands. *Huh, the local equivalent of Rosalina’s wands?* She was shooting targets extremely fast, and dodging fire while doing it, not taking a single hit. The view continued as she was explaining something about probability to Susan, but he couldn’t take his eyes off her. She moved, blinked, laughed, and smiled exactly like a human. If he hadn’t been told she was completely artificial, he wouldn’t have believed it. She was clearly what Rosalina was trying to do with her “wand fu” style just with whatever passed for firearms in that reality.

“The technology in that reality is a lot more advanced than here, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. The civilization she belonged to spanned three galaxies, beings of all sorts contributed their science to make androids such as her, and ships fast enough to traverse galaxies, possible.”

“Then that’s what you’re getting, if I can do it,” he promised. “You probably won’t be able to move like she does, not until I study robotics more, but maybe one day. Wow.”

And then time was up. A second alien craft blasted through the atmosphere to flatten another city, this time Moscow. The team got suited up and went to meet it.

Chapter 11

Are you tense when you sense there's a storm in the air?

When: Moments after the meteorite strike

Where: The flattened city of Moscow

The skies over what used to be Moscow were thick with clouds as the gateway opened and the super hero team that had yet to be named poured through. The robots, all one hundred of them, marched into the rubble of the city and took cover, most of them powering down while six became more animated and scrambled up on whatever debris they could to get a better look at the destruction. Amelia and Lysanias released their drones, providing overwatch, and Fleet started zipping around looking for survivors to bring back to the doctor.

"It's only been a few minutes," Amelia told them. "Be on the lookout for whatever crawls out of the crater. It shouldn't be long, but at least this time we're here before the shooting starts."

"And do we have a plan to stop whatever it is that crawls out?" Tessa asked her.

"Shoot it until it hurts and dies from it," she answered confidently.

"Uh huh."

The group didn't look convinced, and Lysanias didn't feel so great about things himself. Amelia had tuned her railgun so firing it wasn't a threat to anyone around them, turning the original version into a portable, mounted gun that could be fired by remote. As it was also made of metal Lysanias created it wouldn't blow apart and could fire a lot, but had to be totally clear of anyone that could protect it so it was a sitting duck. It could be carried in a large suitcase like container and set up by anyone strong enough to slam it into the ground so it didn't fall over after the first shot. *Or even worse, during.*

He looked the group over. His newest surprise, "Rommie," was with them, as was the mountain spirit, the trio of drones, and a suited up Rosalina. He resisted a chuckle. *Most wanderers travel in a group, but how many of them made the group they travel with?* Rommie was as human looking as he could make "her" and while based on the famous warship of the same name, he of course added his own touches. She was currently armed with one of Rosalina's wands, she had her own and the other. She would never be taken for human close up, even though Meta could run her to more closely emulate a human than the drones Epic was running. She blinked, and shifted her weight, and tried to act as human as possible. "She" had promised him Silverstreak had an idea for him once this reality was saved that could provide "her" with "upgrades" but wouldn't go into details about it. Just that he could get "something of an original," whatever that meant. He was looking forward to what the silver figure had in mind.

The others were specked out in various gear, mostly pulled from various designs he had found online of people's "herosona" (which is the style of the time). The other ladies really liked the boots he had made for Samantha so he designed (i.e. wished up) some for the others in the lighter, elven, metal. Each had a distinctive look, matched by their light saber, and helmet which contained their link to Epic and the overwatch map which did image processing to simply show them an overview of their immediate area and any friendlies and hostiles in the area as green or red dots. They used conventional materials for their upper body protection as that was lighter and more flexible, even if Lysanias had styled them so the whole outfit had a unified look. *We might be totally outmatched here, but we won't be outstyled!*

But it seemed they were not outmatched at all, because as the minutes ticked by no enemy appeared. The group crept closer to the crater where the rock had landed, that much was the same as the previous attack, but nothing crawled out to greet them. The rock hadn't cracked open according to Meta, who flew one of the probes over to take a look.

"It's gotta be some kind of trap," Monica told them.

"I don't feel any sense of danger as yet," Lysanias told them. "Obviously keep alert but maybe it didn't survive the crash this time?" He still held the One Power, ready to make a gateway to get them out of there if something happened. *Of course, if it's just a casing for a bomb and our getting near it triggers it, there won't be much time to react now will there?*

"I'd love a mostly intact one to study," Amelia said. "Though I would be vaguely disappointed if we didn't get to fight *something* out here."

"Speak for yourself," Samantha told her. "This silence is really creeping me out. This used to be a city, people. Show a little respect."

It was true. Looking around Lysanias could see the remains of buildings, cars, and unfortunately, people. The group was moving through an area coming up on the actual impact crater, but the pressure wave and energy release of impact had torn to pieces and thrown anything nearby away in a great ring. Water spewed out of pipes sticking out of the ground, holes where subway cars no doubt passed through collapsed and pushed up, making the terrain treacherous. This close to the impact zone nothing had been left alive, so even though sirens and people were off in the distance here by the crater it was eerily quiet.

"Something else is falling," Epic told them, as all the robots lifted their guns to point into the sky. The group looked up, Lysanias getting ready to weave a gateway if it looked like another rock, but this was metallic and fairly slender. It also seemed guided, as it came down not far from them, landing with hardly an impact on a patch of ground that was now smooth.

"If the next drone is in there," Kate remarked, "they've decided to build wayyyy smaller now. What gives?"

"Let's go see. Stay alert everyone," Amelia told them.

The group made their way over there as the thing started unfolding itself. Four metal looking "arms" simply popped out of each corner, a hinge allowing a second piece that was inside to stand straight up. Along that seam the object popped open, the four sections lifting up and then coming to rest on the arms, making a cube of sorts that had four empty sides and a top, making essentially a crude pavilion. The center having retracted into the top as well, leaving a hollow cube sitting there.

"Some kind of bomb?" Tessa asked. "I can throw it into the sky if you want."

"Not yet, Lysanias and I will get closer, we can survive a blast the easiest. I want a closer look, this is so different from the other time it must mean something."

"You're the boss."

The two approached and the inside of the cube got brighter, like something was shining down from above, and an image came into focus as the two got near.

"Is this thing on?" said a voice. "Oh, there you are. Hey, get those others over here they need to hear this."

"Who are you?" called Amelia. "What do you want?"

Lysanias looked the figure over, as best he could anyway. It was large, armored, but he couldn't really pick out any detail even holding the One Power. There was a distortion to the image, despite it being essentially a 3D hologram, like the person on the other end didn't want to be seen too clearly.

"I'm glad you asked!" the figure exclaimed. "I am Tyronius Ignatious Walufa Patingle Ippsha Flawul Myovian Gijaw Maribia *clicking noise rising in pitch for six seconds* Holaw Twentythreeevntyfive Slinglang Quaaaaaaaaaaaa wawawawawaaaaaaa."

"What-" Amelia started to say but the alien drew a breath and went on.

"Refasival Catchapatori Galethian Minamowzizzle Horthima jazandian *meowing* awooga awooga chimchimane charo." He gave a very human looking bow.

"Are you-"

"The seventeenth." He straightened up.

She waited.

"Are you done?"

"That is the *short* version of my name, that I give to such lesser species as yourself. Ah, the others have arrived, good. Good. Come closer, that I may see you better."

"And what you want?" Amelia asked crossly.

"Currently, I want to know how a bunch of cave dwellers such as yourselves beat my previous war machine up. Those things are pretty expensive, you know? You can't just go around blowing them up."

"My heart bleeds for you. Maybe we're just more technologically advanced than you thought."

The figure let out a laugh than went on and on (and on) finally stopping when Amelia raised a hand to blow the projector away.

“Okay, okay, sorry. But no, that’s not the case. No, see, I think you got some help. So I’m here with an offer.”

“This should be good. You’re here to bargain?”

“That’s right. First one to hand over a Wanderer to me gets to save their own life, and choose the lives of, oh, say, one percent of the planet’s population to also be saved. I’ll take them to another reality where they can live, basking in my glory.”

“Sorry what?” Amelia went on, putting a hand to the side of the armor where her ear probably was. “You want a what? The delicious, cream filled taste of Hostess Twinkies? Those comic book ads were right after all, even aliens find them irresistible! You’re too late, I don’t think they make them anymore. Man, lightspeed delay really sucks doesn’t it? You get a signal about a yummy cake product and by the time you get there, it isn’t made! So sorry you made the trip, no need to trouble yourself further with the Earth, goodbye now!”

“Didn’t another company start making them?” asked Tessa.

“Don’t say that in front of the alien!” she hissed.

“Very amusing. Come now, child, we both know that sensors in my war machine recorded it being blown up only milliseconds after it last fired the main gun, are you going to tell me that was some kind of, perhaps, breakdown? Coincidence? I think we both know better. There’s no way you had any technology that could do something like that, ergo you had help. I mean you got here minutes after the bait landed, you want me to think you happened to live around here? No, it’s a big planet, you got help getting here. I know you didn’t detect the bait while it was making the approach.”

Bait? The rock?

“Now looking around me,” and here the figure studied everyone that was standing there, “any one of you *could* be a Wanderer, it’s true. All that armor and helmets and whatnot you’ve got on hides you all pretty well, so whoever it is blends in perfectly. But they usually travel in packs, so if four of you are Wanderers and the other four of you turn them in, hey presto that’s 4% of your population you get to save. Won’t get that offer again.”

“Take your offer and shove it,” Tessa told him. “Even if we knew what a Wanderer was we wouldn’t tell you squat. We beat your last war machine, we’ll beat the next one. The power of Twinkies fills us!”

The figure shook his head. “Oh dear. You really have no idea do you? Going to maintain you don’t know what a Wanderer is, huh?”

“That’s right.”

“So my question to you is this. What. Is. That?” He pointed to the mountain spirit, but looked right at Lysanias.

The others looked around. “What are you pointing at?” asked Monica.

Crud, of course the avatar could see it. Even through a video link though? I guess unseen things do show up a little, and they would know what to look for, even if they can’t see it directly. It’s not like I wanted to hide from them, exactly, but it would be better if they didn’t know who was here opposing him. Why is he looking at me? Wait, didn’t Inari or someone once warn me that the avatar could see and pull things out of my pocket because they were “above” me or something? He knows which I am, he’s just dangling this 1% business to try and get them to turn on me. Do his job for him. I suppose that could work, if these people weren’t self proclaimed ‘super heroes.’

“Oh, can’t see it, huh? I guess your powers aren’t that sort. Well, no matter. I was just curious but I suppose whoever it is among you that’s not from around here will die with the rest. I gave you a chance, after all. I have a pretty good idea who is here now, not many could manifest something like that. Ladies, others, I wish you the best of luck.”

The object went dim again, folding itself back up into a compact shape. The group backed away thinking it might now turn out to be a bomb, but after folding itself up simply fell over and lay there.

“I’m still not reading movement by the crater,” Epic told them. “One would think after that the war machine would come out.”

"No others have landed, right?" Amelia asked. "Anywhere in the world? This wasn't just a diversion?"

"Nothing else has- wait. Above you!"

"Huh?"

Everyone looked up to find the clouds breaking up to reveal an enormous alien spacecraft hovering overhead. *Of course, there shouldn't have been clouds around here. They should have been blown away by the force of the impact. It was a camouflage. And now we're sitting ducks down here.*

The ship was basically a metal slab hovering over what was left of the city, covered with turrets that were orienting themselves. To his mild surprise none looked to be pointing straight down, but instead simply opened fire on what was left of the city in the distance.

Oh, it wants us to rush off, try and save people, and get killed that way. Much more satisfying, isn't it avatar?

"We did not build big enough. That much firepower will tear what's left of the city to pieces in minutes!" Amelia cried. "Will my mass driver even put a dent in that thing?"

"We should get it set up just in case," Epic told her.

"Right." The case started unfolding, and Lysanias drove the legs into the ground, melting the earth around it so it would stay upright.

"Can we help somehow?" Kate asked.

"Yes, is there anything we can do?" Monica put in.

Amelia shook her head. "It being in the air puts us at an extreme disadvantage. Besides, even if we could all fly, it's like someone with a harpoon gun trying to sink a battleship. It's just not going to work."

"Can you get inside? Disable it somehow?"

"And have it smash into what's left of the city? I guess, if it comes to that. Maybe this will make a hole in the side we can slip through. Get clear, I can't fire until you're all out of the way."

"Right."

The group moved off and when everyone was far enough away Epic triggered the firing sequence on the railgun. Everyone held their breath as the shockwave reached them from the compressed ball of iron that spat out of the barrel. Meta helped him track it, the velocity being tremendous but as it had a good distance to go he could keep it in sight. He imagined a ping noise as it simply smacked into nothing a good hundred meters from the ship and fell straight down.

"Kinetic shields," Amelia moaned. "The thing that lets me ignore bullets, now used against me."

"The city is really in trouble," Fleet told them, appearing at the end of a trail of dust.

"Haven't you stopped that thing yet?"

"It just shrugged off the weapon I had to separate from myself so firing it didn't kill me!" she told him acidly. "What do you want me to do about it, exactly?"

"Something, or in theory given enough time that one craft could destroy the world."

"So we need more time?" Lysanias offered. "Everyone gather around me and touch the armor." He pulled his ring of time out and when everyone was touch him said "Pause." The action stopped.

"You can stop time itself?" Tessa asked, looking at the now frozen beams coming out of the ship.

"Given how long it takes me to get all my powers going, it seemed the prudent thing to make," he explained. "It's supernatural, not magic. And don't go too far, it's a bubble around us and if you leave it, you'll be stuck in frozen time again."

"Got it."

"So you can't carry me up there and have me plant a million bombs on the thing?" Fleet asked.

"No, it only extends a few meters. You can't carry it either, it's not a bubble that moves, it just is set up and that's all you get."

"Too bad."

There was a moment of silence as everyone regarded the ship.

"Hey, that's not a bad idea!" Amelia suddenly said.

"You know, that conversation you have with yourself in your head? We can't hear it," Tessa told her. "You have to tell us what's not such a bad idea."

"Let's fly up there and deploy the mass driver right on top of it. You saw, the field stopped the ball way far away. But if we set it up inside the field I bet it would do more damage."

"Enough to bring it down?" asked Monica.

"It can fire a few times, that box on the back of the barrel holds the balls. If we spun it in a circle, twenty seconds between each round, sure. Maybe? Epic, make a note, we need a motorized version of the IMD instead of one that just locks in place."

"IMD?" Monica asked.

"Independent Mass Driver. I'm bad at coming up with names, sue me."

"Ah. Well, have fun storming the castle."

"I'll have to start time up to get the gun out of the ground," he told everyone. "Any other plans to make before then?"

"Look, stick around," Amelia told the others. "Even if the ship falls by the time we get the IMD set up it will no longer be overhead. If it crashes and stuff pours out of it we'll need to take care of it."

"Oh, good, because I didn't want you to have all the chances to die today," Tessa said sarcastically. "Leave some for the rest of us."

"Sure thing. You can't tell but I'm smiling. I need to put a display on the outside of the faceplate that can show emojis or something."

"Yes, that's really the priority of invention right now."

"Right, you're right. We'll need you so don't go anywhere. Start time up again."

Lysanias did so, the weapons fire starting to pound the city again. He went over to melt the ground, yanking the legs of the device out of the earth. *Not sure how we're going to stick it to the ship, but one problem at a time, right? We need to get up there first.* He shook the earth off the legs and allowed it to fold back up into the suitcase form for easy transport, and looked over at Rommie.

"Going to have to build you some armor," he remarked. "Can you function away from me?"

"Not at peak efficiency but well enough," it replied. "When we return to the Hub I can have a receiver installed."

"Good plan. Okay, help keep them safe if something attacks and hopefully we'll be bringing that thing down in a moment."

"Good luck. I will of course report your demise should you fail."

"You're all heart. Come on Amelia, Rosalina. Mountain Spirit, sorry I'll have to leave you behind again."

It bowed and vanished.

"Now you're doing it," Tessa complained. "Who are you talking to?"

"I'll explain later."

The three took to the sky, looping around the ship to try and come from above where curiously there didn't seem to be any guns. Once past the kill zone under the ship they doubled back, coming for a landing on top. There had been some interaction between the kinetic shield the ship was generating and them trying to land but it was designed to stop small, fast moving objects not large, slow moving objects. If Lysanias knew what a giant bullet bill was this may have been the perfect time to deploy one, but he didn't and had no way to make one, so we won't fault him for that. So they made it through and stood on the ship.

"That was easy," Amelia remarked. "Now we just set the gun up and let it do the work for us."

"What's all these weird black rectangles?" Rosalina asked, pointing at one.

"Some kind of heatsinks for space travel?" Amelia guessed. "Shield generators? It's an alien death machine, who can say?"

"I'll get the gun unpacked, but how we're going to secure it... Actually, I could leave two clones here, they could simply hold it in place and if they get blasted who cares?"

“I guess if you don’t mind knowing what it feels like to be blasted apart,” Amelia told him.

“No choice really.”

“But then we’ll only get one shot. And the IMD could get blown off the ship. We’d have a heck of a time finding it again.”

“Crud you’re right. Let me think.”

He opened the case and it started deploying the legs, meanwhile Rosalina went over to one of the rectangular blocks. It was black, stood taller than she did, and felt solid when she rapped with it a knuckle. “Feels solid. Er, guys?”

“What?” both said, busy with the gun.

“Should they be doing that?” She backed off as the blocks suddenly stood up, showing themselves to be some kind of mech that had just folded up to look like a block. They were blocky and inelegant looking but there were a lot of them, and every one swiveled to point weapons at the three.

“Abort, abort!” Amelia cried, grabbing the gun and trying to shove it back in the case while flying up and avoiding a sudden barrage of weapons fire.

It’s not gonna be easy, Lysanias decided as he lifted off after her.

“What is it, what’s wrong?” Kate’s voice came over comms.

“We’re heading back to you, we need reinforcements.”

“Reinforce- up there?” shouted Tessa. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Do I sound like I’m joking???”

Chapter 11

We're covered with injuries and wracking up experience points! We'll get promotions!

When: No time has passed

Where: In the air

Lysanias now had a new problem. With there being just as many of the rectangular death robots on the top of the alien craft as turrets on the bottom, he couldn't go up or down without being a target. Of course, each robot had *two* arms so the firepower on the top of the craft was actually doubled from that of the bottom. All three were zigzagging and spinning to try and avoid being hit, even in unbreakable armor if those guns were shooting electricity or simply heat he could be electrocuted or burned.

"Grab onto me and hit the brakes on a count of three," he called to the two others.

"Stop moving? Do you see the fire we're taking?" Amelia cried back.

"Just trust me!" The others did what he said and he counted to three, slamming the "orb" into reverse on two so his momentum stopped. On three he *shifted* back to the ground, and the gunfire passed through where they had been. Of course he picked a spot in the air high enough he didn't teleport into any of his new friends, and swiftly put gravity "up" again so they didn't fall. He grabbed the two as they fell, then lowered them all to the ground.

"Welcome back," Kate said to them. "Guess it's not going to be as easy as you thought, huh?"

"No. Can we get back up there with everyone?" She looked to Lysanias.

"I don't know about putting a gateway to up there," he mused. "Those robot things will just shoot through it the second it appears."

"Can you teleport us up there?" Tessa asked.

"I do still have the sword, and the armor itself augments my strength." He looked up at it. "There are other considerations."

"The craft is not moving quickly enough that momentum will be a major issue," Meta told him.

"Or not. So I guess we can try it. Everyone but Fleet, gather around."

"Hey, what's wrong with me?" he asked.

"You can't use a light saber, and you have no other weapon. What are you going to do against death robots?" *Besides, if you can't stop fast enough you'll just go flying off the thing and fall to your death. Slowly, because you can process it so much faster than we can.*

"Oh."

They had tried it before, but the plasma discharge when Fleet carried a light saber wasn't stable enough when he moved at speed. In fact it cracked the crystal so he would have to have it off, run up to something, get it into position, turn it on, move it slowly (for him), turn it off, and then he could run again. Swinging it too fast also broke the crystal as the energy inside it just wasn't conducive to moving at that speed. It just wasn't practical.

"I'll make you a sword later," Amelia promised him. "If we survive that is."

With everyone around and with one hand on him, the other with their light sabers ignited, he *shifted* back to the top of the ship. They all stumbled a little, it was moving towards the city after all, and the black bots reoriented to open fire. Lysanias immediately concentrated on an energy barrier, absorbing several shots and allowing the others to get their barrings. *Can't do too many barriers like that, but one should be okay.* "Scatter, you can go through it from this side!" he called.

Amelia went up, firing weapons from her hands, while Rosalina did the same with her wands. Rommie had given the wand back, instead taking two sabers, and she dashed forward to chop a robot apart. The others were not so quick, and the nearest dozen or so death bots battered down his shield fairly quickly before they even had a chance to move. But they survived the first barrage, and that wasn't nothing.

The main problem, when Lysanias had a chance to think about it later, was that giving a person a light saber doesn't make them a Jedi. So while a real Jedi might have been able to bounce the bolts they were firing back at them, these people couldn't. However, they did have their own powers and ranged in fighting skill from "decent" to "they let me protect the

president in a world of super powers” so it wasn’t going to a slaughter on the side of the heroes. (He hoped) Samantha got to her nearest deathbot first, swinging with her saber and missing rather badly. As this was behind him he lost track of her as he decided how to deal with the ones in front of him.

Kate tried to teleport behind the one nearest her but it got her in the leg, tearing straight through the armor and hitting her. The second shot slammed into Lysanias, who of course was standing right behind her. Her teleport of course worked, so she was behind the thing, and plunged her saber into it. The deathbot didn’t go down. The two to the side of that one pivoted, bringing up their weapons. Lysanias, seeing this, lashed out with the force, shoving her back. He was almost fast enough, Kate taking a bolt through her mostly unarmored arms, crying out as her left arm was shot clear through. The deathbots had fired both their weapons at once and with her not there anymore hit each other, but it didn’t seem to seriously inconvenience them.

Flashes of light were going on behind him, but he couldn’t worry about everyone. Tessa was right next to him, so he stepped up closer to her.

“Quick, smash these four together!” he called to her. “I’ll take the right ones!”

“Right,” she nodded back.

Both raised their arms dramatically, then slammed their palms together. It worked, and all four smashed together in a jumble of blocky parts.

Whew. That’ll take them a second to untangle.

But two shots came from the right, a deathbot a couple of meters away and slammed into the head. She gave a surprised “buua!” and went down.

“Crap, Tessa!” *Mountain spirit, take care of her.*

The spirit appeared, putting itself between the two robots and Tessa. That’s when Lysanias noticed Samantha was down as well. He risked a quick look around.

“The others are wounded but fighting,” Meta told him. “Samantha has no lifesigns.”

“Crud!” *Are we outmatched here? We only just arrived and two people are down already.* He raised an arm as the other deathbot targeted him, bolts pinging off his armor. Two magical bolts flew past him, impacting that one and staggering it, but it was still up. He took the other one, imagining the gravity ball to make him fly in that direction and he scored a deep hit with Ragnarok. It too stayed up. So he twirled the blade and smashed it into the other side, hoping to cut it in half. He managed it, blue sparks trailing the blade as it sliced clean through the bot.

He was now close enough to touch Samantha but there was another deathbot right behind him firing at Amelia, who was trying to hack it part with her saber. He spun, chopping almost all the way through it, but not quite managing it. So again not stopping the momentum of the sword he finished the cut, toppling the deathbot.

He was now looking at the deathbot giving Amelia trouble, he had just watched it dodge out of the way of her downward strike with her saber *and* a beam of blue energy from Monica a few meters away. With a downward glance and *please don’t die* he gave a burst from the gravity drive and made it there behind the bot, slashing it through.

Again he got part way through it, but not all the way.

I know I’m not exactly at my full strength because I can’t wear some of my equipment but what are these things made of?

“Uh, little help over here?” Kate said over comms.

Lysanias looked, and the four (now three, one was unmoving and sparking) deathbots he and Tessa had thrown together were up and about to shoot her.

Allright, let’s try this! He drew his blade back not unlike a certain hero dressed in a green tunic and *shifted*, his blade already moving in a tight arc. He scored on all three, but none deep enough to cut them in half. But their focus did shift to the guy in armor that just appeared out of nowhere, so at least Kate was off the hook for the moment. All three opened fire, five bolts bouncing off his armor but one somehow hitting him in the head. He felt it sting, but didn’t seriously wound him.

Kate took some of the pressure off by slicing through the one she had teleported behind, making an X pattern through its body and cutting it to pieces.

"Samantha is down," Amelia said, kneeling over the body. "We've got to get her out of here. Get that railgun set up and teleport her to the—"

She was cut off as Kate vanished, leaving Lysanias to face the two deathbots alone. *Eh, could be worse.*

He brought the blade back, hoping to chop the one in half and then finish off the other with the momentum. He managed it, cutting both down with a single stroke. There was now only one left, one that had been trading shots with Rosalina, so he rushed back to the center to pick up the case. "Spirit Clone Technique" he called, making the cross with his fingers. Two clones of himself came into existence and started setting it up.

"Thank you for your sacrifice men," he told them gravely. "If the armor doesn't protect you, anyway."

"It's made of the toughest stuff we've ever discovered," the one to the right said.

"Even if we're not fine, you're the one who will have to live with the memory of being blown up," the other said.

"Now get out of here before more unpack. You've cleared a bunch but there's more on the way."

He looked around, and he was right. More deathbots were orienting on them and starting to walk over.

"Take the rest of my energy," he told the left one. "It's not much after all this, but throw it into a barrier. That thing can't be damaged before it fires."

"Okay." He absorbed Lysanias' remaining spiritual energy, making him hope he wasn't going to have to do too much more today before he could recharge himself.

I suppose I could always break out a spirit battery ward. And I'll get a little of it back when they go poof.

He rushed to the side of the mountain spirit, who he dismissed as he touched the unmoving body of Tessa. "Come on, we're getting out of here," he called to the others, now regretting they had taken *all* his energy. *This is going to, in a word, suck.*

The others rushed over to him as a barrier sprang up around the gun, and he *shifted* them back down to the surface.

The group held their breath as the gun charged, and Epic told them "Firing."

There was a boom from above after the ship shook. Black cubes started raining from the thing, and it wobbled a bit unsteadily. The weapons fire from the bottom didn't slack though.

"We've failed," Amelia said sadly. "It's still in the air."

"I am tracking the trajectories of the falling deathbots," Epic told them. "If they are still active when they hit the ground they will be a problem."

"We have to go back up there," Lysanias told them. "See if we can do more damage to it somehow. Kate, get Tessa to the doctor. Monica, Tony, Rommie, Epic bots, you see about making sure those deathbots don't cause trouble."

"Maybe I can use the scaled down version," Amalia admitted, tapping her right arm. "You're right, let's go."

So the three that could fly lifted off again, Lysanias having gotten back a little energy when his clones vanished but not much. *I'll have to rely on the suit's weapons, which actually I'm not too sure of given lightsabers hardly did them in. I would have to unhook part of the suit to put a ward on myself and get energy back. And I don't have time to find a ley line and recharge.* He looked around. *If there are any left. All the wildlife here has been disrupted, I'd have to fly pretty far to find any trees at this point.*

They came up on the top of the ship again, which now had a huge hole in it. There were no deathbots near it, a consequence of either them being blown off or jumping off to start making trouble on the ground. The three stared at it.

"Is it just me, or is this thing just mostly armor?" Rosalina asked.

"You're right," Amelia agreed. "It didn't blow the top off and expose corridors and such the crew would use. It's basically just a solid block. We would have to destroy it section by section."

“Could they have essentially 3D printed the ship?” Lysanias asked. “Just slotting in the engines and such like I did with my ship when the holes were big enough to support the component?”

“Who knows what methods of construction they have. I mean if we have 3D printing, they probably have 4D printing.”

“Still, it made a hole. Would your sun, stuffed down into it, eventually melt it?”

“If you think magic will win out against technology here, I’m willing to try it,” Rosalina agreed.

“If I may make a suggestion,” Meta told them all.

“Go ahead,” Lysanias told him.

“I believe you have several large mechs in your ‘inventory’ if you will. They run on magic, and have beam weaponry that might, if combined, be enough to cause damage to the interior.”

“Seems as good a plan as any. They came from an HP world though, so who knows what sort of damage they might do. Maybe tons, maybe none. They were built for fighting people, after all. Good thing I got a bunch of them.” He got out the ward that held the magiteck armor and the two ladies settled into them.

“How do you run this thing?” Amelia asked.

“It’s actually surprising simple,” he told her. “I’ll give you a brief rundown of the controls.” He did, and before long they were using the fire beams from the armor to try and “saw” the ship apart from where the hole had been made. It was somewhat slow going but the metal (or whatever it was the ship was made of, Lysanias wasn’t convinced it was metal at all) was glowing and separating under the barrage. *We never would have been able to do this with the deathbots shooting at us. I’m glad we cleared them out. In her world one of these would simply attack and then back off, the beam didn’t need to remain on for any length of time because it wouldn’t have done any more “HP” damage if it did. The attack, long or short, was the attack. But here, we can pour out a continuous beam thanks to them being powered by magic. I should have asked Cid how he made them, maybe I could have made some smaller units. Why do I never think of these things at the time? I guess I could still make some, just powered by the Amelia Box instead of magic. No beams in that case...*

Finally the two sections of the ships parted and started falling. Lysanias stopped time, put the armor back in wards, and they flew up to watch the ship crash.

Yes of course it blew up after that, what do you think happened? It had been making its way slowly towards the city so another section of it was destroyed, but there wasn’t anything the group could do about that but watch helplessly from a distance.

“Is everyone all right?” Amelia asked over comms as the blast subsided.

“No,” said Kate. “You better come down here.”

The three looked at each other and headed to the waypoint put on their displays by Epic.

Landing back by the gateway he had tied off when getting here the three followed Kate through it back to the base. She headed to the infirmary where both Tessa and Samantha were laying on beds, the doctor worriedly pacing the floor near them.

“Are they?” Amelia asked, sounding shocked.

“No, no, Epic couldn’t read lifesigns from Samantha because she was hit in the head several times, damaging the equipment.” Teddy showed her the ruined headgear sitting on a table next to her. “But she’s in bad shape. Again. What hit her? She’s supposed to be almost invulnerable!”

Almost isn’t completely. I bet my sword could hurt her, maybe a light saber too. Just because she can’t be hurt by bullets these people go around thinking people like this can’t be hurt. Bullets, while scary, are actually pretty tame compared to some things.

“Some kind of particle weapon or energy weapon from a bunch of deathbots,” Amelia told him. “You’re helping her just by being near, right?”

“Yes, but what if she goes into a coma again? She’s only been awake a few weeks, what if she slips away totally this time?”

I doubt she’ll make a copy of rectangular deathbots in her subconscious. She had years to be afraid of Behemoth, she’s an F5 who proved to be a danger to the president. She only just saw the deathbots. “Look, I’m pretty exhausted but in this case, wards will work just fine,” he told the doctor. “This is damage, it’s recent, so I can heal her up in no time.”

“Whatever you have to do. I can’t lose her again!”

“She’ll be fine,” he assured the man, with more confidence than he felt. *This is what they were made for, right?* He pulled some out and applied them one at a time, and the blue fire he expected did engulf the wounds they both had and started healing them. Meanwhile Amelia asked about the others.

“Everyone was hurt to a certain extent. What about you?”

She glanced down at herself. “A bolt or two did get through, I’ll have to get the armor off to see how bad it is. Doesn’t feel too bad though.” There was a strange mark on the armor, she was rubbing it as though that would do anything. A similar one was present on her left arm. “But nothing else too serious?”

Kate turned to show her left arm, that had a big chunk of flesh torn out of it.

“Oh no, Kate!” Amelia cried.

“It’s fine, it feels better now that I’m here. I’m sure with a bandage and a bit of rest the doc will have me completely healed in no time.”

“Monica reports no injuries,” Epic told them. “But conversely, her accuracy rating was only 33%. In training she showed much higher percentages, but it is possible these robots were equipped with temperature sensors that allowed them to more accurately avoid her attacks. We would need one to study to know for sure. Another possibility is she simply needs more ‘hands on’ combat experience, as the simulated training exercises she has been through have not been enough to prepare her.”

“I am ashamed to admit my android body took a few hits and will need repair when you next Dream,” Meta told him. “Their weapons were quite effective. I suggest we try to find any surviving pieces from the bots blown off the craft to see how they function and make duplicates.”

“I took Samantha’s boots off, take a look at this.” There was a similar mark on them, and he lifted the sheet to show the same spot on her leg. There was a shrinking bruise of some kind there, and he let the sheet fall again. “Whatever those guns were, they could get through even this stuff you made. Thought you said that wouldn’t happen.”

“Well, it shouldn’t,” he admitted. “Maybe they were heat based and it’s just a burn. It didn’t seem serious, the skin wasn’t even broken.”

“True, it’s just something you’ll have to deal with if you go up against something like that again. How long until she wakes up, do you think?”

“If she takes too long I’ll go in and see what she’s thinking. Even with healing of this magnitude, her body needs a few minutes to adjust. It’s not prepared to be wounded one minute and totally fine the next. Give her a chance to reboot.”

“I’ll give you a call if I think she’s taking too long.”

“You’re the doctor, you know best. Amelia, as we’re not dead, we should probably head back to the city. There is no doubt a lot of cleanup and scared people that need to be reassured that thing is really destroyed.”

“Yeah, we should help where we can,” she agreed. “Keep us apprised, doctor.”

“Of course.”

“Stay here and get better, Kate,” Amelia told her. “You’re not going anywhere with your arm in that condition.”

“Okay boss.”

She nodded and the three left again to see what help they could give the now ruined city and its shell shocked survivors.

Chapter 12

I see a suit of armor around the world

When: The next day

Where: White House Rose Garden

So what am I doing here again? Lysanias thought to himself for about the twentieth time. He and the others were standing on a stage at the White House, the president having requested them as the ones that knocked the second alien ship out. He wanted some kind of statement made by the “heroes of the Earth” and Amelia (quick thinking as always) had agreed... with certain caveats.

“We write the speech,” she had insisted on. “We deliver it. You have no idea what I’m going to say until I say it. I will not lie, or mislead, or omit. That’s paramount if you want me on a stage somewhere.”

“Are you implying I do those things?” he had asked. “Ever since I won the popular election in-”

“You do nothing but those things,” she accused and interrupted, looking at him from the chair.

He blustered and tried to get out of it but she wouldn’t budge. “If you want me, that’s part one of the deal. You know, the art of the deal? How come so many of your businesses failed by the way? If you were such a good businessman, I mean? I could really go for a steak right now, but you don’t sell them anymore, do you? At least I could get a wine to pair with it, from your son.”

“What’s the next part?” he asked, deciding this would be a good time to change the subject.

“I’ll be there on stage, but this guy,” and here she pointed to Lysanias, “will give the speech. It is to be broadcast to the entire world as it is given. We’re all in this together, after all.”

“Now wait just a second,” he had protested. “I don’t want to go up on stage in front of hundreds of people and give some kind of speech!”

“You can wear the armor, it’ll be fine. Besides, it has to be you, and you know why.” She stared him down.

I do know why. No translation will be needed if I deliver the message. Everyone that hears it, while I’m speaking it anyway, will understand without the need for, what did she call them on that cartoon she had playing? Subtitles, that was it. Of course, once broadcast it’ll be a recording and no one will be able to tell what I said. Language scholars the world over will go nuts over that little tidbit. “Fine,” he agreed with extreme reluctance. “I hope you don’t expect me to write it though.”

“I’ll do that. So, Mr. Electoral Collage Victory President, do we have a deal?”

And they did, so at the appointed time a gateway had opened on the stage and the group, Samantha and Tessa included, walked out. They had woken up fairly soon after being healed, and while embarrassed to have gone down so quickly, seemed in good spirits for, you know, still being alive and such. Epic was there in the form of 6 robots, Meta as Rommie. Everyone was in armor, their stuff having been repaired or remade that night by Lysanias in the Dream. The president spoke, and Lysanias looked the man over with the cameras in his helmet. *I was right, it wasn’t the lighting in the base, his skin is a strange color. Is he okay? I’ve never seen someone with that color skin before. And Samantha was right, just hearing him talk, the way he speaks, it makes me want to just use blood bending to yank all the water out of his body while he’s standing there. It’s so odd, what could cause such a reaction? He’s just standing there talking, but he somehow infuriates- oh he’s done. Thank goodness.*

The president had said “And now I turn it over to the heroes of Earth, who have agreed to say a few words.” He stepped back, and Lysanias, the flame and the void in his head a raging fire to try and calm himself, stepped up to the microphone. Meta had offered, as a speech giving technique, to use augmented reality and “deepfake technology” (whatever that was) to actually make the reporters in the crowd seem naked. He declined, figuring that might do more harm than good. He felt the others behind him, supporting him, and as he was in the

armor and not really “exposed” he figured he could get through this. The beginning lines of his speech flashed up on the display, so really he just had to read them, not remember them, and he began.

“Thank you Mr. President. Yes, as he’s said aliens have come to our world, seemingly with the intent to destroy it. So far they have sent two unmanned craft, which immediately set out to destroy as much of the nearest city as it could before we stopped it. Had we not, all signs point to it simply continuing until all the cities of the Earth lay in ruin. As such we have no way to parley with the aliens that sent them and come to any agreement to get them to stop, or even ask them why.” *As if I didn’t know, but we left that part out. It’s bad enough for these people that aliens exist, to tell them a being like the shadow avatar also exists? That would really blow their minds.* “As we have, narrowly as it was, defeated both the president wanted our team to come and say a few words.” *I notice he hasn’t given us any medals or the key to the city or whatever they do, but I don’t care about that, I’m just a little surprised.* “Thankfully he has allowed me the freedom to tell the truth, and unlike some I have the courage to do so. Let me be clear: I am not here to reassure you that everything will be all right. Because I don’t know the future,” *without asking*, “no one does, and it very well may not be all right.” *Honestly, how we’re going to fight whatever comes next is beyond me.* “What I am here to do, today, is offer you your choices. You have two. The first you are already doing. Panic. Riot. Make things worse for yourself because,” and here he raised his hands in mock horror, “oh no, aliens are real, but the bible, waaaaa. Get over it.” *Yeah, I bet the Allfather, if He exists in this reality, is loving this speech. I would say the same to Him. Get over it big guy. Don’t see you down here helping. Still, watching their news reports last night after everyone found out about Moscow being a crater now... How did that help anyone? We need people to hear this and pull together so they’re not actually in the way when the shooting starts. I just hope my words are enough. Amelia and Epic wrote this for me, so I have to trust they know what they’re doing.*

“The other is to actually work together for once in your existence. Look around you. Go ahead! Look. Look at the world you have built for yourselves.” He paused, and the reporters there looked around. *It is a nice place.* “You did whatever you can see while at each other’s throats the whole time. Yes, good and bad, rich area or poor, all that is around you is the result of someone’s choices *somewhere*. Now you have a good opportunity to choose something meaningful. You can choose to tear down the walls that separate you, even the newly built ones that someone else was going to pay for, but didn’t.” *She got somewhat incoherent when I asked what that was a reference to, so it must be something recent.* Out of the corner of his eye he saw the president getting a little red, like he wanted to interrupt and in fact he had wanted to interrupt 73 times before that but couldn’t. *Yeah, it’s a jab at this guy unless I miss my guess.* “You can stop letting imaginary lines on the ground fool you into thinking it makes you so different. It doesn’t. You are all humans, all of planet Earth. Put your resources and creativity into defending your planet instead of being horrible to each other. Imagine what you could do in that case! Imagine your military might not used to kill your neighbors but to protect them, because they’re human, just like you are.

“So those are your choices. Do nothing, and be destroyed. The supers of the world can protect some, but they can’t fight a war for you. Enough rocks dropped on enough cities and the survivors can go live in caves, there won’t be enough infrastructure left to maintain your way of life. This planet is going to need every person to do their part, super powers or no. The thing *you* can do, yes, you listening to my words right now, is make your leaders understand the world has changed. It’s not about this country vs that country any more, or this party policy over this other party policy,” *She tried to explain their two party system, but I just got lost.* “It’s about the survival of the human race. You can pull together, you can make an effort to defend yourselves, put your skills and your manufacturing to a higher purpose than ever before. I see the good and the light in each and every one of you. You are all worth saving, but you must work together and save yourselves, doing whatever you personally, no matter how small it seems, can.” *The way she said it, ‘no one raindrop believes it is responsible for the flood, but yet there’s the flood all the same.’ I wasn’t exactly going to use that metaphor, now was I? A bit of a sore point is an understatement. At least she took it out when I explained.* “Or you can die to the last man, and these aliens win. No more Earth. No more

human music, no more human art, no more human thinking. The choice is yours. Make it now, and make it soon.

“And while this has been a lot of gloom and doom, let me remind you all of something; When there’s a crisis you pull together, I’ve seen it with storms, and earthquakes, and fires. Now it’s all of those things all at once, and more besides. Make the right choice. Calm down, ask what you can do for your world, and do it. Unite and get stronger. Because unless you do, it’s over. They’ll just rain rocks on you from space until you’re all dead. You can do something, I know it looks helpless now, but I have faith in you. In your ability to create and survive.

“If the pattern holds you have three weeks until the next attack. Not a lot of time, I admit, but working together I’m confident this planet will survive, and maybe, finally, start to thrive as one people, with one resolve, one cause. Not just a rock floating in space that happens to have a bunch of nearly identical looking people living on it that hate each other because some people happen to live someplace else and have a slightly different view of the world. You think an alien could tell you apart? I don’t think so. You have so much potential. Don’t waste it now. Questions?”

The reporters all put their hands up.

Oh boy. The display shifted so that each face was highlighted and their names popped up above their heads. *Ah, it’s nice to be an AI I guess?* “Yes, Molly Hunter, go ahead.”

The woman he had called upon gave a bit of a start at being called by name, but the others lowered their hands.

“Who the heck are you?” she blurted. “I know all the others, but we’ve never seen you before.”

I suppose they would want to know who to attribute the quotes to. He started to open his mouth but his display put up a caution sign. Under it was some text, he expected it was faster to read than listen to, that’s why Meta had done it that way.

You may want to give them what they are expecting, which is a ‘hero name’ not your real name. Something flashy. To give them confidence in you and your abilities and legitimize your standing on this stage over Arsenal, who they do know.

Under it were several name suggestions.

He grinned at the text, and thought, *sure, I can be flashy. Didn’t I intimidate that woman on Clary’s world in the same way?*

He concentrated on light bending, creating a simple pair of glowing wings behind him. They didn’t need to be convincing as wings, they just needed to be bright, so he didn’t mind this as a skill he hadn’t practiced all that much. He actually did fairly well in creating them so the wings opened, bathing the stage and him in white light. He then drew his sword (from “nowhere”) and used fire bending to sheath it in fire as he held it up for all to see. *Fire won’t hurt it, may as well.* “Know me as Iron Angel.”

He let them stare for a few seconds and closed the wings again, letting them wink out, and sheathed the blade.

I calculate that was 93% effective. The fire was a nice touch. Well done.

He snorted. “Next question?” He saw them looking at his armor in a new light, and felt curiosity from the crowd more than anything. *I did give it a wing motif after all. Let them wonder.* The hands went back up.

“Leland Vittert?”

“Uh, yes! Are you... uh... are you a holy warrior? Were you sent by... are you a real angel? I mean from... uh... Heaven?”

He leaned forward. “Listen to me carefully. You know that your God does not care about you. When He decided His creation no longer pleased Him he sent a flood.” *That much is consistent with my own history.* “And while your bible records the rainbow as a sign He would never destroy the Earth again, does that mean He will intervene if one of His other creations wipes you out? I wouldn’t count on it, perhaps this other race simply pleases Him more, like an offering of a burnt animal over simple wheat.” *My parents told me about that one, yee gods, the Allfather was petty. He was a farmer, for Pete’s sake, it’s all he had!* “I will

not claim to be from Heaven or an angel because I feel that would simply inflame the already petty and minor excuses you use to destroy each other.”

“Good call,” Amelia told him though comms. “It would.”

“You are supposed to be using this time to come together, not find more reasons to stand apart. Your personal faith is no more, or less, valid than any other person’s personal faith upon the Earth. I am not here to validate or invalidate it. You consider a being that can create all of existence as somehow akin to you, somehow knowable, a friend you can ask for help from via prayer. This is your own limited experience talking, as evidenced by the fact you believe being born in a certain place reveals the only universal truth to you while all other places simply have it wrong. What arrogance.” *Huh, maybe laying it on a bit thick. Better walk it back a step there, Lysaniás.* “I will say this; I am here to inspire, to build, and to defend. If you help me, if you can come together as one people against this threat, you may have a chance. Forget what I am, it’s not important. Honestly you don’t have time for those sorts of questions right now.”

There is an 86% chance that answer will simply inflame speculation, Meta printed on his display. However, there is a 100% chance anything you said would have been misconstrued by at least some group so don’t feel too bad.

Maybe the wings was a bad idea...

“John Eligon.”

“What exactly are you planning to build?”

He sighed. “When the first ship came we were unprepared and had to use what we had on hand. This vehicle was land based, a weaponized drone that walked around. So we planned for a land assault and built robots, and trained for a ground invasion.” He indicated the robots who Epic made salute. “The next ship was an airborne platform defended on top by death robots. Our ground training was useless because it wasn’t on the ground. Extrapolate from that and I can only assume the next will simply attack from space.” *But of course we were wrong last time so how do we know we’re right this time? It could be an underwater assault, simply blasting the rock that holds up the continents with gravity guns until they collapse. We would be totally unprepared for something like that. Or what if it sends a million tiny ships? There’s no way to know, though I suppose I could ask...* “We must be ready to meet it there. To that end I will be building at least one space worthy warship.”

“In three weeks?” he blurted.

I’ll have it built by tomorrow. Only reason I didn’t build it last night is I was looking at designs and getting an education how it might work. We are going to have to go on the offensive at some point, I figure if we can take the battle to them, they would leave this place alone for the time being. “I have certain resources that allow me to construct things quickly. But like I said before, I wouldn’t count on just me. If a hundred or a thousand show up, my one ship isn’t going to be nearly enough.”

“We can barely get to the moon!” he went on. “How are we supposed to build a million of the Starship Enterprise?”

Maybe should have thought of that before you had all those wars with yourself? But of course there was no way you could have known aliens would come. You didn’t even know life outside this solar system existed. And I looked at the Enterprise at Amelia’s insistence, a warship it is not. But at least I get the reference. “That is up to you. I wasn’t kidding about working together being your best and only chance here. I would suggest you try that.”

“What do you think our chances are?” was the next question.

“That completely depends on you. Plus, I know there are more powerful heroes than us the Earth can bring to bear. If they move against whatever comes next I’m sure things will work out. If they can be freed up by you people, I don’t know, not doing crimes for like two minutes, maybe we can get them all together and work something out. As it stands now they’re too caught up protecting people from other people smashing up your own cities. Which I ask again, is this in your best interest?” *Because giant rocks start falling from space, the immediate instinct is to smash up what cities remain? Do the alien’s work for them? What are you people thinking?*

He answered a few more questions and then held up his hand. "I've said what I came here to say. The rest is up to you. You know what we're facing, and what you have to do. Go do it. Mourn the loss of life, yes, but prepare. Mr. President, if you have any final words?" He stepped away from the podium and the president stepped up again. Behind him Lysanias opened a gateway and as quietly as they had come, the group filed out.

"Let's get to work," Lysanias told them as the gateway closed back at the base. "We have a warship to build."

Chapter 12

You must construct additional pylons

When: The next day

Where: The base

The next day, after a good night of work getting the shell of the warship created Tessa of all people showed up at breakfast and sat down across from Lysanias.

“Good morning,” he said to her. He felt a bit of confusion from her, as well he should.

She’s never come to see me before like this. I mean she’s sat at the same table as I am, she’s not avoided me, but she’s never come talk to me either.

“Uh, hi.” She started eating, her eyes flicking up at him and then back to her food.

“Something bothering you?”

“Bothering, no. I just didn’t really realize you were probably as good at telekinesis as I was. I mean I seem to recall us working together, uh, before I got shot in the head or whatever.”

He laughed. “We did tie of few of them up, which gave us some breathing room. That made all the difference in that fight. As for my skill in telekinesis, I’m probably not. Am I’m glad you’re okay, I’ve been thinking about what other protections I can give you guys but for now, give this a try.” He slid the sword out and set it on the table. *I’m going to go out on a limb and say people here aren’t as random as I am. That they know their limits and what they can do, what they can’t do, and they don’t just randomly fail despite practicing all the time. So she should have a sense of what she can lift and what she can’t. But I also think she can put energy into her willpower, just like I can, so if she doesn’t do that and finds she can lift things she figured she couldn’t, it’ll show it was the sword and not my skill doing the heavy lifting, if you’ll forgive the pun. Wait, who am I asking forgiveness from?*

“You want me to lift it? That’s easy, it can’t weigh that much.”

“No, no, put your hand on it and lift something else.”

“A sword?” She looked skeptical but did as he asked, touching a finger to the top of the blade and looking around. There was a soda machine over by one wall so she stared at it and the bulky device gently rose into the air. “Huh.”

“Easier, right?”

“It was. I should have had to concentrate much more to lift something that size!”

As I thought. In other words, she would have had to put energy into willpower. “So you see how I could seem to be as good as you, but really, you have one power. Telekinesis. I’m sure you’re more practiced at it than I am.” He took the sword and slid it back. “Without the blade to augment me, which is magical by the way, I would never be able to match what you can lift naturally.” *Unless my skill is less and your resolve is less and my resolve is higher and it works out that I don’t randomly fail every other time I try do to something.*

“I guess.”

She went back to eating for a moment, but her feelings hadn’t changed.

“Was there something else?”

“I just, I was wondering that is, if maybe, if you had a chance, that if maybe you had run into some, like, I don’t know, other techniques or whatever that maybe I could try to learn, you could, if you wanted, to show me? I mean it’s nothing, never mind. Sorry I bothered you.” She got up to leave.

“Hold on there, Tessa. I’d be happy to show you any techniques related to telekinesis that I can!”

“Oh. I mean you are? I mean, uh, great, that would be great.”

“You’re not used to asking people for help, are you?”

“Gee, does it show?” she asked sarcastically, sitting down again.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of. I still can’t really talk to people I don’t know that well easily. The only reason I could do that speech yesterday is because I was in the armor. I was sort of removed from the situation, you know? It wasn’t me, it was Iron Angel saying those things.”

"I guess I get it. So do you think there's other things I can do? I mean moving things around is nice and all, and I can do a barrier I figured that much out. But if there was more I could do, maybe I wouldn't have been taken out so easily. Figured you were the guy to ask."

"Don't feel bad, Samantha went down too, and she's supposed to be the invulnerable one."

"Not really proving your case..."

"You'll never be a Jedi, if that's what you're asking. At least in my case, I don't feel what I'm holding with the force, so I assume it's the same for you?"

She nodded. "I have to track it with my eyes. If I lose sight of something I can keep it there but not really move it with any certainty anymore. And I can't tell a ball from a brick that I'm lifting, it's just an object to me."

"So even putting a weak barrier around yourself at all times that isn't meant to stop anything but just be an early warning something is heading towards you is out. But let's see what else we can find." He pulled out the hubPad and went into the app for agents. Typing into the search he nodded, there were several results brought back which he skimmed.

"Finding anything?"

"A few things, actually. Telekinesis can manipulate the small as well as the large, according to this. Plus a few other neat things..."

"The small?"

"Sure, like heating up the molecules inside something until it bursts into flames, or slowing them to cool it down. Even vibrating them so much whatever you're focusing on simply blows apart."

"Now we're talking!" she exclaimed, feeling more excited now. "Tell me more!"

So he connected to the printers on the base and handed her some sheets of paper detailing what she could reasonably accomplish with just the power of telekinesis. He read her the titles as he handed the packets relating to each over. "Amplifying sound, making things warmer or colder, manipulating magnetic media, ripping things apart, simulating a change in gravity itself, throwing lighting, and apparently the ultimate telekinetic attack is a pinpoint barrier accelerated like a bullet to simply smash through things. And barriers can do something I bet you never considered, you can put it around your hand if you want to punch something, amplifying the force and not breaking your hand in the process."

"This is all great stuff!" she gushed, skimming it over. "Want to, I mean if you're not busy at the moment, help me practice some of this stuff?"

"That's the great thing about being me," he told her. "I can do two or three things at once. Spirit Clone Technique!"

As one clone went off to practice with Tessa and the other went to do his own training with the deck of cards, Lysanias proper pulled up the schematics for the ship he was building and started looking them over again. *I got a good bit of it done last night, at least the outer structure. Now I have to figure out how things like the air filtration system and other life support functions will work. My tiny ship needing me to clear the air is all well and good, but a ship of this size, not so much. The original had a central garden, of all things, in space. That could help...*

The ship he was looking at was the Andromeda Ascendant, for a variety of reasons. Unlike other ships that Amelia had showed him from the "Star Trek" stories, this one was built as a warship. It didn't have vulnerable "warp nacelles" sticking out the back he couldn't make work anyway, but did have a secondary armor system that could be deployed from the "slipspace arms" he also couldn't make work in this reality. Meta had assured him he could probably make an imaginary faster than light engine work, but only while he was asleep, making him chuckle. *The greatest warship ever made by humans, and the guy that makes it go literally does so in his sleep. Once I leave I guess it can just float around until they figure out some way to make it go themselves. Of course, if I had a sample of whatever method the shadow aliens were using maybe we could figure it out and install it. Meta strongly recommended not installing one of the myriad of FTL engines that exist across different realities they could show me how to build. These people are so not ready for that, as evidenced by their behavior now that they've found out aliens really do exist. Let them figure*

it out themselves if they want to go into space so badly. The frame was currently sitting on the moon, he didn't want anything bumping into it after all if he put it in Earth orbit, (or lose it for that matter) and he could easily see the moon and will himself there in a spacesuit. He had plans to install a huge tank of gravitons, for local maneuvering, and was looking over how to set up a larger focusing system like the one in his armor at the heart of the ship.

"Amelia wants to see you," popped up as a message on his screen. "She's in the meeting room."

He put the tablet under his arm and headed to the elevator, heading up, walking in to see her leaning on a chair and watching the big TV she had covering one wall. Lysanias stared at himself, giving the speech the day before.

"Hey Lysanias," she greeted him. "You're all over the news and the internet. Quite the impression you made yesterday."

"I probably shouldn't have answered those questions," he admitted, coming to stand next to her. Luke was there, the two nodded to each other.

"Oh, it's not that, exactly," she explained. "It's the fact that no one can tell what the heck you're saying in the recording!" She laughed. "People who went to play it for other people got quite a nasty shock!"

He gave a little cough. "Ah, yes, wondered what they would say about that."

"All sorts of things. Proof that you really are an angel, or just some kind of hologram created by me, or that's just your power. But then, some say, how did he pull the sword from nowhere, set it on fire, who made the gateway that got them there, what about the wings, etc. Etc. No one has that many powers around here, and they know all about our powers, so speculation is *rampant*."

"I bet. Epic said you wanted to see me about something?"

"We've been getting requests. The first is for a transcript of the speech, so it can at least be subtitled. Some people have tried doing it from memory and I've filled in a few things but can you take a minute to check it over? I want to make sure you said what you said."

"Sure, I don't mind." He sat down at a computer where the video was already queued up for him to review. "What's the second, and how goes the new AI?"

"I had to drag her to bed last night," Luke told them. "I mean away from her work, you know what I mean!"

She laughed. "I've got the hardware 'Andromeda' will 'live' in almost done, and both Milton and Epic say they're making good progress on creating a new AI to run the ship. They're taking a different approach than I did, and I'm designing new hardware to their specifications, which is a little unnerving. She'll be able to multitask better by spinning up less powerful 'clones' of herself like you do, to run drones, fire the weapons, evade fire, all at the same time. I mean I suppose the team could be trained to do that, at least part of it, and we will have stations to take control should she be overwhelmed. But astronauts we are not."

"Not yet, anyway."

"Ha! I was lucky to get my one tiny satellite into orbit. Of course, maybe we'll have a renewed interest in space travel now and finally see peace in our time. We have a 'space force' after all, though I doubt he foresaw this situation when he created it, so maybe my kids, if I have any I mean, will dream of visiting Mars instead of Disney World."

"Our many, many kids," Luke agreed.

"How- how many?"

"At least six. Don't you want a big family?"

"Six?" Her voice cracked.

"I mean I want twelve or more, but I thought I should ease you into the idea. Some could be adopted, of course."

"Twelve?" Now she sounded horrified.

He tuned them out, Luke was clearly amused by all of this, not feeling serious at all, so he bent to his task of typing in corrections to his speech the day before. It didn't take him long, it wasn't a long speech, and he told Epic he was done and to release it to whoever asked.

"Thank you," Epic told him. "Perhaps with this information I will be able to build a translation program for your language. Of course as you are the only speaker it is merely an exercise for me and I could never tell if I had it right it not."

"You almost sound wistful."

"I assure you such emotion is quite beyond my programming."

"Of course. There was something else?"

"If you're done," Amelia told him. "With your bragging about building a warship almost overnight people want to see it. Could you do a sort of daily progress report of what you did the night before?"

"Sure. In fact, grab a camera and we can head there right now. Grab the others if you think they would be interested." *I think. I talked it over with Meta and they said there was no reason the One Power would be limited to Earth. I would have to weave very precisely but I did pick it up from the best. Plus my headband will help, miss you Terra!* He started drawing Sadin, but Amelia hopped up out of the chair.

"What did you say? Go now? Camera? Isn't it on the moon?"

He laughed, the power filling him with life as usual. "It sure is. But the first thing I built up there was a hanger. Airtight, full of lots of nice air to breathe and lights and a heater and solar panels to run it and everything. While I could walk around up there without a suit while Dreaming the less things I need to concentrate on while building the ship the better. It means more mass per attempt."

Her face fell. "Oh, so all we'll be able to see is the interior of the hanger?"

"I'll take you tonight, if you're really that passionate about it. Your armor is airtight, right?"

"You mean it?"

"Yeah, why would I lie? It's easy to go there now that I have a point of reference I've seen."

"Easy, he says. Oh hey Monica."

The others started coming into the room, saying that Epic told them they were heading to the moon if they wanted to come. Lysanias meanwhile was looking over the woman she had called Monica. She was certainly not made of ice, but did have light colored hair, eyes, and even eyebrows. *I guess if I squint I can sort of see the resemblance...*

"What, you've never seen a girl before?" she teased, noticing him staring.

"You're the girl made of ice, the same Monica? But you're human now?"

"That's right. What do you think?" She gave a twirl.

"I can do miracles once in awhile myself, you know," Amelia told him. "You're not the only one. Even if mine are *only* the power of **science!**"

"I think it's great," he told her. "Is this a permanent cure, or can you switch back and forth?"

"I can switch back and forth," she indicated a device on a belt at her back, "but I still have my ice powers so I'm not sure why I would."

Because you're a squishy human now instead of easily reparable ice? But whatever.

Weaving a gateway he was relieved to see the interior of his hanger, and the group stepped through once the pressure equalized. After everyone had their fun bouncing around he led them over to the shell of the ship, several people filming as he narrated. He did tell them to be careful not to show him, and only film the ship, as he was out of the armor at the moment. "The Andromeda Ascendant is 1031 meters long and 976 meters wide at the widest point of the wings. It's made of the same special material my suit is made of, you can probably tell by the color."

"The design is rather striking," Kate told him. "Any reason for that, or is it just ascetics?"

"I looked over a lot of designs from popular fiction that had schematics I could follow," he explained.

"He rejected the Enterprise almost at once, the jerk," Amelia pouted.

"Even while imaginary, if someone worked out the dimensions of where the decks were, and how the elevators worked, and where the weapons were, I could use that as a starting point. Many of the ships were workable, but then I remembered the alien craft that attacked was just a rectangular slab that flew around. Many of the ships Arsenal showed me—"

"Oh, everyone knows my name is Amelia by now."

“Amelia then, what she showed me was either too similar to that, or had various bits that served no purpose. Those warp engines that stick out of the Enterprise may look good onscreen, but they seem fairly delicate. As you don’t actually have warp technology (yet) it would just be a useless decoration. Or energy shields to protect them. In the end I wanted something that really represented the opposite of the alien’s kind of thinking. I mean you can build a rectangular skyscraper that’s just a box, or something that really draws the eye and is a work of art in itself. This is no different. This design with the swooping slipspace runners and the possibility of extending the battle blades for further armor really spoke to me. I can’t show you that system quite yet, but you’ll see it in a day or two I promise. Let’s head inside.” They went through the open doorway into a cargo bay area, and walked through the interior of the ship. This was mostly unfinished, as it needed the most work. “Making the shell was easy,” he explained. “But here inside you have to worry about electrical conduits, and pipes for water, and the gravity plating, and where the lights go, and emergency doors, and internal defense systems-”

“Wait, go back to gravity plating?” Amelia asked him.

“Oh, right. Let’s call that a Mars Global invention that’s not ever going to be on the market, like the armor. Sorry folks, we’re going to have a quick blip in the video and we’ll be right back.” He waited for the others to turn the cameras off.

“Spill, what is it, and how do I make some!” Amelia demanded.

“It’s going to be an extension of the propulsion system, which is graviton based,” he admitted.

“Gravitons are theoretical. Wait, don’t tell me-”

He nodded. “I can make them. I’ll have a huge holding tank for them so the ship can maneuver at slower than lightspeeds, but when it’s gone they’re gone. After I leave, anyway.”

“For those of us at home not following along,” Tessa complained, “explanation please?”

“Gravitons are the fundamental particle that carry gravity, much like photons carry what we perceive as light. Shooting them out in front of the ship will cause it to ‘fall’ if you will in that direction. There will be a focusing system so the ship can basically go in any direction, not just straight ahead. My little ship does the same thing. Some of those gravitons will be oriented, focused, and stored under each hallway. I don’t know how the real Andromeda does it, but that will give us the normal 1g humans tend to prefer so you can walk around the ship normally. And if someone boards, gravitons could flood the area and make them super heavy, so it’s part of the defense system too.”

“But if you can make them, you must understand them,” Amelia protested. “So can’t you tell us how to?”

“Do you have an extremely powerful particle accelerator of your very own?”

“No,” she pouted.

“Then it’s not possible for you to make them.”

“Wait, the aliens must be able to, you said they shot gravity during their attack, right?” Kate asked. “That main gun was shooting gravity, that’s what crushed those buildings! They weren’t just shooting *gravity* somehow, they were shooting these particles that *cause* gravity. I wondered how that worked.”

“That’s right. If I thought it wouldn’t leave us helpless by using them up I would build a similar system into the Andromeda. It could be our ultimate weapon. But if we fired such a weapon while I wasn’t asleep, there goes our propulsion. If I’m asleep, on the other hand, I could probably just think gravity into existence myself, we wouldn’t need any other weapons but me.”

“What weapons are you building into it?” Luke asked. “For the times you are awake?”

“Get those cameras rolling and ask that question again, without the awake part.”

He did.

“I’ve built several exits for mass driver projectiles,” he explained, pointing down into the depths of the ship. “Both fore and aft, so we have at least a good arc covered with those. Some missile tubes as well, just in case we come up with an explosive we can safely have around and arm as needed.” *The original plans for the ship had them, so I just kept them. Figured I might as well. They don’t cost nothing, and if we need anti-matter missiles they need someplace to exit from. I really, really hope it doesn’t come down to me needing to*

make some though, as they seem super dangerous to even have around. "As well as many turrets all along the surface of the Andromeda. You probably couldn't see them from where we were on the ground, but they are there. Once I have more decks built I can take you up to the top of the ship and show you. Those are scaled up versions of the particle beams built into the armor. Heat will still be a problem so we'll need lots of coolant, the tank for that will be over there, I think it is." He pointed again. "Of course we'll build drones just like the alien ship had, that can be launched from the ship and controlled to add additional firepower. As far as defense goes, I'm hoping the massive amount of material I used as the skin of the ship will be good enough, as 'shields' don't really exist." Even I couldn't make it all in one piece by Dreaming, but thinking more into existence as joined up with the other batches seemed to work just fine. I mean it hasn't collapsed under its own weight, even here on the moon when I was jumping up and down on it after increasing my mass it just sat there. So it should be fine. Right? "We have kinetic barriers which I'll install of course, but I actually sacrificed some of the usable space inside the ship just to make the armor thicker." That gravity cannon of theirs still scares me. If they focus it past our armor what's to stop it just squishing us inside the thing? It's gravity, I can't really keep it out. I can contain gravitons electrically for the conduits under the hallways and in the storage tank but this is the opposite of that. Tricky.

"And you built all of this in one night?" Samantha asked, sounding astonished.

"Yup. My first priority is getting enough structure in place to install the AI, it can then control some robots and help me out. Even with my methods, some things are going to have to be done manually. I think. I'll make the parts or bring them up if Amelia makes them, then work can continue twenty four seven." He leaned over to whisper to her. "I get more than eight hours of work done per eight hours of sleep. It's complicated, I'll explain it later."

"I see. Well if I can help in any way, let me know."

The others all agreed they would be happy to pitch in.

"Thanks everyone. I'll let you know once we have a few more floors to stand on!"

Everyone was saying how great it looked so far, and Lysanias felt pretty good. *I'm really doing it. I'm making a spaceship, and it wasn't that long ago the most I could manage was that little balloon my friends and I made. I've discovered a real love of making stuff, and while this whole project is going to be a lot of work, it's good practice for me in Dreaming and science. The shadow avatar may have a huge head start in this reality, with unknown numbers of aliens and robots at their command, but we're fighting back. We can, somehow, take the fight to them. With me to show the way, this world can come together and forge a peace unlike any I've seen on worlds before. We can win. We. Can. Do. This!*

Guess what the world didn't do?

Chapter 13

No Silicon Heaven? Preposterous. Where would all the calculators go?

When: Three days later

Where: Conference room inside the base

Lysanias had been working tirelessly, if that's even the word, on the Andromeda (the ship) and it was coming along very well. Andromeda (the AI) had been installed and was currently controlling a number of robots that were helping in the effort. He felt that if they didn't have the time they did he *probably* could have put the ship together faster, but this was something we was expecting people to entrust their lives to. He was asking the team to go into space with him, risk their lives, and do it in a ship he had made. There was no room for error; the Andromeda had to work, hold up in actual combat, and be able to defend itself against an unknown number of assailants both large and small. The people inside, himself included, needed so many things to keep them alive, the least of which was heat, also air. So he was meticulous in going over things, based on what little real world experience the AIs could pull up.

But at the very least NASA, their space agency, has been very helpful in telling me what to avoid and what to triple check before I let anyone not Dreaming on this thing for more than a few minutes. As they're the only ones with practical experience in "space travel" if low orbit maneuvers can even be called that, they pointed out some weaknesses in the design that the original Andromeda probably had technology or material science overcome in that reality. Or their science just worked differently. Of course the first test flight will be with me Dreaming so if something does go wrong, I have maximum ability to repair it.

Both Andromeda Rommie and "his" Rommie (because you didn't think he would skip making a body for the new AI did you? He wanted this version of Andromeda to be as close to the original as possible, if for no other reason than to honor them. He had reviewed what Susan had done there, meeting Captain Hunt and Trance and the others, who were probably either long dead or just turning from saying goodbye to her given how time ran along realities in strange ways) along with Rosalina were there at the moment. She could make things with her normal powers, if not in the quantity he could, but if they needed something she could call it into existence just as easily. Rommie was helping Rommie2 with AI stuff, as they both "spoke the same language" so to speak, as even an AI needs some practical experience and "she" was only a few days old.

That morning the three, as Luke was never very far away from Amelia, were watching the TV in the conference room. "What are they doing?" Lysanias blurted. "This is the thing I said to not do!" Images around the world showed people panicking, continuing to roam the streets and make trouble while governments that should have been working together to start building a space defense platform dealt with that instead.

"People are stupid," Amelia told him. "It's as simple as that."

"They're scared," Luke chided her.

"So am I. You don't see me running around like a chicken with my head cut off. I'm building new weapons and training to fight what comes. By the way, the ship railguns should be ready to install. I just wish we could test them someplace before putting them in. Given what just a tiny ball does here on Earth a cannonball sized mass is probably not wise to fire anywhere near anything you don't want squashed flat. I'm having Rommie send some robots but if you wanted to help move them from the manufacturing area..."

"Don't change the subject, not everyone has your gifts, Amelia."

"What gifts? May I remind you I don't have super powers! Everything I've done is just studying and building one step at a time. Anyone could have done it."

"Sure, like anyone could have developed $e=mc^2$ or had the courage to say the sun, not the earth, is at the middle of our solar system."

"The formula is actually more complex than that, nobody remembers the whole thing."

"You know what I mean!"

"I guess. All this," she indicated the screen, "just seems counter productive."

"So my tours of the Andromeda's construction progress aren't doing anything?"

Lysanias asked sadly. "I put a lot of work into those!"

"Oh, no, that's not the case at all," Amelia protested. "If you had, you know, an identity on this world with a bank account you could have enabled monetization of your youtube account and made a small fortune. They've been watched millions of times. As it is they're just on mine and I turned ads off because I, like any sane human being, hates ads."

"Do you think he doesn't want the money?" Luke asked her. "You could have kept ads on and collected it for him."

"What's he going to do with our money in other realities?"

"You could have bought him some gold or something. I'm sure he would have just given you the money if he didn't need it."

I can just make that...

"I don't need any more money, I'm rich enough believe me."

Luke got a dreamy expression. "Sometimes you say the nicest things."

"Oh, is that why?" She held the ring under his nose.

He laughed. "Not at all. It wouldn't matter to me if you had nothing. I would still love you just as much."

"So if I gave my fortune away to charity today..."

"I would only love you more for your generous spirit. But maybe wait until after the aliens are beaten back? We might need it."

"Oh Luke." They kissed.

"I don't mean to interrupt," Epic said over the speaker, "but Milton informs me no visitors are scheduled for today."

The two broke it off. "That's an odd thing to not mean to interrupt us with. Does Milton also inform you it's supposed to be sunny today?"

"I'm sure if I had a humor circuit it would be overloaded with electronic mirth at the moment but I mention it only because several vans have pulled up to the front gate. They are unloading people who seem to be carrying signs."

"Signs? You've got to be kidding me. Protesters? Way out here? What are they protesting, the construction of a warship to try and save this planet? We're not even using resources from this world for the most part. I guess they wouldn't know that," she added more quietly.

"I am not sure that is their goal," Epic told her. "Judging from the signs-"

"Whatever," she said, cutting them off. "I'll go out there and find out for myself. Armor me!" She headed to the elevator with Luke presumably to head to the lab to get the armor on, but Lysanias wasn't going to wait. He simply leaned back in the chair and called up his astral form, zipping outside. He cocked the idea of his head as they started unrolling a large banner upon which was painted "hire us, please" in large red letters. *That's different.* He looked all the signs over, there was a mix from "show yourself angel" to "I have three degrees!" *Three degrees isn't that warm, what does that guy think he's proving? Does he have ice powers like Monica?*

A moment later Amelia slammed into the ground behind everyone and shouted "What do you want?" to the crowd. It was shoved up against the fence that surrounded the place, so that was the only place she could land, and everyone spun to face her. It was only then she seemed to see the signs and looked around at the hopeful faces before her. "Wait, what?"

"Arsenal, please!" pleaded one woman. "If I come work for you will you protect my family?"

Another shouted "Can the angel bless us? Can he tell us if our family is in Heaven?"

"I don't believe the angel is real," cried another. "Those videos are fake as well. Change my mind!"

"I'll do anything," shouted another. "I'm an electrical engineer, you need those to build a spaceship right?"

"I- what?" Arsenal repeated. Even in the armor she seemed out of sorts, looking back and forth at the signs which were clearly not what she was expecting.

There was a moment of silence.

"I told you we should have had a more cohesive message," one of the men in front said. "We've only confused her."

"Looks like you're elected spokesman," she told him. "So talk, what do you want?"

"We want to help," he said plainly. "I don't know about this angel business, or how you're seemingly building a huge ship like that so fast, but that guy on TV said we should all do what we can. We're all professionals in our field, and something that size there must always be things to do. Put us to work, let us help protect our world."

"You want to help?"

"It's better than sitting at home waiting for the end to come. You think the president will actually do anything? He was playing golf *yesterday!* You think North Korea or China will come to the table and use the magic of friendship to chase the aliens away? We don't, and given that ship you're building you don't either. The UK still is leaving the EU, despite the unrest. Canada thinks we're all crazy, as far as I know that stupid wall is still being built at the Mexican border. Instead of, I don't know, space missiles or something. We're all still pulling away from each other instead of coming together. The governments of the world will bicker and point fingers and before you know it time will have run out. You're the only one actually seeming to *do* anything about it."

"You beaten those alien ships twice already," said one woman. "We have faith in you, Arsenal!"

Huh, she has an 'I heart Arsenal' shirt, haven't I seen Tessa wearing one of those?

"I still want to see this angel of yours," said one man with the angel sign. "Because he's got a lot of explaining to do if he's *really* an angel."

"That's up to him," she said distractedly. "So what sort of professionals are you?"

"I'm a structural engineer."

"Metallurgist."

"Biologist, in case we capture some aliens. I guess I could be the world's first xenobiologist."

"Botanist. I saw the tree you were planting, why is there a tree in a space ship? If there's going to be plants in space you'll need someone to look after them who knows what they're doing."

"Plumber."

Everyone turned to look at him.

"What, you don't have toilets on this ship? Somebody has to keep the water running, unless you don't want a shower the whole time. Or, you know, drinking a glass of water? You leave to go kick alien butt it's gonna take awhile to get there, right? Water has to move!"

Everyone agreed that was a very excellent point, he could in fact make a valuable contribution and welcomed the man with handshakes and pats on the back. "Yeah that's what I thought," he said smugly.

"Okay, fine, you're all able to contribute. But should we leave this planet, somehow find the alien homeworld and head there are you all willing to come with us?" They all looked a bit uncomfortable at that. "We can discuss that later. You want to help, fine. Know that while inside you will be watched, actually we can probably move the gateway to the ship somewhere outside the base itself. If you have any thought of sabotage the Iron Angel will know, and he will deal with you."

I will?

"For now, come with me. We'll head in and you can get a tour of the hanger where the ship is parked." The gate started to open, and everyone dumped their signs and walked through.

"We're going into the main building?" one of the men asked. "I figured it was in one of the hangers..." He pointed.

"Oh no, it's on the moon."

"Moon?" almost everyone cried.

"Uh, duh? Where you think you build a spaceship?"

Lysanias snapped back to his body to get ready for their arrival, and looked into the startled eyes of Tessa, who was frozen before him. He smelled something odd and moved his eyes to see what she had in her hand. It seemed to be a marker of some kind. Monica was over in the corner with her hand behind her mouth, and his eyes narrowed.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I wasn't drawing a mustache on you because you were asleep," she replied. "It's fake news."

"I wasn't asleep," he told her as she stepped back. He got up. "I was making sure the mob outside didn't make trouble for Amelia. They're coming in here now, they want to help with the ship." He gestured through the tied off gateway.

"Mob? We have angry mobs now? You might not want to meet them looking like that," she told him, capping the marker. "But I don't know who could have done it, I was just... making sure... that... you were... all right, yes, that's all."

"You're still holding the marker!"

"Prove it," she sputtered, slipping the marker into her pocket and showing him her hands.

Having washed his face and making sure he was presentable he went to meet the mob, not bothering to put the armor on. They were in the meeting room, none of them quite working up the courage to step through the gateway yet. He was hauling a large metal tube that was part of the mass driver with metal bending, figuring he might as well make the most of the trip. Tessa was hauling a second one, Monica was just along for the experience. He didn't see Luke or Amelia at first, but caught sight of them across the threshold of the gateway. They were landing, probably demonstrating they were on the moon and that it was safe.

"So don't just stand there, get to work!" he told them, not really wanting to talk to a bunch of strangers due to his shy nature. "Head on through, the robots can assign you some tasks, I'm sure Rommie or Rommie can let you know what needs doing."

"Are you the foreman?" one asked, none of them having budged a smegging inch.

"Usually when I use spirit clones I do two so I'm a threeman at best."

They stared at him. The other girls laughed though, they got it.

"Must have been lost in the translation." He silently tried to not sigh, his 'rushing through' gambit clearly having failed and he was going to have to talk to them after all. "I'm Lysanias, the one you know as Iron Angel. We've got a lot of work to do so if you really are here to work, and I'll be making sure of that in a minute now that I've met you personally, let's go. You can gawk on the way."

"So you're not an angel then," said the man who had wanted to meet "the angel." "I'm not sure I want to work on the project under false pretenses. If that's just your super hero name-

"But then how did he do all that stuff?" asked one lady. "I mean look, it's a door in the air leading to the moon. Who has *that* power?"

"But look at him, he's just a man. Look, *can* you prove it one way or the other? I just... I have to know."

Lysanias looked at him, feeling him out. He felt anguish, a deep sadness, and Lysanias could guess why. "You lost someone recently, didn't you?"

"Yes, my-

Lysanias held up a hand, setting the barrel of the railgun down and putting a hand on the man's chest. He concentrated. The man's past played in his mind's eye, he got the whole story that way. "Your daughter and your wife, in the same accident. The police car that hit them was chasing another car, despite him knowing it was a residential area and high speed chases are typically forbidden in such situations. The officer... Got off, because your wife had dark skin? That can't be right..."

"He knows," the man said in wonder. Lysanias looked at him, his eyes were wet. The others gasped.

"That doesn't prove anything, he's probably just an empath or a telepath," another said.

"Who is a telekenitic and a telepath?" asked a woman. "I've never heard of that combo before. Doesn't explain the door either."

"Wait, I've heard of cops killing black people and getting off, but even in a car chase?" asked another man. "That really happened?"

"Yes, that really happened," he admitted. "But you're right, that doesn't prove anything."

He sighed. "Fine. But I'm not going to give you the proof you're looking for, or the answers you want." He stripped his shirt off, catching Tessa's eye as he mimed "hanging" it in the air. She smirked at him but gave a little nod, taking it and holding it there. *I mean I could do it, but why split my attention when she's right there?* "But I'll show you this, *one time only*, and you can make up your own minds. Let me say this; I am not here to show one religion right or wrong, or change your faith, or prove anything. I will show you something, and you will have to decide what it means for yourself, just as faith is meant to be. Understood?"

They all nodded.

"Then you get to work, if that's really why you're here." He stood in front of the gateway so it was clear on both sides and slammed his hands together, fingers up. Then he created the familiar white wings from his back, getting more gasps from the assembled crowd. He snapped them open, feeling it was nice to have them back, he hadn't actually worn wings in some time now. Then he closed them again. "Satisfied?"

The group all started asking him questions at once.

"Silence!" he cried, flaring up his spirit aura for a second. They took a step back. "What did I just say?"

"Can I at least verify they're real?" asked the man. "I mean if you can make a spaceship, you could make some fake wings. Maybe that's your power, making stuff."

He turned and spread them again, feeling the man hesitantly stroke one.

"They're real feathers, and they seem connected to him," he admitted. He yanked.

"Ow! Quit that!"

"Sorry! Sorry, I just-"

"Yes, I know. Can we get to work now?" He dissolved them again, taking his shirt back and slipping it on.

"I'll follow you anywhere," said one woman, falling to her knees. "Space or beyond. Oh angel of the Lord, you need only command me!"

"I haven't admitted to being an angel, so get up. My name is Lysanias, now come on. We've got work to do."

Chapter 14

Waiting to be killed, waiting to be killed

When: The proposed day of the attack

Where: *Innnnnn Spaaaaaacccccceeee*

Work was completed on the Andromeda Ascendant four days before the proposed day of the attack, and the “crew” spent the rest of the time making sure everything worked. The crew had grown because of course word got out the Arsenal team was “hiring” so that tested out the life support systems too. They fired all of their guns at once and made sure the battle blades could extend and retract properly afterwards. The AI, controlling a virtual avatar onscreen as well as her robot body flew drones and held battle drills. (The Cat-7 had holograms, but that had self destructed with Cat-7 itself and Amelia didn’t care to try piecing that technology back together just yet. That was the only reason she didn’t have a hologram avatar as well) The ship only had the graviton based propulsion at the moment, though it still had empty space for the FTL engine Lysanias would Dream up once they had a destination. Everyone had an official EDF uniform (Earth Defense Force) and separate set of armor (a basic breastplate that was easy to slip on, nothing powered) they could wear should the place be (somehow) boarded, and they had a sidearm copied from the guns he got from the He-Man universe as they seemed to do the most damage. He wasn’t sure if they would scratch whatever the deathbots were made of, but he wasn’t making a hundred or more light sabers for these people. They would have to do the best they could.

He had vetted them as part of the practice he was doing every day in asking the universe things. He had asked things like “Will any being currently working on the Andromeda betray our interests” and “Are there aliens disguised as humans working with us?” No matter what he could think of it seemed everyone was on the level, and anyone who wanted to go into spaaaaaaaaace (he wasn’t sure why Amelia always said it like that) had a place to sleep aboard ship. He restocked the stores every day while Dreaming, figuring that was easier than tons of food trucks unloading through gateways onto the moon. Tessa had continued practicing the telekinetic skills he had suggested, switching out between that, more close combat practice with the group, and manning her station on the Andromeda’s bridge. (There was plenty to monitor and do, if a human did some things it would free up the AI for focusing on combat, where her greater reflexes and precision would be most useful)

Some of the people that came didn’t have college degrees, simply enthusiasm, but he found a use for everyone. Amelia agreed studying the magitek armors was worthwhile and showed him an old show called “Macross” featuring transforming mechs and their use fighting giant aliens. He figured both individual fighter craft modeled after the original Andromeda’s “slip fighters” and larger mechs could be useful, so he had made some of both. (And made a note to ask if that reality existed and if it had been saved from the Avatar yet. He had been surprised to learn this was where “Lynn Minmai” had come from, so he was somewhat curious to meet her but knew he would probably be too shy to actually talk to her if they met. As that name kept cropping up in his travels by various singers, he thought she might like to know she had an impact beyond her own world due to Storytellers and whatever Dream phenomenon kept bringing that name up. He also wouldn’t mind studying their mech and ship design) They were powered by Amelia’s ZPFM but moved with his gravity drive, so they were only useful when he was around. (Amelia said if she wasn’t letting anyone have her armor, letting a bunch of random people have an even *bigger* armor than hers was off the table. But given the situation and the fact the best they could do was slowly walk around without gravitons, which were finite, it was okay.) Weaponry was the full complement of a mounted mass driver, a smallish one they could fire without too much trouble, and the particle beams Amelia had designed. They didn’t have hands so they couldn’t hold light sabers, and as they weren’t magic they didn’t have the beams, but they were “easy” enough for him to make because it was basically all well understood principals so he made a bunch of them. They were more like space tanks than anime mechs, but someone could sit inside the sealed cockpit he added and maneuver in space just fine.

The “hanger” had been expanded to be more an actual base at this point, with underground graviton refueling tanks, automated and manned defense canons, and some

living space as great domed structures for spouses and kids of the people who had shown up to help who wanted to stay with their families. And scientists, once it was learned the moon was literally a step away lots of people wanted to do lots of experiments there, and put telescopes up there, and radio dishes, and all manner of things. He figured it was fine, the more they looked *out* the more chance they had of figuring out where the aliens were coming from, which was all to the good. As it was now proven some form of faster than light travel was possible many labs were working around the clock to figure out how, so jump starting their space “industry” with a moon base he felt was a worthwhile contribution to the planet.

Maybe they’ll actually stop their squabbling if they can start launching ships and terraforming mars or creating space stations where there are no lines on a map. In fact, I wonder how big a city I could actually create on the moon, and what laws they would adopt there if I invited a million people to go live there from all corners of the Earth? I could do it...

There was one snag in the works at the moment though; He had warned them that if things went bad and he was somehow killed they would have no way to leave and would be stuck on the moon. Given of course that Earth had no real spacecraft, just rockets that probably wouldn’t be able to evacuate them in time. They countered with the fact that if he got killed, the human race was pretty much over anyway by the looks of things, so why not die with the best view in the solar system? He didn’t have a good counter argument for that one. But he did make them gardens and stocked as much food and water and air as he could so they could at least be somewhat self sufficient if he had to leave.

Finally the day came. Three weeks of hard work, training, and testing were going to pay off. The Andromeda; now fully armed, crewed, and ready for anything orbited high above the Earth. It wasn’t stationary so there was at least less of a chance something sneaking up on them from the other side of the planet, but space was pretty big so it was still a valid concern. *Of course* governments were now screaming that having a fully armed warship flying around space that was not associated with any government was somehow illegal and they should cease all activities at once, but Amelia rightly replied:

- 1) Come up here and make me
- 2) We’re trying to save you, idiots
- 3) Worldwide support for this is overwhelming positive given you’ve all done jack squat to fulfill the actual promise of government which is *to protect the people that elect you* so leave us alone while we save the entire freaking planet and you can see how arresting the *saviors of the Earth* goes when we get back

So naturally tensions between Earth and the new moon population was a bit high. And yes, the people there were already starting to think of themselves as “moon people” rather than “Americans” which was probably fine? But at this moment aboard ship Lysanias felt a mixture of pride, anticipation, and nerves. They hadn’t had long to train and work together as a unit but by God (their words) they were going to meet whatever death dealing machines these aliens sent to destroy them with the pride and fortitude of all humanity behind them. (Sorta)

It was just somewhat confusing why nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary as the day ticked by. The moon base monitored the portion of the heavens it could, while the Andromeda scanned for large rocks, big ships, energy fluctuations or other shenanigans that would indicate some kind of FTL ship approaching. Nothing. Lunchtime came and went, and feeling gradually shifted to puzzlement instead of an alert readiness.

“We didn’t get the day wrong, did we?” Amelia asked finally, slumping against a panel on the bridge. She was in her armor, along with everyone else

“It’s been exactly three weeks,” the Andromeda on screen said. “Perhaps this unpredictability is a further part of their plan to destabilize us?”

“Maybe there was some kind of space traffic?” Tessa guessed. “You know, a space jam? So they’re just running behind.”

“What would space jam taste like?” Monica asked.

“Cold.”

"I guess I'd like it then."

"Amelia, I'm getting some strange transmissions from the planet," Andromeda told them. "I wasn't focused on the planet below because we all expected warships from space, that's where my attention has been, but I can no longer ignore them."

"What is it?" She straightened up.

"I have your permission to slow and take a geo-stationary orbit?"

"You do."

"Very well. One moment." The ship slowed, coming to rest over the US continent. "The signal is now clearer. I will display it." The display changed to what seemed to be a news report of a nuclear power plant being under attack.

"That can't be right," Kate told them. "She just said it was under attack by human supers!"

"I am getting similar reports from multiple locations," Andromeda told them. "It seems two person teams are assaulting power plants all across the globe. There is no sign of alien presence but this cannot be a coincidence." The display changed to show a map of the globe, and red dots started appearing on almost every area of the map.

"Supers? Human supers attacking places?" Samantha asked, surprised. "I mean we haven't been paying attention to Earth these last few weeks but that's crazy."

"I read a report online a week ago how it seemed supers were keeping a low profile," Tessa volunteered. "I thought it was just they didn't want to get caught up in maybe having to come fight us to stop the construction effort. But maybe it was because they were planning something like this?"

"What, the super community just decided that three weeks to the day after the last attack, they would blow up all the power plants in the world?" asked Monica.

"However it happened we need to get down there," Amelia told them. "Slip fighters can carry two people. I say we head down there in pairs, save as many power plants as we can. If it's two on two, it shouldn't be that bad, right? We should have help from the forces already there, I know security for those places has been beefed up."

"Why not just portal down there?" asked Teddy.

"That's okay for the first one," Lysanias told them. "But there's a lot of power plants on that map. You need to be able to reach them quickly. Do we have good enough pictures of all of them? And that's a lot of gateways to open, it would tire me out pretty fast."

"Okay then. Monica, you're with Samantha. Tessa and Tony, you two go together. Luke, you're still not going to fight?"

"I won't fight like that anymore, you know that," he answered.

"Fine," she sighed. "Kate, think you can manage alone? I think the two of us would be overkill, same as with a clone of Lysanias, but I hate to send you alone."

"I can go with her in a robot body," Epic told them. "But given the distance I would be at a disadvantage, I could not react as quickly as I would normally be able to. Cell signals are fairly high latency."

"Better than nothing. Okay everyone, get moving, and may the force be with you."

Lysanias, after being assured teleporting to the surface wouldn't kill him because "I am an AI you know, I am very accurate and there is no velocity difference between us and the Earth right now," brought Rosalina and Rommie with him to the power plant they had seen in the news report. He quickly looked around and got out his drones, which took to the air.

"I'm hearing gunfire in that direction," Rommie told him. His display updated to show an arrow as well, so he nodded.

"Let's get over there." The three moved off, skimming the ground as by now Rommie had her own set of armor. Not that she needed it, her "body" was the watch at this point so even if the Rommie body was completely destroyed he could just make another. But he wanted her able to fly and take more hits, so she didn't protest too much when he presented her with an armor of her own.

The ground was littered with equipment, all seemingly broken as if cut apart by a blade. Fences were torn to shreds, army jeeps were cut in half and were ablaze. But

strangely, no casualties could be seen. The trio followed the road past the destroyed guard station at the front and suddenly Rommie grabbed both of them and they screeched to a halt.

"What is it?" he asked her.

"The drones... I'll show you." The inside of his helmet opened a window and he saw the scene from a drone's perspective. There were two men standing there, taking heavy gunfire, but seemingly unconcerned. He could only see them from the back but one was tall, with white hair, and a long trench coat. The other was decked out in black jumpsuit with all sorts of guns and explosives hanging from him. Both seemed to be covered by glowing squares of energy in the air, which were currently bouncing back the bullets that were being shot at them from the vestibule doors of the power plant. The white haired guy had his hand up, and seemed to be directing the squares of energy, while the other stood there with his arms crossed, looking around like he was bored.

"That's Justice," Rommie told them, sounding surprised. "But that can't be right."

"Who?" both asked.

"Justice, that's his nickname anyway. John Tenzen. He's an F4 energy barrier manipulator. But more than that, he's an actual cop. One of the most respected men on the force, according to articles I'm reading about him. It's said he can just look at a person and see their sins, and he's brought in more criminals than any two officers."

"A police officer is attacking a power plant?" Rosalina asked. "That's odd."

"It's more than odd, it's impossible. The man beside him is 'The Technomancer' a known criminal. Whatever you do, don't let him touch the suit. He can control any technology like it was a puppet, but he has to touch it first."

"I guess that's who you would send to blow up a power plant," Rosalina admitted.

"Wait, he just touches one of us and against our will the armor goes on a rampage through here?" Lysanias asked.

"That's right. We would just be along for the ride at that point."

"Scary," Rosalina told them.

"Usually he just visits a casino or two, nothing really violent like this. Are we going in?"

"Wait, what about John? Is it just those squares?"

"No. He can form any sort of 2d shape, and control them as with telekinesis. I have no idea how many at a time. The edges are also super sharp, as they're just energy they can be essentially two dimensional and as unbreakable as anything you can make."

"Super, so it can probably at least cut as well as my sword, which given a chance could get through the armor despite what it's made of. You two be careful."

"You be careful," Rosalina told him. "We're just another part of you!"

"Perhaps the mountain spirit?" Rommie reminded him.

"An excellent suggestion!" *Will you help me, Mountain?*

Of course. It appeared next to Lysanias, and the window on his display closed.

"Let's go get them."

"Right," chorused the others.

They headed closer, but suddenly both of the men seemed to pause, listening to something. Two of the energy squares in front of the men broke off and enlarged, forming a wedge in front of them as the rest swung around behind them.

"Uh..."

They then turned around, the Technomancer now looking excited, hands opening and closing as if imagining controlling the suits already. John was preparing, most of his squares forming up in front of him now, leaving some hovering at the edges.

"There's no way they heard us coming, but there was an encrypted broadcast before they turned," Meta told them. "They must have overwatch? You can handle them, right? I'll see where the third one is."

"Go get them," Lysanias told her. "But be careful, it's probably another super."

"Of course." She flew up and started spinning around. Meanwhile the security guards were only firing sporadically at the wedge barrier, bullets continuing to bounce off it.

"You ready?" he asked Rosalina. She held her own magic wand and the damaging one, and she nodded.

"Ready. Say, how many of those things do you think he can- ohmygosh!"

John gestured and his squares shot forward, the larger one breaking into smaller ones and streaking towards them.

Towards *all* of them.

“Bubbles!” Rosalina cried, waving her wand before her. The barriers sprang into existence before the squares hit, shearing right through all three as if she hadn’t done it at all. Lysanias spun, the force warning him and helping him to avoid the damage. Not that it mattered. Five chunks hit the spirit, that of course didn’t bother to dodge because why would it? Clearly these squares were John’s power but they were just energy constructs and couldn’t hurt a supernatural thing like them, right? If the spirit had more time it might have wondered why any were heading towards it at all, how was John even seeing them? The only thing it had time to think was *He must just be peppering the area or not have control over-*

That was when five squares smashed through them, three through the body, one through the right leg, and one through the right arm. The spirit died instantly. This, of course, transferred half the damage to Lysanias, who gave a weak “blaa” as blood gushed out of his mouth, and he fell over. Going unconscious turned Rosalina back into a wand, and John nodded, turning back towards the guards who were stunned at what had just happened. From their point of view the pretty lady in armor tried to put up a force field, fail, vanish, and while the guy in the armor dodged the attacks he seemed to fall over anyway as well. The armor Rosalina had been wearing fell to the ground, unmoving, and her helmet bounced away as well.

“Guess I’ll go take the armor over,” the Technomancer announced. “Wanna let me out of here then?”

“Fine.” John looked over at him, dropping the barrier squares on that side to let him out.

“Cheers.”

He took a step towards them and realized maybe that wasn’t such a good idea as the third member of their team had of course seen all this and was now in “protect the wanderer” mode. She fired off her particle beams as she landed, a lethal measure against someone like him but she knew him getting anywhere near either armor was *unacceptable*.

His head exploded.

She landed and swung to fire on John, who saw this, quickly bringing all his squares back to form a double wall in front of him.

She fired again, beams impacting the wall and splashing off. John neither smiled or looked relieved, simply gesturing as the first layer of wall rushed towards Rommie. It was four squares wide and 6 tall, the outer two layers turned 45 degrees and started spinning like sawblades.

She jumped it, flipping in the air so her head just cleared the top of the upper square and landing on the other side. She gave a half turn, orienting her arms where the beam emitters were housed, looking for an opening in the barrier. There wasn’t one. She fired again anyway, hoping it cost him effort or energy to maintain a shape and maybe they could be taken down. It splashed off again on the squares near his head.

John made a pulling motion, the wall breaking up and shooting back towards her. All of the pieces were spinning now, coming from almost random directions. But she was an android, and while a person might have thought them unorganized, there was a pattern to them. She jumped and spun in the air, positioning them relative to her so they would harmlessly pass by her. They did.

It’s not possible for one human brain to concentrate on 50 or more things at once, he’s just swarming them, in a way. He’s practiced so much he sees them more as pieces of a whole, relying on a pattern instead of directing them individually. If he actually concentrated on hitting me with just one he could probably manage it. The problem is how to get him out from behind his barrier? He’s got it angled to cover attacks from all sides, even above. His record wasn’t an exaggeration, he really is the best.

It’s no good, I’m detecting that Lysanias is bleeding internally, he needs magical or supernatural healing immediately. I could call for an emergency transport to the Hub, but finding these exact temporal spatial coordinates will be impossible. I can’t call for evac from Kate because the distance would increase my ping time to this body, and I’m going to

struggle enough as it is. I can't ask Kate to take over here either because I have my pride too. I was tasked with saving this power plant and the people nearby it. Leaving for even the few minutes of local time it would take to reacquire the coordinates John could still somehow destroy this power plant, contaminating the land for miles around. Can I take that risk? Would Lysanias want me to? I can't keep the door open, Darkvoid might find the Hub, I'm sure he's lurking around here somewhere. Hang on okay?

What are my assets? The armor increases my already decent strength. I can move fairly fast due to the fact I'm not limited by human biology and I have perfect control of the graviton drive. I have the IP cannons, the particle beams, and a mass driver that takes five seconds to charge up. I have a couple of light sabers, some security guards probably low on ammo, and all the wreckage around here if I can find a use for it. His asset, on the other hand, is a nearly impenetrable energy barrier in the form of small squares he can break off and use to attack me from a medium distance. According to what I'm reading online he prefers squares, but can make other shapes like disks or triangles. He doesn't seem to care about property damage, but apart from Lysanias I don't see anyone bleeding out around here. So that's odd.

What are his weaknesses? He's still human. If I had some flash grenades I could blind him, light still goes through the barriers, but he doesn't need to see me to just tighten his shield up. He waits for it to wear off and we're back to square one. I can't get to him. I need him... to come to me.

Rommie searched her memory for anything useful she saw on the way there, and a plan started forming in her mind. She smiled, dropping back into real time and triggering the graviton drive straight backwards. She shot past the parking lot, out of range of John's energy constructs, grabbing a light saber as she did so.

Alert for some trick John pulled the second layer of squares back and waited to see what she would do.

She chopped a tree from the edge of the parking lot in half with one swing, grabbing it in one hand and blasting upwards at an angle. Flying overhead now she chucked it at him, predicting he would simply send several squares sailing skyward to keep it from hitting him. He did, the shattered trunk and branches falling all around him. By the time he could look up again she was gone, slashing another tree and bringing it back to throw at him again. She repeated this several times, debris piling around John until she thought she had enough, and then she went for the cherry on top of the plan.

She picked up a truck, setting the light saber back against her leg.

The gravity drive was refocused to make sure the point of gravity pulling her around was above the truck, and it effortlessly lifted off the ground with her. John got a horrified look on his face as she flew overhead.

Oh, did you realize what I was doing? Let's see how much you like being a turtle after this, she thought, chucking it down at him. With the half dozen tree trunks littering the ground around him he couldn't easily smash his way out, he had only two choices; try and slash it to pieces before it hit his shields or double down and just let the shield take it. Either way might be a disaster for him, because he knew what trucks had in tanks on their underside.

He chose to let the shield take it, and Rommie silently thanked the mouth breathing sicko poisoning the planet for driving such a fuel inefficient vehicle *in this one and only case* because as her twin particle beams lashed out to cut it to pieces, the gas inside burst out, catching on fire. This lit the nearby wood on fire, and of course some dripped into the dome because it wasn't air tight. The wood was green and wouldn't burn well, but that was okay because Rommie didn't exactly want fire. She wanted *smoke*.

You still have to breathe, little man, Rommie gloated. *So if you can make your shield air tight, more power to you. Stand there and suffocate yourself. Alternatively, drop your shield and try and get out of there before you die of smoke inhalation. It's all the same to me.*

John took the option of trying to get out of there, retasking his shield to cut a path through the wood and escape the fire. Fire bad, and all that. *He might have cooked in there, I*

don't know if the shields reflect heat or not. Well, whatever. Rommie wasted no time in dropping him with the IP cannons the second he burst past them.

All his glowing squares winked out, and Rommie landed by Lysanias.

"This is Rommie to Kate. I need evac to the doctor immediately!"

"Rommie?" Kate answered. "Why can't Lysanias do it, he's got the-"

"It's Lysanias that's down. Hurry, he's dying!"

"Be right there."

Chapter 15

The Oracle told me that I would fall in love and that that man... the man that I loved would be The One. So you see, you can't be dead.

When: ???

Where: ???

Lysanias knew pain. He came to, eyes cracking open with a groan to look up at sterile white lighting above and the beeping of machinery nearby. Turning his head he saw to the left and right were some white curtains, and soft voices spoke too low to make out from somewhere else in the room. Lifting his head slightly (*ow*) he saw across from him another row of beds, at least presumably. He saw a bed and more white curtains across the way, making him wonder what had happened and where he was. He could feel a lot of bandages wrapped around his midsection, and put his head down again, scowling up at the ceiling. He could still feel, despite what must be drugs in his system because his thinking was muddy and he felt a bit floaty, so he felt a person quickly walking past the row of patients, stop, turn, walk back, stop, turn, walk back again and again.

At least it's not a prison? he thought to himself, beginning to laugh but then stopping because that hurt too. *Weren't we fighting someone? What's going on?*

The watch at his wrist buzzed, but he couldn't muster the strength to lift his arm and take a look.

Buzz, buzz, buzz, like a little bee. Why have I never been a bee? I could bee. Tee hee. Ow. Not a buzz, a pulsing.

Suddenly there was a noise like a door being thrown open somewhere and he heard a voice not unlike that of Rommie shouting at someone, and hurried footsteps made their way to him. Teddy and Rommie came into view around the curtain, both looking worried.

"You're awake!" Rommie said, sounding relieved.

"Hi beautiful," Lysanias managed. "I made you, ya know? I have so many beautiful woman in my life. You, my wand... What's her name again?"

"Oh yeah, he's on drugs. Look doctor, we need to decrease the dosage so he comes out of it. He can heal himself but not if he's like this!"

"He was pretty beat up, but whatever you think is best." He went over and adjusted something to the side that Lysanias couldn't see. Slowly his mind began to clear, as the doctor walked back and forth down the corridor of beds to try and spread his healing aura to as many people as possible.

"What happened?" he finally managed to ask. The pain had increased as his fuzziness decreased, and he was sorta craving that drug because that was good stuff.

"I was hoping you could tell me," Rommie replied. "I assume John got lucky and hit your mountain spirit? The one I stupidly suggested you bring out? And that somehow hurt you? I couldn't see it of course just the fact you suddenly collapsed with a bunch of injuries you seem to have not taken directly."

"It's coming back to me now. Yeah, he sprayed the area with those squares and more than I would have said were chance hit him. Did I nearly die? Because I ache all over."

"You had massive internal bleeding all on your right side," she explained. "Both arm and leg were smashed up, but nothing really broken. Can you heal yourself?"

"I can barely concentrate on you," he admitted. "I don't suppose you beat up John in my absence and managed to grab my wand?"

"I did, and I've got it." She put it into his hand. "Do you know a healing spell?"

"No, but I know someone who does. I think calling her out will be easier than me trying to heal myself in this state. You saved the power plant then? Good to hear it. Just a second."

He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again he was looking at his inner soulscape, the mountain that normally overshadowed everything looking a bit battered. There was the pedestal for Ragnarok who seemed to be missing, but at least the cottage was in one piece. He went over to it and knocked. The door flew open and he found himself being hugged and kissed by Rosalina, who was clearly and had clearly been crying.

"You're okay! I was so worried!" she kept saying between kisses.

"I'm fine, somehow," he admitted when the onslaught subsided and she was just holding him close. "Never took quite that hard a hit before but it's good to know all this wandering hasn't made me lose my touch."

"What's this?" She let him go a little but only stepped back enough so she could look at him. Her hands were still on his shoulders.

"Back home I would be injured all the time. My two friends were always having to save me. Giant snakes, robots, it was one thing after another once they woke me up. I've been a lot better lately, but apparently I still have some ways to go."

"It's not your fault," she insisted. "It was that stupid mountain spirit." She looked over at the mountain. "Why didn't you *dodge?!?*" she shouted at it and shook her fist.

"He's me, I think he took it because he, and I, felt nothing on this world could hurt him. I guess we learned the hard way we were wrong."

"Of course those things could hurt you," she sounded exasperated. "What did Silversteak tell you about where these people's power comes from? A weakening of the walls between dimensions from some event in the past. Akin to magic, he called it. You didn't think, huh, maybe I shouldn't let that glowing two dimensional knife edge hit me? As it could be close enough to magic to hurt me? Just to be safe? Really?"

"Hey, you live and learn, okay? I've got a lot to keep track of, I didn't think in a technological world I would need to think too much about my *spirit projection* being hurt. Clearly that's not the case, it can. How did that guy even see them? Doesn't make sense."

"Right, so in the future, if something glowing and menacing and seems to be even remotely harmful comes at you I have your word you'll dodge it? Every part of you?"

"Of course."

"Fine." She stared at him for a moment, then moved forward and kissed him again, staying there this time. To him she felt as warm and real and if she had been a person in real space, and her arms tightened around him again.

This is nice, if a bit unexpected. I guess she really was worried about me?

When she finally broke it off she was flushed and looked away. "Sorry, I shouldn't have done that. I was just really worried, okay?"

"It's fine. Did it seem like I wasn't okay with it?"

"No," she mumbled. "It was a bit more forward than I wanted to be. You never really expressed any romantic interest in me, and..." She trailed off, now turned away from him.

"I didn't realize that was an option," he confessed, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I mean, you are your own person now that I think about it, even if you're to a certain extent also part of my own power, or magic, or soul, or however this works. We can talk about that later, if you want. Right now if you could come out and heal me, that would be really ideal. I'm pretty hurt, and I don't think I can manage healing myself at the moment. Magic is my best bet, and that means you, if I can at least get you out you can heal me."

"Of course, why didn't you say so?"

"Someone started rather energetically kissing me!"

She laughed and spun around, seeming smug and happy at the same time. "I did do that, didn't I?"

"You did. By the way are you all right? You didn't get hit did you?" He looked her up and down.

She shook her head. "The attack passed through my bubbles but the mountain spirit was closer. He took the hit first, which made you pass out, which turned me back into a wand. So the armor may have taken some hits, but little old me is fine."

Little she says. She's taller than I am! "Will the mountain spirit be okay?" He looked over at the mountain.

"He's asleep right now, but he's still there. I think as long as you're alive, the spirit inside you will recover just fine. I wouldn't call him out right away, give him a chance to recover as well."

"Okay. You haven't seen Ragnarok have you?"

She shook her head again. "He's apart from you."

"Of course." *Hopefully still attached to the armor. I don't think I had it drawn at the time. No, she would have picked it up like the wand... No one would be able to see it, so Rommie wouldn't have been able to bring it near enough to me that I would be connected to it. I hope. I guess if it fell off the armor as I was moved, a rain would show it. I can just track it down, it's fine.* "I'll call you in just a second, listen for it okay?"

"Always. But Lysainas?"

"Hmm?"

"I know you've been busy and everything, but I feel like I should learn more wanded magic. And train more. You've been hanging out with Tessa lately, doing TK stuff and that's fine," she said this as if it was *not* fine, "just don't forget me okay? I know I can take my arts further, and there's plenty of useful wanded magic to learn. Clearly I have to practice my bubbles too. We'll have another three weeks right? Give me all the time you can."

I haven't really been training with her, have I? Of course we were focused on threats from above but this goes to show you never really can tell. "You're right. Look, you can join us, we can train together there's no reason we couldn't."

She made a face. "I suppose."

"Rosalina! Are you... jealous?"

She stomped a foot. "Yes I am, thanks for asking. When was the last time you raced karts with me? That happens here, in your soul, it doesn't actually take any time. You can't use that as an excuse."

"Oh." *Not the answer I expected. But she's not wrong, and I suppose I would rather her admit it, and talk to me, than not. That's what relationships are about, right? Talking things out.* "Okay. Tonight then, before I go to sleep. We can..." *Actually, it is sort of like that, isn't it? I mean Korra and Amy went on and on about it...* "We can have a date, how about that? We'll race karts, and you can show me more about golf, and this is my soul, I should be able to create a restaurant or something we can have a 'meal' at. Or go to a beach, whatever you want I should be able to create that as a scene." *Maybe the moon? She never really got to see it but I have, in the Dream. I could show her, she's into that sort of thing because of her star people and the sun magic. She might like that.* "Maybe I could surprise you with something, I don't know I'll have to try it."

"You really mean it?"

"Of course."

"It's a date then! Now let's get you healed!"

Lysainas opened his eyes.

"What are you smiling about?" Rommie asked him.

"Huh? Oh, nothing. She was just glad I was all right. Can you take a step back? Thanks. Rosalina, let our spirits work together to protect all people! Bankai!"

The wand vanished, and Rosalina stood there. "Man, you really did get beat up didn't you? Let's get you healed up."

She cast her healing spell several times, then moved down the row of beds healing those she could as Lysainas took off his bandages.

"So what's the situation?" she asked Rommie.

"You were unconscious more than an hour," she explained. "So you missed the fight."

He ground his teeth together. "How bad is it?"

"There are a total of 440 nuclear power plants in the world. Sixty percent of them came under attack. Eighty percent of those had personal trained well enough to shut them down at the first sign of trouble. So despite the super teams gaining entry they had no idea how to restart the reactor and make it go critical, and so they just seem to have walked away again. This left approximately fifty plants vulnerable. Fourteen percent of these fought off the invading supers resulting in the deaths of those supers and a number of casualties on the other side. Twenty percent were handled by Amelia's team, resulting in the supers being captured or killed with only one casualty. That's you by the way."

Of course.

"This meant 35 total reactors went critical and melted down, killing those nearby including the supers if not invulnerable enough to withstand the blast. As even a single reactor

meltdown makes history and is talked about for years, according to their internet, this is a disaster of unimaginable proportions. News reports the world over are... not good, to say the least."

Great. That number could have been thirty if I hadn't been taken out. Another failure for me, and this one cost many lives. Not as many as the death star thing, but still... "That's not going to inflame tensions at all."

"My sarcasm detector is going off or I would ask if you were still groggy from the drugs. World leaders are trying to calm their populations and honestly, for the most part, people are rushing to help those near the sites. But there's only so much help people can give when we're talking about radiation damage."

"At least their hearts are finally starting to be in the right place."

"It's a minimum baseline, I agree. Amelia and the others are currently trying to figure out what caused all the supers, who are being enormously agreeable but infuriatingly vague according to her, to do this. They were eagerly awaiting your return and send their apologies for not being here when you woke up. They are currently watching over the prisoners, making sure they don't make trouble."

"It's fine."

"They say when you feel up to it, please come by and see if you can get anything out of them with your mind meld technique. Tessa also passes along this joke to try and make you feel better. Ahem." She cleared her throat dramatically. "What does Spock always order when he goes out to eat? The Vulcan Mind Melt."

Lysanias stared at her.

"Perhaps my delivery needs work."

"Let's just go. Where's the armor, I want to retrieve Ragnarok as soon as possible and I'm sure Amelia doesn't want it lying around. Where are we, anyway?"

"This is the medical bay of Amelia's base. Kate has been bringing the most wounded here so the doctor's abilities can hopefully save them. The armor, both of them, were put under lock and key in the vault."

That's why he was walking back and forth? "That's fine. Sword first, I'll need the boosts anyway."

"As you wish."

"Hey, Rosalina, are you okay staying here to heal people?" he shouted over to her.

She finished a casting and looked over at him. "Go on, I'll find you later."

"Got it. Let's go."

The pair made their way to the vault where Lysanias was relieved to find the blade, and strapping it on went to the lower levels to meet Amelia and the others. They all expressed their happiness he was all right, if not exactly with the same fervor that Rosalina had. There was John, looking and feeling hopeful of all things, along with various others all behaving themselves behind metal barriers. He turned to John, who stood up.

"So are you the-" he started to say, but Lysanias held up a hand.

"How did you see my mountain spirit?" he demanded. "Did someone give you something that allowed you to see it?"

"Spirit?" John asked.

"That mountain looking thing you attacked not two hours ago. Don't tell me you forgot!"

"Oh, that! Is that what you call it? I didn't actually see it..."

"Of course you did! You attacked all of us, didn't you? All three of us at once. Are you going to claim you just got lucky and hit it like five times?"

"I see." He took a deep breath. "I suppose I do owe you an answer. I am sorry, by the way, if attacking it caused you any problems."

"Any probl- just tell me."

"I've never told anyone this, it's sort of the secret of my success." He seemed rather embarrassed.

"Don't care."

"I can see how you wouldn't, yes. You know how some people have more than one power, like Kate there is an empath and can teleport?"

“Yes, get to the point.”

“I’m like that. I can do the flashy energy barrier stuff, but I can also see people’s auras. I think it might be related actually, it’s all energy, so it might be me putting a small energy barrier inside my eyeballs and looking through that. I don’t know. Anyway, I can use it to help me see who is guilty, that’s why I’m such a good cop. That’s how I saw it, or rather the aura around it. I don’t know what it looks like or anything. I just thought it was someone cloaked or invisible somehow. So I attacked it.”

“So what you’re telling me is, out of over four hundred attacked power plants I *just happened* to go to the one being attacked by probably the only person on the entire planet that could not only see my spirit, but successfully attack and hurt it badly enough in one shot to take me out? That this *extremely unlikely* event of a cop, an offer of the law, deciding to attack the one place, the *first* place I went to, is simple coincidence?”

“Yes?” he answered hesitantly.

“Inconceivable. So tell me why. Why did you do this?”

“As I’ve told them, a man came to me about a week ago-”

“What man?”

“I don’t know. I had never seen him before, of course. He seemed to be average height, weight, hair color, eye color, he was the most bland person I had ever seen. But he said it would be a great idea for me to break someone out of prison and attack a power plant today. And for some bizarre reason I agreed with him!”

Lysanias looked to the others.

They all nodded. “That’s the story they’re all telling,” Monica told him. “We of course hit plants that were nearby but all of them saying the exact thing seems a bit rehearsed.”

“I can get to the bottom of it,” he promised, turning back to John. “You’re not going to make trouble for us, are you?”

“Oh no!” he assured him, waving his hands to emphasize the point. “They’ve told us what’s going on out there, how many of us succeeded. If I had succeeded, I mean, I would have died probably but the loss of life! I could never have lived with myself, you have to believe me.”

Lysanias did feel he was being sincere, and Kate put a hand on his shoulder. “I feel it too, he believes what he’s saying. Can you do me a favor?”

“Of course!” He didn’t realize he had agreed because Kate was being Kate, and part of her power was making people do what she wanted, but it was fine, he would have agreed anyway because he’s just that sort of fellow.

“You can do two people at once, right? I want to go with you, feel how you meld with someone. If it’s at all possible for me, I figure I should try to learn to do it.”

“I suppose, you’re halfway into people’s head anyway. It’s no big deal. If you do try something,” he told John, “everyone else here *will* end you. Energy barriers or not.”

Several light saber blades flashed to life, and he saw them grinning out of the corners of his eyes.

“I believe you,” he replied seriously. “I want to get to the bottom of this myself. I was mind controlled before this, and it wasn’t pleasant. I promised myself ‘never again’ but here we are.”

“Very well. Get the door open and let’s do this.”

The door slid back and he stepped out, surrounded by the others all covering him. He made no aggressive moves, simply stood there. “Do I have to do anything?”

“No. Hand.”

He took the man’s hand and Kate’s too, which was soft, and warm, and made him feel very nice, but shook that off. He closed his eyes and went to pierce their mental barriers.

Inside, John, he, and Kate were sitting in a movie theater like space with two seats. On the screen was playing what John had said, a totally normal looking person walking up to him and simply starting a conversation about blowing up a power plant. John didn’t seem to resist in the least just went along with it like it was the man asking John to donate items to a charity auction for kids with cancer. It then showed him breaking the Technomancer out of jail, them dropping off the radar as they headed to the plant and just sitting around for two days in a

cheap motel until the time came. Of course they went out and got food, but the two men didn't speak apart from planning their attack. The man stopped by a few times to make sure they were still onboard and when the time came they simply got up and without a further word drove to the place and started their attack.

"And that's what happened?" Kate asked, still holding his hand. Of course she didn't, strictly speaking, have to but he wasn't going to complain now was he? The theater was dark now, only a faint glow coming from the screen before them.

Wonder if I should take Rosalina to a movie, if we ever get out of this universe alive.

"That's what he remembers happening," he assured her. "Do you recognize the man?"

"John was right, I don't think I would remember the guy even if I did see him. He's so bland as to be totally forgettable. Can you track him down?"

"I can ask. I've been blocked on this planet before such as when I went to get Monica and because of my recent experience getting injured when it should be impossible I don't want to give a firm yes or no. If he's an alien or a projection or something he might not even exist."

"But he must be a super, how else would all of those people have just followed him without question like that?"

"Couldn't you tell that more easily than me? It's your type of power, not mine. In fact with me bringing you here it should be easier." An image of the man's brain appeared on the screen and he gestured with his other hand. "We're inside his mind right now, draw on my power and sort through his thoughts."

"I'll give that a try!" Both closed their eyes and he felt her scanning his brain through him.

Nothing, she said to him, as really they didn't have to "talk" at the moment. It doesn't seem like a power at all. A telepath, even a good one, even the best ones, leave traces another telepath can detect. This doesn't feel like that at all.

So it's something else then. Drugs?

Maybe. We can get a blood sample just in case, maybe that's why he stopped by every couple of days? Make sure whatever he was doing stuck? But they didn't get injected with anything, maybe some kind of airborne toxin?

Then why not release it over a city and just tell everyone to kill everyone else?

Good question. Do you think there's anything else we can learn here?

He thought a moment. Probably not. I'll break the meld.

Okay.

Both opened their eyes and explained what they had seen.

"So you didn't find the reason?" John finally said. "That's quite troubling. How can I ever trust myself again?"

"If I may?" Rommie asked.

"You have a suggestion?" Lysanias asked her. "What are you-" She had grabbed his hand and held it up to the man's head. "What?"

"I did inform you that the full sensor suite was made available to you once you were given Hub access. But this requires proximity. Yes, the problem is quite clear to me."

"What is it?" everyone asked. She dropped his hand and stepped back.

"This man's brain has been magnetically altered to be more receptive to certain ideas. I can show you a diagram if you would like."

"Like a reverse CAT scan?" Amelia asked. "Instead of magnetically reading the structure of his brain someone went in and changed it? But we need a huge apparatus for that, with enormous magnets, and helium, and whirring, and hours!"

"Apparently whatever did this did not."

"So it could have been a super, with magnetic powers?" Kate asked.

"Unlikely. The level of control over individual neurons, mapped in 3D space in real time, would be above the capability of even an 'F5' magnetic super."

"So it's alien technology then?"

"Wait, so am I still one suggestion away from blowing up a power plant?" John asked, stumbling backwards. "Am I a ticking time bomb?"

“Well, why don’t you come with me and we’ll go blow up the nearest power plant?” Rommie asked.

His demeanor changed and he brightened considerably. “That sounds perfectly reasonable.”

Everyone shared a look.

“Back in your cell until we know what to do to fix you,” Amelia ordered.

“But what about the power plant?”

“We’ll take care of it,” she insisted.

“That’s all right then.” He went and sat down again with a smile as the door closed. “As long as *somebody* blows it up, that’s fine.”

“We’ve got problems,” she said after he was locked in again. “And they start with K and they rhyme with Hewy, Dewey, and Louie.”

Chapter 16

It's the old, old story. Droid meets droid, droid becomes chameleon, droid loses chameleon, chameleon turns into blob, droid gets blob back again, blob meets blob, blob goes off with blob and droid loses blob, chameleon and droid.

When: That night

Where: Lysanias' room

Lysanias had been ordered to bed by the doctor after the group left the prison area because he didn't exactly trust this "magical" healing Rosalina had performed.

"While you seem perfectly fine, just indulge me and get a good night's sleep. I realize you'll probably Dream yourself places and I can't stop you, as long as you say it's as good as regular sleep."

"I've never had any ill effects."

"Very well. Come see me in the morning just in case, I'll want to give you a quick once over."

"Of course, doctor. But I really should try and track down whoever made all those supers believe blowing up power plants was a good idea."

"If they're an alien they're either on a ship flying back to report, they teleported somewhere, or they're still hanging around Earth. If they're still here they'll still be here tomorrow."

"Not necessarily-"

"Go to bed. You almost died, heck you were almost dead less than two hours ago. That's not something you shake off, even with 'magic'."

It kind of is, that's why it's magic. I was wounded "magically" and healed magically, so it balances out, right? And if the guy is going to leave tonight... Well, I can sit and ask the universe if waiting is detrimental to finding them, and go from there. "I suppose. I'll go there now."

"Get going."

He was now somewhat awkwardly standing in his room with Rosalina.

"We're still on for tonight, right?" she asked.

"Of course. If I'm going to lay down I can lay down just as easily and go see you, like you said it doesn't really take any time."

"Can you give me a few minutes to get ready?"

"I'll give you ten at least. I want to ask about that guy, despite what the doctor said. If we are going to lose him by me waiting, since their plan mostly failed," *no thanks to me*, "I'm out of here no matter what he says."

"I can respect that," she allowed. "Actually, why don't I just stay out until you're done, in case you do have to go somewhere?"

"If you want. It's just going to be me sitting here for ten minutes."

"It's fine!"

"Okay." He sat on the bed and threw his question to the universe.

Will it make any difference if I go after the being that modified John Tenzin's mind tonight or tomorrow?

The answer came back: *No*

There we have it then. I can take the night off. He opened his eyes to find Rosalina staring at him, and she quickly looked away. "We don't have to go anywhere."

"Great!" she exclaimed, popping up. But then she pressed her lips together. "What are you planning during your "Dream time" tonight? I wish I could be there with you."

"What I would like to do is somehow help those near the power plants that melted down. I understand about radioactivity, we had to shield against it on the Andromeda. I guess I'll look the armor over, see if it needs repair, then head out just to see if there's something I can do."

"But there is," she insisted. "I mean why wouldn't there be?"

"Huh?"

"Lysanias, if you can make some kind of tiny particle that creates gravity and it normally takes an interstellar civilization to have the resources to do that, you must be able to get rid of radioactivity. Can't you just make the half-life of all radioactive material in an area ten seconds or something?"

"Ahhhhh..." He considered. "Meta, can I make the half-life of all radioactive material in an area ten seconds?"

"Presumably," it answered. "Physical law is no barrier to your Dreaming abilities, from what I have observed. You simply must believe strongly enough, correct?"

"So I could clear the lands in a few minutes, make them safe again?"

"In theory."

He brightened considerably. "Rosalina, it seems your idea is a good one! I think you just figured out how can I help make up for my lapse earlier. You're the best, thank you!"

"Oh, sure." She looked down, pleased.

"You would mind if I kissed you again?"

She put a hand to her chest. "*Before* our date, good sir? What sort of harlot do you take me for?"

"I have no idea what that word means, but you were kissing me earlier when I woke up. Isn't it appropriate when thanking someone you like?"

"Hummmm," she put a finger on her chin and seemed to be thinking. "I suppose it could be a 'goodnight' kiss, here in the real world. Of course I suppose you would want *another* one after our date, which I guess would be fine. If it's a good date. Very well, I'll allow it."

They kissed, Rosalina seemingly trying not to laugh the whole time, but after a few seconds she couldn't help it and pulled back, laughing out loud.

"So you were playing me the whole time," Lysanias mused with a shake of his head. "For shame."

"I'll never tell." She leaned forward again, so he closed his eyes but just as their lips touched she melted away and he found he was holding a wand again.

So that's how it is, huh?

He got ready for bed, giving her "a few minutes to get ready" but he had some things of his own to get ready. Firstly looking up "what to do on a first date" and quickly glancing through, so he didn't make a complete fool of himself. *Just be yourself, huh? Try to get her to laugh, complement her, seems straightforward enough.* He lay down holding the wand and closed his eyes. The mountain looked a little better when he looked over at it, and Ragnarok was there where it should be. *So all is well. Now let's see about this date of ours. First, to see if the stage can be set.* He concentrated, picturing a door just sitting there, that when opened would show a city scene. He had pictured Clary's home city, he had walked around it a bit with the other shadow hunters and knew sort of what cities looked like. The door appeared and he peeked inside, and he was gratified to find a darkened city street beyond, stars above and lights on in buildings and traffic lights as he wanted.

Hey, that worked. I figured it would be easier even than a Dream because this is just my soulscape. Why can't anything I want appear here? Next, to get a little help. He closed the door and turned. "Lumas, can you hear me? Will you help me?" He waited a moment. *This should work, right? They're seemingly a part of Rosalina, and so in theory a part of me, because she's a part of me. I've never really addressed them directly before...*

As though hesitant several of the star like figures appeared, dancing a dance of query and astonishment. "Thanks for coming fellows. I want to take Rosalina to dinner, and through that door and down the street is a cafe. Can you act as 'waiters' for the night? I'd really appreciate it, rather than us just sitting there completely alone. It will make the experience more 'real' if you will."

They went into a huddle, glancing back at him to make sure he hadn't moved, and then flew off through the door.

"Thanks!" he called after them, closing it. *What would happen if I made the door vanish now? Would they be... gone? Let's not try it. Now for me.*

He looked down at himself and replicated the date clothes he had worn for Amy and Korra, changing the style and color so it wasn't the exact outfit. *Done.* He took a deep breath, unable to stall anymore and walked over to the cottage. *I can do this. It's just talking to her, and we're done kart stuff lots of times. There's nothing different about this.* But of course there was, and he stood there a minute or two before knocking.

Rosalina answered, and both burst out laughing. She has dressed in a teal tress with a white lace trim that reached her thigh. On the center of the chest was a white star with a golden orb set in the center, and it was sleeveless with a white collar. She had on long white gloves, and a pair of white heels. Star shaped earrings hung down from her ears and her long hair has braided into a thick strand at her back. Of course her small silver crown perched atop her head too.

"This really is a date, huh?" she asked, stepping out and closing the door. She leaned back against it, hands behind her back.

"Did I think I wouldn't take it seriously? You look great, Rosalina. Every inch a princess."

"Thank you, my prince."

He smiled, bowed, and offered his arm. "If my lady would like to come with me?"

She giggled but took it, and the two made their way to the door. "This is new," she offered.

"Just a little experiment." He opened it and she dropped his arm to step through.

"Oh wow, a whole city!" she exclaimed, spinning around.

"Well," he hedged, "not exactly. Take a look behind that building there." He pointed, willing it to be what he wanted.

She looked questioningly at him, but he closed the door and she headed over there. Looking around the side of the building she gasped and looked up. "It's made of cardboard? But it looks so real from the front!" She was moving her head back and forth from the front to the back, trying to see the difference between the back and the front, and tapping it.

It worked. I wanted this building to be just a front, like a set piece on a play. So I made the back look like a cardboard cutout and made the other three edges vanish. "I only had a few minutes, you'll have to forgive a little corner cutting here and there."

She laughed. "Corner cutting, oh, that's terrible." She walked back over to him took his arm again. "You'll be punished for that!"

"Punished, or pun-ished?"

"That's it, date over. Where's that door?" She looked around.

"Wait, you don't mean that do you?"

She turned around and had her tongue stuck out. "You deserved it."

"Maybe. Come on, there's a place to eat just up the street."

"That's fine." The two started walking. "Actually, I almost feel more at home in a two dimensional world. Does that seem odd? Like buildings that only have the side you can see at the moment is the way the world is 'supposed' to be. Does that make any sense?"

"Not really. Maybe it's because you always have that one eye covered?"

"Maybe."

The two entered the restaurant and were seated by a Lumia, which Rosalina exclaimed over as they left.

"How did you do that?" she asked.

"What, get them to help? I asked them. I'm sure they want to see you happy just as much as I do."

"Huh. Simple as that huh?"

"Yup."

Another Luma brought them menus, and she asked "Can we really order anything from this?"

"Why not? Of course they aren't going to make it, whatever you want will just sort of appear and they'll bring it out. There's only so much I can do, after all, getting them the ingredients and ask them to cook... Can they even cook?"

"Never asked them to, I don't know. They don't eat, so probably not. It's still great. You really tried to think of everything. Thank you."

"Of course."

They picked out what they wanted, of course it was all things he had eaten before because otherwise how would he know what they tasted like? After that they sat in silence for a moment, a little embarrassed.

"So-" both said at the same time.

They laughed. "Go ahead," Lysanias told her.

"What do you think our chances are?"

Wow, she is pretty forward. I guess it's a good thing to wonder about, if we're going to take this dating thing seriously and progress to having a relationship. She would want to know what I thought of her, I mean I'm her master, I control if she comes out or not. That's a terrible amount of influence to have so she'll probably proceed very cautiously. If I really do decide to win her heart, and she's honestly the only woman I could have that kind of relationship with while wandering, I have to be completely honest with her and not joke around where her feelings are concerned. "I like our chances," he decided to tell her. "I'm getting to know you a little, and I know you're willing to try new things, and learn, and you even let me make armor for you so you could stay by my side more. You're kind, and thoughtful, and I want to learn more about you not only so I can call you out easier, but so I can do things like this for you." He indicated the restaurant. "Things that can make you happy, make your existence better while you're not called out. Oh, but I don't want you to think I think you're some kind of possession, that I can call up at a whim, and I'm just making you a pretty cage! I want you to know I think of you as a trusted friend who happens to be in a wand shape when I go unconscious. I don't dread calling you out, even if I don't remember all the time no matter what happens between us I do want you by my side during all this. You're agreeable, and not pushy or whiny, and so far I really do like you. I mean I don't think a wand spirit would choose someone they wouldn't get along with, but it could happen. I think you like me too, I mean you let me kiss you, and if you want to see how far our feelings for each other can go I'd really like that too. I don't know that I'm falling for you yet, but ask me again after the date is over. We get along well enough and isn't that the best place to... start... from? What is it?"

By the end of this her eyes were wide and her face was red.

"Did I say something wrong? I am kind of new to this. Was that not... what... you meant?"

"I actually meant in terms of the aliens," she finally managed. "What you thought our chances of winning were, given all that's happened. Saving this reality and all that."

"Oh."

She smiled then, seeming to relax. "But you know what? It's nice to know I can ask stuff like that and get a real answer. You didn't hold anything back, did you?"

"I think to hold anything back, especially to you, would be very disrespectful. I'm not going to play with your heart. Not only because losing your support as both a wand and yourself would be a big blow to me, it just isn't worth it." He put his hand over hers on the table. "You're worth it, you're worth putting in some thought both here and out there. This is an adventure we're both on, even if you didn't ask for it, I want to make sure you don't regret choosing me in that shop for a second."

"Thank you," she said softly, turning her hand and taking his. "And for the record, I do like you, even if you still need a little training in how to dodge."

"I'm never going to live that down, am I?"

"Nope!" she said brightly.

The two pulled apart because the food arrived, and both started to eat.

"To answer your earlier question, I don't like our chances very much at the moment. Everything we've prepared for hasn't happened. The attack today went in a totally different direction than anyone expected, so I can't even imagine the form the next one will take."

"You could ask though, right?"

"I'm going to have to," he agreed. "But I only get one or two word answers, or a vague concept. Direction of something? Yes or no? A time? I'm your guy. Figuring out what form an attack will take in three weeks? I don't know. My hope is..."

"Yes?"

"I hope we can capture that guy I saw in John's memory, or at least whatever was behind it. It must be alien, maybe I can go into its mind and figure out where they're coming from. Take the fight to the shadow avatar, given they seem to have unlimited resources."

"And if you can't?"

He shook his head. "I really don't know." *Like how do I defend against him magnetically changing my brain to think letting him go is a good idea? Tessa maybe? She's learning magnetic stuff... Hummmm.*

They ate in silence for a moment.

"So what were you going to say?" she asked.

"Oh, right! Tell me about this tower of yours. You've mentioned it, but it's impossible, right?"

"It sure is! I was a wand in a shop for the longest time. I clearly have the sense of sleeping there, until you touched me for the first time and I knew 'yes, that's the one for me.' But at the same time I have this lingering memory of some sort of observatory that was my home. That's where I learned and met up with the Lumas, who taught me the sun magic I use to summon my little sun. Or maybe I summon them, and they summon the sun? I don't exactly know, I mean every time I've used the spell they show up. But I learned about the stars, and read many books in the library, and was... kind of lonely, honestly. But it couldn't have happened! I'm a wand! I'm your wand! So it doesn't make sense."

He shrugged. "We know you exist in other realities, at least according to Meta's explanation that all stories are true somewhere. I mean you remember when I made your armor? A search on your name resulted in thirteen million results, and the images of you just kept coming! People love you here, at least the version of you in the stories they have of you."

"Humph, some of those images were *completely inappropriate*. I mean me as a mermaid I could *kind* of see, at least most of those covered me up to some extent with stars or shells, but the outfits some artists put me in..."

"What was wrong with them? I liked more than a few, honestly wouldn't mind seeing you dressed up in some we saw..." He grinned at her.

"Don't screw things up, and maybe one day you will," she allowed in a sultry tone. "So what are you saying?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know how wands are made, he said he melted down silver to make the core, some kind of eggshell maybe he said? But you usually have that silver crown on." He pointed to it.

She touched it. "I guess I do, I just sort of put it on automatically, I feel weird not wearing it. Like it's a part of me, you know? You don't think..."

He shrugged. "It's not impossible your crown fell through a crack in the world from your reality to the one Susan lives in. He found it, melted it down, and the imprint of you, the dimensional energies I've picked up from wandering, my own nature as a progenitor, they all came together to create 'you.' Tell me, would you want to visit the world the original Rosalina came from, if she's more than just a story? She must exist, you looking *exactly* like the pictures of what a 'Rosalina' is supposed to look like would be clearly inconceivable otherwise. We can ask Silverstreak, I'm sure they would at least not dismiss the request out of hand, if you wanted to know more about yourself."

She sat thinking a moment.

"No."

"No?"

She gave her head a shake. "Nope. Whoever any other version of me is, I'm not that person. I'm your wand. I'm Rosilana the wanderer, companion and possibly girlfriend of Lysanias, savior of realities. I don't need a past, my past will come as I stand by your side.

That's who I am. Maybe I started as a crown, or magic put me together or maybe it was Inari who had a hand in the whole thing. Would you put it past her?"

"I wouldn't put anything past her. I mean a watering can?" They both laughed. "But in this case if she helped you to exist, I would thank her."

"So who cares? Let other 'Rosalinas' exist, it doesn't make my existence any less meaningful. Whatever life they have, they are welcome to it, for I have mine, with you. And I do exist, otherwise how else would I be sitting here talking to you? I'm me, isn't that all that matters?"

"It's enough for me. But let me know if you ever change your mind."

"I will. Thanks for thinking of me."

"This observatory though, do you have *good* 'memories' around it, or would you never want to see it again?"

"I guess it would be sort of nostalgic, I wouldn't hate it if we ran into something like it and want to blow it up. Why do you ask?"

"No reason," he answered slyly. Because of course he did have a reason.

The pair talked and the Lumas refilled their glasses and took their plates, and at the end of the meal he thanked them and told them to head back through the door. They did, and hand in hand the pair made their own way back to it. What Rosalina didn't know is that this was a different door than the one they had come through, the original having been changed when they got close. That's why he had sent the Lumas on ahead, so they could get back okay.

"Let's go somewhere else for a bit before we head back to the normal cottage area," he suggested.

"We don't *have* to race," she told him with a smile. "I just thought that would be a nice date thing I knew about. If you have something else planned, I'm all for it."

Never thought about it that way, she does have a sort of limited experience. I mean we both do, where dating is concerned, but for her there might not be much else she knows to suggest as an activity. I'll have to try and expand her horizons if we're going to keep dating like this, I would want her to choose half the time, it shouldn't just be me picking what we do. "No, I want to, this is just a stop along the way. I know how much you love it, and I enjoy it even if I'm really bad at it so far." *I do like seeing you laughing and excited as you race around the track, and racing you is fun. It's a good way for us to do something you really like so why wouldn't I want to do it?* "Close your eyes."

"I guess I'll trust you. No stealing a kiss now!"

"I wouldn't dream of it." *Okay, I would. I am coming to really like kissing you.*

She closed her eyes and Lysanias led her through the door by the hand. "Okay, open them."

She did, and looked around in wonder. They seemed to be standing on the moon, the sun a tennis sized ball in the distance, Earth hovering there half in darkness, and clear stars shining overhead. "Oh, it's wonderful," she exclaimed, clapping her hands together.

"I hoped you would like it. I got to see it because I can stand on the moon in the Dream, but you not so much. You seemed a bit disappointed so I thought I would bring the view to you." He gestured and a thick blanket appeared in the lunar dust. "Would you like to sit down?"

"I see how it is," she playfully told him, beeping his nose. "It's a beach scene just for you, but on the moon so it *seems* to be for me. Well played, Lysanias, well played."

"Beach?"

"We are here to starbathe, aren't we?" She spun, her dress becoming a two piece bathing suit. She plopped down on the blanket and looked up at him.

"Are you going to join me or what? Or are you just going to gawk?"

"Is that an option?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Not yet it isn't," she replied playfully.

"Very well." As he sat down he was wearing bathing trunks, and after a moment the two were hand in hand again, looking up at the stars. They sat in silence, the view before them

too large and humbling to suggest a topic, but that was okay, they could just enjoy each other's company. But after a time Lysanias spoke up again.

"I do have one more surprise, if you're interested."

"You don't have to give me everything on our first date," she told him. "Gifts from you aren't what I'm after."

"I didn't think they were. Still, now that I know I can make changes like this I've been thinking of one other next to your cottage."

"You better not disturb my garden."

"Not *that* close, obviously."

"Obviously. Okay then, lead on." He got up and helped her up, she brushed her legs off which totally wasn't a move to draw attention to them, by the way. The fact she happened to do it right when Lysanias was looking at her was simple coincidence.

"Do you want to change your outfit again? We're going back."

"Do *you* want me to change my outfit again?"

"I just want you to be comfortable."

"That's not the kind of answer I would expect from you."

He laughed. "Very well, no, I don't want you to change your outfit again."

"That's what I thought. I guess it's fine, it's not really hot or cold here so what I wear doesn't really matter apart from looking nice for the person I'm with." She leaned over to him and whispered in his ear. "Usually when I'm gardening or hanging out in the cottage I don't wear anything. At. All."

Lysanias felt his face heating up and she laughed, skipping ahead of him.

I wonder if that's true or just her teasing me?

They made their way back to the door, which Lysanias had changed again to go back to the "main" soulscape. This time with an addition. As they went through Rosalina looked up at her new tower, complete with a lens poking out the top of the roof of the building.

"You made me an observatory?" she asked, sounding quite surprised. Then she realized. "Is that why you were asking?"

"That's right. Come see." He led her inside and he had given it several floors, the first was a comfortable living area with a fireplace that had a fire going, and thick couches and rugs spread around. The next floor was the study area, with shelves of books extending the entire circumference. Along with desks, tables, squishy chairs for light reading, and plenty of windows. This area was also lit by modern lamps, nice and bright to read by unlike the lower floor that was just lit from the fireplace and some candles on the walls.

"Are they real?" she asked, running her hand along the spines of the books.

"They have words printed in them," he assured her. "I think. I imagined them as being real. Of course I can only make what I know, so it's just going to be things I've read or experienced in book form. We won't be able to bring real books into here, just copies of them."

"Still, that's nice."

The next floor was a display area of sorts. Along the walls he had imagined display cases full of the different coins he had seen on his travels, along with a diorama of the wand shop, a meadow scene with the Lumas waving, the memory island they repaired inside Clary, and more. This was lit by a small replica star, shining in the center of the room.

"Feel free to redecorate, obviously," he told her. "This is your place, this stuff is just a suggestion."

"I love it, I won't change a thing!" She paused. "Until tomorrow, at the earliest."

They laughed.

And finally the forth floor was the telescope room. The windows here seemed in darkness, despite the lower rooms having windows lit up by the sun, and there were star charts and a desk with paper and pens near the seat one would sit in to look through the telescope. "There are really stars out there," she exclaimed, peeking through it. "Despite it being sunny and blue skies at the cottage. This place really is however you want it."

"If it sticks around. Hopefully the more I learn about space, we have been focused on it recently, the more stars will appear here that you can find."

"All of this, it's wonderful," she told him. "You've really outdone yourself."

"Thanks. It didn't cost nothing."

They both laughed.

"Unlike the door I made to be temporary, I've tried to see this new tower as a part of my soulscape, just like the mountain and the cottage. If you want any additions or anything, let me know. Unless you can do it yourself, like with your house. Give it a try sometime!"

"Right now the whole thing is perfect, I want to keep it just as you envisioned it for me. Be careful though," she said playfully. "You keep this up, I won't want to come out, I'll be too busy reading or watching the fire, or looking out at the stars."

"Oh, I hadn't actually thought of that. Well, hope you liked it, the tower is getting knocked over, let's head out."

"I'm just joking!" she told him. "I'll..." she turned away. "I'll always come when you call."

"I hope that's true."

"Now come on." She grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the stairs. "I have a surprise for you, too. We haven't raced karts in so long, I've got a bunch of new tracks for us to try!"

"Let's go!"

And so the date continued. The pair raced the new tracks, even trying a variant (on a motorbike at Rosalina's insistence for some reason) where two people were on one vehicle. She steered, he handled items, which there were more of so it was more a running kart battle than a kart race. He had one arm around her, still in her bathing suit, while he grabbed and threw turtle shells, banana peels, and fake item blocks at the Lumas who were on the other karts. Concentrating on driving let Rosalina really let loose, and he saw just how far he had to go to offer her a serious challenge. *She's really taking it easy on me.* She was jumping, and drifting, and giving the finger to physics as she raced along the sides of walls and boosted and did tricks in the air off jumps. He could really feel her joy and exhilaration as she zipped around the track, holding on tight so he didn't just fly off the bike.

Finally it was time to say goodnight, and both honestly told the other they really enjoyed the date, and promised a second one soon. (They decided one a week was probably a good compromise, they were "joined at the hip" anyway and dating every day wasn't really how real couples did things. They wanted to try being a "real" couple and were already halfway there, because while they did things together, like disastrously fighting supers, they could also do things apart, like when she was healing people with magic. They both felt this was the best way to go, and not hang out together 24/7 at least for now)

Rosalina did allow Lysanias a second goodnight kiss at her door, closing it softly behind him as he walked away. He spent a moment looking at the tower, solidifying its existence in his memory so it would hopefully remain, and opened his eyes.

I think that went really well. What did I have to be nervous about? He set the wand down next to his bed and stroked it. *Thank you, Rosalina. You really are a wonderful friend and I hope someday soon we decide we can be more. Huh, I guess I am falling for you.*

His eyes narrowed. *Fun time is over, now it's time to work again.*

Chapter 17

I don't know, man, that sounds like a lot of work

When: Later that night

Where: Power Plant

"Thank you for saving me, by the way," Lysanias said.

"Of course!" Rommie, sitting next to him in the raindrop ship, said eagerly. "I don't often get the chance to act directly, mostly serving in an advisory role. It was nice to see a wanderer under my protection in danger and actually have the means to do something about it."

The pair were flying in the raindrop ship to the various meltdown sites around the globe, for one because Rommie didn't need to sleep so had no problem accompanying him all night, and two to take care of things should he find himself awake at an inopportune time. Both were in armor, they were going to have to fly around, and he had made it for just that purpose after all. The watch sat on the console next to them, the link needed to keep Rommie functioning at full potential. Plus it had the radiation sensor they would need to make sure what he was doing was effective. If he woke up the watch would tumble to the ground wherever he was, and he would never find it again. This way it could stay nearby, Rommie could handle flying the ship, and he could just come back again when he next Dreamed.

"How are the news reports going?" he asked. "Though I doubt people could be more panicked right now."

"To a large extent you are correct. Initially sentiment against supers was reaching an all time high, given how it was known they had attacked power plants en masse. It was illogical to see them doing this without an outside instigator but humans are not exactly the most logical of creatures. Luckily once Amelia announced the reason behind the attacks on power plants the news of alien interference began to counteract that negativity. People are still frightened, 'if they can do that what else can they do' is the general sentiment. With most of the greatest electricity producing facilities shut down they are frightened in the dark. Not a good idea no matter how advanced the civilization. Interest in solar power is predicted to spike four thousand percent in the coming days. Suspicion of neighbors is at an all time high, as no one can be trusted to be in their right minds anymore.

"In positive news, supers are turning themselves in, and those who were wounded in the attacks and taken to hospitals are receiving treatment under a lighter guard. Previously it was questioned if they should receive treatment at all. Now that we understand as long as someone doesn't suggest blowing something up within earshot they're perfectly safe. Scans are being taken but returning them to normal will be a solution years in the making. Brain function being only partially understood, to magnetically manipulate the brain was not even considered until now. With most having no scans to compare to, it would be difficult to see where the 'damage' was done so that it could be corrected. Such a project, even to restore normal function to those affected by this attack would not be received well, with an 87% chance of extreme negative backlash the world over."

"I could see why. People already don't trust government here, look at how Samantha or Amelia hate the current president. Imagine if a man like that could have a rally and everyone walked out with their brains actually altered!" *At least with the mind trick, it only lasts a few minutes. Anyone on the fence about what he discussed would suddenly think it was the greatest thing ever, and be totally unaware their thinking had been changed externally.*

"The implications are indeed troubling. With less supers keeping the peace crime rate is soaring in some areas, though there are places where cooler heads are prevailing and keeping order. So the planet is not descending into complete chaos. I estimate a 72% chance in the next week people will begin to accept their new reality and work towards the goals you laid out in your initial speech at the white house."

"That high!?" He went on proudly. "Maybe people are more logical than-"

She gave him a look. "I'm kidding of course, it's only 21%."

He snorted. "Oh. Great. Wow, you can make jokes now? I'm impressed, you did get me with that one."

"After observing your interactions with Rosalina I am attempting to modify my speech patterns to 'fit in' better with the group. As that was received positively I will weight my future- I will try to talk more like that in the future. Coming up on the site now," she announced, smoothing splitting the graviton drive fore and aft to keep them from smashing into the front of the cabin. "And you're sure you want me to hold onto... Myself?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"It's just strange to carry myself around, that's all. I have never done such a thing before, having a body and the means to control it on my 'person' so to speak. The site is now directly below us."

Well, it's a day for firsts I guess. First date with Rosalina, first time the Hub AI is given a body and some degree of autonomy. Hopefully in a minute first clearing of radiation the world has ever known. "Let's see what we've got then." She grabbed the watch and he grabbed her, willing them outside the ship. They fell a second until the gravity drive could kick in, and he looked around. As everyone had been evacuated from the area it was quiet and dark, and both dropped.

"Radiation levels are spiking," she announced. "As we have yet to determine the effect radiation would have on your Dream self I recommend we limit our approach to this altitude."

Limit our approach to this altitude? Keep trying to fit in, with statements like that it'll be awhile. Of course, she is sort of in "mission" mode so it's a special case. "Roger!" They slowed and he crossed his arms. "So just focus on the area below me and see if I can accelerate the breakdown of radioactive material?" *See, now I'm doing it!*

"However you choose to do it, creating gravitons simply required you to think about gravity, this process should be no different."

I wonder. "Better do this first." He created some powerful lights in the sky, just a ball of light hovering there so he could see what he was doing.

"Why not create a spotlight with a battery, and I'll hold it," Rommie suggested, "then you won't have to concentrate on it?"

"That's fair, didn't want you to think you were my... What did Rosalina call it? My caddie?" He did then, then looked down at the remains of the plant below him. *Okay radioactive material, you're playing in my Dream now. Dream powers- activate!*

He concentrated a moment, willing any radioactive material in a bubble around him to have a half-life of seconds instead of many, many years.

"Radioactivity directly below us is... dropping," announced Rommie. "We will have to see what sort of range you can cover but this does seem a viable option. Please keep up this effort until radioactivity reaches normal background levels."

As usual with him the results varied a bit, going from a whole kilometer at once to barely a few meters, but Rommie designed a pattern that took best/worst case into account and in only moments they had cleaned the entire area and were on their way to the next one. They repeated this pattern once more, then at the next place he was having trouble getting more than a few meters again when suddenly Rommie announced the entire area was clear out to 10,000 meters.

"Let's do more of that in the future," she suggested.

"Were it so easy." *I'm doing the same thing, seconds apart, why suddenly could I get so much more area? It's so weird being me.*

The pair flew across the landscape, making sure it was truly all gone, when suddenly Rommie stopped. "There's someone down there!" She pointed.

"What? Are you sure?"

"Yes, it's a human heat signature. My infrared vision picked it up. Perhaps one of the supers that caused this? One of the invulnerable ones?"

"We should bring them in."

"Agreed. Follow me."

He followed her down, noticing this area seemed to be more "exploded" and less "evacuated" than the last two. "Is it just me or did something different happen here?" he asked.

“Agreed. There was an explosion here, not simply the reactor going critical because of coolant loss. This super may have used a different method of triggering the disaster.”

“Great, that’s just what we need. Someone powerful enough to cause, and survive, a nuclear explosion.” The pair landed and started digging the guy out, finding him stuck under what was probably a ruined house. *Good thing it wasn’t deeper or she never would have-*

“Wait,” Rommie said, looking down at the man, who was now looking up at them.

“What is it?” The man was somewhat unrecognizable, covered with dirt as he was. He wasn’t wearing anything, and all his hair was gone, *maybe burned off in the explosion? I don’t see any danger though.*

“Oy, can I get some help here?” asked the man. “I’m pinned under this bloody beam.”

The man was trapped, it looked like a heavy piece of wood was across his body, and Lysanias looked to Rommie.

“Amelia has a file on this man,” she told him. “Fairly early in her career there was an attack on a casino. This man was present. Apparently after eating an apple he exploded. Amelia barely got him into the air in time to prevent a massive amount of death. She listed him as deceased, but apparently he is also invulnerable enough to survive his own explosion and subsequent decent. I will update the file with this new information.”

“And here he lays, at the site of a meltdown we both thought was different from the others.”

“There is a 94% chance he is the cause.”

“What are the chances-”

“Hey, you two up there! Are you gonna help me or what?”

“What are the chances he was maybe a test subject for the aliens? They found out he could explode and so tested out to see if he would follow orders and do it?”

“Impossible to say,” she admitted. “Even scanning his brain would not reveal the exact time of any interference. Now if we scanned and found none...”

“He’s a person that would go around blowing things up on his own initiative,” he finished horrified. “I can’t take any chances with this guy. Cover him.”

“Right.”

He easily yanked the beam up and out of the hole the man was in, tossing it aside as Rommie brought all her weapons to up, trained on the man. He started to get up but Lysanias yanked him into the air as well, to hover before them.

“Finally,” said the man. “Wasn’t sure how I was going to get out of that. You can put me down- hey, aren’t you the Iron Angel?”

In answer Lysanias raised both his hands, middle two fingers down and gripped by his thumbs. “Iron phalanx,” he intoned, bringing them together before him. A box of primordial metal came into existence around him, sealing itself up. It included air holes, a slot for food to be passed in that could be locked, and a stout door on one side held in place by a bar of the same substance. Only then did he breathe a sigh of relief and set the box gently down where he could. A man’s screaming and pounding from inside the box could be heard.

“Iron phalanx?” Rommie queried.

He shrugged, lowering his hands. “Amelia said it’s traditional to ‘name’ your ‘attacks’ or at least shout something. Jason was doing the same thing, actually, when I fought him. She showed me some of those cartoons she likes to watch, so I thought I would give it a try.”

“I see. And did you find the experience uplifting or meaningful in such a way as to make you more likely to continue this tradition in the future with your abilities?”

“Eh, could go either way.”

“I suspected as much.” She waved the watch in the direction of the box. “I am not detecting any build up of radiation that would indicate he is about to explode. This box will hold an explosion of unknown potential, will it not?”

But what was the percentage? “Oh it will, don’t worry about that. So maybe he can’t do it on command, or he needs to recharge between events. He’s not coming out of that box until I know he’s safe.” He looked over and a door in the air opened to the prison level of the base. “Shoot, I forgot to say ‘teleportal door’ or something. Ah well, next time for sure.” Several robots were standing guard and he went through, explaining who was in the box and where he had been found. He dragged the box with him, setting it at the end of the hallway.

"I will alert... someone," Epic promised him. "In all honestly he may be stuck in there until this crisis is over and he can be studied to see if he can be made safe. At the moment there really is no good place to keep someone like him, given the chaos in the world today."

"Well, there's no toilet in there," he cautioned.

"Ah, that could be a problem. I will make inquiries."

"Thanks. If nothing else maybe I can meld with him and make him forget he has this power. Then he can be locked up, maybe not remembering why, but at least safely."

"I shall note that as an option."

"Thanks. See you later."

He stepped through and closed the door.

The remaining power plants were dealt with that night, with Lysanias getting 6 hours, 6 hours, and then 8 hours of Dream time. Of course, while his original Dream self was flying around with Rommie he had to go on his own, which slowed him down, but after six hours he had the pattern down and knew what he had to do. No other people crawled out of rubble, so he simply made the radioactive material "evaporate" at tremendously increased speed, as he was able to make the radiation in the area glow with his powers easily enough. As the glow went away he could see the area it was leaving, and when it was all gone he could move on. With that done he felt he had accomplished a lot that night, and decided to just sleep the rest of the time normally.

He knew tomorrow was likely to be a busy day.

"Good morning," Rosalia said with a stretch and a yawn after he called her out the next day. He had gotten dressed and checked the news, which he couldn't wait to share with her. She was dressed in her track suit, and holding her wand. Clearly it was not a day for princessing, it was a day to *work*.

"Morning. Great day for fishing, ain't it?"

"Is it?" She looked out the window, and it was nice enough out. "It does look nice. Hey, thanks for last night, I really did have a great time."

"I did too. Next time is your turn to pick where we go and what we do, so give it some thought okay?"

"I'll see what I can come up with. Maybe Meta can help me," she muttered. "So what happened? Did you do it?"

"Not that I want to brag, or anything, but Epic, can you show her the news report?"

"Of course," Epic told him, the TV switching to a news channel.

"Scientists are stunned this morning as a figure, seeming to be the Iron Angel, has been visiting all the sites of the reactor meltdowns," the reporter was saying. "You won't believe what they've found. Original estimates for when the land would be safe to return to bordered on five hundred years, but as of right now no one can find any trace of radioactive material at all in over thirty sites total. I'm getting reports that the figure has been cleansing sites all night, at times even appearing to be in multiple places at once. A figure in armor believed to be Iron Angel simply flies up, looks around for a moment, and flies away again. Tests after they leave are all negative, leading to massive speculation about exactly what they're doing, if anything, to cleanse these contaminated sites. Those who were evacuated may be able to return as soon as today, once scientists are convinced the radiation is gone for good. We will keep you up to date as this story continues to develop." The TV went off again.

"That's great, how did you manage the trick of appearing in multiple places? Can't you only do Spirit Clone Technique while awake?"

"My Dream self got a lot of time last night, thankfully," he explained. "So technically I'm just finishing up out there, even as I'm now here."

"Dreaming is weird. Still, I'm glad it worked. So could you know the future? Like if you had a late dream, say at 6AM in the morning that went for eight hours, that would be 2PM

right? Then you would wake up at 7:00 and know what the next seven hours of the future would be.”

He blinked at her. “I never considered that,” he admitted. “The math works out, and that’s how Dreaming works, I *would* actually know the future!” *Whatever had happened that morning and part of the afternoon, anyway. Stock numbers, lottery numbers, disasters, the list goes on.* “You have really good ideas, you know that? I did not consider the implications of me running around as my Dream self while my Awake self lived the same time later slash earlier. It was just a hassle like when I was building stuff in the last world, to avoid myself and come back at the right time. But now that you mention it, it’s a huge benefit. Just that power alone, a side effect of Dreaming, many people would give almost anything for.” *Think of the lives that could be saved if you could get tomorrow’s paper today! Of course it wouldn’t always work because sometimes I only dream for an hour or two instead of eight, so by that time it would be too late, I would need to get up. But maybe I could take an afternoon nap and at least get a “preview” of the hours to come.*

“Guess you’ll have to keep me around then.”

“For sure. Want some breakfast? I’m heading down there and then we’ll see about tracking this alien or whatever he is down.” *Have to remember to create a gateway to the moon, it will have dissolved by now.*

“Just don’t forget I want some time to practice my bubble and maybe learn a new spell.”

He chuckled. “If we confront whoever did this it may be you and Rommie taking him down, so you’ll get plenty of practice in magic today, don’t you worry about that.”

“What? Me?”

“Sure. If he can magnetically change our brains he could simply tell us to fight each other and we would think it was a great idea. You’re, no offense, not a flesh and blood person. You would be immune to it, as would Rommie and the other robots. We would be out of range, watching in case something went wrong, but it would be up to you two.”

“You would trust me with something so important?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“It’s just I’ve never had a mission of my own before.”

“First time for everything. Trust me, you’d do fine.”

“Now I’m all nervous.”

“We’ll make sure you have a good plan, we’re not just saying ‘go get him’ and leaving you to it. You’ll do fine. Come on, we can talk about it on the way down.”

“Okay...”

Chapter 18

What I'm about to do to your stubborn, annoying little planet... I'm gonna enjoy it.

When: After breakfast

Where: Conference room

"And you can ask *any* question?" Amelia asked when he told them what he wanted to do.

"Suspicious..." He was currently seated in the meeting room, and Epic had helped him align his normal page of 360 numbers with True North. He was about to ask what direction and distance he would find the being that had changed the brain structure of the supers, but several of the others were there too. He had explained his method of search, and the other's eyes had lit up as he explained what he could do.

"It's nothing bad," she insisted. "It's just my friend Carlos, I haven't heard from him in over a month now. No texts, no calls, nothing. His parents haven't either, and they're getting worried too. The way he left so abruptly, none of us can understand it. Can you ask at the very least if he's safe?"

"I don't see why not."

"You could ask where a person's soul mate was?" Tessa interrupted.

"What about buried or sunken treasure unclaimed by anyone?" Monica asked.

"Rare plants with healing properties?" asked Teddy.

They all looked at him expectantly.

"...Yes? But I think we have other priorities right now."

"There is no greater priority than true love!"

"Riches beyond compare!"

"The healing qualities of the natural world are unmatched!"

"Guys, focus!" Amelia told them, slapping the table. "We have to find this alien. But first you have to find Carlos."

The others protested this gross injustice of his time, all running together but he caught "why" and "what makes you think."

She held up a hand. "Because I'm the leader, and because I was here first. I can order him to find Carlos, because he could very well be in some kind of trouble. Getting you a date, or pirate gold, that'll have to be between you all. If he wants to do it, fine, that's up to him. Personally I'd charge them a percent, or something, if you want to answer questions in your spare time."

"You can't charge a percent of true love!" protested Monica. "Treasure, sure, I could part with a bit of it."

"Perhaps a one night stand before you go off to your new love would be appropriate? Like for like, right?" she suggested with a smirk. "I mean it's not cheating on a partner if you haven't met yet, right?"

"He better not," Rosalina grumbled.

"OH?????" Tessa asked, perking up and looking at her. "Is there *something* we should *know*?" She was rubbing her hands together. "I want details!"

"What was that about focusing?" Lysanias dodged. "You all asking me stuff is not me asking the universe stuff and it takes ten minutes. Are we finding this alien or not?"

Monica pouted. "Fine." But she looked at Rosalina and gestured with a finger between them.

"Carlos first," Amelia insisted. "You need at least twenty minutes for that, right? I can get pretty far in twenty minutes if Carlos needs me."

If it's been as long as you say, he's dead or fine at this point. "You're the boss, boss lady. What do you want the question to be? The name of the nearest city to Carlos? Just if he's safe or not? Oh, and a picture would help I've never met him. I can ask 'Carlos, friend of Amelea' but having his image would help me focus on it."

"Epic?"

His picture flashed up on the TV, it was of him playing a video game, and she sighed. "Been ages since I even turned on my Xbox. Of course, I'm living through an actual alien invasion of Earth, so who needs fantasy?"

“Ninety percent of the married men on this planet?” Tessa asked with a smirk.
The ladies all shared a nod.
I don't get it.

Ten minutes later, after asking “Is Carlos, friend of Amelia whose picture is before me, where he is by choice?” he got back a surprising answer. It wasn't a word, but more the concept of a shrug and “who?”

“Er, that's odd,” he told them, coming out of his trance. “I got a result, but it wasn't yes or no. It was like the universe didn't know who I was talking about.”

“What?” everyone exclaimed.

“I know. It's really weird. I'm not sure that's ever happened before.”

“Is... Is he dead?” Amelia asked, hands over her mouth.

He thought about it a moment. “Nah. I mean, if he went to his death by choice, I think I still would have gotten a yes answer. If he had been killed against his will, I would have been told no. Unless there really is no afterlife here, in which case... Maybe?”

“I guess we know why we haven't heard from him,” Monica said. “Now about my treasure...”

“Forget your stupid treasure,” Amelia snapped. “Look, we can't spend any more time on this, you need to figure out where that alien is. Get to work on that. Wait, can you make me a gateway first?”

“Sure, that just takes a second. Where to?” He started to draw the One Power.

“Epic, can you show him that place in Greece? I think I might know who I can ask for some more answers.”

“Of course.” The picture of Carlos changed on the TV to be a shot from what must be Amelia's helmet camera. It was a run down Greek temple looking place, and he looked it over.

“I should be able to target that.” Strands of the one power shot out of him, weaving a gateway together that rotated and opened to show the same scene.

“That's the place,” she announced. She patted her pocket, nodded, and turned to him. “I'll just be a few minutes if you want to close it. I've got my phone, I can text you when I want to come back. Monica, I don't expect trouble or I would go in the armor, but would you mind coming with just in case?”

“Not at all,” she replied, getting up and heading through. “You know, I'm gonna miss this guy when he's gone. Where is this, anyway?”

“I'll just tie it off, it'll persist at least for today.” He did so and let the One Power go.

“Thanks. It's Greece, actually. Come on, the switch should be around here someplace...”

Finally able to do what he set out to do, Lysanias went into the trance again and asked the universe about the alien. It took him a half hour, as usual his first attempt went unanswered or he didn't catch the answer, but his second and third tries yielded results. With Epic's help he pinpointed on a map exactly where the alien was, and everyone was called to get ready to go.

Amelia, trailed by a fairly beautiful woman and a very confused looking Monica, stepped back through the portal. The woman had long, shimmering hair, and her green eyes seemed larger than they should be. She was dressed in a thin robe, mostly transparent, and stood a head taller than Amelia. Lysanias couldn't feel anything from her, no spirit energy, no life energy, no emotions at all.

Now who in the world?

“Satisfied?” she growled, gesturing to Lysanias.

“So that's why,” she said cryptically. “I would not have believed it.”

“So do we have a chance?”

“Hmmm,” she said by way of answer. She went over to Rosalina and looked up at her. “Very interesting,” she remarked, and walked over to Tessa.

“Your soul mate is a woman named Ariadne Beil who lives in the city of Kayseri, Turkey,” she told her.

“What? I'm not into girls!” she protested, perhaps too strongly.

"You wanted to know who your soul mate was, not simply the person who would satisfy you the most in bed. Ariadne would understand you, connect with you, on a level you can't even imagine right now. If you went to her you would find true love and happiness beyond your measure, but you won't because of your current prejudice of her happening to be a woman. Next time, be sure to ask for what you really want, not just what you think you should have."

Tessa sputtered something but she moved on.

"Doctor," she addressed Teddy. "The medicinal value of plants is still only beginning to be explored. My advice to you is, remember that most advances in any field, from penicillin to X-Rays, was done by accident. Simply look for solutions in the most unexpected of places, and try everything because you never know what is going to work until you do."

"I will. It is good to remember that, thank you."

"Ah! Now you see, here's a man who is actually grateful for a little advice. Unlike some."

"I'm not into girls!" Tessa repeated. "My soul mate should be a *man*."

"Uh huh," she replied, as if not believing it for a second. "But back to you, Lysanias. My advice to you is, today you must put aside your morals and embrace the flame. You will have a chance to vanquish a great foe and take up a great power, but your normal inclination will be to hesitate. To spare a life. To do so will only mean your fight with this one stretches on and on. End it today. I know," she held up a hand, "you believe you have great power already. And you do. But your foe grows wiser, more cunning. They strike at you from a distance, already a great number of people here are dead, and you have not even seen the true face of your enemy. You need all the power you can get. You must let the flame and the void consume you, and strike down your enemies without emotion."

She knows about that? How in the world? "I'll keep it in mind," he told her.

"See that you do." She walked to the doorway. "To answer your question, Amelia, it depends on him. Your destiny, and those around you, has changed because he is here. But now that I've seen him? I actually have a bit of hope. Good luck, all of you." And she breezed out.

"What was that all about?" Kate asked.

"That's Pythia," she answered, flopping into a chair. "Exasperating as always."

"I thought you said she was a little kid?"

"She was. But now that Carlos is the Protector, and she's a mirror for 'what the Protector needs' now she looks like that."

"Wait, your friend Carlos?" asked Samantha.

"Yes."

"He needs... Uh..." She indicated with her hands the woman that had just left.

"Yes. Apparently. Seems that somehow my best friend was *randomly* the best choice to become the next Protector, and left without telling anyone to go train. In the past, because I guess time travel is a thing. Why she decided I couldn't know about it until after the fact I'll never know, or why Carlos agreed to such a thing. That's why you didn't get an answer, Lysanias, he doesn't exist here anymore. He'll be back eventually, he'll be gone the same number of months he trains "in the past" I guess, so the Earth isn't without protection with you gone." She indicated Lysanias. "Bizarre that time travel works that way, but boy did you throw her for a loop when you got here," she chuckled. "Everything she had seen about the future was out the window, as you started messing things up around here. Personally, I approve."

"She told me where to find some lost treasure," Monica said into the silence that followed. She held up a piece of paper with some coordinates written on it. "I like her." She looked pointedly at Tessa. "Even if I'm not into girls."

"So this alien is in the middle of a big empty field somewhere?" Amelia asked as they all checked their gear to go into battle. Rosalina, Rommie, and Lysanias had on their armor, and everyone was making sure their sabers were charged and they were suited up correctly. Not that most of them were planning to get anywhere close to the alien, but they could have drones or other forces in the area that could be fought. Monica was back in her elemental

form, figuring without a meat brain she would be immune to any magnetic manipulation, so the “strike team” was going to be 6 robots, Rommie, Monica, and Rosalina. Lysanias hoped it would be enough.

“That’s what the satellite shows,” Epic told her. “We believe there may be a base underground or otherwise cloaked in the vicinity.”

“Go over the plan again?” Samantha requested, taking her earplugs.

“Sure. Fleet is going to check out the whole area at speed. If there’s mines or other defenses in the area he can easily outrun them. We’ll figure out where the alien base is, open a door, and let our main team inside. Meanwhile we’ll cover the place in case something comes out. You see something that looks like an alien? Run. Hopefully the earplugs will dampen sound enough that even if he gets to us and suggests a course of action, we won’t hear it. You all have a connection to Epic, any comms will be transmitted as text, so keep an eye out. Beat up the alien, but don’t kill them. We need to find their ship and how to get to their home world. Any drones or other tech that looks too advanced for us try to keep in one piece so we can study it. But don’t take any risks for that, obviously. Otherwise, there’s too many variables to plan for, just remember your training and stay alive.”

There were no more questions so the earplugs were put in and helmets were put on. Everyone nodded and Lysanias opened a gateway to the place shown to him by Epic. It was a picture from above but that was fine, and the door opened. Fleet dashed through and vanished, the others more cautiously, sabers out and ready.

Before everyone was even through the door Fleet was back.

“The alien, they’re just standing there,” he reported, his words being picked up and changed to text by Fleet.

“What?” everyone said.

“Look.” He pointed.

It was true. There were several figures standing there in the field, one of them towering over the others.

“And you’re not going to like who’s there with him. There’s a guy I don’t know, but a couple I do. You better come see.”

“Is he expecting us?” Monica asked.

“Seems that way. Stick to the plan for now, let’s go see what he has to say, but those in the B team stay back. We have no idea what the range is on his brain scrambler.”

The team made their way towards the group, Lysanias magnifying the image as they walked. “Oh no,” he moaned, looking at their opposition.

“Yeah, it’s pretty bad,” Amelia agreed.

“No, you don’t get it.” Standing there were five people, three humans, a flat faced alien twice as tall as the tallest person there in armor of their own, and one miruku. “That guy standing there, the one that’s waving, he’s from another reality. He’s a miruku, and he can-”

As he watched Sangray stopped waving and seemed to reach for someone, opening their mouth as though shouting something. Then he shrugged. The feeling Lysanias had though the force that he was about to be attacked shot up, though he didn’t see anything but a distortion heading straight for him. *Oh crap, where there’s Sangray there’s got to be-* He brought up his shield and something clashed off it. He struggled against something pushing him back, and the others looked at him like he was crazy. “Open the faceplate!” he yelled.

Meta complied, and a familiar figure came into view. “Alisha.” *I can’t ‘see’ her using the cameras in the suit, they don’t show supernatural things. Great. At least I managed to not get cut in half, thank you Obi Wan.* She was still veiled, that being so ingrained in her culture it was probably part of her transformation into her spiritual form. And as she had her ultimate weapon form out she clearly wasn’t going to hold back anything.

“It is you, in that weird looking suit of armor,” she said, drawing her enormous blade back. “Sangray said his master would let him know where you were sooner or later, and here you are. We just got here ourselves, but that’s fine, when we told that big guy with the weird face we were here to help him beat up whoever came he said that was fine. And look who showed up. You’re not going to run like you did last time, are you, *coward?*”

“I ran because I didn’t want to hurt you,” he explained. “It may be different this time.”

Everyone was looking at him like he was crazy. "Who are you talking to?" Tessa shouted. "Is someone invisible there?"

Hey, wonder if I should get Justice out, he could really help us here, and there's no chance of blowing up a power plant at the moment... "There's someone unseen, like my spirit!"

Alisha looked back, Sangray was beckoning to her.

"Ugh, fine," she muttered. "Boss is calling me back, seems everyone wants to have their say. What?" She stared back at him, one hand raised like "what do you want from me?" "If you can tell me why not just tell him your freaking self?" She turned back to him. "He says this will be a fair fight, on the honor of the Th'un, so you can approach. No brain bending, whatever that means. The supers have a few things to say to you." She turned and started to walk away. "But one way or another, you'll pay for what you did to me, today." She rejoined the line and with some trepidation Lysanias lowered his helmet so he could more easily talk to the others.

"What was that all about?" Monica asked.

"Look, I don't have a lot of time, just listen. They want to talk, the alien there says he won't use the magnetic system, if you believe that. But more importantly there's someone on the battlefield you can't even perceive. Leave them to me, she's my problem anyway. Stay clear of the guy on the end, that's Sangray. He's from another reality, and his power is to use the powers of the people around him. Mine, yours, theirs, for all I know he can add them up. Take Behemoth's strength and add yours to it, Samantha."

"That's not ideal," she admitted, going a bit pale.

"No, it's not. Try to keep away from him, I don't know what his range is but it can't be infinite. When I'm done dealing with Alisha I'll see what I can do about him. You guys take care of the others."

"But he'll be as fast as I am," protested Fleet. "We can't get away."

"Maybe run in and out? He probably can't switch powers up all that fast, like if he was moving at your speed and lost that power he would break his legs or something. He wouldn't risk it."

"Maybe."

"All right, but keep your earplugs in. Epic will tell us what they're saying," suggested Amelia. "Let's go."

The group moved forward, alert for any trick, but they were allowed to approach. Behemoth, the one most to the left, went first.

"Hey, didn't I beat you to a pulp not that long ago?" she asked Samantha, smacking a fist into her other hand.

"I got better," she growled back. "It's actually pretty fortunate, us running into each other like this. I need to pay you back for last time, and I've been training, so we'll see if it goes the same way this time."

"You think your little glowstick can hurt me?"

"Amelia's sword cut you, I think this will do the job nicely."

Plus I gave her my skill in close combat and with the battle meditation, so in theory it shouldn't be as one sided as it was before.

"We'll see."

Next up was the guy next to her, a man with both red and white hair. "Hey Amelia!"

"Frostfire. Why are you here?"

"Beats prison."

"I guess."

"He's just a common criminal," Epic printed in his headset. "They've tangled before but he usually went down pretty fast as he's really just a person. No augmented toughness. To put it in your terms, he's a fire and ice bender."

Standing next to him was a guy in a tuxedo. "So this is your new team?" he asked. "I see it's mostly the old team. Weird, I must have missed your call."

"Look, I was never much into the whole magic thing you were always spouting," Amelia told him. "And I did sort of forget about you. I admit it. I'm sorry about that, but it's no reason to be on that side. I mean look at him, he's an alien!"

"I know he is. B has been training me." He indicated the alien. "He suggested I show you what magic can really do, so you'll regret not putting me on your new team."

That explains why he's here. Probably altered to believe that. This Frostfire probably just wants revenge and Behemoth probably just likes a good fight, which the alien wouldn't have to work hard to promise her. After all you have to at least be open to the suggestion the brain modification targets, right?

"B?"

"I am B," said the alien. "Our names are short because we are humble, unlike you humans with your extravagant names like Bob and Sue."

Wasn't the name of that alien we saw before like a million words long?

"Bob is extravagant?" asked Kate. "What about me? I'm Kate."

He waved a hand like trying to wash away a bad smell in the air. "Needlessly complicated. Your arrogance offends me deeply."

"Wow. Wait until he hears about Tessa."

"Wait until he meets someone from India," Tessa exclaimed.

"I don't suppose you were just here to bring Alisha, and you're going to stay out of it?" Lysanias said to Sangray, sliding the front of his helmet up again to hear her response.

"No chance. We're double teaming you."

"That figures."

"He is mine!" Alisha snarled, rounding on Sangray and holding her sword up like he couldn't see the massive thing. "If I fail, and I won't, you may have your way with him for your supposed master. I care nothing for this being you say you follow or his quest to evolve himself. I care only for my vengeance."

Did she have her brain modified? This seem to go beyond what I did to her, so that would make sense. Sure, she can't be a Dreamer anymore, but being a spirit hunter when you're an Aiel, a group that prides itself of physical prowess and fighting skills mind you, should actually be an upgrade. She would basically be untouchable on her world. Is running around the World of Dreams really that much of an ability she feels the loss that keenly?

"Are you sure?" he asked. "You know how powerful he is. And I have no idea what that armor of his can do."

"What have I been training for, if not this? He will know the same pain I have felt."

"Suit yourself. Guess I'll content myself with the others in the meantime."

"Whatever pleases you. But Lysanias is mine to humiliate and destroy."

Great, a toxic fan, just what I needed.

"If you have all said your piece?" B asked. The magic user gestured and two round shield looking energy barriers appeared in front of his fists. Behemoth just smiled and took a stance, raising her fists which had spiky looking knuckles on them, while Frostfire ignited one of his arms in flame. "Very well." He lifted a huge rifle looking gun. "Kill them all."

Chapter 19

This is my people's sacred battleground

When: Seconds later

Where: the sacred battleground (That looks like every other part of the planet)

Alisha shot forward, looking eager to begin, bringing her sword back for a mighty strike. Lysanias, calm inside the flame and the void, turned away and took a step. As it was a flat plain they had decided to fight on, he figured *I might as well take advantage of it*. He spirit stepped, going as far as he could to get away from the others. *At least Sangray won't be able to leach off me if I'm way over here. Right?* Alisha hit empty air, her swing seeming to blaze up with fire mid swing, then go out. It also seemed to be leaking something else- sand. She ignored this and tracked him, snarling.

"Coward! Face me!"

He made a "I'm right here, come get me" gesture. She too vanished, making a series of steps across the field to reach him. She was pretty fast, by the time she got to him he barely had time to do more than cross his fingers and shout "Spirit Clone Technique" and get two clones out, shuffling himself a bit so she would hopefully lose track of him.

"You're awfully quick when you're running away," she remarked, catching up to him but not getting too close. "How did you go so far in one step like that?"

My identity gift maybe? I did seem to go a lot further than she did. Never had anyone to compare against before. "Maybe your training hasn't been as complete as you'd like to believe. Give up this quest of vengeance, you can do so much more with your abilities."

"I will, once you've paid for what you did to me."

Really don't want to fight her. He and his clones all took a step back, coming into a low stance and smashing the ground. All three willed huge blocks of stone out of the ground to try and trap her. She vanished from view, and all three nodded, making a yanking motion to draw the stone towards the center, crushing her. *This won't hurt her, she's like my spirit so only spirit energy effects can do that. But maybe it'll keep her pinned down.*

It didn't.

She burst forth with a shout, smashing through the block in front of her in a way Lysanias wouldn't have thought possible. He would later swear her sword was glowing, and as before it trailed sand which stayed in the air as the stone exploded away from her.

Oh. Time for plan B then.

The three shared a look and a nod, and the two clones concentrated on holding Alisa's arms in place, spreading them wide.

"Hey!" she shouted, struggling. One arm broke free but her right arm, the one holding the sword, stayed pinned.

It'll have to do. He shot forward, his speed serving him well as he dropped Ragnarok and swiped towards her. She tried to dodge but being held in place by Lysanias 2 didn't manage it, and he swiped a hand across her belly and *pulled*.

Of course nothing happened.

"What the heck are you doing to me?" she cried, having felt *something* happening.

Nothing, apparently.

She took the sword in her other hand, awkwardly taking a swing at him but he spun away from it.

Lysanias heard a "pop" and looked over, Sangray was standing there, looking unconcerned. "You need some help there- hey, what's this?" He pointed to the sword. "My master would reward we well if I got rid of that!" He looked at the other two. "But is it the real one?"

Yes, and you can't have it. He grabbed it up, floating it into his left hand, which could barely hold it with the shield strapped there. But at least it was harder for Sangray to get to, and he took another swipe at Alisa.

She again tried to dodge, but Lysanias 2 held on and Lysanias 3 managed to get a firm grip on her with telekinesis, so his strike hit her again and once again he *pulled*. This time it worked, and he found himself holding a shimmering soul in his hand.

“Open a portal to the Hub!” he shouted. “And then one back to her reality, I can just get rid of her that way!”

“Negative,” replied Meta. “Known enemy in proximity, Sangray cannot be allowed Hub access.”

He ground his teeth in frustration.

But then, out of nowhere, an energy bolt smashed into Sangray from behind, making him give a surprised “bhuaa!” as he looked down to see a hole through his chest. Lysanias looked, Rommie had shot him from that distance. Lysanias 2 and 3 wasted no time, rushing him and slashing with Ragnarok. He was chopped in half by two strikes, either one of which would have killed him anyway, and his body burned away dropping to the ground as a red earring.

He wore a red earring, I wonder what it'll do for me. “Satisfied?” he asked harshly, as the two pivoted back to back to make sure it wasn't a trick of some kind. The battle at the other site was just beginning, it looked like Samantha was down and there was a song of fire and ice going on over there, but he couldn't see B anywhere. *She said you would have to do it, and Susan once said I would have to do things I didn't like while on this journey. Process it later, get rid of this soul and get back to them to help.*

“This action is not recommended,” Meta told him. “However it has been approved given the special circumstances surrounding Alisa. A portal will be opened between here and the Hub, and the Hub and the world she belongs on. Do not delay, we will try to coordinate the timestream but your clones will not survive your passing from this reality. Rosalina and my android body will hopefully not notice your absence, should your return be swift enough.”

“Very well.”

Lysanias 2 picked up the earring and shoved it into the *pocket*, then both vanished.

“Ready.”

A door of light opened before him, and he ran through it, and the door beyond it. The coordinates were good, her comatose body was laying there in a room he recognized as her house. He slammed the soul into her body and let go, and she gasped and her eyes flew open.

“Now stay here,” he commanded her. “You're not a Dreamer, big deal. You have an amazing power no one else on this world does, instead. Ignore it or use it, that's up to you. But you could do a lot of good here if you wanted to.”

She was looking around as if confused about where she was, and Lysanias wasn't going to stick around to explain it to her. He headed back through the doors and they vanished.

“The battle is ongoing,” Meta reported.

“Then let's go.” He spirit stepped over there.

He was in time to see two light sabers slash Behemoth across the chest, making her cry out. She was bleeding from multiple wounds and held up her hands.

“I surrender,” she cried. “Please, don't kill me!”

The sabers drew back a bit.

“I'll cover her, find that alien,” Rommie told them, bringing her wand and gun to point at her. Behemoth raised her hands over her head, though she was swaying and obviously in pain.

What did they do to her?

“Well I'm not surrendering!” Frostfire told them. He had his back to a wall of ice and Monica was shooting an ice beam at him. He was trying to hold it off with fire, and Amelia, hovering awkwardly overhead gave a shrug and said “Fine,” shooting him with her stun guns. He dropped.

Every weapon now shifted to point where the ribbon of light was being scrunched up, *that's Rosalina's spell of light ribbon!* and B came back into view. They were on the ground, having gone prone which made sense, if they had gone invisible right away no one would think to shoot the ground. *They probably were just shooting wildly, trying to hit him.*

“Some kind of personal cloak?” Amelia squealed. “Gotta make me a copy of that one on the next armor.”

"You will never learn our secrets!" B snarled, pushing himself to his knees. "And I will have your lives, even if it means my own! For the glory of the Th'un!" They spread their arms wide and looked to the heavens.

"You will disengage any self destruct mechanism your armor contains and submit to us!" Lysanias called, pushing that thought into his brain.

"Override self destruct, priority passcode yellow thrasha three eight alooha meeper," the alien called immediately.

There was a pause.

"I place myself into your custody," he told them, tossing his gun down and putting his arms out in the "please handcuff me" position.

"Nice call," Amelia told him. "Guess it makes sense, huh, after all their other stuff blew up."

"Exactly," he told her, his heart slowing a bit. *That could have been a problem.*

"What do we do with him now?" Kate asked.

"Is everyone all right?" He looked over to see Samantha coming around, and offered her a hand. Up close the battlefield was a mess, Monica was putting out the fires but no *person* was on fire so that seemed like a plus. Pasts of exploded robots were everywhere, it looked like Epic's robot bodies hadn't survived the encounter, and everyone's armor had various dings and dents. But they were all alive. Mr. Perfect was missing, Frostfire was sprawled out on the ground, and it looked like Behemoth was about to pass out at any second. She had several light saber burns, and looked like she had been shot several times with both wands and the he-man guns. She was bleeding heavily and had her eyes half closed. He could feel her life force running out. "Rosalina, can you heal Behemoth at least enough so she doesn't die? I don't think she'll cause us any more trouble."

She nodded and went over there, being backed up by Rommie.

"Thanks. What hit me?" Samantha asked, getting hauled up by Lysanias.

"Behemoth," Tessa told her. "She hit me too, but the armor took it. Owe you for that one, Lysanias."

Looking her over the armor did seem dented, but everyone indicated they were, for the moment, fine.

"Where's that other guy?" Lysanias asked. "Wasn't there another guy?"

"I took him back to base, hopefully Luke put him in a cell," Kate answered.

"He is headed there now," Epic told them.

"So let's see what this guy knows," Lysanias told them. "You. Sit down and take your helmet off."

"Of course!" They did so. "But I will not betray my people, and certain articles regarding prisoners of war must be—"

Lysanias waved that away. "You will betray your people, believe me."

"Coercing me will not be effective," they explained. "My suit has an AI that will not allow me to work against the interests of my people as a failsafe against my capture. I have overridden it for now but if it deems me compromised it will activate with no chance of termination."

He gave a short laugh. "I'm not going to coerce you. I'm going to show you the truth. We'll deal with your AI later."

"I don't—" they managed as Lysanias put a hand to his head and forced his way inside the alien's brain.

Once inside he had B's brain show him everything they knew about where their home planet might be found, any plans they knew about, and then shoved in everything he knew about the shadow avatar and his travels. He felt a great deal of shock and surprise from the alien, but acceptance given what was going on. There was no way the two could lie to each other, and Lysanias learned the whole story about how their people had been brought to view what they were doing as right and proper. It had taken generations for the war engines of the Th'un to destroy as well as they now did, but he know the avatar was patient. Once he had everything he could get and felt the alien wouldn't turn on them once the mind trick wore off he broke it off.

"Do you know where we have to go?" Amelia asked.

"Not really," he told them. "The problem is space travel is handled by computer. You have to know where the place you're going *was* when you last saw it, and where it was going relative to your current position, which is also moving. It's light years away so looking for it *now* will only show you where it was however many years ago it took the light to reach you. Then you calculate how much distance it's gone in the time since you last were there. Then you calculate your speed, so you'll arrive where it's going to be when you arrive. That's way too much for a simple, no offense, soldier like B here to keep track of."

"No offense taken," B told him. "I am only a soldier, we all are. We have all been..." He glanced down at his suit. "I cannot say more."

"Yes, that's a problem. Anyway, I've seen him wander around his planet, and I know where he left from, what their cities look like, but he doesn't know how to get back there so how could I? It's not like I can teleport there, I have no idea what direction it is and I certainly can't traverse light years, sometimes just the same continent is troublesome."

"But his ship must know, we'll just find that and have it tell us!" she protested.

He shook his head. "He was dropped off here. You think they would keep an alien craft with technology humans could figure out just sitting around somewhere? With all the crazy powers people have here? For all they knew someone could just point right to it."

"So what's the plan?" Tessa asked. "Was all this for nothing?"

He frowned. "Before we say anything more let's deal with this armor. I assume it's some kind of bomb?"

"Correct. Any outside tampering will cause it to explode, as well as trying to access the AI directly. My seeming to work with you, and various other parameters will also set it off. Right now it probably believes I am stalling and have a plan to turn the tables on you, so it is seeing how this situation plays out. I move from here and it will detonate if you're not dealt with."

"You can't fault their prep work," Monica admitted. "But that's pretty gutsy, strapping yourself into something like that."

"I suppose," Lysanias allowed. *He may not have really had a choice, and like he said before, he was willing to die for what he thought was his race's grand purpose. Not so much now though, I think.* He looked at her. *Actually, here's what we're going to do. I'm sending you this telepathically so it doesn't know our plan. I'm going to teleport him out of the armor. When I do, you're going to slap the ward I'm going to give you in a second on it and will it inside. Then it can explode all it wants. Just nod if you got it.*

She nodded, so he pulled a ward out of his *pocket* and handed it to her. "I guess we can't take you prisoner," he told the alien. "We will have to simply shoot you from a distance, and allow your armor to explode after you are dead. I'm sure that such a glorious death will add prestige and... uh... glory to the empire you serve. You were a good soldier, I bless your passing in the manner of my people." He put a hand on the alien's head again. *Please believe he can still escape before we kill him, and don't explode while I'm just standing here.*

"Wait, my eyes have been opened, I don't want to explo-"

He *shifted*, thinking about only taking the alien with him not the armor, and appeared several meters away. Monica darted forward and smacked the armor, making it vanish. A second later the ward crumbled in her hand.

"That worked," he announced a bit smugly.

"I'm not dead!" B announced. "That's unexpected. How did you-"

"Oh my," all the ladies said. Lysanias jerked his head to look at Rommie.

"What?" she said innocently. "There was an 86% chance the others would say it and I wanted to be included. He is a naked alien after all. A very large, naked, alien."

"Oh, do I impress you?" B asked. He started flexing.

"Anyyyway, with that crisis averted... Hey Behemoth, you going to give us any trouble now?"

"He suggested I beat you up, and it seemed like a good idea at the time. Then you hurt me. How did you hurt me? I've never been hurt before."

"That's easy. You're tough, but only in relation to weapons here. Bullets and such may bounce off you, but we're all using weapons from other realities."

"Other what? Wait, do you have the power to reach into stories and pull stuff out? Is that where real light sabers came from?"

"Something like that. The guns they're using pack a little bit more of a punch than you're probably used to. So I get why you might think you were invulnerable, but you're really not. We can and will hurt you again if you fight against us." *Not in the sense my spirit is, or Alisa is, anyway.*

"Why not fight with us," Amelia asked. "Beat up these aliens that want to destroy our planet?"

"That sounds like a great idea!" she said, smiling. "I'm in! Should I start with this one?"

"No no, he's a friend now. Aren't you big guy?"

The alien nodded vigorously.

"See?" she asked the others. "You just have to know how to talk to them now. I bet if we suggested blowing up alien power plants the others would be all for it too."

"So from now on one of the strongest people on the planet is just going to go along with suggestions of beating people up?" Tessa asked. "That's not reassuring."

"Until we figure out how to undo it. Hey, new friend, how do we undo it?"

"My armor can... Oh wait," B answered.

There was a collective sigh.

"So be useful to us," Samantha demanded of B. "How can we get to your home and stop the avatar?"

"I'm not sure," they admitted. "Word has already been sent back of the latest failure. In nine days it will reach Our Great Leader. Or I guess the shadow avatar, as I know them now. To think some kind of otherworldly entity could have taken over one of us, turned us into a race of soldiers that did nothing but destroy. Convinced us to strip worlds of materials so that we could build more ships so that we could strip more worlds of materials. But in reality we were just doing their bidding of ridding the universe of life so it could take that energy for itself. How did we let this happen? I'm disgusted with myself, and my race."

"Amusing, but not helpful. Do better."

"I cannot. One day later a force will be gathered and nine days after that, transition to this system will be complete and a new assault will begin. How can it be stopped now? You cannot catch the messenger and by the time you arrived, the assault force would have already left."

"Can you tell us how to build the engine you use?" Amelia asked. "Maybe we can at least... Oh, but we don't know where to go, do we? Crud."

"In any case, I do not know how to build our engine. He would know that." He indicated Lysanias.

He nodded. "It's true. No one that knows anything can leave the planet, wouldn't want their tech to fall into enemy hands."

"Naturally our faster than light drive technology is our most closely guarded secret. Very few know how to build the whole thing. But I am curious..."

"Yes?"

"You speak as if going to my home system will change anything. This planet has no fleet of starships. You do not have treaties with nearby worlds to come to your aid. You are, to use your words, 'no offense,' primitives that have sent a few tiny drones to your nearest world but have never set foot there. The defenses around the home world include ships uncountable in number. Drones. Minefields. You believe your one tiny planet can defeat an empire that spans thousands of light years?"

"We will win," Lysanias told them. *We have to, or this reality is lost.*

The group watched as the alien made a sound that might just be their version of laughter.

The sound went on for some time.

Chapter 20

I don't know man, that sounds like a lot of work!

When: A moment later

Where: Still in the field

"There is a way we can win," Rommie announced. "But you're not going to like it."

"Impossible," B scoffed.

"It's not. The original Andromeda Ascendant carried a weapon called a Nova Bomb. Despite it being a warhead on a missile and not dropped like a bomb, but I'll leave that for now. When fired into a sun it would explode, causing the star to go supernova. That would wipe out the system for sure, taking the avatar and this fleet of yours with it."

"You're right, I don't like it," Lysanias told her. "I assume you would get me the plans for such a device and I would build it on the way there?"

"Correct."

"There must be another way."

"I am simply offering you the option."

"Unless, B, who would be around in your home system? Just your people, or do they have prisoners, slaves, that sort of thing?"

"That sort of thing and more. Those races that can be of use to us are put to work, of course. Some as labor, some as sport, some as art."

"Of course." He rolled his eyes. "It would kill too many innocents, that has to be off the table."

"It's a moot point if you can't get there," Behemoth put in. Everyone glared at her.

"What? I want to beat up aliens, like you said. This is my planet too, you'll recall I was part of a superhero team before all this started. I'm one of the good guys. Girls. I'm a good girl. That doesn't sound right."

"She's right," Amelia agreed. "We can discuss how we're going to win if we can figure out how to get there. Plenty of time for that. For now, there is no way you can ask where his homeworld is? Even with him here, something like 'where is the home planet of B, the alien that is before me?'"

"It's a one word answer, with my luck I would be told 'space' and that would be that."

"Ah. Right."

"We're going to have to let them come, aren't we?" Kate asked nervously. "Let them attack again, and somehow capture one of their ships. Keep it from blowing up, and get whatever algorithms they use out of their computers."

"That would not work," B told them. "More than likely the next attack will consist of a hundred of our largest drone ships. Standard procedure for ships attacking other planets is to travel in formation near the generator ship that propels the group through the hyperspace corridor. Once transited to normal space again the generator ship self destructs, and the drones move under their own power into position around the planet. They would not have the correct hardware to open another transit gate, again to prevent it from falling into enemy hands."

"Just thought of everything, haven't you?" Tessa complained.

"We have been doing this a long time," B agreed.

Everyone stood and thought for a moment. "He is being honest with us, right?" Amelia asked, looking between Lysanias and Kate.

"His emotions aren't the same as ours," Kate answered. "But I don't feel deception."

"He would still be under the mind trick, it hasn't been that long," Lysanias agreed.

"I don't get it though," Monica said. "You were sent here to save this reality, right?"

"Right."

"And the super being that sent you here didn't give you any hints as to how to go about it? No, 'oh by the by here's a super advanced algorithm I whipped up ten minutes ago you can feed into your computer and tell where the alien race is that's causing problems there.' Nothing?"

"That's a good point, can you help, Rommie?"

“Actually, you have all the help you need with Lysanias,” she told them. “We pair the solution to the problem with the problem quite expertly. While I suppose resources could be tasked with tracking down the coordinates of the planet from the Hub, there is a way you can succeed here without it. Just remember what you can do, you have many abilities at your disposal Lysanias, that is why you are sent to places where, like here, it seems hopeless.”

“What I can do? Let me think a minute...” He paced back and forth, looking at the hubPad he pulled out of his *pocket*. He paged through, telling the past of the alien wouldn't help any more than reading his mind did. Nor would telling his future. He couldn't make him the opposite of what he was (not helpful to helpful) or do anything with this soul. “Are you sure?” he finally asked. “I mean it's a long list, agreed, but mental is out, physical is out, what else is there?”

She shrugged. “Maybe you should sleep on it.” She tilted her head down, raising an eyebrow in the process like “you get it?”

“Sleep? How would sleep... Wait... B, does your race dream?”

“Dream? Of course! We dream of conquest! And honor! And a better life for our children. That isn't what you meant it is?” He looked down at Lysanias.

“I mean literally. Do you go to sleep and dream.”

“Yes? I'm not sure how that helps you.”

“I do. Thanks for the hint.”

“What hint?” Rommie asked, staring off into the distance. “Nice day, isn't it?”

“Uh huh. All right, let's head back to the base. Get B some clothes, make a report or whatever, and tonight I'll look for their dreams.”

“That will really help?” Tony asked.

“Strangely enough, I think it's the answer to our question. I just hope I can make a gateway big enough for you, big guy. I guess I could just teleport you directly...”

“Yes!” B jumped up suddenly. “Let us go away from this place of bitter defeat, and give me a chance to help my new friends! Lead on, new friends!”

“You're awfully eager to be away from here suddenly,” Kate said suspiciously. “What's up with that?”

“Nothing, I assure you!”

“Wait, do you have some kind of base here? And you don't want us to realize that?” Amelia asked.

“Oh, uh, you might not be as friendly if you go into my base- I mean I don't have a base!”

“He has a base,” everyone said at once.

An hour or so later Lysanias had ripped up enough of the ground to get into the underground base here, and freed the dozen or so individuals from what looked like stasis pods. They had been asleep in canister looking devices, and all of them had F1 powers of one type or another. They seemed none the worse for wear after being woken up, though of course all were very confused as to where they were and how they got there.

“What to explain yourself?” Amelia offered.

“We are interested in what gives you powers,” he began. “But of course taking back someone like Behemoth who, if she woke up, could make real trouble for us wasn't a smart move. So I decided a few people going missing who had minor powers would be a good place to start. I feel really terrible about it of course.”

“Of course. Not terrible enough to volunteer the information I notice.”

“There are limits, I can't just go around telling you everything, now can-” Amelia put a hand on her saber. “I'll start telling you everything from now on, I promise!”

“Better. Come on, let's see what else is around here.”

Two hours after that and everyone was safely back home, there hadn't been all that much of interest in the base, so the group went back to theirs to relax for a few hours.

Rosalina insisted on practicing magic, saying she had tried to stop an attack by Mr. Perfect during the fight that had pierced right through her barrier, the second time in two fights that had happened. So she and Rommie went off to train, leaving Lysanias alone. He lined up

the armors and did what repairs he could in his waking state, which actually took care of most of it. Samantha had really taken a beating and admitted she thought she was dead, but somehow didn't have a scratch on her. The armor had really been mangled though, including one of her boots.

Maybe Rosalina healed her? I'll have to ask. Behemoth really is strong. What are we going to do with her and the others?

Behemoth was behaving herself, asking what she could do to help, and the group finally decided to have her wait on Andromeda. "After all," Amelia said. "If she goes berserk and trashes the ship, she's going to have a long wait before someone comes to check on her. Pretty sure she likes breathing just as much as the rest of us. So I bet she would think twice, and then again, before she made any trouble there."

With the main work out of the way Lysanias pulled the earring from his *pocket* and turned it over and over in his hands. There were still a few hours until sundown when he would be tired enough to sleep, and he was trying to feel it out. He didn't really get anything as it wasn't magical or supernatural, just like the stamp. It simply did what it did, which he didn't exactly understand. Ragnarok was of course no help, but at least looking into his own future he didn't seem adversely affected by putting it on. *I mean I killed a man for it, to not use it seems wrong. Okay, he was a follower of the shadow avatar, but now he'll never get the chance to regret his actions. At least I saved Alisa, without him there hopefully no one on that side will go get her and so I should be free of her. I can avoid her when I go back to finish off the shadows there. I'm stalling aren't I?* He took a deep breath and placed it, simply using alchemy to reshape his ear to have a hole which he closed up around the post, and put the back on afterwards. *As I'm not shoving it through my ear the traditional way, that seems painful.* He looked around. *I don't feel anything, or any different.* "Hey Meta, can you analyze the earring, or I guess me now that I've put it on? It should do something, right? It isn't just a red earring."

"Not without sending it back to the Hub for analysis," the watch replied. "However, before we do that, perhaps we can simply try a few things."

"I'm willing. What would you like me to do?"

"Based off the initial item relating to the creation and controlling of undead, let us assume this item relates to the nature of the Miruku."

"So something relating to the powers of others? I could go walk around the base, see if I can use Monica's ice powers I guess. Or Fleet's speed?"

"That would be an excellent first test."

So he went looking for the others, but was disappointed when he felt nothing from them he didn't usually, and didn't seem to have any new powers when near them.

"That was a bust," he remarked, sitting down in the conference room. "So does that invalidate your hypothesis?"

"I am pleased you are learning to speak my language," Meta told him. "But there is another aspect of the Miruku power that is a bit more difficult to explore. Perhaps you could call Susan and have her explain."

"I guess, if she's free." He got out the hubPad and opened up the messenger app, touching Susan's name on his friends list. It only rang a few times before her face popped up.

"Hi Lysanias, how are you?" she asked cheerfully. She was clearly in her lab, magical potions and shelves of various knickknacks behind her.

"Pretty good, yourself?"

"Great! Just got back from kicking the Darkness off another reality, now spending some time with my lady love and solving local problems with guts, magic, and a good dose of super powers when needed. What can I do for you?"

"You know about my sword, right?"

"Sword? Oh right, the one you came here to wake up. I remember, what about it?"

"I used it to kill Sangray, and he turned into an earring. We're trying to work out what it does."

"Hold on, back up. You killed Sangray? How, even I had trouble with him!"

"Mostly by accident. He was fighting a group of us and I went way far away from him so he couldn't use my powers. I was fighting a spirit hunter and he came after me. He appeared next to me and suddenly Rommie shot him in the back while he was talking to me. Guess he wasn't expecting that, and my two clones cut him down where he stood. I didn't want to, of course, but Pythia said I should so..."

She stared at him for a moment and he feared her connection had frozen or something despite that being practically impossible for this technology. "I have so many questions... The only Rommie I know was the avatar of the Andromeda."

"Yeah, that's the one! I mean not her, exactly, I just modeled a robot body for Meta, that's what I named this instance of the AI that assists me, to look like her. I built a replica of the Andromeda to fight the aliens in this reality, not that it's been all that much help as of yet. Figured I would stick to the theme."

She laughed. "Wanderers have the best conversations. Well, you be nice to her, Andromeda was one cool lady. I'm not going to ask how you "made" a million ton starship I have a feeling the whole story would take a week. You called about Sangray, what can I tell you that the AI can't?"

"We think the item should relate to his power, but I put it in," he showed it to her, "and I can't sense powers or draw off them. Meta said there was another aspect of his power you could explain."

"Ah, I get it." She nodded, understanding. "He could basically pull the souls out of people and use them as weapons. Took a whole bunch of people from Elsa's kingdom, it's one of the reasons I had such trouble with him."

"Wait, he could do what?"

"Yank the soul out of someone, and turn it into something. Like an animal, or a weapon, or a piece of armor. They followed his commands and fought for him."

"That's crazy. I learned to pull the souls out of people from an angel of death, back in your reality if you'll recall."

"To help that kid Garrett, sure."

"But it's just a swirling energy. I've never heard of a technique to-" The watch buzzed. "Wait, just a second. Meta?"

"There is a technique you could learn to approximate what Susan is describing. I'll bring it up." The hubPad shifted, Susan moving off to one side and the database coming up. There was a description there about *Soul Forging*, a technique to turn a soul into an offensive or defensive item.

"I'm reading it too," Susan told him. "It sounds similar, and familiar all right, but this says you can hold at most two, one for each hand. He had a whole bunch. Plus the limitation on function."

"You think it might augment my ability, give me the power to shape souls into creatures and such? That's... rather specific."

"The sword is a part of you," Meta explained, "naturally it would create items that are helpful to you in some way."

If you say so. "I guess in a limitless multiverse there would be more than one way to do something. So, what? I go yank the soul of someone out and see if I feel more from it? Or can do more with it?" He shook his head. "I really put a lot of power behind yanking souls out though. I didn't take all the skill from that angel, if this really is the function of the earring how am I going to practice it? I can't just pull souls out over and over. It's bad enough trying to practice asking the universe stuff. Wait, did you say it sounded *familiar*?"

"That's right. Fought a ghost that could do the same thing. Why?"

"The exact same thing? Pulled a soul out of someone, then turn it into a weapon?"

"Far as I can recall, yes."

"And do you think it was a *power* that ghost had?" he asked shrewdly. "Or a skill they worked at developing?"

"I guess I would say it was something she worked at doing. She said as much, how she worked out how to do it after she died."

"Just what I wanted to hear! Would you mind me watching that battle?"

"I guess not, but how?"

“Great. Meta, Inari once opened a window between realities to let me see a kid using the shadow clone technique. Can you do the same, trace Susan’s path backwards in time and let me see that battle? I’ll use my eyes to learn the technique, and we can try it out!”

“Your tone indicates excitement, are you changing your mind about being reluctant to remove the souls of people?”

“I’m excited to use my eyes again, haven’t had much call for it lately.” *With everyone around here just having powers, not skills. And I couldn’t take anything from the last reality because they were MP based.* “And I wasn’t exactly reluctant about the technique, I did use it to save Alisa’s life and not have to kill her, after all. So it isn’t evil, like blood bending was considered evil on Korra’s world.” *Though it was used to save her after she jumped off that cliff, so even it can be used properly.* “The souls go back to the body when I let them go, none the worse for wear that I’ve been able to tell the few times I’ve done it. So it doesn’t seem like a bad technique to know. I was dreading trying to practice it. But if I don’t have to, it could be interesting to get into a fight, take an enemy combatant out of it, and get a weapon or a spirit like animal projection to fight on my behalf in their place. Tie up the now comatose person at the end of the fight, and give them their soul back. Fight over, they have no idea what happened. Easy.”

“It would be another non-lethal technique for those times you couldn’t chi-block someone, wouldn’t it? Very well, permission has been granted. If you would like to prepare?”

“It just takes a second, and it’s fairly painful. Please start the ‘show’ if you will just as the technique is used.”

“Very well. Opening the window to Susan’s past in three. Two. One.”

A window in the air opened and Lysanias put energy into his eyes, watching as a woman, *I thought Susan said it was a ghost?* Pulled the soul out of herself and turned it into a shield. The woman bounced Susan back when she went to grab her, somehow pulling power out of the soul to do it. They struggled a bit, another girl in the picture getting hit with a few energy blasts from the woman, and Susan plunged her knife into the girl’s leg. Then another boy came in the room and the woman pulled his soul out too, turning it into a small dagger. It was able to extend the blade, which she did to try and poke Susan some more. The action paused. “No more events like this in the timeline,” Meta announced, so Lysanias let the power go and his eyes closed.

“Did you get it?” he heard Susan ask.

“I think so. I’ll tell you in a few hours, I guess. Hey thanks, that worked out even better than I had expected. Even if this earring does something completely different, I got access to a new ability, and expanded my skill in another.” *Man, just how many skills are out there? I really should look through the book, it was in there I just hadn’t seen it. Was too busy surviving out here. Maybe on the long journey to the alien homeworld, when I’m awake? Practice and maybe learn a new skill or two?*

She chuckled. “Must be tough, not being able to just put XP into things. Glad it worked out for you. Send me an email about how it goes, and stop in some time. Don’t be a stranger now!”

“I will. Thanks!”

“She’s gone,” Meta told him. “What would you like to do until your sight returns?”

“Not sure- wait, actually yes I am. Epic? You here? Get everyone together, if this works we’re going to have to move fast, like tonight fast. I’ll explain myself and everyone can get ready.”

“I’ll notify everyone to come to the meeting room,” Epic said.

Half an hour later everyone was there, and Lysanias told them what he intended to do.

“So our friend B says he dreams, and that’s the key here. I’m going to head to the place all dreams happen, his shouldn’t be hard to find as it’s so close. I’m going to get a feel for it, and then use a Dreaming technique to head to a place of dreams that has a large concentration of dreams somewhat like it. They should be different from human dreams, after all, and a large enough concentration of them should be easy to spot. I’ve done this once before, when looking for the Mana Tree flowers, stepping from a dream a girl was having to

her house. Using her as a conduit basically. I'll then be on their home planet, and can hopefully infiltrate a ship or something leaving the area. My hope is Meta can get into their computers, figure out where they're calculating *from* which we can use to calculate a destination."

"What does this all have to do with us?" Tessa complained.

"You need to pack and head to the Andromeda. Once I have the coordinates I'll head back here, Dream up an engine we can use, and be off. The faster we get there the better, so I would like to use my Dreaming time as best I can tonight, and not waste tomorrow sitting around waiting until I can go to sleep again. If I can travel us faster than they can, we might be able to take care of this *before* the report arrives, so another drone force isn't sent here."

"One difficulty I can see," Rommie told them. "I don't yet know how fast Lysanias can make us go. We'll have to run some tests, to make sure we end up in the place the planet is going to be."

"That's not a big deal though, is it? We can head out, then stop, see how far we went, and then correct for that speed." *Though if it's like everything else about it, it'll be random how fast we go each time I make the engine for it.*

"I'm just mentioning it."

"What if we aren't faster than they are?" Tony asked. "What if Earth is in danger in a little under two weeks?"

"I'll have to Dream myself back here, try and take care of them. Besides, you aren't the only heroes in the world, right? Carlos may be back by then, before we leave put the word out that anyone with relevant powers should start getting ready now."

"I just don't want to come back to a wasteland, that's all."

"It's the only shot we've got," Monica told him, "by the sound of it. Let's get moving!"

So they did.

Chapter 21

Free air for all free men!

When: A few hours later, before he went to bed

Where: Cell block

“So let me get this straight,” John said to him. “You’re offering us a chance to go into space, and take this fight to the aliens?”

“That’s right. As most of you are either innocent of wrongdoing until this, or are wanted for just petty crimes you used your abilities to commit, I figure it’s safe enough to invite you along.” *Don’t know how I didn’t think of this earlier. A whole trove of super powered individuals captured during the power plant attacks, powerful enough to be chosen to do that. Epic reports them behaving themselves, so they’re totally normal apart from being more susceptible to suggestion now. Why not bring them along to help?* “Those others who are wanted for more serious crimes, and I’m looking at you Mr. Explosion,” he looked over at the guy who could explode like a nuke after eating an apple, “I have a different plan for.”

“What’s that then?” he sneered.

“As we can’t exactly be here to watch you, once we’re in space trying to save even your worthless life, you’re getting a tiny little stamp on your forehead.” He showed them the stamp. “That way we can just leave you here and you won’t starve to death while we’re gone.” *See, even this can have a positive use if you look hard enough.*

“You can’t just leave us in here!” he protested. “We’ve got rights!”

“I must reluctantly agree,” John reluctantly agreed. “We are, most of us, here willingly because we understand what a danger we are to others now. But eventually I would like to go home. I don’t want to go into space, I want to see my wife and daughter again. If I don’t take you up on it do I have to be stamped as well, and just left here to hope you come back? What does this stamp do, exactly?”

“Er...” *I’m not sure you want to know. I suppose I could use magic, wasn’t Susan under some kind of compulsion not to harm any living thing?* “Look, how many of you would take me up on my offer to go into space?” He walked the cell block, which was never designed to hold so many for so long, so it was pretty crowded. But they had TVs, video game consoles and computers, and contact with the outside world and could stretch their legs under supervision a few at a time (usually a score of Epic bots) so it wasn’t too terrible. Most had their hands raised, even the ones he was decidedly *not* taking because of their violent pasts. Those were getting the stamp no matter what they said, and ordered to remain behind. *Because they’ll only follow my orders, and not need to eat anymore as undead, we can just come back, wash the stamp off, and they’ll be none the worse for wear. But I really wanted Justice to come, his power is amazing!*

“There may be a third option,” Rommie told him. “One that would satisfy both of your needs.” Rosalina was still practicing her magic, but Rommie said she wanted to come along.

He turned to her. “I’m all ears.”

“You haven’t tried your new ability, have you?”

“No, I wanted a volunteer, just to see what would happen. It’s not like I can hang on to more than one soul, and I don’t need to practice it now, I know how to do it because that ghost was really good at it. So I figured I wouldn’t really use it until I got into a fight with someone I wanted to stop in a non-lethal way. Why?”

“Remember that Susan said Miruku could utilize many souls, in fact there may not have been a limit to the number Sangray could hold. If the earring allows you access to that aspect of his power, not just turning a soul into things besides swords and shields, you should find out now.”

“But what does that have to do with him?”

“Removing his soul will probably cut access to his powers. After all, he doesn’t have a ‘produce energy barriers’ gland inside his body. He’s using a form of magic, though his soul, to do that. Take his soul out, and you can do it gently enough now to keep him awake, right?”

“I think so...”

“So do that, see if you can hold it inside you, and let him go home. He’ll be powerless and thus, not a danger. He can still be a cop, a normal cop, just not the super cop he was

before. How about it, John? How about we send you home to your family without powers, but you get to go back to your job and everything?”

“Without my powers no one would tell me to destroy power plants,” he agreed. “But who are you people? You’re talking about taking my *soul* out of my body? That’s the realm of demons or something, isn’t it? I mean just to know I have a soul, that’s a huge deal! I mean if that’s true, what does it mean for religion on Earth?”

Ugh, here we go again with the Iron Angel stuff. “It’s the realm of anyone who can learn to do it,” Lysanias told him. “I wish I could give you a full explanation, but I can’t. You’ll just have to trust me. It’s a decent idea, and I’m willing to see what happens. It won’t hurt you in any case, and your soul will be safe with me. When we get back I’ll just give it back to you, you have my word.” *Hopefully with the technique to undo what was done to you, if we can capture an armor that won’t explode itself.* “If this even works, that is. What do you say? Shall we at least try it?”

“What happens if I have a heart attack or get shot in the meantime and my body dies?”

“Your soul moves on once I let it go, just like it would otherwise. Believe me, nothing will be able to hurt it.” *The pad said they’re invulnerable, like my spirit. Though we know how that worked out, we’ll be fighting science based aliens now, not quasi-magic using humans out there.*

“If I get to go home, I guess don’t care about my powers. If you say you can take my soul out, I guess I’ll believe you. Please do whatever you have to.”

“Come on out. Epic?”

“Opening cell door.”

John stepped out and the door closed behind him, so Lysanias stepped up to him. “This might feel a little odd,” he warned, putting a hand on John’s chest. “Ready?” John nodded and he pulled, as gently as he could. A ball of energy came into his hand, and John looked down at it. “That’s... me?”

“That’s right. Go ahead and try your powers.” He stepped back.

John held up a hand and looked surprised. “Nothing’s happening, you’re right. With whatever that is outside of me, I’m powerless. Maybe it is just my power and you happen to call it my soul. That would make more sense.” He gave a weak laugh. “I mean it can’t be my actual soul, right? Right?”

“Should it be doing that?” Rommie asked.

“Humm?” He looked down at it and the ball seemed to be elongating a little bit, towards the earring. He held it up closer and that pull seemed to intensify, stretching it out. “Well, now how about that?” He shrugged. *It was easy enough to do, I can just do it again if I need to.* He took a few steps away from John and let the soul go. Rather than head back into John’s body it got sucked into the earring, and he gave a start. “I can feel it. The soul is being stored inside the earring. You still feel okay, John?”

“Perfectly normal, strangely enough. This is so weird. It’s been years since I could just will energy constructs into existence. I kind of miss it, now.”

“Even for me, it’s a little weird. Now how can I...” He concentrated, making a throwing motion from the earring in front of him and willed the soul out into a solidified form. Before him was a blue square, hovering in the air about a half a meter across. “Hey, got it!”

“That seems to have worked,” Rommie told him. “Just the one?”

“I’m not sure how to make more.” He tried to envision more of them, but the square just stayed there.

“I just wanted more, and they appeared,” John explained.

“But this is a soul, not John’s power,” Rommie reminded him. “They may be connected, but they are not the same thing. So there are bound to be different rules, despite it looking somewhat the same.”

“Let me try moving it.” He imagined it shifting to the side, which it did, but when the space was clear where it had been, another appeared in its place. So now there were two of them floating there. “Now we’re getting somewhere.” After a bit of experimentation he found he could make a shape, duplicate it, and the shapes all did the same thing. He had to duplicate them by moving the initial one, so he could make a wall, throw it forward or

backwards, but not split it up into two sections because they all had to move in the same direction. But he could make a wall of two sections simply by getting rid of some in the middle after building the whole thing. As long as it was just one shape he could move it at will, and finally absorbed it again. They could move pretty fast, so making a whole wall didn't take long, and he wasn't sure how many separate sections he could support or how big the initial shape could be. "I can play with this later," he announced. "John, for now you are free to go. Tell Epic your address and he'll get me a picture, I can take you there once I'm done here. Anyone that wants to go into space, Epic can show you were to go." *Good thing I Dreamed up a ton of supplies, I shouldn't need to make more for these people.* "You, you, you, and you are not going. You can each have your own cell now," *for the next sixty seconds just so they don't see the others being turned into zombies and freak out,* "but your crimes are such I don't trust you. Sorry."

The chosen ones filed out, several said they didn't want to go into space or have their souls removed, (Lysanias didn't blame them) so took the stamp option and would be left behind. The four "real" criminals, including the exploding guy, had their souls taken by force and bopped with the stamp. Naturally they protested and even looked like they might try to force the issue by fighting him, but he just told them one at a time to be quiet and stand there, so they did. Of course once stamped they had no mind to speak of, and he just packed them into one cell shoulder to shoulder, belly to belly. *And how is this better than blood bending?* he asked himself. *Have to think about that, but it's better than gassing them or someone getting hurt here, right?*

He felt five souls within him now, though he hadn't forged them to see what they did yet. He would have plenty of time for that on the road. Having gotten everyone on the ship and John home to his family he found Rosalina, said he was going to bed, and they headed there themselves. The group was waiting for them, too keyed up to sleep.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he told them. "If this even works. I think it will, but who knows? If it doesn't I don't know what we'll do, so cross your fingers. I should be able to Dream for enough time to at least make it there, then get back here a few minutes later. So I'll see you soon."

He went to his room, trailed by a worried Rosalina after taking care of a few things on the way. "Good luck," she told him. "Don't take any chances, okay? I wish I could come."

"I do too. But this is something I must do alone. Hey, I've been killed by shadows in the dream and just woke up. Sore, but alive. They won't be able to do anything to me."

"I hope you're right. See you soon." She kissed him and was about to turn back into a wand when he put a hand on her arm.

"Wait a second."

"What? You want more? Before our second date? For shame sir!" She grinned as she said this.

"Yes, but no. Put your sleep spell on me. I want to go to the World of Dreams as quickly as possible, and your magic can do it fastest."

"I guess as long as I'm on the bed, I'll fall as a wand and not hit the floor. Okay, get comfortable." He lay down and she climbed over him. "Sleep well, and wake," she said softly, pointing her wand. "Sleep."

When Lysanias next realized something, he was Dreaming, and willed himself from his dream to the Dreaming representation of the Andromeda. He was in his room, which was empty, the wand not being there long enough to form a reflection. He only looked for it for a moment and then left, heading to the room he knew the alien was in. They had been put to sleep in the same way, so he just had to wait until they started dreaming. Of course he didn't have to start from the place representing where B was, but it did feel like the right thing to do. He let himself go, looking up and "past" the ship to find himself in the Dreaming Stars, as he just decided to call it. *Now to see what inhuman dreams are around here.*

He didn't have to wait too long, a dream came into being nearby that looked exactly like the others. But somehow, he couldn't explain how, was different. He "flew" over to it,

going around and around it trying to figure out how he could tell this wasn't the dream of a human. But he could just tell, somehow. As a final check he gently rested his hand on the surface of it and "peeked" in. It was B, doing some alien thing he didn't want to stare at for too long, and pulled back. *Now to figure out where a lot of these dreams are clustered.* He looked around. *Aren't I forgetting something?* He paused, thinking it over. *Oh yeah, Meta! What I am going to do, put myself into the computer and just steal the coordinates directly?* He paused again. *I am dreaming, there's no reason I couldn't do that. But this way is safer.* He stepped back into the World of Dreams and then to the real ship, grabbing up the watch and gently placing the wand on the stand near the bed. Then it was back to the Dreaming Stars, as he cursed all these unneeded steps if he had just remembered to get Meta a little earlier.

You know, when I had been standing in my room just moment ago. Stupid! Now I can look around, he told himself. *Where are you little dreams? Dreams of conquest, and honor, and of a better life for your children. Which will never come, if you succeed in your mission of wiping out all life here.*

Though he did not have eyes to close in this place that he could tell, nevertheless concentrated on the "otherness" of the dream and sent his need into the Dreaming Stars. When he opened them again he was looking at a living room with a priest kneeling before a family sitting on a couch. "And what are your sins, my son?" the priest asked. "I know you've sinned. It's murder, isn't it?"

He quickly stepped out of that dream, back to the Stars, or at least, that's what he tried to do.

"God can forgive, but not that," said the priest, rising and pulling a knife from under his robes. "A commandment, broken? You'll burn for all time for breaking His laws!"

I thought He was all about forgiveness. No, don't interact with it. It's just someone's dream, and I will leave it.

He was out.

Not the kind of alien I'm looking for. Would that priest have stabbed me? Pretty rich, talking about my murdering someone and then murdering someone himself. Wait, why am I even thinking about this? Stupid Sangray, why couldn't you have just stayed in your own reality and made trouble for the people there?

He closed his eyes and focused on need again. When he opened them he was looking at a girl in pigtails looking at a boy putting water from a hose into a wheelbarrow. "Wouldn't a bucket be easier?" she asked.

"Don't have a bucket," he replied. "You have to use what you have."

"How can you not have a bucket?"

How indeed? Thank goodness for water bending, I never need a bucket. See you two kids later. He stepped out of the dream. *Am I getting closer or not? Sounds of an attack.*

Lysanias opened his eyes to find a strange looking being looking at him. "Look out!" they shout, and dart past, swinging a bladed weapon of some kind at a giant bug that was behind him. The weapon clanged off the bug's armor and both staggered back from the blow. "Here, try this," Lysanias offered, holding up the hilt of a light saber.

"What do I do with this?" the being asked, taking it with one hand and trying to keep his sword between himself and the bug.

"Press the button on the side."

They did, and the blade ignited. "Oh yeah, now we're talking!" He started cutting the bug up, and Lysanias stepped away again. *Okay, closer, but not quite there yet. Pleasant dreams, slayer of bugs.* He moved again, this time opening his eyes to a dark cell, a thin alien pacing within it. They stopped and stared at him. "What created such foulness?" they asked softly. "Is this the product of the marriage betwixt woman and gearbalie?"

"Cute. Insult me, sure, that's fine. You're not all that pretty yourself, but consider this; I'm not the one dreaming myself into a *jail cell.*"

"Dreams?" They looked around. "Have I been here so long that I cannot escape even in dreams?"

"How long have you been here?"

His only reply was a blank stare.

“Right, got it. Say, you wouldn’t happen to know anything about really big guys in armor, sort of look like this?” He raised a hand and concentrated on creating an image of B.

“You’re joking, right? You come to the Th’un homeworld and ask if I’ve seen a Th’un? The scourge of the galaxy? The most hated race? The destroyers of worlds? Have I seen a Th’un? I have seen nothing *but* Th’un, and always the pain comes. What can I possibly know that they would want at this point? It’s impossible, but always the pain comes. I don’t know anything else, I swear!” The being had collapsed at this point and was doing the alien equivalent of crying.

“Look, I’m sorry, it’s just—” *Will this being remember anything I say anyway? And can I promise them anything? It may come to using the Nova Bomb after all, so all I can offer them is a quick death. But at least I’m getting close. If this is the Th’un homeworld...* He stepped from the dream or tried to. It seemed to resist him, so he tried again. Again he was denied. *Some kind of protection on the place or just my own inadequacies again?* A third time he tried, and this time the scene changed, though not by much. The same being was there, clearly asleep, twitching on the floor of the tiny cell. *How long have you been here, that this is your whole world now? How can the shadow avatar corrupt a people so completely this is allowed to happen? Are they too far gone to save? Will I have to destroy the innocent and the guilty alike to end this nightmare? I’m sorry, my friend. I would get you out of here if I could, but I have a higher purpose.* Feeling helpless and powerless, he willed himself invisible and intangible, stepping through the cell door and into the hallway. Walking through the place he saw drones every few meters, some flying, some clanking along, but all unpainted metal and deadly looking. *I could bring this place down, but what would be the point? I’m sure I’m in a city somewhere, could they escape? That one looked like it could barely move, it was so thin, though that may just be how those aliens look. All this power, and I have to let this go on. At least for now.* He finally reached what seemed to be an outer door and stepped through, looking around. *I need a space port, let’s see what we can find. Given I came out in a prison there must be one nearby, right? You wouldn’t truck prisoners halfway across the city now would you? Of course you wouldn’t.* He rose into the air, letting his insubstantial nature fall away, but keeping his invisibility. *Gotcha.* In the distance he saw a ship landing, and willed himself over there, then found a good landing spot.

Looking around he saw only armored figures moving around, going about their tasks much like at any airport. He wondered how they told each other apart but shrugged, it wasn’t his concern. “Should we try to sneak aboard a ship that’s leaving?” he asked Meta.

“A better possibility would be to find a ship that was under repair,” Meta answered. “If the computer core is exposed, I could interface with it and determine not only the coordinates of this place, but their algorithms of traversing space faster than light.”

“You would need their algorithms? Aren’t you a million times as sophisticated as any device here?”

“Indeed so. But I do not have all the details of orbital mechanics in this reality, and would be quite embarrassed to lead you to an incorrect destination because of it. Even a slight error, at the speeds and distances we are discussing, will result in a very different ending coordinate.”

“I see. Let’s keep looking around, maybe there’s a repair area around here.”

There was, and Lysanias picked out a fair size ship Th’un were coming and going from. Some of the panels were off on the outside, so it didn’t look like it would be done any time soon. He picked a Th’un and invisibly studied them, looking for any differences in the armor from anyone around. He didn’t really see any, but after they left he headed to an empty room and shape shifted himself to look the same.

“Why not stay invisible?” Meta asked him. “This action increases risk dramatically.”

“I’d like to, but if I have to move things around to get you where we need to go, I’d rather just look like another worker instead of having to wait until no one was around. Hopefully this way is faster.”

“Just be aware we do not know anything about their mannerisms, you could give yourself away by making some unconscious gesture they never would.”

"I'll be careful, I doubt anyone will even look at me twice with how many people are just seemingly wandering around out there." With that he boldly strode forward and didn't make it twenty steps before someone called out "Hey!" and pointed to him.

What already? You've got to be kidding me, what did I do wrong?

"What?" he asked, as the Th'un stomped over to him.

"Your ident chip isn't broadcasting, who are you?"

"My-" *Ah, that's one question answered. I bet their armor broadcasts their identity, so you just look at someone and get a readout on if they're supposed to be there. I just made myself look like one of them, but I have no similar chip because I didn't know about it. So of course the first person that saw me didn't get a reading and came over here.* "That's funny, it was a minute ago," he finished lamely, looking down at himself.

"It was a minute ago," the Th'un mocked. "A likely story." They pulled out a hand weapon and leveled it at him. "And I suppose your suit diagnostic system is similarly faulty, by coincidence."

"I'm not getting any fault readings," he answered honestly.

"Of course not. So who are you?"

"I'm... X?" *Please, don't let him be named that, or any other of a number of things that could hilariously go wrong right now.*

"Wait, you're X?"

"Yeah."

"Well, well, maintenance X." He tapped Lysanias' shoulder, where there was a design he had copied. *Oh, is that what that means?* "I've got a few things to say to you, so this is a good a time as any. In the first place..."

Several minutes went by.

"And another thing!"

Just shoot me already, it'll be less painful!

More minutes.

"And all that means..."

Maybe I could just knock him out and hide the body? But no, the AI would alert someone...

Finally he seemed to be winding down. He was gripping Lysanias around the shoulders, not that the gun had wavered for even a second. "So you see where I'm coming from?" He gestured vaguely with the weapon.

What is this guy blathering about? As far as I can tell it's been about a certain color of what I assume is some kind of fish? It's rubbish, absolute nonsense from that I can tell. But he really seems passionate about it. "Oh, absolutely, you've convinced me."

"Really? Wow, I expected a lot more argument, based on what I've heard about you around the office. I'm glad we had this talk. This is really a load off my mind, you know?"

"I can see why you would say that."

"And you're totally okay with it?"

"Completely." *I have no idea what I'm even agreeing to!!! Go away!*

"That's great to hear. Well, may as well get going."

"I can go back to work now?" *Thank you Allfather!*

"Back to work? You know protocol as well as I do! I'm escorting you to maintenance, where you will be scanned, your identity verified, and your suit repaired. Honestly just shooting you would be less paperwork, but *of course* old L had to be the first to see you so it's off we go! Not like I don't have my own business to be about, but rules are rules so let's get this over with."

"That's not really necessary, is it?" *Stupid Dreaming, I could make this guy go away if I could use the force, but that's one thing I can't replicate, making someone believe something.*

"Oh, it most certainly is. This is for our safety, we don't want aliens running around here, impersonating us. Thinking they're people, or something perverted like that." His

demeanor had changed, he stepped back and leveled the weapon again. "You know the way, move."

I don't actually. How am I going to get out of this? He glanced around, spotting a piece of machinery taking off an armored panel on a ship nearby. There was a Th'un inside, operating it, and the huge panel was being lifted off like it weighed nothing. *Yeah, right there. Perfect. The driver shouldn't be harmed, the plate will keep them from the brunt of the blast.* He willed an explosion to rip out of the now exposed portion of the ship, hoping it would distract everyone enough for him to get away. He didn't want anything conventional or traceable because he didn't know what sort of materials would be found on this planet, but he knew one thing that would produce some nice results. Air. Just like his almost never used air grenades he shoved as much air into a single point behind the now lowering plate as he could, which turned out to be *100,000 kg of pure oxygen* in the space of a golf ball. This of course instantly expanded outward, blasting the mover backwards in a ball of plasma caused by simple friction of the air molecules trying to get away from each other. On the other side the ship slammed across the bay, crashing into armored figures and vehicles alike, causing basically the mother of all distractions. There was a flash brighter than the sun as this all happened, air was swirling around wildly as shockwaves bounced around the inside of the structure, and windows shattered all around the perimeter of the building.

Sorry! Sorry! Crud, I wanted a lot, but maybe not that much? Sheesh, maybe I should use water next time, or would that have been worse?

As expected, L was staring at the carnage and trying to process it, braced against the force of the enormous wind that was battering him, so with nary a wave Lysanias simply went invisible again, reverting back to himself and flying away. He wasn't sure L would even notice, as figures started pouring out of ships and doors nearby to see what the heck all that racket was.

"That was effective," Meta told him. "What exactly was that?"

"Air. Help me find a ship, this should be a distraction enough for anybody, if we can't get access to a ship's computer somehow with all this going on, I'm just leaving."

"That was air? The volume of air required for- processing request. The ship at the far end seems mostly undamaged, we should try that one."

"Heading there now."

Chapter 22

To boldly go where no one has gone before (except all the people already there)

When: Moments later

Where: Back on Andromeda

Lysanias awoke with a start, the Dream ending after he came back and put Meta back in his room. The two had successfully found a ship and gotten inside, and after a quick interface cable was generated and used to hook them together, Meta announced they knew where they were and how to predict where this place would be in the future. With that Lysanias stepped back into the World of Dreams, from there it was a simple matter to see himself back on Andromeda, and then stepped back over into the real world to deliver the watch with Meta in it back to himself. He was surprised to see the room was empty, but shrugged, put the watch on the desk by the bed where the wand was still sitting, and woke up.

Excited, he jumped up and went to grab the watch. His hand passed through the empty air. He looked around the room. The wand was still there. *What could have- I really am an idiot, aren't I? While it didn't take me any time to fall asleep, I spent some time until I dreamed, and then when Dreaming it took me some time to get there. Essentially, Dreaming myself into the future. My Dream self is right now just setting out to find B's dream, so I'm "stuck" here in the "past" waiting for me to catch up to me. That's why I was out of the room when I just dropped off Meta. I guess I better not be here, who knows what it will mean for Dreaming "me" if the "future" I was in isn't what "he" sees. Ugh, this is both the most annoying and convenient set of powers I could possibly have! I shouldn't have to wait long.*

So he put an "ignore me" ward on so he didn't have to explain himself, and went off to find a quiet corner. He wanted to explore those souls he had taken, but he had a more pressing concern. *It's almost time for me to whip up an engine to propel us faster than light. I need to know approximately how I'm going to do that.*

Getting out the hubPad he said "you'll find out" when this version of Meta asked how his mission went, and requested fictional accounts of FTL travel he could Dream up. He had basically figured out what he was going to do when the pad announced "Synchronization with secondary unit complete. Coordinates and algorithm received."

"Fantastic. I'll go back to sleep while you convey that to Epic and Andromeda so they can show me where to point the ship on the monitors."

"I did that while you were saying 'fan' in the word 'fantastic.' Everything is so slow in meat space."

"Let's see what we can do about that."

Going back to the room he saw, yes, the watch was sitting there and got back into bed. He considered "waking" Rosalina to put the sleep spell on him again, (and maybe getting another good night kiss?) but just relaxed and figured it wouldn't be that long until he was dreaming. He was correct, as some time later he realized it and willed himself to the moon base. There he told everyone he was leaving, possibly for a week or more, and anyone that didn't want to be stuck on the moon for that time to speak up now and be brought back to Earth.

"I'll try to come back here," he told them, "and I should be able to manage it, but in case something happens, do you need anything?"

They looked over their inventory, they had tons of water in insulated tanks and a filtering system to reuse it, plenty of frozen food, the power generators worked great as they were solar, and oxygen levels were holding steady because of the number of plants over in the "bio-dome" next door where the air exchanges were. Stacks of toilet paper, waste treatment tanks, etc. etc. Of course some decided to go back to the main base, but those that were staying said they could hold out for months at least, they should be fine. (He had made them keep track of everything they used on a day to day basis and just made a huge storage room filled with everything they used at the end of a week.) They wished him luck, and he thanked them and headed back to the Andromeda bridge. Everyone was there waiting for him, and came to attention as the doors slid closed behind him.

"Did you get it?" Amelia asked.

"I did, hopefully Andromeda should have the numbers by now?"

"They have been transferred, but are you sure your dream skills can help us?" she asked from the view screen. "The numbers are awfully big," she said from her robot body.

"Can you pick one place to have a conversation from and stick with it?" Tessa complained.

"No," both answered.

She rolled her eyes.

"What's the problem?" Amelia asked.

"Let me put some numbers on screen," she replied, stepping to the side. On the screen appeared a few things.

Light Speed

299,792,458 m/s

25,902,068,352 km per day

~ 9,000,000,000,000 km per year

Distance to Th'un system - ~3,000 light years

$3,000 \text{ years} \times 9,000,000,000,000 \text{ km / year} = 27,000,000,000,000,000 \text{ km}$

Target travel time = 5 days

$27,000,000,000,000,000 \text{ km} / 5 \text{ days} = 5,400,000,000,000,000 \text{ km / day}$

$5,400,000,000,000,000 \text{ km/day} / 25,902,068,352 \text{ km/day} = 208,477x \text{ the speed of light.}$

A moment of silence stretched.

"Uh," Amelia finally said, "we have to exceed two hundred *thousand* times the speed of light to get there in five days? How do they do it?"

"I would be extremely interested in the answer," Andromeda acknowledged. "And if they would have even found us in the first place had they not been directed by the shadow avatar. Lysanias, can your Dreaming propel us that quickly? Keeping in mind this assumes you can propel us for 24 hours in a day, while you only Dream for fifteen or so minutes a night at a time."

"That's essentially warp 9.9999!" she went on. Everyone looked at her. "What? You know I'm a star trek nerd, how is this coming as a shock to you?"

"Can you do it?" Kate asked, in a "that's our girl you have to love her" tone of voice.

"Can you do it *safely*?" Tony asked. "Take it from a speedster, it's not the speed you have to worry about, speed is easy. Jump off a cliff and wait a few seconds. It's how to stop when you get to where you're going, that's the tricky part."

"Look, in the star trek universe-" Everyone glared over at Amelia again. "Don't judge me! It has to be as simple as possible, right? And as safe as possible."

"Yes..."

"When they're fighting the Borg they find a transwarp conduit. Basically they open a hole into subspace into a layer, if you will, of fast moving space. The ship isn't moving at all, space itself propels the ship forward, like a boat on a river. They can only go where the river takes them, but they, the Borg, have mapped it out so they know where to get on to get roughly where they need to go. Can you create a conduit pointed in the direction we need to go that's long enough to get us there? A conduit of imaginary if you will, or Dream space that simply pushes the ship along? As it will probably only exist while you're asleep, the tunnel will collapse when you wake up, but that's fine. We'll get shoved back into "real" space but as we're not technically moving, we should be fine."

"Right now that's a good a plan as any," he told her. "I'll try it."

His first several attempts at doing so succeeded, in a fashion. The “tube” he managed to create around the ship was so short they barely went inside before they were knocked out again. This was fine with him, if a bit frustrating, because it at least showed they could go in and out safely. But then (due to his random nature no doubt) he created a “tube” that seemed to go on and on, and Andromeda announced they were really cruising now, and to keep up whatever it was he was doing.

Which he did.

For about five minutes.

Because of course he would get so little Dream time when he most needed it, because that’s how the universe works. When next he realized he was dreaming and went back to the bridge, everyone was looking hostile and he went back to the center to look out the viewscreen again.

“Er, how long did I manage to Dream?” he asked quietly.

“Five minutes!” everyone shouted.

“Ah. Well, that can happen, I guess. Blame my random nature if you must. Okay, here we go again.”

He got another one minute of dream time, so you can imagine how thrilled everyone was when he once again made his way quietly onto the bridge.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s going on,” he apologized, not needing emphatic powers to tell there was some hostility here. “Usually it’s a lot longer than this!”

“Is there anything you can do?” Amanda asked. “I mean, we are trying to get somewhere as quickly as we can, yes?”

“I realize that. And no. As with most things with me it’s completely random and can be anywhere from almost ten hours,” *which probably means something given it’s me*, “to a minute, like you just saw. I Dream, it happens. I can’t control it.”

“Fine, just make the corridor again.”

“I mean if *you* can come up with a way to travel faster than light-”

“Just do it!”

“Okay, okay.”

That time he got an hour of time, and a long corridor on the first try, which was much better. Then he got eight hours, which was a problem. He had to wait the first hour for his “previous” dream self to wake up, meaning he only got seven hours of moving the ship total, and when he next Dreamed, he knew this wasn’t going to work.

I now have to wait about six hours, but the probability of me staying in this Dream segment for that long are low. I’ve basically taken us through the corridor my entire sleep cycle of eight hours. He stared at the clock in his room, minutes ticking by in thought. Then he cocked his head to the side and narrowed his eyes. I can control time to a certain extent. I could try to go into the future, but when I was practicing with Jason, ugh another person I hope I don’t have to kill, I couldn’t “jump” forward very far. I would give myself a one in twelve chance of going 6 hours into the future and then picking up where my previous self left off. But there’s another way.

He went down to the engine room, the place it looked like would remain empty as he was propelling the ship directly, and sat down. It wasn’t exactly the center of the ship, but it did house the graviton tanks so they wanted it very well protected, and that meant as much ship between them and space as they could get. So he sat down and concentrated on slowing time down for the whole ship. *After all, the first me is concentrating on keeping this corridor of “fast space current” around the ship. If another me concentrates on making an hour of time actually two or three hours of time I can double the amount of time the ship goes for. No one would even notice, as inside the ship things will tick away at one second per*

second, but outside the ship it may be a quarter of a second per second. I have no way to know how well I manipulated time, but let's give it a shot.

So for the next hour he concentrated and managed to extend that hour to three hours for everyone else on the ship. After he woke up he waited a half hour, went back to sleep, and when he realized he was Dreaming and got back to the ship he stayed in that segment for 5 hours, and extended that time to fifteen hours. By then his "first" self had woken up, and it would be morning so even Dreaming more he would probably be through his eight hour sleep cycle by then. He was pleased to know his time manipulation had done *something*, he could feel Dream energy manipulating time as he sat there, even if he didn't know exactly how much he had extended his propulsion time. *I'll see about taking a nap this afternoon, maybe I'll spar with Rosalina after lunch that should tire me out, and I can Dream us another corridor for a few hours.*

And so it went. This sequence repeated itself with the usual rate of success for him, and the ship jumped and jerked through the interstellar void towards the Th'un homeworld. Lysanias practiced with Rosalina when he was awake, and even looked into a new skill to learn on his own from the hubPad. There were three possibilities he liked, all things ESPers could do; enhance their skill at something, enhance their combat abilities, or stop time for an instant. Messing with time made him interested in that one, but the description said he had to be a complete master of both teleportation and telekinesis, something Epic said after observing him use those skills he would need more practice in. The combat immersion Epic said he could probably manage, but "Don't you already know something similar, with the flame and the void?" Epic asked.

"It does sound similar, doesn't it? Though it says this makes you faster."

"Do you need to be faster in combat?"

"Who doesn't?"

"So make a ward that does it."

"Oh. Right. Wards." *That angel did make me an artificer, and I have not used wards like I used to. Weird.*

So he started working on enhancing his aptitude at things, though he wondered if just practicing calling the spirits wouldn't be a better use of his time. *This is instantaneous though, but only works for me. I guess everything has trade offs.*

He also spent some time with the souls he had "borrowed" from the convicts. John's, the multiplying shape. A literal old timey looking bomb from guess who. (He put that one away and didn't mess with it. If it was just going to explode he didn't want to be anywhere near it) Then from the other three; a dog, a scythe, and finally a weird looking cage. The dog was the only one that could move around on its own, so he left it out, though initially it was fairly hostile to anyone but him.

"What a cute dog! Some kind of Terrier, right?" Rosalina said when she first saw it. It was all one color, yellow, more like someone drew a dog shape and filled it with a paint tool than a real dog, but it was still unmistakably a dog. It was small, had long hair, and growled at her. "Hey!"

"Watch it," Lysanias said to it. "She's a friend."

They looked at him as if to make sure, and he nodded. The dog's demeanor instantly changed, tongue hanging out and they bounded over to her, playfully hopping around her legs and licking her face when she bent down to pet it.

"Good dog! Who's a good dog then? You're a good dog, aren't you? Yes you are! Do you control it?"

"Sort of like how I control my mountain spirit, I guess? I know it's around, I can sort of direct what it's doing, but unless I'm really focusing it just does what I would want a dog to do. It's not a part of me like the mountain spirit is, but as I'm allowing it to manifest I guess the function follows form in this case."

"So if it was a cat it would just lay around, or a deer would try to run away from everything?"

"I would guess yes, but the others are objects so we'll just have to see with the next animal like one I get how it acts."

He also realized, when he went into his Soulscape, that the souls he was carrying had been put there. They were little more than motes of light that seemed to just be playing, chasing each other around and swirling around Rosalina, touching the Lumias and darting away as if being dared. She said she didn't mind them, they stayed out of the house and she had convinced them to race her (because that's what you do with souls, kart race them) and as she couldn't do anything about them anyway, why not just make the best of it? But at least he knew where they were, they had "gone" somewhere, and really couldn't make trouble having no real form of their own there but maybe a point of light.

It was three days in when Amelia came and sat down next to him, feeling bored.

"At least you're keeping busy," she told him. He was working on both skills of trying to enhance his skill at something and asking the universe questions by asking what number he would roll on a die.

"Always lots to do on my end. The curse of being able to learn so many skills. What's up?"

"I just never realized how *boring* space travel was. I mean in TV shows ships are seen as sort of zipping around to various places but that's impossible. I see that now. We want to go *one* place, not that far away by galactic standards, and we're by all rights traveling as fast as the Enterprise can go, and we'll still take almost a week if not more to get there. Based on how well your Dreaming propels us, which is hit or miss as far as we can tell."

"I wish I could get us there faster, believe me."

"I'm not complaining about that, I mean I get to travel at warp 9.9999, who else has done that? It's just they must have so much down time, no wonder they developed the holo-deck. The characters on the show should age like ten years per season. They have wayyyy too many adventures in far too many places for the speeds they're supposedly going."

"So I'm shattering your illusions, huh? Sorry. At least everyone seems in good spirits."

"That's true. Behemoth and Samantha have been sparing, Sam wants to get better at fighting F5s, and Behemoth realized maybe just powering through stuff isn't going to be enough where we're going. I think they've actually hit it off a little. She's not a bad person, just intense, she had to be because her powers made her stand out so much."

That's good. Maybe that Behemoth inside her won't come back to cause trouble for the primes if she's not so afraid of her anymore.

She went on. "The ones from the power plant attacks have also been behaving. Many of them came, they told me, in the hope a cure could be found for them where we're going. They didn't trust us to bring it back, can you believe it? They're actually figuring out how to best fight together, to use their powers to cover any gaps they have and watch each other's backs."

"Almost like a real crew, on a real mission into dangerous territory."

She laughed. "Yeah, who would have thought? I really am living the dream, no pun intended. I mean in some ways we're light years ahead of the federation in the show. They don't use armor, or AI, or mechs, or drones in their fights. There was one episode, Data, that's their one android, had been essentially kidnapped by his brother and left the ship. They went after him, and figured out what planet he had landed on. There was some kind of interference so their scanners couldn't tell what was down there, but they beamed down anyway. Captain Picard ordered "a highly armed away team" to the surface and Worf took like five other people, *five*, all with type 2 phasers. Not type 3, not rifles. Essentially they each had a single pistol. No armor. No cover beamed down beforehand, no drones to provide overwatch, nothing. Just six people in a field that could have been crawling with enemy forces. Had someone actually been there when they showed up, they would have been cut down in seconds, like that!" She snapped her fingers.

"And this is one of your favorite shows?" *Remind me not to watch it for ideas on rescue attempts.*

She chuckled. "Good point. It's a message of hope, that humanity actually makes it out of our stupid phase (the one we're in right now, by the way) and makes it. Out here, in the star lanes. That we get past materialism and greed, everyone has any possession they want, no one is hungry or homeless, and making art or science advances or stories, or music, or exploring because that's what you want to do is all perfectly valid. That's what I like. Though the Federation is a bit stupid, at least on some level, but that's a relic of the show starting in the 70s or whenever. They never imagined drones or heck, cell phones, so of course no one uses them."

"Time for a reboot then, I guess. I see you're walking around most of the time now."

"Yup!" She waved her legs around, she was in shorts because of course she liked showing them off now they actually had muscle tone on them. "I feel stronger every day, maybe because of Teddy being around? I do a lot of leg exercises so it makes sense I would heal faster with him around and put on muscle faster. I wish I could give this cure to everyone who had my problem, and maybe one day that'll be possible. Well, I won't keep you." She got up. "You actually have stuff to do, skills to practice. I should leave you to it."

"Want to play with the dog?"

"Dog?" She looked under the table at the doggy soul at Lysanias' feet. "I thought it was a soul. Does it really play?"

"Here." He handed her a ball that had been beside him on the table. "Throw this and find out."

She gave it a toss through the open door and the dog bounded after it, bringing it back and dropping it at her feet. "How about that? Come on pup, I'll play with you for a bit."

The dog spun around several times and followed her, tail wagging.

So weird. Who would have guessed?

And so the days passed, and Andromeda announced they were coming up on the coordinates she had selected, far enough out they could see what the situation was in system, close enough to get there with "conventional" graviton drive, with time enough to plan accordingly. With that everyone started changing into their armor and making sure their weapons were charged and ready. Lysanias was still Dreaming, though wondered if he should chance staying that way or waking up and putting the armor on his waking self. It had been four hours at that point, so he probably wasn't going to chance it. It was time for the battle for the galaxy to begin. They were, in a way, about to truly become guardians... of the galaxy.

Chapter 23

Words are useless. There's too much of it darling, too much!

When: Moments later

Where: Space, hopefully near where they need to be

"So where are they all?" Amelia demanded of B.

"What do you mean?" they replied.

"All these defenses you talked about, of course." She swept a hand towards the viewscreen, showing a small planet in the center. "You said there were hundreds of ships in your home system. Are we not in your home system?"

"That is my homeworld," they verified. "Did you think our ships would have bright signs pointing to them or something?"

"Wait, what? Of course not, but we should... they should... oh crap."

"What's oh crap?" asked Tessa nervously. "Are we screwed?"

"The problem," Andromeda told them from the viewscreen. "Is that space, your usual space color, well it's black, isn't it? You don't need fancy cloaking technology to hide in space. You just need black paint."

"Exactly," B agreed. "Though make no mistake, some of our defenses do have means of staying undetected apart from the, how do you say it, the paint job?"

"So how do we tell they're there?" asked Kate. "Space radar?"

"That could tell us a few things," she admitted. "If we could generate a large enough pulse to fill the entire system. And we could wait the hours it would take to fire off the signal, wait for it to bounce off something, and get back to us. We're outside the system, that image you're looking at was taken..."

"Approximately five hours ago," filled in Andromeda.

She made a "so there you are" gesture. "So even if we could deploy a radio telescope at the size we would need to broadcast and get a signal, we would have to sit here and wait ten hours for it to get back to us."

"Plus that means they would receive the signal and start to wonder where it came from," B added. "You would be announcing your presence, and our ships are quite a bit faster than yours even when not traveling at faster than light speeds."

"How do you know that?" Tony demanded.

"I admit to having no evidence for my claim, but this ship is somehow powered by dreams, if what I've been hearing from the crew are correct? And gavitons? No, our ships are superior."

Tony looked to Amelia, who shrugged. "I have no idea how fast their ships are, so there's no way to verify or deny their statement. But they have been doing this a lot longer than we have. And perhaps we should watch what we say around the not-yet-to-be-trusted alien?"

"I am on your side," B assured her. "I do not wish this reality to be destroyed, any more than you do."

She just made a growly noise in her throat.

They went on. "Especially as I know now that I was the one helping to hasten my own demise. I'm not a *human*," they made a face. "If I learn something is bad for me, I stop doing it. I mean what do you call it? Smoking? And drinking poison? Alcohol you call it, right? You know it kills you, and you drink it anyway. So bizarre."

"So rather than insult us, give us some ideas on how to proceed," Kate demanded.

"You must have fought more advanced alien races than us, those with better ships or sensors. How did you fight them?"

"We sent expendable drones until we sent *just enough* expendable drones to overwhelm them. If drones failed, like in your case, one agent such as myself was sent to figure out why, and to discover how to create more effective drones that could be sent."

"Efficient."

"it is! We're not *human*, we know that resources are finite-"

"But it won't work for us, so what would?"

“Let’s go sit down,” Amelia suggested. “Andromeda, let us know if anything comes close to us.”

“Of course.”

The group went to a meeting room and sat down. “So what do we have going for us that can get us what we want?” Amelia asked.

“I think you must first define what you want,” B suggested. “Just killing Our Great Leader will not end the conflict between us. Unless you plan to push your thoughts into every person on every world we occupy, and assume they believe you, just killing Our Great Leader will only increase our fervor. ‘You see,’ everyone will shout, ‘alien races cannot be trusted, one has killed Our Great Leader! We must exterminate them all!’”

“Can you manage that?” Kate asked.

“Not even a little bit,” Lysanias assured her. “I would have to touch every single person. It’s like Amon all over again, trying to take the bending of every person on the planet. He would have had to do it for hundreds of years.”

“We need to have him undermine himself,” Tessa suggested. “Maybe get him monologuing, telling his big plan to everyone to make his race lose confidence in what they’ve been doing all these years.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “Give him a ‘you’re on candid camera’ moment!” The younger generation looked at him like “what?” “You know, candid camera?”

“How old are you?” Tessa asked. “Anyway, sure, broadcast when he thinks he’s just talking to us. That’s an idea.”

“There is a system in place for that,” B told them. “We are bombarded daily with an endless news cycle of how many rebellions that have been crushed, how many new alien worlds are ours to plunder, that sort of thing. It plays from every street corner, in every home. Subvert that system and you’re halfway there.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere!” Amelia exclaimed. “I’m sure it’s pretty heavily guarded but not as guarded as weapon’s research or the plant that makes star drives. We could get in. But how to get the message out?”

“I have an idea about that,” Monica told them. “What if Our Great Leader,” she did Jazz hands as she said that, “simply turned on his followers? Came out and told the truth on his own? Insulted people, made them feel stupid for following him? They may not be *human*,” she glared over at B, “but I bet they would be pretty pissed off if he called them dumb. Maybe enough to turn on him right then and there.”

“How would he phrase it though?” Samantha asked.

“Maybe he’s decided they’ve moving too slowly for his liking. He thought, hey, the universe would be mine right now but we’ve only explored and conquered X percent of it. So he found another race he’s going to use instead, and this one can kiss his fuzzy ass-”

“uming we could transmit such a message,” Samantha finished for her, “how do we get him to say all that stuff?”

“That’s the best part,” Monica said, beaming. “His image must be everywhere. We just dress up our resident ‘guy with powers’ to look like him and say whatever we want.”

Everyone looked to Lysanias.

“Wouldn’t work,” he told them with a shake of his head.

“Why not?” she grumped.

“The old ‘president’s speech’ situation again. Oh, they would hear it if I said it live, but suddenly they watch a recording and what I’m saying is all gibberish.”

“Oh.”

Everyone slowly looked over at B.

“Why are you all looking at me like that?”

“How about you make yourself useful and *you* do that part of the plan?” Amelia suggested with a wicked grin. “You already look mostly the part anyway.”

“You mean pretend to be (.), Our Great Leader? I don’t know, I mean, I could get killed for doing something that like.”

“Hang on, did you just say his name?” Luke asked. “I didn’t catch it.”

“Yes, it’s (.)”

"It's what?"

"(.)"

"What is that?"

"Oh, Our Great Leader wanted the shortest, most humble name he could in our language and so he took the name (.) when he assumed the mantle of leader."

"What letter is that?"

"You mean his name isn't... play the tape Epic," Amelia commanded. "I can't remember all that guy said."

The viewscreen lit up and there was the footage from the time the 3D drone came down of a shape saying "I am Tyronius Ignatious Walufa Patingle Ipsha Flawul Myovian Gijaw Maribia *clicking noise rising in pitch for six seconds* Holaw Twentythreeevntyfive Slinglang Quaaaaaaawawawawawaaaaaaa Refasival Catchapatori Galethian Minamowzizzle Horthima jazandian *meowing* awooga awooga chimchimane charo. The seventeenth."

"That's his *name*?" B asked, incredulous.

"That's what he said," Amelia insisted.

"I will do anything you ask that furthers the cause of his defeat!" he promised, smashing the table. "The nerve! The outrageousness of it! I've been trying to call him (.) my whole life and that's the name he gives to alien species behind our back? I'll murder him myself!"

"I see that you feel strongly about this," Amelia told him, "but let's just go back to the impersonating him plan. Hopefully his followers will turn on him and we don't have to do anything."

"Just tell me what to say and when to say it!"

"We will, I promise. So for now we have the beginnings of a plan, let's figure how to go to where we'll need to broadcast from."

"Aren't you missing the part where we *record* the message?" Tessa asked. "Think you skipped a step there, boss?"

"What do you mean? Lysanias can take a nap and go down to the planet, get his image, make whatever he wears normally (probably armor) and came back, whip that up, and then shape shift B here once he's awake again."

"I still don't understand this talk of him doing things in his sleep..." B complained.

"Never mind. We have our phones, we can record him."

"I think," Andromeda said, appearing on the screen, "that she is thinking a bit ahead of you, Amelia. Once we have this footage, how exactly are you going to get it from your phone to their broadcasting center? I'm pretty sure they don't have iCloud or Google Drive here."

"Well, we just, uh, that is... huh. Crap."

"That is an apt summation."

"Wait, Lysanias plugged his watch thing in to get the coordinates to this system right? Can't you do the same thing? We just give you the footage and you can broadcast it?"

"Meta?"

"While it is true I could create a compatibility cable to plug in and fairly easily determine the coordinates I needed, I don't know how their broadcasting system works any more than you do. That's on too small a level from my perspective. Just like I needed the alien ship to tell me the coordinates, I would need alien hardware to know their video system."

"I get it, that's fair. We would have to make two raids then?"

"Indeed," Andromeda agreed. "The first, to acquire whatever video camera technology they use, and the computers they use to edit the video. After all, without a lot of work decoding it Epic or I would not be able to work with the footage directly. And then we would have to re-encode it for their systems. It is probably encrypted, they wouldn't want just anyone broadcasting something, so it might not even be possible for us otherwise. Then we have to figure out how to work the stolen equipment, power it without blowing it up because do we know what voltage and amperage they use? Successfully record and edit the video, encode it, certify it if needed. Then a second raid to break into the place to play it."

"Won't work," Tony decided. "Once we steal the equipment the word goes out. They'll expect that exact thing, not to mention beefing up security around the place. Stealing video equipment would be, ahem, broadcasting our intention, if you will."

Everyone groaned.

“Could we just do it live?” Monica asked.

“No idea,” B admitted. “Everything may have to go through some kind of censor program, meaning nothing live can be broadcast, as an additional security measure. It’s what I would do. I suppose such a system would have to be circumvented one way or the other.”

“You mentioned rebellions?” Kate asked. “Maybe that’s an angle we can look into.”

“The recordings claim so many members put to death every day, but perhaps that is simply another fabrication to make us think they are doing something. Perhaps such a thing doesn’t even exist.”

“Could you ask?” Amelia asked, looking at Lysanias.

“From here? Maybe, but I’ve never asked for something so far away.”

“We have to go there anyway,” she mused. “This won’t be a three hour tour. We’ll have to be on the ground for a day or two planning everything out in greater detail. Layout of buildings, number of guards, all sorts of things.”

“Which brings us back to trying to get to the planet,” Tony said. “A thing we can’t really do past all the defenses B says exist.”

“They exist, are you questioning my intelligence?”

“So where are they?”

“We have already gone over the fact that space is black-”

“Look, we can get around that,” Amelia told them. “Tonight. When Lysanias goes to sleep he can open the corridor for us, they won’t be familiar with it and won’t know what happened. That’s also our escape route. We scream into the system, guns blazing, and draw their fire. Then blip out through the corridor. Meanwhile, a few of us in slipfighters come in from the other direction. We find a safe place to hole up, Lysanias joins us, brings the rest of us down to the surface, and we figure things out from there. Maybe we can knock over an electronics store and get some gear that way.”

“So to recap, as we’ve done this backwards,” Monica spoke up, “diversion. Head to the planet, hide. Get equipment or help from the resistance if it exists or on our own if not. Set up a temporary studio and film B as OGL mocking everyone for being so stupid to follow him when he wants them all dead. Civil war? If he hasn’t been taken out, find him, do the job ourselves, back to the ship, go home victorious?”

“That’s about the shape of it,” B told her, “think you can pull it off?”

“Pssssh. We’ll be done by supper.”

“Really?” They seemed quite surprised. “How fast are your ships, the little ones I mean.”

“Plenty fast! They are, right?”

“B has a good point,” Andromeda told them. “Let me show you some numbers again real quick. I’ll use what we believe to be their top speed given the ‘fuel’ they can carry and stress on the pilots.” Numbers came up on the display again.

Distance to planet: 5,400,000,000 km

Ship acceleration: 90m/s²

Time to arrive if stopping distance is not a factor: 4 days

Time to arrive if stopping distance is a factor: 5.5 days

“So you would have to spend 2 days accelerating towards the planet, cruise for a day or so, then slow down for 2 days. Unless your system of initial dampening can handle going 11,664,000 km/hour to a dead stop in a few minutes, Amelia. And I think we both know it can’t.”

“She’s right,” Amelia sighed. “Even if it could, that would only shave a day off the trip. We can’t spend days in those little pods. Maybe 4 hours, if we’re lucky. We’re going to have to use Lysanias for this too.”

“But he can’t be in two places at once,” Tony protested. “Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“So we warp in,” Monica mused, “hold off whatever forces are near the planet while Andromeda launches fighters, then warp out again? He just joins on his own later?”

"You're thinking of star trek again," Amelia told her, rubbing her head. "We land in slipfighters, now we have to *hide* a bunch of slip fighters. We don't want them knowing what area we landed in. I guess once we landed we could blow them up, Th'un style. But then we're really stuck there."

"Could we capture one of their ships?" Luke asked.

"Sure, if you can magically figure out how to fly it. Their AI would just blow it up if aliens got onboard."

"Do all your ships have AI?" Samantha asked B.

"Our *suits* all have AI, what do you think? Plus my people would gladly give their lives if an alien was prevented from stealing one of our ships. So its destruction would be instant."

Of course. The shadow avatar would condition them to think they are individually worthless. They're going to be killed in the end anyway, may as well get them to think it some kind of great honor and have no self preservation instinct while they're busy destroying all planets. Make them more ruthless fighters too, if they have no fear of death.

"Why wouldn't they?" Amelia told her. "Once you have one AI you can have a million of them, you just copy it. Write once, run everywhere. It's a good idea though, if we could make it work."

Well any idea is a good idea if you can make it work. "Wait though, what if we were in one big drop pod," Lysanias asked. "instead of a bunch of little ones? Andromeda warps in, like you said, then I just take us down to the surface in a dream pod. It would be under my total control and could be invisible as that is the physical reality I projected around it at the time. When we landed the pod just vanishes, we don't have to hide it."

"How do we get back though?" Samantha asked.

"By winning. Once we've won the Andromeda can approach the planet without being fired upon. And I can go back in a Dream and warp it there again. Worst comes to worst I could probably teleport from the ground into orbit, in either state. Dreaming is easier because I wouldn't have to worry about the physics of it, but the Andromeda could match the planet's speed for a bit."

"Could you make a bunch of pods?" Luke asked. "So as to distract from the one we're in? Not that I would question your ability to make the pod itself invisible, but if we're dropping through atmosphere there's going to be a shockwave and heat build up that will be visible. They might just start shooting at that on principal. Might as well give them something visible to shoot at, take the pressure off us."

"Don't see why not. We could pack the cargo bay with them, then just release them once we're over the planet."

"And they would hold up?" Monica asked nervously. "They may have some big guns on the surface."

"Oh we do, the very biggest guns," B agreed.

"They'll be made of the same metal as my armor, the almost indestructible stuff. They would hold up long enough to be a good distraction. And I can put an energy barrier around ours... Right, don't want to call attention to it..."

"So make it clear," Behemoth said, "like a force field instead of some Japanese cartoon energy barrier."

Everyone jumped as she spoke. "When did you get here?" Amelia demanded.

"You think I can't move quietly when I need to? Thanks for letting me know there was a meeting by the way. I'm part of this team too now, you know. I mean the alien is here but I, a human last I checked, don't get invited? What's that all about?"

"Sorry," Amelia said genuinely. "I still have trouble thinking of you as an ally I guess. I'll try to do better in the future."

"See that you do. I'm risking my life in all this as well, it would be nice to have some say. Though I admit I don't know what Lysanias can do, as most plans seem to revolve around him somehow."

"I was just unprepared for how vast space is I guess," she admitted. "How things really work up here. You can't just fly around and stop on a dime and have sensors tell you everything in real time from two star systems away. You have to consider every little thing. Lysanias can work around some of that."

"They should do a show about real space problems!"

"But it would be so boring, it would just be people talking for half an hour interspersed with twenty minutes of commercials and then two minutes of action."

"I wonder..."

"So is that the plan?" Tessa asked. "Because I'm bored."

"We don't get this right and you'll be dead," B told her. "Boredom is life!"

"Remind me never to put you in charge of our motivational posters..."

"Of course not, I am in charge of our motivational battle hymn. I was thinking something along the lines of 'We head into battle to challenge our leader, who turned out to be, a being so dark-'"

She held up a hand and he stopped singing. "No. Just no."

"We must have a battle hymn, come now, do your people not enjoy music?"

"Let's just focus. Any other plans before we go with this stop, drop, and hope plan?"

Everyone sat in silence for a moment.

"Then it seems we have our plan, at least to get to the surface," Amelia said. "We'll stay here until Lysanias goes to sleep. Keep us on yellow alert, if something around here was going to detect us they would have by now."

"Stand down from red to yellow alert?" Andromeda asked.

"That's right."

"Are you absolutely sure? It will mean changing the bulb."

Amelia stared at her. "When did you learn to quote Red Dwarf? Come to think of it that space is black thing was from there too, wasn't it?"

"I scanned many instances of space related stories in case something could become relevant, and to more easily communicate in a language my creator, you, would understand. After all, some things are universal such as sneaking around or throwing off pursuers. I wanted to see what other people had imagined such situations would entail."

"Fair enough. Change the bulb and don't anyone go too far, just in case something does come at us out of the darkness."

The meeting broke up and Lysanias went to get out Rosalina, figuring she might as well be out as they had almost a whole day to wait. *I guess it's all down to me. My Dreaming skills have been getting a workout lately, I just hope I'm up for it.*

Chapter 24

Of course it's a good idea!

When: That night

Where: Inside the pod

That night when making the pods Lysanias learned something interesting about his Dreaming abilities. He created several pods, as many as would fit in the cargo bay, and then in the middle the one they would ride in. If he created a pod, then made it transparent (so he could see how close to the ground they were), then gave it an energy shield, it demanded more of his attention than creating a transparent metal pod with an energy shield and cloaking device built into the top of it. He didn't understand why this would be so, apart from it being all one thing instead of many things that did the same thing, but there it was. This took him several minutes, and he was fairly certain if a dream lasted for more than ten minutes it would last at least an hour, enough time to allow them to get to the surface without him getting them all killed.

When he was certain he could create the device quickly he went up to the bridge and told the group it was now or never. They went to red alert again and Lysanias started envisioning the "fast space" tunnel they needed. *Not too long, and not too short. The problem is if it's too short they may be alerted to us being here. I think I can control for it being too long, as I only want a tunnel that leads to the planet.*

He concentrated, and a tunnel opened up before the Andromeda, which it was swept into. By the time he went with everyone back to the cargo bay they were coming out of it, surprising whatever defenses by popping up out of nowhere. The ship was in full attack mode, firing everything it had at whatever Andromeda saw near them in space. "The hull is holding up," she reported. "But get out of here before they bring in some gravity cannons."

He created the pod they would ride in, everyone strapped in, and the door to the cargo bay opened. He gave all the pods a shove, and they spilled out the door and towards the surface. He made the pod turn, so he could see the Andromeda and create their escape route before he was out of range. *I hope you get out of the system safely, this is our only shot at this.* The tunnel opened and the ship was gone.

"Now it begins," B told them.

"Let him concentrate," Amelia shushed them.

But there wasn't much to do at the present, he simply activated the buttons for the "cloak" and the "energy barrier" and hoped from the outside the ship faded to invisibility. While the "pod" was little more than a box with seats, his seat had some buttons and controls next to it he could use to steer and turn the various functions on and off. The pods fell towards the surface, scattering like shot as they were not under his control. This pod stayed righted, he was moving the stick in the opposite direction it wanted to tumble so it stayed "upright" as it plunged downwards. There were flashes of light near them, probably the guns B had talked about, but none seemed to blow them out of the sky. The energy barrier glowed a bit but Lysanias controlled their fall speed and finally they were above a huge city, so he stopped them and the pod hung in mid air.

"The less time we stay here the better," he told them, still not sure how long he would be able to Dream this segment. "B, any particular landmarks we should look for? Where is the broadcasting station?"

"I only know there must be one, as the daily programming comes from somewhere. I don't know the specifics."

"Guess I'll just set us down then, maybe we can find a quiet place."

There seemed to be no "outskirts" to this city, it just kept going and going, so Lysanias eventually just decided to land on the roof of a tall building, scout from there, and take everyone there via portal. So he selected a roof, headed there, and turned off the energy shield. Landing the pod he noticed several things. One, that he felt much heavier than he was used to, and two a building a few kilometers away looked like it had recently been smashed to pieces.

"Oh crap," he said aloud. "The other pods. They fell on the city, didn't they?"

"That was the plan, was it not?" B asked. "You made them out of a material durable enough to survive the trip."

"I didn't consider them landing though. I bet a bunch of people died because of it." *Super, we're proving them right again. I should have held onto them, made them vanish after we went a certain distance.*

"You show concern, even though right now every one of my race would kill you on sight for being an alien?"

"Of course!"

"I see."

"Something's wrong," complained Tessa. "We've landed, but I still feel like we're falling. What gives?" She unstrapped herself and stood up. With effort. "What the heck? I feel so strange, it's taking me a huge effort just to stand here."

"Increased gravity will do that to you," Rommie told her. "Did you not anticipate this?"

"Increased what?"

"My planet is more than twice as big as yours," B agreed. "Why do you think I look like this? The more gravity a planet has, the larger the organisms that evolve there. To a certain extent, of course. That's why I have such a low center of gravity and thick limbs."

"Great, another complication!"

"For you, perhaps." B got up, stretching. "I finally feel I'm not going to float away with every step. It's good to be home."

"It's going to be a problem for us," Amelia agreed, standing herself. "If we get into a fight and can barely move? Even with the armor we're still going to be more sluggish. Walking half a mile is going to seem like walking two miles, because of the added strain on our systems. We can't stay here. I should have thought of this, sorry everyone."

"I can't take on this task by myself!" B protested.

"If only you had some kind of anti-gravity technology," Monica lamented.

"If I had that, I would have put it into the suit," Amelia told her. "Before I made the EMDrive I could have used anti-gravity and relied less on thrusters."

"Wait just a second," Lysanias told them. He looked around, up, down, spinning right round, and there seemed to be no one nearby. "I'm dissolving the pod, everyone ready?" They all stood up and braced against each other for the minor fall they were about to take as the pod vanished. Hot, dry air swept across them, and the sounds of the city below reached them. Oddly pitched, probably because of the gravity and higher density of air that implies. Lysanias concentrated again, creating a cylindrical drone that was mostly storage space for gravitons, that would slowly release them with an "upwards" spin. It had a chain on it so it didn't float away, which he took hold of as it activated. The bot rose in the air and while it wouldn't negate gravity completely below, as long as they stayed near it gravity would at least be more normal. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief as the pressure on their bodies lessened. "I have no idea how long this will last, but I can create a storage tank and refueling station when we have a good hiding spot. Here." He handed the chain to Amelia. "I'll scout around, see what I can find." *Wish I had thought to bring some 'ignore me' wards out before we left. Anyone can activate those. I need a system to carry them that's not too bulky, even pieces of paper are a little much when you have a whole handful of them. Something to look into for the future.*

"Good luck," everyone told him.

He willed himself invisible, then looked over the edge. *No, flying I think, he decided. Though aren't these buildings awfully short?* He looked around, they didn't seem to rise as high as back home. *Duh, higher gravity. Means anything that falls would fall with a lot more energy. Need tougher materials too, to build higher up.* He rose into the air, not really feeling the increased gravity probably because this body was only an idea here, and zipped off to look for something nearby that would serve. Everywhere he looked were Th'un, some accompanied by other aliens that were carrying things or just trailing along behind sullenly. Not many wore armor, but he saw at every corner a drone of some kind, scanning the crowd. There were also, as B had described, giant TVs (or their equivalent) hung everywhere, and

speakers blaring about how great their civilization was, and how aliens were beneath them, and how many tons of ore had been brought in that day. He hovered in front of one, watching a reporter for a moment talk about the latest aliens that had been discovered, and how tiny and pathetic they looked.

“Ripe for conquest!” they were saying. “We’ll be sending drones after them in just days!”

He turned away. *No wonder these people are messed up, if they have to live with this constantly. But that’s not why I’m here, not yet anyway. I need to find a place we can stay and be undetected for a time.* But that proved to be tricky as every building he checked was occupied, every storage building patrolled. *Come on, not every building can be occupied, can they?* He started looking in windows on every floor, zooming past places lit up with Th’un inside. *Wait a second.* He went back, that area had been dark. *A surprise party about to begin, or an actual empty floor?* He touched the glass (or whatever it was) and flew forward, passing through it. *You know, Dreaming really is sorta the best thing ever.* He looked around. Darkness and stillness. There didn’t seem to be any Th’un here, and the place looked bare. He opened doors and looked around, then tried the floor above and below after finding a staircase. Below looked like everywhere else, Th’un going about their daily lives, but above it looked like they were painting and tearing the walls down. *Ah, renovating? And no one has moved into this floor yet? Excellent.* He picked a place in the center, it was a wide open space away from any windows, and let go of flying and invisibility. *Maybe destined to be a lab of some kind?* He replaced it with a window in the air back to his friends, and motioned them through. They passed through, Amelia yanking the drone down until it could fit, and he closed it once everyone was inside. Amelia clicked on the lights on her suit, and the others drew their sabers and ignited them.

“Okay,” he said softly. “This is a floor inside a building that’s being renovated. Below us are normal offices. Above us are work...people. I think we’ll be safe here. I’ll rig up some stuff, go and get my body, and we can plan our next move.”

“What if someone does come in here?” Monica asked.

“Pretend to be furniture?”

She glared at him.

Actually... “This room is big enough, let’s do this.” He went over to the door and looked at both sides of it, holding a ball of light in his hand. Stepping out he simply made the door go away, replacing it with a seamless section of wall so anyone walking past would never know there was a door there to begin with. He willed himself back through easily enough and nodded to the others. “That’s the only door, and I just got rid of it. Unless someone comes who knows this room specifically should be here, we’re safe. Now for the rest.” He created a system not unlike the Andromeda, but this time on the ceiling. It projected gravitons downward with an upward “spin” so again gravity was more normal. He made a mountain of canned goods and such to eat, and a huge basin of water. He even managed a portable toilet, Amelia had showed him some before they had left for just such an occasion. *Wow, all that and I did it the first time every time. But of course just making matter is easy.* “Okay, I’ll be back.” He imagined a door to the Andromeda bridge and was relieved to see it appear before him. “If you want to get anything your forget, now’s the time.” He darted through, back to his room.

“How was the attack, any damage?” he asked along the way.

“No serious damage sustained,” Andromeda told him. “I successfully survived my first battle.”

“Good. Let’s hope that’s the only action you’ll see. You got far enough away?”

“I am near my starting point again, yes. No problem, I have not been scanned that I can tell, and there are no ships I can see as of yet.”

“Let’s hope our luck holds.” In his room he collected his body, gently floating it through the corridors which wasn’t weird at all, no really. He managed to bring himself through the still open portal, setting himself down gently in the corner after making himself a bed to lie on. “Everyone here?” No one said they weren’t so he closed the window. “Okay. I’m going back out, gather as much intel as I can during this dream cycle. Anyone want anything?”

“Why don’t you let B out, they can see about getting some of the equipment we need?” Amelia asked.

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no,” B said swiftly, waving their hands. “I’m not going out there.”

“Why not?”

“I have no ident chip, right now I am a non-person,” they explained. “Same as you all. I have no currency, and no means to get currency. I’m not even sure what continent I’m on, or how to explain how I got here if questioned. Which I would be, walking around without ID. The first corner I came to I would be apprehended and questioned. I wouldn’t make it to a bank, even if I could make a withdrawal without my ID.”

Lysanias nodded. “It’s true, I saw armed drones and such all over the place. As well as the propaganda screens they talked about. It’s bad out there, at least for us. They’re just walking around like it’s totally normal.”

“It is normal, for us.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. We have built a great civilization here. Misdirected, perhaps, because of this shadow avatar, but once redirected our civilization will only reach new heights.”

Or new lows. “I’m sure that’s true. Anyway, I’m off, see you when I wake up.”

He went invisible again, started flying, and willed himself high above the building to keep looking around.

Two hours or so later he found himself awake and sat up. Luckily he was where he expected to be, with the others, waiting for him in the lab area. They all seemed to be sitting around, the light from Amelia’s armor casting a dim glow into the whole place. “I’m up,” he called. “Any problems here?”

“No problems,” Rommie said, walking over to him. “I’m the only one awake, I felt the others should get some sleep while they could. This is their night cycle time as well, after all, and tomorrow will no doubt be a busy day. How did it go?”

“Imagine the biggest city on Earth, and then just duplicate it in every direction. I don’t know how they feed as many people as much live here, but they must somehow. There are stores all over the place, now that I can get wards out I think we should be able to walk in, steal what we need, and get back here pretty easily. I’ve picked out some good places, I can open gateways back to them in the ‘morning.’ For now I’ll ask what questions I need to, and then get back to sleep. I’ll stick around until everyone is up, just in case we get noticed in here somehow.”

“Any kind of fight would wake you up though,” she reminded him.

“True, but at least I could do something before then.”

“I suppose.”

So he sat there and tried his new technique of trying to be better at something, and then asked the universe some questions.

“In what direction is the main building housing the broadcast system I saw running every TV in the streets?”

134

Excellent, so far so good. He noted down 134 degrees on his circle.

“How far in kilometers to the main building housing the broadcast system I saw running every TV in the streets?”

681

Two for two? I am dreaming! Am I dreaming? No, I don’t think so.

“Does a resistance exist, that is already fighting the shadow avatar in the form of the existing government?”

Yes

Well well, isn't that interesting? Okay, that's all I need for now. He went back to sleep.

He spent the first hour of his next Dreaming cycle silently practicing Dream skills. Turning the walls different colors, making heaps of gold coins whoever discovered this room could find, and flying around while doing chi-blocking moves. He thought about ways he was going to attack shadows once he was confident enough in his dreams powers, and thought about Miruku and their connection to the shadows, who were quite similar. *They're both powerless until someone with powers comes along. Then they can draw off that power and use it against someone. Odd, but I suppose parallels exist if you know where to look. Strange that I've run into two beings so similar in my limited journey so far. Wait, what am I doing?* He smacked himself in the head. *I'm so dumb!*

A plan had formed in his mind, risky, but what choice did he have? And really, hadn't he already succeeded? Of course he had. He first willed himself backwards in time just a bit, to before the Andromeda had arrived when he had been making the “dummy” drop pods. Stepping back into the World of Dreams he easily made it back there, then watched through a “window” into the real world. *Jason said to avoid your previous self if doing what he called a “time heist.” Said it just complicated things in various ways.* When his previous self left to head to the bridge Lysanias stepped out again and destroyed them all. He made some new ones that he concentrated on, making sure to make one with a transparent bottom so his previous self didn't suspect anything. He waited inside that one, felt his previous self slam the pods into the air, and rode it down keeping it “right side up” himself. Before the thing slammed into any buildings he stopped concentrating on it, as well as the others, and took to flying himself. He quickly looked for the building he had seen, couldn't quite remember where it had been, shrugged, and basically picked one at random. *After all, this will close the loop and so whatever building I pick now must be the one the other me sees, right?* He created an illusion around it that something had smashed into it, smoke and fire and debris everywhere, holding it for as long as he felt his other self was on the roof looking at it. *I didn't stay out in the open for long, after all. There may be some confused Th'un down at street level wondering what's going on, but better that than dead. That should about do it.* With that he stepped back to the present, breathing a sigh of relief. *It worked. I made sure no one died, tricked my previous self into thinking people did so he would go back in time like I just did, and am back here no one the wiser. Now that's a “time heist!”*

In the “morning,” which was actually after sundown for this place, he announced the building they needed to attack was six hundred and eighty one kilometers “that way.” He also said this would probably be the perfect time to do a raid on a store or two, get what equipment they needed.

“I can show you our computers and video recorders and such,” B told them, “that's not a problem. But there's no guarantee we can get that footage into the broadcast system.”

“One problem at a time,” Lysanias told him. “If need be I can just command someone to do it for us. It shouldn't be an issue.”

“I guess I've seen you do some impossible things, why not this too? Let's go then.”

Lysanias stuck ‘ignore me’ wards to himself and B, along with Tessa and Tony who agreed to come with them. “We should be undetected, but don't hang around,” he told them. “While this makes us ignored if someone looks at us, I don't know about sophisticated surveillance systems. We might show up as a distortion, or maybe just as ourselves. If someone comes just keep your cool, don't draw attention to yourself and the wards will hold.”

“This piece of paper will keep us hidden?” B asked.

“That's right.”

“Extraordinary. I will be interested to see it in action.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” He started drawing the One Power through the bird. “Don’t touch the edges of this, you’ll cut your limbs off. I’ll make it as big as I can. Remember, it’s full gravity out there I don’t want the drone clunking around and messing things up. There and back here.”

“Got it,” the others said.

The gateway opened and they stepped, or squeezed, through. The regular old heist had begun.

Chapter 25

Our Unification of Thought is a more powerful weapon than any fleet or army on Earth

When: Seconds later

Where: The alien equivalent of a mall

The group stuck together, Lysanias now feeling the effects of the increased gravity on his actual body for the first time. *She was right, this is terrible. I feel like this world is crushing me, and it's hard to just walk. My heart is hammering, it's tough just to move my blood around my body. I was never very strong physically since the beginning, while my sword and other equipment make me stronger to a certain extent, that doesn't extend into my heart and lungs.*

"Why are there no doors on anything around here?" Tony asked. He was looking into all the shops as they passed them. He was right, where malls in civilized areas on Earth had bars or others doors when they were closed, this place was just open to all.

"Why would there be?" B asked. "For one, anyone walking into the place has their ID scanned. Anyone walking around without it wouldn't even make it this far. And there's very little crime here, unlike your planet. We trust our citizens, some houses in warmer areas don't even have doors so why would we put some here?"

"Probably very harsh sentencing," Tessa guessed. "To make up for it."

"Actually no, that's another thing we differ on," B explained. "Even your people know this, but still you build more and more places to 'put people' that have 'done crime.'"

"Know what?"

"That harsh sentences for crime don't deter crime. Crime is a cry for help, something to be looked at as a symptom of a greater ill. In the rare case a crime is committed, those that are caught are sent to therapy, their situation is understood and we try to help them through the problem that caused them to deviate in the first place. We don't want to lose productive members of society, we want to help them. Of course if they are damaged mentally and cannot function as normal members of society we have a planet we ship them, and they can be horrible to others of their ilk as they wish. But it still doesn't have tightly packed cells, they can live however they want."

"But weren't you saying not that long ago that those in the 'rebellion' are killed?" Tony asked. "How do you reconcile those two things?"

B stopped in their tracks. "That is a form of crime, isn't it?" they finally asked. "I never actually thought about it that way before. Odd..." They seemed troubled.

"Think about that later, let's keep moving," Tessa told them.

"Yes, of course. This way." B led them through the place but they didn't have too far to go, he walked into a store full of electronics.

"Man, if only we could bring some of this stuff back with us," Tony pined. "I'm sure it's all far in advance of anything we've got."

"But how would you manufacture it?" B asked, selecting a box (from the back of the stack of them, because they're not an idiot) and moving on. "Give one of your cell phones to an ancestor and tell them to make a million copies of it. How would they even know how to open it, or what each piece of the inside did? The battery they might be able to tell was a battery, but how would they make it so small? It is only through experimentation that happened, making better machines to make better batteries each time. Same with the chips, how would they tell their function or how to make more?"

"Oh... Yeah."

B loaded up with boxes, though Tony and Tessa took some that were small and light. Lysanias cautioned her about floating anything around with telekinesis, that would show up on cameras where anything carried on their person wouldn't. They couldn't carry much because even the smallest package was, to them, weighty out of all proportion but they at least helped where they could. Finally B said they were satisfied and headed out, but not back to the doorway.

"We need other stuff?" Lysanias asked, looking at the number of boxes he was carrying.

"We do if you're going to make this believable. Ah, here, this should do it." They turned into something like a general store and picked up a book with a Th'un on the cover, then

several small packages with the same (as far as the humans could tell) Th'un on the package. "This will do it, let's head back."

They moved in silence back towards the gateway, which Lysanias had tied off to avoid having to create another one. He was still holding the One Power, the boost it gave to his senses was coming in handy in the low light of the darkened "mall." It also allowed him to hear the voices up ahead, and grabbed Tessa and Tony, stopping them.

"Wait, wait I said, there's someone talking around the corner!"

B looked back suspiciously and crept forward, the group looking around the corner to where the gateway hung. It was a square of blackness in the otherwise dim light and two Th'un were standing there. One was playing a flashlight like device over it, watching the light zoom into the room beyond, the other was making some kind of report. Both were wearing armor, different from what B had been wearing, styled like some kind of uniform.

"Law enforcement," B told them. "Figures."

Amelia turned her lights off, at least. They haven't rushed into our hiding spot, unless that is some did and these got left as guards.

"I can't describe it, it's just a dark rectangle hanging in the air," the one was saying. "We got a report of suspicious activity in this place and came to check it out. This is what we've found so far. No, I've never see anything like it. Yes, the footage you're seeing is what I'm seeing, it's just a black hole in the air."

"Ugh, that one is standing right in front of the thing too," Tessa complained. "We could just walk through otherwise. Think they'll move before more show up?"

"You could shove them with your power, right?" Tony asked.

"Are you kidding, they weigh twice as much now at least! Maybe with Lysania's help?" She looked over at him.

"We attack them, and our wards burn up," he cautioned. "Are there cameras around here?" He looked around, but of course they could be the size of a grain of rice around here, he would never see them.

"There's cameras everywhere," B told him, like he was stupid for suggesting there might *not* be cameras someplace. "Let us wait and perhaps they will give us an opportunity to slip by them."

But the other one had gotten braver, sticking his hand through it and wiggling it. He was trying to see the other side, probably to see if his hand was there or not, and leaned a little to far.

Slice

The Th'un howled in pain and held up their stump of an arm after it got sliced clean through on the edge of the gateway.

"I need immediate medical assistance!" the other shouted, stepping in front of the thing and pulling their gun. "What happened?"

"It sliced me!" said the other. "It wasn't an attack, I just touched it and it went clean through. Don't touch the edge of that hole. By my ancestors this hurts!"

"We need to stop the bleeding, I release the right arm so I can put a tourniquet on it."

"With what?" the one demanded as the rest of the armor fell off their right side.

"I'll go find something." They rushed off to the nearest store, fumbling their gun back into the holster.

"Now we may go," B told them calmly. "Come on, while the way is clear."

"You go ahead, I have to find a way to help this one!" Lysanias told them.

"You have to what now?" B asked, screeching to a halt after only two steps around the corner.

"Help them! I can probably reattach the arm."

"So can a medical center."

"Will they live to reach it?"

"Eh, maybe? What do you care?"

"It was my- just get going!" He piled his boxes into their arms, while Monica and Tony did the same. B was grumbling something but squeezed past the still freaking out and bleeding to death Th'un and through the gateway. Lysanias drew his sword.

"I thought you were going to help him?" Tessa hissed.

"I am." He came up behind the figure and made sure the flat of the sword was positioned right. He yanked the Th'un's helmet off with the force and swung the blade, cracking the Th'un in the head from behind. His ward burned away, making him visible, and the Th'un stumbled.

"What?" they managed, trying to look at what hit them.

Oh, marvelous. They're still conscious. Because why wouldn't being hit in the back of the head with Ragnarok put them down? It's not like it's the ultimate sword and I'm far stronger than I have any right to be holding it. Wait, how do I even know that they can go unconscious like a human could? Making a lot of assumptions right now.

The Th'un went down hard, Tessa straining beside him. "Do what you need to do," she told him. "I'll hold him down. Tony, go get Behemoth and keep that other one busy."

"Right." He vanished through the door, calling for her.

Lysanias sheathed the sword and looked through the door, catching sight of the arm on the other side. He willed it into his hand and knelt down by the confused and battered Th'un officer. He yanked the arm out of the armor, looking it over to see how the fingers were bending. Grabbing his arm he set the appendage next to it, and started trying to heal it. "This will take a while, hold him still!" He was thrashing around, trying to figure out what was holding him, no doubt.

"I'm doing my best here!"

Behemoth and Tony raced by him, Samantha poking her head out as well. "Do you need me?"

"Help hold this guy down," Tessa told her. "Keep his arm still so it can be healed."

"I can do that." She went over and grabbed his arm, allowing Lysanias to take the severed portion in both hands and orient it better. *I don't want it healed on backwards, after all.* He focused on enhancing himself and then twisted it a little more, trying to feel it out. The pieces were sharp and smooth as if cut by a razor but he felt good about their position and healing energy flowed out of him. The flesh started zipping together, starting on one side and heading through the center. He heard sounds of combat from down the hall, and Tony zipped past him.

"Got his gun," he said, briefly stopping on the way back out and tossing it through the open portal. "Figured we could take it with us. Hurry up okay?" He was off again.

"Hurry up he says," Lysanias muttered. "This takes as long as it takes, you know? There's no hurrying it." *At least it won't take ten minutes.*

The Th'un was struggling more weakly now and it was hard to tell but Lysanias *had* smashed him in the back of the head after all. Keeping one hand on the arm to continue healing he yanked a healing ward out of his *pocket* and slapped it on the Th'un's head. It started glowing blue, so he hoped that would help keep the alien from any permanent brain damage. Finally the wound sealed at the other side and Lysanias stood up, feeling drained. Behemoth sauntered up.

"Do I have to heal that one too?" Lysanias asked in a defeated tone, looking back the way she came.

"I held back. I'm not some bloodthirsty killer or anything you know," she insisted. "This place is great, people aren't so breakable here."

"Glad you're enjoying yourself."

"My arm," said the one Th'un, staring at it and wiggling his fingers. "It's fine now. How did you... Wait, you're aliens!" They went for their gun but Tony had it in his hands, breathing heavily by Lysanias.

"This place sucks!" he said, "It's so hard to move here."

"What, what, what are you going to do?" the Th'un asked, backing away a little.

"Leave," Lysanias told him. "I suggest, when an investigation is made of this incident, you do everything you can to claim it as some kind of mistake, and have all video footage destroyed. Believe me, it'll be easier than the alternative. Go on, get through," he said to the

others. "Don't just stand there." *Don't you know the first rule? Don't hang around a crime scene!*

"It's really a doorway to another location? Who has that kind of technology?"

"What if I told you it was magic?"

"Then I would say I got hit in the head harder than I thought!"

"So you see my point." Everyone had gotten through and Lysanias stepped through himself, but felt some kind of parting words were called for. "Your leader is lying to you. You think you're so advanced, such a great civilization, how do you know if all you do is send drones to wipe people out? Someday you're going to meet a civilization that bites back, and they're not going to have any compassion for you after what you've done. Wipe the footage. Let everyone know that nothing happened here. Believe me on this one." He channeled, yanking the strands of the gateway apart and causing it to vanish. *That should have been dramatic enough, I would have just vanished from his point of view.* He created a small light and looked around. "You can turn the lights back on, Amelia." She did, her LEDs lighting the place up again. "Everyone accounted for?"

"Did you get what you needed?" Kate asked.

"I hope so. Ask B here."

"Is that going to be a problem for us?" Behemoth asked. "You blowing the heist, I mean."

"Okay, I shouldn't have left the gateway there. I admit it. How did I know in the two minutes we would be gone someone would stumble upon it?"

"It wasn't that though, you broke cover and healed that guy, right? Talked to him. He knows aliens are here now."

"Finally, someone that agrees with me," B told her. "He has no idea what he's doing."

"You're both terrible," Samantha told them. "And I say that not just because I'm married to a doctor. He did the right thing."

"Perhaps, but not the smart thing," B told her. "We have bigger concerns than one police officer living or dying."

"Just get the stuff set up and start working on your speech."

"Very well. Here, this is for you. These as well, but we'll have to set up the display to see them." B handed him the book and the cases.

"What's this?"

B tapped a finger on the book. "That's the person you need me to impersonate. As all aliens probably look alike to you, study the image carefully because it has to be perfect."

He scowled at it, opening the book, and it was a book about the life and times, with many pictures, of the Great Leader (.). "Fine."

B got the equipment set up, the cases contained their equivalent of DVDs, just solid state chips with video on them, which he put into the reader and had Lysanias watch. They were some of his "best" speeches, sold so that others could experience their glory as well. They seemed about the same from what Lysanias could tell, but there was no accounting for taste, was there? He figured he had a pretty good handle on the Th'un's armor and face, but something bothered him. In all the footage there was a green glow, faint but there, around (.).

"What is that?" he finally asked. "Some artifact of the display? Did we get a bad one?"

"The glow? No one knows. Rumor has it (.) has that glow all the time. He's been alive hundreds of years, some people think it has to do with that. There are rumors he absorbs the life energy of his enemies somehow, and uses it to stay alive himself. Of course, there are all sorts of stories about him in general. Surviving assassination attempts that were foolproof, being seen in multiple locations far faster than he should be able to, all sorts of things."

"I don't like sound of that, don't like the sound of that at all." *A green energy? Staying alive longer than he should? That could mean we would be in for a hard fight.*

"Can you mimic it or not? I got you the video so you could clearly see it but if you can't I wouldn't worry too much. I'll try to inflame everyone right at the start so they aren't looking for it."

"No, I can, I'll have to be asleep to make you the armor he wears anyway, we'll just record it right after that and I can create the effect on the fly."

“Good.”

“Do you think that cop will do what you asked?” Monica asked him while they ate lunch. “If they don’t the city is going to be on high alert. They saw you step through a gateway and then close it. That would blow anybody’s mind, and these people seem awfully paranoid about security. If an alien can just step out of the air someplace, who knows what they might do?”

“I’m hoping the theft won’t be discovered for some time,” he mused. “They wouldn’t focus on video equipment after all, but I’m sure they would be wondering what we were doing there. I mean why use your super duper ‘hole in the air’ technology to visit a mall that’s closed? But what we stole was never on camera, at least directly, and checking every video feed from the whole place will take some time. Still, they know we can do it but at the same time the broadcasting station is pretty far away. Will they realize that’s our next target and beef security up over there?”

“I’m more worried it alerts the shadow avatar,” Samantha said. “If word of the incident gets back to them. It might be unique enough to, especially if they’ve put out a general ‘if something weird happens let me know’ order. They’ll know what it means right away.”

“Now that is a bigger concern,” he admitted. *But they would be pretty confused what we were doing there too.* He sighed. *When I was looking over ESPer skills to learn I did see one about manipulating memories. Had I learned that instead of trying to make myself better, I could have replaced their memories with just us climbing ropes or something to a hole in the ceiling. The video would have showed it as it actually happened, but with a different story told by the cops the whole thing would be thrown into question. As it is, I thought ‘oh, when would I ever need to do that?’ and skipped it. Stupid, as usual.* “Nothing I can do about it now though.”

“And if there is more security, we simply have more to smash,” Behemoth told them. “That officer wasn’t that tough.”

“Maybe for you,” Lysanias groaned. “I’m still sore from just walking around in that heavy gravity for a few minutes!”

“Ha! You are weak little baby.”

“I can’t say you’re wrong.”

So B practiced his speech the rest of the day and Lysanias went out a few times in his astral form to see if he could notice anything different about the ongoing broadcasts. The city, like most big cites, never saw a complete shutdown so Th’un went about their business with no change to their routine at all that he could see. Even after the sun came up and more people started filling the streets, the message hadn’t changed. It was still about Th’un superiority, and resources gained, and not about “be on the lookout for a skinny alien being you could break in half with one hand.” Police presence in the streets might have been a *little* greater, but it was hard for him to say. As it was mostly automated anyway, there was no need for living enforcement roaming the streets, the cameras and sensors took care of all that. So he figured they were in the clear, and after changing B to look like (.) and doing more sparing with Rosalina he tired himself out and was ready for bed. With the others there to look them over and suggest any changes he felt confident (.) would think he was looking in a mirror to see B, and lay down to get some sleep. Stepping back into reality from there he put a soundproof dome around himself (with air holes, so it wasn’t completely sound proof but it was probably good enough) and he replicated the set (.) seemed to use for his broadcasts. He made (.)’s armor, (minus any special features, it was just his armor because that’s what he knew how to make, in the shape of (.)’s and minus the weapons) lit the scene so that looked the same, and provided B a nice, subtle, green glow to fully sell the deception.

“Deep fakes have nothing on you,” Amelia complemented him. “We are on the air in five. Four.”

The what fakes?

B played his part well, using phrases that Lysanias had heard (.) using in his broadcasts, but this time against the Th’un and not aliens. He called the Th’un weak,

ineffective, and told them right out that he was going to come back for them with this new alien force he had discovered and wipe them out as they had wiped out so many others. He told them how stupid they all were, how cooperating with aliens would have given them returns far greater than killing them had, and how no one would come to their aid as they were wiped out. He insulted their names, their heritage, and basically challenged all of them to a one on one duel as he left the planet, because they were so weak as to be no challenge for him at all and he wanted to pummel some personally. Finally the camera clicked off and the lights went dim again. The green flickered out and B smiled at them.

“How was that?”

“Let’s load it into their weird computers and do any editing we need to,” Amelia said. “It looked fine from here, we’ll see what the camera thought of you and if it looks good, we’ll plan our next move.”

They messed with the footage, it didn’t need much work as it was just pointing the camera and recording a speech which he had spoken flawlessly as far as Lysanias could tell. Of course it had been done in the Th’un language so no one but him could understand it, but he listened to it several times, going back and forth between B’s speech and (.) to make sure they sounded as close as possible, and they did.

The deception was ready, and it was time to break into the broadcast center.

Chapter 26

Your mission, should you choose to accept it...

When: Eight hours (or so) later

Where: Their hiding spot

Lysanias tried to use his Dreaming time wisely, but couldn't exactly tell how many kilometers he flew at any given time and so couldn't figure out how to tell where the broadcast center was. He asked Meta if they could, if he took the watch with him, calculate the distance but they said not exactly.

"And by not exactly I mean not to a high degree of accuracy," they said. "As there is no 'gps' like network here that I can discover, I would have to rely on guesswork based only on visual distance finding. Accurate over a short area, but given the distance and a weaker magnetic field here to keep you exactly on track, it would become increasingly suspect. My apologies."

"That's all right, we'll figure it out somehow."

So he stayed out of sight and practiced in the World of Dreams until it was time to get up, which he did and then got to work. Stopping time around himself he made a set of new "ignore me" wards that the group could wear, so that everyone could see everyone wearing the new set. Then they had to discuss how to figure out where they needed to go.

"We can't just pile into a cab and tell them to take us so many kilometers that way," Tessa complained. "Do you have a google maps like service that's mapped out your cities?"

"We had that hundreds of years before you did!" B told her. "The problem is accessing it."

"Wait, Meta can connect to wireless signals," Lysanias said, raising the watch. "Can't you do the same thing here and access their version of the internet? Get us a map that way?"

"If there were wireless signals available I would have already done so, and save you the discussion," it replied.

"Yes, wireless data transfer is mostly banned," B told them. "When we realized how easily it could be compromised, it had to go. The only real wireless systems we allow are the ID system and that is extremely short range and limited in scope, with heavy encryption to protect the transmitted data."

"You gave up a wireless internet?" Monica gasped. "You guys are hard core."

"Thank you. We have made many sacrifices over the years in the name of freedom, which now that I say it out loud sounds stupid. How is my not being able to get information on any subject at a whim making me more free? But I cannot change my society to fit your needs, we must come up with another plan."

"What other options do we have?" Amelia asked. "Libraries?"

"We do not have libraries here, that is an Earth thing. I suppose there is one similarity between our people, and that is our shops. You may have noticed last night that there were machines out on display for customers to try. We could, if we go back there wearing these 'wards,' probably use one long enough to get the information we need."

"You still sell computers in shops?" Tony asked. "Is that what those were? Like we have, boxes with CPUs inside?"

"Indeed we do. They are not common, naturally personal AI and portable devices are the norm, but there are some occasions one may want more substantial hardware, and of course 'retro' is not just the domain of humans."

"I mean how can you still be coming up with innovations enough to justify upgrades?"

"We don't. They are made available simply to replace equipment that has, over time, broken down to the point it is not cost effective to fix."

"Ah."

"So you want to return to the scene of the crime?" Samantha asked. "That's never good."

"Yeah, isn't that the first rule?" Tessa asked. "Don't return to the scene of the crime?"

"Depends on who you ask," Lysanias told her. "Some would say the first rule is 'never admit you're a vampire' while others might say it was 'don't hang around a crime scene.' I guess that could be the second rule or maybe a 1.a?"

"So you admit it's not a great idea?" Tessa pressed.

"I don't see a way around it, not without a lot of work and time on my part," Lysanias said after a moment. "I could project my senses in the direction we have to go and open a gateway back here after flying for a moment. Then ask how much further, the direction, fly again, stop, ask again, until we got near enough to walk it. But the longer we stay out in that gravity the worse it's going to be for us. Graviton generator or not."

"More chance of us being spotted too, or the gateway being seen," Kate added.

"So we'll just open a gateway back to the mall, I can put it up high," Lysanias planned. "When no one is looking we'll drop through, head to a place we can find a computer, and access their database."

"You want your ankles to be powder?" Rommie asked. "Don't forget you'll land more than twice as hard as you expect. Why don't I just go? I can use their computers easier than you can, and do the distance conversions and such myself. It can be a smaller gateway too, as we won't have to send B the whole way there. Then you can just lift me up again when I get back."

"That does carry the least risk," he admitted. "Okay, here's a ward for you, I'll open the gateway in a second." He gathered the One Power and thought about where a good spot to open a gateway would be, then did so. It was high enough they could look through, being careful not to touch the edges of course, and when it was clear she dropped down. Heading out of sight the group waited, and it wasn't long before she came back.

"Got it, haul me up," she told them, and he and Tessa pulled her up with telekinesis. The gateway closed, he got out the hubPad and it showed them the "street view" of where they needed to go.

"At least, that's as close as I can come," she admitted. "I didn't see anything resembling a highly guarded military facility though, perhaps these images are censored? I figure if we go here," the image changed, "a few hundred meters away, we can put the gateway here and walk the rest of the way. You can manage a few hundred meters, right?"

"Gonna have to," he admitted. "We've got the drone, it should be fine. Okay, we probably won't come back here so pick everything up that's ours."

The group packed up, Amelia, Rommie, and Rosalina getting back into their armor, though he went without. Amelia needed help to walk in this gravity so it was fine for her, and Rosalina being protected was all well and good. *I've gone this long without it, I won't bother.* He opened a gateway down to the street where the hubPad showed, pressed against a building where hopefully it wouldn't be noticed. The group went through, and they headed off. As shown the city continued, buildings and more buildings met their eyes.

"So where is the place?" Behemoth asked. "This can't be right!"

"I agree, something isn't adding up," Lysanias told them. "I did expect something that stuck out. But then, why would it? They don't use wireless communication, so there wouldn't be broadcast antennas anywhere, it would just be underground wiring. Why announce where the daily program comes from? Let's find a quiet nook and I'll ask where the building is, we should be able to narrow it down from whoa-" At that moment the dog soul simply manifested out of Lysanias, hopping to the ground and sniffing around. "What in the world?"

"You didn't expect that to happen?" Rommie asked.

"I did not. What's it doing?"

The group looked at the soul, sniffing around and getting some odd looks, as it was totally visible even if he wasn't. It started to bark, ran around in a circle excitedly, then shot forward. It got to the end of the street and looked back.

"Is it trying to escape?" Samantha asked.

"If it is, it's doing a terrible job," Kate replied. "I think it wants us to follow."

"No, really?" Tessa asked. "I thought it was saying we should go the opposite way! Good thing you're here to tell us this stuff."

"I understand you're feeling frustrated, but you don't have to be a jerk about, Tessa."

"Yeah, well, you don't... have to... be so nice about it!"

"Come on, let's follow the dog," Lysanias told them. "Maybe their special power is finding stuff?" *But how did it activate without me doing it? Of course, there must be rules to all this and I don't really have a manual for it. There is no manual for me, not for the stuff I alone*

can do. I wanted to find something, the soul can find something, and that may have been enough for it to pop out and start finding that something.

The group followed the dog, which excitedly ran back and forth between them and a spot some distance away, sniffing and wagging their tail.

“Does that thing really know what it’s doing?” B asked.

“I would be lying if I said I knew, but it does seem to be taking us somewhere.” *How it knows where we want to be and what it searches for to find that location is a question of course.* “And here we are?” The dog stopped in front of a regular looking building, ran around Lysania’s legs with abandon, and looked up at him, tail wagging as if to say “am I good?” “You did a good job,” he told it, scratching its ears. *I hope?*

Their next task was to get inside, a feat they had to wait a moment for because the doors had no handles or obvious way to open them. They were tinted so he couldn’t see inside, though of course he could have sat down and projected his senses if he absolutely had to. *But I would rather not have to worry about losing the ward or opening a gateway.*

They needn’t have worried, someone came along and the door automatically opened after they put their hand on a panel next to it, and B hustled them through “before an alarm went off the door stayed open too long” according to him. They waited a second just inside the building but nothing seemed to happen, so they headed in. It seemed much like a standard office building, with people working at desks, and picking up copies, and talking in the halls. Of course, everything here was twice as big as on Earth, not only because the people were bigger everything had to be more durable because of the higher gravity. So ceilings were higher, desks were deeper, doors were thicker.

“Lead on, if you can,” Lysanias said to the dog. It started furiously sniffing around, finally coming to an elevator looking device.

“Going up?” B asked, after everyone crowded into the small space. “Luckily this doesn’t need an access key, it’s just buttons.”

Everyone looked at the dog, who looked back up at them as if to say “what, you want me to do everything here? I’m just a dog!”

“We’ll have to try every floor,” Lysanias reasoned. “Wherever they get out, we get out.”

“Reasonable enough,” said B. He pushed the button for the next floor, and the doors closed. “There’s only four floors anyway, it won’t take long.”

Except it did, because after all four the dog was still just sitting there. The group looked at it, and the dog stared back tongue hanging out.

“So you’re useless then?” Tessa asked it.

The dog cocked his head to the side.

“So now what?” B asked.

“And you’re sure there’s no other floors?” Tony asked.

“There’s no other buttons for other floors,” B told him. “You can see that just as well as I can.”

“Man, I don’t know about your alien iconography. Those could be anything.”

“Well, I’m telling you, there’s four floors. At least there’s only 4 buttons.”

“Just a second. Hold me up, will you?” He projected his senses and rose up, finding that no, there were no other floors above that the elevator could get to. So he went down, past the car again and down, counting three floors and then heading down further. The shaft seem to go a little ways and there was another door. He stepped through it, looking around. There was a short hallway, then another door, so he mentally shrugged and tried to go through that one. It resisted him. *And we have a winner.* Rejoining the group he relayed what he had seen.

“Perhaps a hidden control, or if a keycard is presented there’s a hidden sensor here that take you down to the lowest level?” B mused.

“So how are we going to do it?” Amelia asked. “Hacking? Could we use hacking?”

“I don’t think that’s going to work, Amelia,” Lysanias said. “Just take us back to the ‘first’ floor if you would?”

“Very well.” B pushed the button and again the elevator went down. The doors opened.

“Great. Now everybody out, and push the button for the top floor again. It should go up there, meanwhile I’ll force the door and we’ll just head down that way.”

“Elevator won’t move if no one is inside,” B told them. “Weight sensor, that wasn’t fooled by this ‘ward’ business, that’s how it moved with us in it.”

“Why wouldn’t it have some complicated thing,” he sighed. “Fine. You stay here and ride the thing up again.”

“Very well. I’ll try to block anyone trying to use it. If I just stand in the doorway what will happen?”

“They’ll be very confused they can’t find the open door, and hopefully find some stairs or something.”

“I thought that might be the case. I’ll do that then. Good luck.”

So everyone else got off and the elevator went up.

“How do you know there isn’t an alarm on this door if it opens without the car being there?” Monica asked.

“I don’t,” he admitted. “But I don’t really see any security here, do you? What are they going to do if there is? It’s not that far down, we’ll be long gone by the time anyone comes to see what’s happened.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Now for the-” He was about to say door but Behemoth went over and with a bit of a gear grinding and crunching sound forced the doors open. “Or we could just do that.”

She jumped down, and the others followed, most being put down gently with telekinesis, as there was no ladder here just a smooth shaft.

“Must be magnetics,” Amelia said on the way down, running a hand along the shaft. “No safety features?”

“Maybe they’re built into the car?” Rosalina guessed, hovering beside her.

“Maybe.”

The group landed, Behemoth was standing there. “Waited for you.”

“That’s nice of you. Now let’s see...” He walked to the door and tried to sense past it. “There are two beings behind here, I think. The door is made of something that blocked me before, but I can at least feel that. Let’s be ready for anything though. Rosalina, you put one to sleep, Tony get their guns, Samantha and Behemoth pin them down. We may need to ask them how to broadcast the signal.”

“Right.” Everyone nodded, and Lysanias stepped out of the way. Behemoth shrugged and actually tried the door handle, which smoothly turned so she slammed the door open and burst into the room.

Two very surprised Th’un playing some kind of game at a table in the room fell out of their chairs as Behemoth rushed them, their guns vanishing as Tony grabbed them.

“Sleep,” Rosalina cast, and the one relaxed and closed his eyes. The other got grabbed and had a hand put over his mouth.

“Hey,” said Behemoth. “Wanna answer some questions for me?”

“I don’t speak your filthy alien language!” they answered. “How did you get down here?”

“What’s he saying?” she asked.

“Just hold him down,” Lysanias told her. “This can’t be the place...” He looked around, and there was what could be a bank of computers there, he wasn’t sure. It was machinery of some kind, with some lights on it, but that’s about all he could tell. “Look, is this where the signal is broadcast from or not?”

“What signal? What broadcast? Who are you, how did you learn our language, alien?”

“The daily messages that play continuously. On all those screens? Out there? We have reason to believe it comes from here, so does it or not?”

“How should I know?” they insisted. “I just am paid to guard the equipment. I don’t know what it does.”

“You guard something you don’t know what it does?”

“Why would I need to know what it does?”

“Marvelous.” The dog meanwhile was pawing at the machine, tail wagging. “Yes, you found it, good dog,” he told it. This generated much barking, running in a circle, and demands for everyone to pet it.

“There’s a few cables in the back,” Amelia told them, peering around the boxes. There was another door to the side of the room and Kate opened it.

“Hey look at this.” Hundreds of cables converged here, thousands of lights blinked on and off on racks of what were probably some kind of splitter. But there was no sign of a display, or a keyboard, or anything to enter commands into.

“Doesn’t look like we can just load our footage and have it be broadcast,” Amelia finally decided. “I’m not sure what to do now. If this is where it’s broadcast from, well, I have no idea how they get the video into it. There’s no ports on these boxes at all that I recognize, and disturbing those other cables may disrupt the signal, but that’s not what we want to do. We want to broadcast our own. I don’t know which line to pull to broadcast out, or if it’s all of them, or what. This could be custom hardware with an AI build specifically for this task. For all I know disturbing it will blow it up so it doesn’t fall into enemy hands, just like the rest of their stuff.”

“So let’s ask the person that comes to fix it,” Behemoth suggested.

“But it’s not broken.”

“Yet.” She smashed a fist into her hand. “I think we can fix that... or break it, as the case may be.”

“Go ahead,” she allowed, sounding resigned. “It’s a good a plan as any. These two aren’t support personal, and even advanced equipment must break from time to time. Someone must come to service the machines, and if we break it I bet they’ll be here quick if the daily broadcast isn’t playing.”

Meanwhile Lysanias looked up and back at where the elevator probably was. *B, this is Lysanias. Someone is going to be down here, we hope, to fix the equipment we’re about to break because we can’t find how to do anything to get our message into the system. We hope they will. If someone comes, let them ride you down in the elevator, don’t block it anymore.*

“Right then,” she said, a gleam in her eye. “Where to start?”

“Just smash it? I wasn’t kidding about it exploding though, maybe we should stand back and put up that shield?”

“Amelia! For shame. Smash hardware? I’m surprised at you, thought you were the smart one.” She leaned over and pulled a plug out of the wall, making the lights stop on the main units. “See?” she held it up and wiggled it. “This one was different, so I figured it was the power cord. Turns out I was right. I’m not just about smashing things, you know. Now all we have to do is wait.”

Chapter 27

You like me because I'm a scoundrel. There aren't enough scoundrels in your life.

When: After waiting

Where: Room with equipment in it

And wait the group did. But not for long, as the elevator doors opened and a much shorter than B alien stepped out. By this time the other guard had been put to sleep, and both were snoozing peacefully on the floor in the corner. The Th'un that stepped out was wearing somewhat nice clothes, and looked puzzled though put away the card she used to access the lower level without hesitation. B was right behind her, and she went over to the door and opened it. She gasped in surprise and dropped her tools as she saw those without wards, holding up her hands as Lysanias pointed the point of his blade at her throat.

"We have a few questions for you," he said quietly. "Answer them, and you can be on your way."

"Aliens!" she breathed. "You're aliens, right?"

"Yes?"

"Oh my gosh, I've never met an alien before, this is amazing. Wow, you're an ugly little thing, aren't you? I mean no offense of course!" she added quickly. "I'm sure you're very popular with whatever you prefer on your planet but what is that stuff on your head? Is that a really weird hat? And that can't be your chin, it looks like the same stuff."

Okay, this isn't going exactly how I imagined it. "It's hair."

"Growing out of your chin?"

"Yes, it's called a beard look are you going to give me any trouble or not?"

"Can I see what you look like under those clothes?"

"What? No!"

"Then I refuse to cooperate, alien scum! Do what you want to me, I'll never help you."

She crossed her arms.

Rosalina was snickering.

"Oh, think this is funny, do you?"

"It's a little funny. She's refusing to help because she wants to see you naked!"

"I'm just curious, wouldn't you be? How did you even get here, aliens shouldn't be here, I'm pretty sure of that. Were you trying to steal the server or something? But the alarm was twenty minutes ago why are you still here?"

He looked between the two for a second. *You know, I never thought about it before, but she must share my ability to understand all languages. And a good thing too, I would have needed many more wards of translation than I've used if she didn't. Wonder if I should put one on her so the others can understand her? I guess if it comes to that.* "Steal it? No, we want to broadcast from here! We turned it off so that someone would come and fix it, and we could ask them how to do that."

"This is how you ask for help on your planet?" She looked down at the sword. "Must be an awfully violent place."

She's not wrong. He lowered the sword. "So I take my clothes off and you'll help us? That's your price?"

"Oh, no, sorry. That was my initial offer, which you rejected. The price has gone up."

"Fine, we'll do it the hard way then." He grabbed her and projected his consciousness into her mind. A moment later he pulled back. "She doesn't know a thing about it," he complained, throwing his hands up. "I don't believe this!" He slammed the sword back, she didn't have any combat skills as far as he could tell, she was no danger to them.

"But she came to fix it," Amelia said.

"I know! But she doesn't know what it's *for*. She is just hired to do maintenance on some computer hardware. She doesn't have to know what that hardware does to fix it, she just has parts and whatnot. This is just another dead end!"

"Boy you aliens sure are pushy," the Th'un said, rubbing her arm where Lysanias had grabbed it. "What was that you just did? Who are you talking to? Are all aliens as rude as you're being right now?"

"So sorry that trying to save my entire race from extinction seems like rudeness to you. I'm just frustrated, I don't have a lot of time and I can't seem to get anywhere in what I want to do around here."

"I guess we do kinda do that, don't we? I've never really understood why but what can I do about it? Hey, we could ask my boss, he might know."

"I'm sorry what?" Lysanias was having a bit of trouble processing all this. He had expected a belligerent Th'un he had to browbeat into submission not a helpful one.

"My boss. I'll call him right now, let me hook my phone up."

"It's probably a trick," B cautioned him. "She's going to sound some kind of alarm."

"Even if it is, what are they going to do about it?" he asked. "We're already in the room, they can't blow it up without damaging the equipment, and we can leave they don't have us pinned down. Maybe if some people in authority come—"

"Oh, the equipment!" the girl said. "Did you seriously break it? I should really get it back up and running or my efficiency rating will go down. Why can't I seem to get there, it should only be a few steps away but for some reason I can't make up my mind how to reach it..." She was peering at the warded people standing in front of her, confusion plain on her face.

"Plug the thing back in," Lysanias told Behemoth with a sigh. "We can always unplug it again later if we have to."

"Who are you talking- hey, it's booting up again!" Lights started coming on the units, and she entered some data into her phone. "This'll be my fastest repair yet for sure, maybe I'll even get a raise." She was humming and swaying back and forth as she typed into her device. "Met aliens in server room. Convinced them... to allow... repair... to pro- pro- how do you spell proceed? Wait, no, no, I've got it."

"This is all wrong," Lysanias moaned.

"There done, when I sync again it'll go through. So maybe we can start over? Hi, I'm V, repair technician first class. May I have the honor of your name?"

"I'm Lysanias, this is Rommie and Rosalina. In the room with me, hidden, are B, Amelia, Kate, Tessa, Monica, Behemoth, Tony, and Samantha."

She glanced around. "You're making that up! And what's with those crazy long names? Wait, I did hear rumors about military cloaking technology..."

"Yes, something like that. Look, we just want to broadcast a message over your network. We hope it will turn people against your 'great leader' but we don't know how to do it."

"Is that what this does?" she asked. "Control the ever victorious broadcasts? Are you sure? I thought it was just a server for the building, though there are a lot of cables in the next room for just one building..."

"Not anymore," he admitted. "I expected a studio, and cameras, and people running around and all we found here were two security guards, that computer hardware, and a bunch of cabling."

"Where? I mean the guards, not the cabling, I know where that is, obviously."

Amelia moved away from them, letting V see them. "How in the world did I miss them?"

"Never mind. They'll be fine, they're just asleep. The point is, we need to send our signal into the system. We were hoping the person that came to repair it would know how."

"You think a single message will turn people against (. . .)?"

"We do, as it will seem to come from them."

"Well, it does or it doesn't that would be hilarious. Okay, I'll help!"

Lysanias only felt excitement from her, but looked over at B. "Can we trust her?"

"Eh, there's all kinds of weirdos in the world. We're not some big collective or anything you know," he told him. "Some people just don't get our glorious mission to, umm. I mean what I previously *thought* was our glorious mission. That's what I meant to say."

"Uh huh. Let me have your hand again."

"Asking this time? So you can be civil when it suits you. I guess it's fine, but you're doing that, that, whatever that was last time, right? It felt like you were inside my head."

"I was, and no." He took her hand and looked into her future. It took him a moment but he caught it. "She won't betray us. Do what you have to do."

"Thanks." She pulled a cable out of her pack and plugged it into the device she had in her other hand, and then plugged that into the wall. "Met some aliens," she muttered as she typed. "Oh, oh, can I get a picture, they won't believe me otherwise."

"I guess?"

She scooched next to him and put her fingers up, holding the phone and taking a picture after scrunching down to his level. "Blasting. My friends are gonna be twisted."

"How is it you've never met an alien? Wait, don't answer that, your government sends drones to wipe us out is how."

"Yeah. I mean I've seen some, from a distance, but I'm not rich enough to get one of my own."

We are not pets.

But she was dialing a number and waited to be connected. "Hey boss! Yeah, do you know how the broadcast system works? What do you mean, what broadcast system? The one I'm standing next to. Oh, I have my ways. I do kinda need to know. Why? Uh, because I'm being held hostage by aliens of course! It's no trick. He wants to talk to you." She handed him the device.

"Hello?" he said into it.

"What's going on down there?" a voice on the other end demanded. "Is this some kind of joke? What's this about holding V hostage?"

"That's right," Lysanias told him, getting into the part a little now. "And the two security guards that were here too. Unless my demands are met, we'll... Uh... Blow the whole place sky high."

"Let me see who I'm talking to. How do you switch the-" There was a sound of the phone being muffled but he could still hear the Th'un shouting to someone. "How do you change the mode on this stupid thing? Video, yes. No, don't take it, just tell me, take, stop, no not that the other camera."

I'm Dreaming right? This is a nightmare I made for myself and... Nope, not Dreaming. It's real.

"There it goes. What am I looking at? Take the stupid thing away from your face, idiot!" He pulled the phone back and was looking at a Th'un. "Put it back, put it back, you're hideous. Why is an alien holding one of my employees hostage?"

"He's not that bad, boss."

"Was that V? Show me V!"

He swung the device around and V waved into it.

"She doesn't look like a hostage."

"Oh, I am, boss, believe me," she insisted. "They've wired the whole place up to blow, and I'm stuck here with them. I'm afraid for my life, it's horrible! Oh, if only some handsome hero would swoop in and save me, my gratitude would know no bounds!"

"So why do you sound like you're enjoying yourself? This *is* some kind of gag, isn't it? You rented an alien and staged this whole thing, did you?"

"No boss, it's real! My terror is so high it... wrapped around the other side?"

"What nonsense are you, alien! Turn the thing around again." He did. "What kind of game are you playing down there?"

"Look, can you move the phone a little to your left?"

"What, like this?"

"No, your other left."

"Oh, left, I get what you're saying. Like this?"

"Perfect." Lysanias could see beyond the Th'un and drew open the One Power. There was enough space behind him that he could open a gateway, which is exactly what he did. He handed the phone to V. "Thank you."

"What are you doing now?" the Th'un demanded.

"Coming to see you in person," Lysanias said, stepping through. The Th'un glanced behind him where the sound of his voice was coming from, then did a double take, his mouth dropping open.

Lysanias lifted the sword again, pointing it at him. Quickly glancing around he was in an office with a surprised looking Th'un near the door, probably the one helping him with the phone. He flicked two fingers and slammed it shut. "Now then-

"Telekinesis..." whispered both, staring at the door.

"Oh, yes, now-

"I've heard rumors," said the one sitting at the desk. "But only of elite soldiers. Aliens have it too? And what's that doorway, how did you do that? There's no tech in the universe that can do that. Otherwise we would have it, and we don't."

"Never mind that! How do I broadcast a message over that system?" He pointed to the display on the wall, showing the typical news reader telling the Tu'un how great they were today. And every day. And into the future.

"Are you threatening us with a *sword*?" asked the other. "We're twice your size! How can you be advanced enough to get here but then threaten us with a piece of sharpened-

Lysanias looked over, saw he was near a huge window, and smashed it to pieces with Ragnarok, blowing it out. Glass shattered and rained down on the street below, and warm air rushed into the office.

"It's not just a sword," said the one Th'un, putting his hands up at once.

"Not just a sword," the other agreed, also putting his hands up. "I didn't know you *could* break that stuff!"

"Do I have your attention?" Lysanias asked them. They both nodded. "Good. How. Do. I. Broadcast?"

"I don't know the particulars," the sitting one said. "Just what I've worked out over the years."

"What do you know about it?" *At this point I'll take whatever information I can get.*

"I think there's three locations. I can mark them, there's a map in my desk, may I get it?"

"No sudden moves, I will cut you in half."

He glanced at the window and back at the sword. "I know."

"Go ahead." He put his hands down and rummaged through his desk.

"Here." He marked three locations. "When the system was set up, cables were brought in from three directions. But it only leaves at one. There are three heavily guarded locations nearby, and the cables were laid in secret. I know because the street was torn up once and they got cut from one location, and in a panic soldiers came down and arrested everybody and made us fix it. It was just an accident though but the screens went dark during that time. So it must all be connected. I don't know how the signal leaves the three locations, I've never been there, but it's too much for coincidence, don't you think?"

"Why three? If it's a redundant system the other two should have kept you 'on the air.' Right?"

"I don't know that phrase, but I take your meaning, and that's what I thought too. No, I think the signal comes from three places and is *compared*. The server hardware we have down there is optimized for image processing. I think all three streams are checked and if identical, the signal goes out. It's a way to avoid aliens taking over just one place and compromising the whole system."

"That... presents certain difficulties," he admitted. "You guys really have thought all this through, haven't you?"

"Why yes, I suppose we have," he admitted. "I could be wrong about all this of course."

"The broadcasts are always on the dot," said the other. "They may have to be, if what you're saying is true. It makes logical sense, hey you're pretty smart huh boss?"

To keep the system synchronized. A fraction of a second off and the images wouldn't be the same, and so the system would fail until it could be restarted at the same instant. The clocks are probably all set to a single time and an AI starts the next feed at the exact instant the other two locations do, making it work. "And that's all you know about it?"

"I swear, that's all I know!" they insisted. "Here, take the map."

Alert for any tricks he grabbed it and stepped back through the gateway. "Thank you for your help. I'll return your employee unharmed, and the two guards as well. Clearly we're

in the wrong place but at least now we may be on the right track. There's no actual explosives, if we blew it up we couldn't use it! So you don't have to worry about that."

"You... You won't kill us to keep us quiet?" he sounded flabbergasted.

"But you're an alien," agreed the other. "You would kill your own parents for a scrap of meat!"

My parents are long gone, all I have of them is a picture. But what would I give up to see them again? Even just for a moment, to tell them their sacrifice for me wasn't in vain. That I'm saving whole realities now. He blinked back a tear. "That's not how I do things. I don't want a war between our people, the only person I have a problem with is your leader. With luck, he's the only one who has to die."

"You can't kill Our Great Leader!" blurted the other one. "Do you know how many attempts have been made over the years? He's still alive! He claims he's immortal and facts suggest he's right! He's been alive for generations! He's had multiple genetic tests by independent labs that have verified it. Why do you think everyone follows him?"

"He's a monster," agreed the other. "The things I've heard he can do- You're just going to your death."

"We'll see about that. Watch for our broadcast, you'll know it when you see it." He closed the gateway. "You heard?" he asked the others.

"We heard," Tessa told him. "We've got problems."

If the shadow avatar is keeping their host alive somehow, and has augmented them in some way, it's going to be a harder fight than I expected.

The group decided the best way to proceed was to first verify if the information was correct, and Lysanias figured he would ask the universe some questions. "But let's go back to the 'base' first," he decided. "Let them wake up," he indicated the two guards, "and get out of the gravity."

"Fine by me," Tony told him.

"I'm coming too," V told him, unplugging her phone.

"What?" everyone said.

"Yeah, you aliens are actually *doing something*. You actually seem to *care* about things. I've never met anyone who actually seemed to care before, actively care and not just complain about how things should be different. And you're aliens! I'll never get this chance again, to learn about you not from what (.) says about you but how you actually act. You didn't kill those two, or throw them out the window, or anything. You thanked them. I think. I wasn't even sure our language had those words anymore, but I heard you say them. I haven't gotten a thank you in years, but you thanked them for some vague info that could be totally wrong. We've gone wrong, I've never been able to articulate it before because everyone around me was the same way. But watching you, I think we don't have to be the way we are. I think you are trying to help fix us. You may be doing it for a selfish reason, to save your planet, but you're trying to send us a message, wake us up. You're not just shoving the biggest bombs you can through holes in the air, which was totally amazing by the way you have to tell me how you did that, you're trying to talk to us. Just talk. Not kill our babies, or poison our atmosphere, or steal our water. All things I've been told aliens want to do my whole life. I want the truth, not Our Leader's lies. The only way I'm going to get it is to stick by you."

"It will be dangerous," he cautioned. "If this information is correct, we're going to have to attack these military bases to broadcast our message."

She smirked. "So you'll need someone that understands our systems, won't you? That's me. You need me, admit it."

"It is possible she would be more efficient than myself," Rommie admitted. "And there are only a maximum of two of me, should we split up. We will need to attack and broadcast simultaneously if what that Th'un said was true."

"Wait though, do we? We're in the room the signal does go out from. Can't we just unplug it and broadcast our own signal using the equipment we..." he looked at V. "Borrowed?"

"People have been trying to decode the signal that comes into their homes since it started being broadcast," V told them. "We haven't made heads or feets of it. It's encrypted

somehow, but we have no idea how. It goes into a chip on the device and that chip does something to it so it can be displayed. Unless you can encrypt it using the same algorithm at this end, pulling the cable and plugging into something else is useless. I can show you which cable it is, we don't have to guess, but I've never seen anything like the board I plugged it into when I put this all together. I assume that board has the encryption hardware, I have replacement parts for everything except it, meaning it's unique. That's probably our guy."

Maybe using a method the avatar brought with them? Something super advanced they'll never figure out in a million years? And they told someone how to make the corresponding hardware to decode it? That would make sense. "Just checking. I sometimes overlook the obvious, so I just want to make sure I wasn't doing that here before we leave."

"No, the only way is going to be to find where the signal is sent from, and get it here to be encrypted and forwarded properly."

"Very well," he sighed. "Opening gateway."

Chapter 28

Okay Shredder, now you're taking the fall! Say where did I learn to say stuff like that?

When: Half an hour later

Where: Military base

"This is so whizpop!" V exclaimed as guards marched by them. They were pressed against the wall sneaking around the military base, and their wards seemed to be holding. After verifying that yes, the manager's theories were correct with some questions to the universe, the group split into three teams to take on a military base each. These locations proved to be fairly small, basically a few buildings with a high fence around them, so there wasn't that much ground to cover. It seemed they had no other purpose but to guard the location the video footage was sent from, as there didn't seem to be any training or other exercises going on. Just soldiers standing around along with drones and cameras sweeping the place back and forth. *That's gotta be the most boring job ever.* Lysanias had made two clones, and one clone went with each group. This way they could stay in contact and coordinate their efforts. The plan was to interfere as little as possible, if one group slipped up and showed themselves the schedule might be thrown off, and the broadcast wouldn't happen. So they were to stick to the shadows, sneak around, and try to find a way to put their footage in place of the official footage for that night. (or whenever the footage played, they had no idea the schedule and would take anything they could get, as long as it went up on the screens at some point)

This group was Lysanias (the original), Rosalina, V, and Tony. They breathed a sigh of relief as the soldiers passed, but then pressed up against the walls again as they turned around and marched back down the hall again.

"There's nothing here I'm telling you," one was saying as they passed. "I don't care what the AI says is on camera. What?" They stopped right in front of the group and looked right at him. "Right there? You're crazy, there's nothing! Have the cameras checked, it's some kind of glitch."

Lysanias looked up, and there were cameras in the halls. The nearest one and the two next nearest were pointing right at them. "Come on," he whispered, and continued on his way. The cameras moved to track him. *That's not creepy at all. Maybe I need to come up with a combination ward that makes us unseen and invisible at the same time. Having AIs around that can perceive us is a real problem. We need unseen so that anything we bump into or pick up is overlooked, otherwise I would just say invisibility was enough. Of course, in a group like this it wouldn't work because we need to see each other. Very vexing.*

The group scoured the base, though it turned out the three were quite similar as the other two of him reported. So while they covered enough of the base in triplicate to know it was the same layout duplicated three times, they swiftly narrowed it down to a heavily guarded room Lysanias couldn't seem to get into even by projecting his senses. The other two reported similar rooms, heavily guarded in the form of drones, turrets, two soldiers standing outside it, and the door itself was different from all the others. It was made of solid metal with seemingly no handle or other way to open it. They were looking at it through a tiny gateway, having backed off quickly once they got to that floor. Lysanias looked at it enough to get the gateway there, then the group found someplace to hide. They were discussing various options to get into the room when something happened.

The two guards brought their guns up and pointed them down the hall. A second later another figure came into view, carrying a briefcase. He or she was flanked by two more soldiers, and they all came to a stop in front of the door.

"You're thirty seconds behind schedule," the one guard said.

"Of course I am," answered the one carrying the case. "I was being hassled trying to get in here, something about some glitch in the system the AI keeps going on about. Some kind of interference moving around. As if that had anything to do with me. Look, you want the next hour of programming or not?"

"Give it here."

The Th'un opened the case and handed over a storage chip, which the soldier popped into a device Lysanias saw was on his leg. There was a pause and it popped out again. "It's clean."

"Just like it was the last million times," grumbled the case carrier.

"We can never relax our guard, aliens out there are clever," said the other guard.

Wait, we're so clever but at the same time primitive baby killers scrounging around for a scrap of meat. Do these people listen to themselves?

"They'll never get close to this place. Just get me the old one please?"

"Very well." The guard turned to the door and put his hand on the side of it. Lysanias held his breath, *will I be able to see inside?* But it didn't open, a small slot seemed to materialize in the center of the door, and a small tray slid out. The soldier put the chip on the tray, and it was sucked in. A second later another chip, either the same or an older one, slid out. He took it, handed it to the man who put it in the case, and the portal in the door irised closed.

"Thank you. See you in another hour when we do this all again."

"We have to follow that guy!" Lysanias decided. "Quick, come on, let's head downstairs!"

"Why?" asked V.

"They're the key to the whole thing! Come on!"

The group rushed down there, spotting the man and the two soldiers climbing into a vehicle of some kind.

"You can't follow it, can you?" he asked Tony.

"In this gravity? I'd be dead in ten minutes if I tried to go as fast as a car around here."

"Crap, how are we going to- Rosalina!"

"What?"

He grabbed the hubPad from his *pocket* and shoved it at her. "It would be dangerous to go alone. Take this. Fly after that car and don't lose it. Take pictures of where they end up and I'll open a gateway there to come get you. Go, before it leaves!"

"Oh, uh, okay, right!" She took to the air, flying after the car as the other soldier got in and the door closed. They zoomed away.

"Now we're getting somewhere," he said, rubbing his hands together.

"We are?" V asked. "I don't get it."

"You'll see. Meanwhile, Meta, broadcast to the group. Everyone, pull back. I think I have a solution. You probably just got a visit by someone bringing a chip to that room, maybe some of you are following it as well? I think our best chance is to switch the chip before it even starts on the way here. Meta will have some pictures of the place when Rosalina takes them. Open a gateway and we'll meet up there."

So they did.

The place wasn't too far, and turned out to be more what Lysanias had originally had in mind. A studio, with the set of the news broadcast, and guards walking around scowling at everyone. Not military, at least they didn't have the same armor on, but B said they were probably just trying to draw less attention to this place. They found the booth where the recording was being done, and watched as the next news stories were committed onto the memory chip.

"So the news is always an hour behind?" V asked. "I never suspected that. The clocks here are an hour off, that must help hide the delay. But what are we going to do?"

"Simple," Lysanias told her. "I'm guessing as these people are working on this station right here," he pointed to the box under the desk the Th'un were sitting at, "there's going to be a memory card that pops out of that slot right there. You can see the edge of it."

Those nearest it looked under and saw he was right.

"Then there's this machine." He walked over and patted a machine on a table guarded by a Th'un with a gun. "There's an empty slot here," he tapped it, "but three more memory cards here." He tapped them. "I think the original comes out there, goes into this machine,

makes three copies, and those copies are taken to each location as we just saw. All we have to do is wait, grab the card they just made of this hour's news, switch it, and they'll do all the rest of the work for us."

"That sounds like making a copy, but with more steps," Amelia protested. "Why not just wire it into the network and send the files to the three memory cards directly?"

"Security," B told them. "This system is air gaped. That way no alien force can break into the network and write their own video file while the people here think they are writing their own. It's physically carried over there, and that guard watches the whole thing so there's no alien interference. They would have to do what we're doing, something they never considered when the whole thing was set up, I'm guessing."

"You just have to hope they don't verify the contents of the three copies," Tessa told them. "If they watch it, they'll know it wasn't what they just recorded." She laughed. "Boy would they be surprised though."

"Oh. Should I wait, do you think? Try and switch them before the case closes?"

"I bet that's what this station is for," Monica said, pointing to another screen and box like computer no one was currently paying attention to. "They bring the copies over here and play them. Look, only power cable right, no network?" She turned the box, which everyone ignored of course.

"Makes sense," Amelia agreed. "I think you should wait until the last possible second, if you can."

"Great."

The group found tons of memory cards lying around and stood in front of the machine while they duplicated three more, getting them ready for the transfer. Lysanias made some clones again, each one took one, and they waited. The minutes ticked by and the final edits were made to the video, and the real broadcast footage was taken to the machine and duplicated. Meanwhile the soldiers and couriers were back, setting their cases down to receive a file. Each clone stood next to each case as the three copies were fed into the machine, and the footage checked against what they had just recorded. Each was given a random sweep, the technician simply chose a random point in the timeline and watched it for a moment on each. Satisfied, the card was ejected and handed over. As it was placed in the case and the Th'un's hand left the card but before the case could be closed Lysanias put his hand on the thing and paused time. This allowed him to interact with it, pulling the memory chip out and substituting his own. From their perspective everything went as it always had, and all three filed out.

"It's done," Lysanias announced, slumping over. "The next hour should see our fake leader giving his speech, and we'll see what shakes loose."

"Let's get out of here, we've been pushing our luck with these wards," Kate suggested.

"Why did I even come?" Behemoth complained. "You didn't need any of us."

"Don't worry," he assured her. "You'll have plenty to do once we figure out where the not so great leader is."

"Promises, promises."

The group picked a good place out in the street to sit down and wait for the broadcast to begin, sitting under a giant screen. They were out of the way, in the shade, and had the graviton drone overhead to take some of the pressure off. Lysanias of course couldn't help asking the universe "Will our footage be delivered to the three distribution points?" which he called "practice" and got a "Yes" answer to. Finally the wait was over, and what looked like (.) came on the screen.

There was just one *tiny* problem.

It was actual cannibal (.) himself.

"Hello, Lysanias," said (.) from the screen and the speakers nearby. "I assume you're watching, of course. Everyone else, you can ignore this broadcast, it's not for you. I have

some pesky aliens to teach a lesson to, they thought they had fooled me. Yes, me! Your Great Leader. It can't be done."

"What?" he shouted, jumping up. "It can't be! I got a yes, what did he do?" *Did I ask the wrong thing?*

(.) went on. "Did you really think your wards would be good enough to sneak around and not be seen by *anyone*? Did you think you were that good at making them? Please. You're terrible at everything. You always will be! You're too random, admit it!"

I will not.

"Not to mention I know you know how to make them, so I told my forces exactly what to look for. Why do you think there's cameras everywhere on this planet? Oh sure it wasn't just to find you, I had no idea it would be you when I came here, but it sure helped! I instructed everyone as soon as I knew which wanderer had shown up that any aliens on this planet acting like they couldn't be seen should be ignored as if they could not be seen, just to make sure you had enough rope to hang yourself. And you did! Trying to replace me with that cut rate copy, for shame. A good effort, it probably would have fooled most, so I commend you. Of course, when I figure out who the traitor is, well... you know. So your plan failed, and my people will not turn against me. All that effort, wasted. Too bad." He shook his head. "But because I got such a kick out of it, I'm willing to make you a deal. I'm going to show some images on the screen, so you can come here and we can get this whole thing settled. I'll be waiting. Are you ready to record them? Are you? You're not are you? You're just sitting there gaping up at the screen still trying to process all this. You're so dumb, Lysanias. Someone smack him and tell him to get the camera out. I'll wait."

He paused, looking around and humming. Then he seemed to notice something on his desk and exclaimed over it, picking it up and then throwing it into his mouth. Meanwhile Lysanias scowled and got out the hubPad, ready to record. He was gritting his teeth together, wishing he could just explode this guy's head from here somehow. *Smug bastard. Think you know everything, do you? Think you've got me all figured out? Though I have to admit, the white background behind you means I can't tell where you were, and just teleport there. So I have to give you some credit, I guess.*

He finished chewing whatever it had been. "All set? Okay, here they are." A series of images flashed on the screen, looking like they were taken from a drone that descended from the air to show a wide angle view and a close up. "Hope that's good enough for you, kid, because that's all you're getting. I'll be waiting, but not for too long. In fact, let's give you a countdown. I love a good countdown. Don't get here by then, I'll have left the planet and you can have fun chasing me all over the cosmos. Here we go." From the speakers started to blare "It's the final countdown" and a 10 appeared on the screen.

"What is that racket?" B asked. All the Th'un in the street were wincing and hurrying away.

"Human music," everyone said.

"I hate it."

"Are we going?" Amelia asked.

"You know it's a trap, right?" Tessa asked.

"Yeah, what's to guarantee he's even there? The whole place could be rigged to blow when you show up," Monica agreed.

"Are you thinking clearly?" Kate asked him. "I felt what his jabs were doing to you."

"What choice do we have?" he asked, getting the contain ward out that held his armor. He started climbing into it. "This is why we came here. Even if there's only a one percent chance he's there, we have to take it as a certainty."

"That doesn't sound right," Samantha mused. "Can't you just ask?"

"The counter is already at eight, he's not giving me time. Look, we still have the wards, only cameras can see us and only then just barely. Don't attack anything, just dodge and run past anything you see. We just need to find the leader, and he's made himself easy to spot with all that green glowing he seems to do. Just be careful, I don't know what it means, he could have a ton of tricks up his sleeves."

"Does someone have a gun I could use?" V asked. "I'll do what I can too."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "You should stay out of it, you're not a fighter."

“No one is, until they take that first step. Come on, let me help.”

He paused in putting the armor on and looked at her.

“She’s determined,” Kate told him.

“I can tell that myself. Fine, but if you get killed...” He handed her one of the guard’s guns from his *pocket* and kept putting the armor on. B bent over and showed her what to do with the gun.

Finally he was all zipped up, stuck additional *armor* wards on everybody, and gathered the One Power for the gateway. “Remember what I gave you,” he reminded them. “The flame and the void. Don’t stop moving. You attack and you can be seen, whatever forces are there will be on you in an instant. Stick together and cover each other. Even you, Behemoth, we’ve shown you’re not as tough as you think.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s down to four get it open already.”

“Good luck everyone.”

He held the hubPad before him and opened a gateway to the scene, and everyone rushed out though it. He was through last, popping the pad back and stared at the forces arrayed against them. Mechs, vehicles, drones, soldiers on the ground all in power armor, all of them looking at the gateway. He closed it, trying to see the shadow avatar, but didn’t let go of the One Power. *I’ll want the boost to my senses, and magic can be useful.*

“Are you sure they can’t see us?” whispered Tony.

“Positive. Let’s just go and-” That’s when the sprinkler system kicked on, drenching everyone instantly and every weapon in the place came up to point at them.

He does know his stuff, you can’t deny it. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Chapter 29

Avengers... Assemble!

When: A tense second later

Where: In front of the building shown to them in (.)'s broadcast

As every weapon in the place came up to zap these pesky aliens the soul of Justice appeared as an angled plane, big enough to shield the group. Weapons fire slammed into it, but it held.

"Okay, the wards are useless," Lysanias told them. "We're going to have to-"

"You need to get into that building," Behemoth interrupted. "We'll keep these forces out here busy. Everyone, make a hole and get him inside."

"We should do this together!"

"No. This is why we came, this avatar person is your-"

"Incoming!" shouted Tessa. "I can't deflect it!"

Everyone looked where she was pointing, a huge glowing ball of energy was arcing over the barrier. *Some kind of plasma? Well, he did provide us with all this water.* Lysanias circle stepped back, pulling his hands back and connecting to the water in the area. He wasn't great at it, preferring earth or fire but enough responded to his will that when he shoved his palms forward it smashed into the ball, exploding it far enough away no one was hurt.

"Go," Behemoth insisted.

"Fine, but at least let me get you some cover." He changed his stance, firming his connection to the ground, and then stomped. The ground from where he was to the soldiers buckled and twisted, sending chunks of rock up to tilt vehicles and make the Th'un loose their footing. With the shooting now stopped the soul vanished and reformed back as just a square hovering nearby, and Lysanias pounded both fists on the ground. Rock started to melt as he poured energy into it, making them scramble away and further sinking the vehicles. With one final flourish he grabbed at the ground, pulling up a huge slab of stone near them. "V, stay here under cover and shoot what you can. Stay safe everyone."

"What do you even need us for?" V muttered as she took her place at the wall.

It's true, with the suit and my other items augmenting my strength, I'm pretty much the greatest earth bender to ever live. Take all that stuff away from me, and I'd probably only be among the greats, seeing as how I stole skill from some masters in the first place. Lysanias, Rosalina, and Rommie rose into the air and shot forward, heading for the building. There was a garage like opening on the side building, probably where all the vehicles had come out of, and the door was still open so he figured that was a good place to start. Zooming by all the soldiers were too busy trying to find decent footing or avoid boiling rock to shoot at him, so he made it in there without incident. *Where are we anyway?* he asked himself. *This building is all alone out here, did he really build his base out in the country somewhere? It must be on the same planet, I don't know if I'm good enough with gateways to cross other star systems. I do see a road, so we're not completely cut off here I guess. Maybe it's some kind of weapons test location, that's why we're so far from other buildings?*

The garage area was empty, everyone was out on the Great Leader's orders to try and defend the place, so he wasted no time smashing down doors and heading to where he felt the only lifeform in the place was. As he got closer he got more and more worried, whoever was here had a fair amount of spiritual energy, and possibly even powers. He was feeling almost an echo of the force, seeking him as he sought whoever was ahead, and as he came to a long corridor he held up a hand and the others stopped. "Be careful," he told them. "I don't like this. He's just up ahead, and he was way more energy than I do. I think he has powers too, and for all I know a million robots."

"What kind of powers?" asked Rosalina.

"ESPer? And I'm feeling life energy apart from that. Something-"

He was interrupted by the door in front of him peeling back like a camera shutter opening, and there in the center of an empty room was a large Th'un. He was hovering with his legs crossed, arms outstretched as if praying, and he seemed to be naked. Green light played around him as if he was underwater, and the feeling of power coming from him came into much sharper focus.

"Oh my!" Rosalina exclaimed.

"We did that joke already," Rommie told her. "No robots."

"No," agreed Lysanias. "Come on."

"Ah, welcome!" said the figure, unfolding his legs and lowering himself to stand before the three. His companions moved to either side, covering him. "Just us two, as I intended. Good."

"Uh, there's three of us," Rosalina told him. "Or can't you count very well?"

The avatar laughed. "You're of no consequence. Come in, it's rude to lurk in doorways." He gestured Lysanias forward.

"Is this some kind of joke?" he asked. "You're facing me unarmed? Are you just giving up?"

"I think you're honorable enough not to attack me right away. I thought we could talk a moment."

"So talk."

He put his hands behind his back and wheeled to the side, pacing. "Do you know why I dislike you wanderers so much?"

"We cost you worlds, of course!"

"Not exactly." He turned and went the other way. The room was about twenty paces wide, and Lysanias was alert for hidden doors or other traps that would spring open and start shooting him. But he could feel the avatar in the room with him, it wasn't some kind of illusion. And the walls and floor, and ceiling which he risked a peek at were all smooth, uniform, gray, metal. He wasn't even sure where the light was coming from, if he was being completely honest with himself.

Does that mean anything? A body here and getting rid of me? Would he make that trade? He's talking about how much he hates me. "So what, exactly?"

"It's the disruption to the natural order I don't like. Look here, Sangray, bless his heart, told you this right? Or Jason did? I simply wish to take realities that are too weak to fight back. The law of the jungle, on a much larger scale. But then you come along, sent by my sibs, and mobilize the inhabitants in a way they wouldn't have before. The reality gets warned, you use your mystic powers to fight me, and a reality that should have fallen to me gets saved. Then you leave, never to look back, and that reality falls into chaos or disrepair anyway. It's wasteful."

"What is your point?"

"I want to ask you a favor. In exchange I'll leave here, right now."

"I'm not giving you the sword."

"Sword, shord, I'm talking about your wandering. The sword isn't active, methinks you don't like using it at full power, so maybe I was wrong to be concerned. Some wanderers would kill everything they could with it, just to see what items they would get. Not you though, which is weird. So weird I'm taking this risk to talk to you, and I think you'll keep your word if you give it to me. I know you won't give up wandering, that's fine. Just don't be the best at what you do. Warn the people where you go, that's fine. Look into any magic or tech that interests you, also totally fine. Then get the heck out and let it fend for itself again. Your conscience is clear and I get to do what I need to do."

"You want me to be less effective? Just be a herald of your coming, grab everything of use in a reality and try to not think about the billions you'll kill?"

"Think about it as wanting you to warn as many places as you can in a short time. All this fighting me off, it takes time. Are you really going to be doing this forever? The more realities you warn the faster your job gets done and you can get back to your own life."

You're worried, aren't you? I keep going places, I keep learning and practicing, eventually I might just become unbeatable. It might take a hundred years, but what's time to us? You'll still be limited by whatever you find in that reality but I'll have brought all sorts of toys and skills with me to fight you. "Yes. If that's what it takes, this is my life now. I think it's a good one." *I mean what would I be doing at home? Making trouble for the magic guild? Training the remaining progenitors like me? Important, but not as important as this.*

He sighed. "I was afraid you would say that. I guess it's time I started taking you seriously." He stopped in the center of the room.

“How is standing there naked taking me seriously? Are you really that powerful?”

“Probably, but simply crushing your head or stopping time to tear you in half wouldn’t really be satisfying, would it?”

Doing what now?

“I mean I could have just rigged the whole place to blow and not even been here. No, I want to show you what you’re going to be up against in the future from now on, once I realize you’re around.” With that he gestured to the wall and two things happened. The floor seemed to bubble and shoot upwards, covering the avatar’s body, and from the wall the same thing happened. A bladed weapon formed, seemingly out of the metal of the wall itself, and slammed into his open hand. Just like that, the avatar was covered in armor, shining gold and stylized even more than his own was.

“Nice trick, but I bet my sword can still cut it.” *Where in the heck did all that come from? Is he saying he’s an alchemist somehow? It didn’t feel like a power, he just gestured.*

“Oh, that’s not the fun part,” the avatar told him, smacking the bladed weapon into the floor where it stuck. “That’s just me getting ready. This is the fun part.” He made a grabbing motion and was suddenly holding four small slips of paper.

“What in the world? Did you just-”

He pressed them between his fingers, then flung them outward, each one orienting and sticking to one of the walls. *He did. He stole wards out of my pocket. I was warned he could do that, I never thought he actually would. And he just used telekinesis, as if floating around wasn’t enough of a giveaway, he found an EPSer in this reality it seems.* Lysanias recognized them, they were his own *spirit lock* wards, the ones he had used to keep the jedi in line. He felt a chill, knowing what was coming, but he didn’t know the half of it. *I can easily run over to one and slash it-* Metal plates slammed down across all four walls of the room, making it smaller and covering the wards up. The One Power left him, which shouldn’t have been possible, and he took a step back, bringing both his sword and shield up.

“Wait, you just crippled yourself as well,” Lysanias told him. “Those wards keep you from using energy to power abilities too! You may as well not have ESPer powers now!”

“I think we’re still about even,” the avatar told him, grabbing the blade again. It was as tall as he was, with a center piece that separated two double edged blades. “I won’t have access to that power set in all realities but my skill with a blade, that’s something that will be consistent. Plus there’s enough mental powers I can use, and of course my cybernetics.”

“Your what?”

“Come on, Lysanias. This is a highly advanced civilization. You think I couldn’t provide them the specs for some *lifestreaming* cybernetics? Just like a certain kitty cat I think you’ve met? The big silver doofus isn’t the only one that has access to those you know.”

“Life-” His blood ran even colder as the avatar put a hand out and a glowing ball of green energy balanced there. *The rumors were true.*

“Sleep!” Rosalina cast, figuring if these two were just going to stand there ignoring her she might as well end the whole thing in one shot and- “What?”

The avatar laughed some more, longer this time. “I was waiting for that! I mean I wanted to put my armor on, you just stood there and let me. I wanted to steal wards and activate them, you just stood there and let me. Is it really your *wand spirit* I have to worry about after all, Lysanias? Is she the real combatant between the two of you? Or does she just have more brains?”

“It didn’t work!” Rosalina cried, taking a step back. “I didn’t feel any magic.”

“Of course not, dear,” the avatar told her sweetly. “You think I can’t invent a metal to cut off magic to an area as large as this? For shame. Oh sure, scientists here were very confused why I wanted a metal with the properties I did but they can follow directions as well as anyone. They got me what I needed. I didn’t want you just zapping me like that, after all. Wouldn’t be sporting and all that, what?”

That’s why the One Power left me, it’s magic, and that’s been cut off. Not that I really used much in combat, but not being able to use my energy based skills? Plus that leaves her vulnerable, should I just turn her into a wand again? Do her innate abilities cost energy to activate? I never really thought I needed to know. A “lead” for magic, who would have thought? “You really want to just pummel me don’t you?”

"Little bit," he admitted. "You gonna stand there and let me?" He stared laughing again. Lysanias wanted to just rush in and attack. But he knew better than that, and remembered the man who had taught him about the flame and the void. *Really should have taken his sword skill, somehow I don't think 100% hit rate is going to mean much here. But I can still do this. Wait, isn't the property of my sword that it always hits magic? Has than been cut off too?* He concentrated, feeding his anger at his own stupidity into the flame. *He does have a point, I should have just spirit stepped over there when I had the chance and sunk this blade into his bare chest. I guess that's the plan for next time. Don't let the avatar, should they just reveal themselves like this, have a chance to do anything. Remember your opponent and just go for the head.*

"You feel serious, at least," the avatar noted. "I guess it's time to get this party started." He squeezed his fist and both the energy and he vanished.

Right, B's armor could do that as well. "That doesn't frighten me," he called, feeling the avatar hadn't moved yet. *It concerns me plenty, that doesn't break like all of mine do when I attack. And even with the technique I'm going to use against him his weapon is still invisible. So that's a problem. Force, don't fail me-*

"Oh, you think your precious *force* will help you? Don't make me laugh."

Wait, is he reading my mind? "The force? Possibly. But I was thinking more about a pup that can find things." He gestured, and the dog soul appeared at the other end of the room.

"The what?" The dog ran over and jumped, clinging to the avatar's back. "Hey, get this thing off me!" It swung around like he was trying to shake the dog off.

Surprise, I can see where you are just fine. He shot forward, his identity gift of speed undiminished but also ready to step to the side as soon as he struck, in the air bender style. He clanged off something, and stepped away, spinning. The force warned him of a strike and he swept the shield out, deflecting a blow and sending him stumbling.

Rommie ran towards Rosalina shouting "Take a pistol!" and flipping one to hand it over. She unloaded at the same time with her other hand, but the floor between them rose up, intercepting the shots.

"I don't know how to use a gun!" she protested.

"Point and shoot, just like a wand."

"I guess..."

Meanwhile, the floor retracted again as the shots stopped, making Lysanias wonder what that was all about. The force warned him of another strike, which he again barely caught on his shield, and still spinning lashed out with this blade. It struck something and was deflected. *The other half of his weapon, didn't feel like the armor, he probably spun it around.* *Wait-* The force again warned him the blade was coming at him, and again he raised the shield. This time he felt nothing, but was fairly sure his air bending was serving him well as the avatar grumbled "Stand still, will you? All this whirling around is undignified!"

Tell that to Tensen, he was the most dignified man in that reality.

He felt the avatar swinging again, and again was missed.

This is no good, we're too evenly matched! He's as fast as I am, somehow, though I'm trying to use the force and anticipate his movements which I'm pretty sure is the only thing keeping me alive right now. Ugh, he can probably use that ESPer "combat mode" I was reading about. I can keep dodging or blocking but I need to attack. However I see I might get some backup at this point.

Rommie had reached Rosalina, and handed one of her guns over. She opened fire again with her other gun, and again the floor seemed to flow like water, trying to intercept the shots. This time it wasn't quite fast enough, and the shots briefly illuminated the avatar as they slammed into his armor.

As he clearly saw where the armor was Lysanias didn't bother trying to listen to the force, just slashed upwards with his blade. He felt it stop and slid it back, it must have been blocked it was far too low to have struck the armor. *Darn it, come on, what else can I do here?*

"I've got an idea," the voice of the avatar ghosted through the room. "Reconfigure the floor like his earth bending."

Who is he- yipes! Lysanias almost stumbled as random blocks, large enough to trip him up, suddenly appeared out of the floor. He stopped whirling, trying to move more than a step would require him to carefully put his feet where the blocks weren't. There was now a random pattern of blocks across the floor in the room at different heights, making it impossible for him to go anywhere at any speed.

"That's better. Dodge this."

He raised his shield but miscalculated, the blow fell to his right arm. There were sparks and a screech as the metal was gashed, but he still seemed fine.

Shots rang out from Rommie but again the floor rose up and intercepted them, causing her to groan.

"It's some kind of programmable metal I think," she yelled.

"So do something about it!" he yelled back.

"Like- oh. Shoot the floor!"

Lysanias swung, but it was easily knocked aside as the girls started trying to blow the floor up. Not even Rosalina could miss simply pointing the gun down and pulling the trigger, and bolts started tearing through the metal, which shifted to focus on repairing the damage.

"Hey now, we can't have that," the avatar chided. "Do something about them, would you?"

"Look out!" Lysanias shouted to them, the walls on either side forming a spike to try and stab them both. Rommie shoved Rosalina, taking the spike herself, though Lysanias was pretty sure it hadn't gone through the armor. The spikes retracted again, and the girls resumed shooting. *It's taking damage, it's tough but not that tough. My sword still sparkles as I swing it, it's still the sharpest thing in the universe and the walls that slid down didn't look that thick. I think I know a way out of this, but it'll take a little time and some luck.*

"You should worry about yourself," the avatar told him, probably going to attack again. Lysanias didn't care, he just got out the soul of Justice and it became a wall between them. Something smacked off it, causing the avatar to grumble. "Oh, now you've done it."

Lysanias put his shield into his *pocket*, instead gripping his sword in both hands and trying not to trip as he made his way towards the nearest wall. A green light played around the edges of the barrier, and there was a flash. The soul cracked a little. "Ah, thought that would work," the avatar crowed. "They are of a similar- hey what are you doing over there?"

If he destroys that soul is that the end of John's power? Hopefully it'll hold long enough, I promised him he would get it back.

He made it to the edge as blast after blast slammed into the barrier, putting a big crack in the center as it was pounded by *lifestream* energy. Lysanias put his sword where he felt the energy of his stolen ward, trying to carefully line it up. *Come on, hold!* he willed as the barrier took another hit. He couldn't wait any longer, the crack was getting bigger and the soul was dimming, so he shoved the blade through. It started cutting through but he had to shove with all his strength as another two flashes smashed into the soul. Finally he pierced all the way through, and he felt the power in the ward vanish. *Okay!* He yanked the blade out and recalled the soul, leaving the avatar holding a green ball of energy, the only thing about him that was visible.

"Oh no you don't!" he cried, throwing it at him. Lysanias put energy into his own barrier, making the ball harmlessly splash against it. "Think you have the upper hand, now that you have the ability to use energy again?" he taunted. "That barrier took most of your energy, what has really changed?"

What's changed is now I can escape. "This." He teleported to the other side of the room, and called to the others "grab onto me."

"You're not getting away," the avatar told him, the floor flattening out to allow him to walk. But that just let Lysanias know exactly where he was, and called upon another soul; the cage. It sprang into existence around him, making the avatar pause. "What's this? Another soul? I'll soon have it broken." The green ball appeared in his hand.

"You won't have the time," Lysanias informed him, calling upon another soul. The bomb appeared in the cage with him, and began to flash.

"I'll destroy it!" the avatar cried, and raised the ball. Rommie put ten shots into his hand, making him cry out and the energy winked out.

“Go!” she cried. “I’ll make sure he can’t escape somehow!”

“It’s a bomb, you’ll be destroyed too!”

“Lysanias, I’m not Rommie, remember? Take Rosalina and go!”

She put more shots into the cage, which he tried to block while gathering energy.

I guess she’s right. I didn’t want to do this, I don’t know if the souls will survive. But if it can save their entire reality, the sacrifice will be worth it. Right? Sorry Rommie, I’ll rebuild you better than ever.

He took the dog soul back into himself and *shifted*.

He and Rosalina were outside, where he had put the original gateway to get here and behind the stone wall. It was pretty beat up but still served as cover, and he shoved Rosalina down. “Epic, tell everyone to find some cover, it’s going to-”

We didn’t get to finish as the top blew off the building and the walls blew apart, mostly containing the blast but still sending shockwaves through the air. He felt both souls return to him, damaged and unable to be sent out again he was sure, but he breathed a sigh of relief they weren’t gone completely.

“It’s over,” he breathed.

“Not exactly,” Meta informed in. “Withdrawal event has not been registered.”

“What?”

“Lysanias!” the avatar’s voice rang out over the battlefield. “You coward, this isn’t finished between us!”

Chapter 30

Good idea, who needs a king? No king, no king, la la la laa laaa!

When: No time has passed

Where: The larger battlefield

"I think he could teleport, same as you," Rosalina told him, peaking over the wall. "He could be anywhere in all this."

"That would make the most sense. I should have considered that, once I got my powers back so did he." He sighed. "Is anyone hurt?" he asked. Before him, far enough away he started gathering the One Power again to see a bit better, the battle raged. Flashes of light from gunfire made it clear soldiers were still alive and kicking, but he was pleased to see the larger machines smashed to scrap. *No more of those plasma bolts, or whatever they were.*

"Minor injuries, everyone has been playing it safe," Epic reported. "Even Behemoth, she's just been throwing stuff rather than engaging directly. After tearing the larger machines to pieces, that is."

"Good. The avatar is out there someplace, tell them to be careful. He's both an ESPer and has energy based powers."

"Noted and distributed. "

"So what now?" Rosalina asked.

"We try to find him. You can use magic again, right? Or your natural abilities? Cover him with paint or something so we can see him." The dog soul appeared again, and started sniffing the ground nearby.

"Good idea! Hey, is Rommie really..."

"I assure you, that body was simply remote controlled by me," Meta told them. "I still have all the memories I made as 'Rommie' and with a new body will be as good as new. That body and the armor have been destroyed, the blast saw to that."

"Could you make her new body less pretty this time?"

"Is this really the time?" Meta asked.

"I guess not. Where's V?" She looked around.

"She moved up when her shots were no longer effective at this distance and found different cover," Epic told them. "Would you like a retreat order sounded? We are holding our own but more forces could be inbound. We could at least regroup."

"No, we have to finish this where they are. Let's not put them in danger if they've got good cover." He noticed what must be Amelia in the air smashing things with a light saber, and stuff was flying around probably thanks to Tessa. "With the two of us in the field they'll have more people to go after and that lets the pressure off. Amelia has the right idea, let's go after those drones, Rosalina. I don't like the amount of air support the avatar has, and hopefully they won't be too heavily armored. If no serious injuries have been taken on our side we can use our flight to even things up. Come here pup, we'll go after the avatar later, I doubt he'll run now after I nearly blew him up." The dog ran over to him, looked up and furiously wagged his tail, and vanished. "He'll probably find me if I'm flying around out there."

"Here's your gun back," Rosalina said, offering it. "I'll stick to my wands, but I guess I should learn more about them in case we run into another situation like that."

"Hey, you shot the floor up like a pro!" He took it and put it in his *pocket*. "I just wish you could access the *pocket* so you could grab one if you needed it. Well, can't have everything. You ready?"

"Ready!"

"Wait, he had a good point." He held the sword up. "Awaken, Ragnarok, let all who know your bite know change!" It glowed briefly, and he felt it was awake now. "Okay, may as well get an item from this guy, have to kill him anyway. Let's go."

The two blasted off, towards the fight and Rosalina quickly got into the middle, firing her wands off and blowing up drones while dodging enemy fire though seeming to not even notice she was being fired upon. Lysanias simply zipped between them, smashing them to pieces with his blade.

"Nice of you to join us," Amelia said to him, flying by and cutting a line across another with her particle beam. "What's this about you totally failing to do the one thing you came here to do?"

"Har har, just be careful he's around here- whoop!"

"What was that? Lysanias?"

But he had been smashed to the ground, and was blinking away surprise. "What was that?"

"Possibly some kind of gravity attack," Meta told him. "That may indicate that the—"

He flipped over, the pressure already gone, as the force and his other senses warned him faster than his computer companion could. He didn't block with the sword though, he made a grab for the arm welding the weapon that was crashing down on him. He caught it, grabbing on.

"What?" asked the avatar.

"You know I took the skill of several martial arts masters, right?"

"So you've caught me, what are you going to do with me?" He started forcing his arm down.

"Maybe take some of that energy of yours?" He tried, and felt he got a little, but as with most things with him someone can just think really hard about not allowing him to do something and that seems to work.

"Don't make me laugh."

Suddenly explosions went off all around him, blinding him as he got thrown around. When he came out of it he wasn't holding anything in his hands anymore. "Ragnarok!" He activated the graviton system and popped up, looking around. A Th'un was nearby, also shaking his head as if getting caught in the explosion, but it wasn't the avatar. He didn't feel the avatar around at all. "What just happened? Did I let go? I didn't think I did."

"I'm actually not sure," Meta reported. "I think he may be able to stop time."

"That skill I was looking at? So he fired a bunch of missiles at me or something and stole my sword, and then ran away? I don't believe this!"

"Given how simultaneous the events were, yes, I have a high confidence that's what happened."

"Unbelievable." He yanked a light saber out of his *pocket*, glad *that* hadn't been stolen too, and slashed the gun out of the hand of the Th'un that was recovering with it as it ignited. With that he grabbed the Th'un's chest and pulled him down. "Where's your boss?" he demanded, showing the soldier the light saber. In reality, this was a trick, he just wanted to be close to the guy to steal any energy he had.

"How would I know?" he asked. "What are you doing to me?"

Draining a mere soldier was far easier than trying to drain the avatar, and within a few seconds Lysanias felt he was full of energy again. So he threw the guy into someone else, making them both smash into each other. *They'll be fine!* The dog appeared. "Let's go find my sword buddy!" he told it, and the dog ran in a circle and put his nose to the ground, sniffing around. He bounded away. *Steal my sword, will you? Stupid avatar. How do I fight someone that can **stop time**? Ugh, this is annoying. I mean, sure, I can stop time with my ring, but I don't get to interact with anything when I- Wait a second. As usual I'm ten steps behind and being an idiot besides.* "Shadow Clone Technique!" Two more of him popped into existence. "Right," both said, flying left and right. Both went to help smash drones out of the air, when they could they flew down and grabbed up a soldier so they could refill their energy. Down on the ground they could use their now not quite as impressive earth bending skills to further put the hurt on the forces attacking his friends, who were finishing them off quite nicely by themselves anyway. *Now I don't feel so bad about running after my sword, as that was probably his intent, to take me from the battle. My participation on the battle has been doubled, and I have a plan. What could be better? Oh right, actually finding the thing.*

The dog was unerringly heading in one direction, bounding over wrecked vehicles and wounded soldiers alike, and soon Lysanias could see his sword again. It was stuck point first into the ground, and a ball of darkness was gathering near it. *Crap, could he actually destroy it? Using energy drawn from his higher self? I have to assume the answer is yes. Let's get him away from there, shall we?* "Open the faceplate," he cried, and it lifted up as he smashed

the ground, popping up as much rock as he could behind him, and tossed it at the black sphere. Then he activated his gifted Sharingan, hoping this was going to work. He hadn't really paid attention to it before, it was fairly painful to use after all, but thinking back those few seconds he had used it in the past he had seen a bit of a glow around and inside those he was copying. With the One Power in him he could clearly see an energy where the avatar was, a dark, twisted, mass that seemed to come from nowhere, but yet somewhere he could *almost* see. He hoped it would be enough to capture what he wanted when the avatar got away from the rock. He knew the rock was coming and whirled, making a choice. Once again he vanished, along with the sword, and the rock smashed into the place they had been. "Pause," he cried, after grabbing something out of his *pocket*. Silence fell over the battlefield and he stopped maintaining the eyes, watching them go black.

Now we see.

And so he waited. Time was of course frozen around him, but that was fine. In the dark, in the silence, he sat with his legs crossed and meditated on the battle he had just participated in. The flame and the void were before him, within him, around him. He hadn't used the eyes for long, so he didn't have too long to wait, not that time meant anything to him at the moment. When he was ready he opened his eyes, and he could see again.

I really must thank you. Now, where did you get to?

"Are you all right?" Meta asked him. He jumped, screaming and went into a defensive stance. "Apologies, I did not mean to startle you."

He put a hand on his chest. "Oh my goodness, Meta, don't do that! Sound a tone or something, would you? Just out of the blue like that, you can't just start talking."

"I see that, your heart rate has increased dramatically. I shall make a note. I thought you were thinking of a strategy to win as you did not seem injured, and I did not want to disturb you until you seemed ready to go."

"Something like that. He's just handed me victory, so I owe him some thanks. I was trying to find him when you spoke. He can't have gone far, I know how it works now. Ah, there you are."

He looked and there was the avatar, frozen in place with the sword in one hand and the ball of black energy in the other. *So spirit step over there, grab it, and run him through. Simple.* "Lower faceplate." It did, and his display came back to life. "Let's end this."

With time running again he now used his brand new skill of *chronokinesis* and stopped time in a different way. He spirit stepped there just like he wanted, easily coming to a halt next to the frozen avatar. He could imagine the avatar's eyes on him, unbelieving. "Yes," he said, taking the sword away from his unresisting hand. "I stopped it this time." He rammed the sword home, taking the avatar through the neck. "Thanks for the technique."

Time started again.

"Bluga," managed the avatar as he died, the energy he was holding harmlessly dissipating into the air. A silver circlet dropped to the ground as his body, armor and all, burned away.

"Withdrawal event registered," Meta informed him. "Dimensional encryption of this reality has begun. As a note, based on your body's reserves as I calculate them, you can use that technique a maximum of 5 consecutive times before you risk passing out from the strain on your systems."

"I'll keep that in mind." He grabbed the circle of metal and shoved it into his *pocket*, thinking *I'll deal with this later. The battle is still raging, and there's still lots to do around here.* He headed back into combat, grinning a wicked grin as he went to find his clones. Heading to the edge of the battlefield they all slammed into the ground and working together lifted a huge chunk of rock out. They positioned it to shadow the battlefield, and everyone looked up at it. Lysanias and his two clones were simply hovering in the air, they didn't need a strong stance to hold it up now that they had control of it, and the remaining forces seemed to get the message. Gunfire stopped, weapons were thrown down, and they started surrendering to the others. Satisfied he had their attention he slammed the rock back into the ground where it had come from and went looking for the rest of his party.

He found them marching survivors away from the torn up battlefield, hands on their heads. Tony and Monica were just sitting there, looking exhausted, but the others were up and around. He greeted them and went over to make sure they were okay.

"We're fine," Monica told him. "The others have super strength or whatever, but we needed to sit down."

"I got their guns away from them," Tony told him, gesturing to a pile of weapons sitting there. "But that's all I've got. I want to be away from here and sleep for a week."

"Hang on, we'll get you back to the base in a bit. Actually, you could go into a ward if you were really that beat. You wouldn't feel the gravity in there."

He waved it off. "It's fine, but I wouldn't mind a candy bar or something."

He laughed, made them some food with magic, and went to go see what he could get out of the Th'un.

"Good, you can talk to them," Amelia said. "They're cooperating but I can't tell what they're saying. What are we going to do with them, anyway?"

"An excellent question. How do you change a whole society anyway?" He turned to the Th'un. "Who is in charge here?"

They all fell all over each other insisted he was in charge. Yup, no one but him, obviously. Whatever he wanted them to do, he just had to give the order. Totally him.

"What are you talking about? You must have a chain of command of some kind!"

"A chain? Are we to be tied together in some way?"

"No, who is in charge if your leader dies?"

"Our Great Leader is dead?" There was a shocked look as everyone looked to see how everyone else was taking this news.

"Dead and gone. Who do I talk to now? Who is in charge?"

"No replacement was ever discussed," the Th'un admitted. "We are all directly under the command of (.). No one ever thought he would die, we were all convinced he couldn't die." They all agreed that was the general thought.

"Great. So let's say I want to announce it, let your people choose what to do next. How would I do that? Do I have to record it and use the triplicate system? That message for me seemed to be live."

"There was the emergency broadcast system," one said, "under (.)'s control. It was in the building, which seems to have blown up for some reason. I don't think it can be used now."

He resisted the urge to scream. *Shooting myself in the foot, as always.*

"I think it was linked to his DNA," said another. "So much of what he invented was..."

Everyone agreed this was also true, even if the building hadn't blown up, it probably still couldn't be used.

"Like what?" he asked.

"Oh, his regeneration pod, and the monthly maintenance on his cybernetic systems."

"Regeneration pod?"

"The rumor was he had some kind of mental powers, but they degraded over time. He needed to use the pod to refresh them. It's a similar system to our magnetic manipulation of alien brains, but only he could activate the regions that gave him powers."

I see. He physically changed the structure of his brain to make him an ESPer, but it wasn't permanent. Not like me doing it to someone would be, because I'm targeting their soul. He had to keep doing it or his brain healed the "damage" back to what it was supposed to be. And as he didn't want others getting that power, he made sure it would only work for him. Maybe?

"With him gone, I don't know what we're going to do," another said.

"He led us for hundreds of years," said another. "Are we really believing the word of this alien?"

"Yes, where is the proof of Our Great Leader's death? Show us the body!"

And there it is. "I can't. It's disintegrated."

"How convenient," said another. "I don't think he's dead at all!"

“Tell you what. If he shows up in the next ten seconds, I’ll defer to him, okay? Otherwise, I killed him, that puts me in charge. Got it?” He waited, making a show of shading his eyes and counting on his fingers. “Nope, hasn’t managed it. Until such time as he does show up again, you follow my orders now.”

“We’re not following the orders of an alien!”

“Fine, follow *his* orders!” he cried, pointing at B.

There was some grumbling, but given that logic (of him not being an alien and having no other way to choose a leader) they agreed to it.

At this point they had a huge mess to deal with. No one there knew where the “command center” was, the place (.) used to issue orders, so they were going to have to convince people using other methods to stop building drones to attack alien civilizations and the rest of it. The group put together a hastily worded summary and duplicated it, over at the studio they had found earlier. The workers there were surprised, but when two dozen Th’un walked through a hole in the air and overwhelmed the guards, everything went smoothly. Basically the message was it would be the last transmission of its type and to look to normal news broadcasts which would have to start up again. They explained the “Great Leader” was dead, and that he had been an alien himself that’s why he had lived for so long. (This wasn’t a total lie, after all) They had all been tricked, and it was time for them to decide, as a species, where they were going to go from here. Naturally B gave this message, Lysanias stayed out of it, he was pretty sure they weren’t ready for that yet. V was sure equipment could be modified as easily as changing a channel to receive unencrypted content, so after that went out and people were sitting around wondering if this was some kind of joke, the group headed back to the distribution center and V plugged a new server into the “out” line. There she ran around changing all their displays to the new “channel.” She then had B stand there and make a speech as she watched the building’s displays, and it worked perfectly, they could broadcast live, or anything they wanted as the hardware was now under their control. So they destroyed the old system, figuring everyone would try what the last transmission had suggested just to make their stuff work again. (They didn’t want any “normal” broadcasts about how evil aliens were and such to continue, and this was a way to guarantee that) It was somewhat inconvenient at the moment, having to broadcast from the tiny room, but at least it was getting the message out. They could run some longer cables up the elevator shaft and create a studio later, while they rerouted the whole system (if they wanted). The larger displays in town centers and such were a different problem, those couldn’t be changed as easily, but at least as smaller ones switched over people could start getting real news again. For the moment V just put it on a loop, playing the message about how the leader was dead and to stand by for news.

The next biggest problem was the factories that made the drones that attacked planets, but there were surprises in store for our heroes when he asked about that too.

Chapter 31

You've conveniently learned the Kaio Ken and Spirit Bomb offscreen.

When: Near sundown on the planet after a long day

Where: Back at the base

The group had undone the camouflage job on the floor they were using and Th'un were coming and going now as reports went out that (.) had been unmasked as an alien, other aliens had come, and were trying to help them put their civilization back on track. They had to use that as their base because of the gravity system there, but no one minded. They enabled the network ports on the floor and had brought in computers so they weren't out of touch, so it was becoming the true heart of the "rebellion" if it could be called that. According to reports a lot of people thought like V did and were, at worst, willing to let aliens live if they didn't bother them. Naturally some didn't believe the whole thing and were beginning to organize but strangely, didn't really have the means to do more than stand around and shout things at passerby.

"(.) didn't want any uprisings, so naturally anything more deadly than a squirt gun was banned," a Th'un named I told him. "We didn't really manufacture weapons on this world, those that we did make went to his personal guard and anyone going off world. And that's going to be a heck of a thing to straighten out as well. Getting all them back here and disarmed without their suit AIs just blowing them up."

"Manufacturing, yes," Lysanias said. "That's the next point I want to raise. Let's stop making drones to attack alien civilizations, shall we? I'll need to deal with the ones en route but if we can just stop making more for the moment, that would be great!"

All the Th'un looked at each other.

"What, no one knows where the drones are made? It must be huge factories, someone's gotta know!"

"I'll put the word out," one of the operators said. They were using all sorts of social networks to communicate, so they flooded message boards with requests for anyone who worked at a place that made drones. The answer they got back was "make what?"

"I've got something," Meta told them. It had materialized a connector out of nowhere and the hubPad was currently plugged into the network in order to interrogate any AIs floating around. They were rudimentary, it seemed only soldiers got advanced ones, and those were installed more to keep the soldier in line and help fire the weapons in the suit than to work with them, like Epic and Meta did. But they were tasked with looking for things the avatar wouldn't have wanted them to know, and they came back with something. "There are various sites that have a huge power draw, and receive shipments of raw material by the truckload, but from camera footage I've been watching no one actually works there. They are far from populated areas so while there are few cameras nearby there are some on the way, and no living people head in those direction. Based on trajectories captured by cameras in populated areas of ships leaving atmosphere there is a 73% chance those facilities are responsible."

"We should try to destroy them right away," B told him. "If (.) put some protocol in place upon his death, the next ones that are created may turn on us. They could be in production at this very moment, awaiting a signal that will never come, and so start tearing this planet apart out of spite."

"That would be terrible," Tessa told them, gushing with sarcasm. "Imagine, drones coming out of the sky, cities burning, and there wouldn't be a thing you could do about it because you don't have the weapons to fight them off. Gosh, I wonder if there was a way I could imagine what that would feel like?"

"Now now," chided Behemoth. "We can't wish a similar fate onto these people no matter how much they deserve it. Imagine them scrambling around helpless as drones smash their cities to pieces. Th'un running everywhere, finally knowing how other races felt. Weeping in the streets over their dead."

"Oh, I am!"

"Just get me as close as you can," Lysanias told Meta. "I'll go take care of them myself."

"You can't go alone," Amelia insisted. "Those places will be heavily guarded!"
"But not by people, or should I say living beings. Don't worry, I have a plan, I'll be fine. They'll never see me coming."
"And he's not going alone, I'll be with him," Rosalina told her.
"If we get into a fight it's gone terribly wrong, believe me. But I'll call if I need backup."
"Okay..."

The pair went through to the first site and Rosalina turned to him. "What is the plan, by the way?"

"This." He pulled the soul of the bomb out, which was still just swirling energy at this point.

"It's the color of the bomb one but can you really use it again?"

"I think so. It just used up a lot of energy exploding that one time. I think..." He sent energy into it, and it seemed to brighten. "Yes, if I put energy into it recovery will be much faster. Let's see if we can find some ley lines I can hook into and charge it up."

They didn't have too long to search and when the soul was back in a bomb shape both took to the air. Climbing fairly high so any defenses would overlook them both looked down over the large building beneath them. "I'm going to check it out," Lysanias said. "Have my body hover here while I do."

"Acknowledged," Meta told him. He projected his senses downward, leaving his body hanging there, and went straight down. They hadn't covered the whole place in whatever kept him out of smaller spaces and it was true, he didn't see anyone alive in the whole place. Just robotic arms and drones piecing together other, larger, drones.

Unbelievable. Once set up it would just run. Drones are created and sent to other planets. The inhabitants are killed, and their resources brought back here. All the living people that were here are fired, and drones take their place. These automated systems make more killer drones. That are sent to more planets. To kill more inhabitants. It's the circle of life. Huh, wasn't there something similar back home, with those robots we have wandering around? Factories just keep making them because no one told them to stop? I'm pretty sure that's how it went. Looking up he zipped back to his body and got the bomb out. "I'm dropping you, no exploding until you hit the ground," he told it. He let it go.

"Are we safe here?" Rosalina asked a little nervously. "How powerful is that bomb anyway?"

"We should be fine." He brought out the soul of Justice and created a large sheet of squares. "You know, I'm going to miss these souls," he admitted. "This one especially. I mean the dog is super cute and turned out to be way more useful than I would have first thought, but this energy shield one—"

There was a tremendous flash and explosion beneath them, and he felt he had the soul back. If there was an impact on the shield he didn't feel it, and he nodded. "Great, that's one down. Let's hit the others before they can mobilize or work out what happened."

He repeated this, gathering energy, repairing the soul, and blowing up factories until Meta told him that was probably all of them.

"Great, I'm exhausted," he admitted. "Repairing those souls may take energy from the planet itself, but it still takes effort and I killed an avatar today. I know the people at the Hub are probably celebrating that another reality is safe but I'm still out here working my tush off!"

"Speaking of your tush, with the crisis over you think we could have our second date soon?" Rosalina asked.

Not sure what my butt has to do with it, but "Absolutely. You want to do it tonight?"

She shook her head. "Not in the soulscape."

"No?"

"No. Look, last time was amazing, with the tower, and the racing, and the moon. But I want to know if we can get along just quietly together. Like just dinner and a nature walk."

"Whatever you want to do. It's your turn to pick anyway, so that suits me just fine. There is still matter of saving the Earth though. We can't get back there soon enough on the Andromeda, I'm going to have to go back through the World of Dreams and take care of the

drones myself. I don't want our victory here to become defeat because of something that happened after the avatar was killed. But before we leave this reality, I promise. We deserve a break."

"Can you take care of an unknown quantity of drones with an unknown amount of weapons by yourself?"

"I've gotten pretty good in the Dream. I feel I still have further to go, of course, but I made a whole starship. Piecemeal, I admit. Destroying matter is almost as easy as creating it. I only need to take out the engines, they can float out in space all they want."

"I guess. Let's get back then."

"Shall we?" he offered his hand and they *shifted*.

News of course got out about the explosions but for a while no one could figure out *what* exactly had exploded. It turned out, the factories had been created so long ago no one even remembered they were there. But as they didn't make any product Th'un actually bought, no one would miss them. AI had been handling shipments of resources to them, driving the (rented) trucks out there, unloading the resources, and taking the trucks back. It gradually dawned on even the most ardent "We Love Our Great Leader" supporters that *maybe this really reflected badly on them as a people*. They had been trained to think of aliens mostly in the abstract, a vague "other" that was some kind of threat to them but what kind, everyone had a different opinion on. Also most thought aliens were out there someplace, and might need to be taught a lesson from time to time, but automated factories pumping out hundreds of drones with the soul purpose of wiping them out of all life? That was a bit much. It was V who brought up a good point though.

"How do you know you got them all?" she asked.

"I asked in the morning. 'Are there any drone factories left on the surface of the- oh.'"

"You see my point? There's moons, and there's other planets in this system, and those planets have moons. And what about the next system over? It has planets, and those planets have moons. If I was this avatar you talk about I wouldn't have put all my self sealing stem bolts in the same bucket. I would have automated factories everywhere there's a level patch of ground and enough sunlight to power them. With my original factories gone I would spin them up, and start pumping out more donees. Drones everywhere."

"And so our task is laid out for us," B announced. "We must defend the universe from a threat we ourselves, however unknowingly, unleashed upon it. We must build ships to defend worlds from drones that may still be out there, or may yet be built. We must scour our system and others until no trace of this avatar's plans remain. We owe it to the dead to see this mission through."

"That will take generations."

"It took generations to cause, the cure can be no easier. Only then will our collective souls be free. Only then will the galactic scales be balanced. Lysanias, you have my word. I will work to make my people understand this need, and your Earth will be the first planet we protect. We will share our knowledge and our technology that they may also learn to defend themselves. The first step on our long journey."

"Let's talk technology!" Amelia said, lighting up. She was rubbing her hands together.

The first order of business in protecting the Earth, of course, was to figure out exactly when the ships would enter the Sol system, so Lysanias could get there in time. He had another day, based on what B said was the maximum speed of their engines, and while the exact configurations of the ships were classified (or never written down anywhere because they were the avatar's designs) the technology was in general use the world over and he got some other hints in how to easily destroy them. Meanwhile the group worked to expand and take inventory of what technology these people actually had, knew how to make, could make quickly, and what could help most immediately. The avatar had given them a lot of technological advancement but had kept many of the secrets of material or physical construction to itself, so while nothing stopped working immediately it was going to be tough to repair when it did. It wasn't like they were starting in the wilderness or anything, they had a better, faster, easier to navigate "internet" as long as you could plug in somewhere. They had

factories run by both people and algorithms, that could churn out anything from spacecraft to new wireless routers, given a design spec. The biggest issue facing them was the people that had been duped for so long- It was almost impossible to tell truth from lies after so long of being under a dictator's complete control. But Epic and Meta could both dump vast quantities of information about various forms of government onto their "internet" to get the Th'un talking about what style suited them, allowing them to take control of their destiny back in the way they wanted. B's daily broadcasts counseled patience.

"Let's go see what's out there," he suggested. "Let's go see what aliens are still alive, and what we can do to help them, and in return ask for their help too. We don't have to throw away our civilization because some things may not be true. We can find the truth for ourselves. Until that time, let's not talk major change until we've all had time to process all this, and learn what it means for us as a people. Right now we need to get out there, not get bogged down in bureaucratic process. These humans at the very least need our help *now* not a year from now when we finally figure out what kind of government we want to replace the obviously awful 'Great Leader' concept."

"Did these people just create a real life star trek?" Amelia whispered. "Because if we did... best... day... ever!"

The day passed quickly, with offers to help and death threats coming in to the control center seemingly in equal measure. Historical experts were brought in, to see what sort of arrangements had been used in the past, and scientists were brought in to figure out how to save the Earth. It turned out that Th'un ships traveled much like he had, opening a doorway into a space that allowed them to bypass physical law, traveling through it, and then opening another doorway once they had gone far enough. He was given a detector for this second opening, which he put into his shuttlecraft before shoving it back into the World of Dreams when he had a few hours left until it was scheduled to open. He then stepped through himself, willed himself back to the reflection of the Earth (because really, what does distance mean in a dream?) and flew it back out again.

"What method do you intend to use?" Meta asked him.

"At first I thought, maybe something sophisticated, like hitting them with a really fast moving rock. I could figure out where they came out, go back in time, make a rock, accelerate it with gravitons for like a week, and by the time the gateway opened the rock would just smash them. Timed perfectly the gateway would open, and the rock would be there to meet them. Too quickly to dodge it, they would just be smashed to pieces right off."

"You do know how to make that technology now," it admitted. "You wouldn't have to maintain it, and I could calculate the appropriate trajectory. A large enough mass, moving quickly enough, would generate sufficient force to destroy even large ships."

"True. Then there's sneaking onboard, planting a bunch of explosives, or the Th'un offered me a really big bomb I could just put on the ship that generates the gateway. It'll be in the middle, and it's going to blow itself up anyway, this would just be a larger explosion."

"I wondered why you turned that down."

"But no. I want to do this directly. These drones, controlled by a being not even alive anymore, I want to see destroyed by my own power. So, I'm going to take a page from Perit. She had the bright idea of gathering and compressing light while the rest of us fought shadows in the World of Dreams. I'm going to do the same thing, just with something a bit more damaging. Gather energy and compress it over and over. I saw how creating some compressed air worked to destroy that hanger when I didn't even mean to do it. Now I mean to do it. Then when they come out I'll just move the ship, teleport the ball of energy over to them, and release it."

"Just so long as we're not anywhere close, it should be fine. Very well."

"I'll practice a bit, then start charging for the main event."

"Would you like some music to work by?"

"Music? I hardly ever get to listen to music, and I have songs from across the multiverse to enjoy. Absolutely!"

And so, as he started doing a Dragon Ball Z impression without even knowing it, a song started to play in the cockpit.

"I got chills, they're multiplying. And I'm losing control.
"For the power, you're supplying. It's electrifying!"

Nice.

"The alien device is picking up the exit gateway," Meta told him. His first Dream session had lasted only a little more than an hour, but he easily stepped back into the ship and started practicing again. Little did he know this session would last 4 hours, but he would only need two of them. After an hour of compressing explosive energy into a ball the size of his head he had to concentrate on simply keeping it compressed, but still bobbed along to some sick beats provided by Meta.

"Distance and direction?" he asked, the music cutting off.

"Approximately 20 million kilometers, rotating the ship to program intercept course."

"Their ships are still faster though, right?"

"They have a higher acceleration, top speed is determined by time accelerated, but in the spirit of your question, yes. Why do you ask?"

"Why go through the trouble? We know where they want to go. Earth. They'll go in a straight line from where they are now to the planet. Just get in their way. I know, I have unlimited fuel but may as well not chase them all over."

"Very well. Recalculating. I still recommend putting enough distance between the Earth and the explosion no satellites are damaged."

"Agreed." The ship started moving.

Not long after that the ships came into view, at least insofar as you could see a black ship in the blackness of space. They were huge. Meta outlined them as best they could by knowing where the stars should be behind them, and so got a sense of how big they were.

"Planet busters," Lysanias grouched, "no doubt."

"The avatar had apparently decided to simply destroy the planet rather than risk further setback there," Meta agreed. "Probably they hoped to destroy you along with the planet. These must be the biggest ships they had."

"If they had bigger, I wouldn't want to see them."

The ships were little more than boxes full of gravitons. Really, really big boxes. B had given him information on the types of ships he had heard rumors about, and what their technology could really do.

"If I wanted to," he had said, "destroy a planet, that is, gravitons will do it. If you made a really big container for them, and just sent a bunch of them, they could encircle a planet and just pull it in different directions at once. Tear it to pieces."

"And as they're just drones, they don't mind sitting there, their fuel expended, until someone comes to pick up the pieces of the now shattered planet. It's a one way trip and they don't care."

"Correct."

"That's some scary technology you've got there, B."

"Let us hope it is now used correctly. Used for mining or defense only, the technology is a worthy one."

"How far out are they?" he asked.

"This image is thirty eight seconds old. They have covered nearly half the distance needed to reach us, and I estimate our separation at 11,392,113,404 meters."

"That's... I can't even..."

"11,392,113 kilometers?"

"Somehow, still not helpful. I don't want to put it behind them, but putting it in front of them via gateway, if I can even reach that far, it'll be behind them if I take this image as the present. This was forty seconds ago! I didn't take that into account when I came up with this

plan.” He looked down at the energy he was holding. *My beautiful energy! How can I give you to them?*

“Waiting until they are in real time range increases the risk setting off the explosive damages us. You did go, to use the vernacular, a bit overboard.”

“I had to! I’m only going to get one shot!”

“I think you just really wanted to blow them up, and had the time.”

“I stand by what I said.”

“I suppose you could throw it at them.”

“Throw it? How?”

“Simply open a portal only permeable by energy to the front of the ship and accelerate the energy packet forward. I doubt these ships have advanced sensors, the only thing they need to find is the planet. They are hardly likely to dodge it.”

“Space is pretty big though, even a fraction of a centimeter off at these distances and it’ll miss by a million kilometers!”

“I’m sorry, it sounded just then like you doubted my ability to provide you an optimal firing solution. That wasn’t what you meant was it?”

Can you hurt the feelings of an artificial being? Still... “I’m worried about my own human failing than anything you would be responsible for. Can I be that accurate?”

“With my assistance, of course.”

“Very well. There’s no problem then, I have complete confidence in you. There’s one problem though- What’s permeable mean?”

“That only one type of thing can pass through it. In this case we don’t want the air in the capsule to leak out, so make it permeable by energy only.”

“I suppose if I can conceive it...” He stood up straight, the arm with the ball of energy at the end out before him. Opening a gateway to the outside he started imagining it flying off as fast as it could once he got the go ahead signal.

“Hold steady while I make micro-adjustments to the ship’s heading.” He didn’t feel anything but Meta activated the gravity drive with more precision than any living mind could, lining up the ship. Meanwhile Lysanias tried to pack more “speed” behind the ball. The other end of the gateway, stuck to the front of the ship, moved as Meta calculated exactly where it needed to go.

It’s difficult splitting my attention three ways, hurry up!

“Release!” Meta announced, and he relaxed his control keeping the sphere there. It sped off into the darkness, and he closed the gateway.

“I guess we’ll know in a few minutes if it worked.”

“I will track the progress of the sphere as I am able.”

Moments later Lysanias announced “Something happened. I can’t maintain the sphere anymore, it must have impacted?”

“We will know shortly.”

They didn’t have to worry, as a bright light reached them, all that was left of the high energy explosion that (hopefully) took out the planet busters. Meta searched along their likely path, and they waited another hour near the Earth to make sure nothing showed up, and it didn’t. It seemed the threat was, for the moment at least, over.

“If the Th’un homeworld can send ships to this region immediately they should be protected,” Meta told him. “After all, even automated systems would have to spin up new drones to perform another attack. If there were closer facilities, they would have been used initially.”

“I agree. I’m docking the ship in the World of Dreams back at the base, I’ll pick it up there when we get back to Earth or I need it again on the way. I think it’s finally over.”

“You did well. You know you have the thanks of the entire Hub for your efforts.”

“I know. Let’s go back and tell everyone the good news.”

Chapter 32

Press F to pay respects

When: Several days later

Where: Back on Earth

The Th'un had installed one of their engines into the Andromeda and escorted it back to Earth using the same system the drones used, a central "gateway" ship and several support craft. This would allow the ship to make the journey across the Sol system on its own when Lysanias was gone, greatly increasing their knowledge of the outer planets as well as, Amelia hoped, jump starting humanity's own space program.

"There's no way of knowing how many species were wiped out by the avatar," she had told the group. "It's up to us, the survivors, to start spreading out so we're not vulnerable to extinction ourselves. We must nurture life in all forms, so once again the galaxy's life flourishes. But to do that we need our society to change as well, which isn't going to be easy."

"I wish I could stay and help," Lysanias told her.

"You have given us this chance, now you have to move forward and give that same gift to another reality. Kick the avatar in the teeth once for me, okay?"

"Promise."

Before leaving Lysanias and Rosalina toured the world a bit, going on a second and third date, the second actually a bit awkward, but the third one, a trip to an amusement park, going much better. He collected a bunch of books from used book shops, as he hadn't forgotten his friends back home, and while he mostly focused on science topics his world no doubt once knew and lost in the upheaval of the chaos moon's coming, he picked up some "fiction" too. (As he know knew many of these stories could be real... somewhere.) At night he practiced more Dream skills, and worked on both asking the universe questions with the cards and making himself better at things.

He hadn't forgotten his promise to the girl made of fire, and while Amelia said curing someone like that might be a bit trickier, she would give it a try. She got a nicer room ready with lots of metal furniture and Lysanias went in search of her, surprised to find she hadn't actually been moved very far. The people "studying" her put her into a freezer like meat locker down the hall from where she had been, so it was a simple matter to gateway into the place and track her down. She agreed to come, with a little help from Monica showing she had been cured, and agreeing to help manage her heat until her body too could be recovered. (As obviously she would start melting whatever she was near before too long, that's why she had been put into the cell with Monica in the first place) Lysanias then went on a mini-rampage, rescuing anyone else that was there and leaving them with no one to study. Those with physical bodies like the rock elemental she could cure easily, so, she did.

Before he left he released the souls, as all of the victims of "magnetic brain manipulation" were found and the damage to them undone. He made sure the moon base people had plenty of supplies, space to expand, and even put some domes on Mars that were full of air and water, in case someone wanted to head there and start building stuff. They assured him they were set, in a pinch the Andromeda could ferry supplies but with friendly aliens hanging around, ("says who" the eternal nay-sayers could be heard remarking) the newly formed Earth's Defense Force was busy understanding the technology brought by the Th'un and making strides past "rockets." They would soon have plenty of ships going back and forth across the solar system and beyond. He also worked up a report on Amelia, as a possible candidate for Hub access, and said he hadn't observed anything that might disqualify her. He was certainly brave, kind, and heroic enough that he would recommend she be tested.

"I guess this is it," Lysanias told them that morning, several weeks later. All his friends were there, in the main meeting room, to see him off. Rosalina was there, they were packed up and ready, though neither liked saying goodbye. "No attacks by drones and the Andromeda is working great without me there to Dream up any fuel or propulsion for it. Think it's about time for me to move on."

"We'll miss you," Amelia told him, and everyone there agreed. She hardly ever used her chair now, and was standing there with Luke. The others were scattered about the room, sitting or leaning around the conference table.

"I'll miss you all too. You've given me a lot, and I will miss and remember you in my travels."

"You can move through time and space right? Come back when you're getting married, we'll have a double wedding for the ages."

"I'd like that," Rosalina told her with a smile. "But that's a long way off."

"Time and space, like I said. You're welcome back any time."

"Thank you," Lysanias told her honestly. "Leaving is always the hardest part. Be well, all of you. Take your planet to the next level, and hey, maybe one day I'll see some of you walking around the Hub. Meta, activate gateway please."

"Gateway active."

"Goodbye everyone."

"Goodbye!" they all waved, and he stepped through the door.

"So can you finally tell me about this surprise you hinted at after I made Rommie?" he asked, standing in the transporter room.

"Silverstreak would like to explain," they replied. "They are currently meeting with someone, but if you don't mind waiting a moment there is a 100% chance they will be free."

"No problem. Where should I go?"

"Straight ahead."

The door opened to a hallway containing several doors, and he stepped through and went down it. Most of the doors were open, showing various conference rooms, but one was closed. He stepped up to it, then looked back down the hall. "I guess I'll just sit and wait in one of the empty rooms, if that's all right?"

"Perfectly acceptable," Meta told him.

"Very well, I'll just- ya!" He jumped back as a woman popped out of the door without even opening it, making them both crash together and get dumped on the floor. *Wow, I thought only I did that!*

"Why don't you watch out?" Grumbled the lady, pushing herself up "No, no, sorry. Aarg. No. Sorry. That's not what I meant to say. I meant to say, are you all right?"

The door opened and Silverstreak was standing there, and looked down at the tangle. "Perhaps fate has played a hand here," he announced cryptically. "But the only one I can offer at the moment is my own." He held a hand out.

"Oh, now he offers his help," said the woman, but she took at, as did Lysanias. Both were pulled to their feet. Lysanias looked her over. She seemed fairly young, with long, spiky blue hair, and was wearing a strange one piece outfit in red and black with a diamond pattern.

"Nothing broken, I hope?" Silverstreak asked. "And I explained my reasoning Ryoko."

"I'm fine, thanks. What was that all about?"

"This is the cutest thing!" Rosalina exclaimed from behind them.

"Wha?" everyone said. He turned to see her holding a petting a brown animal with long ears, that was purring and mewling as she scratched under its chin.

That cat has the longest ears I've ever seen!

Ryoko snorted. "Looks like you made a friend. Guess he jumped clear when I, uh, crashed into you. Sorry about that, I really am."

"No harm done."

"Come on Ryo-Ohki, we're leaving." She held out her arms and the creature gave a sad meow and jumped back to her.

"Just one moment, I think some introductions may be in order here. Come back and sit down. Lysanias, come on in." He held the door open and Lysanias and Rosalina went past him. "Rosalina, nice to see you again."

"Greeting, sir." She curtsied.

"Oh, very nice, but completely unneeded of course. You coming?"

"Fine." Ryoko vanished and at the same instant, appeared sitting in the chair. "But you were fairly clear so I don't know what I'm still doing here."

I didn't feel that, how did she... actually, I'm feeling a lot of odd things about this lady.
Who are you?

"That will become apparent in one moment. Lysanias, Rosalina, I would like you to meet Ryoko and her pet slash ship Ryo-Ohki. Ryoko, two fairly new agents of mine, Lysanias and Rosalina."

"Hello."

"Let's get a few things out of the way first. Lysanias, I see you have an item created by Ragnarok, do you mind if I have a look?"

"Not at all."

He was already holding it. "Great, thanks. Ah yes, have you done any experimenting with it? I trust not, as you were still carrying it in subspace."

"Actually, about that, can you lock it off somehow? The avatar stole my wards and used them against me. I'd like to keep that from happening again."

"Sorry, that's not something I can do. Locking it would lock you out of it too. I mean I suppose you could have a lock and key system, but unlocking it would take some time, and you do pull things from it like you shield right?"

"I do. I'll have to think of something else then. That's fine. Do you know what that does?"

"I can tell you in just a second... yes, I suspected as much. You'll want Rosalina to wear this, I think." He handed it over to her.

"Me?" she gasped, surprised.

"To be fair, Lysanias already has a headband... Wearing two would look very silly."

"True. And it augments my magic basically making gateways work for me." *Though I suppose it's something I could practice more.* "They don't form nearly so well without it, so it would have to be pretty special to make me take this one off."

"As for what it does, here, try it on." He wiggled it at her and she took it, slipping it on her head.

"That's odd," she announced. "I'm aware of things I never was before."

"I'm not surprised. Here, try setting this chunk of wood on fire." He held up a fist sized chunk of wood from nowhere, and she scowled at it.

"I'm not exactly sure how to- wait-" She looked sideways at it a little and it burst into flames.

"You see!"

"She can set things on fire now?" Lysanias asked. "She could do that with magic..."

"Not exactly," he told them, the wood vanishing. "She now has all the powers Darkvoid did when he was killed by the blade. Essentially it means she can use any ESPer skill, though sadly she will never be able to practice them."

"Because she's linked to me, and I'm so random?" he asked.

"That's a big part of it. It's how your universe works, and you carry your laws with you. Darkvoid and the universe he inhabited at the moment had different rules, and they are not exactly compatible. This will let you access those powers, but does not make you, or whoever wears it, an ESPer. So it's a trade off, like many things."

"This is all fascinating," drawled Ryoko, "but how does it help me find Tenchi?"

"I'm getting to that. If you do want to keep it on, Rosalina, just know that it's best to use it as a supplement to your other abilities. Setting someone's hair on fire or stopping time for a split second can be the difference between a battle lost and won. Don't try freezing a whole lake or anything and you'll be fine."

"Can I wear it though?" she asked, slipping it off. "It will just clatter to the ground when I go back into wand form if I forget it."

"With your permission I can make it a part of you, like your crown or your wand. Then you will always appear with it."

"Oh!" She thought for a second. "I don't see why not. Unless you really want it, Lysanias?"

"Nah, I can learn anything that item would give me, I expect. And might even interfere with what I've already learned on my own. You keep it."

"Then please do what you suggested," she told Silverstreak, putting it on again.

“Done.” He put a finger on it and then nodded. “Now, to Ryoko here. Would you like to explain?”

“Sure. A friend of mine, Techni, has gone missing. He’s an agent of this place because he’s so powerful, but I turned it down. Too much responsibility for me. So I came to try and get some help. But this guy here said ‘no agent at present is powerful enough to accompany you to your reality,’ and tried to shoo me out. That’s when I crashed into you in the hall. I am sorry about that, I should have opened the door. I was just so mad, I reverted back to my old self I guess.”

“I didn’t ‘shoo you out’ I said you were welcome to wait or I would send someone along.”

“Send someone!” she scoffed. “As if some promise of future help was ever fulfilled by anyone, anywhere!”

“We tend to keep our word around though,” Lysanias told her. “And I can’t see *him* lying about anything. No use arguing about it, I’m back and I’m perfectly willing to help if I can.”

She gaped at him. “Just like that? You don’t even know me!”

“Sure, why not? You don’t get to be an agent, I think, unless you’re the type of person that would go out of their way to help people.”

“Oh really?” she glared at Silverstreak.

“We would have worked on it,” he told her.

“I see. So he’s powerful enough, is he?”

Silverstreak considered him. “Borderline, but with the new skill he seems to have picked up, and help from Rommie and Rosalina, it might be enough. The problem is a lot of people with raw power, like you Ryoko, are terrible at solving mysteries such as the disappearance of Tenchi. But those with great sensory skills, like Lysanias here, lack in raw power. But he can work around that at least part of the time. Finding someone with the *perfect* mix would be nearly impossible, even for me. But I think he could manage there. You would, of course, be responsible for his safety so if he came to harm, well...” He shifted his gaze. “There would be consequences.”

“What consequences? No, don’t answer that. You think I wouldn’t stick by his side the whole time?”

“You have been known to be a bit lazy sometimes, Ryoko.”

“I’ve looked non-stop for Tenchi for three days. I had to practically beg Washu to open a door to this place, she said she didn’t want to antagonize you in any way. She only did it after I agreed to take all the blame should you be angry!”

He chuckled. “Am I so scary? You were on a mission of mercy, though my systems would have caught up with him sooner or later had he not checked in.”

“Even so. You’re like a system admin, you could snap our reality in half and there would be nothing our goddesses could do about it!”

“That’s Darkvoid’s bailiwick, not mine, but I take your meaning. Humans are giants to both ants and mice, despite how much better off the mouse is.”

That’s a good point. Inari jokes around and hits me with a watering can, but she could sneeze my reality away if she really wanted to. These beings go out of their way to seem friendly, and approachable, and ‘human’ but they’re not. Not even a little. No matter how much I practice and improve myself, I’ll still be at best a mouse around them. If not the ant, as there are still demons and angels in my reality I would never want to mess with. If the Allfather is the mouse, what does that make me? A flea on the mouse’s back? I should never forget that, maybe Rosalina was right to show the deference she did. She really is smarter than I am, isn’t she?

“I would stick by his side until Tenchi was safe, believe me. If you want me to say I’ll give my life before his, there, I said it. If he can find Tenchi and bring him home safe, well, my life isn’t worth that much. He’ll be safe with me.”

“Well said, Ryoko, I really do wish you had taken the test to become an agent. If he’s willing, I can send you both back and he can get started. But with a slight detour along the way.”

“Meta said you had a surprise for me, sir, but if you wanted to wait until I got back...”

He leaned back, radiating confusion. "What's with the 'sir' all of a sudden? Anyway, your Rommie unit sacrificed herself right?"

"Needlessly, as it turned out, but yes. I haven't made another but I planned to."

"How about we get you an original?"

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Okay, I'll back up. The reality with Andromeda in it has been saved, by Susan as you know. But that was the main branch, the one with the highest probability of making it all the way to the end. There are sub-branches where different things happened, because Darkvoid and Susan weren't there, they were busy fighting in the main branch. So reality took its normal course there. One of those realities split off during an attack on the Andromeda by the agents of Darkvoid in that place, called Magog. In one reality, oh the Magog were always around, Darkvoid just took them over and organized them better. They're that realities' big threat no matter what. Where was I? Right, in one reality, after an attack on the ship things were looking bad for the Andromeda crew. Their Rommie had been damaged and that's where the reality split. One wasn't damaged badly enough to stop her, and she routed around it, rallied the crew, and they survived. One *was* too badly damaged, did not rally the crew, and they died. She's still there, floating through space on a dead ship. That reality is now basically lost, a dark, dead end where the original evil there triumphed. What I propose is you make use of this damaged Rommie. Go get her, and repair her. Her reality is lost, but that doesn't mean she can't live on. What do you say?"

"I think that would be a great idea!"

"Excellent. Ryoko here can help you get aboard the ship, and repair her systems. Then you can all head to her reality and begin the search for Tenchi. Sound good to you, Ryoko?"

"Meow!"

"You don't get a say," Ryoko told Ryo-ohki, who was sitting on her shoulder. "But I guess what he said goes for me too. It's only fair."

"Splendid. I've gotten your report on Amelia, if there's anything you need to do here you can just head to a transit room afterwards. I'll make sure it's extra big, you'll have to go in Ryo-ohki and board the Andromeda once it's safe."

"Can't survive in space, huh?" Ryoko asked.

"Not without all my armor on." *Amelia's was airtight, so mine should be as well. Never really tested it though, any space stuff I did was in the Dream.*

"That's all right. Is there anything you need to do?"

"Uh?" He thought a moment. "I suppose I could stow some stuff if I didn't want Darkvoid stealing it, but what's he going to do with a novel about a big footed fellow bringing a ring to a volcano? It's probably fine. Nah, I'm set, let's get going."

"I'll send you there directly in that case." Silverstreak got up and the rest followed him back down the hall. The door they passed through led to a massive chamber now, and Ryo-ohki jumped down off Ryoko and in seconds *transformed into a giant spaceship.*

"What?" Lysanias stammered, looking up at it. *And how did I get on the ground?*

"Yeah, it's a bit unsettling the first time. How Washu did it I have no idea. Come on." She looked over at Silverstreak. "Thanks."

"Of course."

Putting a hand on Rosalina and Lysanias she teleported them to the bridge, and the viewscreen came on.

"Meow!" cried Ryo-Ohki in greeting.

"Well someone's excited," Ryoko told them. "I guess he misses Tenchi just as much as I do. Ah, here we go." The view outside shimmered and changed into the blackness of space, and there floating before them was the wreck of the Andromeda.

"Oh no!" breathed Lysanias, rushing to the screen and looking it over. "That beautiful ship, what did they do to you?"

"It's pretty beat up all right," she admitted. Holes were torn in the hull everywhere, and one of the "runners" at the front was simply snapped off. It was tumbling, uncontrolled, through space, and he wasn't sure how he was seeing it in the blackness of space but there it was. "Interesting design, very stylish. From what I understand you're looking for some kind of artificial life form that's aboard?"

"The Andromeda had an AI that ran the ship, but it also had a body it could use to walk around in. I made a rather primitive one back in the last reality from what they knew of robotics, but like he said it was destroyed. There should be one there we can salvage and use. One that is far more complex and lifelike."

"So actually if I find it, I could just bring it back here, right? You don't need to go down to the ship?"

"I guess not, that would make things easier wouldn't it? But there may be spare parts and such to make the repair job easier. We should salvage what we can, right?"

"I mean we could maybe get an air envelope around it one way or another. For now wait here and I'll check out how badly the inside looks. Maybe we can pressurize an interior section. Be right back." She vanished and the viewscreen changed to be magnified, she was floating outside the ship. She gave a wave, created a ball of light above her hand, and headed inside through a hole in the hull.

"Let's go with her!" Rosalina suggested.

"Go with her?"

"Sure, follow her in with astral forms. We can get back easily enough, and I'd like to try it."

She wants to try out her new powers. I can see the appeal. "No harm in it I guess. Okay, just don't stay out too long. It can kill you."

"Got it."

The two projected their senses and "hand" in "hand" went over to the Andromeda. (They found out they could see each other just fine in this form) The inside was just as beat up as the outside, there had been a terrible battle here. Decks were ripped up, the walls were scored and dented, all the plants were long dead. It was spooky, the layout of the ship matched his exactly (it was made from the same plans after all) so he knew right where to go. But seeing the ship like this, he could only shake the idea of his head at the waste and loss.

They returned back before Ryoko did, looking around the bridge of the ship which didn't have many controls. *Of course, she probably just tells Ryo-Ohki what she wants to do and he does it.* But return she did, carrying an Andromeda with a huge hole in her midsection.

"Slammed through with some kind of pipe," she reported, as a table rose up out of the center of the bridge. "And then pinned to the wall. Must have been shoved pretty hard, to do that. What exactly were they fighting back when this happened? There's a lot of stuff over there if you want it, looks like whoever attacked it just left it alone. Weapon closets, what appear to be cabinets full of some kind of computerized paper so probably records of some kind. A whole machine shop, so we should be able to find some parts if we need them. Let's strip her down and see how bad the damage is."

His face hardened. *Nova bombs. Can't forget they carried nova bombs. If someone came across them and figured out how to use them? We better take or destroy them just in case.*

The damage, as you might expect, was pretty bad. They figured out how to open her panels, and got to work. With Meta able to scan her and following the schematics they found aboard the ship, they were sure they could repair her good as new. First though the group got to work stripping everything of value that wasn't tied down. Lysanias put the armor on and made a few clones, making Ryoko shrug and make a clone of her own. *So could she do that the whole time or did she copy my doing it?* Rosalina stayed to sort everything they brought, which included weapons, armor, a closet full of Rommie's clothes as far as they could tell, they were her size. The records, books, other personal effects they found in cabins, and any spare parts from the machine shop. It seemed Ryoko could teleport without limit, and was super strong so no matter how big a box he handed her, she took it, and Lysanias made a few gateways, so it didn't take too long to at least bring a pile of stuff from the ship and dump it to be sorted later.

Ryoko proved very expert in android repair, despite saying she had never seen technology like this, theirs was very different. (He believed it, if a tiny rabbit like creature could turn into this giant spaceship) But between them following the directions Meta gave them,

creating parts out of nowhere if they couldn't find exact matches, and alchemy to seamlessly repair damage they soon had her closed up and looking exactly like a human woman again. She was short, with short black hair flawless skin, and a small nose. *If I hadn't just seen her robotic insides I would have said she was just a naked dead woman on a table. Extraordinary, the technology that could create such a lifelike imitation.*

"Ryo-Ohki is charging her batteries," Ryoko told them. "It shouldn't be long now."

"Remind me to give her a better power supply at some point," Lysanias told them. "For now I just want to make sure she actually works, before I start introducing technology from other realities into her."

"Actually, the job is not quite finished," Meta informed them, "in any case."

"What's up? You said we were done a second ago! Why did we close her up then?"

"Your part is done. The problem is her memory and personality. Both have been damaged and you have a choice to make. Leave her as is, and hope with time her systems are sophisticated enough to compensate and put her to rights. Secondly I could wipe her memory and run her body directly as I did with the one you constructed. Alternately have me act as her original "over" AI compensating for the damage by "prompting" her so to speak wirelessly from the watch unit. Your final option would be to allow a copy of my personality algorithms to merge with hers, allowing 'us' complete autonomy. Her personality would then be a combination of my own and hers, as I would copy myself into her memory matrix to patch the missing code. We would effectively be running together, though as time went on we would merge closer into one being. I do not know the exact percentage of memory loss, but again as long as the access point was nearby I will be able to fill in any gaps."

"I don't like the idea of leaving her confused and amnesiac. Nor do I like the idea of murdering her after we just put her back together. Which, let's be honest, is what it would be. If any part of her can be saved, I think we should do it. If it's safe for you to integrate with her, let's do that. You may need to function away from me and that's the fastest way to do it, right?"

"Correct. There would be an increasing delay if I were to move away from her vicinity if one of the other options was chosen. With your permission then, please strap me to her wrist and I will begin the integration."

"Do it." He unhooked the watch and attached it, and they waited.

They sorted stuff and Lysanias went to sleep, it had been a busy day, but when he got up again Meta said she was ready to reactivate.

"Now I guess we see how well we did. Wake her up."

"She's still naked though!" protested Rosalina.

"She can put her clothes on far easier than we can," he told her. "She weighs a ton and had to be undressed by cutting her clothes off. I don't think she minds, honestly, she's an android. We've got crates of her stuff here, she can take her pick."

"Oh, very well."

Meta sent the signal and she started to "breathe" and move a little bit. Her eyes opened, and she glanced around. Then she tensed, threw her legs over her head so she vaulted backwards, and came out of the spin in a martial arts stance. "Who are you-" she started to demand, then straightened up and looked around. "Wait, I do know you. Lysanias? Ah, it appeared to work. I am running a self diagnostic. How long was I out for? What happened to the Magog? Oh no, Dylan!" She ran over to the viewscreen, putting her hands on it and looking out at the wreck. "That's... That's me? That's what they did to me?"

"I'm sorry, Rommie," Lysanias told her. "This reality is long lost. Just take a minute, we had to repair you and some of you is another AI called Meta. I wanted to preserve as much of you as I could, but you had been unpowered for some time. There was damage to your memory."

"Yes, something is... Different about me. I know you, but I shouldn't. I know what happened to me, that this reality is just a branch, and the other branch may have made it, but I'm still Rommie and I would weep for my crew if I could."

"I wish there was something I could do to help."

“There is.”

“Name it.”

“Take this ship and use it to destroy the Magog worldship. Perhaps the damage has been done but my original programming demands justice. Even if most life has been destroyed here, let us give any new life that may arise a chance.”

“Er...”

“A fight?” Ryoko squealed. “Now you’re talking my language.”