

::Note: This story takes place shortly after Yasha's demise, before the events of Spirit Sanctuary. Thanks to Sean Boyle for all the help!::

Ikkou looked at the phone for the tenth time since he had entered his room only a moment ago. He picked up the phone, and started punching in the number that had seared itself into his head, but half way through he hung up again and shook his head.

"Why am I still trying? She obviously doesn't care..." He shook his head, and sighed, "I don't know that, she could care for me a great deal... But with what we've been through can she see me as more than a friend. Please don't let her say it. I just can't handle her saying 'we should just be friends'."

Ikkou stood up, and walked across the room to the window. The sun was setting, and a beautiful sunset spread itself across the city sky, but it was just a bitter reminder of his original intentions for coming into his room in the first place. A bitter reminder of another beauty that had caught his attention and wouldn't let go.

"Just call, just call and ask her out to the movies... buy her desert... a walk in the park..." Ikkou sighed, "But if I ask will she say yes because she wants to, or simply because she is too nice and just doesn't want to hurt my feelings..."

He sighed again, pushing a hand through his hair, then frowned, as he suddenly got mad at himself.

"Is that it then? Are you giving up on Naoko without ever really trying?! Are you simply going to step to the side and watch the best thing in your life walk right by?"

Ikkou winced as his own thoughts cut into him, and without a second thought he punched in the phone number.

His heart was racing as the phone rang once.

"What will I say? Do I ask her out to the movies? Or... or..."

The phone rang again, and his mouth had gone completely dry.

"What am I thinking, I should just quit while I'm ahead... no, no why am I giving up now."

The phone rang a third time

"It doesn't matter, when she picks up the phone just talk, it's not that hard, just start talking and pray you don't make a fool of yourself... Oh how I hate using phones..."

The Phone rang a fourth time and there was a sudden click.

"Hello..."

"Hi!" Ikkou blurted, "Could I speak to..."

"You've reached the Yamino residence, we're not home right now, if you could..."

Ikkou's heart stopped dead and dropped into his stomach. Where he had been filled with nervousness and hope he was suddenly filled with bitterness and anger. He slammed the phone down and growled.

"The answering machine! You've GOT to be kidding me!" Ikkou snapped, "After I finally get the nerve up and..." Ikkou wound up to kick his bed, but his anger gave out suddenly, "Who am I kidding. She's better off without me."

A sudden, bright burst of light came from down out the window and a somewhat familiar sight caught his eyes. A large pillar of energy emanating from somewhere in the city, much like the kind that was created when Naoko transformed into Darkbolt. Except this beam was of the brightest light.

Ikkou watched for a moment, his mind suddenly racing off in a different direction. "If Darkbolt causes a pillar of darkness... then... could it be that the angel of light... has come back?" He started concentrating on transforming, and then caught himself. His transformation into the Demon of Destruction, while lending him incredible powers, including the power of flight and teleportation, also had a draw back. Everything within a ten foot radius would be destroyed.

Basically his whole room.

Cursing, he grabbed his jacket and ran out of the room, and his house making his way towards the inner portions of the city

* * * *

He shook his head; the transformation had come almost to late. The bus had crashed into him only a second later, but it hadn't hurt. Maybe it was the armor he was wearing. It confused him, no matter what,

if those creatures didn't seem to have their own physical force behind an attack the results didn't seem to harm him much. Or, for that matter, his armor.

Unfortunately a bus was still an incredibly heavy thing to have pushing down on one's self, and it was starting to make it hard to move and breath.

"Goren Nova..." He grumbled, mumbling the words to an old cartoon show he'd once seen, "Sword... of... light..."

His hand closed around nothing, then in his fist a sword of the purest silver appeared, and as with his armor it seemed to glow with an energy of it's own. He strained for a moment moving the sword up then swung it down, pushing energy down his arm and through the sword. The sword connected with the bus, and a flash of energy erupted as the bus was suddenly sliced in two and flung to each side.

"HAAAAAAA!" He screamed as the bus flew away. For a moment he just laid there catching his breath back, then pushed himself up, this was no time for him to be laying about. Trouble was afoot.

Despite the great irony of thinking that thought at the exact moment as he was suddenly kicked across the street and into a building, he somehow didn't find it to be all that humorous.

~ ~ ~ ~

Ikkou kept running down the street, impatient at the time it was taking to simply arrive. Again the thought of transforming popped into his head, but there were too many people around, and so he kept running. But his mind wasn't paying attention to where he was going, he was still thinking about Naoko, and the cause of the light.

What if it was the Tenma just setting another trap? There was no reason to believe for a moment that the angels had returned.

Ikkou slowed down at that thought, but before he could do anything a stone hand, as large as Ikkou himself, shot out of the ground in front of him, grabbed him, and started to crush the life out of him.

And suddenly he didn't have to worry.

* * * *

Stars.... why were there so many stars?

It's too bright for stars...

Is that the sun?

An armored hand came up in front of him blocking out the light (hey, that's my hand, isn't it?), and he saw a figure standing before him with his arm extended well over his head, the sun in the figure's hand.

"Wait..." he mumbled out loud, "that's not the sun..."

"What can I say?" The figure laughed in an unnaturally gruff voice, "You always were a sharp one, Knight." and with that the figure leveled his hand at the one he called Knight.

"Knight?" the downed man thought, his mind slowly catching up with him. He shook his head, to clear the stars, and swung his left arm around to block the attack. And as he cringed back, the ball of energy getting ever closer, the light was suddenly blocked out. But before he could figure out why he found himself flying through the air yet again.

~ ~ ~ ~

Ikkou screamed with all of the pent up anxiety and rage he felt bubbling down inside of him, and transformed. He could feel the bottled up energy inside of him explode outwards, and explode it did. The stone hand holding him exploded, shards flying everywhere, and Ikkou floated in midair where he was being crushed only seconds before. But where a helpless schoolboy had been only moments before, one of the most powerful creatures in all existence stood.

A creature so dark that across the universe in every language they referred to it as the most feared of the vilest creatures. Demon. But not just a Demon, but the Demon of Destruction.

One waiting to live up to its name.

Ikkou smiled with a cocky expression, what ever that was that had attacked him hadn't known what it had gotten itself into, but he was going to let it know, with a vengeance. But as absorbed as he was, he hadn't noticed that his transformation had done more than destroy the hand, it had bit deeply into not

only the sidewalk, but also a nearby lamppost, which had begun its decent at stunned, helpless crowd. A scream cut through the silence that had accompanied the transformation, and caught Ikkou's attention.

His head snapped around, and he reached out with a hand, grabbing onto the falling lamppost with a single hand, and pumping raw energy into it. There was no finesse, no style, not technique to it, just sheer power that was the Demon of Destruction's calling card. The lamppost vaporized before it fell another millimeter.

But Ikkou had taken his eyes off his opponent. He was smacked across the street as yet another hand blasted out of the ground. For his troubles he ended up plowing through the ashfaut before coming to a sudden stop against a building.

Slowly he reached up and touched his lip, his fingers coming away covered in blood. He smiled again, in a cold way, "Now... it's on."

* * * *

The Knight smashed up against the same building he had collided with only a few seconds before. Again he winced in pain, but this time the collision didn't knock him senseless, but knocked sense back into him.

He looked down to his arm, which was covered in a silver gauntlet, and a battered shield that hadn't been there a moment before. He looked to his other arm, the sword, still glowing with a light of its own, was held firmly in the other armored hand.

He knew who he was, he knew what he was, and he knew what he was fighting.

"RANCOR!" He screamed, standing suddenly.

The effect was worthy of a movie scene, the supposedly helpless man standing up to reveal a medieval knight in full plate mail, with sword and shield, crimson cape billowing out behind him.

Applause is what greeted him.

The Knight spun looking for Rancor, but all he could hear was his voice.

"Beautiful, you'd make Steven Spielberg cry with joy." Rancor called out, "But your posing won't help you any. I know where you are. There's no hiding from me!"

The Knight snarled, "I am not hiding! Come out and face me!"

The response was a swift, sudden kick in the back, launching him forward. The Knight tumbled forward for a moment, then awkwardly rolled to his feet, spinning to face his opponent.

Rancor was there waiting for him. A mirror opposite stood there, another knight, this one covered in head to toe in black armor which came out to sharp points on the shoulders, fists, knees, and boots, unlike the Knight's own armor. Rancor stood waiting, his own sword, a dark glowing sword, drawn, and a shield at the ready.

"Okay, Bunkie." Rancor snapped, "Let's dance."

They both charged, and with a great crash of metal on metal the fight began.

= = = =

It's started...

~I...

He's working towards his own doom.

~I know.

And you just let it go on? It'll destroy him!

~It has to be done, without him...

The demons have taken his place! We no longer need him to combat the Tenma, or the Sect of...

~I did NOT give you leave to speak.

...

~You are right, though. The demons are what we require to destroy the Tenma...

Then there is no need to continue with...

~We will continue with the boy.

But... Why?

~We don't need him to destroy our greatest opposition... but he could easily become one of our biggest threats instead of our greatest weapon... no we continue.

But you haven't said wh...

~You dare to question me?!

... No Excellency.

~Good... We are continuing. When we are finished even "if" he lives he won't be a threat to us.

But how will we get the demons to destroy the Tenma?

~That's the best part... we don't have to do anything. They'll hunt down the Tenma on their own, and when they've weakened each other to the breaking point, we sweep in and finish the job.

* * * *

He swung high, but his blade simply bounced off Rancor's well-placed shield. Rancor's counter thrust was similarly blocked. But the kick Rancor launched at the same time wasn't. The Knight crashed onto his back hard, the wind blasting out of him, and as he looked up he saw Rancor leaping at him trying to go for the finishing blow, but before either of them could react a brown blur cut between them and collided with Rancor.

The Knight forced himself to his feet and saw Rancor on his back, struggling with a large furry creature, which seemed intent on ripping his throat out.

"Serves you right!" The Knight laughed, "You bring a monster with you to help, and he turns on you. How ironic."

Rancor didn't see the humor in the situation.

"You imbecile!" Rancor snarled, "Does this look like Lassie to you!? It's a friggin' Lycanthrope!"

The Knight stopped laughing as the dire situation hit him. Rancor finally grabbed the lycanthrope by the neck and tossed him roughly to the side, scrambling to his feet, and rushing over to the Knight's side.

Side by side they waited, weapons raised, as the huge wolf creature got to its feet and started moving towards them.

* * * *

Ikkou roared, bursting up into the air, raining blasts of sheer destructive force down at the ground. The street had been damaged so badly it could hardly be referred to as a street anymore, but it hardly slowed Ikkou. After a few moments he stopped, floating above the ground as the dust slowly settled, waiting to see what his handy work had achieved.

He received another giant punch for his efforts.

With a bone jarring thud he crashed into the ground again, but this time he bounced back to his feet, ready to eradicate his opponent. But he wasn't prepared for what he saw. The ground that he had destroyed had started to shift, the move as the rock and asphalt itself was nothing more than water. It currently had two misshapen limbs, which could be classified as arms, and as he watched a large blob of asphalt shaped itself into the upper torso of a vaguely humanoid creature. Its eyes glowed a dull red, and an extremely large mouth opened up.

"We failed to hide the demons." It bellowed, "So we shall DESTROY them instead!"

Ikkou dusted himself off, and locked his gaze on the creature, "I don't know who you are, or what you think you're doing but you picked the wrong guy on the wrong day..."

The creature surged forward suddenly, but Ikkou wasn't surprised, he had been expecting it, but he was annoyed at being interrupted.

"Earthspark!" He shouted, watching with a smirk as energy shot from his feet, trailed across the ground, the burst out at the large rock creature. His smirk slowly disappeared when the blast hit, and only a few pebbles were shattered from the creature's rock like hide.

"Ooooooh greeeeaaaat." Ikkou muttered under his breath as the creature closed.

It was just one of those days.

* * * *

"Will the ironies never end? We came here to kill each other, and now our only hopes of survival are to fight side by side." the Knight shook his head slowly with a bitter laugh.

"You know, Bunkie, there's only two problems with that. You see, one... We could probably take it out one on one... and two..." Rancor suddenly dropped down low, kicking the Knight's legs out from under him, then as he fell Rancor slammed his shield into the Knight's back, launching him forward to

crash only a few meters from the snarling monster, "Well, all I need to do is distract it with you, I escape unharmed and you die!"

As the Knight climbed to his feet the lycanthrope charged, and behind him he could hear a slowly disappearing, glee filled voice.

" I win!"

* * * *

"Molten LANCE!" Ikkou screamed his palm held outwards toward the rock creature. A huge spike burst from the ground and smashed into the creature's chest... shattering upon contact.

The creature laughed, "That which is from the ground cannot harm me, for from the ground am I."

It heaved a massive arm, rocks bursting from it's fists shot for Ikkou's heart, only to ricochet off a hastily raised force field. The creature didn't even hesitate, only fired off another blast, then another, then another, content to simply bash the force field until it gave out.

Ikkou's rage was building. He reached down, pulling up all the raw destructive energy he could and pointed at the creature. If his focused, technical attack failed, then a show of sheer force was his only resort left, short of a Golden Crash.

He didn't want to use another one of those any time soon.

He was on shaky ground with the others as it was.

The blast flew forth, enveloping the incoming rock shards, then catching the creature full on in torso, it's head, and most of it's chest disappeared, leaving two arms hanging oddly in thin air. Then they crashed to the ground.

Ikkou watched the dust settle, then slowly landed on the ground, looking at the destruction he had caused in his battle. A small portion of him protested that he should have been more careful to avoid unneeded damage on the surroundings, but he ignored it. The Tenma's death was much more important than a few buildings and a road.

Still he couldn't shake the small feeling of guilt.

And as his feet touched the ground, it suddenly rushed up to swallow him whole.

* * * *

Lycanthropes are not immortal, as many people who faced them believed, but it was easy to see why some people might believe them to be. Like the stories for centuries have depicted, they are nearly invulnerable to any form of attack, but this isn't because they quite simply be hurt, but because they heal faster than most wounds can be inflicted. Silver, enchanted weaponry, and supernatural attacks all did damage that the were-creatures couldn't regenerate at an increased rate, but having one of those tools at your disposal was never enough. You had to inflict enough damage to kill three normal men, and most importantly, you had to be able to hit a seven foot tall target that moved faster than the human eye could follow.

In the Knight's experience defeating a lycanthrope wasn't impossible, just difficult. To succeed one needed to have the advantage of surprise, and a well-detailed plan of attack, not to mention a retreat route planned ahead of time.

He was beginning to worry.

A glance to either side showed no easily accessible avenue of escape, though, as soon as the thought cross his mind he knew it was hopeless. How could he hope to outrun a lycanthrope?

Escape was out of the question; he was cornered with his back up against a wall. And with nowhere to run, that left only one option. Fight.

He charged and caught the monstrous creature completely off guard, it had obviously been expecting him to run, but as he swung his sword across viciously he watched as his sword cut into thin air as the werewolf disappeared a half a second before it could connect. He allowed the momentum from his swing to turn himself all the way around, and brought up his shield in front of him, and grimaced as he heard the sound of sharp claws digging deeply into metal. He danced back for a moment, then swung his shield out wide and thrust ahead with his sword into nothing.

He paused for a moment, then he was struck from behind. He crashed to the ground hard, doing an awkward roll to get back up to his feet, and glanced around for his opponent. But the lycanthrope was nowhere to be seen.

"Firrirst blood."

The Knight spun around again, and saw the lycanthrope standing on top one of the portions of the destroyed bus. The large wolf-like creature held it's hand up high, his claws dipping a familiar crimson substance. He took his eyes off the creature and looked over to his side to where he could begin to feel a throbbing sensation. His armor, which had been hit with a bus, then smashed into two buildings without so much as a scratch, had a hole punched into it, and blood was slowly starting to ooze out from the hole. His heart rushed for a few seconds, then he slowly caught himself before he could completely panic. Despite the blood on the creature's claws, the wound was most likely just a flesh wound, and probably wasn't very deep.

And that's what he told himself to keep from panicking and dieing right then and there. But the lycanthrope had done it's damage. He was now doubting his chances for survival, and as he looked back up he realized that the lycanthrope had already disappeared again.

"Firrrrrst blood... Destroy the body of the possessed and free the soul."

The Knight spun around, and upon seeing nothing, spun again, desperately trying to get a bead on his opponent. He felt something crash into him from behind, and he was sent crashing forward again.

"Prrrrraise be to Gaia."

* * * *

Ikkou struggled to no avail. There was no give in the solid stone surrounding him, and moment by moment the creature was regenerating. Soon the arm was attached to a blob of rock, then a second arm grew from it, and finally a head.

"And now die you shall." It boomed, "The demons must be destroyed."

"I'm human!" Ikkou shouted in helpless rage, "You're not killing a demon, you're killing a human being!"

The rock creature paused momentarily, then it's head bobbed to the side, "The death of one innocent to save billions. Acceptable terms are these."

Ikkou started to pull up more energy for a last ditch attack, but as he started he noticed the shadows behind the rock creature move of their own will. Before his eyes shadow balled together, then from that ball a humanoid form grew until the shadows stopped stretching, revealing a skeletal face and hands protruding from a shadowy cloak.

He smiled as he watched it, and then looked directly into the eyes of the rock creature, "You offer no mercy then?"

The skeletal figure reached a hand out, and a scythe appeared in it.

"No mercy for the demons."

The skeleton lifted the scythe high.

Ikkou's smile turned into a grim snarl, "And none for the Tenma dogs!"

And on those words the scythe cut through the rock creature. For a moment nothing happened, the rock creature remained absolutely still. And then it fell apart without warning, turning into small pieces of the destroyed asphalt that it had formed from.

* * * *

Mariko watched in confusion as the armored man bounced around violently. For a moment he stood still, then he'd go tumbling forward or to the sides, clutching at a new wound.

She watched for another moment hoping to see what was causing the wounds, but it was coming more and more obvious by the second that if she didn't take action soon there wouldn't be anybody to save.

She frowned ever so slightly, looking over the edge of the building on which she stood. The damage done to the area was minimal compared to what Ikkou had done. There was two pieces of a bus forced up onto the sidewalk, a sign of impact on the wall of a building, and a burn mark on street.

She was just happy to see that most of the people had decided to flee before they could get hurt. There was still the random straggler, or person whom wanted to see the whole situation until the very end, but they were smart enough to stay away.

Mariko closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and readied herself. Her eyes snapped open again, and she threw herself off the building. She hit the ground hard, crouching to dissipate the momentum, then turning the rest into a foreword roll. When she was back on her feet she was already moving at a run. Her goal was in sight, and she was focused on it. A flash of moment to her side sent her into an evasive pattern.

Behind her she could hear the whiz of something sharp cutting through the air, only mere inches from her side.

The sound of a murderous dagger reaching out for her, to suck away her life, to drain her of her hope...

She pushed the surprising morbid thought from her mind, and brought her mind back to the present. Back to the battle. She turned suddenly, aiming herself at a portion of the destroyed bus, then jumped straight forward at it. As she closed she flipped herself around, bringing her feet to bear on the bus, then used it to springboard her straight back the way she came, fist outstretched.

"If I'm wrong," Mariko thought, unable to help but smile at the thought of how odd she must look, "I'm going to look very, very silly."

But even as she thought this she plowed into a very large, and previously invisible creature. It let out a loud yelp as her fist smashed in, cracking and breaking bones. It took most of the momentum from her attack as it went flying away, leaving her to land lightly on her feet, only a few yards away from the downed armor-clad man. She watched as the odd creature she attacked smashed into a wall with a sickening crack, and then slid down to the ground, unmoving.

She let out a sigh of relief. She enjoyed a good fight as much as the next girl, but fighting something you can't see was almost always an object lesson in uselessness.

"Besides," she mumbled to herself, "It's really aggravating."

She walked up to the man, who was laying face first on the ground; his cape was flared about him hiding most of the archaic armor he wore. He looked so oddly out of place, like an armored knight out of a fairy tale tossed into the modern world. Except that this knight was bleeding heavily from a few horrible wounds that she could see.

"Oh man... Where's Yun when I need him?" She wondered aloud, then reached forward and placed a hand on the man's left shoulder, turning him over, "Hey are you okay?"

He slowly turned over, and she saw numerous more wounds, most of them much shallower, but most showed signs of blood. She watched him flop over onto his back and lay still and she started to panic. She didn't know what to do, and this man, for what ever his crime, was about to die. She knew she couldn't help, she didn't even know if she should try, if the man even deserved any help.

"What do I do?" She asked herself, her mind whirling through plan after plan trying to think of which would best suit the situation.

"You DIE!" a deep voice snarled from all around her.

Mariko, surprised by the unexpected threat, was caught flatfooted as the Knight laying on the ground in front of her sat straight up and thrust his sword straight at her face.

Not enough time to scream...

Not enough time to move...

Only time enough to die.

* * * *

"Yun!" Ikkou smiled broadly, "Thanks."

Yun hopped down from the building he was standing on and ran over to Ikkou, "You here to figure out what that light was too?"

Ikkou nodded, "Yeah, but it turned out to be a trap set by this rock creature to kill us."

"No... I don't think it was," Yun shook his head, "There is another fight going on just a little ways down, I think I saw Mariko heading down that way."

Ikkou started floating immediately, "Which way?"

"No, Ikkou!" Yun grabbed onto Ikkou's leg, "Remember back to when the world was destroyed? Just let me open up a viewing portal, and you can just teleport us there."

Ikkou winced inwardly. His impulsiveness was getting him into trouble again, and to make this mistake even more glaring and embarrassing, it was the same mistake he had made only a short while ago.

Yun frowned slightly, "Uh..."

"What is it?"

Yun looked over at Ikkou, "I can't open a view portal... something is blocking me out!"

* * * *

The sword came straight at her, and turned ever so slightly to the side, then her face was covered in something wet and warm. She let out a yell of surprise, and started to jump to the side, only to find the blade diving in again at her in the same direction she was meaning to move. She stopped herself, then spun to the other side, but the sword was still there, and she was pelted with something before she could stop moving.

She leaped backwards, landing at the ready, one hand reaching up to see how badly she had been cut on her face. She winced as pain shot from her side, but upon touching her face she found no cut. She looked down to her side and saw not one, but five fair sized cuts on her side, and she noticed one other grisly discovery. Where she had felt something hit her she found a disembodied finger of some creature with long claws hanging on her costume where it had become snagged.

She looked up at the knight who was struggling to get to his feet, he brandished his sword threateningly in every direction he could, but it was obvious he had no intentions of attacking Mariko. Or any idea of where the creature that had attacked them had gone.

"Get away from her!"

The knight and Mariko both looked up in surprise as the Phoenix Samurai came flying down, sword cutting across in a brutal horizontal cut. The knight reacted slowly, but managed to bring his shield up in time to block the blow, but for all of his efforts he was forced to watch as his shield was cleaved into two by the attack.

The only thing that saved his arm was the fact that the angel of life had already pulled his weapon back to prepare for a second strike. It came in fast and furious, attack after attack, the Knight forced to deflect many blows with an armored gauntlet as often as he did with his sword, and his armor was beginning to show from the wear and tear. As was the knight himself.

From where Mariko was she could see that he was moving slower every moment, and that his counter attacks were coming less and less often. She didn't know weather it was from being outclassed, or from all the blood he had lost, but both ways she knew she had to stop the fight.

The knight batted away another attack, then another, then suddenly reached out and grabbed onto the Phoenix Samurai's sword with his armored hand. He cried out, the sword pierced right through his gauntlet, and seemingly tried to bring his sword across to finish his defenseless foe, but he seemed unable to raise his sword at all. Instead he managed to plant his foot into the Angel's stomach, knocking him away, before he lost his fingers.

The knight's other, now wounded, hand latched onto the hilt of his sword and he lifted it high charging while he still had the advantage.

Mariko's cries to stop where drowned out by a familiar voice.

"Dark Beam!"

A bolt of dark energy's crashed into the knight's stomach, tossing him like a rag doll back down the street, collapsing to a heap on the ground.

Mariko ran forward, placing herself between the downed man. She watched as he slowly forced himself up to all fours, the strain of simply getting up that much had caused him to shudder violently, then leaned back so that he was kneeling and brought up his sword in front of him in an attempt to defend himself. The sword was shaking so violently that Mariko doubted he had the strength to actually use it. She walked slowly, holding her hands out before her to show she meant no harm.

The sword wavered for a moment.

Mariko reached out slowly, pushing the sword to the side, she kneeled before the man. The sword clanged to the ground to the side, and he let his head drop forward in defeat.

"Mariko, what are you doing?!" she heard Naoko ask with a worried tone.

"Get back from him and let us finish this before he attacks you again!" The Angel of Life demanded.

Mariko ignored them for a moment, reaching forward to lift the helmet up so that she knew the man was looking at her. She locked her eyes on his and then...

Then she smiled to him.

The man cocked his head to the side, looking much like a confused metal dog, that, had he not been so badly hurt, would have looked fairly comical. She looked back over her shoulders at Naoko, "Don't worry... I don't think he's dangerous."

"But he attacked you, I saw it with my own eyes."

Mariko heard an odd clang as though metal had just hit the ground, but ignored it, "He wasn't attacking me, he was trying to defend me!"

"By cutting your face?" The Phoenix samurai sounded completely dumbfounded.

"He didn't cut me, this isn't..." Mariko cut herself short, letting out a surprised yelp as she felt something touch her wounded side. She turned her head around immediately, seeing that the knight had taken off one of his gauntlets, and currently held his hand firmly against her wounds. She reached down with both hands grabbing the hand firmly, but she watched as the man's hand glowed and the pain slowly disappeared. He slowly lifted his hand away revealing only an odd hole in her uniform showing off some rather pale looking skin where five deep gashes used to be. He slowly reached up to Mariko's face, his hand started glowing again and he ran it across the bloody portion of her face. She reached up to touch her face and found the blood was gone.

"Mariko, are you okay?" Naoko asked, starting to run over.

The knight brought his hands back over her face again, running his fingers gently over her eyebrows and down across her eyelids, forcing her to close her eyes.

"Thank you," the man said softly in Japanese.

Despite her closed eyes she could see the sudden flare of light. When she opened her eyes again the knight was gone and both of her friend were standing covering their eyes.

"He got away..." The Phoenix Samurai stated slowly, pulling his hands away from his eyes.

Mariko got to her feet, feeling the warmth from the light slowly dissipate, "No. I let him go. World of difference."

"He wasn't the one who did all this then?" Naoko asked, waving a hand to the debris.

Mariko shrugged, "I don't know to tell you the truth... I just had a feeling he wasn't the bad guy..."

"You let him go because you had a feeling he wasn't a bad guy?"

Mariko spun on the Angel of life, marching right over to him, "Look, first off, you have no right to question my decisions. I never asked you to be here, and I certainly didn't ask for your opinion. Second off, it was my choice to make, I made it, and I'll live with the consequences. And," She looked up at him and pulled the finger from where it was stuck on her costume and shoved it in his face, "He is probably the only reason one of these didn't imbed itself deep in my neck."

Mariko stood there for a moment, and then threw the finger on the ground, walking away. Naoko stood silently beside the angel for a moment before following after her friend. After they were out of earshot Naoko spoke up.

"Are you sure you're right?"

Mariko sighed deeply, "I'm the only reason he's still alive, and he's the only reason I survived the rescue... I kind of owed it to him to let him go. Tell the truth though... I think he was afraid of me near the end there..."

Naoko looked over to her friend, curious, "Oh?"

"I think he was waiting for me to kill him." She said with a laugh, "He seemed very surprised when I smiled at him."

Naoko nodded slowly, turning to look as Yun and Ikkou arrived in the area. They looked around for a moment at the destruction, and with curious expressions looked over to the others.

"What happened here?" Ikkou asked, relieved to see the others were okay.

Yun frowned slightly upon seeing the tear in Mariko's costume, but kept quiet about it, "I think that there's time enough for that later, perhaps we should go..."

The others gathered around and Ikkou closed his eyes for a moment, "Where?"

"What do you think, Mariko? The dojo ought to be fairly empty about this time of day." Yun asked.

Mariko nodded, "Sounds good."

Ikkou nodded, then a few seconds later they disappeared into thin air.

* * * *

The knight peeked down from his spot on a nearby roof and watched the proceedings. There were five of them, but they didn't seem to get along well with the red haired one, whom was left standing alone as the others converged down the street. Soon after they disappeared, and shortly after the red haired one transformed his sword into a red bird, then disappeared himself.

"Invisibility?" He mumbled aloud, "That would have been useful."

He looked down at himself. He was healing already, in an hour or two he'd be well enough to walk, his ankle had been hurt during the fighting, and after blinding everybody with the light caused from

his healing ability, he had leapt from the ground to the roof, but his feet hadn't been set properly. His ankle had snapped under the sudden pressure, and he almost didn't make it onto the rooftop.

He sighed.

Japan certainly was interesting, to say the least.

"But... not very friendly."

* * * *

"Marrriko."

The lycanthrope appeared out from behind a dumpster, and slowly started walking off down a dark alley.

"I will find you... Marrriko..." It snarled, "You help the possessed ones... You... must... die..."

* * * *

A blaring alarm clock brought Naoko to consciousness, but just barely. The whole night Darkbolt had been taunting her, bringing nightmares. He had left her alone for the last few weeks, even helped her out recently with some information, but he was flexing his muscles, showing that he didn't appreciate being trapped in her body.

Personally, it was the last place she would have wanted it.

All she wanted to do was roll over and sleep for another three hours, but she knew she had to get up or she'd be late for school. And she couldn't be late for school. Even after being possessed by a demon of pure evil she valued her academics above almost everything else. Before it had represented her future, but now it was more than her future, it was something she could hold close to her heart. If she ever freed herself, she'd be ready for a normal life.

Just like everybody else.

~But you're not like everybody else~

"Be quiet..."

~You are the harbinger of doom and destruction.~

"Be quiet."

~You are the leader of death, destruction, war, and pure, unadulterated evil. You are the bane of all you wish to have.~

"Be quiet!" Naoko yelled, slapping her hand down hard on her alarm clock, turning it off.

Darkbolt's voice was silent too, the only sound now was the sound of Naoko's mother walking down the hall to her room.

"Are you okay, dear?"

Naoko forced a smile on her face, "Yes mom, just... a nightmare."

"Oh... Well, don't let it bother you, it's not real after all." Her mother said with a comforting smile, walking over and giving Naoko a hug.

Naoko wanted to cry; her nightmare was more than real. It was living inside of her. And in the arms of her mother she suddenly felt all of the pain, all of the fear, all of lost dreams... She stopped pushing the emotions down, and let it all flow out.

And she cried.

"It'll be okay, dear." Her mother said, hugging her even closer.

"I-I... I ho-ho-hope... s-s-so..." She said pulling herself even closer to her mother.

* * * *

Mariko was waiting outside when Naoko finally walked out the door.

"Funny, for the girl who's always obsessed with being early, seems that your being late more and more often," Mariko gave Naoko a teasing smile, "Is this a new trend or..." As Naoko got closer Mariko finally got a good look at her face, and her voice trailed off. Naoko's eyes were bloodshot and puffy as though she hadn't got any sleep and had been crying recently.

"Naoko, are you okay?"

Naoko forced a small smile, "I think I'm feeling better than I have for weeks..."

Mariko smiled back, "Come on, we need to make sure you get to school on time."

They walked the rest of the way to school in relative silence. Upon arriving at the school they found the grounds buzzing with activity. People were gathered everywhere on the grounds talking together excitedly.

Mariko elbowed Naoko, "Looks like somebody started another rumor about you actually going out with somebody." Naoko turned bright red immediately, and ducked her head down slightly, causing Mariko to laugh, "I'm just kidding Naoko!"

"It's not funny." Naoko protested quietly.

"Hey, there's Yun, maybe he can tell us what's going on." Mariko declared, trying her best to make sure that Naoko couldn't see that she was still smiling.

Yun, upon seeing Naoko and Mariko, waved to the people he was talking to and promptly made his way over to them.

"Hello."

Naoko smiled to Yun, ignoring his curious expression as he looked at her still blushing face.

"Hi Yun," Mariko said with a grin, "Care to tell us what's going on around here?"

Yun raised an eyebrow, "You mean you haven't heard already?"

Mariko rolled her eyes, "We just got here. Now come on, share, Yun."

"Well, a nearby school was running a student exchange program, six of their students went to Canada, and six Canadian students were going to come out here and go to school here for a few weeks. You know, see what Japan is like, learn the language, see the sights."

"A glorified field trip." Mariko said with a smile.

Yun nodded, "Exactly. But the school they were supposed to go to had a small explosion, I believe it was a gas leak. Any ways, since the school they were supposed to go to is now closed they sent the exchange students here." Yun ran a hand through his hair, "Apparently we're having an assembly first thing this morning, probably to introduce them."

"Well, this day just got a lot more interesting." Mariko smiled suddenly and tossed Naoko a wink, "And finally in a good way!"

Naoko couldn't help but agree.

They found Ikkou waiting in the auditorium; he had somehow managed to save a couple seats. As they sat down Ikkou tried to say something to Naoko, but the noise from the crowd simply drowned him out. He sighed, pasted a helpless smile on his face, shrugged, and simply waving to her. Naoko smiled shyly, waving back.

The principle came out in front of the students, taking his place at the podium, and calling for silence. When the crowd finally calmed down he beckoned off to the side, and seven people came in, each seemed to be fidgeting uncomfortably with the uniforms.

"Students, due to an unfortunate incident with another school, I am happy to announce that we have received seven exchange students from Canada. These young men and women will be joining us for the next three weeks to learn the language, and find out what Japan is really like. Unfortunately most of the students cannot speak Japanese very well, so I'll be assigning them to students to help them grow accustomed to the school, and help translate the school assignments for them." The principle leaned forward on his podium, and looked into the crowd, "Now remember, these people are our guests, so treat them with respect, be nice, and try to be understanding. I want them to be saying great things about Tokyo Bird High when they return home."

Naoko looked at the group, eyes flicking from person to person. There were three girls and four boys. Two girls seemed to be excited to be there, a larger redhead, and a girl with long blond hair and glasses. The last girl, a dark haired one, seemed to be very unimpressed with the proceedings. She allowed her eyes to drift to the boys. One was fairly handsome, and she got the feeling he knew it all too well, for he was spending time smiling, looking from girl to girl. Another, a small guy with a buzz cut, was fidgeting nervously with his tie, as though he felt the whole crowd was about to jump up and attack him. To his left a guy was smiling, patting him on the shoulder trying to calm him down. His uniform was wrinkled and a little too loose, and his hair was shaggy and messy, but he seemed to be the only guy who was generally happy to be there.

Naoko sat up right suddenly as she looked at the last boy, and found that he was staring right at her. The tallest guy in the group was standing with his arms crossed, his uniform looked a little small for him, as though they hadn't had one in the proper size. But most disturbing thing was that he was staring right at her, with a dark expressionless face.

Naoko blinked, then looked to her sides trying to tell if he was looking just beside her, then right back at him, but by that time he had turned to look at the principal.

"So, I will now introduce them, and call their student advisor up to the front." The principal continued, "Jodi Baker and..."

Naoko looked over to her friends, "Are you getting any weird feelings about this?"

Ikkou looked over at her confused, "You mean besides the fact that they barely know Japanese?"

"No..." Yun said slowly, staring right at the group of students, "She means do you feel anything weird from them..."

Ikkou looked at Yun for a moment, then looked at the group and shrugged, "They look fine to me."

"The one beside the girls is pretty cute," Mariko said, smiling slyly.

"I'm feeling something definitely odd here." Yun stated with a quiet, cold tone, "And it's a very strong, very bad."

The others looked at Yun, surprised, then looked back at the group.

"Which one is it?" Mariko asked, with a suddenly determined voice.

"I don't know.... I'm just getting a feeling from their direction..." Yun closed his eyes, and concentrated for a moment. He sighed, and shook his head a moment later, "It could be any of them... It could be all of them, it could even just be somebody in the crowd ahead of us."

"When they were standing up there I noticed..."

"Ikkou Zenkai," the principle said, interrupting Naoko, "You will be helping out Jack Marcott."

Ikkou sat there surprised for a moment, then got up and started making his way up to the front where the messy looking kid was waiting for him.

Yun watched for a moment, then looked back to Naoko, "You were saying?"

"Uh.... When they were standing up front, I noticed one guy staring right at me..."

"Which one?" Yun asked, still looking at the front.

"He's the..."

"Naoko Yamino," the principle called, "You will be helping out Tyris Engelhard."

The big man stepped forward towards the podium, and stood there for a moment. His eyes scanned the crowd but stopped on Naoko. She sat there staring back, like a deer caught in the headlights, unable to move.

"Naoko," Yun asked, "Which one?"

"It's... It's him... The one that's been assigned to me..." She replied, still staring right at him.

Yun and Mariko looked at each other then looked at Naoko, who hesitantly stood up and walked up to the front. She stood before the big man for a moment before he slowly extended a hand. She hesitantly offered her own and he shook it, nodding to her, but never taking his eyes off of her.

She couldn't help but think that the next three weeks weren't going to be any fun at all.

* * * *

Ikkou grumbled quietly to himself.

"What am I supposed to do with this guy if we get into any trouble? I can't just transform right in front of him. Explosion aside I don't need anybody else knowing about my powers." He thought to himself. He sighed, "And this also means I won't be able to talk to the others... or ask Naoko out... Not unless I want to drag this guy with me while I do it..." Ikkou winced as another thought came crashing down, "And now I have to help this guy out with his school work as well as my own! There's just no end to this..."

Ikkou looked over at Jack, and muttered in Japanese, "You are just more trouble than you're worth."

Jack smiled, then in clipped Japanese responded, "Well, that's a real nice greeting. Do I get a hug next, or do you just try to push me out in front of a train?"

Ikkou gaped for a second, "Wait... you can speak Japanese?"

Jack rolled his eyes, never once losing his grin, "Of course I speak Japanese. Just not very well. Speaking the language was a small portion of who got chosen to go, luckily I've got an uncle who does a lot of business around here."

Ikkou nodded, "Good, this means I won't have to translate to much for you... Which is good because my English isn't all that good."

Jack shrugged, "Well, then I guess you just got the best tutor in Tokyo Bird high. I'll tell you what, I'll try to teach you as much slang as I possibly can to drive your teacher crazy."

Ikkou couldn't help but smile, as Jack continued to smile at him. Something about the guy's good mood was infectious. He already knew quite a bit of Japanese, he was very amiable, and for once Ikkou had the chance to get an A on his next English assignment.

"Come on," Ikkou said, smiling, "I'll show you around, then you can coach me on that slang."

"You got it Ikkou."

Ikkou continued to smile as he showed Jack around.

The next three weeks were certainly starting to look up.

* * * *

"So do you like Japan so far?" Naoko asked, after spending an hour mustering up enough courage to ask.

Tyris looked up from his notebook for a moment and locked his eyes on her until she looked away, then continued scribbling in his book.

Naoko sank down in her seat, going back to work. He hadn't said a word, Japanese or English, since she'd been called up to meet him. She'd asked him a few times during class if he understood what the teacher was saying, or if he needed help. Every time though he just looked at her until she became uncomfortable and looked away, at which point he went right back to what he had been doing.

At this point in time he seemed to be drawing in his notebook, as for the first time all day he had finished his assignment long before the class was over, or at least that's what Naoko was assuming. She didn't think English class would be all that difficult for somebody who already understood it.

This guy was seriously giving her the heebie-jeebies, and what's worse is she couldn't do anything about it. The guy hadn't actually done anything, and she was responsible to take care of him during school for the next three weeks.

The final bell rung, and she for once was happy that the school day was over. She collected her books, and looked back to Tyris only to find him waiting for her. She walked out of the room down to her locker, Tyris following her a few steps behind. She grabbed her stuff from her locker and move down to Yun and Mariko's lockers.

Ikkou was already there talking to Yun, Jack wasn't to far off though, in fact he was busy watching Mariko who seemed to be flirting with Steven, the exchange student she had decided was cute. Naoko watched Jack, and watched as his smile slowly dissipated into a deep frown.

Naoko looked back, about to say something to Tyris until she remembered who it was that was behind her, but the look on his face was the same as Jack's. Except where Jack looked worried and uncomfortable, Tyris looked angry.

Steven smiled and walked away, waving, oblivious to the people who had been watching the exchange. Tyris stormed over to Steven, where the two began arguing in quick, quiet, and decidedly unpleasant tones, just far enough away that nobody else seemed to notice though.

Jack walked over to Mariko about the same time Tyris returned, looking even angrier than before.

Jack looked over to Tyris, then over to Mariko, who was busy digging through her locker.

"He asked you out, right?" Jack asked bluntly.

Mariko looked over to the side suddenly, surprised by the three people who were now surrounding her, "Maybe... Why should I tell you?" She snapped, defensively.

Jack shook his head and sighed, "Look, Steven is bad news. Very bad news. You should stay away from him."

Mariko's eyebrows narrowed, staring daggers at Jack, "I can take care of myself, now stay out of my business."

Jack sighed, holding his hands up in surrender, and looked over to Tyris, then to Naoko, "Big guy here scaring you?"

Naoko didn't know how to respond, fighting the urge to blush at admitting it, but nodded any ways.

"Well, don't worry about it. He's a pussycat, but he doesn't seem to like anybody but his sister. He's.... anti-social." Jack stated simply, then grabbed Tyris' arm and switching to English he muttered, "Come on you big lug, let's stop scaring the ladies."

Tyris shrugged Jack's arm away, replying, "I have to borrow some notes."

Jack just kept walking, not even bothering to argue.

Naoko ignored Tyris for the moment, figuring he couldn't understand them any ways, "You are going out with him aren't you?"

Mariko looked at Naoko for a moment, and then nodded with a smile, "He's taking me to the movies on Wednesday."

Naoko bit her lower lip, "Uh, are you sure that's a good idea?"

Mariko glanced at her with a confused look on her face.

"I mean... both Tyris and Jack seem to distrust the guy, and Jack just warned you..."

"Naoko," Mariko said with a sigh, "Look, he seems okay, and if he isn't you know I can deal with him without even breathing hard."

"But..."

Mariko waved her hand stopping Naoko, "Look, I'll keep on my guard. Come on Naoko, you don't have to worry about it, you know that."

"I know but... I just don't want to see you get hurt, that's all." Naoko said with a sigh of defeat.

"I know, that's what makes you such a good friend..." Mariko smiled then looked around looking a little confused, "Wasn't that big guy supposed to be getting notes from you?"

Naoko nodded slowly, remembering the man with a sinking feeling, "Yeah, I think that's what he said."

"Then..." Mariko raised an eyebrow, "Where is he?"

Naoko turned around, but Tyris was nowhere to be seen, "I... I don't know."

"Weird guy." Mariko said with an absent-minded shrug, "Still he doesn't seem so bad."

"Easy for you to say." Naoko said with a frown, "You didn't have to have him tag along with you all day."

"But he never tried anything did he?"

"Besides staring me down at every point possible? No." Naoko shook her head, and forced a small smile, "Sorry Mariko, he's just making me feel very uncomfortable."

"Don't worry about him," Mariko said, leading them to the door, "If he tries anything I know you can handle him. Besides, you've got all of us, and we'll always be there to help."

* * * *

Ikkou sighed, watching Yun, Mariko and, most of all, Naoko leave school to go home. Another day gone, another day where Naoko barely acknowledged his existence, more or less how much he cared for her.

He felt hollow inside, a small portion of him wanted to go break something, but another larger portion just felt like wallowing in self-pity. And currently it was winning.

"Hey, what's eating you, Ikkou?"

Ikkou looked over his shoulder and saw Jack standing there on the steps behind him, "Nothing..."

Jack took a few steps forward and looked off to where Ikkou had been looking then nodded, "Ahhh, girl problems."

"Hey," Ikkou protested, "Mind your own business."

Jack quieted down for a moment, then as Ikkou went back to watching them leave he asked, "Which one?"

"Naoko... The one with the green hair." Ikkou said quietly.

"She's very beautiful."

"And smart... and nice..." Ikkou looked down and under his breath mumbled, "And too good for me."

Jack patted him on the shoulder, "Not from where I'm standing. Besides, that's for her to decide, now isn't it? Don't give up without trying. It'll just make you feel worse about it."

Ikkou spun and looked at him, his eyes narrowed dangerously, "And what do you think you know about me? What could you possibly know?"

Jack shrugged, still watching as Naoko finally disappeared from sight, "I don't know anything about you. But if you're anything like me..." Jack closed his eyes and took in a deep breath, "If she means that much to you, don't let her go. I've been regretting it for quite awhile now."

Ikkou looked at him for a long moment before relaxing, "Sorry."

Jack shrugged, "It's okay. You need any help?"

"No, I'm sure I'll do just fine asking her out by myself."

Jack grinned innocently, "I was talking about your English homework."

Ikkou crossed his arms, "Oh no you weren't."

Jack's grin disappeared into a large smile, "Okay, so I wasn't. But I am now. So what do you say?"

"Sure," Ikkou nodded, "But aren't you supposed to be going to meet the family you're going to be living with?"

"Well, we were, but for the next couple of days I'm living in the dorms, then we're supposed to meet the families of the exchange students, get a feeling of what it's like to live in Japan and all." Jack looked back over at Ikkou, "Probably for the best that some of us stay in the dorms though. I don't think any families could afford to feed Tyrus, and I wouldn't wish Steven on anybody."

Ikkou snorted, "And what about yourself?"

"Me... I'd just feel weird living in somebody else's house. I'd feel like I was invading, or trespassing, or something..."

"You make it sound like you're not going."

"I'm not."

"Why not?" Ikkou demanded, a little surprised.

"Well, the people I was going to live with don't actually live in Tokyo, so I have the choice of living with them and missing school, or going to school and living in a dorm." Jack let a mischievous tone enter his voice, "The school board decided I was living in a dorm."

Ikkou laughed lightly, then waved for Jack to follow, "Come on, I'll show you the dorms, and introduce you to the guys."

Jack smiled and started to follow, but stopped to look back at Tyrus who was standing off to the side, staring in the same direction that Naoko and her friends had gone, scribbling in a notebook. He watched for a moment, then slowly went to follow.

"Tyrus won't try anything yet," Jack thought to himself, "Meaning for tonight, I don't have to worry."

Jack smiled and ran to catch up to Ikkou.

* * * *

"Yun."

He could feel it, gathering around him, slowly. The air stilled, then crushed in around him. The spirits were screaming, they were angry... Why were they angry?

"Yun?!"

They were angry because somebody was going to die. And they didn't believe that person deserved to.

"Who?" he called out in his mind, begging for them to answer, to tell him whom they were so worried about. Wondering whose death could cause them this much upheaval.

~One who's time hasn't come. One who's job hasn't finished.~

"Who's this one?" Yun asked, then felt his heart stop suddenly as he heard the reply.

~Mariko.~

Yun's eyes shot open and he threw himself into Mariko. As he collided with her he felt something rake down his back, causing searing pain. He screamed as he crashed to the ground, arching his back in agony.

"Oh my god... Yun!!" Mariko yelled.

She sounded so far away, and he couldn't figure out why. He was too busy trying to figure out why the world was spinning so rapidly, and why it was so hard to keep his eyes open.

Then every thing went dark.

Mariko sat up right, getting ready to yell at Yun for knocking her over. Her anger died before she could open her mouth. Beside her on the ground was Yun, screaming in pain, clutching a hand to his back. A hand covered in blood.

"Oh my god... Yun!!" Mariko cried, dragging herself over to him.

"Mariko.... Yun... We've got trouble."

Mariko looked up to see Naoko had already transformed, and been surrounded by dark figures. Naoko's face was locked in anger, and she looked ready to tear the group to shreds by herself.

"Naoko..." Mariko said with a snarl, transforming, "They're MINE!"

She launched herself forward, punching right through one of the first figures. It split perfectly into two, then dissipated into thin air.

"It looks like they're made of shadows..." Naoko noted, blasting a shadow man as she flew over to stand by Yun.

Mariko lashed out with a kick, taking off the head of another of the shadow figure, spinning to the side at the last moment to avoid a swipe by another figure that had changed his fingers into long sharp claws. "Shadows? Lets see how well these shadows take a *Razor Storm!*" she yelled, firing shards of razor sharp metal through a couple of shadows, which immediately dissipated into nothingness.

Six more shadows pulled themselves from the ground and formed the shadowy figures that Mariko was fighting.

"So that's it," Naoko thought, "That's how they ambushed us..."

She raised her hands to blast a few of the shadows sneaking up on Mariko, but they were destroyed by a brutal spin kick before she could even summon forth the energy. She nodded slowly, Mariko didn't need help, but Yun did. Naoko closed her eyes and summoned a portion of energy up.

"Fushi..." She said quietly, pulling the energy into a summoning, "I need you."

She knew it couldn't work, she had no idea of where the angel of life was, but she had to try. Maybe he would be able to sense her trying and allow himself to be teleported. It was a stretch, but otherwise she'd need to go hunting for him herself.

Mariko yelled as she brought her leg down in an axe kick, shattering yet another shadow into nothingness. She allowed a cruel smile to cross her lips as she saw the final shadow looking around for it's companions and finding nothing. It stepped backwards rapidly until it was standing at the mouth of dark alley. Mariko leapt forward in a jump kick, and watch in surprise as the shadow reached into the darkness, and pulled out a large dark shield made from shadows with which to defend itself. She struck the surprisingly solid shield and bounced back a few feet to her, and the shadow's, surprise.

"Finally, one that's actually a challenge...." Mariko grinned, summoning forth energy.

The shadow wasted no time, pushing it's other hand into the darkness and pulling forth a large gleaming blade made from darkness. It leapt forward bringing the sword down at Mariko's head.

Mariko didn't flinch, simply held her hands out before her, "*War Blade.*"

The shadow managed to bring up it's shield as a giant buzz-saw appeared in front of her, and flew straight at the shadow. It collided with the shield, and for a moment nothing happened. Then it cut through the shadow and disappeared into the alley. She looked around for another couple of moments hoping for another target, but none presented themselves, so she turned and ran back to Yun.

"How is he doing?"

Naoko opened her eyes, "Not good, the cuts look deep and I can't do anything for him... I was trying to summon Fushi but I... I can't."

"Then I've got a better idea. Yell."

"Yell?" Naoko asked.

"Yeah, yell. Half the time we get into a fight he seems to show up under his own power right after the fight begins. I'd bet you anything he's in the area." Mariko stated, kneeling down beside Yun.

Naoko started to protest, but what Mariko said made sense. Finally she flew up into the air and yelled, "Fushi!" at the top of her lungs.

To her surprise Chou, the red bird which always accompanied Fushi, appeared almost instantaneously and Fushi himself wasn't far behind. Slowly she allowed herself to touch down beside Yun again, and Fushi touched down right beside her.

"Yun..." He said slowly, kneeling down over the fallen teen, "What happened to him?"

"We were attacked by these... shadow creatures, they looked like men but were made completely from shadows." Naoko said, watching as Fushi waved his hand over Yun's wounds and the wounds miraculously disappeared.

"Shadow..." Fushi looked up suddenly, "Wait, they couldn't take much damage could they?"

"A punch or a kick was usually enough to defeat one, but for some reason that last one took a lot more of a beating. I think it was because it managed to reach more shadows..."

"And used them to boost it's own powers." Fushi completed the sentence for Mariko, who simply nodded.

"You've heard of them before." Naoko stated.

Fushi nodded, "We called them Specters, creatures made out of sheer darkness. Your powers are fairly ineffective against them, but they're completely unable to do any harm to you, Naoko. Can't say the same for the rest of us. They're very weak, unless the attack at night or in dark place, and because of this they always attack in large numbers. They're usually only visible as shadows on the ground until they take their humanoid form to attack, and can shift their limbs to make weapons..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Mariko said, helping a dazed Yun to his feet, "It sounds like you're giving us a lecture on this style of monster."

"I am." Fushi said, looking off to the sky, "It's the same one I used every time I trained a group of people to help fight."

"You fought that many of these... Specters?" Naoko asked.

"Yes. It was a horrible couple of months when these things started showing up in large numbers... Many people died, many innocent people died."

"But you said you trained people to fight them, does that mean you fought them too?" Naoko asked.

Fushi nodded.

"Then how come they're showing up now?" Naoko asked.

"I... I don't know what to tell you. I never heard of you fighting them until well into your future. Something has changed... some how things are going differently." Fushi stated quietly. He didn't say that he had to be the cause, that some how his presence alone at this point in time had caused the awakening. He didn't say it because he knew everybody around him probably already were thinking that themselves.

And they were.

"How did we win?" Naoko asked, breaking the long silence finally.

"We didn't win," Fushi stated simply, lifting up into the air, "We survived. And just barely."

With that Fushi flew off. He knew what had to be done, he had to find the cause of it now, and destroy it while he could. If he didn't destroy it in time the Specters would attack, except that this time they wouldn't be able to win. He knew what he had just done had probably just left Naoko feeling confused and betrayed. He couldn't help it. Better to have her hate him and to have saved her, then to have her die for a disaster of his cause.

"Better my life then yours... My love..."

* * * *

The Seers have news for you, Excellency.

~What is it?

The one with the red hair, the seers have been bothered by his presence since his arrival last night...

~Make it quick; I do not have time for your meandering.

Sorry, your Excellency. As I was saying the seers have been bothered by the red haired one, so I sent out a group of Specters to attack the Demons to draw him out...

~I am very displeased....

Please, your Excellency, allow me to explain first. We drew him out and the seers managed to get a good look at him before he disappeared. The reason they're having problems with him is because his existence is causing massive disturbances in space/time.

~And what exactly is that supposed to mean?

It means that he's not from this time. He claimed to be from the future. And he claims that they met our forces in the future and they won.

~I see...

...

~Order the Specters out, launch the second wave of our attacks. Keep the Demons busy and capture the red haired one. If conventional methods fail.... Possess.

Yes your Excellency.

~What of the boy?

His exposure to the demons is eating away at him. Our plans are currently working perfectly.

~Excellent. See that they continue to do so.

Yes your Excellency.

* * * *

Ikkou toyed with the phone again.

Seven numbers, all it would take and she'd be talking to him.

Seven digits that he had inadvertently memorized, that danced before him, on the front of his mind, the tip of his tongue, and edge of his finger.

Seven buttons he couldn't bring himself to push.

"Why do I do this?" Ikkou asked himself, "All I want to do is phone her, ask her out, nothing that bad. Chances are she'll say yes. It's nothing really..."

But even as he said it a little voice in the back of his head asked "Then why are you so scared?"

"Because..."

"Because why?"

"Because she..."

"Come on say it! Admit it!"

"Because she might..."

"You're scared to death because you know she's too good for you, and she knows it too! Because the Angel of life from the future has already told you that you'll never be the one to love her, to be with her. So you know it can't work, all you'll do is hurt her. All you can bring her is pain. You're not the one she can love, you're a cruel pestilence of which will ultimately be the cause of her death. All of this and what's the reason you can't pick up the phone?"

"Because she might say..."

"Go ahead, deny it all. Say, "he can't be from the future, he's lying" or "The future is always open to change". Say, "I love her, I could never hurt her". It's all lies, and you know it. You couldn't protect her before, what's the difference now? Let the poor girl live in peace. Let yourself live in peace... All you have to do is put the phone down and walk away. Avoid it. Avoid the pain. Hers and yours. But you can't, can you? All you can think is the same thing over and over again. The one true reason you can't call."

"Because she might say no."

For a moment his mind was completely silent. It was the truth wasn't it?

He knew it could never work.

He knew that Fushi would be the one who in the end was with Naoko.

He knew that he was the one responsible for Naoko's death.

And he knew that if he let her walk away without even trying he regret it for the rest of his life.

"Is it love or stupidity?" He asked himself, "Is it love or stupidity that refuses to let me walk away without trying?"

He punched in the number, hesitating on the last one. His heart was racing; he was more scared now than he was when the rock monster attacked him. He paused for another second, and then stabbed the last button before he could talk himself out of it.

It rang once.

"Great, you phoned her and didn't even pause to think about what to ask her out to!" He thought smacking himself in the head.

It rang twice.

"Doesn't matter, just come up with something... anything... Just please... please, let her say yes!" he pleaded in his mind.

It rang three times.

"What in the heck am I thinking? She's turned down everybody else, why wouldn't she turn me down to, especially if I'm supposed to kill her in the future?"

It rang a fourth time and there was a sudden click.

"Hello..."

"Hi, could I please..." Ikkou blurted

"You've reached the Yamino residence, we're not home right now, if you could..." The answering machine continued after a slight pause.

Ikkou sat there, his mouth hanging open. He had been ready for anything Naoko had to say. He had been ready for a yes, and he had been expecting a no. But he hadn't even thought about the answering machine.

A loud bleep broke him out of his stupor, and he spent a second rapidly panicking, trying to think of a message to leave for Naoko, then quickly hung up.

Ikkou looked down at the phone for a moment realizing that he should have left a message. He slowly took his hand off the phone and used it to smack himself in the forehead repeatedly, "Stupid, stupid, stupid..."

His fear and excitement was quickly turning to anger again as he stormed around his room, "The bloody answering machine... Again!! Doesn't anybody live there?!" He stopped dead for a minute then yelled, "And why do they have that damn pause after 'Hello'!?!?"

Nobuyuki, Ikkou's roommate looked over at him with a confused look on his face, "Ikkou, are you feeling okay?"

Ikkou just let out a groan and allowed himself to collapse face first on his bed.

* * * *

Naoko yawned.

She was still having nightmares, and getting little sleep, and now her waking life wasn't proving to be any better. All day Tyris had again refused to speak a single word to her, yet somehow he managed to get almost all of his work done. And of course, any time she tried to talk to him, he simply stared back at her, his face completely emotionless.

It was currently lunchtime, and even then she couldn't get rid of him. He simply followed her into the cafeteria, grabbed himself some food and sat down at the same table as her. She had been hoping to lose him and talk to the others about the Specters, or even that rock monster, or the large furry thing that had attacked Mariko a couple of days ago, but as long as he was around she couldn't risk it.

At first she had assumed he didn't know any Japanese, but if he didn't then how could he know how to do the assignments, which he completed for good marks. One thing she did know was that he couldn't read the language, but that didn't help at all.

All she wanted to do right now was try to get some actual sleep. Get away from all the hassles. Get away from all the troubles. Get away from demons, angels, Tenma, and all other kinds of monsters. Get away from the creepy guy sitting only a few inches away from her. He sat there, stirring his food with a food with a look of distinct uninterest, oblivious to her.

"Hey, Naoko."

Naoko looked over, unfamiliar with the person talking to her, and saw a teenage boy standing right next to her table. He was only a little taller than she was, had shoulder length blue hair, and a smile she had become all too familiar with.

"I was thinking that you and I should go out on Saturday to the movies."

Another guy asking her out. With all of the strange things she had gone through in the last couple months she had almost forgot about the trouble that had normally plagued her. And now she had to turn down yet another attempt at somebody asking her out. Before she had simply been too shy to accept, now she simply couldn't afford to bring anybody into the troubles she'd been surrounded by recently. And even if she was using it for an excuse, she pointed out to herself that it was a pretty good one.

"I'm..." She started to say, but the lack of sleep over the last two days had finally got to her, and as soon as she opened her mouth she found herself yawning instead of talking.

The boy's face turned red immediately, and he started snarling, "What? Oh, am I too boring for you Miss Yamino? Am I not interesting enough for you to even talk to? Is that it!?" he reached down and grabbed her wrist, squeezing it, and pulled her around in her seat so she was facing him.

"Stop it! That hurts!" Naoko yelled. She pulled her arm, trying to free it from the grip, and balled her other hand up into a fist.

"And you think treating me like dirt doesn't!? I should..."

Tyris stood up suddenly, reached across the table, latched his hand onto the boy's wrist, the arm that held Naoko's, and squeezed. The boy let out a yelp of pain and released her wrist immediately, reaching across with his free hand to pry Tyriss' hand from his wrist. If Tyris noticed his attempts to free himself, he ignored it, his hand still squeezing the boy's wrist, his eyes locked in an angry glare.

Naoko, looked from one boy to the other the quickly grabbed onto Tyriss' arm to stop him. Tyris snapped his head around over to Naoko, and to her surprise, he looked at her like she had stung him. He released his hold immediately and drew his arm back out of her reach suddenly.

Naoko turned to the other boy, "I'm sorry, I wasn't trying to insult you, I haven't gotten any sleep recently and..."

"It's okay, it's okay, I'm sorry..." The boy yelled dashing off holding his wrist close to his body.

Naoko watched the boy leave then turned to look at Tyris, who was already sitting back down stirring his lunch like nothing had ever happened. She sat for a moment running through what had just happened, and then she noticed her hand, still clinched in a fist so tightly that it had gone white. She suddenly didn't know what scared her more, the fact that Tyris tried to help her, or that if he hadn't that she would have punched the guy.

And she hated violence.

If it had happened two months ago she would have broke out crying, and desperately pulling away until somebody came to help her, she would have never even thought to fight back. Yet, now she hadn't just thought of fighting back, but she had almost done so out of sheer instinct.

She sat there, staring at her fist until Ikkou and Jack showed up. Jack immediately sat beside Tyris, trying to start a conversation, with little luck, and Ikkou grabbed the seat beside Naoko. He looked at her for a long moment then hesitantly asked, "Naoko, are you okay?"

"I don't know anymore, Ikkou. I just don't know anymore..."

Ikkou patted her on the shoulder, unable to do anything more to comfort her.

* * * *

The walk home was nerve racking this time. Every shadow seemed to move under it's own power, and every so often each one of them would swear that there was a flicker of movement over their shoulder.

"Note to self, thank Angel boy for healing up Yun, then kick his butt from here to..." Mariko trailed off for a second, then punched a hand into an open palm, "Canada."

Naoko wanted to protest, but she knew that Mariko was just venting some frustration. And truth be told she was a little upset that Fushi took off like that without telling them a bit more on the subject. Now they officially knew that there nearly invisible enemies whom were extremely difficult to harm when night falls. Suddenly sleeping in her own bed seemed ten times worse, if nightmares weren't enough now there was a chance of being killed in her sleep by something she probably wouldn't see coming.

"I made these." Yun said finally, pulling out a few strips of paper, handing four to Mariko, then four to Naoko, "I'm not sure if they'll work, the power might have ran out soon after I made them, if they even ever had any, but... they might prevent those creatures from coming into your rooms... Just put two on either side of a door, or a window."

Mariko grinned, "Oh great, now he's going into magic mumbo-jumbo."

Yun rolled his eyes and rustled Mariko's hair, "Gee, go out of my way to try to help you guys, and this is the thanks I get."

Naoko smiled, "Well, that's one less thing to worry about, now I just need Yun's home remedy for nightmares."

"It's two hours of meditation, and a pizza." Yun said with a shrug.

Mariko's smile was far from fading, "I suggest skipping the meditation and having some chocolate ice cream."

"You say that about ever... Naoko, call Ikkou now."

Yun had stopped moving, and was looking around slowly.

"What is it?"

"The spirits are angry again..."

Naoko looked around the street only to find it absolutely devoid of anybody. She transformed and hoped that Ikkou wasn't talking to any of his friends (or worse, having a shower).

"Yun... I thought you could only sense the spirits at the temple." Mariko said slowly, transforming and watching for any signs of danger.

"I can only sense them there... and a few other places... And they've never spoke before." Yun said slowly.

"Then what's going on?"

"I have no idea."

"What... the... hell?"

Mariko and Yun turned to see Ikkou standing in his boxer shorts and socks, face covered in shaving cream, holding a razor to his chin, looking thoroughly confused. Naoko was simply standing there trying not to turn red. Mariko burst out laughing.

"You don't even grow enough hair on your chin to warrant shaving!" Mariko said between laughing fits.

Ikkou glared at her, "Okay, what in the hell am I doing here, and you better have a very damn good excuse!!"

"There!" Yun yelled, transforming, and pointing to a manhole cover.

"If you think you can summon me out of my bathroom to go gallivanting around a sewer system, you've got a big surprise coming." Ikkou stated bluntly.

Then all of the manhole covers for the surrounding two block flew into the air suddenly, steam billowing out from the open holes.

"Ikkou..." Naoko called, her eyes locked on the open manhole.

"Yeah, yeah," Ikkou said considering the razor as he transformed. He watched it melt into nothingness, except for a small portion of the handle. He tossed it on the ground, and wiped the shaving cream off his face, "Needed a new razor any ways..."

All at once a geyser of water blasted from the manhole cover closest to them, blasting high into the sky and spraying water everywhere. From the geyser a figure slowly stepped onto the street. A featureless human body made completely from water, save for a black crystal which was implanted in it's forehead, looked at the four of them for a moment, then bowed.

"I am honored to meet you." It said in with an oddly bubbling voice, as though the person was actually gargling the words.

Naoko looked to the others but they looked just as confused as her, "You're honored to meet us?" She finally asked.

"Yes," The geyser suddenly stopped spraying and the humanoid water creature suddenly shifted into the form of a giant crab, "It means that I will also have the honor of being the one to kill you!"

"Go figure, an enemy that seemed smarter then he looked. And then he opened his mouth." Ikkou muttered.

"Get ready for it guys." Naoko called, charging up her energy.

"Geyser Deluge!"

Everybody reacted differently as the water exploded from the manholes again. Naoko aimed her blast straight up, evaporating the stream of water that had come straight down at her, threatening to crush her. Ikkou simply raised a force field and watched the water flow off the dome surrounding him with his arms crossed. Mariko dove forward, and Yun jumped backwards.

"You guys alright?" Naoko yelled, firing a blast of energy into the water-crab creature.

"The crab thing is a joke from the Tenma right?" Ikkou deadpanned.

"I'm okay." Mariko called out, ignoring Ikkou.

"I'm soaked to the bone in raw sewage... Otherwise I'm okay." Yun growled.

The others all winced and made a face.

"Okay, lets get this straight, giant crab creature made of water, whose main attack is dousing us in sewage." Ikkou sighed, "Short of the gross out factor, I don't even understand how this guy is a threat!"

The crab suddenly focused itself on Ikkou, and pointed a giant claw at him, **"Deep Aqua Incarceration!"**

Ikkou blinked in surprise as a bubble of water suddenly surrounded him. He immediately raised his fist and fired off a blast of energy at the crab. The blast easily destroyed the bubble, and dissolved a portion of the water that made up the crab.

"I think it's continuing to prove my point!" Ikkou yelled.

The crab let out a howl and pointed another claw at Ikkou, **"Poseidon Trident!"**

A giant trident made of water burst out of the claw streaked at Ikkou, smashing into his hastily raised force field pushing him back a few feet.

Ikkou growled after the attack finally dissipated and started stomping forward, "Okay, that did it, play time is over."

The crab sat there, gawking helplessly as it watched all of it's attacks go by without doing nearly any damage.

"Dark Beam!"

"Razor Storm!"

"Molten Lance!"

"Ugh, for crying out loud... sewage... agh." Yun grimaced flipping his bangs back out of his face, away from his mouth and nose.

The three blasts connected with the crab creature, each blowing a portion of the water making up the crab away, until it was no long three times the size of a normal van, but the size of a small toddler.

"Okay," Ikkou asked with a smile, "So who wants to step on it, so we can all go home?"

The crab creature hissed, and brought its claws down signaling another geyser of water to burst out of the sewers. The crab jabbed its claw into the water and slowly started growing back up to the size it was when it had first entered the battle.

"Your attacks are useless against me!" the crab laughed.

"Wow, just like yours are against us?" Ikkou inquired.

The crab just started choking on curses and hammering its claw down, then yelled, "***Geyser Deluge!***"

Another blast of water shot out of the sewers and came crashing down at the four teens. Both Ikkou and Naoko simply raised barriers to stop the water from hitting them, and both Yun and Mariko tried to leap out of the way.

"Arg... that rat ba... errr..." Yun snarled, "He did it again!!!"

"Wow, that's the second time you've hit him with that, and all you've done is piss him off..." Ikkou said watching Yun, then looked over at the Crab with a cocky grin, "You might want to surrender right now..."

"I'll never surrender to the likes of you!"

"***HOWLING ERUPTION!***" Yun screamed glaring at the crab.

A dark portal opened up beneath the crab and from it spirits flew out, howling horribly as they cut through the crab and disappeared into oblivion. The crab staggered, then the crystal in its head shattered, and the water simply splattered onto the ground.

"Well, that was anti-climatic..." Ikkou said with a sigh, "Can I go home now?"

"What's with you Ikkou, this is the first time I've ever heard you want to walk away from a fight!" Mariko said, giving him an odd look.

"And this is the first time I've ever seen Yun really angry. But, okay, let's look at it like this: first off, I'm depressed. Second off, I was teleported in my underwear out into an open street, so I'm feeling a little humiliated and embarrassed... Really not helping with that whole depression thing. Thirdly Hana could have beat up that monster!" Ikkou counted off the things on his fingers, nearly growling out each point, "And now I'm out a razor to boot. Next time can you try to give me a little warning when you decide to yank me out of nowhere?"

"Uh, yeah... sorry Ikkou." Naoko apologized.

Ikkou sighed slowly, "I'm going home now... if you need me... call!"

Ikkou disappeared suddenly, leaving the others to look at the mess the creature had left behind.

"I don't care what the rest of you guys are doing... I'm going for a shower. Now." Yun grumbled stomping off towards his place.

"I'd tease him about it, but I don't think I need him trying to give me a hug while covered in that slop." Mariko whispered to Naoko with a wink.

Naoko smiled, but couldn't help but wonder why the thing had attacked them. And why it had been so utterly helpless.

* * * *

You called for me your Excellency?

~Yes. you know that water creature?

Yes.

~It was supposed to be a threat to their existence, right?

Yes.

~Then how come they walked out of that fight without a single scratch on them?

Uh.... It turns out that the creature was horribly weakened without a constant connection to a source of water.

~Do yourself a favor. Make sure this kind of a problem never happens here.

Yes your Excellency.

* * * *

Fushi could feel the presence; it was all around him now. He had fought these creatures for two years, he knew all of what they were capable of. While in a head on fight they were no match for any

creature with powers, their ability to remain almost invisible made them deadly. If one could get behind you chances were good that you'd only know after you found their claws in your back.

'And they always fight in large numbers,' Fushi reminded himself as he glided over top of an urban neighborhood. Everybody had started to go inside for supper and the streetlights were starting to come on. It was night, the time when the Specters were strongest, and they were all around him. He could sense them, though they possessed no true life energy, they were built of another creature's which made them stick out like a sore thumb.

But sensing them and seeing them were two different things.

He flew upwards suddenly, glancing around. Chou was gone. Something in him noted he should have felt worried, but he knew that nothing could harm Chou. That and Chou didn't even cry out in surprise or pain. Chances were that he simply went off to do his own thing. While he had pulled Fushi out of trouble many times, Chou had a horrible habit of disappearing when ever he felt like it, with no explanations, when Fushi could have really used his help.

Sometimes he thought the bird did it on purpose, but he could never figure out how Chou could ever know just when to disappear, so he never voiced his suspicions to the bird.

Yet.

Every passing second reminded him how much he could use some help, even if it was only companionship. Two years worth of bad memories assaulted him, the screams of loved ones, the tears of friends, and the many times he had barely survived a fight.

And now it was happening again.

'But why so soon?' he thought to himself, watching block below him, 'They aren't supposed to show up for another fifteen years... and Naoko herself didn't know what they were then.' He grimaced slowly not liking where his thoughts were turning.

Either these creatures were going to disappear as fast as they appeared, or something had woken them up prematurely. And he knew that chances were that he was the cause. Somehow his being back in this point in time had triggered their appearance.

He shook those thoughts off, how could he have activated them, he didn't do anything beyond bring the world back to life, it made no sense that he was the cause, yet the thoughts still lingered. What if his prolonged existence in the past was putting Naoko in even more dire situations rather than helping to protect her?

He was so intent on his thoughts that he never noticed as a specter flew up behind him. It was shaped like some prehistoric flying reptile, gliding silently towards the distracted angel, claws extended, and collided hard. The Angel smashed into the ground before he could even start to fight back, and by then most of the fight was over as shadows flowed over him, locking his arms and legs in place. He instinctively tried to fly upwards, but before he could get far the shadows started to pull him back down.

"Halo Star!" Fushi yelled, frantically trying to loosen the grip. Unable to aim the attack it simply burst into appearance in his left hand and fired straight down, a ball of energy tearing through every specter it touched, then burying itself deep into the ground. But the shadows quickly flowed back in to replace themselves and slowly but surely they pulled him back down.

"Chou!" Fushi screamed, straining against the pull with everything he had, "Help me!"

He could feel Chou coming, but the bird offered no words of encouragement, nor did it transmit any feelings of worry. Then he felt another presence following behind Chou, one that seemed strangely familiar.

He saw a specter come out of the crowd; it lifted high and flew at him hard. He watched it with a grim sense of satisfaction. He had seen them do this before, when they tried to possess a person and gain control over their bodies. He watched as the thing collided with his chest and simply seeped through the armor and into his chest... then burst into bright red flames. As it had been in this world's future, in his past, the specter couldn't hope to possess him. He was already possessed by the Angel of Life. And the Angel of Life wasn't very fond of people trying to usurp control of the body away from Fushi; it's rightful owner.

The shadows suddenly started to apply more pressure as they continued to cover his body. They had realized that possessing him wasn't going to work they moved to kill him and finish it once and for all. As the shadows started to flow over his face he saw Chou coming down the street towards him, and watched as the streetlights down the street suddenly exploded with radiance, the dimly lit streets was suddenly awash with light and the silence was broken by the pain filled screeches of the specters.

"Golden Halo."

Fushi could feel his body tingle as though electricity was flowing just above his skin, then he watched as the shadows confining him shrieked and pulled away, releasing him. He fell to the ground, landing lightly; he looked down at his arms only to see them, and his whole body, glowing as though it were a light bulb.

He smiled, this was better than the solar lamps they had packed with them in the old days. No way for the Specters to tamper with the batteries.

"*Phoenix Wing Blade!*" he yelled, holding his arm out, and waited for the familiar weight of his Katana to appear in his hand before charging the mass of shadows.

Off to his side he could see flashes of light ever few seconds, but he was too busy to actually look to see his benefactor. Shadows dodged in every direction but he wasn't in the mood to allow any of them to escape. A sudden burst of speed brought him within reach of a group of them, all of which fell before his Katana, then he noticed a few starting to fly away, and then he was up there beside them, arm pumping, sword singing. From his new vantage point he saw many small groups of the specters fleeing, and without a second thought he started opening up on them with everything he had. Halo Stars filled the air one moment, then the next pillars of flame shot from the ground as he called forth the Phoenix Life Fire.

After a few moments a calm voice intruded into his thoughts.

"Yes, I do know it's a waste of energy..." Fushi said at length, to his sword, "But I can't let any of them escape."

Chou didn't respond, but Fushi wasn't expecting him to. They had both been there, and they both knew he was right. But Fushi also knew Chou was right, it was a horrible draw on his power to keep tossing out attacks left and right.

He lowered himself to the ground watching as his benefactor finished off the last small group of Specters, and he felt very uneasy. The man who had come to his aide was the same man he had tried to kill only two days ago.

Fushi stood there watching as the Knight, clad in platemail, finished off the last specter, and then slowly turned to face him. They stood there for a moment, silent, studying each other.

Fushi lowered his sword, then nodded to the knight, "Thank you for your help."

The Knight stood there silently, his face obscured completely by his helmet, leaving Fushi to wonder what his reaction was. Suddenly the Knight raised his sword up to his forehead and snapped off a curt salute, then brought his sword forward pointed right at Fushi's heart.

Fushi grimaced, the knight's intentions seemed fairly clear. He wanted a fight. "We don't have to do this, I do not wish to fight you."

The Knight's response was to simply maintain his stance for another few seconds then launch himself forward with his sword leading. Fushi didn't even think before parrying the attack, and before he could think to teleport away, or even fly away to stop the fight he found himself hard pressed to keep up. He backed away as the knight pressed the attack, biding his time. Soon enough the Knight's attacks would slow down and his chance for a counter would come. He brought his sword across using a lifetime's worth of training to lead his sword. A quick flick of the wrist deflected a thrust; a short sideways chop blocked a brutal swing.

'He's good,' Fushi thought to himself, ignoring the sweat that was starting to roll down his forehead, 'but he keeps leaving his left side open, his swings are wild and wide, and it's only a matter of time...'

The knight came across for another hard swing, and Fushi was waiting. He brought his sword around as if to block, then with a deft flick of the wrist he brought his sword around the knight's and thrust in at the knight's exposed side. His sword plunged in fast, but the knight didn't try to bring his sword back around to block it, instead he grabbed onto his cape and brought it front of the trusting blade, and used the momentum from his swing to turn himself all the way around. Fushi's sword pierced the cloth easily, but the blade was pulled off target and it only scraped the side of the knight's armour as it passed.

Fushi grimaced again as his attack was defeated, but he had managed to turn the tide and wasn't about to let it go now. He chopped his sword in, then as it was deflected he feigned a quick vertical slash, then thrust forward. He watched with grim appreciation as the Knight's sword came in at the last second each time to just barely deflect the attack. The knight was good, with some great potential, but he had picked a fight he couldn't hope to win, and was outclassed. And it was time to beat this point home.

Fushi snapped off another couple of quick thrusts, then suddenly dashed forwards, smashing their blades together and knocking the knight off balance. Another slash was blocked, but the already off balance Knight was forced to place all of his weight onto one leg, and his sword arm was outstretched, an easy

target. Fushi's first thought was to go for the arm, but decided to simply disarm the man rather than disembowel the man's arm. He went for yet another slash, aiming for the Knight's sword, hoping that he could simply bat it away and end this fight. He swung hard, but as his sword was about to connect the knight suddenly swung his arm back, dropping to a knee and using the momentum to spin himself around and bring his sword in for a chop at Fushi's side. Fushi, completely unprepared for the Knight to be able to do anything, short of fall on his back, was off balance as his sword cut through nothing, and at a bad angle to block an attack, but he hadn't lived this long only to fall to one simple attack by a lesser swordsman. He used the momentum from the swing to throw himself another step forward, away from the other sword, and to bring his sword down and back around behind him, twisting as he went, to block the attack.

Which never came.

"Dark Shard CHARGE!"

The Knight, in mid-swing, was hit in the side by a stream of black glass shards. He toppled to the side completely off balance, and landed hard on the ground holding his side, yelling in agony.

Fushi took a few steps away from the knight, for safety, and then looked up to the roof of a nearby house only to see another knight, this one's armor pitch black. The dark knight's crimson cape fluttered in the breeze, and the man's laughter cut through the sudden silence. With a deep bow he snapped off a question to the downed man, whom obviously understood, for the next thing to happen was a blast of light nearly cutting the dark knight in half. The dark knight dodged to the side at the last second, still laughing, and asked another question in an inhumanly deep voice.

The Knight was suddenly on his feet and leaping through the air at the Dark Knight, but the Dark Knight was already jumping away, leaping from rooftop to rooftop as the Knight chased him deep into the night.

Fushi watched, confused by the altercation, then started to raise himself into the air to give chase. He didn't know what they were doing, but people could get hurt, and he had to make sure they didn't.

"Going somewhere?"

Fushi's heart stopped. He had been so focused on the fight he hadn't noticed as another person had approached. For a moment his terror and hatred got the best of him and he almost turn around firing off a blast of energy. But he stopped himself at the last moment; at this time this man wasn't his enemy.

Not openly.

Not yet.

"I'm going to stop them, Destruction." Fushi said, allowing an icy tone to accompany the demon's name.

"Funny, but I don't see why you should be stopping them." Ikkou said with a growl, "Unless of course this is another one of those things you're 'doing for the future but can't tell us about'."

Fushi's eyes narrowed, and he turned to face the boy, "Their fight could cost people their lives, unlike you I'm not simply going to allow them harm some innocent bystander."

Ikkou glared at him, "Yeah, I'm a heartless bastard, and what about you? You keep telling me that I'm a monster, you keep telling me I'm out of control and causing more... destruction... then I am helping." Ikkou walked forward, until he was standing only a foot away from Fushi, "But the way I'm looking at it, you're the monster."

Fushi laughed, "I'm the monster?"

"Who made these shadow creatures?"

"I can't tell you that, it could change the future."

"How did we beat them finally?"

"I can't tell you that, it could change the future."

"You're going to go and protect the helpless from those two?"

"Yes."

Ikkou smiled suddenly, a cruel smile of a creature that had trapped it's prey, "I can't let you do that."

"Why in the hell not?"

"You might change the future."

Fushi stood there flabbergasted for a moment, then shook his head, "This is different..."

"Oh really? Oh, well then, please, do explain how this is different." Ikkou said in a sarcastically amiable tone.

Fushi looked away for a moment to where the duo had disappeared, "Because when they met the man in the silver armor and I had been in a fight. If I hadn't been here he wouldn't have been here to fight the man in the black armor. There fore I'm responsible for anything that happens as a result of it."

Ikkou snorted in disgust, "That's a convenient bit of logic. Then why do you keep coming to help 'us' out? By doing that you're changing the future! And hell, if you know what's going to happen you could save everybody a lot of time and effort, we could stop these shadow things before they really hurt anybody, we could wipe out the remnants of the Tenma while they're weakened, we could be prepared for any attacks that might be coming..." Ikkou raised a hand to interrupt Fushi before he could say anything, "But no, we can't do that, it might change the future."

"It could quite easily change the future for the worse!" Fushi snapped.

"It could quite easily save a lot of people a lot of misery and suffering, and you aren't even willing to risk it!" Ikkou yelled back.

"It could kill hundreds of thousands..."

"But by knowing this we could SAVE even more!"

Fushi turned his back on Ikkou, "You could never understand..."

"Understand what you pompous bastard?! This isn't about saving the world is it? No... No, it was never about saving the world for you, ever since you saw Naoko it was different. You say you're trying to save the world but you're just in this for yourself!"

Fushi spun around, "I'm just trying to protect her from YOU!"

"I can't let you do that, it might change the future." Ikkou stated in a slow cold tone.

Fushi bit back the rage, knowing that Ikkou was goading him on, "So you'd just let her die."

Ikkou's cat with the canary smile returned suddenly, "Well, well, well, you decide to bring that up again. That's right, ever since you got here, while you've been overly tight lipped with any information you've been real happy to point out again and again that I'm the one who kills Naoko in the distant future. You claim you don't want to affect the future but that simple statement could have changed everything, but maybe that's just what you want. Maybe you just want her to stay away from me!"

"Yes, that's exactly what I want..."

"Yes, it is, isn't it. But, funny, tell me... What proof do you have?"

Fushi blinked, "What?"

"Where the hell is your proof? How do I know you were ever married to Naoko? How do I know that I'm the one who killed her? How can you prove that any of that ever happened?" Ikkou screamed at Fushi, waiting as Fushi stood silently, then continued, "The way I see it is like this, as far as I know you're the enemy. Maybe you're trying to split us up, maybe you're jealous, maybe this is an elaborate attempt by the Tenma to destroy the demons once and for all, but I'll tell you this right now, I don't like you. And if you ever get between me and Naoko I will kill you. And if you ever put her in dangers way, I will kill you. And if I ever find the slightest proof, ever, that what you told her was indeed a lie, **I will kill you.**"

Fushi snarled, "That's the destruction I remember, always jumping to conclusions, and when the story isn't one he likes he makes one up. Always diving in headfirst, never thinking. You want to know how you killed her? You lead her head first into the enemy, she was trying to help you out, she was trying to protect you. You never even looked back, you never even knew she was there, and yet she was there. Trying to save your useless ass. And that's where she died, surrounded by enemies, unable to escape while trying to help you. She died screaming for help, but by the time you had even bothered to look over she was dead. And then you lost control completely, and the demon was released, a hundred men died before I put my sword through you." Fushi, narrowed his glare, "Oh, didn't I tell you Ikkou? I killed you in the future. And if you ever bring Naoko to harm... I've killed you once and I will kill you again."

Ikkou and Fushi snarled at each other for a long moment, then Ikkou turned around and slowly walked away, "Any time you care to try. Any time."

Fushi sighed deeply watching Ikkou walk away. He had lost control of himself completely then, but how could he not. The kid didn't know anything, he was lucky that he couldn't kill Ikkou, Naoko's life had ridden to much on his protection. But he was serious, if Ikkou ever did push it to far again...

"How lovely."

Fushi turned around, but there was nobody to be seen.

"Trying to scare him away from her by giving him a guilt trip? How would you like to be on the receiving end?"

Fushi turned around again and then he saw two glowing points of light pointed at him from a dark alley, "Who are you?"

A bitter laugh echoed around him, "What too good to remember your old friends? Of course you are, for one who claiming that the boy is a hothead you've certainly got a few things to remember, I don't suppose you even remember the living hell you lefts us all in..."

"Who are you!?" Fushi demanded, but if the thing in the alley heard it didn't acknowledge it.

"You dove in head first, unwilling to wait for us, unwilling to ask for the help you needed. You were always so damned proud you couldn't even see straight. I'll never understand why the others followed you without a second thought, but," The voice laughed bitterly again, "We all know what that got them for their troubles."

"I don't know what you are talking about, and frankly I'm tired of this..." Fushi stated simply, turning and walking away, but as he did he noticed another set of glowing points, resembling eyes, in the shadows ahead of him now, he glanced over his shoulder quickly, and noticed that the ones in the alley had disappeared.

"You can't just walk away from me, no, after what you just did you have to listen. You think you don't know what I'm talking about, but how about actually thinking about it before you deny it all. Think back, about the kids, how nobly you were trying to protect them from the demons. How utterly stupid. Instead of hiding you decided to stick it out and fight, is it coming back to you now? The fight between you and Darkbolt?"

Fushi didn't respond but he was getting suddenly flashes of emotions, and mental pictures of the situation. It had happened, he realize, but not while I was with the Angel of Life.

"I guess everything after that is a blank, well let me fill you in on what happened. The children are dead, because of you. Those that survived became Tenma, and so were dead to us. Without 'you' the rest of us fell apart, it made me sick. Peace, good old Peace couldn't even raise a hand in a fight without your constant presence, and the others fell into fighting by themselves, our once glorious team fell apart, despite my best efforts. Because of your cocksure attitude many died, not hundreds, but hundreds of thousands, entire planets, races, solar systems, galaxies fell before the Tenma forces. We fought, and we fought, and we fought, and we were beaten back farther and farther, our students died while we watched helplessly. The demons should have won, but thank goodness for Destruction, his discord gave us the chance we needed, Darkbolt sealed him in an orb, and well if Peace didn't finally come through for us. By watching he somehow learned how to seal the demons away himself. After a couple of brutal battles we finally managed to seal Darkbolt himself, but the results were disastrous. Love and Good were mortally wounded, their only hope was to allow themselves to go into a deep hibernation and pray that maybe one day they might raise again to fight with us. That left two of us. Do you understand that? TWO OF US! I had to fight the demons by myself, with Peace as my backup, the only reason we managed to get through that was because of the damage that Good and Love had done before they went down. The Demons were weakened, and Evil couldn't quite get the other two to listen to her. But even as Peace got the last one in an Sealed away Evil managed a last ditch shot. And then I was all alone. I was all alone, do you know what it's like to watch all of your people die and be helpless to stop it all? I was hurt too, and without the demons to fight against I gathered up the energies of the Angels and flew to this planet. We're all here Life. It's just up to you to finally live up to your calling and find us. And try to make up for killing each and every one of us."

Fushi stood there silently, feeling very out of place. The feelings of pain and morning where there but they weren't his, yet they very much were his. Finally he got his emotions back under control and looked to the hidden "angel of light", "You lie."

They glowing eyes narrowed for a moment, "No more then you did to the boy. The results were the same, but the situation wasn't exactly as I told you. Just like your story to the boy. You see my story isn't exactly the truth..." The eyes slowly started to fade away, and the voice, in a distant echoing voice, spat one last thing vehemently before disappearing completely, "A couple of our children survived."

Fushi sat there for a moment trying to figure out what exactly had just happened. Images of humanoids that the Angels had taken in, taught, and called their children ran through his head. Somehow he knew each one's name, and each had a distinct feeling associated with them. After a long moment he shook his head, pushing this past memories away. Somehow this creature claiming to be the Angel of Light knew almost too much about the past. And much too much about the future. He was right, he had lied to Ikkou about how Naoko had died, but he had done so to try to curb Ikkou's impulsive nature, which might help prevent the disaster from coming.

For a minute he thought about just telling them all what happened, but he couldn't. It would mean them changing the future too much, and not necessarily for the best. And how could they go on enjoying their lives now if they knew what was truly awaiting them in the future?

No, he decided, they couldn't know how or why it had happened. Hopefully them knowing about Naoko's immanent demise would be enough to prevent her death. Hopefully.

"Chou..." Fushi looked over to his constant companion, "Do you think that it was telling the truth about the Angels being here on earth?"

Chou cocked his head to the side and looked at him for a moment.

"Yes, I am thinking about finding them now... If they were around, maybe so much of this could be changed for the better..." Fushi stated.

Fushi glared at the bird, "I don't care if you think this is oxymoronic that I would try to change the future by bringing in the Angels instead of simply telling them the future. This is different..."

"Think of it," Fushi continued, ignoring Chou's response, "The Demons under the control of Naoko and the others combined with the Angels... we would be a force to be feared throughout existence... we'd be able to bring peace to the cosmos again..."

Fushi looked up to the stars for a moment, if the Angels were here on earth, if they were truly here and he could find them, then the future was no longer the same one he had come from, the future was a bright jumble of possibilities.

And for the first time since Naoko's death he felt hope fill him.

The dreams are coming again.

I hate them.

Every time they appear I always wake up screaming, except this time people notice. The look at me oddly, the always look at me oddly, but now they wonder if I'm crazy, insane, mad... And they're right, I must be mad, because in this dream nothing was right.

There was the hallway, the hallway is always in this dream. It's dark, and for some reason the roof is always dark, but everything halfway down is lit... The floor is made of something solid, I don't know what, I never look down, but I can always hear the cold clicking of my heels with every step I make. The hallway... it goes on, why doesn't it end?

And I hear screaming. The screams, they cut through me like a knife, and I'm scared. I'm scared to death. All I can think of is that I need to run, and it doesn't matter where; run to help them, run away and hide, it doesn't matter... but no matter how fast my heart is racing, no matter how much I silently scream, or try to do otherwise, all I do is walk slowly forward.

Ka-click.

Ka-click.

Ka-click.

The door is in front of me now. Just a normal door, in such a strange place a normal door, but as I reach forward to open it the door swings open by itself. Everything I've been through before doesn't prepare me for what I'm about to see.

The room is large, and empty except for the signs of a recent fight, and what can only be the results of the recent fight. Four crystal crosses, with four monsters crucified.

And this is when the dream gets weird.

The creatures are all there, the ones that have haunted me, that stalked me, that torment me... The panther-man, the raven-human thing, a red wolf, oozing blood from everywhere, and a creature... I don't know... could it be a sloth?

They're all there, crucified, helpless. They've been beaten, they are dying, and I should be happy. These creatures of infinite evil, monstrous murders of entire species, these... these... THINGS! They are evil incarnate, the only thing they have ever done is cause pain, misery, suffering and now they're beaten! And I should be happy.

...

But I'm not happy.

Something is wrong; everything about this should be making me happy. A bit brutal treatment of these creatures, I admit, but nothing that couldn't easily be justified... and yet I can feel a void opening in my stomach. I look closer, and then they start to come clear... There are children inside the demons... And suddenly the demons disappear completely and all I can see are two boys, and two girls, pinned to the crosses by jagged crystal spikes through their wrists and ankles. There's so much blood running down their arms and... Oh god.

They're innocent!

They're innocent, these things aren't supposed to happen to good people! **Good people shouldn't die!!!**

And not like this... never like this...

I don't know how I know that they're innocent... I can just tell. I can't even see their faces, but I can tell. They never deserved this.

I'm crying now, I can feel the tears burning their ways down my cheeks, but I'm not sure why. I'm crying because this is wrong, but I know there is so much more to it. I know why this is wrong, but I can't tell why.

Then, one by one they disappear leaving only one. She lifts her head, and looks at me, and despite all her wounds, and her current state, she tries to plead for help.

"Please... please... help... me..."

The words cut through me and stab deeply into my heart. I can feel it stop and freeze in place. I scream, this time out loud, as her cross disappears and I know that there's nothing I can do for her.

Then the laughter starts, and from the darkness I can see eyes. Eyes of pure malevolent evil. Slowly but surely a woman steps out from the darkness, and she offers me her hand, all the while laughing. This creature is even more evil than the demons, I can feel it, but there's something else that the me in the dream knows that I don't... because while I would have... While I would have screamed, attacked, knocked her hand away... The dream me took her hand, and I knew it was all over.

And that's when I woke up screaming.

They're all looking at me oddly again, but none of them dare to say anything because they're afraid of me. Good. I'm afraid of me, and I don't see why they should be any better off.

But what does this mean? The children in the demons, their death, the monstrous woman whom I can't refuse... What does it mean? Why do I wake up drenched in sweat, crying and screaming? **Why me!!!**

...

I hate these dreams.

* * * *

Naoko woke suddenly in the middle of the night. It was Darkbolt's doing, he had woken her up for some reason. She didn't care why at this point though; he had been leaving her relatively alone tonight, only bothering to mention that he was allowing her more sleep because it allowed her to protect herself. And in turn him. She didn't care though. Sleep was sleep.

And now her only thought was to roll right back over and go to sleep. A small thought burst to the top of her mind asking, "why would he wake you up if there wasn't some danger in the immediate area?" All she wanted to do was close her eyes, but slowly she forced herself back to her feet, and stumbled forward across the room to flick on the light switch.

Just as her fingers brushed the switch she saw something across the room come flying towards her, a large blade pointed right at her. She screamed, and hit the lights by accident while stumbling back. As the light flew on, the creature made of darkness looked like it was melting away, in what had previously been a dark room was now a very brightly lit one. One where the creature couldn't call on the darkness to help boost its energies. It didn't stop though, it didn't need any power for this, all it needed was to move another four feet and plunge the blade into Naoko.

Naoko, shocked, was trying to pull herself together to transform, but just before she could start she watched as the shadow creature, still slowly dissolving around the edges, smashed into an invisible barrier and crashed to the ground. She looked over to the side and saw Yun's wards, which she had placed by the door. By the looks of it, they were working, but not quite the way that Yun had intended. While Yun had made these to keep the creatures from entering, it seemed that it had instead created an impenetrable force field from the one side of the room where her door was, to the other where she had placed the wards by her window.

The creature bashed up against the field a couple of times, helplessly trying to get at Naoko, but only managing to allow itself be dissolved even more by the bright lighting. Naoko stood back up closing her eyes, and summoned forth the energies she'd need to transform.

She, and the creature were surprised as the door suddenly flew open, and crashed right through the shadow creature, obliterating it. Naoko jumped, loosing her focus and accidentally canceling out the transformation before it began.

Naoko's father looked in, looking tired and worried, "Naoko, are you okay?"

Naoko stood there flabbergasted, just opening up her mouth and shutting it, then shook her head, "Uh, yes dad... I was just... having a nightmare."

"Oh," her father said slowly, walking in and giving her a quick hug, "Well, it's just a dream you don't have to worry about it. Now you get some sleep, you look horrible."

Naoko smiled, and then quietly replied, "You look just as bad."

He smiled, ran his hand through her hair, then left closing the door behind him.

'He's right. I need sleep, but there is something much more important I have to do first.' Naoko thought to herself. She moved the wards to the four corners of the room, hoping that they'd have the effect of keeping everything stuck beyond the other sides of her walls, then she transformed to Darkbolt and teleported to Mariko's, then Yun's place.

They were still asleep, and a portion of her knew she should wake them up, but she knew there wasn't much she could tell them beyond that she was attacked. All she could do was worry them, and she knew that Yun's wards would work, and with those thoughts she quickly and quietly moved their wards to make sure their whole room was protected, not just the space between the doors and the windows.

Finally she teleported to Ikkou's dorm. She'd never really been inside Ikkou's room so she simply teleported into the hallways, then walked around until she found a door with his name on it. Ikkou was the one person who hadn't been attacked by the shadow creatures yet, and he was also the one person without any kind of wards to protect him.

Chances were that the creatures wouldn't be able to find him, but she wasn't willing to take the risk. She teleported inside the door, suddenly wishing she had woken Yun for more wards. As she arrived on the other side of the door she saw a dark figure standing over one of the beds, a large sword in one hand.

Both her and the figure were surprised, but the figure seemed to be more prepared for such a situation. It threw something towards her, and then dived towards the window. Naoko brought up a barrier without a second thought and watched as a long piece of paper collided with her barrier and stuck to it. For a long moment she wondered if it was actually going to do something, but after a few moments it slowly slid off the barrier and onto the ground. As she looked back up all she saw of the figure was the tail end of a red cape as it disappeared out the window.

Naoko ran over to the bed and found Ikkou sleeping soundly in it. She slowly walked over to the other bed to find a smaller, but perfectly fine boy snoring contentedly.

'I guess I managed to stop that creature from attacking Ikkou... but then, what had it been doing in the room...' Naoko looked slowly around the room and found four more of the strips of paper that had been used to attack her. one in each of the four corners of the room. She slowly walked over and picked up the one that had been thrown at her, and saw that on the other side there was writing, the same kind that had been on the ones Yun had given to her, except these ones seemed more ornate.

She considered waking Ikkou, then decided against it. It was late, she was tired, the creatures couldn't attack her, and the figure with the sword tried to protect him. Short of scaring him she couldn't do anything. So she teleported home and went back to bed.

Darkbolt was feeling very kind, as kind as the demon ever got, and decided not to subject her to nightmares throughout the night. Besides, there would always be another night in which to torment her.

So for the first night in three days she slept soundly.

Naoko, with a full night's sleep under her belt, felt like she could take on the world on her way to school. The feeling quickly changed when she arrived at school, Tyris was just as bad as ever, and she noticed the worried looks on both Mariko and Yun as she passed them in the halls. She managed to slip them a note to meet her at the Dojo after school, before Yun and Mariko's classes started.

As the final bell rang she couldn't help but feel happy to escape Tyris's prying eyes, was quick to grab her bag from her locker and make her way to the exit.

"Hey Naoko!"

Naoko stopped, looking around for a moment before seeing Ikkou trying hard to make his way over to her as fast as he could.

"Hey Naoko... I wanted to ask...."

Naoko, in her hurry to get going towards the Dojo, didn't notice Ikkou's nervous tone or stance, "Ask me later, we've got to meet Yun and Mariko by the dojo."

Ikkou stood there, unmoving, unable to come to grips with what had just happened. He had finally gotten the courage up to ask and she blew him out of the water before he could even say a single word.

Naoko glanced at Ikkou for a moment, then noticed Tyris off by the side of the stairs with Jack, but his eyes were locked on her. She reached over and grabbed Ikkou's hand, "Come on, we've got to hurry."

Ikkou, snapped out of his daze only to be dumped into a worse one as he ran with Naoko towards the Dojo, holding her hand the whole way. Just a moment ago he thought he'd been shot down, but now he was holding hands with her. He felt flustered, unable to speak or do anything, not that he would have given the opportunity, but he couldn't help wonder if it really meant anything.

As they arrived they found, against all odds, Yun already there waiting for them.

Naoko looked at him, slightly confused, "Yun... how did you get here so fast?"

Yun shrugged with a small smile on his face, "I took the stairs."

"Stairs?"

Yun shook his head, "Sorry, obscure joke, I know a shortcut." he paused momentarily then looked over at Ikkou with a raised eyebrow. Ikkou shrugged, his face oddly red. Naoko looked over at Ikkou then realized she was still holding his hand and let go quickly, blushing.

"Aw how cute," Mariko declared walking past the others to sit on the steps to the Dojo, "You two finally a couple?"

Naoko turned a deeper shade of red, "N-no, I was... I was just, uh..."

Ikkou just stood there helplessly.

Mariko looked from Ikkou over to Naoko and sighed inwardly, realizing that no such thing had actually happened. She simply smiled wider and laughed, "Gee, Naoko, I'm just kidding. You turn red anymore and you're going to pop!"

Naoko turned to the side so that the others couldn't see how red her face really was, and because of it missed the look of disappointment plainly displayed on Ikkou's face. Both of them managed to get themselves composed, and Naoko looked over to Yun.

"Those wards you made for use were really useful, they saved my life last night."

Yun's eyes opened wide, "What? They did? But that's... I mean, that..."

"Yun, what is it?" Mariko asked.

"I... I just copied those symbols from some of the stuff our sensi has hanging on the walls in the Dojo, he said it protected it from dark forces... I, well, I just made those to try and calm your nerves so you wouldn't be worrying unnecessarily."

Ikkou looked around at the others, "What are you guys talking about?"

"Yun made some wards to help keep the Specters away while we were sleeping... Oh," Naoko said, looking over to Ikkou, "We haven't even told you about them have we?"

Ikkou turned away from the group, "Yun phoned me after you guys were attacked and told me."

"Sorry Ikkou, I should have thought to tell you sooner..."

"Yeah..." Ikkou mumbled, "Whatever..."

"Hey, Ikkou, you feeling okay?"

Ikkou stood silently for a moment, "Yeah. I'm fine. Keep talking."

Naoko paused, then continued again, "The wards work... they create an invisible barrier between each piece of paper which the Specters cannot pass through... umm... But unless they're surrounding the whole room they're kind of useless."

"Because they could just get in from an air vent instead of the door or window."

"Exactly. So I moved them around last night."

"Why didn't you wake us up, tell us about this?" Mariko asked.

Naoko shrugged helplessly, "And say what exactly? It would have been pointless to wake you up to tell you it was safe to sleep..."

"And I guess you put up those wards for me then, that would explain where they came from..."

Ikkou said, turning to face the others again.

"Actually... No... Ikkou..."

Ikkou's face darkened immediately, "Then those papers aren't yours? What are they doing in my room?!"

"Well, uh, when I went to your room to check on you... uh... There was already somebody there."

Ikkou turned pale then started to turn red, and faced the other direction again.

"I don't know who it was, it was too dark to see... But the person had put up wards around the room, and even attacked me using one." Naoko winced as she saw Ikkou's hands clench until they turned white, "But the paper didn't do anything, and the person jumped out the window before I could stop them."

"So... somebody was in my room... putting up strange wards... and he attacked you... and you didn't even wake me up?!" Ikkou growled.

"Why bother waking you up? The person was trying to help you! Waking you up would have just left you awake, paranoid, and unable to get back to sleep..."

"Because there was somebody, in my room, someone I didn't invite, putting up strange symbols in my room, while I was helpless to do anything. How do you know those wards don't cause other things to happen? What if it is to weaken my concentration and release..." Ikkou stopped then shook his head, "You should have woken me up."

"Lighten up, Ikkou," Mariko said, "First off, if he wanted you dead you would be. Second off those wards haven't done anything yet, so we'll just get Yun to make some new ones for you and you can toss the old ones. And third, ease up on Naoko, she was just doing what she thought was right."

Ikkou didn't respond, but his head nodded forward.

"I... I didn't want to bring this up, but I've been noticing some odd behavior from you two recently, and I'm beginning to worry that the Demons are effecting you." Yun stated solemnly.

Ikkou, Naoko, and Mariko all turned to face him in surprise.

"What do you mean?" Naoko asked.

"Well, Naoko, I've known you for a long time. You are a very shy, cautious person, but when you become Darkbolt... You change. You're loud, your determined, your forceful. Underneath it all you are still you, but every so often I notice that you're showing off those traits even when you're not transformed."

Naoko grimaced, remembering the fist she had made when the boy had grabbed her wrist.

"And Ikkou... Well, I don't know you all that well, I know you were a hot head... but recently it's gone beyond that. When you transform you become fanatical and violent, and even when you aren't transformed, some of your friends say that your temper is worse than ever when you get mad..."

"Well, Yun, being turned into a monster, nearly killing someone you care for," Ikkou looked over his shoulder to Naoko, who ducked her head slightly under the scrutiny, "Having to fight for your life and everybody else's around you, and finding out that there is an alien armada waiting to take over your home will change a person."

"Yes, but... what if?" Yun asked, allowing the question to hang.

"Look, Yun, I'm in control of what I'm doing! No "ifs" "ands" or "buts"... And if you can't believe me, maybe I shouldn't be here right now." Ikkou fumed.

"Calm down Ikkou, we're worried about you that's all."

"That's not all it is, is it Mariko. You're worried about what I might do. You are all willing to believe Fushi above me..." Ikkou said, trailing off silently.

"Ikkou, he came from the future, he knows what happened." Naoko said.

"Prove it!" Ikkou snarled, "Prove to me he came from the future, every time we ask he gives a bad excuse for why not to tell us. In fact I can't think of a single situation in which he really helped us out."

"What about bringing the earth back to life?"

"He could have been doing that just to gain our trust. He could have been doing it for himself just as easily!"

"What about Mariko?"

"Yun, you saved Mariko, and that was after he refused to help you. He was fully willing to let her die."

"No he wasn't!" Naoko yelled suddenly, surprising the others, "He knew she'd be okay because he knew the outcome of the battle."

"Then how come he didn't know anything about it!" Ikkou said, not willing to miss his opportunity to make this point, "It's not like we felt any huge urge to keep it secret!"

"I don't know..." Naoko shook her head, "But I know Fushi, we can trust him."

Ikkou stopped dead, looking over at Naoko. His glare softened, and he looked sad, "Kakko."

Naoko turned pale. Kakko had been a member of the Tenma, one that had convinced her that he had no interest in obeying the Queen any more. She had trusted him, and only Ikkou had been able to see through him fast enough to save her life.

Naoko took a step back, then raising a hand to her mouth.

Ikkou walked up to Naoko, still looking sad, "Naoko... I'm sorry..." He reached out to place his hand on her shoulder, but she pulled away. He hid the wince before she could see it, but he couldn't help but feel the cold stab her action had sent to his heart. "Naoko... I'm sorry about what happened, but we can't let that happen again. We can't risk one of us getting hurt..."

"I can't risk losing you." Ikkou thought, but while his mouth moved, no words came out.

Naoko shook her head stubbornly, "But we can trust him, this is different!"

"How?" Ikkou demanded, throwing his hands up in the air, "How is this possibly different?"

"I... It... It just is!" Naoko yelled.

"And that's it, is it?"

Nobody said anything for a long time then Ikkou turned around and walked away.

"Fine, Naoko. If that's the way you want it... fine." Ikkou stopped a few steps away, "You know I will always be there for you. I will ALWAYS be there for you... But I thought that maybe... just maybe after everything we went through together that maybe you'd trust me. But it looks like you've already made up your mind."

Naoko watched as he started walking again. She slowly moved her mouth, but couldn't say a word. All she could do was reach out towards him, and silently watch him leave.

"Naoko..." Yun said quietly, "Go after him."

"And... What do I do? He doesn't trust Fushi, but I do! I know we can trust Fushi. I won't lie to him... and I... I won't stop Fushi from coming around or helping us."

Yun shook his head, "It doesn't matter, haven't you caught on by now?"

Naoko looked down quietly.

"He cares about you deeply, and he may be sounding like a spoiled brat about this, but it's because he cares about you. Can't you see that?"

"Yes... I know." Naoko mumbled quietly.

Yun threw up his arms in exasperation, "Then what are you waiting for? Go after him! You can't let him go away like that."

"I'm... sorry... but I... can't." Naoko turned and ran the other way.

Yun shook his head and sighed loudly, "Remind me, why do we have these meetings?"

"So we have a plan... So we're all informed... and so we're united." Mariko responded, ticking off each response on a finger.

"How many of those were successful today?"

"Uh... I think we're informed... I think."

"And what have we learned from all this?" Yun asked with a long sigh.

Mariko smiled sarcastically at Yun and stated, "Naoko and Ikkou are insane."

*

*

*

Naoko stopped running when she had gotten back to the tree where this whole mess had started for her. The tree by the cliff, looking out at the city. This is where she had found the box full of orbs. This is where she became Darkbolt.

At first she had denied that she was Darkbolt, but now it was becoming more and more clear to her that she was. Three were two of them, herself, Naoko, and the demon of darkness. Combined it was only appropriate that she assumed his name for herself. His powers, her control.

On the day of the transformation she had learned just how much stronger her will was compared to his, and for a brief moment when she had wrestled control from him she had thought that it was all there was to it, that life would go back to normal.

Nothing had ever been the same since that day. Ever since then it had been constant fighting, both physically and mental. She had to destroy those who threatened to kill her, and all that she loved, but she had to also make sure she didn't lose herself to the darkness in doing so. The slightest slip and Darkbolt might gain control again, and there was no telling if she could beat him a second time.

But even then everything was so simple. Her enemies were her enemies, they never claimed to be anything but, and her friends were unfaltering in their loyalty. But then Destruction had gained control over Ikkou. Ever since then nobody in the group completely trusted him, in the heat of battle they wouldn't hesitate if he asked them to do something, but at night when nothing else was pressing she couldn't help but wonder how long it would be before Destruction gained control again. Before Ikkou tried to kill her again, and this time succeed...

And then, Fushi had shown up.

He came from the future in their darkest hour, with the earth destroyed, and all life killed. He arrived and saved the planet, but in doing so had revealed a startling fact. He was married to Naoko in the distant future... and in that future she had died.

She knew that Ikkou had feelings for her, and at first she simply wished he'd stop... But she had grown fond of him, despite all of his flaws, and she knew that it wouldn't take much of a push before she could feel something for him.

And then Fushi had shown up.

He came from the future, he knew what was going to happen, and he couldn't lie to her. She had seen it in his eyes, the pain at revealing what had happened, to tell somebody so dear to him that she was doomed to die in the future. He told her stories about how they were married, that they had been deeply in love, and that it had been Ikkou who had killed her in the end.

Now she was faced with horrible problems. Ikkou still had feelings for her, and he was letting his jealousy rule over him. Fushi still cared for her deeply, but she had to wonder if he hadn't accidentally changed the future horribly by telling her this. What if she had been meant to marry Ikkou long before she met Fushi? What if they just had a relationship? Now she'd never know because she couldn't let herself get close to Ikkou. She already knew how it would turn out, how could she hurt him by leading him on?

"Are you sure you're not leading yourself on?" Asked a curious voice.

Naoko jumped involuntarily, as a small child walked up beside her and sat down next to the tree, "Who are you?"

The little girl cocked her head, long black hair draping over the plain white dress she was wearing.

"Are you sure you're not leading yourself on? You're so worried about everybody else," The little girl pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them, "You've forgotten to do what makes yourself happy."

"But, so many people are depending on me... And why hurt them if I already know?"

"How do you know? This is only your first time through, silly, this is your chance to live!"

"But..."

"My brother keeps telling me about love," The girl said quietly, looking up at the sky, "He says that when two people are in love, they're happy just to be around each other, and they feel happy when they see each other, and that nothing else matters. Don't you think so?"

"... yes."

"Then how can you be in love if you're worried about how you're going to hurt a person? Remember, this is your first time through, there is only the here and now, and you're not supposed to waste it. I'm just a kid and I know that! You've just got to do what makes yourself happy; you can't be in love if you're worried about everybody else's feelings. You've got to worry about your love, and your feelings first."

"But... how can I just say to one person who cares for me that I can't be with them... and how can I choose anything other than what I already know is going to happen?"

"How do you know what's going to happen?"

Naoko looked over at the little girl who had started drawing in the dirt, and hoped she didn't look as foolish as she felt as she said, "Somebody told me what was going to happen."

"Oh..." The girl nodded slowly, "Well, if you stand there for the next ten seconds, a bird is going to doody on your head!"

Naoko blinked, "What?"

"See, I just told you that a bird was going to doody on your head, so you already know what's going to happen right?"

"Uh..."

"So then why are you standing in the same spot? And why isn't your hair a mess right now? Probably just because me saying so doesn't make it happen... Well, my brother says I could make it happen if I tried hard enough, but he's kind of silly."

"Well this is different... you're just a kid." Naoko said.

"Maybe..." The girl said, standing up, "But if I'm just a kid how come I know you're feeling bad about love, and how come you're so willing to talk to a kid, and how come you're not suspicious of me, and how come I'm talking english, and you're talking Japanese, and we can still understand each other perfectly?"

Naoko took a step back from the girl. She hadn't noticed it before, but everything the girl just said made sense. The little girl had been speaking english since the beginning, but Naoko had understood it without even thinking about it like she normally had to. And she had felt some apprehension at first about talking to the little girl, but it had disappeared suddenly like it never really mattered. And the girl had known a little to much about what Naoko was thinking.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Naoko demanded.

The girl looked a little sad, "I'm here trying to help you... and my name is..." she stopped, then looked around, and then looked at Naoko again, "I can't stay, the bad lady is coming. I don't want her to find you, you're nice. Even if you can't think about yourself for ten seconds. That must make you a very un-shell-fish person, huh?"

The little girl hopped forward and gave Naoko a quick hug, smiled up at her, then ran and jumped off the cliff. Naoko didn't move for a second, then dived after the girl, trying to catch her or stop her before she could go over the edge, her fingers just missed as she dove for the child, and she found herself face first on the ground. She quickly crawled over to the edge of the cliff and looked down. The fall wouldn't be that long, but for a kid it could still be very deadly.

She gasped in surprise as she saw the kid on the ground a good distance away, waving and yelling, "I didn't finish my picture, can you finish it for me?"

Naoko laid there gaping as the kid ran off, still waving, then slowly started to get up. She walked over to the tree where the child had been sitting before she noticed a small heart had been etched into the ground, inside it read:

N.Y.

+

?

*

*

*

Ikkou stormed off again. He didn't like to admit it, but maybe they were right, he was having a hard time controlling his temper lately. But he'd always been a hot head; it wasn't like this was surprising or new.

He hated walking off like that, making himself to be an ass in front of Naoko, but he couldn't stand it. He'd do anything for her, take a blast a close range, fight off an army by himself if he thought it would help her but... Nothing he seemed to do was good enough for her to put her trust in him anymore.

He stopped and looked back, wondering if he should go back and try to patch things up. He shook his head, he was right, and it was time for Naoko to realize it.

But as he left he couldn't help but wonder if he'd just killed any chance he had ever had of being with her.

*

*

*

Mariko sighed deeply, toying with an earring absentmindedly, trying in fact to forget the man standing only a little ways to her left. The full moon glistened down on them. A slight breeze ruffled her hair, and the dress she had worn to her date. It wasn't her usual style, but she had decided to try and look especially nice for the date even if she didn't care much for dresses or jewelry.

But her date hadn't gone quite as she had been hoping it would. In fact most of everything had gone wrong. Not only did she have a hard time talking with Steven as the language barrier showed itself very brutally during their trip to the movies itself. To make matters even worse the movie had been in Japanese, meaning that Steven had gotten very bored and decided to try to keep himself preoccupied in another manner. She had spent most of the movie making sure he kept his hands to himself.

"Great," Mariko thought, "First cute guy who asks me out in a long time turns out to be a total creep."

She saw a hand snaking forward again, and batted it away. Despite her urging that she didn't need an escort, he had decided to escort her any ways. Probably to make another attempt at grabbing something he wasn't allowed to touch. To try and make the trip as short as possible she decided to make the trip through the park, and to shorten it even more the trip through the trees off the normal path. That way she'd get home earlier, and get rid of him sooner. Or, if worse came to worse, nobody would see her beat him up.

But as the hand came forward again she completely lost her patience. She didn't care if this was acceptable in the backward little place he came from, but she had been overly kind up until this point, and it was time to teach him a lesson.

As the hand came forward she grabbed him by the wrist and twisted his hand around until he let out a yelp of pain then let go.

"I've already told you to stop that, you do that again I'll break your hand." Mariko declared in a icy tone.

Steven pulled his hand in close, his face turning red with anger.

"You little bitch, I paid good money to take you out to that movie and it's time you paid me back." he yelled in English, reaching out to grab her.

Mariko didn't speak perfect English, but it didn't take a genius to figure out what the boy had in mind. She batted both his hands away then stepped forward and planted her palm into his chest, knocking him back a few steps. She knew it wouldn't hurt much, but it was the only warning shot she was willing to give him.

He was a creep, and he deserved a beating, but she had promised her sensei not to use what she learned from him unless she had no other choice.

She had decided, with a grim smile, that if he tried again she had no other choice. She took a step back, to get into a proper stance, and then felt something catch on her sandal. She looked down and saw that she had accidentally put a root right through an opening in her sandal, and accidentally pinned that foot the ground.

He head snapped back up as she heard something move in front of her, and she caught a backhand punch right across the left side of her face. Instinctively she rolled with the punch, but her left leg was still pinned down and she fell backwards. Without thinking she brought her arms to hit the ground as she hit herself, diffusing most of the force of the landing. Steven dove on her, trying to pin her arms down, not giving her a chance to get back up.

But Mariko wasn't worried, this was combat, this was her game. And she never lost yet. She only allowed herself a second of self-reprisal before she had another plan in mind for dealing with the pervert. He had her hands basically pinned down, and one leg trapped by the root, but the sandal's strap had snapped during the fall and was now loose. Within a second she could bring up her leg right into the man's groin, and if that didn't work she was willing to follow it up with a head butt into the man's nose, and even if that didn't work he couldn't do anything without letting go of an arm for one second. And as soon as that happened she was going to tear him to pieces.

But even as she jerked her foot free from the root, she felt Steven's weight diminish suddenly, and watched as somebody dragged him off her and threw him into a tree.

She pulled her foot again and felt the sandal give away completely, freeing her. She quickly got her feet under her and pulled the damaged sandal off without taking her eyes off of the two fighting men.

Steven, after being thrown into the tree received a couple of solid punches into the face, but after a second he managed to step back and drive a viscous side kick into the other man's stomach. She noticed that the man was wearing a black leather jacket and a red bandanna covering his face. She couldn't help but wonder if he was a gang member, but she figured it didn't matter.

He helped her, he was on her side.

She watched as the kick hit with a loud smack, and watched as the bigger man stumbled back a few feet, clutching his stomach. Steven moved in to attack while the man was hurt, but stopped as a sandal hit him hard in the back of the head.

"Hey!" Mariko yelled, rubbing a hand across the side of her face, and wiping the blood away from her split lips, "You are **mine!**"

Steven turned around and shook his head at Mariko, "You should have just run away when you had the chance."

"Funny. I was thinking the same thing of you."

Steven turned back to the man he was fighting, but another sandal smacked into the back of his head. He snarled, looking over his shoulder. Then the bigger man stood up, grabbing Steven on either side of the man's waist, lifting him up into the air, then slamming him down, back first into the ground.

Mariko watched in shock as Steven smacked his hands down into the ground, much like she had only a few moments ago, to diffuse the force of the landing. He wasn't moving, but chances were he wasn't hurt. But her benefactor didn't know that.

"Look out, he's faking it!" She yelled.

Steven suddenly lifted his leg up and kicked the man in the groin, causing the man to fall to the ground yelling loudly, until he hit the ground, head first into a rock. With a sick dull thump he fell limp and silent.

Steven got up, snarling, looked down at the man, then back over to Mariko, "Okay, time to finish this."

Mariko didn't respond, she now knew that this man knew some martial arts, not much by the looks of it, but some. This made him more dangerous. But she had been attacked, watched an innocent man try to help her only to get hurt, possibly badly. And she certainly didn't like what he had been attempting to try. He had made her mad, very mad. And that made her deadly.

She waved for him to bring it on. He snarled and charged. Before he could get to her, he sprung into the air with a jump kick. Mariko sidestepped deftly, burying a fist into his side as he passed by. She watched as he stumbled on the landing with a smile. She hoped it hurt. She make sure he was by the end of this.

Steven turned around, growling loudly, and ran at her again. She leapt forward, suddenly with a snap kick. Unable to stop, and barely able to get an arm up, he received a foot directly in the face. His head snapped back and fell backwards, with a yell. He rolled on the ground for a second holding his nose, screaming in pain.

From behind her Mariko heard movement, and she glanced over her shoulder only to see her masked benefactor pulling himself up to his feet, leaning heavily against a tree. His eyes transmitted the feeling of intense pain he was currently in clearly.

Another noise came, this one from in front of her. Without any hesitation she dropped to the ground and swept a leg out in front of her. She felt more then she saw Steven's charging body crash into the ground as his feet was knocked out from under him.

"Fool me once, shame on you," Mariko stated calmly, watching Steven push himself back up to his feet, then got ready for another attack, "Fool me twice..." she watched as he stood upright then launched a flurry of punches into his chest and stomach, then danced back as he swung a clumsy fist in response and placed a foot into his chest, hard.

"Shame on me."

Steven hit the ground, and rolled around moaning, clutching his battered chest. Mariko walked forward, grabbed him by the hair and dragged him up to her eye level, ignoring his yells.

"If I ever hear of you laying a single hand on any girl ever again, if I even guess that you might have touched a girl without her permission, and I'll show you how much I was really holding back tonight." She snarled, then as an afterthought added in English, "And just in case you didn't understand that... you hurt another girl, I'll kill you."

She planted another fist into Steven's stomach and dropped him on the ground. Normally she would have felt bad about the brutal treatment she had just given, but this was anything but normal. She personally felt like she was suddenly responsible for him trying to harm another person, and felt that he'd understand not to do it much better if he had to permanently learn to breath through a nose splattered across his face. But her oaths to her sensei prevented her from doing that.

"Promises be damned, I hear the slightest thing and I will kill him." She mumbled to herself, picking up her sandals.

She sighed, looking around but not seeing her benefactor anywhere. Her whole night had gone down hill in a hurry, and now she was left with a few bruises and a bunch of muscles that were going to be punishing her tomorrow for their sudden and harsh treatment. And she noticed that her benefactor was beating a quick retreat, as quickly as he could, hobbling slowly while clutching his head. She thought about chasing him, but decided against it.

"The ground would tear up my feet..." She mumbled to herself, with a slight grin, "Besides... I already know who he is."

She shook her head to dislodge anything caught in her hair, then walked home in barefoot, hoping that her parents wouldn't see her like this and ask any questions. It just wasn't one of those things she felt like explaining.

Jack grinned, moving his hands around through the air describing an aerial assault, "And then at the last moment my character slid into position behind the enemy fighter dogging my pal Mithren, and ka-bla-ow! We just barely managed to get through by the skin of our teeth."

Ikkou smiled and nodded to be polite. Mostly he didn't have much of a clue what Jack was talking about, he had started talking about "rpg"s and wouldn't stop. But then again Ikkou didn't mind listening to most of it, a lot of it sounded pretty interesting. And a bit of it almost sounded familiar.

"What game was that rock monster from again?" Ikkou asked.

"uh... Well, bunch of different ones I guess. Probably D&D. They're called Golems. Big, strong, not very smart... but really hard to destroy."

Ikkou nodded, sounded right. Jack wasn't so hard to get along with, and he found it conveniently easy to keep his mind off of what had happened yesterday while he was around. Plus he had, if nothing else, gave him something to call the rock monster that had attacked him.

"So you play any?"

Ikkou blinked, "Any what?"

"Rpgs." Jack laughed, "You mind sure isn't here right now is it?"

Ikkou scratched his head and sighed, "No, not really, sorry."

"Naoko?"

Ikkou turned and glared at him. Jack just smiled broadly, "Naoko it is."

Ikkou sighed, giving up on trying to intimidate Jack into silence. He would almost swear the Canadian was just too stupid to shut up. Or just to ornery to acknowledge Ikkou's desire not to talk about it.

"You want to talk about it?" Jack asked.

Ikkou just shook his head.

"Well, look man, maybe you don't want to talk to me... but maybe you should talk to her. And speak of the green haired beauty... there she is."

Ikkou's head snapped up suddenly, and his eyes locked on Naoko's. She looked at him from across the hall, to nervous to actually do anything, but too guilty to look away. Ikkou knew how she felt. He felt the exact same way.

"Go talk to her." Jack whispered shoving him forward.

Ikkou stumbled forward, almost colliding into Naoko.

"I swear," He thought to himself, "I am going to kill that guy..."

He managed to stop only a few inches away from Naoko, and found himself staring deeply into her eyes... And suddenly there was nothing else. There was him, and there was her, alone in a sea of darkness. The only things in the world that mattered. And she was so close, he could feel her breath on his neck, see her lips open hesitantly to say something, and then close again. She was so close, and all he could seem to think about suddenly was kissing her.

Ikkou was bumped to the side and reality came crashing back down around him in full force. Where a moment ago everything had been moving extremely slow, where the only things in the world had been him and Naoko, a new world existed, filled to the brim with the noise, hustle and bustle of a few hundred teens. Naoko looked nearly as disoriented as he felt. He could feel his face getting warm, realizing what he had been about to do.

"What do I say? Say I'm sorry! No... no, but I'm not, I can't lie to her... but I gotta say something." Ikkou's mind whirled.

"Hi." He managed to say.

Naoko fidgeted, "Hi..."

"I... uh... well... I was... uh..."

"Naoko!" Hanna called, coming down the hallways, "Naoko, we got to go talk to Mr. Miamoto about the test next week, remember? Come on, lets find him before he leaves!"

Naoko looked at Hanna, then over to Ikkou, she tried to say something but before she could do anything more then move her lips Hanna was already dragging her down the hallway at a frantic pace.

Ikkou swore under his breath, leaning head first up against the wall. After what had happened yesterday he hadn't expected her to even want to talk to him, and he didn't expect to even want to talk to her. She had basically said she didn't trust him, or even consider him as man. But when he had been so

close to her he noticed that both of them were nervous, both of them were uncomfortable, and he noticed that neither of them tried to step back.

"Dammit," He mumbled, "She isn't interested in me, I shouldn't fell this way..."

But as he turned to walk to his locker he realized that nothing he said would change it. He could just as soon stop feeling as oddly as he did as he could push Naoko from his mind.

He couldn't.

Mariko danced through the halls as fast as she could. She didn't want him to be gone before she got there. Again she just managed to slip by somebody, only to have her gym bag catch them and stop her dead in her tracks. She tugged on her gym bag again, and started through the halls again.

"This is ridiculous, I can't get through this crowd right now with this bag," Mariko thought, "And I can't run it to my locker right now..."

She noticed Naoko being dragged through the halls towards her by Hanna and had an idea. Just as Naoko passed she pushed the gym bag into her hands and yelled, "Put this in your locker, I'll get it from you tomorrow. Thanks!"

Naoko just gaped helplessly for a second as she was dragged into the crowd while still holding the gym bag. Mariko plunged into the crowded hallways again, but this time she was doing much better without having to drag around her gym stuff, and in nearly no time flat she made it to the hallway she wanted to be in. Now all she had to do was wait.

Mariko saw Tyris he walked down the halls, and she couldn't help but notice how he limped rather heavily. She walked over to him as he opened his locker and slid up against the lockers so that she could see his face as he dug in his locker. His eyes darted over to her then went back to his locker as he put away his binders.

"What were you doing last night?" Mariko demanded finally.

Tyris' eyes locked onto her again, then switch back into the locker again.

"I donno what you're talking about." He grunted in English.

"Oooh." Mariko nodded slowly, pasting an apologetic smile on her face, "Sorry about that I must have mistook you for another big guy with a newly acquired limp, goose egg on the head and..." Mariko slapped him in the stomach hard. Tyris dropped his books on the floor and clutched his stomach, bending over and grimacing in pain, "Of course, I can't forget the giant bruise you must have on your stomach. Come on, I'm not an idiot, not only are you one of the biggest people I know, you just happened to be one of the only other people who heard my plans for yesterday. Ready to talk?"

Tyris swore loudly, still clutching his stomach, he glared up at Mariko, "I help you out of a horrible situation and this is the thanks I get?"

Mariko was happy she was better at her english then he was at his Japanese, "I didn't need your help!"

"Bull!" Tyris snapped, "When I got there he had you pinned at his mercy."

Mariko's eyes narrowed, "He might have gotten me pinned, by sheer luck, but I was far from at his mercy."

"Prove it." Tyris shot back, trying to pick up his books.

Mariko nodded, "Fine, you want me to prove it? Come on, right now, I'll prove it to you." She motioned for him to follow her.

Tyris shook his head, "I'm not going to fight you! I don't hit women, and I certainly don't need to get into a fist fight with one."

Mariko shook her head, "No no no, you're going to come down to the Dojo with me, put on some pads and we're going to spar. Or you have problems with women kicking your butt too?"

Tyris jammed the books in his locker and locked it, "Fine. Fine. Lead the way."

Mariko glanced around the empty Dojo and counted herself as lucky. The Sensei was busy around the grounds, and there were no classes being taught. No distractions, and nobody to say that the match wasn't allowed. She switched into her Gi, and upon coming out of the changing room she found Tyris waiting, wearing a chest guard, standing on some mats he had placed across the floor. Generally the Sensei only used the mats when people were learning falls and throws for the first time, but Mariko didn't argue about them.

She figured he'd need them to soften the landing when he fell. Not everybody knew how to fall correctly.

She walked over to face him and slipped into a combat stance, waiting for him to respond in kind. Instead he glared at her.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm getting ready to fight, what do you think I'm doing?"

His frown deepened and he pointed over to a chest guard over at the edge of the mats, "Put it on."

"I don't need it," Mariko declared with a cocky grin, "You're not going to even get the chance to touch me, more or less hit me."

Tyris shook his head, then started to talk then stopped, his angry expression suddenly changing to one of curiosity. He raised his eyebrow then craned his head forward, and tilted his head to one side like a confused dog. All the while staring at her chest.

"**What** do you **think** you're doing!!" Mariko yelled at him angrily.

Tyris looked up, and his face turned red, "Uh, no, I wasn't staring at your... I mean, I... But there is a..." he sputtered rapidly then quickly spat out "Do you have a red rock sticking out of your chest?"

Mariko looked down and saw that the folds of her Gi didn't quite cover the orb containing the Demon of War. She quickly rearranged her Gi to hide it.

"Look, are you here to fight or not?" Mariko said, ignoring Tyris' question.

Tyris nodded, "As soon as you put on the padding."

Mariko ignored him again, this time lashing out with a kick. Tyris moved back out of the way without a second thought then went back to growling. All she heard from him at that point was something along the lines of "There is more than one way to skin a cat."

She jumped forward, launching a few kicks, all of which Tyris simply backed away from, never even attempting to counter attack. Obviously he was refusing to even attack while he thought he could hurt her, not wishing to strike a woman. She figured she would just have to point out how foolish that sentiment was at this point in time.

Again she lashed out at him with a couple of kicks, but this time she moved forward quickly, keeping up the attacks until Tyris couldn't back away fast enough to avoid the attacks. Instead she watched as he blocked them with his forearms, trying to bat them away nearly as hard as she launched them out at him.

She sighed in disgust; he still wasn't even trying to counter attack. All this was turning out to be was a farce. But in her disgust at the situation she made one fatal flaw, she was growing over confident. Tyris waited for the perfect moment, then caught one of her feet as she kicked. He held it for the briefest of time, then threw it to one side as hard as he could, forcing her to spin around to remain standing. Then he stepped in behind her and put her into a full nelson.

She kicked herself mentally, she had stopped taking seriously, and because of it she allowed him the opportunity to get this attack in. Not that it was very effective, she noticed with a grin. She tapped his instep with the heel of her own foot, then moved her head back so that it tapped him lightly in the nose. Then she twisted her arms up just a bit higher than Tyris was already holding them, and dropped straight down.

Tyris quickly dodged back, managing to avoid the leg sweep that Mariko had been planning.

"I hope you realize that I could have just hurt your foot, and broke your nose instead of just tapping them." She said with a predatory grin.

"And I could have actually put all of my strength behind that hold and forced you down to your knees." Tyris snapped back.

Mariko dove back in, pumping her arms rapidly in a quick burst of palm strikes, watching as Tyris danced back, slapping her arms away and dodging nearly half of the strikes. She stopped suddenly, bringing her foot up to kick him in the side, and grinned as he caught it. She immediately jumped up into the air and booted him in the chest with her other foot. Tyris stumbled back, coughing, but came back swinging his arms at her. She dodged back to avoid the punches, but realized quickly that he didn't seem to be trying to punch her, in fact his hands weren't even balled into fists.

"For god's sakes, are you trying to **poke** me?" Mariko asked incredulously, grabbing one of his arms at the wrist and twisting it.

Tyris' only response was a wolf like grin as he pulled his arm back in towards him as hard as he could. Mariko stumbled forward a step, as Tyris stepped forward and twisted his wrist out of her grasp. Then he quickly wrapped both arms around her, pinning her arms to her side, locked his hands behind her back, and lifted her off the ground squeezing just hard enough to keep her from slipping free.

"Actually, would you believe I was just trying to pull you in close?" Tyris asked still wearing the large grin.

Mariko ran through her physical responses in her mind. A head butt to the face would work, or a kick to his groin, even though he seemed to be trying to place his leg between them in such a way as to prevent such an attack. "Smart man," She thought with a smile. But as Tyris had claimed only a few moments ago there is more than one way to skin a cat.

"Pull me close so that you could hug me?" Mariko said with a coy tone, "You know if you wanted to cuddle you should have asked me out on a date first."

Tyris turned red again, blushing furiously, "I'm not hugging you! I mean, I'm not trying to... I mean I wasn't inten..."

Mariko tried to hold back the laughter as she watched Tyris completely lose his cool. And his grip. She snaked both her legs around his and brought the heels of both of her feet into the back of Tyris's knees. He toppled forward, dropping to his knees, letting go of Mariko and flailing to regain his balance. Mariko landed on her feet, immediately grabbing Tyris by the collar with one hand and balling her other into a fist only a few inches away from his face.

"So, ready to admit that I win?" Mariko asked.

Tyris sighed, "You win."

Mariko smiled, "Good, now you see your pretty good, pretty fast for a big guy, but you're relying on your size too much, and you need to keep moving all the time, even when you're blocking," Mariko started, explaining in great detail the flaws in his fighting style.

Tyris watched her intently for the longest time, as she continued talking in Japanese to fast for him to understand. But he couldn't bring himself to stop her, something about her was captivating him. Finally he suddenly stood up and kissed Mariko lightly on the lips. For a long second nothing happened, then he pulled back and looked at her.

She looked at him for a heartbeat then punched him in the stomach as hard as she could, causing him to double over and fall back to his knees. He clutched his stomach, coughing violently as she leaned down and whispered something in his ears in Japanese before walking out of the Dojo, leaving him on the ground.

The Sensei came in a few minutes later, walking over to Tyris and crouching down beside him, "Are you okay?"

Tyris nodded, "Yes... Sensei, what does this mean?" he asked, repeating the phrase.

The Sensei looked at him oddly for a moment then stated in English, "It roughly translates to English as, "Never without my permission"."

Tyris nodded, "That's what I thought."

Naoko sighed.

School again.

Normally it would have made her happy to be in school but the Specters were dragging on her. All the time now she felt like they were over her shoulder, watching, waiting. Luckily Tyris was completely preoccupied and didn't seem to even notice her.

Or the bell.

Often she was forced to pull him out of his cloud to follow her to the next class, only so he end up with his head in the clouds again.

She watched him with some envy. She missed the days where she could just go out into the park and read without a worry in the world. With a sigh she recalled that it was exactly that thing which got in this place in the first place.

She sighed again and wondered how much longer this would go on. How much longer would she bear the demon of darkness in her chest? How much longer creatures would keep attacking her and her friends?

And how long Mariko would be before she came to get her gym bag. There was only a few more minutes before the next bell would go and she would be expected to be in her next class, and she still had to rouse Tyris from his daydream, then drag him over there. And the longer Mariko took, the less time she had to get there.

"Marrrrrrriko."

Naoko looked around the hallways, which suddenly seemed very empty. She turned around and looked up to see a massive figure hunched over her, nearly blocking the doorway into the classroom where she had just left.

Where Tyris had been waiting for her.

The creature looked human in shape only, covered in fur, and towering over her easily. She couldn't see much of its features, not that she needed to; She could see glowing eyes, and the light glinting off of large teeth and bigger claws. It was all she needed to see.

"Marrrrriko.... No longerrrr will you harrrrm us." It raised a hand up, it seems to disappear from its place by the creature's side only to reappear above its head. Its claws glittered in the light, "No longerrrr will you infect the people."

Naoko's eyes narrowed. It moved fast, and it would be on her by the time the transformation ended, but she had no intentions of going down without a fight. The power surged and she felt the energies wash over her. Her clothing dissipated to be replaced with the purple bodysuit that Darkbolt favored, her hands covered in armoured gauntlets, her legs in armoured boots.

She saw the claws moving, fast but not so fast now that she was transforming. They would land in only a second, a second later the transformation would be complete. She didn't wait for the transformation, she reached down and pulled the energies as hard as she could. She could feel the strain from the combined efforts in her body, the energies burned in her body as she gathered them.

In one second the claws would strike.

A second later Naoko would obliterate the creature with everything she could manage.

She watched as the claws moved ever closer, then to her surprise she moved back, almost without any conscious thought. She realized a second later that Darkbolt had been screaming at her to jump back, it didn't really dawn on her until afterwards, she had been too busy. The claws dug into her stomach, ripping across the top layers of skin. She screamed, as the tidal wave of pain swept across her. Somehow she pulled the pain in, forced it into the energies she was gathering for the attack.

The creature moved again, Naoko didn't know how it did it, but in the quarter of a second it took for the claws to scrap across her stomach, the creature was right on top of her, its hand already back for another attack. It grabbed her by the neck and tossed her into the classroom she had only just exited.

Naoko cursed mentally as she crashed into a desk, then another, then came to a grinding halt in the floor, shattering the floor tiles. A startled Tyris jumped to his feet above her, he looked down at her for a second looking frightened, then he moved as though to help her, then stopped again, looking confused.

"DIE!"

Naoko and Tyris both looked over to see the creature charging towards them. Tyris snarled immediately, his hand reaching out to the side, a dagger seemingly appeared out of thin air to be in his hand. Naoko didn't pay it any mind; the energies were almost ready she just needed a second more. And it sure wouldn't hurt if the creature caught the blast point blank in the face.

Then the creature disappeared completely.

Naoko's heart raced suddenly. If she couldn't see it how was she going to hit it with the attack?

Tyris jumped across her suddenly, thrusting the dagger forward into thin air. A blot of blood hit the ground, and the dagger was suddenly covered in the dark red substance. Without missing a step he dropped to one knee and spun around, dagger leading the way. Again blood hit the ground, as the blade appeared to catch something for a split second. Then he was on his feet again one arm upraised, his dagger flashing forward in the other hand.

Then it reappeared, its claws coming down at Tyris' head, held back only by Tyris' straining arm. The dagger was stuck deep in the creature's chest, though the creature didn't look hurt. It looked angry.

"If an innocent must die to keep them from getting the Black Katana... **So be it!**" it roared, bringing its free hand across to bat Tyris off to the side.

Tyris yelled in agony as the claws ripped into his right side. He smashed hard into the wall, his dagger skittering away across the room, and slide to the ground in a crumpled heap.

"Can you not see?" It howled, looking over at the broken man, "They must be killed, they cannot get the Black Katana!"

Naoko didn't know what it was talking about, nor did she care. What she did care about was the fact it had stopped moving.

And she was ready.

"DarkBEAM!"

The creature didn't see it coming until it was too late. The blast caught the creature dead in the chest and sent it flying through the air, and through the windows out to the school grounds below.

Mariko swore under her breath, "Naoko is going to kill me, Naoko is going to kill me..."

She had been on her way to meet with Naoko when the Phys. Ed. teacher had asked her for some help, and not even her loudest pleas had registered with him. In the end she had hurriedly helped with a few other students to set up hurdles for the next class, and then made a mad dash back for the school. But she had taken way too long, and the bell was going to go long before she got to where Naoko was waiting for her. And she was going to be upset at being made late for her next class.

Mariko gulped in air, leaned farther forward, and ran harder continuing to mumble, "Naoko is going to kill me." between gasps.

A loud crash stopped Mariko dead in her tracks, looking up she saw a huge shape hurtling down towards her, surrounded by a thousand sparkling lights. For a moment it looked beautiful. And in that moment she realized that the huge shape was about to land on her, and that the sparkling lights were glass. She realized the latter when a sharp shard of glass ripped through her shirt and cut into her arm.

Mariko threw herself sideways, into a diving roll and gathered together the energies she needed to transform. By the time she was back on her feet the transformation was complete, and she was again wearing the blood red attire of the Demon of War.

She watched as the creature tried to get up, and her eyes opened a little more with a realization of what she was facing. It was more beat up, and missing more of its hair, but this was the same creature she had been fighting when she had tried to save the main dressed up a knight.

She didn't bother with any questions. If the thing started to move again chances were that she'd never see it coming.

"Razor Storm!" She yelled launching a barrage of blades into the creature. It shrieked in pain as the first couple connected with it, then it blurred and disappeared, leaving the remaining blades to dissipate into nothingness only a foot away from the school wall.

"Damn it," She swore, glancing and turning around, looking for her hidden enemy. If she didn't find it soon she'd be in a lot of trouble.

"Die vile one!"

Mariko threw herself forward as she heard the voice, forcing herself to flip forward and twist so that she could face the creature attacking her and launch a blade into it. Her plans were brought to a brutal end as the claws of the creature ripped across her legs, instead of her back, and sent her sprawling across the ground, sending the blades she launched wide.

The creature was on her even as she started to slide to a stop on the grass, raising its claws up to strike her down. But as the claws went up a beam of darkness crashed into it, battering it away.

Naoko flew down in front of her a moment later, following the creature and pounding it with a barrage of dark energies, smashing the creature into a concrete wall then through, finally stopping when she couldn't see it anymore amidst all of the dust that had blown up into the air due to her attacks.

Mariko forces herself up onto her knees, despite the pain, "Naoko!"

"I think I got it," Naoko said grimly.

Mariko grimaced, forcing her feet under her. The creature had managed to rip up the back of her thighs pretty badly, somehow managing to hit just high enough to avoid the protection her boots would have provided. Between the pain and the actual damage done to her legs she figured that any movement beyond a slow walk was out of the question.

She got up out of a matter of pride; she wasn't going to be lying down while something was attacking her friends.

"I think I got it." Naoko said grimly.

Mariko gritted her teeth to try to bear the pain, and looked over to where Naoko was standing. She couldn't see anything beyond the outline of Naoko in all of the dust rising up around her, but she had to agree. Not much could withstand the amount of damage Naoko could dish out when she wanted to.

Mariko felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up on end, and felt a chill run down her spine. The feeling grew stronger by the second.

"It's still alive!" She yelled. Without thinking she tried to move into a defensive stance, and the pain shooting through her legs almost drove her back to the ground. She bit back the scream building up, and started pulling up energy for a Razor Storm.

Naoko was on her way back now, coming full speed, but she was facing the same problem as Mariko was. How could she possibly defend herself, much less her friend against a target she couldn't see?

A flicker of light cut down between Naoko and Mariko. For a second nothing happened, then without any warning the creature reappeared. A moment passed, then another, then the creature let out a screech of pain, looking down to his left foot, which was stuck to the ground.

Mariko fired off the Razor Storm as the creature looked up, smiling at the surprised look on its face as the shards ripped into it. It howled under the sustained barrage, then collapsed into a heap on the ground.

Naoko stopped half way towards Mariko as she saw the creature collapse into a heap. With the creature stopped she looked up to see where the flash of light had come from, and saw Tyris standing in the broken window on the second floor of the school.

He teetered for a moment, a hand unsteadily reaching out for the window sill to steady himself, then he fell out of the window, doing a slow summersault down towards the ground.

Naoko was in the air moving immediately, but she was too far away. But Mariko wasn't.

"Mariko! Help him!" Naoko yelled, pointing over Mariko's head, flying towards her full speed.

Mariko turned and looked up back at the school.

She had been expecting Yun or Ikkou fighting another creature; she certainly hadn't expected to see somebody falling towards the ground only a few feet away from her.

Her shocked expression was the only sign she was surprised, as her whole body moved to take her underneath the falling boy. But with the first running step the pain from her wounds caused her legs to buckle from beneath her. She dropped into a kneeling position, realizing there was no way she could run over in time.

She set her feet as best she could and jumped forward. If she thought running had hurt, this was a pain beyond words, but one of the last thoughts she had as she hit the ground beneath the boy was that it was successful.

Her second last thought, just before he landed on her, was, "Uh... now what do I do?"

Naoko watched as Mariko dove toward Tyris, but she looked away. There was nothing she could do for either of them now, but she could make sure the monster wouldn't bother them.

She landed a few feet away from the creature, which threw the dagger that had pinned its foot to the ground at her. Naoko batted the dagger away, allowing its blade to deflect off of her gauntlet.

With a snarl of disgust she raised a hand towards the monster and started pulling the energies she'd need to finish off the creature.

"Why did you attack us?" Naoko asked as the dark energies started to flicker and flash in her hand.

"Yourrrr going... to kill us all..." The creature gasped, looking over at her, "But we will not... allow... you to get the Black Katana..."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Naoko stated, "We have no interest in your sword."

The creature laughed raggedly, "You... think we'd believe... that? You'd forsake... the power... of three daemons... and two angels? We are animalistic... not stupid."

"I don't want to kill you." Naoko said slowly, "But you really give me no choice..."

"Then do it!" It roared suddenly, climbing back to its feet, "Kill me... if you can!"

She felt the energy surge before she saw the attack coming, leaping back to avoid the attack before it could strike. A blast of fire scorched the earth she had stood on moments before. Then another blast came at her, then another, then another. Within a moment it was all she could do to fly backwards as fast as she could to avoid being hit by the flames licking at her feet.

She didn't notice that she was flying back towards the tree near the entrance to the school until she collided with it full force. She groaned as she landed on the ground, landing on her feet, and erecting a barrier.

"Like I should have from the start," she thought to herself with a small amount of disdain.

Somehow she hadn't found the time to get used to the fighting, especially after the lull that had happened since Yasha's defeat. She had hoped that after Yasha had been defeated that maybe the fighting would stop. That maybe she could have a normal life again.

The flames enveloped her barrier, licking dangerously close. Despite her barrier though, the heat blasted in at her, threatening to overwhelm her with heat alone. Then the flames died away without warning.

"You've killed two of us so far... You won't be so lucky with me!" a voice, sounding as though created by the crackling of flames, called down from above her.

She looked up to see the shape of a man, if a man had been made from nothing more than living, burning, flames. Its mouth looked more like a dark depression in the flames, but it moved in the shape of a smile, touching two fingers to its forehead, near a small crystal in its forehead, as a salute.

"Oh wait, I haven't even introduced myself have I? Heh, not really much of a problem there. I don't have a name!" It said with an odd laugh, "But really you should be proud. I was made for the sole purpose of killing you. Doesn't that bring a bit of pride to your heart?"

"W-what?" Naoko asked surprised, "Why are you trying to kill me!? What have I ever done to you?"

The flame creature stopped for a second, tapping a finger against its chin, "Hrm. You know, that's a good point, you've never really done anything to make me mad... heck, you're the sole reason for my existence. But you see..." it stopped and tapped the crystal on its head, "I don't really have much of a choice in the matter. You know, I really do appreciate your sacrifice here, I'll be sure to make you a nice tombstone!"

Naoko sighed. A bubbly happy villain who didn't want to kill her, but was going to try anyways. This was just one of those days that it simply didn't pay to even bother getting up in the morning.

The creature pointed both arms down at Naoko, but she had enough of this joke. She brought both of her arms up and fired off a blast of darkness right into the creature's chest.

It shuddered suddenly, stopping to clutch its stomach, "Brrrr, that's kinda cold, you know?" It moved its arms away revealing that the blast hadn't done any damage, "But that's okay, I can understand you're trying to fight back. I mean, I would in your situation! So go ahead, do your best, I won't mind."

"Gee, thanks." Naoko muttered, charging up another attack, "**DARK BEAM!**"

The beam shot out and hit the flame creature in the chest, then went right through. The flame creature smiled happily, doing nothing to avoid the attack or to defend himself, and never showed any sign that the attack even phased him.

It shrugged lightly, then aimed its hands at her again.

"HAI!"

Naoko blinked, surprised as Ikkou flew right into the fire creature, fist outstretched. With a yelp of pain, Ikkou punched the creature in the face. Without a second's pause he was already moving again, landing a few feet in front of Naoko. He glanced down at his burnt gauntlet and fingers for a moment, then in the same motion brought his other hand around and launched a huge beam of destructive force into the fire creature.

The creature took the hit for a moment, then it flew upwards towards the edge of the beam, but as its head emerged from the beam the rest of its body wavered and disappeared completely.

The crystal fell from the air, what's left of the head turning into a fiery halo around it. It fell like a small comet, crashing to the ground where the flames slowly started to flicker out.

Ikkou panted hard, clutching his burnt hand to his side, glaring at the crystal. He turned to Naoko finally, "Are you okay?"

Naoko started to nod, then she felt the energies of the flame creature flare up again, "Ikkou..."

"I know."

He rose up into the air, Naoko following a second after. The crystal on the ground, as the last of the flames started to dissipate, burst back into bright flames. A body soon formed with the crystal moving up to its place on its head.

"Wow," It said, still smiling, "That was pretty powerful, but you can't destroy me like that."

"Gee, what are the chances of that?" Ikkou said, sounding less than impressed, and far from surprised.

The flame creature shrugged, then leapt into the air to join them. Then the battle became joined once again. Despite Ikkou's usual lack of control, Naoko noticed his attacks seemed less powerful than normal.

"He's holding back," She thought, wondering why, and then it started to dawn on her. Before he had claimed that it didn't matter if a few people died when he had to stop a Tenma monster. But when he

knew the people it was a different matter. Or maybe... maybe he was trying to change his decision on that matter.

"It doesn't matter now," Naoko decided, putting her attention back into the fight. As she watched she noticed that no matter how much Ikkou tried, every one of his shots simply went through the creature. Every so often he was cause one of the creature's limbs to dissipate due to the sheer force behind a blast, but within a few moments of the attack the limb grew back.

She sighed, wishing the answer would hit her, there had to be some way of doing lasting damage to it. Then the answer did hit her.

Out of nowhere a fire extinguisher bounced off her boot. She looked down, surprised, to see it hit the ground below her. She looked around, but only saw the trailing end of a crimson cape as it disappeared around the corner of the school.

She landed on the ground, picking up the fire extinguisher and smiled. "Either this is going to work, or I'm going to look pretty silly," she thought to herself.

She flew up at the creature as it launched some balls of fire at Ikkou, it seemed to be doing it more for fun then to really hurt Ikkou, who was easily dodging the attacks. It looked over as she flew up, and even waved happily at her.

Until she sprayed it in the face with the fire extinguisher. It let out a shriek of pain, then it quickly started to disappear. With in a moment all that was left was a crystal, which was covered in flame retardant foam. It hung in the air for a moment, and then fell down.

Right into Yun's waiting hand.

"Nice timing," Ikkou said sarcastically.

Yun smiled and shrugged, "Hey, you know how hard it was to sneak away from class after the teacher hears a wild animal is loose in the halls?"

Ikkou sighed, "Actually yeah, which reminds me... I'm going to get yelled at as soon as I get back to class."

"Uh," Yun looked around, "Where's Mariko?"

"WILL SOMEBODY GET THIS LUG OFF ME!?" Mariko yelled from where she was pinned to the ground over by the school.

Yun walked over with an arched eyebrow.

"Not a word, Yun. Not a word!" Mariko snarled from under Tyris.

Yun just smiled, and started to help her out from under the young man, "Funny, I thought you'd be strong enough to move him by yourself."

"I would... but I couldn't even start to lift him without my legs hurting," Mariko said, looking away, "Besides, I didn't want to move him to much, no telling what may have broken in the fall."

"Fall?" Yun asked, as he lifted Tyris gently, allowing Mariko to roll out from under him.

"Yeah, idiot fell out of the bloody window," Mariko muttered, uncomfortable with the whole situation. Not only had some odd creature made easy work out of her, she had been pinned to the ground by a falling student, and hadn't been able to make it back into the fight under her own power.

"It's okay Mariko, everybody's okay. Ikkou burned his hand, but I fixed that up fairly easily. Now lets see to you." He said, moving his hands so they were just above her legs and closed his eyes.

She watched as the cuts slowly dissipated to leave only a tear in her costume revealing the unmarked skin beneath.

"Thanks Yun, you're the best." She said with a smile.

"Yeah, yeah." He said with a small grin, waving away her words, "Now back to your new friend here."

"Hey!" Mariko protested, but Yun wasn't listening. He was to busy chuckling.

He placed his hands on Tyris and concentrated. But nothing happened.

"It's not working..."

"What do you mean it's not working?" Mariko asked, looking up at Yun worried.

Yun looked down at her helplessly, "It means it's not working!"

Mariko turned pale, "You mean he's going to die?"

Yun shrugged helplessly, "I don't know... but I can't help him, my powers just aren't working on him..."

Mariko jumped to her feet, transforming back to herself as she ran out to the street. The police would be here by now, the ambulances couldn't be far behind.

Yun, Ikkou and Naoko watched from the distance as Tyris was placed onto a stretcher.

"Any ideas?" Ikkou asked.

"None." Yun said.

"He Tenma then? Or something else?" Ikkou asked.

Naoko sighed, "I don't know... he helped me out... but he seemed very shocked by me, and seemed unsure..."

"Unsure?"

"..." Naoko looked away, not responding.

"Great, a guy who helped you out, but might be out to kill you, who Yun can't heal." Ikkou let out a loud sigh.

Yun looked over to Ikkou, "Maybe he was scared, we aren't always the most pleasant sight right after transforming, what with the residual energies about us."

"And he did help me." Naoko said quietly, turning to Ikkou, "Please... don't..."

Ikkou turned away, "I'm not going to kill him Naoko."

Naoko stopped dead, "I-Ikkou, I didn't mean... I wasn't going to say..."

Ikkou closed his eyes, "I know Naoko." he started walking away, "I know."

Naoko looked over to Yun, but he shook his head, "You're the only one who can get him to stop Naoko... all you have to do is ask him."

"I... I..." Naoko turned to look back at the ambulance, "I can't do that..."

"Naoko, this is beyond his feelings for you. And don't deny it, everybody around us could tell he's hung up on you. But if you don't reach out to him as a friend one of these days he'll leave for good, and you'll have lost a friend." Yun stated in a hard tone, then in a softer tone, "Naoko he needs to know you believe in him."

"I do."

"I know that. But he doesn't."

Mariko watched as they placed him on the gurney and strapped him in. A part of her knew she really shouldn't care as much as she did. And she hadn't for a moment until she realized that he might die, and she had gotten really worried.

"Fell responsible for the dumb lug because he tried to help me out," She thought to herself as she watched.

Then Tyris woke up. He let out a pained screech, convulsing towards the wounds on his side. If he hadn't been strapped down to the gurney he would have fallen right off. His eyes bulged for a moment then he simply lay there, as if the world around him had suddenly stopped.

Mariko took a step towards him, but the paramedics cut her off, loading the boy into the ambulance as fast as possible. But as she watched she saw the boy reaching off to the side, towards the school, as though for something just out of reach... and then he was gone.

Mariko paused momentarily as the ambulance drove off, watching it disappear down the street. Then she turned to look over at the school where Tyris had been pointing. On the ground only a little ways away a dagger was sticking out of the ground.

She looked at it, and then slowly walked over while nobody was looking, and scooped it up off the ground, hiding it behind her back.

"Hey!" a police officer said, noticing her, "What are you doing?"

Mariko slipped the dagger into the waistband of her skirt, tugging her shirt down to cover it, then adding her best innocent expression said, "I was just going to class officer."

The police man looked at her for a moment, then smiled, "Sorry little lady, but this area is off limits until we do an investigation, you'll just have to go another way."

Mariko smiled, relieved that he hadn't seen her take the dagger, "Okay officer." She smiled and waved quickly retreated back to where Yun and Naoko were waiting for her.

The officer watched her as she left smiling, "Nice kid."

He slowly reached down to his radio and turned it on, "I've acquired target number 2. Orders?"

He waited for a moment then nodded at the response, "Understood."

Naoko looked around the hospital feeling a little uneasy. It had been a day since the attack at school, and everything had gone as back to normal as it could. Construction crews were currently working

on repairing the damage done, but classes were continuing as normal, though the newspapers were having a hard time trying to figure out what had happened. Most of them blamed another "panther" attack like the one that had happened at the Temple.

None of them knew, and nobody seemed to really want to know the truth. It was almost frightening how willing a lot of the people were to simply ignore that anything really strange happened.

A fight between them and a monster had happened just outside a school full of people, but nobody was willing to say anything. It was frightening that nobody would even question how a panther got up onto the second floor of a school, more or less leave the amount of destruction it had on it's "escape" from the area.

"Would I be as willing to ignore the oddity of it all if I hadn't been forced into this?" She wondered to herself.

"Excuse me, miss?" A nurse asked walking over to where she was sitting in the waiting room, "Can I help you?"

"Ummm... I'm here to see somebody, but I was waiting for somebody else to get here before we go see him..." Naoko said quietly.

"Mmm-hmm, I thought so, but visiting hours are almost over. If you don't go soon you won't be able to see him at all." The Nurse said with an apologetic tone.

Naoko sighed, she really didn't want to go in by herself, and Mariko said it was important that she see him too. But if she didn't go now she didn't know when she might get another chance to. She nodded finally, "Okay."

She stood up, "Do you know which room Tyris Engelhard is in?"

The nurse raised her eyebrow, "Oh, you've come to see him? He's in room 413, around the corner there." she pointed down a hallway, "But good luck... he hasn't spoken a single word since he arrived here."

"Sounds like him alright," She thought to herself as she walked down the hall and peeked in the door to Tyris's room.

There were two beds in the room the other one was unoccupied. Tyris was currently sitting in his bed, which had been propped up so that he could sit at an angle. She noted that the bed almost looked to small to accommodate him, which only made him look bigger than he actually was. His face was bandaged in a few places where he had hit the ground, but otherwise she couldn't see any sign that he was hurt besides the shapes of the bandages on his right side where he had caught the claws from the creature.

As she stepped into the room she noticed for the first time that he was staring right at her, and nearly right through her, and as she moved away she noted that he was looking at the door, not at her. He didn't even acknowledge that he had noticed her walk in. She walked up next to the bed slowly, looking at him.

"H-hello?" Naoko said slowly, "Tyris?"

He didn't respond, still staring off into space. Naoko wished again that she had waited for Mariko. She sat down on the chair next to the bed.

"Uh... I just wanted to say thanks... uh... for helping that girl..." Naoko said, stuttering along. She felt extremely uncomfortable being alone with this guy, even if she didn't believe that he would hurt her she still didn't feel safe being near him. And now she was trying to thank him for his help without letting him know it was really her.

"If he doesn't already know," Naoko thought.

But again he didn't move, or even look away from the doorway.

"Tyris?" Naoko said, starting to get a little worried. What if he was dying?

She reached over placing her hand on his shoulder, "Tyris, are you alright?"

He sat upright suddenly looking over at her, "No, don't touch me!"

And then the world disappeared.

His scream of agony dissipated as the world got darker, then suddenly she was all by herself in the dark again.

"Darkbolt!" Naoko yelled, angry, "What are you doing?"

But to her surprise the demon didn't respond. For the first time since she had become one with the demon she couldn't even sense it's presence. It was as if it didn't exist.

"Pain... to much... pain..."

Naoko looked around again, but there was nothing anywhere around her, but the voice pressed in on her from all around. And it sounded almost familiar.

"Why? Why are they hurting me?" the voice asked. The confusion and pain in it's voice was overwhelming

"Who are you?!" Naoko yelled into the darkness, "Where are you?"

"Who..."

The darkness exploded into color suddenly, and where she had been standing in limbo only moments before, she was now standing in a dimly lit operating room. She could see in the dull blue light that the room was filled with surgeons, working on somebody on the table in front of her. But she couldn't see who they were working on.

"Who am..."

Naoko took a step forward, more of the room coming into view. On the tables sat scalpels and scissors, but the more she looked the more she realized that most of the tools didn't look right. Odd looking clamps, saws, and needles. All of the tools were covered with blood. To her horror she realized that so were the hands and surgical gowns the people were wearing. The room around her was suddenly taking on the feel of a nightmare.

"Who... am..." "I?"

Naoko found herself taking another step forward despite herself. Then the body came into view and she drew her hand up to her mouth in shock and disgust. The body was cut open everywhere. The muscles in the legs and arms had been cut and pried open, along with the chest cavity. As she watched the surgeons moved to take out the person's heart and replaced it with something dark and evil.

"No..." She said, looking for the person's face, but a surgeon suddenly stepped in the way, obscuring her view. She didn't move for a second, then realized to her horror the surgeon was looking directly at her. She looked up to his face, but all she could see was a pale human face hidden behind a surgical mask, with glowing red eyes. Then as she watched, in dead silence, all of the surgeons stopped what they were doing and turned to face her. All of them had the same glowing red eyes, and slowly each and every one of them lifted a knife, saw, or needles, all dripping of blood, and walked towards her.

She backed away, "No... NO!"

She turned and ran for the door.

"Who am I?" the voice asked again as she hit the doors and pushed through.

And then the world shifted again; suddenly she was sitting in an office where a bald old man sitting behind a desk was watching him. "You're a very gifted individual," he said.

The room shifted, suddenly she was on the streets, a man wearing leather and chains yelled, "You're a freak!"

Another shift. This time she was in a small plain looking room with bunk beds coming out of the wall, a short girl with red hair was snarling at her, "You're useless."

Shift. A dojo, dead people littered the floor while a voice stated, "You're a killer."

Shift. A boy with long hair, and a smile "You're a pal."

Shift. A man, "You're a tool."

Shift.

"A monster"

Shift.

"A weapon"

Shift.

"A sucker."

Shift

"A murderer."

Shift.

"You're my brother," Suddenly the images stopped on a little girl with blond hair. She smiled up at Naoko, "And I love you."

Naoko grabbed her head, feeling dizzy and lost. "Why are you doing this!?! Please, help me..."

"Help..." the voice stated again, sounding confused.

"Help me." Naoko repeated, starting to recognize the voice.

"Help... who?"

Naoko watched as the world shifted around her again, then suddenly Mariko was standing in front of her with a big smile on her face. "Naoko," she said with a big smile, "You're my best friend."

The world shifted again and Yun was standing in front of her with his usual laid-back smile, "Hey I'll always be here to help you Naoko. That's what friends are for..."

The world shifted again he parents appeared and without a word gave her a hug.

Another shift, and Fushi was standing in front of her. He reached out to touch her, tilting her head upwards, "I love you."

Then suddenly he dissolved, and in his place as though he had been there the whole time stood Ikkou in his armor as the demon of destruction. He raised his hand towards her face, "Naoko, I... I..." His hand stopped and wavered uncertainly, then slowly dropped to his side, his shoulders slumped, and he let his head fall forward until his chin was touching his chest.

Defeated.

"Naoko... he needs you... you can save him... break the barrier down..."

As she watched the world around the two of them shifted again, and they were on top of a skyscraper. Ikkou was fighting something, she couldn't tell what. All she could see was silhouettes. She watched as Ikkou beat the attackers back again and again, but she noticed something was missing in Ikkou. She looked in his face, then his eyes, and shuddered. They were hurt and lifeless.

Then before her eyes a large silhouette slipped in behind him, short hair flapping in the wind, a large cruel smile that seemly cut through the darkness, and stabbed him through the back with a katana. Ikkou jerked suddenly, looking more surprised then hurt. The sword pulled back out of him, as he reached down to where it had pierced his chest. He moves his hands away from the wound, his hands covered in his own blood. He looked up, a line of blood rolling down his bottom lip, and a single tear fell from his eyes.

"Na...oko..." He said, reaching his bloody hands towards her for help, then collapsed into a heap on the ground.

"Ikkou!" She screamed, dropping to the ground beside him, pulling him up onto her lap. She cradled his head in her arms, watching helplessly as he slowly bled to death.

"Push through the barrier... You can save him... Break through the block... you can save him... see through the lies... you can save him... Find the truth.... You can save him..." the voice continued in the back ground, starting to talk faster, louder.

"N-naoko..." Ikkou coughed quietly, "I... I..."

She hugged him closed as he stuttered, "Ikkou, please... don't die..."

Ikkou coughed again, then slumped down in her arms. He wasn't breathing anymore, she could tell that just from how lifeless he felt in her arms. She could feel his heart's final beats.

"Naoko..." the voice stated loudly.

"Ikkou.... no." Naoko said, tears rolling down her face, shaking him, "Please... wake up... Ikkou... please..."

"Remember.... Naoko... REMEMBER!"

"Ikkou!"

"Ikkou!" she screamed, tears rolling down her face.

She was standing by Tyris' bed again; the world had gone back to normal. She didn't notice though. All she knew was that she had to find him. She had to find Ikkou.

She turned and ran out of the room as fast as she could.

Mariko was nearly run over as Naoko ran past, tears flowing across her face. Without a thought, or any visible sign she recognized Mariko, she shoved her out of the way and ran out of the hospital.

Mariko watched Naoko leave, taking a step to follow her then stopped dead in her tracks. Naoko could probably use a friend right now, but she wasn't about to leave without exacting some revenge on Tyris. Nobody made her friends cry... especially Naoko.

"You bastard!" Mariko yelled, storming into the room with clinched fists, "What did you do... to..."

She trailed off as she took a clear look at the room before her. A chair was laying on it's side beside the bed, which itself was a mess. On the floor, curled up in a ball was Tyris, shaking uncontrollably.

"C-c-cold... S-s-so c-cold..." She heard him call out.

She watched him for a moment, then walked over and kneeled by his side, placing her hand on his shoulder. He looked up at her, surprised, his eyes filled with pain. Mariko smiled hesitantly, then stopped.

"What did you do to Naoko?" She demanded in a hard tone.

"N-naok-ko?" his teeth chattered as he tried to speak, "I-I didn-n't do an-anything to N-naoko."

"She ran out of here crying!"

Tyris looked at her, confused. He reached up with one arm and grabbed the side of the bed and started to pull himself up to his feet, "I d-don't kn-know what you're ta-talking about... I p-passed out b-before the surgery and I j-just w-woke up on the f-floor... ARGH!"

Tyris barked, wincing as pain flared out from his wounded side. His hand slipped and he felt himself falling again only to stop suddenly as something warm slipped up under his other arm and held him up. He looked over and to his surprise the previously angry looking Mariko was holding him up with a worried look on her face. He unconsciously reached over with his other hand, running his fingers lightly across her cheek. She pulled away from the touch, uncomfortable with action, but Tyris didn't notice.

"Y-you're... s-so... warm..." He said, then leaned closer to Mariko and whispered in her ear, "Are y-you real?"

Mariko blinked, surprised by the question, and then shook her head with a smile as she helped him up, "You must be really doped up right now. How much pain killers did they give you?"

Tyris reached over again, as he moved to sit down on his bed, and placed his hand on Mariko's shoulder, brushing up against her neck. She shuddered as she felt his ice-cold hands brush against her skin.

"Jeez, you weren't kidding, you are cold." She said, concerned, "Maybe I should get a doctor..."

"Y-you are real?" Tyris asked, surprised. He didn't allow his surprise to prevent him from pulling his sheets up over himself as soon as he was back in his bed. He shuddered again, and then let out a small sigh. "W-warm..."

Mariko picked up the chair and sat down next to the bed, watching him as he curled up into a ball underneath the covers.

"Why don't you think I'm real?" She asked after a few minutes.

Tyris looked at her for a long time before responding, "I... I don't know. Sometimes it's just hard."

Mariko waited for him to continue, but he remained silent. "Hard to what?" She prompted.

He sighed, but continued, "Hard to distinguish between reality and fantasy..."

"Wow... they did give you a lot of painkillers didn't they?" Mariko asked again, leaning forward to take a better look at him.

He sat there for a moment, then mumbled, "Yeah, painkillers..."

Mariko shifted. He was obviously uneasy with her being there, and she did need to go catch up to Naoko, but she needed answers.

"What are those big monsters?" She asked suddenly.

Tyris' eyes bugged out, and he gaped at her.

"What are those monsters?!" She demanded again.

"I... I don't know what you're talking about."

"You fought with one of them with a dagger!"

"I... I don't have a dagger, what are you talking about." he said in increasingly garbled Japanese.

"This dagger!" Mariko snapped, pulling it out of her backpack.

Tyris' change was immediate. He sat straight upright, his eyes narrowed, and he reached out of the dagger, "Give it to me. Now!"

"I thought you didn't have a dagger." Mariko said, pulling it out of his reach.

"Give it to me! It's mine! GIVE IT TO ME!" He yelled, leaning forward for it again.

"Tell me about the monsters." Mariko said slowly, holding it just out of his reach.

He glared at her for a minute, and finally she let out an angry growl and threw the dagger onto his bed, picking up her backpack and turning to leave.

"Lycanthropes."

Mariko stopped and turned around to face Tyris. The dagger was gone, and he was sitting far enough forward to have reached it, but she couldn't figure out where he had put it. He wasn't looking at her, instead looking down to a pendant he was playing with.

"What?"

"They're... Called Lycanthropes." He said quietly not looking up at her.

Mariko put her bag down sitting down again, "What are they doing here?"

He shrugged, wincing immediately, "I don't know..."

Mariko glared at him, "You're lying."

Tyris closed his eyes, his voice barely audible as he pleaded, "Please... you don't want to know about these things. Please, forget about them."

"Tyris," Mariko said reaching and touching his hand. Her hand brushed up against the pendant he wore and she felt a light shock go through her hand like a bit of static electricity. He opened his eyes and looked over at her, and she looked him in the eyes, "What are they doing here?"

"They... They're looking for the black katana. And... And they want to kill... special people." He said slowly.

"Black Katana? What do you mean special people?!" Mariko demanded, noting the more he told her the less she really seemed to be learning.

Tyris shook his head, looking back down to his pendant, "You wouldn't understand."

Mariko sighed, "Please, it's important. What if they attack again?"

Tyris shook his head again, "No you quite literally wouldn't understand... even if you were willing to believe me you'd never understand what I'm saying, I can't speak Japanese well enough." He looked up at her and then snarled, muttering under his breath, "hell, you probably don't know what I'm saying right now. I'm such an idiot, what am I think..."

"I can understand you perfectly, now please tell me about these special people."

Tyris looked up at her, surprised, but nodded slowly, "O... okay. They hunt people who they claim have been possessed by evil. They claim that by killing them they destroy the evil, and release the soul of the innocent. But they're just monsters, they don't care... They kill simply because people show special gifts as often as they kill because people are possessed."

"Possessed?" Mariko asked, "Like an evil spirit was in control?"

"You understood me?"

"Of course I did," Mariko said, giving him an odd look, "Why wouldn't I?"

"Because... I..." he sighed and shook his head, "Never mind... And yes, like an evil spirit was in control. But sometimes they claim that it's simply hiding in them. They don't care."

Mariko nodded, "What about the Black Katana? And how do they disappear when they move? And how did you fight it?"

Tyris' eye narrowed, "How do you know I fought them?"

"Them?"

Tyris shook his head, "My question first, how did you know that I fought them. The only one who saw was..." he stopped and locked his eyes on her.

"Uh... I saw you throw your dagger out the window, I was... uhh... on my way back to school."

Mariko said, lying quickly, though not very well, "I was on a school assignment in the city."

Tyris continued to stare at her, and then nodded slowly, "The Black Katana is a myth. Something about Angels, Demons, and a sword created by them that could destroy absolutely anything in its path. They said that it could destroy reality... but it's just a stupid myth."

"How do you know?"

Tyris ignored her, "And I don't know how I fight them, I can just... feel them. They move faster than we can, but I can just sense where they are and where they are going to strike." He sighed, shrugging with one arm, "I don't know, it's like I can simply feel what they intend to do before they can actually do it. Kind of like your martial arts I guess."

"Huh?"

"You know, sensing your opponent... Feeling their presence... Something like that." He shrugged again.

Mariko didn't understand, she had been taught how to detect her opponent's moves by watching their posture, movements and their eyes, never by simply feeling their presence.

"How do you know so much about these... Lycanthropes?" Mariko asked.

Tyris leaned back in his bed, closed his eyes, and shook his head.

"You have to tell me how you know about this!" Mariko said, leaning forward.

"No. I don't." He said quietly.

Mariko looked at him for a minute, but he didn't open his eyes or move. The pendant on his chest, a crystal in the shape of a snowflake she realized as she finally got a good look at it, flickered in the reflected light as he breathed slowly.

"Tyris?" She asked quietly.

He didn't respond. She reached over and placed a hand on his forehead, pulling back as she felt his cool skin, but she noted he was getting warmer now. His arm jerked up suddenly, grabbing her wrist, and his eyes opened a little.

"Please... please..." He shuddered a little and his hand fell from her wrist, "please... don't... go..."

"What?" Mariko asked, surprised by the request.

His eyes were slowly closing again, as if he couldn't keep them open any longer, "I don't... want... to... Please... Don't go-....." He trailed off as his eyes closed. Within moments he was sleeping quietly.

Mariko watched him sleep for a minute unsure of what to do now.

"Oh, he's sleeping."

A nurse walked into the room, smiling at Mariko, "He your boyfriend?"

Mariko shook her head, "Uh, no. Why do you ask?"

She placed a hand on his head and frowned, "Well, you're the first person I've heard him talk to. He never said a word to any of us, before or after the surgery. We were starting to wonder about him."

"He hasn't talked to anybody?" Mariko asked.

The nurse shook her head as she pulled back Tyris' blankets, which he had left down by his waist after sitting up trying to get his dagger. Mariko winced, expecting to see the dagger sitting there beneath them, but it wasn't there. The nurse wasn't even looking, she simply pulled the sheets straight, then right back up around Tyris' shoulders, then tucked them in, then moved to a closet to retrieve another blanket.

"No." She said, "Nobody. Maybe you should come again, it would probably do him some good to have a friend to talk with."

"Umm.... we're not exactly friends..."

The Nurse looked over at her, "Well if you came to fight with him I'm afraid you shouldn't have come in the first place, we don't need him getting angry and yelling anymore..."

Mariko raised her hands and shook her head, "Uh, I was just teasing him with a letter from home, that's why he was yelling. Just teasing."

The nurse shook his head disapprovingly, "Well either way, don't do it any more, he needs to rest. But... Well, maybe you could ask his other friends to come to see him. Believe it or not it helps if the person has somebody to talk to."

Mariko sighed, "I don't think he has any friends around here..."

"Oh?"

"He's from Canada, student exchange, and I haven't seen him hang out with anybody since he got here."

The nurse sighed, "Poor boy. Comes to Japan to see the culture and is attacked by a wild animal in the middle of the city. And now he's going to be in the hospital by himself the whole time..."

Mariko sighed, looking down at him. All he had done since he'd gotten to Japan was try to help people, and this was what he got for his efforts. She remembered Yun's warning, that one of the exchange students was harboring dark powers. But as she watched him shiver under the blankets she couldn't see how he could be trying to hurt any of them.

"Tell him I'll be here tomorrow." She said finally.

She picked up her bag and walked out of the hospital. She had to find Naoko and find out exactly how warmly she would be greeting Tyris the next time she met him.

Ikkou sighed.

The phone was sitting there in front of him, taunting him.

Seven digits danced in his head. The same seven numbers. His hands danced over the buttons again and again, but he couldn't get up the heart to pick up the phone. He knew it was useless. Something kept hammering that into his head, but hope prevails.

"Naoko..." he sighed, "Why?"

He stood up and walked across the room. If it had been any other girl there would have never been any of this trouble. Nobody else was possessed by the Demon of Darkness and "engaged" to the Angel of Life.

"Why did I have to fall for you Naoko?"

He remembered then, his selfish reason. When he first met Naoko he had been attracted to her, and had thought she was nice, but he wanted to go out with her because she was simply very good looking and going out with her would have made him one of the most popular people in school. He winced at the thoughts now, they seemed so cold and callous. Somewhere between that time and now something had changed, but he couldn't pin it down to any one thing.

Because Naoko wasn't any one thing.

She was nice, she was caring, she was protective of her friends, she was determined, she was quiet, she was....

Ikkou stood looking out the window as he continued to go through a list of things that Naoko was. He could find too many reasons for why he liked her, and for once he wished he could find a single reason why he shouldn't like her.

And she couldn't find one reason to even think about him.

He sighed as he thought it, but somehow he knew it was true. Naoko could only love him as a friend as long as Fushi was around, she couldn't see that he was only using her. She was so trusting, she couldn't even understand how somebody could simply use her emotions against her.

He frowned. Things had been pretty bleak when Fushi had shown up. The world was destroyed, he had beaten his friends nearly to death, they were doomed within a few days if they couldn't find something to eat, and to make matters worse the Tenma were still in outer space waiting for them. Then out of nowhere this "angel" appears with, conveniently enough, the exact powers they would need to bring life back to the planet.

Nobody ever questioned how he got there. Nobody ever asked why he was doing this to help them, or why he didn't come earlier. Nobody ever bothered to wonder why he refused to talk about the future. Nobody.

Except Ikkou.

But nobody wanted to hear his objections. Yun and Mariko weren't fully willing to buy everything he said, but they were willing to believe that he was their friend in the end. That meant only Ikkou was willing to believe the undesirable fact that this "angel" might be a wolf in sheep's clothing.

But he realized that a lot of the reason he didn't trust Fushi was because of the relationship he supposedly had with Naoko. If he was lying, he was dragging Naoko around by her heart and was going to hurt her badly at some point. But if he wasn't... If he wasn't that meant that he never had a chance with Naoko, and he never would.

So what was he to do?

Naoko wouldn't go out with him while Fushi was around, she believed him when he said that they were together in the future. At least she did enough to keep her from even considering going out with anybody now.

Right?

He sighed again. He didn't know how she'd react to him asking her out, but he was willing to bet she'd turn him down. She'd shoot him down without a second thought.

Right?

He shouldn't bother trying because he knew she'd never say yes. There was no point in it because she couldn't say yes. There was no reason because she had never said yes. But despite these arguments that raged through his head that annoying little voice in the back asked, but there is still that small chance she'll say yes...

Right?

"I hate this," Ikkou said to himself, "I'm sick and tired of not knowing. I'm tired of the second-guessing, and the self abuse... I'm tired of not knowing."

He sat down on his bed, picked up the phone and punched in the numbers. If for nothing else he needed to make this phone call for his own well being. At least if she said no he would have some form of answer. At least then he could stop wondering.

The phone rang.

His heart leapt again. He hated it, just the thought of this was screwing him up. In about five seconds he was going to get an answer that was going to crush him. And despite all this, he was excited. Simply because there was that slim chance she might say yes instead of no.

His brain said no, but his heart said yes. And it was tearing him apart.

"Naoko..." He sighed.

"IKKOU!?"

Ikkou's heart skipped a beat and he, pressing the phone against his ear, "Naoko?!"

"Ikkou!!" The yell came again, though he noticed now that it came from out in the halls.

He jumped to his feet, dropping the phone, and ran to the door. He flung it open, and to his surprise he saw Naoko, leaning heavily on the wall. He face was flushed with exertion, panting deeply.

"Naoko?" He called.

She looked up, he got a good look at her tear-streaked face and his heart stopped dead. Something horrible had happened. His mind whirled with the possibilities; Was it Mariko or Yun? Or had something happened to Fushi? Had those creatures hunted down her parents and killed them?

Naoko ran forward, colliding with him as she wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his shoulder. Ikkou stumbled back through the doorway and fell into a sitting position on the bed, instinctively wrapping his arms around Naoko.

"Naoko, what's wrong? What happened?!" he asked urgently, feeling the destructive energies building within him. He didn't know what had hurt her like this, but he'd make sure it paid in spades for making Naoko cry.

Naoko didn't say anything for a long time, simply crying and holding tightly to Ikkou. After a few seconds he started stroking her hair gently, whispering, "It's okay, Naoko. It'll be okay."

"Don't die, Ikkou." She said between sobs after a minute, "Please don't die."

Ikkou looked at Naoko curiously, "What are you talking about?"

Naoko looked up at him, tears flowing, "I... I saw you die... I was so afraid..."

Ikkou hugged her, smiling slightly, "I'm okay, Naoko. You don't have to worry about me."

"I-I... know I don't..." She said trying to control her emotions again. She hugged him close whispering quietly, "but I do anyways."

Ikkou smiled.

She cared.

Katsu, Hanna, Nobuyuki, and Jack peered through the open doorway.

"I don't know whether to feel happy for Ikkou or sad for Naoko." Katsu said finally breaking their silence.

"Poor Naoko," Hanna said sadly.

"I wonder what happened." Jack said.

Nobuyuki scratched his head, "All I know is this means I've lost access to my room for the next hour or so. And I needed my physics notes to study..."

Katsu grinned, "Well I didn't do so well in that class, but you can borrow my old notes..."

Hanna started walking through the door, "She looks like she needs some emotional support."

Katsu snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her back through the door, smiling, "Don't worry Hanna. She's in good hands."

Jack nodded, "He's a good guy, and he's her friend too. He'll take care of her."

Nobuyuki sighed, "I'm going to fail Physics, you all realize that right?"

Jack rolled his eyes and closed the door.

Mariko arrived about forty five minutes later. Half dead, sweating and panting heavily, with Yun in close chase. Within a few minutes of their arrival, and Mariko's profuse apologies to Naoko for not coming after her right away (and Naoko's assurances that it was okay), Naoko and the others left for home.

Ikkou sat there on the bed long after they had gone. It was dark now, he could barely see anything in the room, and he was starting to get a little cold. But he didn't feel any of it, and didn't notice anything around him except for the wet spot on his shoulder from where Naoko's tears had fallen.

Tears cried for him.

Nothing else mattered at this moment in time. Despite the dangers of the demon inside him, the dangers of the remaining Tenma forces, even the specters and his unknown "benefactor", despite all of this he was happy.

He knew Naoko cared. She cared about what happened to him. He knew in the long run this only meant she considered him a friend. But right now it was enough to know that she cared.

She cared.

Nobuyuki walked past his roommate to get his book and couldn't help but wonder about the oddly large dopey smile on Ikkou's face. He shook his head as he walked back out of the room with his notes.

Outside Jack and Katsu were waiting for him.

"Well, how is he?" Jack asked eagerly.

Nobuyuki pushed his glasses up back onto his face, "He's comatose."

Jack and Katsu looked at each other as Nobuyuki walked past.

"Comatose?"

Tyris locked his eyes on her the moment she stepped through the door. For a moment he looked startled, then his eyes turned as cold as marble watching her every movement.

"Uh... Hi."

Tyris didn't move an inch. He didn't smile, or wave, nor did he scowl or snarl. He simply sat, and watched.

"I... I don't know what you like, I asked Jack but he didn't know either. He said you read comic books, so I bought you an English Manga... I thought it might help pass the time.."

He blinked slowly as she offered him the comic book, but made no move to take the comic. She sighed, slowly lowering her arm.

"What is it? Why are you staring at me like that?"

"What do you want?" Tyris demanded coldly.

"What do I want?" She asked. She looked surprised.

No, he realized slowly, she was surprised.

"I... I don't want anything. I was just coming down here to cheer you up, but fat lot of good that did." She spat suddenly, throwing the comic on the bed, "What makes you even think I'd want anything from you?"

"Nobody visits me without wanting something." He stated. It was true.

Almost.

Nobody ever came to see him without wanting something in return.

Almost never.

"Well you're wrong this time. I just came because I thought *you* might want somebody to talk to."

"Me... want... somebody to... talk to?" Tyris couldn't hide his shock.

He never talked to anybody. Almost nobody. He almost couldn't think of a soul on this planet that he'd want to talk with.

Almost.

"But instead you act like a complete jerk. If you didn't want me to come in, you should have just said so!" she growled walking out.

Tyris hesitated. She was leaving, which is what he wanted.

Right?

Yet, he knew in his heart she was telling the truth. This time she hadn't wanted anything from him. Except to try to make him happy. And almost nobody had ever done that for him before.

Almost.

He moved before he even thought about it, reaching forward and grabbing onto her wrist as she turned away from him. She didn't even look back, simply jerking her hand to break it free from his. He yelped in pain as his torso was jerked to the side suddenly, pain flaring suddenly through his body.

The girl spun around looking at him in surprise, "Are you stupid!? Sit back down before you rip yourself open again!"

"Don't... go..." Tyris said, shocking himself as he heard the words leave his lips.

Had he really just said that?

"What?" She asked. She looked a little puzzled, and a little worried.

Tyris leaned back into the bed, hugging himself tightly as though that would ease the pain. "Don't go."

The girl looked at him slowly, then sat down in the chair next to the bed. He didn't know why she stayed. Maybe pity?

"Promise you won't be a jerk?" She asked.

Tyris locked his eyes on her again, but she immediately glared right back. Slowly he nodded, "I'll... try."

She didn't look overly pleased with the answer, but let the topic slip away.

"Why," Tyris asked slowly, "Why did you come?"

"Well, I was going to try and cheer you up..."

"No," Tyris shook his head, "Why did you come? You don't know me. Why are you here?"

She looked out the window, avoiding looking him in the eyes, "I... Saw what you did for those people that day when you got hurt. I thought that... well, you deserved some kind of reward."

"Are you my reward?" Tyris asked, curiously. He wasn't sure if he should be amused or annoyed by that notion.

The girl's eyes nearly left their sockets, "What!?"

"Is your companionship to be my reward?" Tyris asked.
She shook her head, obviously rattled by the question, "Uh, no... no, no, no... uh, your reward is... uh, dinner."
"Dinner?"
"Uh, yeah. I'll take you out for dinner... You're new to Japan so I'll give you a bit of the local cuisine to add some flavor to your trip." She said. She was obviously making it up as she went.
Tyris didn't care, he found it all very pleasant for some reason.
"Thanks... but you don't want to take me to dinner." Tyris stated softly.
"Oh, and why not?"
"Trust me, you just don't."
"And that's that then?" She said, frowning.
Tyris sighed, "If you insist, I will... Just so I'm not a jerk."
The girl smiled wirily, "Good, then it's settled."
Silence fell on the room for awhile, then the girl shifted uneasily, trying to start up a conversation,
"So... tell me about yourself."
Tyris looked away, "I'd rather not talk about myself."
"Why not?"
"I'm..." Tyris cleared his throat awkwardly, "Shy."
"Shy?"
"Yes."
"Okay, well... Do you like sports?"
"Not really."
"Uh, where are you from?"
"I'd rather not talk about that."
The girl was starting to look irritated, but continued trying to come up with something to talk about.
"That's a nice pendant you got there, where did you get it?"
Tyris looked down to the crystal snowflake hanging from the silver chain around his neck, "My sister found it... she gave it to me."
"You have a sister?"
"Yes."
"What does she look like?"
"I'd rather not talk about that."
The girl threw her hands up in frustration, "I give up!"
"Huh?"
"I give up, everything I suggest to you, you shoot down. If we can't talk about anything about you what are we supposed to talk about?"
Tyris turned to the girl, "You."
"M-me?"
She wasn't expecting that. She looked stunned by the comment, and for some reason he couldn't help but feel a bit of pleasure. Not because of her sudden discomfort, but in spite of it. He couldn't help but think it was an odd sensation.
"What do you want to know about me?"
"What's your name?" Tyris asked instantaneously.
"You don't even know my name?"
Tyris shook his head.
"My name is Mariko."
Tyris lifted an arm and reached towards Mariko, to shake her hand, "My name is Tyris Engelhard. I am... I am pleased to meet you."

Naoko sat on the temple stairs waiting for the others to arrive. For some reason they always seemed to decide to meet back here, in the place it all started, to discuss demon related business. Not because it was where it all started, but because the park made it easier for them to slip away and talk in private. The fact that this is where it had all started was simply another one of the ironies that had plagued Naoko's life since that day.

She waited patiently as the others slowly came one by one. Yun was the first one to show up, as he had come early to do some chores around the temple for his sensei. Ikkou was next to show up, readily flashing Naoko a big smile and warm greeting. She hadn't ever seen him this cheerful. The last to show up was Mariko, who arrived late.

Mariko came running down the path at a breakneck speed, and came to a stop next to Naoko, putting her hands on her knees, bending at the waist and panting hard.

"Sorry," She said between gulps air, "Busy..."

"It's okay... I just wanted to get you here together to talk about the specters." she said quietly.

The reaction might not have been as noticeable if she hadn't known them for so long. Yun moved his bangs away from his eyes, as he always did when he was uncomfortable or nervous, Mariko refused to make eye contact, and Ikkou's reaction was the most blatant of all. His smile slowly faded away as he looked up into the sky and watched a plane go by.

"What is it?" Naoko demanded, her voice becoming louder.

"Nothing." Ikkou said immediately.

"What's what?" Mariko said, finally catching her breath again.

"I wanted to know if the specters had attacked you since the last time we were all together."

Naoko said, watching all of them carefully.

Slowly, one by one, they shifted uneasily.

"How many?" Naoko said finally.

"Three." Yun said finally with a sigh.

Ikkou shrugged, "Seven."

"Twenty... I think." Mariko said.

The others all focused their attention on her.

"How was I to know they had reinforcements when I chased them into that alley?"

Naoko winced, "You... chased... them?"

"Well, I couldn't just let them run away could I? How would I know if they were following me, or if they were going to hurt somebody else. Besides, I can take care of myself." Mariko stated awkwardly, not appreciating the attention.

"Mariko... All of you, why didn't you tell me?" Naoko asked.

Ikkou sighed, "We didn't want to put any more pressure on you."

"We knew you were having troubles with Darkbolt, and school..." Yun said.

"... Add on the new guy you have to help out, plus your homework, you're already pulling a full load. Besides, we're fully capable of..." Mariko continued.

"Taking care of yourself." Naoko said, cutting her off, "I know that, but this is too dangerous for us to be simply looking after ourselves. How am I supposed to be there to help you if you guys won't let me know there's any trouble!?"

"And what are you going to do other than worry about it?" Ikkou asked, "Naoko we can't do anything about it right now other than deal with the attacks as they come." his face darkened, "Unless of course Fushi decides to come clean and tell us what's really going on here. And I doubt that's going to happen."

Naoko looked down. Nothing she could do would make Ikkou and Fushi get along, and she knew it. She still wished she could change that, but something told her they were never meant to be friends. And it made her sad.

Ikkou shook his head, "What I'm trying to say is that short of a miracle showing us where these things are coming from, we really can't do anything about it. Except worry about something we can't control."

"What if it's that kind of thinking that allowed these creatures to become powerful enough... to kill hundreds of innocent people?"

"Okay, so we're going to stop them then..." Ikkou threw up his arms helplessly, "How?!"

Naoko hesitated.

"Ikkou is right Naoko." Yun stated.

Naoko shook her head, "We have to at least try..."

"So we... what?" Mariko asked, perplexed, "Patrol around at night looking for shadows?"

"Why not?" Naoko asked, "At least we'll be trying then..."

"At the point in time when they're the most powerful." Ikkou added in.

Naoko hesitated.

"Plus there is the question of how we're supposed to even follow these things. I mean, shadows in the dark..."

"I can sense them if we get close enough." Yun said suddenly.

Naoko nodded, "I can too, but we'll have to go searching for them... I'll understand if you don't want to..."

Ikkou reached out and put a hand on Naoko's shoulder, "Just because I don't think it's a good idea doesn't mean I won't help you..." he stuttered for a second as he realized what he just said, "Uh... I mean..."

Naoko smiled, "Thank you."

Ikkou smiled weakly in response.

"So then we'll go on patrol tomorrow night then..." Naoko said, watching all of the others nod.

Except one.

"Uh, tomorrow night?" Mariko asked, fidgeting.

"What's up?" Yun asked, raising an eyebrow and grinning lightly.

"Uh, I kind of promised to take somebody out to dinner tomorrow..." Mariko said slowly.

Naoko noticed the momentary flicker of Yun's grin as she said that, but the grin returned in full strength before anybody else noticed.

"Oh? Mariko is finally going out again; finally found somebody to swoon over?" Yun asked with a teasing tone.

Mariko glared at Yun, "It's not like that!"

Yun's smile was his only response. Mariko smacked him in the side with an annoyed roll of her eyes, "I'm just taking him out to dinner that's all."

"Who are you going out with?" Naoko asked curiously.

Mariko frowned, "I'm not going out... oh, forget it." she grumbled.

"Ah, evading the question. She must like this one." Yun interjected again, earning him yet another elbow to the ribs.

"It's just dinner! Sheesh," Mariko folded her arms with an exasperated expression.

"It's okay with me if you don't want to tell us, but..." Yun started, but trailed off as Mariko drew her arm back for another swing. He smiled and looked over to the temple, "Oh wait, I think I hear sensei calling, excuse me!"

Ikkou watched with an odd expression as Yun ran off to the Temple, just barely dodging another attack by Mariko, who decided to chase him all the way.

"I've never seen those two act that way. Especially Yun." Ikkou stated, surprised.

Naoko nodded, "They care a great deal for each other."

Ikkou raised an eyebrow, "Is that what you think that was all about?"

Naoko nodded, "They'd do anything for each other."

Naoko closed her eyes and smiled. She'd do anything for them, because she loved them. And she knew they'd do the same for her.

"Uh... Hey, Naoko... uh..." Ikkou nervously rubbed his hands on his pants, "How about I... uh... walk you home?"

Naoko was startled by the question, and immediately averted her gaze downward from Ikkou, "uh...."

"Just friends," Ikkou interjected quickly, noting her discomfort.

Naoko looked up tentatively, "Just friends?"

Ikkou nodded. Naoko smiled shyly and nodded. Slowly they turned and started to make their way away from the temple, chatting lightly.

All the while Ikkou silently berated himself, "Just friends? Ugh, what was I thinking!?"

Naoko drummed her fingers on her desk looking outside. In a few hours she'd be out there, hunting down the shades. But she realized that Ikkou was right. The only chance they had of finding these things was by quite literally tripping over them.

"But at least we'll be trying," She thought to herself, watching the leaves in the trees flutter in the wind, "At least then maybe we can save some people... maybe we can stop it all together."

The bell rang, breaking Naoko from her daydream. She was starting to pay less and less attention in school, which was really starting to bother her. She decided she'd have to spend some more time studying to make up for the lapse.

"Naoko," Her teacher said above the ruckus.

Naoko winced, figuring that she wasn't the only one who had noticed her lack of attention. She gathered her books together and walked up to the front of the classroom in front of the teacher's desk.

Her teacher looked up and smiled, "Ah, good, you are the student looking after Tyris Engelhard, correct?"

Naoko nodded slowly, and her teacher handed her a small sketchbook.

"Give this to Tyris when you see him next, he must have dropped it when he..." the teacher suddenly looked ill at ease, and rubbed the back of his neck, "Uh... if you could just see that he gets it back. Thank you."

Naoko nodded again, then hurried to her next class. She let out a loud sigh as she sat down, setting her books down on her desk. She watched as the sketchbook fell from the desk suddenly landing on the ground, open. She looked around for a second and then shrugged mentally, figuring she must have simply set the books down to hard.

"I've got to stop worrying so much, like Mariko keeps telling me, and I've got to start paying more attention to," She paused momentarily as she reached down to pick up the book and saw the sketch on the open page, "oh... my... god..."

Ikkou shook his head as he walked towards the temple. These meetings were coming more and more frequent now, and to make matters worse he was starting to have problems getting away to go to them.

He sighed again as he noticed Jack was still following along behind him, whistling happily.

He had tried to get away right away after Naoko had told him to go to the temple with a note. The writing looked so shaky and hurried that Ikkou had almost forced her to talk to him there. But he was surprised by the look she had given him when he had grabbed onto her arm. A look of angry determination.

One he had only seen before when she had transformed.

"What if Yun was right?" He wondered to himself, "What if the demons are starting to affect us?"

He snorted, "More likely that Naoko simply is becoming more determined since her encounter with the demons... She had to since everything we went through." he paused for a second, "Though she doesn't show it as much when she's not transformed."

"So where are we going exactly?"

Ikkou frowned, being forced from his contemplations, "I'm going to the temple, you should go back to the dorm."

"Nu-uh. I got here almost a week ago and I haven't gotten to go anywhere yet. You think I'm just going to sit around in the dorm the whole time?" Jack said incredulously, "Would you sit around the house if you had a chance at seeing Canada? Mmmm, no, I don't think so."

Ikkou let out a long sigh wondering how he was going to lose Jack.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and continued on his way, Jack thankfully deciding to check out the sights rather than continue chatting. As Ikkou came up to the Temple he saw Yun waiting for him on the steps. Yun waved, looking curiously at Jack. Ikkou shrugged helplessly.

Jack looked at the temple, his jaw hanging open, "Wow... can I actually take a look around on the inside?"

Ikkou looked over to Yun who simply shrugged, "Sure... just don't touch anything."

Jack quickly dashed up the steps, disappearing inside.

Yun turned to Ikkou who shrugged again, "I couldn't get rid of him."

"Any idea what we're meeting about this time?" Yun asked, "Doesn't sound like it's just the patrol that Naoko wanted to run."

"Yeah... about that patrol, I was thinking..."

"That just you and Naoko should go?" Yun asked, not looking surprised in the slightest.

Ikkou nodded slowly.

Yun flashed Ikkou a small smile, "Well, I suppose you and Naoko could cover more ground flying then we could on the ground. I'll just be you backup for tonight."

"Uh... thanks." Ikkou said, slowly starting to smile back.

"Hey, just remember to keep an eye on what's going on around you."

Ikkou chuckled, "Don't worry, I'll keep Naoko safe."

Yun raised an eyebrow, "I know that, I'm worried about you."

Ikkou paused momentarily, thinking for a moment, then asked, "What do you mean?"

Yun sighed slowly, "Maybe you need to protect yourself a little more. We all know you'd take a hit for Naoko, but don't forget to protect yourself while you're protecting her."

Ikkou felt a little bit of building pressure lift off his shoulder. "Good," he thought, "He wasn't referring to my relationship with Naoko..." He allowed a slight frown to cross his face, and a bitter voice slipped in, "Or lack there of."

"There she is now."

Yun's words snapped Ikkou out of his funk, and he turned and watched as Naoko ran up to meet them. His happiness to see Naoko was stolen the look on her face.

"I can't find Mariko anywhere..." She said between pants as she came to a stop beside Ikkou.

"Uh, I already told you I couldn't make it for the patrol Naoko..." Mariko's voice called from behind them.

As the others watched Mariko walked out the door of the temple and down the stairs to join them.

"I kind of already had plans for today."

Naoko shook her head, her determined look coming back, "No it's not that, it's... Well, look for yourself."

Naoko pulled out Tyris's sketchbook and opened it up so they could see it. Ikkou scowled unconsciously balling a fist, Yun raised his eyebrows taking a closer look while Mariko peered over his shoulder.

"Who drew this?" Ikkou demanded.

"Tyris." Naoko stated coldly.

"Tyris?" Mariko asked, taking a step back and looking back up at the temple, "But how did he know?"

Naoko shook her head again, "I don't know, but he knows more than he's letting on. And I want to know what he's doing here."

"Another Tenma spy," Ikkou spat in disgust.

Yun looked at the picture then back up at Naoko, "You know this could just be an odd interpretation of what he was feeling from you... some people are more sensitive to these things."

"Like you are?" Naoko asked, then shook her head, "But even you didn't know that I was possessed by a demon."

"I say we track him down and demand an explanation right now," Ikkou stated, crossing his arms.

Tonk.

Yun stiffened as the familiar sound touched his ears.

"Oh no..." Mariko said quietly.

"Somebody's fighting," Yun yelled, charging up the stairs, book still firmly in his hand.

Somebody was fighting with the bokken that Sensei had kept in the temple. Normally it wasn't odd that somebody would be using the wooden swords for practice, but there was nobody who was to be practicing kendo today. In fact, nobody was training today, yet the sounds of bokken colliding together was unmistakable.

And that meant trouble. One of the first things that Yun had been trained to learn was that even a practice sword was a deadly weapon and was to be treated as such.

As he threw open the door and ran inwards the scene that greeted him left him a little surprised. He had been trying to prepare himself for anything as he came in, but what he hadn't prepared himself was for the people fighting to be good.

As he watched the two people twirl the bokken around as if they were a simple extension of their arms. One after another they attacked, swords rushed up to greet the attack, to bat it away, or the combatant simply danced out of the way at the last second.

Tyris was leading the attack using his size to help over power his smaller opponent, Jack, who was using superior speed to deflect and avoid the incoming attacks. With a momentary pause as both of their swords collided, they both faced off. Glare for glare, snarl for snarl, then as the swords came flashing at each other their resounding yells filled the temple. With a resounding crack their swords collided and both combatants slid back a few feet.

Ikkou and Mariko slid to a stop beside Yun.

"Jack?" Ikkou asked surprised.

Mariko groaned, "Oh no... Tyris..."

As he watched the fight Yun could only be impressed. The two of them fought with strength and ingenuity that many students of Kendo lacked and could never find. But, he noticed promptly, they had

many flaws in their style. Tyris' swings took him off balance to often, Jack was far too defensive, the both wielded the swords awkwardly as though they were used to a blade which didn't curve slightly, they used the weapons one handed rather than two handed, and their feet were out of place almost constantly. This gave him options if plan A failed.

Yun stormed forward, drawing himself up to appear as strict and imposing as possible, and yelled, "Stop this at once!"

Both fighters never paused instead they increased the pace, circling in on each other, blades crashing together with increasing ferocity. Yun watched surprised as the two of them suddenly converged on his position swords coming in at him. Yun brought his arms to block an attack going for his face, but watched in surprise as the blade pulled back at the last moment, cut an outline of his head in the air and blocked an incoming attack from behind him. Yun tried to move to the side, but a thrusting blade from behind him cut him off, but the sword in front of him batted it away. He grimaced and stumbled to the other side, but again was cut off by another blade which had been trying to slip past him to hit the other opponent, but again the other blade slipped past and knocked it away from Yun.

Yun heard Mariko yell his name, the sound of a door slamming open and the sounds of somebody running towards them. He looked up and saw a blade coming down at his head. As he threw himself to the side another blade interposed it above his head, and a large hand planted itself on his side and pushed him out of the way.

Yun stumbled and fell to his knees, looking back over his shoulder to the fight that was still going. They not only hadn't stopped fighting, they had continued to fight around him like he hadn't even been there to begin with.

"Yun, stand back."

Yun looked up to see his Sensei stalking past him, bokken in hand, an angry look in his eyes.

"ENOUGH!" He barked loudly, bringing his sword across quickly twice beating both of their swords away.

Their response was immediate, Tyris blocked the second swing, and Jack brought his own sword across, knocking the sword from the surprised Sensei's hands to land near the far wall.

"Jack!" Ikkou yelled, "Stop it!"

Jack and Tyris clashed again, blades flashing rapidly in at each other only to be knocked away at the last second.

"Tyris!" Mariko yelled, taking a step forward.

Tyris hesitated, turning his head towards Mariko. In a confused voice he asked, "Mariko?"

Jack's sword came, unhindered, into his ribs with a resounding crack. Tyris' bokken hit the ground, Tyris following close behind it. He landed on his knees, crouching forward and hugged his ribs, grimacing in pain, blinking back tears of pain.

"Tyris!" Mariko yelled again running over to his side.

"What the hell?" Jack asked, looking around as though he had just woke up, his gaze fell onto Tyris and he dropped his sword immediately yelling, "Oh crap!"

Yun's Sensei grabbed Jack by the back of the shirt and dragged him towards the entrance, "You are no longer welcome at this temple, get out and never come back!"

Jack let out a yell trying to, unsuccessfully, dislodge the hand from his shirt, "I'm sorry! I'm going!"

Ikkou fumed as he watched Jack get dragged out, unhappy at being associated with one of the people responsible for the disaster. Naoko simply looked out of place, unsure whether to leave the temple, see if Tyris was okay, or demand to know about the contents of his sketchbook. Mariko was kneeling by Tyris' side, hand on his shoulder talking to him quietly.

Yun stood up slowly, collecting the bokken and placing them back in their rack. He didn't say a word, but simply walked to the entrance and motioned for Ikkou and Naoko to wait outside.

"This probably is best left a private matter for the dojo," Yun tried to explain.

Naoko simply nodded, "We can wait out here."

Yun nodded, and closed the door as his Sensei walked back into the temple and stopped in front of Tyris.

"You've been here less than a half hour and this is how you repay my kindness?" Sensei started, not raising his voice. It wasn't necessary, his tone cut deeper than yelling ever could, "I did a friend a favor by taking you in for the duration of your stay, and within a half an hour you touch equipment without

permission, could have quiet easily have injured or killed one of your friends and one of my pupils, and dishonored my teaching establishment in acting in such a manner."

Tyris slowly raised his head so he could look up from the ground and at the man in front of him, "I'm sorry... I..."

"Silence!"

Yun and Mariko glanced at each other then back to their Sensei.

"I did not give you permission to speak." Their Sensei stated in a low tone, "You are a guest in my hospitality, but you have acted like an irresponsible child and are not worthy of the hospitality I was offering."

Tyris lowered his head, slowly forcing himself up to his feet, still clutching his ribs.

"But, I am a much too forgiving man. Since you were the only one hurt because of your foolishness, I will offer you the opportunity to earn your stay and right the wrong you have done this day. I will expect you to do all of the chores around the temple, by yourself, assist me in training the classes in any manner I see fit, help with the cooking and cleaning of meals, and..." Sensei paused momentarily then pointed to the Bokken, "Since you think you deserve to use those, you will train in kendo under my supervision during your whole stay here. You will learn to respect them for the dangerous weapon they are, and perhaps you will learn why you shouldn't act as though they are toys. Do you agree to this?"

Tyris looked up to the man in front of him, then glanced over at Yun, then Mariko who was still standing at his side, "I... I don't understand..."

Mariko whispered quietly to him, "Just say, Hai."

Tyris looked forward again, "Hai."

"From now on you will refer to me as Sensei. Do you understand?"

Again Tyris' eyes flickered back to Mariko, but she immediately whispered to him, "Hai, Sensei."

"Hai, Sensei."

Tyris shuddered involuntarily, clutching his side even tighter.

"Move your hand, let's see how badly you got yourself hurt."

Tyris slowly removed his hand from his side, covered in blood.

Mariko bit her bottom lip as her Sensei gasped, "Oh my god, take off your shirt, I need to see how badly you're hurt. Yun, call an ambulance..."

"I don't understand..." Tyris said slowly, then looking back over at Mariko, "But tell him I'm okay."

"But you're not."

"Just tell him!"

Mariko took a step back as he snapped at her, her eyes narrowing dangerously, "No."

Tyris winced then he sighed, and mumbled, "I... I won't go back in there. I hate it there."

Mariko hesitated, then called out, "Yun, hold on... let's see how badly he's hurt before we start worrying to much."

Yun was flabbergasted, nearly breaking his overly calm exterior, "Mariko... he's bleeding..."

Tyris slowly peeled off his shirt revealing where the werewolf had attacked him. The doctors had stitched it up extremely well, but it still looked nasty, especially with the blood that had seeped through.

Mariko's eyes widened then her face turned red with anger, "Where are your bandages!"

Tyris turned his head so he wouldn't have to look at her, "I took them off, I co..."

"I don't care!" Mariko yelled, "I just barely managed to get you out of the hospital, and you're trying to get yourself thrown back in!? Yun, get the bandages."

"But I..." Tyris started.

Mariko glared at him, raising a fist in front of his face, "You'll wear the bandages or I'll put you back in the hospital myself. You got it!?"

The big man sighed, holding up his hands in surrender, "You win."

Yun paused looking to Sensei, who simply nodded, then went to get the bandages. Sensei turned around slowly, "I'll expect him to be at my place by seven tonight. Mariko, can you show him the way? You seem to be the only person he'll listen to."

"Yeah, he's just so.... stubborn!"

"Reminds me of you."

"He reminds you of me?"

Tyris smiled slightly, "I remind him of you?"

"Quiet down you. I'm not talking to you yet." Mariko said, shooting another burning glare at Tyris, but he took this glare while still maintaining a small smile.

She continued to look at him for a few seconds afterwards, surprised by the smile, and a little annoyed. Yun returned with the bandages, and despite his and Mariko's attempts to bandage the wounds they were forced away by Tyris as he demanded to be allowed to do it himself.

Yun watched as his Sensei watched for a moment then walked into the back room. Yun watched Tyris gingerly place the bandages on, then followed behind his teacher. His Sensei was looking out the window at the nearby trees and bird.

"Sensei, why are you allowing him to train here... even be here after the incident he was a part of? I've seen you send away people for less." Yun asked, standing beside him, watching the birds as they landed on the patch searching for food.

"I have a few reasons. One of which is the family, which was supposed to look after him, is a very dear friend, and I would like to do them the favor they asked of me. Secondly, with him here not only will he be less likely to get into trouble under my watch, but perhaps I can instill some discipline in him and work away the self destructive nature he tries to hide." For a moment the man watched the birds, then smiled as they suddenly leapt into the air a flew away, "And because I see some potential. You of all people should know that some of my best students were troubled individuals when they got here, and now look."

He looked back out the doorway towards Mariko and Tyris, then reached out and patted Yun on the shoulder, "I wouldn't want to miss another opportunity."

Yun smiled, but couldn't help but wonder if his Sensei had made a good choice, or a horrible mistake in allowing Tyris to stay. But he couldn't say anything, and simply walked out of the room to go speak to Naoko and Ikkou.

Ikkou was leaning up against a post on the walkway, Naoko was sitting on the stairs, her elbows resting on her knees, hands propping her head up. They both seemed to be staring off into the distance, watching some birds fly away. As he stepped out they both turned to face him, curious expressions on the face.

"Sensei decided not to punish him too harshly," Yun said eventually.

The expression on Naoko's face fluctuated for a few seconds then finally she looked up, "But is he okay?"

"He was bleeding, Jack apparently hit him where that creature had cut him. He wouldn't let me get close, but it just looks like it's been popped open, I think the stitches are still holding."

"What color?"

Yun and Naoko looked at Ikkou, surprised, "What?"

He met their gazes evenly, "What color was his blood?"

"Red, just like yours or mine." Yun stated.

Ikkou frowned, "So I guess that doesn't prove anything really."

"Expecting him to bleed green?"

Ikkou sighed, "I was almost hoping he would. It would make this a bit easier. Can we see him?"

Yun looked over his shoulder, "I think that we can see him for a few minutes without anybody else noticing, we just have to keep it down."

He threw in that last comment in hopes that Ikkou would note it and try to keep his temper reigned in. Yun knew that Ikkou was a good person at heart, but his temper made him make the wrong choices at critical junctures. He couldn't help but wonder if it was actually the influence of the demon of destruction, which Ikkou kept locked away in his mind.

Ikkou walked past him into the temple, face shifting into one of anger. He stopped a few feet away from where Tyris was bandaging himself up, with Mariko adding "helpful" comments ever few moments, which Tyris ignored completely. Slowly both Mariko and Tyris looked up at him from where they sat on the ground.

Tyris flinched visibly, then looked quickly from Ikkou to Yun, then to Naoko.

"Okay, Tenma." Ikkou growled, "what are you doing here?"

Tyris grimaced, standing to his feet, holding the bandages in place with one hand, his other hand slipped down to his side. He looked at Ikkou again, then Naoko and backed away, "I don't know what you're saying."

Mariko stood up with Tyris remaining beside him, unsure as how to react to the situation. Naoko could sympathize with her, as she was feeling the same way. She nervously brushed a few hairs behind her ear and watched as events unfolded.

"Don't pull that crap!" Ikkou snapped, snarling, "We know you aren't who you claim to be."

Tyris took another step back. He shifted slightly, his free hand disappearing slowly behind his back, as his face hardened into an angry look to match Ikkou's, "I don't understand!"

Ikkou threw the sketchbook at Tyris. It flipped around through the air to land at his feet, opened to the page that the others had been looking at only a few moments ago. It was a half completed picture, one side was Naoko, but instead of the other half of her face and body Darkbolt's stood in it's place.

Tyris looked down at the sketchbook for a moment, and his eyes widened. He looked up at Ikkou again, then without another word he bolted for the door. Ikkou was a step behind him before he could even get halfway to the door. He grabbed onto Tyris's arm, pulling hard to spin him around. Tyris turned with the momentum, a sudden flicker of light coming from the hand he had previously been hiding behind his back was all that Ikkou saw as the big man suddenly attacked him.

He watched as Tyris suddenly stopped, holding a dagger only mere inches from his throat. Tyris looked at him with wide eyes, as though he couldn't believe what was happening in front of him. His hand wavered for a second, then he tried to turn and continue running, but he was off balance from being spun around in the first place, and even more from the sudden stop he had made to keep the blade from slicing through Ikkou's throat. He stumbled over his own feet and fell backwards away from Ikkou, landing hard.

He let out a yelp of pain as he hit, which turned into a sudden woof as the wind blasted out of him. The dagger flew from his hand, skittering to a stop on the ground in front of Naoko.

Ikkou blinked, surprised by the events that had just happened, then got angry again. Who ever this man was, he had just tried to kill him. He balled a fist, and felt the energy build up in him.

Tyris looked around as though the world was spinning, he held his left arm tightly to his body, holding the bandages on his side. His right hand was balled into a fist, but instead of trying to fight he was still trying to push himself towards the door with his legs.

Ikkou dropped to his knees over Tyris, bringing his fist up high, but hesitated. He heard the others suddenly move to stop him, but that wasn't why he had stopped. The man had tried to kill him, but he didn't.

"Why did he stop?" Ikkou wondered to himself, the odd question blasting through the wall of rage that had been building in his head.

He lowered his fist, pointing a finger right in Tyris' face, "This isn't over."

He stood up and walked out of the temple before anybody could stop him.

Naoko looked on in surprise.

Tyris ran. Ikkou stopped him. Tyris almost cut him, but he stopped, and fell (Did Ikkou hit him?). Then Ikkou went to his knees, going to punch Tyris while he was down.

She realized that wasn't right, and took a step forward, but Ikkou suddenly stopped, stood up and walked out. She could tell by the look on Yun's face that he was surprised too. They looked to each other then nodded, Yun picking up a bokken off the wall and standing off to the side while Naoko went to follow Ikkou.

Mariko snarled, leaping on Tyris as he tried to sit back up, slamming him back down to the ground with a hand on his throat and the other cocked over her shoulder to hit him, "Why? Why did you pull a knife on him?!"

Tyris looked away not answering. She struck him across the face. Tyris, surprising Mariko, sat upright and slid out of her grip, but the grimace of pain he showed the cost of the action as he stood to his feet. A glitter of light fell from his chin and struck the ground.

He turned, stumbled over to where his knife lay, and then picked it up slowly. He looked at it for a moment, then slowly turned back towards the door, with his back to Mariko.

"Dammit..." She said, from where she kneeled on the floor, then she looked up Tyris, "I trusted you... I thought you were my friend... Why?!"

Tyris paused, his head bowed forward, the quietly came the words, "He was going to kill me."

"What?"

He didn't look back, "He was going to kill me."

"He wasn't goin..."

Tyris turned around, an angrily look on his face, "Then how come you screamed?"

Mariko blinked, she hadn't screamed aloud, but she had panicked when she saw Ikkou run after him, "But I didn..."

"And the looks on your faces, you all expected him to." Tyris said, leaving the accusation to hang in the air, then with a snarl he turned to walk away.

He stopped just in front of the door, "And, I don't have any friends."

She heard the words, but she heard the wavering tone underlying it. He meant it to sound bitter, and angry. But he hadn't. He sounded lonely and hurt.

"Wait... where are you going?"

"Home."

Mariko stood up slowly, "By yourself? But you don't know where Sensei lives."

"Not his home, my home."

Mariko blinked, looking over to Yun who simply shrugged looking rather confused, "But you promised Sensei that you were going to stay and train to redeem your..."

"What?" Tyris interrupted her, turning to face her again. She could still see the welt she had left on the side of his face, "I never promised him that!"

It was Mariko's turn to get angry again, "Yes you did, you were staring right at him and said 'Hai Sensei', or was he just trying to kill you too?"

Tyris' jaw jerked to the side as a muscle spasmed, his face locked into a look of anger now, "I didn't understand a word he was saying! And you made me promise to train under him?"

"What do you mean you didn't understand him? You understand me just fine!" Mariko yelled back.

"Of course I understand you, you stupid..." Tyris sputtered for a few seconds then simply threw his hands up in disgust, yelling "Gaaah!"

He instantly snapped his arms back down, holding his wounded side, simply growling. He turned around and walked through the door.

"Fine then, run home." Mariko yelled after him.

Yun looked at her for a long moment, then placed a hand on her shoulder, "Calm down, Mari."

She looked over at her best friend, still seething, she shuddered, "Rrrrrah, it just makes me so angry! He's known about Naoko for who knows how long, then he pulls a knife on Ikkou, then he starts lying about not understanding Japanese!"

Yun looked at her oddly, scratching his head, "Well he obviously must know some Japanese if he kept up with you in that conversation, though I didn't know your English was so good."

Mariko's angry expression slid down into one of annoyance, "What are you talking about?"

Now Yun looked really confused, "What do you mean what am I talking about? You were yelling in Japanese and he was yelling in English."

Mariko shook her head, "No he was yelling in Japanese."

Yun sighed, shrugging, "Whatever." He knew better to argue with her when she was like this because she'd never admit to being wrong.

"He was!"

Yun's only response was a shrug, as he walked around the temple collecting the rest of the equipment he'd need for his Kendo lesson.

"I shouldn't have let him go." Mariko started, her tone changing from angry to a state Yun had learned awhile ago was simply grumpy, "I should have sat on his chest and punched him in the face until he talked."

"I think Ikkou tried that already," Yun called over to her. His attempt at levity was ignored.

"Yeah, he tried to kill him by slicing his neck wide open!"

"But he didn't!" Yun said finally, deciding to nip this problem in the bud, "I saw him pull the knife out of nowhere, bring it up to Ikkou's neck... and then he just stopped like he'd seen a ghost."

"So what, maybe he just choked under the pressure..." Mariko was starting to realize her arguments were lacking the same punch of common sense that Yun's were, and it was starting to annoy her.

"So then we have a guy who's unable to kill, who knows who we are. Not a frightening prospect considering what we've already faced."

"What if he stopped just because he knew we'd kill him and you'd heal Ikkou?"

"What if he sliced open Ikkou's neck, grabbed him, teleported to a volcano, and threw him in? Or what if he turned out to be Yasha, reborn from the dead, coming to hurt us without the demon of evil, and in a male body now?" Yun shook his head, "Mari, we can play 'what if' all night, the fact of the matter is that he didn't. Personally, I don't like him much, and I wouldn't trust him, but there's not much we can do right now."

"Hmpf," Mariko grunted, then raised an eyebrow, "Wait a moment, if you don't like him why are you defending him?"

"Well, somebody had to play the devil's advocate."

"So you admit, you think he's evil!" Mariko said, finally allowing a slight smile.

"Yes, he's most defiantly the root of all evil, now will you help me get this place ready?" Yun asked returning the smile.

"Not yet, I don't think you've agreed with me nearly enough yet."

His only response was to hit her in the head with a balled up pair of kendo pants.

Ikkou stormed out of the temple, angry at himself for stopping, angry at his friends for not trusting him, and angry that there was still a Tenma agent so close to his friends.

He shook his head trying to sort out the thoughts, trying to get past the irrational thoughts that were dragging him down. He wished for the thousandth time that everything was more straight forward, that he didn't have to keep second guessing everything he did.

He almost let out a bitter laugh as Naoko, the reason for most of his second-guessing, walked up beside him quietly. He waited for a moment but she didn't say anything. His anger welled up again, "she's just here because she thinks I shouldn't have attacked that Tenma. She doesn't trust me either."

He turned getting ready to yell, but Naoko cut him off long before he could ever start, and stole all of his anger away from him with one quiet, worried question.

"Are you okay?"

Ikkou shook his head again, more to clear his mind than to answer Naoko. What was wrong with him? A second ago he was ready to tear her head off for no reason at all, and he would have if she hadn't shocked some sense back into him.

"I'm... okay... but I need some time to think."

Naoko nodded slowly, she reached out hesitantly to put her hand on his shoulder, then stopped, slowly dropping her hand back by her side looking at the ground, "We can do the patrol another night, it's okay."

Ikkou started to protest, but Naoko shook her head, "We can go tomorrow, just get some rest, okay?"

If it had been anybody else he would have insisted, but she sounded more shocked than he felt. He nodded, giving in. There would be plenty of time tomorrow. Ikkou felt a cold shiver run down his spine, and spun around to see Tyris storming out of the Dojo, a trail of gauze from his bandages dragging along the ground as he walked past, pulling on his shirt. He ignored Ikkou, looking straight ahead as he walked by.

Naoko looked a little torn as to whether she should mention the bandages or just remain quiet, but before she could decide he was past her and down the pathway. She sighed, wishing she knew if he could be trusted or not.

She watched as Tyris stopped suddenly spinning around and started walking back to the Dojo. Ikkou stepped out beside her, blocking the stairway long before Tyris even got close. The large man's eyes flickered from Naoko to Ikkou, then to the Dojo.

He stopped in his tracks staring at them for a long minute before he, looking frustrated, stormed off to the edge of the forest, leaning up against a tree.

"What does he think he's up to now?" Ikkou muttered under his breath.

Tyris was still watching the temple as Ikkou was forced to step to the side to allow some students through inside. Tyris's eyes grew large and he took a step forward again, but Ikkou stepped forward once again. Tyris glared at Ikkou from the edges of the woods, then his eyes flickered over the Dojo again. Tyris finally clinched his fists, a look of intense frustration crossed his face and he walked out to the street and quickly disappeared.

Naoko sighed slowly, thinking of all the homework she'd need to do just to keep a little ahead after their patrol tomorrow. Mariko always teased her about doing too much homework, but Mariko didn't understand that Naoko enjoyed it. The answers were all there simply waiting for her in books. Waiting for her to find them, not like in the real world where there wasn't always a right answer.

"I'm going to go home now..." She said quietly, breaking off her own musings.

"I'll..." Ikkou swallowed trying to get past the sudden lump that had appeared in his throat, "I'll walk you home."

Ikkou ducked her head down, looking down at the ground, "It's okay, Tyris won't bother me... I'll be okay..."

"It's... not... that." Ikkou said, struggling to speak suddenly. He could feel all the words he wanted to say, all the feelings he wanted to express, but all he could do was try to force a few garbled words past a tongue that suddenly wouldn't work. "I just... want to walk you home," he blushed furiously as he said it, looking the other way.

"What if she says no? What if she says no?!" His mind screamed at him.

"Oh..." Naoko said quietly, "Okay."

If he could have seen her face at that moment, Ikkou would have realized that he wasn't the only one who was blushing.

Tyris ignored the knocking on his door, his eyes closed, trying to meditate.

"Sensei told me you were here, you know..."

Tyris didn't respond; ignoring the statement. He silently berated himself for not hearing the door slide open, as he heard her enter his room.

"How did you find here by yourself, Sensei said he found you waiting for him when he got home..." She allowed the question to trail off, waiting for any response.

Finally Tyris frowned, and snapped, "Does it matter?"

"... No... I guess it doesn't." She said, sounding a little disappointed.

He tried to ignore the hurt he felt when he heard that tone in her voice. He tried to but it was hard, he had never felt like this before.

"You weren't at school, I was worried..."

"That you hurt me?" Tyris interrupted her, not trying to hide the bitter tone.

She didn't answer, but he could hear her shift uncomfortably.

"My stitches were torn open again, but I'm fine. Sensei decided I should remain at home and rest." He said, intentionally adding a note of finality to the sentence.

She ignored it, "I'm sorry, I..."

"I said I'm fine."

She was quiet for a moment, and he just wished she'd turn around and leave. Why wouldn't she just leave him alone, like all of the others?

"Look... Well... Let me try to make it up to you." She said, trying to sound cheerful, despite the fact she obviously wasn't, "Let me take you out to dinner, like I promised before. I can show you..."

"No, thank you." Tyris growled.

She finally stopped pretending to be calm and snapped back at him, "What is your problem?! I came here trying to apologize and all you do is act like a jerk!"

Tyris stood up and turned to face the little blonde girl, "And what, I'm just supposed to accept your apology like that? Just accept that 'oh, well she feels bad' and move along. No!"

"And why not?" She said, getting right into his face.

"Because you betrayed me! I thought you were my friend!" He yelled at her.

He stood there for a moment, hand covering his mouth. What had he just said? He didn't have any friends, and he didn't trust her. He had never trusted her. Hadn't he?

He turned around, looking out the window at the setting sun, "I don't want to forgive you. I may not know who your friends are, but I certainly could feel what they were. You lead me into a trap after..." he stopped. He was going to say after he had started to trust her, but he hadn't trusted her, he decided, ignoring the small voice which declared otherwise.

"I..." She stumbled for a moment, looking for the proper words. It was odd, she sounded sincerely surprised by what he had said and saddened because of it. "I'm sorry, it wasn't a trap though! I was taking you to meet Sensei; he was the one who you were going to be staying with while you're in Japan... The rest was just a coincidence."

"What ever." he said, brushing off her attempts to apologize again.

"Fine..." She said, the frustration building in her voice yet again, "Fine."

He heard her turn around and walk back to the door, where she stopped again.

"Oh, I forgot, you dropped this..."

Tyris spun about immediately, his heart racing, and his hope soaring. He watched as she pulled on a chain hanging around her neck and a small crystal pendant of a snowflake appeared. He was beside her in a

moment, his hands on her hips, he lifted her into the air high above his head, a smile across his face as he spun them both around, his eyes locked on the pendant.

"You found it! I thought I lost it!" His mouth continued to move but he couldn't get any words past the feelings welling up inside him.

She, surprised by suddenly being lifted into the air and spun about like a child, clamped both her hands onto his wrists to make sure she wouldn't fall. She looked him in the eyes, looking extremely confused, and more than a little worried, "Uh, could you please put me down!?"

Mariko felt the floor under her feet and started to relax again. She had never suspected that Tyris was that strong, and after his angry tirade only a few moments before she had actually thought he was attacking her for the pendant. Her worries were shattered a second after she touched the floor because she found herself trapped in a powerful hug.

"Thank you," Tyris said, squeezing her tightly, "Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you..."

"Okay! Okay! You're welcome!" Mariko said, trying to escape the hug, "Now let go you're crushing me!"

He let go hastily, looking as though he thought he'd broken her, "I'm sorry, I was just excited, I..." Mariko couldn't help but let out a laugh, a lopsided grin coming to her face, "I'll say. I've heard that teenagers were supposed to experience mood swings, but that was just scary!"

Tyris looked at her for another long moment then sighed, "I'm sorry for yelling at you, I just felt..."

Mariko nodded, understanding completely, "Let's just call it even then."

"No," Tyris said, shaking his head, "that pendant means more to me than you'd ever know. I owe you one."

"Really?" Mariko said, a shifty smile on her face, "Good then you're coming along to dinner then."

Tyris looked at her for a moment then shook his head, "I couldn't."

"You have to, I already promised to take you yesterday, and you just said you owed me one." She grinned even larger a moment later, "Besides, the money I got for dinner came from Sensei. He heard about the time you had since you got here and felt sorry for you. The bus explosion as you got into Japan, then an animal attack, then being attacked again in his own Dojo."

Tyris let out a small chuckle, then cocked his head to the side, like a confused puppy, "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"Maybe it's just because I'm a wonderful person," She declared with a regal tone, then rolled her eyes, "And maybe you should just stop questioning your luck and enjoy it."

She reached around behind her neck and released the clasp on the chain holding the pendant. She dropped it into her palm and held it out to Tyris who hesitantly reached out as though he was expecting her to pull it back any moment.

"Well, come on, take it." She said with a laugh.

He looked a little embarrassed and moved to take the pendant, but as his hand touched it both of them felt a jolt of electricity pulse up their arm. They both yelled, but instead of jumping away their arms spasmed and they found themselves unable to let go of each other's hand for a second. Then just as soon as it had started, it had disappeared. She looked down at the hands for a moment, and then looked at Tyris wondering if he had been responsible for that, but the completely befuddled expression on Tyris' face told her that he was even more surprised than she was.

She stood there for a minute watching him gape, then couldn't help but ask in a teasing tone, "So are you going to take the pendant or are you just going to hold my hand?"

Tyris' face turned a bright shade of scarlet, and he jerked his hand away quickly, forgetting about the pendant completely.

'She must think I'm an idiot!' He thought to himself, feeling incredibly foolish.

So he was holding her hand, it's not like he was touching her in an inappropriate place. So why was he acting so weird?! He'd never felt so nervous or uncomfortable in all of his life...

Why wouldn't she just go away? If she went away he wouldn't feel this way, he knew, but something in him couldn't help but hope that she would stay. He was lonely with his sister so far away, and suddenly he couldn't even talk to anybody around him.

Except her... she understood him, she came and talked to him when nobody else would, and now she was trying to be his friend even after he had treated her like dirt.

"She betrayed you!" A voice in his head yelled, and he hesitated. She had, but she said it was a mistake. And she had brought him the pendant back, she could have claimed that it had gone missing. "Maybe she doesn't know what it is," the voice argued, but he wasn't listening anymore. If nothing else the sentimental value of the pendant was worth more than anything else in the world to him.

Could it hurt so much to trust her?

"Don't trust anyone!" a voice from his past screamed at him, "People will use you, lie to you, and throw you away when your usefulness has run its course."

He shuddered, remembering how true those words had actually been. The ironies still brought a bitter laugh to his lips.

He looked up as he realized that the laughter he heard wasn't his, but Mariko's. She was looking at him, her brown eyes twinkling with mischief, shaking her head slightly, "You're something else, aren't you?"

Tyris froze. Did she know?

She grinned, "Okay, I'll put it on for you, hold still."

He let out a breathe he hadn't even been aware he had been holding, relaxing as Mariko stepped around behind him, reaching up to slip the pendant over his head. He immediately felt nervous again, and his heart skipped a beat as she brushed up against him. The only time he remembered feeling this way was when he was facing an opponent he didn't believe he could defeat, but this didn't feel frightening like that. This felt warm, but just as nerve racking.

What in the world was wrong with him?

Ikkou floated in the air above the forest beside the temple. Flying always made him feel good, and today the gentle breeze that flowed through his hair only made it much more enjoyable. School had seemed to fly by, and Tyrus had been strangely missing making it even more enjoyable. Today would be a good day, and nothing could ruin it for him.

'Ikkou, remember, this isn't a date,' he thought to himself, 'It's just a patrol to look for those Tenma shadow creatures.'

But it was also the first time he would be alone with Naoko for a long period of time.

"Hi."

Ikkou smiled as Naoko floated up beside him.

Yes, today would be a very good day.

"So tell me again, what are we?"

"Freelance demon hunters."

"And what do we do?"

"Hunt freelance demons?"

"Oh, for crying out loud!"

"Calm down, Jax, calm down, it's just a joke."

"Yes, Biggs, but the problem is that despite the fact that we're Freelance demon hunters, what have we done so far?"

"Well, you see, we... uh..."

"We haven't found a single demon!"

"Well we can't find them. I mean, we've been looking all over Ohio and yet, nothing."

"Ugh," Jax let out a long tired sigh, "I guess you're right... at this point the only way we'd ever find them is if they called us and told us where they were."

Biggs sighed too, but before he could say anything the phone rang, "Hello? Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh." He put down the phone and scratched his chin, "Jax, you're not going to believe this..."

"Excuse me, I was sent here to pick up some papers for a Tyrus Engelhard, concerning his stay here."

The Nurse looked up from her spot at the desk, then tapped a few keys on the computer in front of her, "I'm sorry, we've never treated anybody by that name."

"That's funny, he was brought to this hospital after being attacked by an animal at a local school."

The Nurse nodded, "Oh, I read about that, but I'm afraid he wasn't brought to this hospital."

"Really? Then who was in room 413 a day ago?"

The Nurse looked at him as though he'd just told her that the world was flat, "I'm sorry sir, but we don't have a room 413 in this hospital."

"Oh. Well, I'm sorry to have bothered you." Yun said as he turned and walked out of the hospital.

He didn't know why he had gone to the hospital, there was no reason for him to have gone there, but whenever he thought about Mariko spending time with somebody who might be an enemy. He shook his head, he had to at least check it out and now that he had he was wondering if he had been better off not even knowing. He had seen the wounds, and the stitches. He knew that Tyris had been hurt, but the hospital he had gone to denied he was ever there.

He shook his head; he'd have to ask Mariko which hospital Tyris had gone to, again, just to make sure. And right now, he thought as he started running home, I'm late. He had to get home before Naoko and Ikkou started their patrol so that if Naoko needed him she could teleport him there.

"It is time for us to show the demons what they truly face, they believe that they are hunting us, but they are mistaken, it is we who are hunting them. We have sent those to test their powers, and they were defeated, yet their losses were not in vain. Because of their efforts the enemy believes us to be weaker than we are, and we know that we cannot bring them over to our side." A long stream of light laughter escaped the woman's lips as she looked around her at the ever-shifting darkness, "So, instead of trying to bring them to our side we shall crush them beneath our feet and with them out of the way we will be unstoppable. On this night the shadows themselves shall rise up and the Demon of Darkness himself shall die!"

I had the dream again last night.

The blood, the screams, they haunt me now, even when I'm awake. I don't pretend to smile anymore; I hurt too much to lie. I hurt too much to care what anybody else thinks. Why should I care? They don't know... They could never know!

I can't keep this up much longer, I haven't felt right since I escaped... I'm getting weaker and weaker, and the dreams are coming more frequently. And I can't escape them.

The screams... they call to me, dragging me back down, into the darkness. Into the despair. The dream changed a little this time. I saw the crosses disappear, but the girl never appeared, the evil woman never appeared. Instead I saw myself: the child, the adult, and the monster.

I am none of these, yet, they are all me.

All of them looked at me and to my horror I watched the child suddenly burst into flames before my eyes. Then the adult and the monster attacked each other, locking themselves into deadly embrace, both screaming for my help.

But how could I help either of them, when they are me?

I am not the man, and the child in my heart is dying, and all that leaves is the monster I must never become. So I turn away, and the screams start again. Pain and agony wrack my body as I hear these cries. They're not mine, but because of me...

A sword drops down in front of me, but as I reach for it, I see the end. I see a bright light in the distance, and then nothing.

Absolutely nothing. A feeling of loneliness is the only thing that is left. A feeling of loneliness that permeates the void.

I woke up crying.

My fate is revealed. Very soon I will die... But... Will everything end with me? I'm scared... I'm afraid... I just wish somebody else knew.

The feeling of loneliness haunts me today.

Just as it will haunt me again tonight.

In my dreams...

No.

In my nightmares.