

## **Darkbolt**

### **Guardian Saga I: Demon's Claw**

I won't pretend that humans are a force to be reckoned with, or even worthy of more than a passing glance in history's eye. But for some reason, when the Tenma attacked Earth, the galaxy held its breath.

The end was swift and predictable; within minutes, the planet was a barren husk. Any fire of life once held there had been extinguished, as if the human race were a bead of sweat casually being wiped off the brow of the universe. There had been no horrendous backfire; the Demon's Claw worked perfectly. No terrible catastrophe struck the Tenma citizens; not even those still loyal to the old ways. To the Queen. There were not more than a handful of tears shed in memory of the seven billion lost that day.

The Angels, what was left of them, were scattered across the known universe. The last to fall, Life, sacrificed his mortal host in vain to attempt to stand against the terrible united power of all five Demons.

“But,” I hear you complain, as if your complaints could make Me wrong, “But the Tenma were beaten back! The Demon's Claw dismantled, and the Earth saved!” Certainly this is the way you remember things, but let's not pretend that your perceptions cover the breadth of this universe in all its incarnations. History, as a rule, is subjective. And this time, I am the subject.

There was moderate resistance when, following the downfall of the Tenma Empire, the New Tenma Republic requested as a condition for Earth joining the alliance that the Demon Orbs be turned over for safekeeping. The humans in possession of the Orbs were more than willing to part with them for the sake of galactic unity. Rather, they would have been, were it possible. However, the majority of the council decided that this was not sufficient, and demanded that the remaining Demons' power be sealed similarly to that of the former Queen. The human government might have gone along with this plan, but they at the same time craved the prestige that having four out of the five orbs brought, and felt that the Demons' power was worth something as a bargaining chip.

It was a difficult, but brief period, where the hosts were pursued by both Earth and Republic forces. Earth seeking to hold them to their home planet, and the Tenma Republic seeking to seal their power, as they had with the Dark Queen a century before. In the end, it was the intervention of the Council of Angels that stayed both their hands. The Council ruled that the powers were to be contained by their respective hosts. This was possible due to the nature of the Demon Orbs, but meant a sacrifice on the part of the humans. The hosts agreed that if they were ever to use the powers of darkness again, the consequences would be on their heads.

Darkbolt was perhaps the most upset by this ruling. The Demons had grown accustomed to being able to manifest, and were unwilling to return to what could be another ten thousand years of isolation. Darkbolt's desire to avoid this fate drove his host mad, with visions of horrors and nightmares mortals are unfit to witness. A mere human could not hope to withstand the throes of the Demon of Darkness, assisted by the Orb or not. For though his power was contained, Darkbolt's mind was still free.

Scant months later, Naoko - Darkbolt's host - was placed into stasis, similarly to Queen Yasha. Unable to sleep, and plagued by waking nightmares, the stasis chamber would be her only peace. Some saw this as an indignity to one who had so often put herself between her world and harm of all varieties, but those voices were small among the masses. Even the Angels considered it just, though sad, to free her of her pain by freeing her of her consciousness. Thus she too was placed into stasis behind a wall of warded crystal.

The remaining three Demons witnessed this through the eyes of their hosts, and decided that biding their time was a better choice of action than joining Darkness and Evil in their tombs.

But our story only begins there.

“Yun, I told you not to bother me when I'm practicing.” Mariko looked up from the three foot log she had been attempting to split.

“I know, I'm sorry, but this is important. Read this.” He handed her his console.

One glance at the title caused her face to fall. “Where did you get this? If this is another one of your jokes, Yun...”

“Sensha. She sent it to me herself.”

Mariko looked back down and read on, quiet for awhile, but clearly growing more anxious with each moment. Halfway through, she blurted, “Who would do such a thing?” She finally looked up. “The galaxy's been at peace for over a century now. Even if that peace came at a cost... Do you think she's...”

“Let's not jump to conclusions. The entire sanctuary was destroyed. The attack definitely came from outside.” He stopped Mariko before she could repeat her question again. “No one knows who it was. That kind of firepower doesn't just materialize, it would have been detected.”

Mariko paused a moment. “We have to let Ikkou know.” Ikkou was the only one who had decided not to live at the complex Naoko had purchased. Instead, when last they had heard from him, he had secured a magnate's license and had bought a shipping fleet. Maybe it helped him keep his mind off of things, but he took to running the business with almost ferocious efficiency. And as a result, his already sizable fortune had grown considerably. But as well as he did, both Mariko and Yun knew that he was only using it as an excuse not to think about the past.

Yun lowered his eyes and exhaled into the silence.

“Ikkou doesn't need any more problems-”

“Yun! For all we know Naoko was just vaporized! It's been a long time, but everyone knows Ikkou still has feelings for her. How are we supposed to-”

“I know, Mariko, and that's exactly why we can't tell him. You know how hard it was for him to curb Destruction after the Council's decision. He and Naoko weren't given control the way we were, and if news of this gets to him... He's got a strong will, but what's to keep him fighting if he's got nothing to fight for?” Yun placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. “We'll tell him, but not now. Not when things look this bad. He needs hope to keep him going.” Yun looked up again, and Mariko saw what she hoped was regret in his eyes. “The Republic will be keeping this under wraps until they know more, themselves. Try to get back to your practice.”

The sanctuary worlds were supposed to be exactly that, which is why it came as such a shock when Clotho Prime was obliterated. Minister Sensha was present as soon as the news came through, accompanied by the Republic's special task unit. The unit did a good enough job of assessing the damage. Collecting debris, routing the larger chunks into a holding orbit, and rounding up witnesses. There weren't many witnesses, which gave the only human member of the Tenma high council plenty of time to think.

There aren't many individuals in the galaxy capable of decimating a planet like this. Powers were regulated like any other weaponry. She pored over the records of registered Powers, but as evidence started coming in, it was doubtful that any of them were responsible. Not enough raw power existed in any of them to even crack an object the size of a planet, even one as small as Clotho Prime. The odds of it being a Power were further reduced when blast analysis revealed that the damage was done from high orbit.

A battleship would certainly have enough power to do this. But something didn't add up. Any normal battleship would be seen coming. One thing was certain, however. The center of the attack was the stasis complex. Nothing physical remained of it, and only the wispy ethereal signatures of the warding energy indicated that it had been there at all.

It seemed like so long ago that Naoko had been placed in stasis. Almost a hundred years now. Sensha once saw Naoko as a friend. Though never close, they could understand one another. Both humans, both enslaved by the Old Empire. Sensha to do its bidding and Naoko to protect what there was to protect. Something in this caused

Sensha to recall, painfully, how Darkbolt had torn Naoko apart, how she had so quickly wasted away, and how peaceful she seemed to be, locked away behind several inches of crystal.

Almost without realizing it, she sent a copy of her report to Yun, one of Naoko's old friends, and host to the Demon of Death. Yun would tell Mariko and Ikkou. Though she had never seen herself as exactly close to any of the others, they deserved to know.

“What?”

“Ma'am, I said that the advanced ballistics data has been compiled.”

“And?”

“According to the data... This was done with a single shot.”

“And that, fellow councilmembers, is why I request the hold we have placed on the Demon hosts to be lifted.” A murmur built among those present at the meeting as Sensha came to her request.

“Order, please, order.” The Speaker quieted the crowd, but they were clearly still unsettled. Representatives from a thousand worlds were present at this emergency session, and they hadn't found out why until minutes ago, when Minister Sensha got up before them to explain the situation.

“My dear Sensha, are you telling us that we should unleash perhaps the three greatest known forces of evil in the universe without restriction on your *suspicions*?” Councilman Marek rose as he responded.

“The council recognizes Minister Marek of Jora.”

“These aren't suspicions, Marek, these are conclusions. Conclusions based on facts. No trace of the host was found at the scene, and that includes-”

“Yes, yes, we heard you before. But how are we to know that the Orb hasn't merely been blasted into space, hmm? It could be floating around anywhere. From what you say, it may as well already have a new host.”

“As well it may have, but only the powers of the other Demons can tell us that for sure.”

Marek smirked an oily smirk before responding, “And what if they don't feel like chit chat when we let them out, hmm? How many worlds will have to fall before this council realizes that the Demons are an evil as pure as this universe will ever see?” A moment of silence closed like a curtain over the chambers before Marek continued. “Honorable councilmembers, what do you think is the more likely result? Minister Sensha seems to be under the impression that the Demons operate on a basis similar to a food replicator. You merely turn them on when their services are required, and off again when their function is complete.” His face then turned to a gray scowl. “I think not. Twice this council has imprisoned the Demons, the first time for ten thousand years, and when they finally surface... On Earth, of all places,” more than one dark glance was turned on Sensha, “they were held back again.”

The crowd was still, waiting possibly for Sensha to cry bias, or burst into tears, or perhaps teleport Marek bodily into space, but she was a rock.

“What do you think their first instinct would be, upon being freed once again? I know what mine would be, fellow councilmembers.”

After a minute of silence, Marek sat down. Usually greasy and disagreeable, his attachment to *laissez faire* politics and his dislike of humans might mislead some into believing that he was ineffective. Quite the contrary. In order to reach the position he occupied, with the biases he possessed, quite a bit of skill in politicking was required. His speech certainly put a spin on the request that Sensha had wanted to avoid. Certainly, *she* trusted the hosts, but her faith alone wasn't sufficient to convince those whose people had suffered at the hands of the Demons millennia ago.

The vote was tallied and the council adjourned, Marek with a smile, and Sensha without.

Mariko had never gotten used to having the sentinels around. They always gave her the creeps whenever she noticed them. Fortunately or not, this wasn't often. As if she couldn't be trusted to hold War in check. She stopped on her way down the hall and harumphed, as a wavering in the air behind a pillar ahead indicated the place where she had seen the metallic sensing stalk disappear. They were programmed to be unobtrusive, but on those times when they didn't quite manage it, it was downright unnerving.

Maybe it was just that she didn't like being watched every minute. Though watched isn't quite right. These sentinels were blind to the world. They existed in several dimensions simultaneously, and thus followed her everywhere she went. Her and the other hosts. She had been told that they could only sense Demon energy, and were only warning mechanisms. But Mariko had glanced enough vicious looking appendages slipping into nothingness to know better.

She and the other hosts were powerless, though remarkably long lived. The Tenma republic had attempted to grant them some form of compensation for the loss of the Demons' powers. Even though it was being done supposedly for the greater good, powers were seen as assets similar to financial ones among the Tenma. But the procedure to unlock any latent power in the hosts had failed, most likely because of the orbs. It seemed that there was still some latent power left in them that wouldn't be superseded by mere science.

Her feet eventually carried her to the dining wing. The two hundred room complex belonged to Naoko. When compensation in power failed, the four were compensated with wealth. Wealth beyond any of their understandings. As they were compensated for the powers they had lost, Ikkou was the most well off. He had gone at great expense to see Naoko sealed, and he had seen the others perhaps twice since then. Aside from the occasional galcon message, they hadn't even heard from him in the last twenty years. According to his messages, he was traveling, looking for something, but he wouldn't say what.

“It's about time you got here, look at this.” Yun was in a robe and sitting at a small table in a corner of the massive dining room. The robe came to a sharp V, and almost accented the black marble sized sphere embedded in his sternum. Mariko had a similar one, where the Demon of War had bonded with her.

Mariko walked over and sat at the table with Yun, who copied up the console he was reading and handed it to her. The headline was 'The Demon Age', but a glance through the body of the text told her that it wasn't the usual tabloid story. Those seemed to crop up whenever she and Yun were seen together outside of the complex, but they

hadn't been off the grounds in weeks. No, this was more of a documentary account of the last time the Demons were free. Free, free, as in over ten thousand years ago. Before the Orbs.

“So?” That was quite how she felt at the time. “Why should I care if someone's running documentaries about the Demons? It's not like they're lying or anything.”

“But why now?”

“Why not? Yun, you read too much into these things.”

“Do I? Do me a favor, and read the top of page three aloud.”

Mariko rolled her eyes and thumbed the console down two pages. “With every year, the efforts of the galaxy's most prominent archaeologists reveal more of the true horrors of the Demons' reign.” She glanced exasperatedly across the table at Yun.

“Keep going.”

“A reign that ended ten thousand years ago. Or has it? With only two of the five Demons truly contained, it remains to be seen whether or not this could happen again.”

“Still think I'm paranoid?”

“Please. I read worse every day. You'd think the people on galcon would have better things to do than send me hate mail, calling me a murderer for things that happened thousands of years ago.”

“Yes, but this isn't some message flame, or tabloid sheet. This is the galcon newsfeed. This isn't a dig, it's propaganda. You know how far galcon goes to maintain impartiality, what are the odds that a line like that would just slip in?”

Mariko had to admit it was unlikely. Just last week, a galcon reporter was restricted from accepting a volunteered interview with Grand Minister Kode over the

recent trade sanctions against some outer systems because they could not also secure a comparable interview with the head of the blockaded systems.

“Ok... But why?”

“All I can think of is that someone apparently thinks it will be critical to rally support against us presently.”

“But we're not a danger to anyone... Not even 'presently'.”

“Unless we might be, but don't know it.”

“I still think you're nuts.”

“We'll see about that. Sensha called and said she needed to talk to us. She'll be in tomorrow from Wingo. Claimed it was an emergency.”

“Maybe we're both nuts.”

“What do you mean you can't find the records?” Sensha was fuming, and the clerk her wrath was currently coming into focus on was fighting a losing battle against a sudden desire to become very small, and perhaps live underground somewhere.

“I've checked three times, Minister, they're not in the databank.”

“Well check again!” It was probably the stupidest thing she had ever done, but following the capture of Queen Yasha and her subsequent imprisonment, she had been flush with victory. She had ordered the Go-Ka dismantled with the hopelessly noble intent that it never be used for evil again.

The clerk went back to typing, trying to look like he had just figured out how to use his terminal.

The Go-Ka had been the most powerful warship the galaxy had ever seen, and since its decommissioning, there had never been another made to equal its capabilities. That was a good thing. However, it was also the last known man-made device capable of locating the Demon Orbs while they were inert. It was a simple matter to scan for a Demon's power signature, but so far none had been detected. Sensha had high hopes that that technology could be recovered from the schematics recorded as the Go-Ka had been dismantled.

Sensha looked up when she realized that the clerk had stopped typing again. "Well?"

The clerk appeared ready to burst into tears, but managed to get out, "The most pertinent mention of the Go-Ka that I can find is in your acceptance speech to the High Council, where you said you were going to have it dismantled."

"Where's the order? There has to be a record of that, I signed it the very next day. Hmm? Where is that?" She tapped her foot noisily on the marble floor of the records building. "Oh for Angels' sake, BREATHE."

"I can't find any such record..." The clerk's complexion shifted from blue to red to white. "The next chronological mention of it in an official context was in a memo from Minister Petra to the council, stating such power was no longer required in the galaxy, and thus funding for the New Republic Army for research into lost Tenma technology should be cut."

Sensha furrowed her brow and thought for a moment. Suddenly, she smiled a radiant, beaming smile, as if all the universe were sunshine and daffodils. "Thank you for your help... Greg. I'll be needing a copy of the record card for the searches you've

been running. Thanks ever so much for your help.” She maintained the jovial demeanor as the clerk, more terrified than ever, punched up a copy of the scan records and handed it shakily to her.

Good help isn't just hard to find, it plain doesn't exist. She found herself a quiet terminal and engaged the privacy screen before plugging in the clerk's search card and ordering herself some lunch.

Three hours later her back had developed a terrible cramp from the blocks of stone that this facility called chairs, and she was almost ready to admit that maybe the clerk wasn't such an idiot after all. His searches had been very thorough, and apparently he wasn't screwing anything up. There really *wasn't* any mention of the Go-Ka actually being dismantled. Unless...

Despite the privacy screen, she glanced around nervously before keying herself into the encrypted section. She had access as a member of the High Council, but always felt nervous using it. Strictly speaking, the information she was looking for was supposed to be public record, but of course it *was* the Go-Ka she was looking for.

The classified section had little more in it, but she did find her decommissioning order, and, she noted with a sigh of relief, it had been signed by the requisite witnesses as to having been carried out. But still, no sign of the schematics.

It wasn't until several hours later that she realized that the public records office had closed sometime while she was looking through encrypted files. She was alone in the records building. Well, almost alone. There was one other figure shuffling among the racks as Sensha made her way out.

“Zetto.”

“I don't think so.”

“I think I need a drink.”

“Are you sure it was him?”

“You do remember who Zetto is, right?”

“Was. And of course I do. Short, froggy looking chap. Licked Gamma's boots.”

“Good. So can you think of *any* way at all I could mistake him someone else for him? Because that's all I've been trying to do the whole way here.”

“Can't be him.”

Sensha was a wreck when she arrived. They would have made her sleep the trip off before talking at length like this, but she had insisted that they speak immediately. Other than being ugly and generally reducing the quality of the air around him, Zetto wasn't really a threat. But if Zetto was alive... There were ramifications to that that none of them wanted to think about.

“I'm telling you, I know what I saw... I don't want to believe it, either.”

“But I killed him. Myself. Death Soul isn't one of those maneuvers you just walk away from.” Yun tried to remember the details of that day, over two hundred years ago.

“I think I need another drink.”

“Mariko, you don't drink.”

“Yun... If Sensha's right... if she did see Zetto...” At this point she paused. “Wait a second... We creamed him.” She turned to Sensha. “You had him alone in the records section. Why didn't you hit him up for information?”

“Too risky. Besides, I haven't forgotten what our last encounter was like. You may have 'creamed' him, but you had the Demons' powers at your disposal.”

“Maybe Gamma's not alive?” Yun offered helpfully. “What if Zetto's trying to revive him or something?”

Sensha looked like someone had kicked her for a moment, then blurted, “Of course!” When she had everyone's attention, she continued as if this thought was just coming to her and she was speaking it aloud to make sure she didn't sound crazy when explaining it. “Gamma was destroyed by Darkbolt's power back on Earth... What if Zetto found a way to bring Gamma back, but needed Darkbolt's power to do it? That would explain the attack on Clotho.”

Yun snorted. “Fat chance of that. Like Naoko's going to help that weasel.”

Mariko smirked, but Sensha didn't look nearly so hopeful. “No, Naoko wouldn't... But Darkbolt might. And in the state Naoko was in when she was put into stasis, I don't know how long she could keep control.”

The impact of this settled for a minute or two. “But,” Mariko finally spoke in a small voice, “that's a whole lot of 'ifs', right?”

“Of course. But it's a start.” Sensha reflected for a moment. “Hey, where's Ikkou? I was sure he'd be here by now, this is big news.”

Mariko glared at Yun, who attempted to seem confident. “Well... we sort of didn't tell him.”

“What? Why not? I sent it to you specifically so you could notify everyone else. I knew I should have split the message...”

“What was I supposed to tell him? ‘Hey, how’s it been? Been what, four years now? Oh, by the way, Naoko’s dead. Let us know what you want for Christmas, ok?’”

Sensha just stared at him with her mouth hanging open. After a moment she collected herself. “I had hoped to have you all together when I showed up. There may not be much time. Less now, if Zetto is actually involved. This just means that I’ll have to contact him myself.”

“That won’t be necessary, Sensha. I already know.” They all turned to see Ikkou standing in the doorway.

“And so that’s where we stand.” Sensha had explained her report.

“Ikkou... I’m so sorry...”

“Save it, Mariko. I didn’t come here to grieve. Like Sensha said, we don’t even know for sure.” He turned to Sensha. “If that’s all you have, I’ve got some news for you, but I don’t know if it’s news you want to hear.”

“It can’t get any worse.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. You see, one of my ships was in the area of Clotho when it was destroyed.”

“But that can’t be correct... Both the sanctuary worlds were heavily monitored.”

“The Kiersis belt. I’ve been using it as a staging post since Naoko was... Well, since I had need of ships in that area. There’s a facility on one of the asteroids there, been abandoned for centuries. I had my men take up post there to... keep an eye on things. Now I’m glad I did.”

“Even so, the emissions, the supply shipments... Something.”

“Let’s just say I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve.”

Mariko winked at Ikkou, “Nothing illegal, I hope.” This got her a small grin.

“So, what did you see?”

Ikkou thought for a moment. “Admittedly, not much. You said in your report that the damage was done with a single blast, dealt from high orbit. That’s only partly true.” He fished around in his jacket and pulled out a console. “According to the data my team gathered, The attack from orbit served primarily to mask what had occurred on the planet’s surface.”

“I knew something didn’t add up!” Sensha exclaimed triumphantly. “So what really happened?”

She earned a rather embarrassed grimace for her question. “Actually, I don’t know. The Kiersis belt isn’t exactly in the front row, and the cycle of the planet put it at a bad angle when the attack occurred. What we were able to piece together, though, is that a battle occurred on the ground in and around the stasis complex. There was at least one heavy hitter there. That one power level drowned out any others we might have been able to get readings on.”

“I’d like to get a look at these readings. Might help me narrow down a list of suspects.” Ikkou handed his console to Sensha who started scanning copies to her own. In the midst of one of the scans, she looked back up. “Wait a second, most of this is just noise.”

“No, the signal was clear, that’s the power signature.”

Sensha just furrowed her brow and kept the scan going.

“Anyway,” Ikkou continued, “after the main action started, my team suited up and boarded landing cruisers. As they were pulling away from the asteroid, there was a lull. The fighting was already over. They were going to go anyway to see if they could save anyone, but before they could get out of the belt...” He seemed to stall a bit, but recovered before anyone could call him on it. “Before they could get too far, they detected a massive power surge, and the entire planet was consumed by a single, monstrous energy beam. Most of the techs just stared at it on their monitors, and I don’t blame them. Apparently the beam was wider than the actual planet itself.” He shook his head and sighed. “When the emissions cleared to the point where readings were possible again, whatever had done it had vanished. But not without a trace. One of the away team got this picture of the attack going off.”

He pulled a photo from his jacket and held it up. It was amazing. Clotho was a black silhouette against a huge pillar of energy that stretched from one side of the frame to the other. To one side, you could just see the planet beginning to break apart.

Mariko paled. “That’s...”

Ikkou finished her observation, “Golden Crash. I didn’t believe it either, until I saw the picture.”

“Uh, excuse me for a moment, but aren’t *you* the one with Golden Crash? Unless you’re saying you destroyed Clotho, that doesn’t make much sense.” Yun had a point, but Ikkou merely shook his head and sighed.

Sensha took the picture and looked more closely. “No, not Golden Crash... That’s the Crash Cannon. The Go-Ka destroyed Clotho.”

Maybe there was a psychological factor, but Sensha felt far more comfortable and confident about the whole situation once she had gotten back to the council chambers on Wingo. Her first order of business was to investigate some of the leads she had acquired. With her contacts, it should not have been a problem to locate a few people. Even one would suffice to still her mind, but as she started to get responses back from her inquiries, there weren't many conclusions she could draw.

Of ten people on the witness list for the Go-Ka's decommissioning, three were missing and four others had died since then. Three of unnatural causes, and one under suspicious circumstances. Two seemed to be perpetually 'unavailable', according to the various aides and agents she spoke with. And the last one, she found out after four days of waiting for an intensive person search to complete, was a John Doe at a hospital in a remote corner of the galaxy, and had been in a coma for the last several years.

As none of the witnesses was available to do their duty, and time was of the essence, she made her next stop the Wingo military shipyards. Floating gently in orbit around the system's star was a massive array of solar panels and photon collectors connected to some of the highest capacity energy to matter converters in the galaxy. They were very nearly capable of fabricating entire ships in a matter of days, were it possible to imprint fine circuits. But as it stood, the one piece hulls produced here were some of the strongest available anywhere.

The docks themselves were built onto the outside of the ring of solar collectors, and enclosed with force bubbles to keep an atmosphere. The effect was of a large parking lot where ships that were capable of landing could, and ships that weren't could merely pull adjacent to the side. As Sensha's shuttle was brought in, she noticed that the

whole port was a flurry of activity. Her shuttle was eventually guided to one of the unused portions of tarmac and brought down.

Powers, of course, represented the vast majority of humans' first contacts with galactic civilization. The Tenma under the Old Queen was comprised entirely of Powers, for obvious reasons. As such, it represented more of a consolidated military force than a galactic nationality.

However, this was hardly the norm. Powers originate often in the most unlikely of places, from natural skill, exposure to bizarre circumstances, intensive training, to any of a myriad of other means. But they are still fundamentally rare. Military forces comprised entirely of Powers were as rare, since Powers were coveted in a manner similar to monetary wealth. As such, Powers gravitated towards the free market, offering their services to the highest bidder, rather than the good of their society. This being the case, Normals, as they were called, were used to fill out the majority of the galaxy's military forces, and made up between ninety and ninety five percent of any modern army.

The harbormaster greeted Sensha with honest respect, something rare in typical council/military relations. The reputation from her stint as captain of the Go-Ka and soldier against the Old Empire had stayed with her to this day.

“Welcome to the dockside, Minister, though I must say you've caught us at a bit of a rush.” His name was Gibbons, and he was correct. There seemed to be activity everywhere. Carts and Powers hauling various crates around, squads of shock troops running by in formation. It generally looked busy.

“I see. Well, I don't mean to inconvenience you, but this really can't wait.”

“One moment, ma’am.” He turned to sign the three consoles which had been shoved into his arms. As he looked them over he mentioned offhandedly, “The fleet’s been called out to protect Lachesis in case there’s any chance of an attack occurring there as well, so we’re rushing to get them to flight status.”

“Actually, that’s sort of what I’m here about. I’ve got some new evidence regarding the attack on Clotho, and I need to know if it’s valid or not.”

“Well sure, what can I help you with?”

“I need to speak with Admiral Tagon.”

Gibbons pursed his lips and shook his head slowly. “Couldn’t have been something easy, huh?”

“Please, it’s very important.”

“Now, I didn’t say it was impossible... Hang on. I’ll see if I can find his second around. Wait here, I’ll be right back.” The harbormaster disappeared into the shifting crowd, and Sensha, not seeing any seats in the immediate vicinity, just stood there.

Twenty minutes later Gibbons hadn’t returned, and she was ready to try and find a telepath among the Powers gathered so she could get the admiral’s attention directly. Just then a lieutenant approached her. “Ma’am, if you’ll please come with me.”

“Harbormaster Gibbons said-“

“Certainly, ma’am, just come with me, please.”

The lieutenant ushered her through the still bustling crowds towards the command block. The command block was a set of temporary looking buildings constructed on the tarmac used as field offices for command personnel.

She was shown one of the buildings. “Admiral Tagon’s waiting, ma’am.” He bowed curtly and walked quickly back towards the docks. Sensha looked around briefly, maybe expecting to spot Gibbons somewhere, but after not seeing him, she opened the door and stepped inside.

“Go right in, Minister.” The secretary waved her through with a polite nod.

The admiral stood as she walked in, and offered his hand across the desk. “Ah, Sensha, always a pleasure. Please, have a seat. It’s been quite a while, hasn’t it?” Always the charmer, Tagon certainly liked his job. The walls were dotted with certificates and medals earned through his years as both a serviceman and a commander. To add to this, Tagon was a Power, as well, and much like Sensha, he had once served unwillingly under Queen Yasha.

In fact, Tagon had served under Sensha directly as first officer aboard the Go-Ka. Which is why she had come here. “Thanks, Tagon. Oi, what a week I’m having... but I know you’re busy, so I’ll keep it brief.”

“Less the pleasure, my dear, but as you please. What’s on your mind?”

She smiled a bit at that. “The Go-Ka was dismantled at these docks, correct?”

“Well, that *was* brief. Yes, it would have been done here.”

“You don’t know for sure?”

“Hmph. Like you, my time was both limited and elsewhere during the great ship’s deconstruction. It was unavoidable, sadly, but I did get that souvenir that I wanted.” He reached forward on his desk and turned a block of clear crystal to face Sensha. Inside was a shard of interface glass that Sensha recognized as coming from one of the Go-Ka’s consoles.

“You kept the activation control for the Crash Cannon? I don't know if that comforts or disturbs me.”

He grinned. “I prefer to call it ‘The Button’, to use an old Earth colloquialism.”

“Cute.” She grimaced slightly in mock-disgust. “So, you saw the dismantled Go-Ka?”

“I've seen parts of it. Some being sent out to museums, some going for research... Nothing bigger than those ugly chairs they put on the bridge. I can probably get you a bolt or something.” He and Sensha both grinned at the joke, but internally, Sensha was utterly relieved. The ship *had* been dismantled, after all. But then...

“Ok... So what do you make of this?” She produced a copy of the photo Ikkou had shown her.

Tagon furrowed his brow and stared at the photo, sinking into his chair. After a moment, he glanced at her over the top of the photo. “I'm assuming this wasn't us?”

“That was Clotho.”

Tagon looked askance at that, and would have asked how she had gotten the picture if it had mattered. She had it, and he trusted her. “This... is troubling.”

The understatement of the year. “I've been trying to determine the source of that blast. That is the Crash Cannon, right? I'm not crazy?”

“Yes, it is. I can see the photon granulation in the planet's shadow... Very unlikely another weapon could have done this.” He looked up. “Do you mind if I hang on to this?” Sensha shook her head. She had other copies.

“Does this mean you'll look into it?”

“I wish I could, but as you probably gathered, we’re in the middle of a rather sizable deployment here. Aside from not even technically having the time for this conversation, I’ll be leaving aboard the Ragnarok to command the forces at Lachesis within the week.”

“Oh. Well, good luck on that... and... be careful, ok?”

“I am always exactly as careful as fate allows. I won’t make any promises, but if I do come up with anything, though, you will be the first to know.”

“Thank you so much.” Sensha smiled warmly and after parting nods she found her way out. She strangely felt at ease, even though she now had confirmation from two sources that the Crash Cannon, or at least a similar weapon, was involved. She didn’t notice as she left, though, the odd glance she got from the simmering crowds, nor the two individuals that dematerialized at a gesture from the source of the glance.

“I expect she wants us to stay put.”

“Oh, who asked you, Yun?” Mariko scooped another few handfuls of clothes from her wardrobe into a small travel bag, shaking the back of her head at the image on the videocom.

“She expects us to be here when she finishes her investigation. She’s not going to know where to find us if we just up and leave.” Mariko continued to ignore him. “We at least have to let her know where we’re going.”

That got Mariko’s attention enough to cause her to face the screen when she spoke. “Yun, Ikkou said he had something important we needed to see, and specifically said Sensha couldn’t know about it. Now, I don’t know about you, but I trust Ikkou, and

if he says don't tell Sensha, I'm not going to tell her. If you don't want to come, fine with me, but you're not going to ruin this." She turned around again and added, "Besides, *we* don't even know where we're going, Ikkou won't tell *us* either."

She felt Yun roll his eyes before he shut off the video. Ikkou had waited until Sensha had left before drawing them all aside, and letting them in on the real reason he had returned.

"Clotho wasn't the only big thing that happened in the last few weeks." He had said. "You know how I told you I've been searching for something?" Two nods. "Well, I couldn't tell you what it was, because I really didn't know, myself. But I felt certain that I'd know when I found it." He paused, likely for drama. It worked. "I found it."

"Ok, so what was it you found?"

He smirked. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you, even if I could, which I can't. You'll just have to trust me. Pack a few weeks worth of clothes and anything off of this list that you can get together." He had copied them each a datasheet from his console, containing such items as-

"A pickaxe?"

"Climbing rope?"

"Wick torch... Ikkou, what's all this for?"

But they had gotten nothing else out of him. She had set aside most of the things from the list from a recreational equipment storehouse that was on the grounds, and had the computer working on fabricating the rest. By the end of the hour, she was ready to go, and proceeded down to the entry hall where Ikkou was waiting.

“Are you all set?” He asked as she came in with a bag that couldn't possibly have contained everything that she had packed into it.

“Yup. I don't know about Yun, though. He seemed a bit-“

“Hey, you guys aren't thinking of going without me, are you?” Yun entered the hall with a big grin on his face and a bag similar to Mariko's.

“Got over your doubts in a hurry, I see,” Mariko taunted him.

“You believed me? Ha. I always knew you were gullible.” Mariko responded with her tongue.

Ikkou chuckled. “Good to see you two haven't changed, anyway. So, are you both ready?”

“Sure, but when do we get to find out where we're going?” Yun apparently hadn't disposed of *all* his concerns, after all.

“When we get there.” He turned and started walking out. “C'mon, my ship's all warmed up.”

They followed him out to their landing pad, where they found a vaguely triangular jump ship which was just having its tanks topped off. The insignia on the side of the ship indicated it was part of Ikkou's shipping fleet.

They stowed their bags, and clambered into the compartment. To their surprise, Ikkou climbed into the cockpit and started flipping switches and talking to the ground crew. “Detach fuel line, we're all tanked up. Release docking clamps. Clear in ten. Nine... Eight...” The engine began to stir to life. “Five... Four... Three...” A rumbling sensation gradually set itself in to the hull. “One... And liftoff.” The ship rose slowly off the ground, and glided over the complex on VTOL thrusters. When clear, there was a

palpable thrumming as the orbital boosters kicked in and shot them into the sky and over the horizon. As they cleared the atmosphere, Ikkou took off his headset, punched some keys and came back into the passenger's compartment.

"I didn't know you were a pilot, Ikkou." Mariko remarked with interest.

"Well, you don't think I'd own a shipping fleet and not learn how to fly any of them, do you? Anyway, we'll be docking with the Elysian in a few hours. She's got hyperspace capabilities, and will take us the rest of the way."

"The rest of the way to where?"

"Oh, just drop it, Yun." Though Mariko was getting rather curious, herself.

"Don't worry, I'll explain everything, but not until we get there."

It was going to be a long trip.

High above Lachesis, drifting in the silence of space, an armada had gathered. Regular patrols flew from carriers, every ship polished and in perfect working order, the insignia of the New Republic Navy freshly painted on each. The council had decided that whoever had attacked Clotho might not stop there. As a result, Lachesis, the second of the sanctuary worlds and the location where Yasha, the Dark Queen, was kept in stasis, was now under heavy guard, both on the surface and in space.

Admiral Tagon gazed out over the planet's shining blue and green arc from the command deck of the Ragnarok. The stasis complex was clearly visible even from this altitude, made more so by intermittent flashes of light from the quantum refractor that crowned the pyramid-like building. It truly was a tomb, in which the New Republic had hoped to seal the Dark Queen's power for all eternity.

Drills were scheduled every hour, and all posts were put on full alert. For many of the cadets, this was the first actual combat situation they had been in. The drills served to provide some sense of normalcy to it. Tagon hoped that drills were all that would be necessary. The presence of the whole fleet, minus a few sundry ships, was intended to be enough to give pause to whatever force had attacked Clotho. As such, the picture Sensha had shown him gave Tagon a lot to think about. If the Go-Ka had been responsible for Clotho's destruction, he was forced to admit that it was unlikely that even the entire fleet would be able to protect Lachesis.

On the surface, there were ground units stationed all around the complex. Due to the wards, it was impossible to teleport into or out of the pyramid itself, or to use certain types of powers, so any attack would have to start outside. The ground forces were headed by a group of Powers Tagon had appointed himself. They had stationed themselves around the entrance to the complex.

It probably should have worried Tagon more than it did, when the request came through that a handful of the ministers wanted to visit the complex, but he knew that under normal circumstances, the sanctuary worlds did quite a bit of business as vacation stops. Not nearly enough to cover the massive expense of maintaining the facility, but as a tourist industry it was self sufficient.

The military presence had dissuaded civilian visitors, but there was no reason they wouldn't have been permitted down, had any shown up, so it seemed acceptable to Tagon to allow a few galactic councilmembers into the facility. They were here to stop the Go-Ka, after all, not a troupe of diplomats.

“This is the diplomatic courier Forsythe, requesting permission to land.”

“Diplomatic courier Forsythe, you are cleared to land.” The dockmaster radioed back. “Proceed to docking pad six and sign in with Commander Vess.”

The bowed horseshoe shuttle cruised over the landscape, reaching the designated landing site, and coming to a routine stop. Several galactic ministers and their aides climbed out and followed a guide to one of the ground shuttles that ran between the pads and the stasis facility. No one thought to ask Minister Marek about the new aide he seemed to have taken on. A short fellow, rather unpleasant smelling.

Someone even made the joke that he and Marek were perhaps lost siblings. Out of range of both, of course.

They passed through the gates of the stasis complex moments later, and were soon standing before the Dark Queen herself. The chamber was large, taking up most of the center of the pyramid. Conduits wide enough to walk through but full of superconductive wire connected machinery in various locations around the edge of the room. The sole power generator for the pyramid and all the stasis machinery was the quantum refractor at the apex of the structure, making the entire complex self contained. An important fact, given the nature of its purpose.

The machinery itself was impressive, but less important than it looked. Primarily it regulated conditions within the facility and the flow of power from the refractor. The most important module was the bio energy converter, which took in electrical energy from the refractor and converted it to bio energy, which was required to maintain the wards, but even that was superficial to a degree.

The most critical piece of construction was the sarcophagus itself. It was one solid piece of crystal, materialized in place around the subject. It was rendered absolutely

inert through the application of various runes to its surface. Nothing could pass into or out of it, not even time. Due to this, the crystal was also nearly indestructible. It was then suspended in a true vacuum, maintained by wards against all matter. This finally was protected by a myriad of mundane defenses from outside intrusion.

This was the Dark Queen's tomb. Since it had been sealed two hundred years ago, Yasha had experienced nothing. She wore no clothing, and her arms were crossed before her, palms turned up. Her eyes were closed, but her gaze was to the sky. From the floor, it looked as if she was a work of art, innocent and pure. It was hardly comprehensible that two centuries earlier, this work of art had held the known universe in an iron gauntlet with crushing strength. Bonded with the Demon of Evil, whose royal purple Orb still appeared affixed to her sternum, her power had been unmatched until she was forced into hiding and eventual capture by a rebellion in her own ranks. A rebellion spurned by the humans, and fulfilled by Sensha.

The councilmembers stared at the crystal blankly, all save for Marek, who was casually strolling around the room, eyeing the various consoles. Marek's aide seemed to have interest in the devices as well.

"Piece of junk," came a disgusted spitting hiss from beneath the aide's cowl.

"Can you do it or not, worm?" Marek sneered at the little man.

"Ha." The figure drew himself up to a still unimpressive slouch. "Having no faith in Zetto. Think Zetto cannot do *it*... You will see. Master will reward Zetto."

"You'd better be able to. I have to go now."

"Yes, yes, go. Zetto will do work for Master. Not fail." At that word, his head twitched unnaturally to one side, then he added. "Not forgetting doll." He produced

from his robes what appeared to be a rolled up paper. He unfurled it into the air with a flourish, and it was a picture of him, as he was dressed. He stood it up on the ground, and suddenly it *was* him. It didn't move or speak, and it was still paper, but somehow it was unmistakably him.

Marek blinked a few times himself before taking the 'hand' of the paper doll and dragging it towards the door. The remainder of the ministers and their aides turned as one and followed Marek out as the real Zetto crowded himself into a shady corner.

"Ten hours. Zetto will please Master in ten hours." And so he sat, unblinking eyes twitching over the room, counting the seconds.

It was a fact of space travel that distance traveled in hyperspace seemed to take longer than it actually did. Hyperspace travel in general was similar to punching a hole in the space time continuum and weaving through like a needle through fabric, popping back into realspace on occasion in order to recharge the drives. The more powerful the drive, the less you had to do this, and cargo ships were second only to military vessels in the classification of drives that they could mount.

So, that meant Mariko, Yun, and Ikkou spent most of the next few days in a stifling red miasma.

"That's five, I'll up you two."

Mariko eyed her hand and considered carefully. She rifled the cards a bit and bit her lip before saying, "Go fish."

Ikkou had been playing earlier, but left when the computer alerted him that they would be arriving within the hour. It was odd, but they were apparently alone on the

ship, and the Elysian wasn't a small vessel. Ikkou hadn't said anything about why, but they had figured that if he was keeping their destination secret from everyone, a crew would be out of the question.

The computer came on again, an even toned male voice with a faint British accent. "All passengers: We will be arriving in ten minutes. Please report to your quarters and secure for realspace." It then repeated the message, but Yun and Mariko were already on their way back to their quarters.

Entering and exiting hyperspace were probably the two most stressful actions a ship could take, short of engaging in actual combat, so as the ship was forced through the space-time barrier Yun and Mariko cringed against the creaking of the hull. There were no complications, however, and soon the ship was quietly drifting in orbit around a large tan world.

"It looks like a huge desert from here." Yun eyed the image and scan data feed he was getting on his console. Mariko was gazing out the window.

"I wonder what's down there."

Ikkou's voice came over the com, "Mariko, Yun, collect your things and meet me in the shuttle bay." They repacked the few things they had removed during the trip, and took the hurried walk down the tight metal hallways of the transport to the shuttle bay.

They chatted briefly on the way, but neither of them knew where they might be. There was no shortage of speculation, however. Speculation as well on what they were being taken to see. Ikkou was in the shuttle bay when they arrived, and ushered them onto the drop ship. Their pleading glances earned them a smirk and a "We're almost there," from Ikkou.

Once out of the bay, the planet flew up to meet them. They entered the cloudless atmosphere, and cruised over a good sized valley. They were not the first ones here, however. Various tables, some tents, and other machinery were set up as well, but they appeared vacated.

The ship came to a rest on a portable landing surface a bit further on, and after disembarking it was a short walk back to the camp they had seen. Ikkou remained silent, save for the occasional “Not yet,” or “Almost there.” They proceeded through the campsite, which was indeed vacant, to an outcropping of rocks. The rocks held a giant archway, at least twenty feet tall, and fifteen wide. The archway was made of blocks, and each block bore an unfamiliar symbol. Mariko and Yun stared at it, but Ikkou didn't stop, so they were forced to follow. When he got to the entrance, he went to a terminal that was set to one side of the arch. He pressed some keys and they could hear the generator back at the campsite whirring to life. “Ok, step inside.”

They did so, though they weren't quite as sure of their situation as they had been moments ago. Ikkou punched some more keys and, to their relief, joined them. A moment later, there was a crackling in the air over the entrance, and Ikkou seemed to release a sigh of relief.

“This is it.” He simply said.

“This is incredible. It looks really old.”

Ikkou nodded. “Our dating tests put its creation back no fewer than two hundred thousand years ago.”

“Holy cow!” Yun looked around with new appreciation for what he was seeing. Current galactic civilization didn't go back more than fifty thousand years at the earliest.

Perhaps the earliest recorded sentient life would have been a hundred and fifty thousand. This was a major find.

“Ever since the Earth joined the alliance, I’ve wondered what makes the Earth so special. Why did the Tenma not just wipe us out? They certainly had the chance, and the power. Tenma legend doesn’t give any reason more specific than that there is some ‘Great Power’ contained within.” Ikkou started walking down the tunnel, which descended into the ground. As they were about to round a corner, Ikkou took out a lighter. “Torches?”

Yun pulled out a wick torch, which was similar to a standard torch, but featured a self contained fuel supply, so would burn for far longer. Mariko pulled out a flashlight.

Ikkou rolled his eyes. “I said torches, Mariko.”

She smirked. “Heh. Just because you want to maintain some sort of spooky atmosphere doesn’t mean *I* have to.” There was a click as she flipped the switch. Nothing happened.

It was Ikkou’s turn to smirk. “Good thing I brought extras, hmm?”

“What the... I just recharged the cell, too!” She whacked it a few times while Ikkou lit one of his spare torches and handed it to her.

When they were walking again, Ikkou resumed talking. “Anyway, this power the Tenma were convinced was within Earth confused me. I mean, you’d think some of it would have rubbed off on the humans.” They proceed around a few more turns, then were going up again. “I wanted to find out what all the fuss was about, so I started funding research projects and digs like this one which were looking into ancient Tenma legends and galactic lore in general.” The stairs topped off in a large room. Ikkou

walked to one side, and lit a torch that was in a stand near the entrance. "There's two more over there, if you don't mind." He pointed to the opposite side of the room.

Mariko and Yun obliged, and lit the two torch stands, and soon the whole room was bathed in soft orange light. The most striking feature was a door on the opposite side of the room to the stairs they had entered on. The door was arched, and coming up the arch on both sides were more symbols similar to those on the archway outside. These symbols also continued along the bottom of the walls in both directions, and went back down the stairs.

"So you can understand how excited I was when I found this." He pointed towards the door, then swept the room with his hand. "Those symbols. Starting at the top of that door, and reading to the right. They go all the way outside, up the archway there, then turn around and come back in through the other side, ending back at the top of this archway here." He paced over to the door amidst the flickering light. "These symbols, when interpreted, match exactly a sequence of proteins found exclusively in human DNA."

Yun and Mariko were stunned by a combination of disbelief and incomprehension.

"And here," Ikkou continued, moving his own torch to illuminate the door itself. "Is something you may recognize." The door was covered with inscribed symbols, most of which were unrecognizable, but they were all background to a large figure of six circles, five around the sixth. Each of the five circles was inscribed with a Tenma symbol.

Going around the circle, Yun read aloud, "Evil, Darkness, War, Death, Destruction."

"And the symbol in the center..."

Yun just stared, so Mariko spoke. "Earth. That's the Tenma symbol for Earth."

"Exactly. These are the five Demon Orbs! Don't you see? This was nearly two hundred thousand years before the Demon Orbs even existed. Before humans existed. Before any of this happened. Someone knew that the orbs would find their way to Earth, probably knew about us, if any of this other text was decipherable."

Mariko and Yun felt a sudden chill, and Yun spoke. "So... what's through the door?"

"Why don't you come and find out?" He smiled, and reached back, placing his hand on the circle marked Destruction. There was a glow from the figure, and Ikkou suddenly vanished in a flash of light. When the spots cleared, Mariko and Yun caught a faint yellow glow in the circle fading away. They looked at one another.

"Well... guess we don't have much choice." Mariko nodded uneasily and walked towards the door. Yun stopped her, though. "Wait, I'll go first." He waited for Mariko's acquiescence before extending his arm, as Ikkou had done, and placing his palm squarely against the circle marked Death. His eyes went wide, and he too disappeared with a flash.

Mariko was left alone. "Well... No sense in not," and she thrust her arm forward, closed her eyes, and touched the circle for War.

“Minister Sensha, thank you for seeing me on such short notice.” The tech had stopped by without an appointment. Sensha had an idea what it was about though, and this should be well worth it.

“Well, what did you find?” She had sent the energy signature Ikkou had given her to be analyzed.

“Those readings you gave us... very bizarre. We couldn't make heads or tails of them.”

“And?”

“And what?” The tech seemed puzzled by the question.

“That's it? You barge into my office without an appointment to tell me you have no idea what you're doing?” Admittedly, she had been expecting more.

“Well, maybe if you told us what to look for... It's just noise, there's not much we can do with noise.”

“I told you what to look for. I told you it was a power signature, you just had to match it to a registered Power.”

“Well, yes, we did get the message you included with it... But ma'am... this is noise. There's no pattern. If it does contain a signature wave, we need to know more about what type of interference was in the way.”

“The signal was clear.”

The scientist looked like *he* was getting impatient. “It isn't though. Either that, or it's clear background noise.” He produced something from his coat. “These are the test records as you requested. You can run them yourself if you'd like, but they won't tell you anything.”

Sensha yanked the card out of his hand and jammed it into her own console, where she began typing furiously. The tech waited a moment and let himself out with a heavy sigh. Sensha put her console to running the tests on the card, cursing first the incompetent techs, and then herself for being too paranoid to give the tech the proper information. What was she worried about, anyway?

Wanting to avoid sitting in one place the whole day, and probably well into the night as she had ended up doing in the archives, she locked her console's display and left to go for a walk. The public grounds had some very nice walking paths.

It was a vaguely park like path she found herself on when she cleared the sight of any of the government buildings. It was quite relaxing, with light filtering itself through the trees, benches tempting her to stop and enjoy the scenery, which she did on several occasions. Being born human, she was at first surprised at how alien the rest of the galaxy seemed, but as she slowly learned, the condition of the galaxy mirrored its ruler. At the time, that was Queen Yasha, who had detachments of Tenma stationed on every habitable world, and many that weren't, specifically to ensure that its resources were removed and sent to fuel the Tenma war machine as swiftly as possible.

After all that was over, parks like this sprang up, becoming almost commonplace, and she was glad for it. It reminded her of Earth as she remembered it. The green grass and trees, the smell of nature, and especially the calming sound that winds through the treetops make. She found a bench half in the shade, facing a sunny field where several children were playing some complicated ball game on hoverbars. Looked like three... no, four balls, she noted, as she caught a brief glimpse of a tiny gold one. Watching this, she calmly drifted off to sleep.

“Look what I found, Burn. A little white poochy asleep on the bench.”

The haze over Sensha's consciousness slowly lifted and she saw... kneecaps.

Another voice chimed in. “Aw, you're right, Crash. Too bad though, this one's a stray.” Mock pity was inserted into the voice at this point. “Looks like we're going to have to put it down.”

Sensha was suddenly awake. She bolted up and dodged away from the bench, just in time to see it broken into fragments by a fist nearly as wide as it was. There were two of them. The first a nine foot slab of muscle who was now dusting flecks of concrete from his fist sized knuckles. The second was a slight female dressed in taught red spandex and perched on the larger one's shoulder.

The female spoke. “I'm sorry, did we wake you? Don't worry, you'll be getting a lot of rest where you're going.” At this point the large one, presumably Crash, lunged forward with another punch. Sensha dodged out of the way again, but it was a close one.

“Look, I don't know what you want with me, but you're not going to get it.” She tried to sound more confident than she felt. “You'd best leave now, I've already summoned help,” she lied.

“More for Crash to crush!” The ogre ripped a tree out of the ground, and swung it around like a bat.

“Ooh, Crash baby! You know it makes me so *hot* when you do that!” Upon saying ‘hot’, the female, Burn, jumped from Crash's shoulder and, predictably, burst into flames.

The two circled around, trying to get to either of Sensha's sides, Crash merely pivoting in place, and burn hovering a few inches above the ground, the grass beneath her

smoldering. "C'mon guys, two on one? Isn't this a bit lopsided?" Even as she said this, though, a shimmering blue and crystal trident sprang into existence in her right hand.

"I doubt that, Sensha dear." Sensha noted that they knew her name. "These odds suit me just fine." It was possible they had anticipated her being here, or followed her from the office... She had to think quickly. "Crash? Kill her."

"Crash smash!" The giant brought the tree down like a mallet, and no doubt it would have had the same effect, had Sensha not sidestepped through the ether. But twenty feet away where she rematerialized, Burn was waiting.

"Nitro Charger!" She put her hands out to her sides, and Sensha was barely able to vault herself out of the way in time before the ground where she was standing exploded. She vaulted again as she realized Burn was retargetting, and this time remained airborne. She floated there, brandishing the trident in a menacing fashion, eyes shifting nervously between her two attackers.

"Crash dear?" Burn tilted her head to one side and looked over at crash

Crash hefted the tree trunk, now short of most of its leaves up on his shoulder, disturbingly like a javelin. "Ready."

Burn began to pivot in midair, a wake of flame building as her speed did. It traveled up her body, into a spheroid forming in her hands. She stopped, wheeled back, and cried, "Orb Inferno!" as she threw the ball not at Sensha, but between her Crash.

Crash threw the tree at almost the same time. Sensha had started to move out of the way by the time the tree struck the ball and burst into flame. As the burning bolt hurled through the space where she had recently been she counted her blessings, when suddenly-

“Nitro Charger!”

The tree trunk exploded violently, flaming shrapnel flying everywhere, battering Sensha out of the sky and tossing her into some bushes next to the path. She clawed her way further off the path, trying to gain some distance from where she fell while simultaneously trying to beat out the little fires which had started where the splinters had pelted her. Several of them stuck, however, making it difficult to concentrate.

“Crash, honey, go stamp her flat.” The ogre’s footsteps tromping quickly towards her, she tried to gather her wits about her. She had one chance at this. Sensha perceived a ‘whoosh’, as Crash leaped into the air, soaring over twenty feet, his garbage lid sized metal boots hurtling towards the bushes where Sensha lay.

“Abyss Fissure!” Sensha cried, planting her trident fork in the ground. Where she stuck it, the ground opened up like a black maw, just before Crash tried to land there. He kept going, through the gap, and vanished from sight as the fissure closed. Sensha rose up from the bushes and glared towards Burn.

“Crash, baby, no!” she cried in shock, then she turned to Sensha, the flames licking her body growing a step more intense. “You! You’ll pay for this! This is for Crash!” She bent herself back, and raised her arms to the sky, and a screamed, “FIRESTORM!”

Sensha steadied herself. Suddenly a sheet of flame ripped out of the sky, through the treetops, and right at her. She sidestepped backwards to gain time on the wave, and jabbed her trident into the air. “Void Bubble!”

Sheets of flame tore through the area, but Sensha held her ground as best she could, the opaque black ball that she had created absorbing the fire, but each wave taking

its toll on her. She was on her knees when the attack stopped, and the field fell of its own accord as Sensha gasped for breath.

Fortunately, it seemed to have had a similar effect on Burn, who descended, and began wheezing as well. The entire area had been reduced to charred cinders, some of which still smoldered, but the majority had been burned utterly.

Burn recovered first. “N- Nitro...” She extended her arms, and Sensha forced herself to jump for it, backwards. “Charge... Charger!” The last patch of uncharred ground exploded as if there had been a mine buried there.

Sensha landed in her knees on the ashen ground and cried, “Astral Strike!”, thrusting her trident forward with both hands. The tip vanished, leaving a ripple in the air.

A small “Hrk...!” escaped Burn as her flames flared up, then died completely. She reached around to her back, struggling against something, but her struggles didn't last long. They slowly died, then stopped altogether and her shoulders slumped forward.

Sensha, panting, pulled her trident back, and the tines reappeared. As she did, Burn fell completely to the ground, three neat holes in her back slowly oozing her life onto the ashes. Sensha stood, assisted by the staff of her fork, and proceeded to look for a com box to request some real assistance.

“This had better not be another excuse to skip your drills, private.” This was the third time he had supposedly had some critical issue that prevented him from attending drills on time.

“No sir, not this time, sir.” He hadn't been let off of attention yet.

“Good. Now I expect an explanation that I can BELIEVE, private, or you’ll be doing your drills in the latrine, do you get me?”

“Sir, yes sir.”

“Now, why are you here, and make it good.”

“Sir... When the ministers left, I noticed something was wrong, sir.”

“Explain.”

“Sir, when they landed, one of the aides... well, I noticed that... uh...”

“Spit it out, private!”

“Sir, one of the aides really stunk, sir!”

“I fail to see how that is any of your business.”

“I’m not done... uh... sir”

“Well?”

“Sir, when they left... he, uh, didn’t stink anymore.”

The sergeant was momentarily furious, but suddenly paused. “Private, report to your drills. Dismissed.”

“Sir, yes sir!” And the private retreated from the room, suddenly thankful to be going to drills.

The sergeant sighed and eyed the com on his desk. He had been ordered to report all abnormal occurrences, regardless of the apparent relevance. And this was just about as irrelevant as you could get. He hit the button. “Lieutenant Mathes.”

The com held a bit before connecting. “What is it, sergeant?”

“Sir, one of my men mentioned to me that there was a... discrepancy detected in the party of ministers which visited between their arrival and their departure, sir.”

“A discrepancy? What kind of discrepancy?”

“Olfactory, sir.”

“Eh?”

The sergeant explained the situation as his charge had explained it to him.

The lieutenant was silent for a moment, then responded. “You were right in reporting this.”

Ten minutes later the ground forces had been placed on alert, and a squad was just completing an external sweep of the complex.

“Nothing to report, sir.”

“Thank you, corporal. Hold your squad here.” The man was obviously a Power. One of three present. All three were clad in light armor which was customized with various colors and symbols. Their actual ranks were unclear.

“Yes sir.” With that, the corporal returned to his squad, shouted some orders, and the squad started prepping. Checking their armor and such.

“So, what have we got here?” The first Power turned to the lieutenant who had sounded the alarm.

“One of the men caught a funny smell on the ministers going in, which was gone when they came out.”

The Power in red armor snickered. “I always did think something stunk about that council.”

“Yes, well, we're not sure what it was exactly, the soldier wasn't able to describe it. We're considering that it might be an explosive of some type, or likely some other type of chemical.” He added quickly, “That's if it's anything at all, of course.”

Red spoke up, thoughtfully. “Well, better safe than sorry. This is the most fun I’ve had all day, anyway.” He hooked his arm and gestured to his compatriots. “C’mon T, Nox, let’s go.”

“Right, Cobra.” And they proceeded inside. The lieutenant brought the squad he had been prepping in behind them to watch the entrance.

“Hey, Cobra, I don’t like dis.” Nox was a bulky andoran who held up the rear. Andorans were large, as a rule, and featured bony caps on most of their joints, in addition to a pair of bone ridges lining the temples and protruding as stubby horns from the back of the head. A sturdy race, for Hegonaise, where they originated, was a high gravity world.

“What don’t you like?” It was a ways down the corridor to the central chamber. “What are you worried about, a *bomb*? Please.” Cobra was of a bulky build, but he was a branded Hothan. Meaning he wore the Tenma mark that had been forced on him when the Old Empire was still around. Hothans were generally human sized, but the back of their skull featured a second spine hanging in a free tendril down their backs. This second spine allowed incredibly fast reflexes, as well as some limited telepathic abilities to all Hothans, more so to Powers. Cobra’s most prominent feature currently was a large two pronged claw gauntlet on his right hand.

“Some of us aren’t made of carbonite, you know.” Tycho, or T, trailed along after Cobra, his wiry appearance more based on comparison with the others than any deficiency in his own physique. He was Molian, from Zeffec. A low G world possessed of a very hostile atmosphere. It was reputed that Molians could not be poisoned.

Finally reaching the end of the corridor, Cobra stopped, and held the others back. “Hang on... I got something.” His secondary spine twitched, and he looked around. “This doesn't feel right.” He shut up, and motioned for his partners to circle around the edge of the room, and converge on a point to the left. They did so, moving perhaps more silently than individuals their size should be able to.

Cobra followed T, with a vague sense that they were being watched. He was certain of it, and by the time he was halfway around, he had a fix. He motioned for Nox and T to stop. “T, there.” He pointed to a gap in the consoles.

T held up his hand and pointed it at the gap. A tiny ball of light appeared several inches away from his hand, but it didn't stay that way. Electricity began to arc, at first between his fingers, then it spread, moving down his arm and back, the point swelling slightly.

Cobra stepped away from the wall he was hugging. He addressed the dark gap where T was aiming. “We know you're there, come out and keep your hands where we can see them.”

After a few moments, Cobra was about to call again, when a small man stepped from between two of the larger consoles. A space where it was unlikely he could have fit. “Zetto not ask for circus to visit, but if clowns wish to play, Zetto will play with clowns.”

Zetto's eyes seemed to watch both groups simultaneously, rotating independently of one another.

Cobra stepped out. “Look, clear out. The group already left, we'll get you a transport and-“

“For clowns you talk a lot. Make Zetto lose count.” Cobra took a few more steps into the middle of the room, to stand more directly in front of the offensive little man.

“Look, are you going to come quietly, or shall I have my buddy T knock you down?” T’s light show was growing more impressive by the minute. Electricity was now arcing from all parts of his body, and the effect was spreading to the surrounding ground.

“You not so tough. Zetto give *you* chance to go now.” His head bent ninety degrees to the side, demonstrating an unnatural crook in his neck, and his voice took on an almost whimsical quality. “Or stay. Zetto not care. But not interfering, or Zetto make you sooo-rry.”

“Drop him, T.”

“My pleasure, sir.” The sparks surrounding T uprooted themselves, and rapidly fed into the growing ball. Once they had all died down, he aimed his hand like he was aiming a cannon and cried, “Thunderball!” The ball of lightning flew from his hand at Zetto and struck him square in the chest.

There was a moment of confusion when Zetto’s body flew apart. His arms went flying and the pieces, including his still sneering face clattered to the floor as if they were hollow.

“Hollow?” Nox was quick, he realized that what had been struck was no more than a facsimile. “T, watch out!”

The voice came from everywhere at first, but they turned as it localized behind them to see Zetto standing in a fighting stance. “Shattering wave!” He thrust his palms forward, and a compression wave flew towards T. T jumped, trying to take to the air, but

when the wave hit the console that had been at his back, it turned the glass into a series of airborne flechettes. Illuminated by a bright flash and flying sparks, T was cut to pieces in mid jump by shards of flying carbon glass. He fell hard in a spatter of blood several feet away, and didn't move to get up.

Cobra was already off. To the outside observer he had simply vanished, but this was what he did. The scene froze for him as he bolted to one side of Zetto. Moving around at incredible speed the rest of the room a set of statues and still life. He wheeled in an arc, coming at the stubby man from the side. He raised the arm with the gauntlet and closed in at a run.

Suddenly, as if Cobra was approaching in slow motion, Zetto's head whipped around to face him, a menacing purple glow shining in his eyes. He opened his mouth.

Nox was watching as Cobra vanished, using his 'Viper Strike' technique, but he jumped at a sudden crash from a set of consoles to Zetto's right. Cobra had impacted there with quite a bit of force, but... there was movement. He was all right. Nox turned back to see Zetto looking at him.

"Zetto like this game. Funny clowns."

"Funny clowns." Nox jumped as a second Zetto stepped from the shadows to his left.

"Funny." "Clowns." Two more. Nox didn't like this. Cobra clambered from the debris, clutching his claw arm, which appeared red and swollen. Likely broken.

"Cobra, beans?"

"Beans, yeah." Cobra removed his claw gauntlet and fit it as best he could on his left arm. He hoped he could pull this off. Nox was already starting.

The ground started to rumble, and even the multiple Zettos seemed to be growing wary. Nox had hunched down and clenched his fists, and a low growl was escaping his clenched teeth. His eyes were open, but they glowed yellow.

While Nox had the Zettos' attention, Cobra jumped, arching over the middle of the chamber. Two of the Zettos spied him, but just as Cobra crested the jump, Nox let fly with his attack. "Boulder Zone!" Chunks of the scenery responded to his call, and flew free. Large rocks dug gouges from the ground, pieces of concrete tore away from the support struts, and the whole stony miasma spun up like a whirlwind gone terribly wrong.

"Viper Machinegun!" Cobra vanished again, just as the twister apexed at his location. Boulders started shattering as they reached the top, streams of smaller rocks flying from the pinnacle of the whirlwind with pinpoint accuracy. All four Zettos dropped, three shattering much as the first one did. The cascading shrapnel aimed at them stopped, and the hose towards the real one quadrupled. Zetto squirmed under the hail for a moment before-

"Shattering Field!" The air around Zetto shimmered, and the rocks were no longer pelting him. Instead, they broke apart as they got close. He didn't stop there, though. He leveled his gaze on Nox, and, "Crystal Casket!"

A magenta blast flew from Zetto's chest, leaping across the room, dodging boulders, towards Nox. It jumped for him, looking almost like an animal when it did so. Jumped into him, into his chest, as it had exited Zetto's. Immediately boulders flew everywhere. Cobra dropped out of his technique as one of the stray rocks knocked him on the leg. He managed to control his fall and land relatively soundly. Nox wasn't fairing as well.

He was frantic, screaming against an unknown force. Then there was a flash and the screaming stopped. In fact, Nox had stopped, frozen behind a wall of crystal. Cobra looked up at Yasha, then back at Nox in realization. Then finally at Zetto, just as he dropped his shield.

The room was a shambles. Consoles sputtering as large rocks rolled down their faces. The generator conduits were similarly broken, and the bio converter was offline. Fortunately, there was still plenty of energy in the various wards and such. The converter was intended as maintenance rather than upkeep.

Cobra fingered his com on to all channels and spoke into it. "This is Cobra, situation critical. There is a Power in the complex; power level reads twelve, one two. Send help immediately. I repeat, assistance is required."

Zetto had paused as Cobra sent out his distress call. "Could not have left Zetto alone. Could not let Zetto please Master. No matter, Master will be pleased. Zetto will show you what Master wants!" He wheeled back, a purple flame forming around his hands. He spun once, a move that looked decidedly awkward for him, and pointed his palm at the downed Power. "Withering Bind." A strand of sickly looking energy shot from Zetto's towards Cobra, who put his good arm up to shield his eyes.

The blast didn't strike him, however. There was a bright explosion, and Cobra was rolled back over the ground by the shockwave. When he moved his arm to take a peek at the scene, his hope was renewed. Green flame was dying down around a person who had just arrived, and Zetto's attack had careened off course and was currently causing a console to rust and sag in a corner of the room. Cobra recognized the man

immediately. "Sir!" But that was all he could manage before he passed out from the exertion.

The new arrival turned to face Zetto, who actually took on a look of unease, taking an involuntary step back. "That's right, you stubby freak. I don't know how you got back, but I'm here to make sure you stay dead this time."

"Sergeant Tagon, Zetto not expecting you here." He seemed wary. One eye was darting uncontrollably, the other focused unswervingly on Tagon, pupil fully dilated.

"That's Admiral now. It's over, Zetto. I beat you once, I'll do it again."

"Was long time ago." Zetto recalled vividly the day he was bound to serve on Kuris, the Tenma prison world. Bound by Tagon, while he still served Queen Yasha. It all seemed impossibly long ago. "Zetto get lots of practice since then." Tagon didn't turn as a second Zetto stepped out behind him, and a third, and a fourth. "Zetto has new tricks now. Not fall for old ones." He seemed to be growing more confident in his speech as at least eight copies snuck towards the unwary admiral.

"Oh really. Well if that's the best you can do, I'd say you're in for a whooping, boy." With that his hair erupted into green flame, with arcing electricity playing over it. He raised one hand up in the air, palm facing upwards. When he spoke, his voice had a hollow, but intense quality, which caused it to fill the room yet always seem to come from just behind your head. "Arc Cyclone!"

Chains of surreally green lightning pulled from the walls and floor, spiraling up to Tagon's raised hand. They spiraled inward, whipping around the room, and kicking up a whirlwind breeze. The Zettos attempted to flee, but didn't get very far, bolts striking them and sending them flying into one another with horrible burns. All but one of them

shattered, pieces clattering to the floor, then being further pulverized as the attack continued. When it completed, again, only one Zetto remained. He stood shakily and faced Tagon, a fiendish sneer forming on his lips.

“If that the best Tagon can do-“

But he didn't get to finish, as Tagon cut him off. “Cyclone Heart!” Zetto had somehow missed the now basketball sized orb of liquid green energy that had collected in his opponent's hand over the course of his previous move. Now he threw it towards Zetto, who found himself frantically trying to evacuate the area.

He barely made it away before three feet of the concrete wall behind him melted before the ball caught up with a solid surface and detonated, expanding into a virtual electric maelstrom. The tail end of this did catch the little man, though, and sent him careening across the room. Tagon casually lowered his hand, and drifted over the floor, to be opposite Zetto in the room again.

“Still slow, Zetto. Where's Gamma?”

“Zetto not realize this was interrogation.” He clambered out of the large hole he had made in one of the consoles. He was visibly scuffed, and cut in several places, but he didn't look like he felt the damage.

“Maybe I should beat on you some more?”

“Maybe it Zetto's turn now.” He inhaled deeply and intoned, “Shatterzone!” A bubble of shimmering air formed around his body as before, but this time it didn't stop there. The field expanded outward, tearing up what was left of the tile floor, as well as a fair amount of the concrete below. Boulders that had been strewn in its path exploded, sending daggers of stone flying. T and Cobra's unprotected bodies fared no better.

Tagon dropped to the ground and crouched down just before the wave impacted him. The advancing wave started pulverizing the pebbles that were left from boulders it had smashed. Dust clouded the room.

The wave died, and the dust started to clear. Zetto peered into the dust, and almost fell over as he saw Tagon advancing on him, a translucent greenish sphere holding the dust at bay, electricity arcing over its surface.

“Maybe not.” He gazed darkly at Zetto’s shocked expression. ”Plasma...” He raised his hands above his head, and they were struck from the ceiling and the fragments of console by bright green lightning, forming a ball which caused the air around it to ripple. The ball inflated around a fiery core until it reached a critical mass. Then the second stroke. “... Destroyer!” The ball came to the ground, propelled by Tagon’s own hands. On contact, the blast wave swept the sound from the room, and replaced it with a blinding, burning light.

“Master Gamma! I have failed you again!” Zetto stood his ground for an agonizing handful of seconds, before his defenses gave out, and his body was blasted to ash.

The detonation died, and the dust cleared. The entire inside of the pyramid had been gutted. Girders that had been exposed by combat were white hot and sagging, and rubble was strewn across the floor. Just about the only things that hadn’t been destroyed were Yasha and Nox, behind their crystal barriers. The lights were out, and the emergency systems had closed blast doors on the entryway. He could hear the corporal outside shouting to get them open again. The only light in the room came from the glowing metal.

Just then there was a sound from the corner. Tagon peered into the shadows for the source of the sound, and turned towards it, ready to let fly with another blast if necessary. "You're never going to free Yasha, you hear me? I won't let you." He was half expecting Zetto to reemerge, having managed to substitute a simulacrum at the last moment.

From the shadows, the figure - for it was a figure – paused. One of the sagging girders nearby fell, and exploded into a brief shower of sparks when it landed, clearly illuminating the corner.

Tagon dropped his stance in surprise "It's... It's you! Thank goodness... How did you-"

"Demon..."

"What the... Wait... No, don't!"

"Dark..."

"Stop, no! Aaaaaah!" Tagon put his hands up in front of his face.

"Beam!" A wave of black energy swept the room.

Given her diplomatic status, the authorities were ready to believe Sensha's account of what happened in the park, and, unable to really tell a Power how they should behave, allowed her to return to her duties. And return she did. Her console had finished its processing, and, she noted with a sigh, the results appeared exactly as the tech said they would.

"I really have to start believing it when people tell me something is fruitless," she muttered to herself.

“Oh, I don't know about fruitless, just not in season yet.”

Sensha spun around, ready to call her weapon again, and almost regretted it.

“Fushi! You nearly scared me to death!”

Fushi, also known as the Phoenix Samurai, also known as host to the Angel of Life, had been waiting in her office since he heard about the attack on her. He and Sensha were close, but in a strange way. When she met him, he had seemed enigmatic at best. It later turned out that he was from the future. However, even after this came to light, he was still a trifle odd. For example, as far as Sensha had determined, his idea of formal dress was combat armor.

Thankfully, he was casual today, in a light green shirt and white jeans. The shirt covered, but didn't quite hide the faintly glowing green orb set into his chest. The tomb of the Angel of Life since Darkbolt had bested him in combat ten thousand years ago. Quite the irony that due to this, the Angel was around when the others had left, and available to send word to his brethren that they were needed once again to assist against Yasha's armies. Were this not the case, the Tenma may never have been defeated.

“Good to see you too, Sen-chan.” He tended to see her more like a little sister than a peer, but that was fine with her. “I heard what happened, and got here as soon as I could. But seeing you here, I suppose everything worked out for the best?”

“Yes, I'm fine. And even if it was in a hospital, at least I got the rest I was looking for.”

“Well, I'm glad for that, anyway. It doesn't look like your scans got anywhere, though.” He noted, glancing over her shoulder.

“Unfortunately. Looks like I'm back to square one.”

“Why don't you try this...” He reached over her shoulder and started tapping on her console, adding parameters to a few of the scan filters. He inserted close to fifty apparently random numbers and symbols, then restarted the scan.

Sensha watched the scan filter go to work on the noise, then looked with a grimace at Fushi. “Excuse me?”

“Those are the parameters for the warding fields that were set up around the Clotho stasis complex.”

Sensha started to nod, but then realized something. “Hey, how did you know-“

“Let's just say that Ikkou's not the only one with tricks up his sleeve.” He put his hands in his pockets and took a few steps towards the door. “Well, it's nice to see that you're all right for myself, but I really do have some other business to attend to.”

Sensha stood and bowed as he left. “Bye... Don't be a stranger.” After he had left, Sensha glanced at the timer. After noticing that this scan would take “Four hours!” She sighed and decided to lie down on her couch. The extra parameters Fushi added were probably at fault. At any rate, it would be dark long before the scan was finished, but she wanted to have the results as soon as they were ready.

While she was asleep she had an unusual dream, but she was accustomed to unusual dreams, ever since Yasha had unlocked in her the ability to see those far away.

She saw a cold shell. A ship, it was a starship, but still cold. She saw it passing through her, and she saw inside it. There was no one, but its mere presence awakened fear in her. Then it was gone. She tried to see where she was, but suddenly she wasn't there anymore. She saw another shell, but this one warm, caring, tender. Another starship. Two impressions struck her, one was of a sword, and the other of her father.

Her father whom she had never known. She had been found abandoned on a desolate world. Was her father here? No. Somehow she knew this was not a vision of her father, but of someone like him.

The shell crept through the darkness. As it moved she saw behind it and there was a planet there! A planet and an uncountable number of other ships. They loved the planet.

Then, faintly, she felt the cold again. No! she tried to cry, Stop! She tried through sheer force of will to stop what she knew would happen. The cold ship appeared, drifting towards the planet. She looked back towards the ships that had been near the planet, but they were gone. Then she looked to the ship of swords and it was gone, too.

The planet was growing cold. Then, it was gone. Sensha screamed.

Awake instantly, she realized that she had really screamed. A passing guard looked in on her to be sure she was all right. "Thanks," she said, after having calmed down. "It was just a nightmare."

"Yes, ma'am... Can I get you something? Some nice tea, perhaps? It might help you calm yourself."

"Tea would be wonderful, thank you." The guard smiled and bowed before heading out of the room.

Sensha got up and walked a little circle to get her feet back into reality, when she noticed that the scan was done. Fushi's numbers had worked, and the resulting waveform seemed somehow familiar to her. Unable to place it from memory, she accessed the database of Powers and keyed in a scan for a match.

No sooner had she started the search than she had a match. Ninety nine point nine nine percent. The waves transposed perfectly. It wasn't until she glanced at the name on the profile that the pit of her stomach dropped out.

She denied it at first, told the scan to continue, look for a better match. 'Error', it flashed on the screen. 'No further Power records capable of producing sample wave.' It was no fluke.

She stood up and concentrated, a mirror-like oval appearing in front of her. She quested in her mind and whispered to it, "Mariko, Yun, where are you?" She strained for a fix, a glimmer, *anything*, but couldn't even get an impression.

Sensha's legs gave out, forcing her to sit. She needed to think, and fast.

"This... is incredible." Mariko was quite correct. The room she had fallen into was circular, about sixty feet across. The door was nowhere in sight, but the diagram appeared to be mirrored on the floor, and she had appeared standing in the circle marked 'War'. The diagram took up perhaps a ten foot radius circle in the middle of the room, and was carved from a single block of a sandy yellow-orange stone, similar to that which made up the remainder of the caverns they had seen.

On the outside of the diagram, there were eight twenty foot wide leaves which filled the remainder of the circle. That was where the normal construction stopped. Above them, there was nothing. No ceiling. They appeared to be floating under a vast starscape. The walls came up a foot or two off the ground, but stopped with a series of intricate carvings. Mariko looked over the edge, and saw nothing. No planet. Apparently, they were drifting through empty space on a sixty foot wide disk. She was,

however, strangely unconcerned about falling. At three points around the wall there were pedestals... no, pedestals wasn't right. It was as if the wall were continued up to a point. The top of each had what looked at first to be a window, but Yun examined one and found it to be convex, like a lens.

Ikkou was standing, and smirking like a kid showing off a new toy to his friends. "None of the archaeologists could figure the door out. I got wind of it from the reports they had been sending me. When I got there they were convinced it was some sort of mural, but when I touched it, well, you know what happened next." He walked over to one of the lenses and peered through it. When he turned back, Yun was staring at one of the eight leaf stones around the central diagram. "They made me copy down all eight of them, character for character."

Mariko looked at the floor. There was writing there, she had noticed that there were inscriptions, but hadn't really looked until now. "This is... German?" Ikkou simply nodded.

"Over here, Spanish." Yun motioned her over.

They looked over each of the panels as Ikkou dictated. "Russian, German, Italian, Spanish, English, Japanese, Chinese, and Arabic"

"But none of those languages have been spoken in over a century, since Earth switched over to galactic standard."

"True, but none of these languages would be spoken for hundreds of millennia at the time this room was constructed. Whoever made this knew that the Demons would be trapped in the Demon Orbs. They knew that they would find their way to Earth, they must have also known *when*. None of these languages has been in use for a century, but

to *you*, these are your native tongues! This room was meant for the hosts of the Demons to find, exactly as you have.”

Yun glanced at Ikkou offhandedly, and was about to say something when Mariko started reading.

*“When through time and space the seeker sages  
rouse them from their Sleep of Ages  
The path obscured, the corner turned  
in darkness find what can't be learned*

*“What found in three the orbs contain  
has given, taken, nursed with pain  
Light has risen, darkness falls  
the path has split, the knights are called*

*“No image in the looking glass  
for all whose futures touch their past  
Only those whose path is true  
will find that one is sometimes two*

*“The doomsday pipes sound loudly now  
The thousand hands will show you how  
Wake the sleeper, take his heed  
Teach him of our awful deed*

*“When the brothers see the stars at last  
our midnight hour has finally passed  
Only those who find their ways  
may see the start, or end of days”*

Ikkou looked puzzled. “That’s it? That’s all it says? No, there has to be more...”

He glared at Mariko and barked, “There *is* more, isn’t there? Keep reading!”

Mariko shook her head. “That’s all there is, look for yourself.”

“He can’t.” Yun held a determined stance opposite Ikkou. “Isn’t that right, Destruction?”

Mariko and Ikkou both shot glances at Yun, but whereas Mariko's was laced with confusion, Ikkou's was one of a burning resentment. "Something Fushi told me once, the Demons and Angels don't see the world like we do. They can't read through our eyes. That's why you had to bring *us* here. Your archaeologists couldn't get in, so you needed us to read it for you."

Mariko backed away from Ikkou towards Yun, several things starting to make sense. "That's right... wanting to keep Sensha in the dark about what you were doing, and you've been referring to the demon hosts as 'you', not 'we'..."

Ikkou smirked and assumed a relaxed stance. "Oh, bravo, you figured it out. But apparently you've already given me the information I wanted, so you're a bit late." He snarled. "And of course, you have no way of getting out of this chamber, so I guess I don't have to worry about you telling anyone."

"What do you mean, no way out? You've been in and out before." Mariko was standing with Yun, and had half assumed a fighting stance.

Ikkou's smirk turned into a grin. "Oh, and you expect me to tell you?"

"Yun, what are we supposed to do? Destruction's way too powerful, especially since we can't transform."

"We might not be able to change, but neither can he."

If possible, Ikkou now looked even more amused. His grin turned to a cackle. "Oh, I wouldn't bank on that one, human." With that there was a brief rumbling in the ground, and Ikkou was suddenly consumed by a pillar of golden energy. His clothing disintegrated as the power suffused him, but was replaced by the ornate armor of the

Demon of Destruction. The light died away, but remained in his eyes and his hair, both of which glowed menacingly.

Mariko looked around, waiting for something to happen, but wasn't rewarded. "The sentinels! Where are they?"

She was cut off as Destruction's voice played its throaty, echoing baritone through Ikkou's mouth. "They can't hear you. Give it up." Mariko doubled over as Destruction was suddenly right in front of her, his fist lifting her off the ground by her abdomen.

Yun was backing away, looking frantically around for something that might help. He glanced over the floor, and something bothered him. Whenever Ikkou had transformed before, it was as if a bomb had exploded. The ground had been ripped up, or at the very least there was some sort of scorch mark. Here there was nothing. He looked at Ikkou, who seemed to still be paying attention to Mariko.

Destruction grabbed the front of Mariko's shirt, and wailed her with a backhand, sending her flying limply across the room.

There had to be something... Ikkou certainly wasn't an illusion... The room must be warded against damage like that. When he thought of it, it actually had to be, to have survived all this time. So if the room was warded against damage, he thought to himself, then maybe...

Ikkou had just reached Mariko when a blast of icy wind struck him from behind. Yun was consumed in a sphere of black spirits, flying from within the orb on his chest. The armor of Death coalesced on him, and the spirits flew screaming back into the orb.

Yun felt power he hadn't felt in over a century. He had awakened the Demon of Death once more, and he could feel its will pressed against his own. But unlike Ikkou, it was he who was in control. Again, he could see no sentinels. He had been right. "Mari! Transform, this place is warded somehow, the sentinels can't get here!"

Destruction switched his focus, and was on Yun almost immediately, but Yun was ready for it, and the powers of Death gave him the speed he needed to avoid the blow, which slammed into one of the three columns, but did no damage. Destruction seemed furious that they had discovered this, and his rage doubled as Mariko was swept over by tides of what looked like translucent blood.

The blood ran down her sides, and left her garbed in War's armor.

Ikkou backed away, not out of fear, but caution. The battle had suddenly become far less one sided, and even he didn't want to be flanked. "Haven't we had this conversation before? You're still no match for me!" He swept his cape aside and leveled his hand at Yun. "Molten Lance!" A golden beam streaked from his outstretched index finger towards Death's host.

Yun dove to one side. "Howling Eruption!" The ground around Ikkou's feet began to roil. A split second later, a column of vengeful spirits blasted skyward, attempting to drag Destruction with them. The column dissipated, but Ikkou seemed no worse for wear.

"Is that the best you've got? You'll get nowhere with your feeble tricks. Your friend's soul is far better contained, *this* time." As if to confirm this, he let fly with a series of energy blasts, knocking Yun to the ground. With Yun down, Ikkou prepared a much more substantial attack, power building in his palm. "No more games, human."

“Razor Storm!” A barrage of metallic darts pelted Ikkou and he flinched, a beam of energy several feet wide flying skywards as he was forced to release his attack. However, it wasn't nearly as bad as it looked. After the first few darts hit, Destruction's shield came up, and the rest were merely deflected.

Ikkou pulled one of the darts out and licked his own blood off it, chuckling to himself. “I wonder how yours tastes, my dear?” He vanished again, but Mariko saw this one coming, and was able to block when he reappeared attempting to stick her with her own dart.

“Not fast enough, goldenrod.” She let fly with a bone crunching kick to Ikkou's left side, sending him flying into the center of the room.

Yun took advantage of the situation. “Dark Epitaph!” A giant hand made of swirling black smoke shot from the end of Yun's arm to grab at Ikkou and drain the life from him. Yun only hoped that he could stop in that sliver of time between when Destruction had been subdued, and Ikkou was actually dead.

He never got the chance. Destruction vaulted out of his slide to land back against another wall, eyeing his two opponents. He glanced nervously back and forth between them before seeming to resolve himself of something. “You have gotten better, I'll give you that. But you'll never be my equal. No human will ever best me!” He crossed his hands over his chest and bent slightly. “Omega Barrage!”

Ikkou whipped his hands to his sides and stood, as if he was a cross. As he did this, volleys of energy started loosing themselves from his chest and flying at Yun and Mariko. Yun managed to dodge the first one, two missed Mariko, but it was like they were seeking them out. Both went down under a hailstorm of shimmering force bolts.

And they kept coming. Mariko heard a sickening snap from her leg. Yun took one in the shoulder and felt the joint give way. They did their best to shield themselves, but their energy was rapidly waning. Destruction's laughter echoed shrilly in their ears.

When suddenly it stopped. Destruction doubled over and grabbed his head, writhing in apparent agony on the ground. "No! Not again, NO!" His body shook and a mounting cry filled the air. Then it died abruptly, and there was silence.

Barely conscious, Yun lay back, willing his body to mend while trying to stave off the torpor that threatened to conquer him. His cuts and scrapes closed quickly, but when his shoulder shifted and popped back into its socket, he screamed in pain. Ikkou rolled over and groaned.

Mariko lay, clutching her leg and trembling, but soon Yun was kneeling next to her. "Hang on, Mari, just try to stay focused." He placed his hands over her leg and concentrated. Mariko squirmed at the sensations of her muscle and bone straining to repair themselves, but there was little pain. Afterwards, he helped her up, and steadied her until she was able to stand on her own.

They both looked at Ikkou, who was curled up and appeared to be-

"Are you *crying*?"

Ikkou sniffed a sob back and tried to dry his eyes. "It was so dark, so cold..."

"Hey, it's ok... We're here, don't worry." Mariko went over and sat by him. He looked like a scared little boy, and she felt sorry for him.

"What happened, Ikkou, how did Destruction get control of you again?"

Mariko reprimanded him. "Yun, he's been through a lot. Give him some time."

“Mariko, time’s one thing we may not have here.”

“You let him rest or I’ll knock you down.” Mariko looked daggers at Yun.

Ikkou finally spoke up. “No... Yun’s right, there isn’t much time.” He tried to sit, and Mariko steadied him. He looked up at Yun. “It was Gamma. Gamma... put me to sleep or something so Destruction could control me. I’m so sorry...” He looked at the floor, and appeared as if he might have started crying again.

“So, how did you break free?”

“Gamma must’ve let me go. I know how to keep Destruction suppressed, so I put him down as soon as I was able.”

“But why would he just let you go?” Mariko asked.

“I don’t know, I’ve been his slave for months. I... Oh my god, I helped him kidnap Naoko!”

“It’s ok, Ikkou-“

“No, it’s not!” he shouted at Mariko. “I tried so hard to keep her safe, but I wasn’t strong enough.” He buried his head in his knees.

“So help us set things right.”

“Yeah. Tell us everything you know. Sensha’s already working on the case with Clotho and-“

“Sensha’s dead... Gamma was talking to Destruction about how he had sent two assassins after her after she started nosing around at the shipyards.”

“What?” Yun jumped up. “Then we have to get out of here... We have to warn her!”

Mariko was still calm, though admittedly, this news didn't sit well with her, either. "Yun's right, Ikkou. If what you say is true, then it's even more important that we talk to her."

"Listen to yourself, Ikkou." Yun spoke sternly but evenly. "You're lost in self pity here. You need to get your act together. You're over two hundred years old! Start acting like it." Mariko eyed Yun with reprehension, but didn't add anything.

Ikkou slowly rose to his feet, with Mariko's help, and stood shakily, looking around as if for the first time. "This room is warded against teleportation and dimensional powers, and acts as a sort of soundproof chamber... You can't tell from outside what's going on inside." He looked eyed the lenses, but kept talking. "The whole cave is warded against technology, which is why Mariko's flashlight didn't work, and why the sentinels couldn't get here. By waiting until he was here to start attacking, Destruction guaranteed that the sentinels wouldn't interfere."

"What about on Clotho?"

"On Clotho it was the same deal. The wards inside the stasis complex kept the sentinels out, and there was too much background noise for them to determine if I had transformed or not. Oh, Naoko..." He sighed and crouched, leaning against one of the lens posts. "I took down the warding devices, broke the wards holding the stasis crystal, and brought the whole crystal back to the Go-Ka, after which... Gamma destroyed the planet, and a handful of ships that had seen us there."

"What about the asteroid base you... I mean, Destruction told us about?"

"It was real... Until Destruction found out about it," he choked a bit, "f-from me... and told Gamma. Then we destroyed that, too, but not before taking the scan data.

Gamma knew Sensha was headed to talk to you, and he was going to give her the data to keep her busy while I took care of you here.” His head drooped a bit. “That’s all that I know, I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right, Ikkou. No one’s blaming you for anything that’s happened.” Yun put a hand on Ikkou’s shoulder, and it seemed to help. “Now, do you know how to get out of here?”

“Oh, yes... Just stand on your circle and will yourself out. The room wasn’t designed as a trap.”

Mariko looked puzzled as everyone made their way to their circles. “That makes me wonder... what *was* it designed as?”

“Even Gamma didn’t know... At least, that’s what he told Destruction. Oh, don’t forget to drop to normal before we leave the room. The sentinels will detect you otherwise.” Yun and Mariko realized they were still masking as Demons and quickly dropped back before stepping onto their circles. Then, one by one, they vanished in flashes of light.

Was it possible? Was she awake? How long had it been? Yasha was unaware of any time having passed at all. She searched her feelings and there, deep in her soul was the Demon of Evil. Her Demon. It whispered to her, messages of revenge, of hatred and lust. That was the only indicator that any time had passed at all, was that Evil seemed so anxious to confirm her loyalties. She placated it by promising that she would bathe in Sensha’s blood by the end of the day.

She opened her eyes slowly, and saw- “Brother!”

“Greetings, my sister.”

Gamma's tone was as smooth as silk, but made her feel putrid. Moreso as she realized she wasn't wearing any clothing. Rather than blush, as another might have done, she barked, “Get me some clothes.” She had addressed a short man with a crooked gaze who was also present, but he didn't move.

Instead, Gamma spoke again. “Now, now, I'm sure my dear twin sister would have many things in her time. But right now, I'm afraid she is in no position to bargain.”

If not for the actual words he had spoken his tone may as well have been asking her to dance, but she knew better. “What do you want, you filthy sw-“ She choked as Gamma casually grabbed her by the throat, and tilted her chin up. She felt his aura, and it was powerful. More powerful than she had ever seen it. He looked down her body, but stopped at the smooth purple orb affixed to her chest.

“As if you needed to ask.” He reached with his other hand, seized the orb with two fingers, and pulled.

Yasha screamed.

There was a bit of confusion when Ikkou arrived with Mariko and Yun at Sensha's office on Wingo. Which is to say, Sensha had seven Powers present to detain Ikkou. Fortunately one was a clairvoyant, so when Ikkou explained that it was really him they knew he was telling the truth. They apologized profusely, and Ikkou forgave them. He was relieved enough to see Sensha alive, especially after he heard that the assassination attempt had failed.

Then he heard about Lachesis, and his mood turned around. Sensha's mood fell when she mentioned it, as well. "I should have said more. I shouldn't have let him go." Mariko and Yun wondered who 'him' was, but knew better than to ask.

"Uh, Ikkou... Why don't you tell Sensha what you told us?" Mariko diverted the conversation to a less painful area.

After Ikkou had finished his recounting of what he knew, and what they had seen in the chamber, Sensha was both intrigued and confused.

"Alright, so Gamma is back, but what does he want with the hosts?"

Yun was looking at some pictures of Sensha with various political figures that were hung on the wall. "Gotta catch 'em all," he mumbled.

Mariko rolled her eyes.

Sensha looked thoughtful, however. "You know, he may be right. You say that the chamber had symbols for each of the Demons, is it possible that something different could happen if all five of you were there? Maybe something with those lenses, I don't know."

Ikkou shrugged and hesitantly replied, "It's *possible*... I'm sure I don't remember it coming up while Destruction was talking with Gamma at all."

Yun turned around. "Either way, if he's after all the Demons, that means he'll be after us next. Ikkou, don't take this the wrong way, but could he free Destruction again?"

Ikkou lowered his eyes. "I- I don't know. The first time," he said, and then took a deep breath, "I was tortured beforehand. I don't know if he'd need to do that again."

Sensha let the quiet hang for a moment before speaking in a more positive note. "Well, I can probably get the council to lift the ban on your powers with this information.

Temporarily at least. There's a session tomorrow to address the events at Lachesis... I'll bring it up then."

Yun was looking at a picture of the five demons, as they appeared 'naturally', when suddenly Darkbolt's image lit up. "Hey, Sensha, what's-" He was cut off by the sound of claxons from outside.

Sensha rushed over to where Yun was standing when she heard the sirens and looked at the picture. "Naoko... The sentinels caught Naoko using Darkbolt's powers." She opened a scrying portal and peered in it. It didn't take long. "She's here, on Wingo!" Everyone in the room saw a picture of Naoko, nude, lying face down with-

"Oh my god... Is that a sentinel?" Mariko's eyes widened as she saw the metal behemoth that was towering over Naoko. It was vaguely humanoid, but its left arm was missing, replaced with a mass of metallic tendrils, each ending in a variety of appendages, from sensors to blades to weaponry of various types. The head was small, a single sensor placed on its front, and its other arm was ended with a powerful looking hand. All told, it was probably ten feet tall. As they watched, it pointed the large arm at her and a blast of turquoise energy struck Naoko's prone figure. Her back arched and they saw her chest.

"There's no orb! She hasn't got the orb! We have to stop that thing or it'll kill her." Ikkou was frantic.

Sensha stepped back and said, "I've got a fix, I'll go and shut it down."

"I'm coming too." Ikkou was grim in his determination.

"You're doing nothing of the kind, now wait here where it's safe."

"If you don't bring us along, so help me I'll transform and teleport myself."

Sensha was stopped. Would he really do it? After seeing the sentinel? One look at his eyes answered that question. “Fine then, but be careful. Ready?”

Everyone nodded, and Sensha seized the Astral envelope with her mind and pulled them towards Naoko's position. A split second later they were there. What happened next was not to be accurately recalled for several hours.

Sensha cried, “Sentinel, stand down under the authority of the high council!”

But Ikkou had already begun running to Naoko. Yun and Mariko tried to stop him, and ended up running after. The Sentinel backed off, vanishing back into whatever dimension it resided in and was gone by the time Yun and Mariko joined Ikkou at Naoko's side.

Ikkou carefully turned her over, and took off his jacket to cover her. He listened, and his heart leapt when he heard that she was breathing. “She's alive!” Then he turned to her, as her eyes started to open just a sliver. “Naoko, oh Naoko... Say you're all right. Say anything!”

Then she spoke, and her voice echoed through the blackest reaches of the souls of everyone present. “Dark Shock!” Black lightning raked the area, and Yun, Mariko, and Ikkou lost consciousness.

Three days later, Sensha was in front of the council again, but not as a speaker. “This court will come to order. We are here to pass judgement on the recent actions of High Minister Sensha. She has pleaded guilty to charges of withholding critical information in the case of the Clotho incident, as well as conducting her investigation in a biased manner. In addition to these, she has pleaded guilty to involving the Demon hosts

inappropriately, but claims to be innocent of hiding them, having no knowledge of their current whereabouts. These charges and their registered pleas have been acknowledged and verified by recognized clairvoyants to be true and correct.” The minister eyed his console. “The Council of Angels would like it known that it is their unanimous view that High Minister Sensha has acted in a responsible manner, and should not be held at fault for these violations.” He looked back up at the packed chambers.” However, as the Council of Angels is purely an advisory body, we will now hold a vote in accordance with galactic law to determine a course of action. You have until tomorrow at this time to register your votes with the council secretary.” He tapped his console, and a gavel sounded. “This meeting of the galactic council is adjourned.”

Sensha sat until most of the room had cleared and then, head hung, she made her way back to her office. Somewhere along the way, Fushi matched pace with her, but thankfully he was silent. The one thing Sensha didn't want was to have someone try and cheer her up. She never should have brought the others with her, what had she been thinking? Now they were all gone. Darkbolt had immobilized them with his Dark Shock technique, and then they had all vanished. Gone back to Gamma, she thought.

They reached her office, still silent, and Fushi closed the door quietly behind them. After a few moments of silence, he spoke. “There really wasn't anything you could have done. I believe Ikkou would have transformed in order to get to Naoko, sentinels or no. And deep down, so do you.”

Sensha was out of tears, so she just stared at the picture of all of them together she had on her desk. Naoko and Ikkou were next to each other, smiling. Yun and Mariko were slightly behind them, Mariko giving bunny ears to Yun. Sensha was sitting cross

legged, chin in her hands on a bench in front of everyone else. It had been taken in a park, back on Earth. She hadn't really realized how much friends like them meant to her until now, and she found herself unable to release her guilt at getting them abducted. She didn't respond to Fushi.

“You need to be strong, Sen-chan. The Angels seem to believe that Earth is Gamma's ultimate objective.” He paused, wondering if he could change the subject. “I'll be going there with them to see to its defense.” It didn't seem to be doing any good. “We're leaving tonight. I was hoping I could treat you to dinner first...”

Sensha looked up slowly, seeming to realize for the first time that there was genuine pain in his voice. She tried to smile, for his sake. “I'd love to. But... let me get cleaned up first.”

Fushi smiled warmly. “Of course. I'll meet you at Kuroki's at, let's say six?”

“Six it is.” She kept up her smile as he left the room, and was surprised to find that she didn't need to force it after the door closed.

She showered and changed in to fresh clothing for the first time in three days, and felt better for it. When six rolled around, she found herself waiting outside Kuroki's with a downright positive attitude. Fushi was right on time, and had changed into his armor. They had a quiet dinner that was full of unspoken words, but finally it was over, and Fushi needed to get to his transport.

“Sensha, I've got to get to my ship.”

“Sure.” She sighed.

“Will you be ok?”

“Yeah. I'll be fine.” Then she added, “Thanks to you.”

Fushi smiled, turned, and left towards the docking pads. Sensha watched him go, with only a small amount of trepidation. It had been thousands of years since all five Angels had risen to defend the Earth against a threat, and together they had been unbeatable. She hoped they wouldn't be necessary, but something in her knew better than to hope for that. She wished she could go with him, but first of all, he would never allow it, and second, she was under complex arrest and couldn't leave the government sector until the vote completed.

"Be careful. Good luck. Damn it, you'd better come back in one piece," she called after him, but he was already gone.

She felt utterly alone as she made her way to the hotel she had secured a room at. Her regular quarters were off limits, being outside the government sector, but the local hotels usually kept rooms available for ministers from offworld who didn't have actual houses on Wingo.

She changed out of the dress clothing she had donned for dinner and decided an early night was well deserved. The vote was due in by plus four – four hours past midday – and it would be a long wait until then. She drifted to sleep surprisingly easily, and slept dreamlessly.

When Ikkou came too, he couldn't see much. It was dark, and the walls felt close. He shuddered. He was aboard the Go-Ka again. "Mariko? Yun? Are you here?" No answer. His ears strained against the darkness, but there was no sound. He didn't know how long he was sitting there, but eventually he heard footsteps coming towards him.

A door opened, and he was bathed in a blinding light. A silhouette faced him. As his eyes came into focus he recognized the form. "Naoko you're-" he started before he remembered. "No. You're Darkbolt."

The dark voice echoed all around him when she opened her mouth. "Correct. Not that it makes any difference now. Follow me, and don't think about trying anything, or I'll end this lovely thing's life faster than you can blink." Grim sincerity dripped from those words, leaving Ikkou precious little choice but to obey.

He walked along the hallway after Darkbolt, not so bright now that his eyes had adjusted. "So, did the Demon of Darkness need Gamma's help to hold back one puny human?" Darkbolt ignored him as they turned several corners. Finally they entered a larger, vaguely circular chamber. There were five sets of some diabolical looking apparatus stationed around the walls at even intervals, and devices suspended from the floor and ceiling in the middle. Also present were Yun and Mariko, who relaxed visibly when they saw him being ushered as they had been rather than lording over them.

"You, over there. Gamma will be here shortly." Darkbolt shoved Ikkou towards one of the devices. It looked like a capsule of some kind. Naoko walked over to another one of the capsules, pressed some buttons, and climbed in. As it was closing, she glared back. "No heroics, or this girl dies."

Once it was closed, Naoko shut her eyes, and the tank filled with some sort of fluid. Looking around at the rest of the capsules, Ikkou noticed that one of them contained, "Queen Yasha?"

"He needs all of us for something," Yun said darkly.

“Indeed, I do, my dears.” They all looked to the source of the sound, and saw Gamma standing in the doorway. “Now, if you’ll be so kind as to transform and climb into each of your capsules. I’m sure you’ll find the accommodations uncomfortable, but that’s not something that will get any better the longer you wait, if you get my meaning.”

With the collected rage built up in each of them, the moment Gamma stopped speaking they all burst into their Demon forms. Ikkou, thankfully, heard only a growl of resentment from Destruction, and was able to keep him under control.

Something clicked to Mariko. “Where are the sentinels?” Surely this was enough to draw their attention.

“Oh, I’m so glad you asked that. You see, this ship was *built* using the powers of the Demons. It’s steeped in them. You, sadly, aren’t anything but background noise against it. Furthermore, those mindless robots don’t have the faintest idea where we are.”

“Where are we?” The question came out almost before Yun realized what he was saying.

“We are in the Void. This is the only current ship capable of traveling through it, you know. Void travel makes Hyperspace look like a summer stroll.” There was quiet, during which Gamma grew only more giddy. “Ah, but you must be feeling rebellious. I can feel your hatred of me, and of what I’ve done to you. So, who wants to start, hmm?”

They all looked strangely at him.

“Come on, someone attack me.” He sneered. “You want to, I can sense it.” He leveled a finger at Ikkou. “You! Hit me. I’m not defending myself. You could put a molten lance through my cranium before I could blink. Or you!” He spun to face Yun. “Steal my soul with your powers of Death.” He looked around, but no one flinched.

“Not up to it, hmm? I don't blame you. Good, good. Now that it's plain who's in control here, climb into your tanks. But before you do, heed my words. Once you're in those capsules, you will be made to channel a great deal of power. Whether or not you do so is up to you. But before you go and martyr yourselves to defy me, know that should one of you not carry his,” he glanced at Mariko, “or her burden, I'm afraid the effect on the rest of your friends would be quite lethal. Now, in!”

The glass on each of their capsules opened of its own accord, and they all slowly stepped in. Once they were in, the glass closed, and the chamber started filling with fluid. In a burst of panic, Yun beat his fists against the window, but it stood, and Yun's struggles waned after the liquid filled in over his head.

Ikkou watched his own capsule fill, trying to ignore Destruction's laughter. The liquid filled over his face, and reflexively he held his breath. When his chest burned, though, he was forced to exhale, and a thick fluid invaded his lungs. He gasped it for a moment before, just as reality started to cloud over, he realized that he wasn't going to drown.

Gamma turned to Zetto, who was peering in from the doorway. “Set course for Earth.”

“Yes, Master!”

The following day, Sensha didn't feel much better. As she nervously watched the first few votes come in, she reminded herself that it didn't matter what happened to her, so long as Gamma was stopped, and Earth was safe. With that fact in mind, she turned off her console and went to breakfast. In eight hours, she would know.

It was a quiet morning, even on average. No one spoke to her, and that was fine by her. She grabbed various of the foodstuffs offered, and proceeded back to her office to eat them.

The day dragged on interminably. She took two walks before lunchtime, neither of which was able to settle her stomach enough to eat much. It only got worse as the hours ticked past there. At plus three, she was pacing in her office, thinking another walk would be in order, when her console signaled an incoming message.

It was a message from Fushi, saying he had arrived safely on Earth, and they hadn't heard anything yet, but were working to revive the proper wards that had been dormant on the planet since the last time the Angels had defended it. The work was going quickly, and they expected to have them operational again soon enough. He also sent her shorter 'Good Luck' style messages written by each of the other Angels. She was reading them until a knock came on her office door.

"Yes?"

It was one of the council's messengers. "Minister Sensha? The council is being called together. Your presence is required," he called through her closed door.

"Thank you, I'll be in shortly."

"Yes, ma'am." She heard his footsteps retreating down the hall.

Sensha took a deep breath, brought herself up from her desk, and proceeded to the council chambers for the verdict.

Mariko stood on a black landscape. She was puzzled at first, having never experienced a true telepathic bond. "Where am I?"

“You are in my mind.” The voice came from nowhere in particular.

“Our minds.” This had a source. She looked and saw Yun, Ikkou, Naoko, and Yasha standing around a circle, as they had been placed in the capsules. They had spoken.

“My mind.” Gamma was standing in the middle of them all. But he was strange. His features looked wooden, not vengeful, as they had before the capsules closed.

“Mariko. Yun. You're here.” Ikkou was looking around.

Yun responded. “Yes, we're here.”

“Ikkou? Is that you?” Naoko had looked up. Somehow, Mariko knew it was Naoko who had spoken, and not Darkbolt. Then she realized how empty she felt. Where was War?

“We are here.” The throaty gurgling voice came from behind her, and she saw that each of their Demons was standing behind them.

“Are you all ok?”

Rather than nod, Ikkou, Yun, and Naoko said, “Yes,” in an even tone.

Yasha didn't respond. She seemed oblivious to her surroundings.

“What is this place?” It was Yun who asked the question this time.

“This is my mind. The mind of the Gamma-Ka.” Gamma, standing in the center of them had responded.

“What do you mean, *Gamma-Ka*?” Mariko decided to probe the issue.

“I am the ship. When I died at Darkbolt's hands over two centuries ago, I found myself here. My soul had bound itself to the Go-Ka in order to survive.”

“Why?” Ikkou asked.

“We are the same.” There was silence. Ikkou asked again, but got nothing else.

Naoko spoke up. “Where are we going?”

“Nowhere.”

“Where is the Gamma-Ka going?” she revised her question.

“To Earth.” Then, as if anticipating the next question, Gamma continued. “When we arrive, we will take the Power from within the planet.” Again, there was no persuading him any further on this topic.

“Why is Yasha silent?” Naoko asked this with a certain amount of trepidation in her voice, as if she was uncertain of herself for being concerned for her enemy.

The large spider behind Yasha answered, in a thick, oozing voice which made their blood curdle. “There is not enough left of her to speak. She will always be mine.”

Suddenly, they were there. A blue and green sphere descended from above, slightly smaller in diameter than Mariko was tall, but somehow she knew that this *was* the Earth. And she quailed to think of what she was about to help do to it.

“And so, the votes have been cast, it is my duty to inform you, High Minister Sensha, that all charges against you have been lifted.” Anything else he might have said was drowned out by applause from the overwhelming majority which had sided with the Council of Angels. The gavel sounded again repeatedly, the speaker trying to restore order. It was only partially successful, however, and it was almost a full two minutes before the noise died down to the point where he could speak again.

“However, in light of recent events, you are being replaced as the official council agent in the Clotho case, including the more recent incident at Lachesis. Furthermore,

you will be assigned a partner on all future cases, at the discretion of this council.” He continued on about how she could file a registered complaint if this ruling was unsatisfactory to her, and assured her that her position was not at stake, but she wasn't listening. It felt wholly good to be vindicated.

After the session let out, she went straight to her quarters, suddenly tired. It hadn't hit her until now how stressful the past few days had been, and now that it was over, it was all catching up to her. By the time she got home, she was positively exhausted. She didn't even bother to undress first, and fell asleep almost immediately after lying down.

She slept soundly at first, but as she lay there, a dream crept around the corners of her unconscious mind. It was the Earth. It was beautiful from here. She could see a huge iron shield being erected in orbit. Behind the shield was a golden bird, warming it against the cold abyss. She sat still, just watching, wishing to help, but not able to get any closer.

At some point, she realized that they weren't building fast enough. She knew something terrible was going to happen if they didn't finish soon. She tried to call to them to work faster, but her words were lost to the distance. Now she started to panic. They must finish, they must finish now, her thoughts were yelling at her. She felt ill, as if catastrophe were imminent. Then she felt it.

Like icy fingers brushing her neck, she felt the familiar sting of death as space opened up and issued forth the cold ship she had seen before. She shouted with all her strength to work faster but if anything, the holes in the shield were growing larger as she watched them.

The cold shell advanced on the planet. A planet she loved, and she watched in abject terror as the planet started growing cold. The shield tried to stop it, but it was not complete, so didn't stop anything. It cracked, and the giant bird that was holding it started to grow cold. Cracks appeared around its whitening feet, and the edges of its plumage. Its heart tried to beat the cold back, to warm it self desperately, but it was slowly losing. Sensha realized her own feet and arms were starting to crack. The cold was stifling, consuming her.

Suddenly she was awake. She panted, her clothes soaked with sweat. She tried to move, but at first her body wouldn't listen. Her feet and arms were numb, and it was only slowly that feeling returned to them. It was another vision, she was sure of it. She saw the Go-Ka attacking Earth, and she knew she had to get there.

She was out of bed and donning her old Tenma combat clothing almost before she realized it. It occurred to her that she had already decided how she was going to get to Earth, but she only now had stopped to think that the trip might be just as dangerous as what would happen when she got there.

Normal space was layered. The specific number of layers wasn't known, but it was like a ball, where concentric levels existed above and below what humans regard as 'reality'. Several of the layers had specific names. There was realspace, which was the layer that people existed in normally. Somewhere below realspace was the ether. One could use the ether to travel quickly for short distances. Further below the ether was the Astral Plane. You could travel even faster through this, but still only for relatively short distances, and it was almost imperative to have a target before you started.

Far below this was what humans referred to as hyperspace. Ships fitted with a hyperspace drive could pierce the boundaries and enter this layer. Once here, sophisticated tracking could be used to travel a very short physical distance and have it equate to a very large distance in Realspace.

Still the layers went deeper. Reputed to be the lowest layer of space, the Void allows near instantaneous travel anywhere in the universe. Unfortunately it was virtually impossible to access due to its distance from Realspace. Certain high ranking officials in the Tenma, including Sensha herself, had once used special devices that softened the boundaries between the layers enough for them to enter the Void.

The Void was out of the question. When Sensha had been a ranking officer of the Tenma, she had been given access to it, but now that the Tenma's machines had been destroyed, she could no longer go that deeply.

She had decided to use hyperspace. This was potentially dangerous, as hyperspace represented a highly hostile environment. The energy present there required the armor of a starship to successfully divert. But maybe, just maybe, she could survive the trip by using one of her other defensive techniques to divert the energy. She would be exposed to hyperspace for, she figured, fifteen minutes of real time, and she hoped she could maintain her Void Bubble for that long.

Time worked opposite to distance. While in the lower planes, time passed more slowly. Days of time spent in hyperspace amounted to minutes of real time. Through some other odd twist, however, a person didn't age for time spent in layers outside of realspace. So, even though you would be aware of days passing, you would only age a matter of minutes during that time. A similar effect occurred with energy used. Energy

to perform techniques and move ships was spent as if in real time. So the lower you went, the potentially more powerful you were. Tenma who were in the Void could perform almost effortlessly feats which they were completely incapable of elsewhere.

So Sensha steeled herself. She was going to do this. Her trident sprang into being in her hand, and she held it, concentrating. "Void Bubble!" The room went opaque as the ball surrounded her. This was it. "Sidestep... Hyperspace!"

A physical rush took her, and she knew she had gained access to hyperspace, even before the tremors started in her bubble. She decided it wasn't bad, so attempted to scry for Fushi. She wanted to be where he was. He would listen to her. Gazing into the swirling gateway, she saw things rushing past. Stars careened past in her view, as she tried to localize the impression. Then, she saw planets coming up fast. One she recognized as Earth, and her view approached. Coming in over a land mass, she saw buildings. Inside one of the buildings was a room, and there, in the room, "Fushi, I've got you. I'm coming." Her black bubble flew forward through Hyperspace towards the fix she had.

Four days later, she ached all over. She was fighting to stay conscious, lest her bubble collapse and she be torn apart by the energy currents that battered her shield even now. She was getting close. She could feel it. Fushi hadn't moved since she had detected him initially.

As close as it was, it seemed like hours before she arrived. Her body was aching, her mind was numb, she clung to her trident purely out of habit from the past days of travel before-

“-adjust the secondary... What the... Sensha? Sensha!” Fushi bent over her as she popped into existence at his side, swaying unsteadily.

“Have to... warn you... Gamma's coming... you won't make it...” She was panting uncontrollably.

Fushi put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead, and suddenly she was revived. She stopped panting and stood up straight, as if she had just awoken from a good night's sleep. “Now, Sen-chan, slow down and tell us what's wrong.”

She related the whole dream to them. When she finished, the Angel of Good spoke up, his voice uplifting, causing her to feel light. “She speaks truly. I can feel my twin approaching through the Void.”

“We all can.”

“Very well then.” Fushi, Life, seemed set. “We must do what we can. Everyone, double time, no rest until Earth is safe.” He looked to the doorway, where a man had stuck his head in. “Duty officer, wake the second shift. We're going double time until we're finished. Let them know their help is appreciated.” He bowed and sprinted off, and Fushi turned back to Sensha. “You can rest if you would like, or help outside, but don't interfere with us. I know you want to be of some help, but we can't work any faster than we are already.”

“I... understand, Fushi. Good luck.” She exited through a door that seemed handy, looking for the duty officer that had run off. In concept, it was simple what they were doing. They were performing spot maintenance on the wards which had protected the planet ten thousand years ago, before the Demons' imprisonment. Since then, they had fallen into disrepair and weren't capable of enduring against the Go-Ka. However,

the actual job itself was daunting. Many of the wards were based on physical foci constructed on the surface of the planet itself, and those foci, in ten thousand years, had either been lost entirely, or had come out of alignment due to the shifting of the geological plates.

The Angels were doing the bulk of the work, but there was still outdoor work to be done. The foci had to be duplicated exactly. Scribed blocks of marble, temples, spires in specific locations. These were being constructed at a fevered pace to exacting specifications the Angels given when they arrived. It seemed the whole planet was working together.

Sensha eventually found someone in charge and tried to make herself useful. There were a number of Powers helping, but more were certainly welcome. She was given jobs fine tuning inscriptions and moving large stones after they had been cut from the ground. Everything was just starting to come together when suddenly she felt a twitch, and knew instinctively that she had to get back to Fushi.

She was there in an instant, and gazing into a scrying pool the Angels all had open. She saw just then a ship phase into reality, just outside of Mars' orbit, and begin moving very quickly towards the earth. It was the Go-Ka.

Or was it? Certainly parts were familiar, but overall the shape was slightly different. This was definitely a different ship. Mostly, at any rate. But she knew it was the one she had seen in her dream, moving like black ice through the solar system.

Fushi seemed unaware of Sensha's presence. He hadn't been kidding about needing to concentrate. His awareness was greater than just this room; he was using his spirit as a buffer to shield the Earth, hopefully until the wards could be brought up.

The pit of Sensha's stomach dropped as she got the feeling that her dream was playing itself out again. The shield wasn't done yet, the bird... the phoenix would die. The ship stopped just inside the Moon's orbit, and in areas where it was night time, was seen in high relief against the pale sphere.

Fushi's lips moved, and she wondered if he could see what she saw. He silently mouthed, "We're too late."

Sensha felt, before she saw power begin to build up in front of the Go-Ka. A glowing disk of accelerating particles perpendicular to the nose of the ship, and its main cannon, flew inwards, in a sort of reverse corona. Then there was a strange flash, eerie, cold, and an energy beam flew towards the Earth. It was odd, though. It moved erratically, and it had left a trail that went back to the cannon. She could feel it pressing in all around her, getting closer, and even though it took only a fraction of a second to reach the ground, she was certain she would suffocate before it hit.

The beam struck, centered on the building Sensha was in, on the very room where the Angels were standing with arms pointed inwards towards a glowing column of light. There was a deafening silence, before she heard a blast, and the building was torn from around them. Above them was a dome, inverted and absorbing the energy. It was supported by the column of light the Angels were projecting. Good's knees began to tremble.

They were losing! The Angels were losing, and she had seen this happen! Her brain was flying, trying to come up with some way to prevent what she was seeing, but the image of the phoenix, being frozen and dying kept returning to her. Fushi – Life's brow was covered with sweat, and it was clear he could not hold this forever. His fellow

Angels were faring no better. Good was on his knees, gritting his teeth, and Light had lost two steps. This was just too much.

Then it happened. With the maelstrom raging around her, she was suddenly struck by a sensation of weightlessness. Of absolute calm. It was as if she were seeing the scene in slow motion, and listening to it through a pillow. She couldn't feel her feet as they carried her forwards. She couldn't feel her hands as they reached over her head, and she was aware of only one thing as she stepped into the beam.

Fushi was screaming, "No!"

It was impossibly dark. Almost like the Void. Nothing anywhere. Sensha felt, rather than saw a person, and turned towards him. She didn't recognize him at first, but something about him felt familiar, so when he beckoned, she followed.

Moving wasn't easy at first. She felt like she was stuck in molasses. After a few seconds of practice, however, she found she could walk with ease. Even fly. She glided over the featureless, skyless landscape after her familiar friend, because she was certain he was a friend, until she saw others.

Her friend drifted into a group consisting of Yun, Mariko, Ikkou, and Naoko, and motioned for Sensha to join them.

Sensha glided over "Where are we? How did you get here? Who are you?" This last was directed at a comfortably dressed middle aged man that, now that she was close, looked disturbingly familiar. Familiar, of course, because my visage is in all things, and when she looked at me, she saw everything she had ever known.

“I was just getting to that part, actually. We hadn't been expecting you, and I'm afraid some of what I have to say may come as a bit of a shock.” I smiled at her. When I said ‘we’ hadn't been expecting her, I of course meant the others hadn't. I had been counting on it.

“We're not here, Sensha. We're aboard the Gamma-Ka.” Ikkou looked up, as if expecting to see it.

“Gamma-Ka?”

“Now, I have a good deal to tell you, and I'm sure you have lots of questions. It will be my pleasure to answer as many as I can, but let's have them one at a time, please.” I thought it better that I moderate, as I already knew what they were going to ask. “Now, Yun, you may have the first question.”

“Oh, that's easy. Who are you? I'm sure I've met you somewhere before...”

“In a way, you have, but not in a manner that you know it. I can't give you my name, since I was never given one, but I can tell you about myself, which I think may answer your question as well, Mariko.” She had wanted to ask me if I was a Demon. “Once, I was an Engineer. A builder. But now I am more like a Guardian. I am both the master and defender of my domain. That domain is Balance. I am one of three such Guardians, and together, we are the beings which created this universe and all that resides in it. It is my task to ensure that there is balance in the universe. For if there was no balance, the fabric of reality as you know it would destabilize.” Having answered two proposed questions, I addressed Mariko with, “We'll come back to you, I think,” then turned to Naoko. “Your turn.”

She thought a bit. “Are you the reason behind the Tenma legends about Earth?”

“Excellent! Yes, I guess I am. Though as with all legends, the truth tends to become garbled over as much time as has passed. You see, I created the Angels and Demons to act as my agents within the universe, enacting deeds to maintain balance, while both challenging and nurturing the inhabitants, something all sentient life forms require in order to advance. But after Earth came into existence, and my brothers and I went to sleep, the Angels and Demons began to forget their purpose, and fight, rather than work with each other. Eventually, they lost their past altogether. The one thing they did remember, though, was that I, or at least a ‘Great Power’ was sealed within Earth. The Angels took it upon themselves to protect this power, and the Demons assailed that protection, until the sentients finally got sick of it and trapped the Demons in those clever marbles. The Angels left, thinking their purpose satisfied, and I was ultimately forgotten.” Though I wouldn’t admit it to them, being forgotten isn’t as bad as all that. One can certainly catch up on one’s reading. “Now is a good time for Mariko, I think.”

She smirked, probably without realizing it. “You mean you’ve just been dwelling inside Earth since the dawn of creation?”

“Well, the dawn of its creation, yes.”

Mariko wasn’t satisfied, though. “Why?”

“Establishing a true universal balance is exhausting work. I needed a break.”

“No, why Earth?”

“Why not?” She looked puzzled. I deigned not to tell her at this point about how little of the universe I had *actually* created, and how much had just come into being through random permutations of the infinite. “Oh, I forgot how much fun talking to

sentients is. You're all so wonderfully inquisitive. Ikkou, you haven't had a go. What's on your mind?"

"What happens now?"

Sensha, perhaps more than most others, held my respect, and coming up with this question is merely one example of why. "Ah, now *there's* the question I was looking for. What happens now, indeed." I had known exactly what I wanted to say, but suddenly, looking at them standing there, I felt I had to pad it with something. "Well, you can't very well stay here. And I'm afraid none of you are dead. Yet. So you do have to go back, eventually. But of course, you want to know what happens when you go back. Your positions weren't exactly optimistic when you left." I couldn't face them, so I turned away. Though inevitable, I didn't envy what they were to be made to do. "You have a choice, but I'm afraid it's not an easy one."

I decided to give it to them straight. Sentients are at their best when fully informed. "I will split the universe. I have been asleep for far too long, and I'm afraid the balance is already too far gone to repair seamlessly. With power shifting so quickly between Demons and Angels, very soon now everything threatens give way. So, you have a choice. When I split the universe, you may choose your own path. But I warn you, neither will be easy, and neither will be pleasant. Hopefully, at some time in the future, the paths can be rejoined, but this will be impossible until they each have reached an internal balance." It was actually far more complex than this, but I believe I caught as much of the essence as I had wanted to without explaining the mysteries of the universe.

"What are the paths?" Yun asked.

“On the first path, the Angels will triumph. The Earth will be saved. But I am sorry to say, Sensha must die. Your life can make the difference between the Demon's Claw draining Earth of its energy or being turned back by the wards that have been placed on the planet. Sensha's sacrifice will allow the Angels to beat back the Gamma-Ka and the Demon's Claw, ultimately reversing the draining effect. Gamma will be drained of his power, and defeated. The Demons will remain sealed within their orbs, and those orbs will remain bound, as they are now.”

“As for the second path, balance must be served. The Demons will have their victory, and the Earth will be lost. Drained of all its energy, and I will no longer exist in the form in which you see me here. My power will be placed into Gamma, as that is what he has been planning. However, those connected to the Demon's Claw, Mariko, Yun, Ikkou, and Naoko, you will have the opportunity to seize some of that power for yourselves. You will receive the positive aspects, while Gamma will claim the negative ones. You will be my Knights, and you will be capable of taking Gamma on directly. As for the Angels, they will be no more. Their energy will be scattered across the cosmos. The Demons, on the other hand, will be freed from their Orbs.”

Sensha looked white as a sheet. “W-What happens to me in the second one?”

“Alas, that which I have not told you is not certain. Sentients will make their own destinies. Just as you may defeat Gamma as my Knights, he may defeat you with equal likelihood. Such is how Balance will be maintained. As for you, Sensha, your life will rest on how quickly your friends are able to disable the Demon's Claw. In the warding stream, as you were, you would be highly protected, but not forever.”

Sensha quailed, wishing suddenly that she hadn't been so stupid as to walk into that beam.

“Now, you must keep in mind that both universes will exist. They must, for individually they would each send the fabric of reality into a self destructive spiral. I am merely giving you a choice as to which path you personally wish to follow. And it's also unfortunate, but you all must take the same path. I cannot cause the split between two fates.”

It certainly wasn't an easy choice.

Sensha was the first to speak, a testament to her courage and strength of character. Her choice was a further testament. “I... I think I want the first one.” Her hesitation did not detract from her bravery in the slightest. “I don't think I could live knowing the Earth died because of me.”

Naoko looked at her with an expression that transcended words. “But I don't want this to be the last time I ever see you. I know to me it feels like I just saw you not two weeks ago, but it's been over a hundred years.”

Sensha was near tears. “Maybe some day... If the universes can be rejoined...”

Yun clenched his fists. “I want to make sure that day comes. Sensha would give anything to see the Earth alive again, so we must give everything to help her. I can't let myself trust anyone else, even another me, to do that. I will shoulder the burden because I have to. *Because* I don't want to, I must.”

Ikkou nodded. “Yun's right. Both universes will exist, so even if we pick the first one, the Earth will still die on the other path. I don't want it to have died in vain.”

Sensha felt as if there was truth in those words. “And... Even if I live, and the Earth dies, somewhere it will be alive.”

There was muted nodding from

Balance smiled. “Excellent, so you’ve decided?”

“We have...”

“But I have one more question,” Sensha added.

“Certainly, my dear.”

“What must occur for the universes to be rejoined?” A fair question, given what she was sacrificing in order that she might have the chance to see them restored.

“I’m afraid I can’t give you an exact answer to that, Sensha. The general answer is that balance must be restored internally to both universes. Additionally, I must be restored along the second path, for until I am, I will have no power there. If you are seeking a specific course of events, the easiest example for you to grasp that I can come up with would require both the Angels and the Demons to be restored and set free in both universes. They represent such a powerful balancing force, that I may be able to operate solely with their assistance.” I stopped there. Some things, they wouldn’t want to know.

This satisfied Sensha, as well as eased the doubts of the others.

“Very well then. Are you ready to leave?”

There was an assortment of affirmative responses.

“Now, there is one thing that is critical. Just because you have stated that you would like to take the second path, does not mean you get to. You must know it, and physically act on it when it comes. Sensha, this is your responsibility. When you return, I want you to have one thought on your mind. You must focus on it with all your heart,

and you must *not* waiver, even for an instant. That thought is, 'I don't want to die.' Can you repeat that for me?"

"I don't want to die."

"Again."

"I don't want to die."

"And, one last time..."

I don't want to die.

As Sensha stepped into the beam, arms held stretched over her head, she flinched. She had entered the beam somehow knowing it was the right thing to do, knowing she would not survive, but something greater than herself had compelled her to act on behalf of the Earth. But now that she had gone through with it, some desperate piece of her subconscious was clawing its way to freedom. I don't want to die.

She could have ignored it. It would take only a fraction of a second with a clear mind to release her own life force to the flow of the warding stream to strengthen it, and maybe even to save the planet. But the one thought in her numbed mind absolutely refused to go silent.

I don't want to die. Please...

The light was all around her, and suddenly she didn't know why she had done what she distinctly remembered doing not a moment before. Why had she entered the stream? What had she been thinking? She could see nothing but its energy now, streaming past from the Angels who were routing it. Routing it and losing against the terrible weapon aboard the Go-Ka. Sensha could feel the Angels around her, her friends,

losing their strength. She wanted desperately to give herself to save them, but the voice in her mind was like an anchor, tying her to the ground, keeping her from letting go for even an instant.

“I can help them! I have to help them!” But she could not bring herself to do it. She wasn't strong enough. The realization of this set in like a lead weight, and once it had, her tears flowed freely.

Meanwhile, all around her, the Earth was dying.

They were killing the Earth.

They could feel their bodies, and the Demons channeling incredible power. And here they could see it as well. Tendrils of wispy white smoke crept from Gamma's feet towards each of them, flowing gently along the floor. The trail passed their feet, going through them to the Demons waiting behind. Each Demon was poised, looking over the heads of their hosts towards Gamma, whose hand was raised. The smoke rose at first gently, wrapping around the bodies of each Demon, but as it rose it changed. Became faster, more powerful, until from each Demon's eyes issued brilliant colored beams of energy, all focused on Gamma's raised hand.

From his hand, a cold white light bathed the Earth, and they could see where it struck, green and blue fading away. It was oddly peaceful, watching it go. It was completely silent. No violent shaking, no screams, the hosts did not register the pain they were inflicting. Gamma was starting to glow, and as his power increased, so too did the stream of energy from Gamma, and the feedback from the demons as well. It was a vicious spiral.

Ikkou was looking between the Earth, now half gone, reduced to a dull gray matte, and his friends. Out of course, he looked at Yasha, and was surprised when he came to focus on a single tear staining her otherwise unmoving features.

When he looked to the Earth again, something had changed. The gray layer was starting to peel back as well, like over dry paint, it had cracked and was flaking off. Through cracks at first, but more definite as the surface peeled back, there was something inside. Light shined forth in beams so bright as to be opaque in the darkness. Then it faltered. It flickered as Gamma's light bathed it. He twitched slightly, his own glow seeming to flicker as well, but not into darkness. He was absorbing the light within the Earth.

The power must have been immense. The slow stream of smoke from Gamma's feet instantly tripled in volume and velocity, and it just kept getting stronger from there. The power was such that Mariko started to become aware of difficulties she was having channeling the whole stream. Up to now, War had been doing all the work. She could have stopped it, but her participation wasn't required for it to continue. Now, though, she was starting to feel the stream backing up into her. She cringed against it, but found she could force the excess through with some effort.

A look at the others told her they were faring no better, and it wasn't getting easier. The stream was a torrent, and wispy smoke filled the room up to their waist, blasting outwards from Gamma. All of Naoko's concentration was focused on keeping the power moving through her, but even then it was sluggish. The world started to blur, to run at the edges.

Then it happened. Something in the power stream spoke to them.

“... you will have the opportunity to seize some of that power for yourselves...”

Naoko felt it. Yun felt it, they all did. And suddenly they were aware of something within themselves. Like a pocket, or empty space they had not noticed before. The power was there, and they knew it was theirs.

So they took it.

Zetto was frantic. There were overloads occurring in almost every system, and the Demon's Claw was still increasing its stream. Gamma had been very clear that the Claw was to remain active as long as it took, but the images outside were starting to become disturbing. The stream had latched onto the planet, and the entire surface had been reduced to dust. It should have stopped there, but it didn't. There really *was* a legendary power locked inside the Earth. Zetto didn't know what it was, but it was immense. Too immense even for the Demon's Claw, perhaps.

Zetto rushed from the bridge along the abandoned halls to the weapons chamber, where capsules still held the five hosts, and Gamma was poised in the center, bathed in power so intense it was nearly liquid.

The capsules were glowing as well, so that he could barely make out the people still locked within. Something strange was happening with them as well.

“Master! You is breaking apart!” He attempted to cry over the wailing of the machinery. He had had to shut down the majority of the systems on the ship, including offensive and defensive systems, and all but emergency life support.

Gamma was reveling in it. The power was amazing, truly cosmic. He was grabbing as much as he could, but there was no possible way even he could contain it all.

“Silence! I must have more, do you hear me?”

“But Master, the ship, your body-“

His pleas fell on deaf ears. Gamma was swept up in the power, his feet rising from the ground. But Zetto was right. The Gamma-Ka couldn't take much more of this. He ran back to the control room to do what he could.

Shortly after he left, there was a terrible lurching sensation. Hairline fractures began sneaking into the hosts' capsules. A creeping web formed over the face of each, the people locked within oblivious.

Until Naoko's shattered. Viscous liquid washed over the floor, followed by her limp body. Then Ikkou and Yun, and finally Yasha and Mariko. The hosts sloshed around weakly, all save for Yasha, who lay still.

“Is everyone ok?” Yun cried over the rushing sound.

Naoko coughed up a lungfull of the thick liquid, but generally felt no worse for wear. “I'll live.”

“A little soggy.” Ikkou was trying to gain footing on a slick coating of what looked like thin mucus.

Mariko looked aghast, trying to scrape what was left of the goop off of her, but was otherwise in one piece. It took them a moment to realize they were back in their 'normal' clothes. Gamma seemed lost. He was staring right at Naoko, but he didn't seem to notice anything was wrong.

Maybe that was because the stream was still on.

Ikkou was the first to realize it. “The stream! We’ve stopped channeling, why is it still on?” He had to raise his voice over the sound of the hull starting to creak.

“Ikkou, look!” He turned at Naoko’s call, looking back into the capsule he had just fallen from, and there, suspended between two arcs of electricity, was a small yellow orb.

His hand reflexively went to his chest, but he was unrewarded, then he noticed the others. “The Orbs, we’re not bonded with them anymore!”

Yun had other concerns, though. “We have to get out of here before this whole place comes apart!”

They would have time to worry about the Demons later. Ikkou led them out a door, but Yun hesitated at the frame. He figured he might regret it later, but couldn’t just leave. He walked back into the room, hoisted Yasha over his shoulder, and finally followed the rest up the hall.

“Follow me,” Ikkou said. “I know the way to the shuttlebay.” He dodged in seemingly random order, through doors, down serpentine halls, until finally they emerged in a larger area. The others were shortly behind them. “Over here, this one!” He started towards a larger shuttle that looked to be armed.

Mariko spotted a familiar painted logo on one side of the ship. It was one of Ikkou’s. He was already inside, so she and the others followed. Yun set Yasha on one of the benches and covered her with a blanket. She simply stared blankly at the ceiling. When they were in, Ikkou thumbed the controls, and blasted the airlock doors off. Seconds later, they were away.

“Ikkou, is this one of your ships?”

“Yes, Destruction would get Gamma things through my company.” He started to steer the ship about, until it was broadside to the far larger Gamma-Ka. “Quick, put those crates in the airlock!” He motioned to some hard plastic containers stacked in the back. Yun and Mariko nodded, and slid two of them into the closet like compartment.

They shut the doors and Yun called up, “All set. What’s in them?”

Ikkou pressed a button, and with a thump, the airlock doors blew, the crates carried out by the decompression. He turned the ship again, and found the crates in his crosshairs, drifting towards the Gamma-Ka. “Cordonite.”

A one pound brick of cordonite represented enough explosive to level a city block, and this was taking into account advances in building materials present in a modern city block. The crates that had been jettisoned, assuming they were full, probably weighed upwards of forty pounds each. Ikkou pulled the trigger and gunned the engines.

Sensha had barely blinked and it was over. She could no longer feel her friends around her, or any life on the planet at all. She was suspended in the warding stream, which was persisting even without the Angels feeding it.

And it was the only thing keeping her alive.

Then the stream changed. Suddenly it didn’t seem to be protecting her anymore. Its flow seemed almost anxious for her energy to preserve itself. She fought it reflexively, but it wasn’t about to lay off. It flashed orange, and she threatened to fly loose under its increased force. It began to fade, but not relent, and she was able to see the Go-Ka’s energy stream still battering on the shield.

Then, suddenly, it all stopped. The stream, the shield, everything, and she dropped. As she fell, she looked up, and saw what looked like a huge explosion, high up in the sky. She was unconscious by the time she hit the ground and lay still surrounded by dried husks of buildings and gales of dust.

Within minutes, a shuttle had landed near her location, and just waking up, she was able to weakly recognize Mariko and Ikkou as they helped her aboard. As they lifted off and flew away she caught snippets of their conversation.

“... Nothing left”

“What about Gamma?”

“No sign.”

Sensha felt a weight lifted from her shoulders, and fell unconscious again. She missed Yun's next statement. “No trace of the Angels, either.”

Earth was only one world. And with Gamma apparently gone once again, there was no immediate threat remaining, so the galaxy continued as it had. In council once more, the galactic government was making arrangements for a massive investigation of the episode, and undergoing an reorganizational phase to attempt to operate without the support of the Angels. It wasn't going to be easy.

Especially not for My Knights. Some would say that I wronged them in not telling them they would not remember our conversation, but there was little difference it would have made had I told them. They chose their own path, and now they must lead their own lives. Perhaps some day I will be able to return to that universe. They may yet

bring Balance to their universe, and allow the paths to be rejoined. Sentients, I am learning, are capable of amazing things.