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# HEROES

OF ANGEL CITY



KAMINO  
NEKO

FACE TO FACE

**Kamino Neko**

**HEROES OF ANGEL CITY BOOK 2**



**FACE TO FACE**

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# CHAPTER 1



A pair of tiny transparent golden eagles flew and clashed just below the ceiling of the Guardians situation room.

‘God, am I bored....’ Starlight leaned back in her chair, and watched her constructs do battle. She was in costume, but the triangular symbol and feathered wing constructs were missing.

‘Clearly...’ A knock followed the voice.

Starlight turned in her chair, and tilted her head back further to see who it was. She grinned, when she got her answer. ‘Ma!’

Her mother, John Matteo, also known as the heroine Foton, leaned on the door. ‘Hey, Jenny. Keeping busy, I see.’ She looked barely older than her daughter, and when she grinned back, there was an uncanny familial resemblance.

One of Jenny’s constructs faded from existence as the other swooped down toward John, and shifted its shape into a miniature of Starlight, feathered wings formed and spread. ‘Slow day. So what’re you doing here? Thinking of going back on the active list?’

‘You know your Mama’d kick my butt if I even seriously considered that, right now.’ She reached out and poked the construct. ‘So, you going to sit up, or am I going to be talking to Tinkerbell here?’

The construct shifted into Tinkerbell’s dress, though it retained Jenny’s face and hair, and the wings remained feathery, rather than insect-like.

‘That answers that.’ John rolled her eyes and stepped into the room. ‘I should have seen that coming, though.’

‘You certainly should have!’ The Tinkerbell/Starlight construct settled on John’s shoulder, and Jenny sat up straight. ‘Especially since you’d have done the very same thing.’

John laughed. ‘More or less. Though I think I’d have gone for the whole Tinkerbell look. At least kept the bug wings.’

‘Sure, but you don’t usually wear wings, or at least you haven’t since I started.’ The construct lifted off John’s shoulder and spun, disappearing in a cloud of ‘fairy dust’. ‘So, what brings you here?’

‘I can’t just come by to say hi to my favourite daughter?’ John leaned on Jenny’s chair and spun it slightly.

‘Firstly, only daughter.’

‘Still my favourite.’

‘Second, sure you can, but you do so so rarely, I get suspicious when you do.’ Jenny looked up at her mother and made a face.

‘Fair enough.’ John sat lightly on the edge of the console. ‘To be honest, I am bored out of my skull, too. Figured I’d stop in, see what’s going on.’

‘Nothing.’ Jenny gestured toward the screens. ‘Well, a little bit, but nothing that can’t be handled easily.’ She shrugged. ‘We’ve got the new kids all broken in--’ She stopped and glared at her mother, who had started giggling. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘I remember when you were the “new kid”.’

‘Yeah, but that’s not a big deal. You also remember when I was in diapers, old woman.’

‘Diapers which I changed as often as not. Stinky, stinky diapers.’ John shook her head.

‘You win. This conversation just went to a disturbing, disturbing place.’ Jenny shook her head, in an almost perfect copy of her

mother's motion.

'I try.' John glanced over at the monitors. 'Oh, hey, looks like you have company.' She gestured to the monitor showing the front door. A costumed hero was approaching.

The man, a touch younger than Jenny, was wearing a white t-shirt with a red maple leaf, under a red jacket, with white sleeves. His pants, boots, and gloves were black, and in lieu of a mask, he wore a pair of red goggles.

Jenny hit the intercom button just before the man did. 'Johnny Canuck. It's been a while. Come on up to the sit room.' She punched a couple buttons on the console, granting Johnny access to the area.

Canuck smirked and opened the door, heading in without a word.

'Well, I guess I'll be leaving.' John hopped off the console, and shifted into her energy form – a naked, though decently non-detailed, version of herself made of the same yellow energies that she and Starlight form their constructs of.

'You don't need to go. You're a Guardian, after all, even if you're only a reservist, now.'

‘Yes, but this is your show. I don’t want to overshadow you.’

‘Fair enough, I suppose.’ Jenny shrugged. ‘But why’d you change?’

‘Appearances. If I run into Mr Canuck, there, I should do it “in costume”...so to speak.’ She looked down at herself. ‘Stretching the term a whole lot, I admit.’

Jenny snorted, and leaned over, and gave her mother a kiss on the cheek. ‘I’ll see you, then.’

‘Alright. Are you coming to dinner tonight?’

‘Of course...I happen to know you’re cooking your lasagna, so I wouldn’t miss it.’ Jenny grinned.

‘Ah, just what a cook loves to hear.’ John started walking toward the door – a few centimetres off the floor, as was her habit when in her energy form. She nodded to Johnny Canuck as he came through the door. ‘Hello.’

‘Ma’am.’ Johnny nodded back, politely, then stepped into the room, as Foton floated past him. ‘And Starlight.’

‘Johnny Canuck.’ Starlight held out a hand, which Johnny took

and shook. ‘To what do we owe the pleasure?’

‘Well...’ Johnny leaned on the console. ‘I was wondering if you could spare two members, for a week, or thereabout.’

‘Oh?’ Starlight settled into her chair, and leaned back, looking at Johnny. ‘And why’s that?’

‘Well, see, I’ve been invited to...’ Johnny gestured with one hand. ‘A conference, of sorts, I guess.

International heroes. Was asked to bring two other Canadian heroes. All to build international understanding in the meta-hero community, and good stuff like that.’

Starlight tilted her head and raised an eyebrow. ‘And you thought of the Guardians?’

‘Eh. Heh.’ Johnny looked at the monitors and scratched behind his ear, chuckling a little.

‘We were your last choice, weren’t we?’ Starlight grinned at him.

‘Ah, no!’ Johnny straightened, and raised his hand. ‘Not the last. Just...’ He shrugged and grinned back.



‘Not the first.’ He leaned on the console again. ‘Aurora’s incommunicado, Northman’s got some sort of family business, Avalon’s on another plane of existence, and CMAT refused my request for a couple agents to be attached. So, the national level are out.’ He sighed. ‘Locally, I talked to the Avatars, but Dark Avenger was there, and you know what he’s like.’

‘Gyrfalcon and Jeanne probably refused you just to keep him from blowing his top.’ Starlight nodded.

‘Exactly. So, you guys were next on my list.’ Johnny shrugged. ‘So, anyone on your team willing and able? Or do I have to go see if Fame and Raksha are busy?’

Starlight rolled the chair a little further from Johnny and pulled up the duty roster. ‘Well, I can’t, due to my position. Paladin’s on medical. Class is in session, so I don’t think Amazon can take an extended leave at this sort of notice without risking her job. King...’ She shook her head. ‘Would just be a bad idea all around. Long story.’ She spun in her chair. ‘That leaves Caballero and the new kids.’

‘Ah, I’ve seen your new members on the news. Working out well?’ Johnny stood.

‘Very well, yes. Wukong could use a chill pill or two, but they’re awesome kids.’

Johnny chuckled. ‘Ever think we’d be calling anyone kids when we started out?’

‘Hell, yeah. I was looking forward to it!’ Starlight grinned. ‘Only took ten years, but it’s good to be able to call someone else kid for once.’ She laughed. ‘Anyway, Caballero and Headbanger are in the field, but Shako and Wukong are in the lounge, last I saw. Maybe the gym....’ She reached over and punched a couple buttons on the console. ‘You’ve got access to those areas, for now. Why don’t you go and ask them?’

‘Great, thanks, Starlight.’ Johnny headed out, and waved, absently, to her.



As Johnny stepped into the lounge, he saw two people, a man and a woman. The man looked, for all the world, like a 6 foot tall chimpanzee, while the woman was wearing green and blue, vaguely insectoid armour, the helmet set on on a nearby table. They had set up a Gamestar X-3 system, and were playing Rock Band.

Johnny had to chuckle at the sight. The woman was playing guitar, and singing...the man, not to be outdone, was also playing two parts...while he played the bass part, he also played the drums – with his feet. He leaned on the door and waited for them to finish the song.

As the man played the last few percussion beats, he also threw his hands up in the air. ‘Hello, Wisconsin!’

Johnny could no longer hold back, and burst out laughing. The two startled and looked toward him.

‘I’m sorry. It’s just... Ah, never mind. You two are Shako and Wukong?’

The woman nodded. Her eyes were striking – red sclera, iridescent green irises and blue pupils – and faint blue scales covered her forehead and cheeks. ‘Yes. I’m Shako, and this is Wukong.’ She pointed to the man.

‘I figured as much. Starlight said something about Wukong...’ He tilted his head. ‘How did she put it?’

“Needing a chill pill or two.”

‘Why does everyone say that about me?’ Wukong set his

drumsticks on the drum controller and put the guitar aside.

‘I wouldn’t know.’ Johnny shook his head. ‘In any case, I seem to have you two at a disadvantage.’

‘I’m...’

‘Johnny Canuck.’ Shako bowed slightly to him. ‘I’ve read about you.’

‘Ah, well...’ Johnny laughed. ‘I suppose that means you have me at a disadvantage, then...’

‘What can we do for you, Johnny?’ Wukong leaned in and offered his hand.

Johnny shook the offered hand and nodded. ‘Well, I was wondering if the pair of you would be interested in joining in a gesture of international metahuman cooperation.’

‘How you mean?’ Wukong grabbed his chair with a foot, and pulled it forward, before climbing up and sitting on the back.

‘There’s a conference of sorts, in Moscow.’ Johnny pulled a sheet of paper out of his pocket. ‘My friend, Medved is hosting it.’ He handed the paper to Shako. ‘Medved is a Russian meta,

obviously.’

Shako looked at the paper. ‘You and two guests...that would be us, then?’

‘If you’d like to do it.’ Johnny nodded.

‘Why us?’ Shako looked up.

‘Well...’ Johnny coughed. ‘Starlight suggested you.’ He shrugged.

‘You, Headbanger, or Caballero, if you don’t want to do it.’

‘I’ve never been to Russia...could be interesting.’ Wukong did a flip over Johnny’s head, and tapped him on the shoulder. He grinned when Johnny turned. ‘I’m in.’

‘I think I would like to go, too.’ Shako looked at the paper thoughtfully. ‘I would like to visit Moscow.’

Johnny smiled. ‘Very good, then. Guess Caballero and Headbanger miss out.’

# CHAPTER 2



Several days later, the three left a Moscow airport. They were dressed in civilian clothes, including hoodies and sunglasses for Wukong and Shako. Johnny wore his costume jacket, though not the rest of it. A robotic trolley, loaded with their luggage, followed them.

‘So, this is Russia...’ Wukong looked around. ‘Nice place. Would have expected to see people doing that sitting hopping dance, though....’

Johnny looked at him, an eyebrow raised.

‘If you can’t tell if Frank’s joking, he probably is.’ Shako pulled her hood a little lower over her face, as they passed by a group of people. ‘If you can tell, he probably is, too.’

‘Jeeze, Emiko, give the game away, why don’t you?’ Frank blew a raspberry at her. ‘And stop pulling on your hood. People are going to think we’re crooks or something, the way you’re hiding.’

‘Ah, you’re right...’ She slipped her hands into her hoodie’s

pocket. ‘So...will we be able to look around the city?’

‘Not until after the conference...’ Johnny turned into a rental car lot. ‘Ilya – that’s my friend – he wants us to check in right away. It...’ He shook his head and laughed. ‘Well, it took me too long to get you guys, so there’s not really a lot of lee way.’

‘I’m beginning to get the feeling we weren’t your first choice.’ Frank grinned at Johnny.

‘Ah, there’s our car.’ Johnny hurried toward a minivan parked some ways in from the entrance, the trolley speeding up to keep pace with him.

‘We definitely weren’t his first choice.’ Emiko laughed, as she and Frank hurried to catch up with Johnny.

‘So, where is this conference happening, anyway?’ Wukong grabbed his bag, as Johnny opened the van’s back.

‘See that building there?’ Johnny pointed into the distance, toward a large building. The architecture stood out, among the buildings of Moscow. It was a strange combination of traditional and modern, with a number of onion domes topping a steel and glass skyscraper.

Emiko looked away with a quiet groan.

‘Emiko?’ Frank looked over at her as he tossed his bag into the van. ‘Are you OK?’

‘Yes, I’m fine. I just...’ She shook her head. ‘I don’t know, I suddenly got a headache, but it’s gone, already. That was really strange.’

‘Why don’t you sit down?’ Johnny held out the keys to the van. ‘We’ll finish loading the van.’

‘Alright. I think that might be a good idea.’ She took the keys and wandered toward the passenger seat of the van. ‘It was very strange, though.’

She climbed into the van and set the keys on the driver’s seat.

Frank and Johnny each took hold of an end of Emiko’s trunk and hoisted it into the van, and Frank looked up at the building again. ‘Isn’t that kind of dome usually only used on churches, though?’

Johnny straightened and looked over. ‘I don’t rightly know, actually.’ He shrugged and tossed his own suitcase in the van. ‘You’ll have to ask one of the Russians when we get there. One assumes they’d know.’ He straightened and reached up, taking



hold of a string around his neck that had been hidden by his jacket's collar. It was attached to a small, circular plastic item with a flashing LED on the front. He placed the device in a matching recess on the trolley's handle. With a beep, the LED turned off, and the trolley backed off, before turning and starting back toward the airport.



Emiko groaned and held her head as they turned onto the main road. 'Itai....'

Johnny glanced at her, before turning back to the road. 'Should we try to find a hospital, or something?'

'No, no. I think I just need to sleep, maybe...' Emiko shook her head. 'We can find a doctor if it doesn't go away...'

'Well, if you say so. I'll make an excuse for you at the introductory meeting...' Johnny shrugged.

Frank leaned over the front seat and peered at Emiko. 'You sure you'll be OK. You look like you're in a lot of pain.'

Emiko nodded. 'I feel like I'm going to be sick, but I think I'll be alright. Thank you.' She smiled at Frank, though it quickly turned

into a wince.

‘Wish we knew why this happened so suddenly. It really doesn’t make sense...’ Frank dropped back into his seat. ‘Doesn’t sound like jetlag, or anything like that...’

Emiko laughed and waved a hand at Frank. ‘I’ll be fine, don’t--’ She gasped and fell silent for a moment. ‘D-don’t worry about me.’

‘You could have made that more convincing...’ Frank frowned.



Emiko stepped out of the van, and immediately fell to her knees, a weak whine escaping her lips.

‘Emiko!’ Frank jumped out of the van, and helped Emiko to her feet.

‘Can’t. Think.’ Emiko gripped Frank’s arm tightly. ‘Hurts. Too. Much.’

‘We have to bring her to a hospital.’ Frank looked over at Johnny.

‘Get her inside, we can call for an ambulance, it’s probably easier.’ Johnny ran around to the other side of Emiko, and slid under her

other arm. ‘Or maybe they have medical facilities.’

‘That would be ni--’ Frank stopped short as Emiko went limp in their arms, and stopped moaning.

‘Emi!’ He started to shift, but stopped and took hold of her again, as she started to shift.

‘Hold on...’ Johnny held a hand in front of Emiko’s face. ‘She’s breathing...I think she just passed out.

We’d better get her inside, quickly, though.’



As consciousness returned to Emiko, she looked around. She seemed to be in a hospital room. Her bed was a hospital bed, and surrounded by a curtain, at least. She was slightly relieved to notice she hadn’t been changed into a hospital gown.

‘You’re awake.’ She turned as the curtain moved aside, and Frank stepped inside the curtain. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Better. I’m sorry I worried you.’ She sat up. ‘It was very weird, but it seems to have passed.’ She smiled. ‘How long was I asleep?’

‘A couple hours. Not as long as I slept after I jumped into that barrier.’ He tapped his head. ‘Are you sure you didn’t go through any weird magical barriers getting off the plane?’

Emiko laughed. ‘Yes, I am.’ She reached up and tapped his head, in the same place he had. ‘Unlike some monkeys, I look before I leap.’

‘Why do I get the feeling I’ve just been insulted?’ Frank made a face.

‘Because you’re not a total idiot?’ Emiko smiled at him again.

‘OK, now I don’t know if I’ve been insulted or not.’ Frank scratched his head, then shrugged. ‘Well, in any case, you’ve got another visitor.’

‘Johnny?’

‘Nah. He’s busy.’ Frank slid the curtain aside again. ‘Just a second, I’ll go and get her.’ He turned toward the door, and Emiko watched him walk past the curtain, following him, even after he’d have been invisible to an ordinary person, only losing him after he stepped out of the room.

‘Her...?’ She sat bolt straight, and grinned broadly as her other

visitor stepped into the room. ‘Tsukiko!’

The curtain slid aside, and Tsukiko stepped in. She was a young woman, the same age as Emiko, built slightly less slenderly. A pair of white rabbit ears twitched atop her head, and patches of white fur were visible, peeking out from under her clothes. She turned the chair beside Emiko’s bed to make room for the small, rabbit-like tail which poked over the top of her jeans. ‘Hi, Emiko.’ She smiled, revealing prominent front teeth.

Emiko slipped out of her bed and hugged Tsukiko. She sat down, and slipped into Japanese. ‘I wish I’d known you were going to be here, too.’ She laughed. ‘But I suppose you didn’t know I would either.’

‘No. But I’m glad you are. It’s been too long, Emi-chan.’

‘I know. I should write more.’

‘A lot more.’ Tsukiko laughed, then frowned slightly. ‘But, I suppose, when you move as much as you have been, I wouldn’t have been able to write back.’

‘No, I suppose not.’ Emiko frowned. ‘But I’ve missed you, Tsukiko. So I promise, I’ll write more. Or phone. Or email.’

Tsukiko laughed and shook her head. ‘So, you haven’t written...’

‘I said sorry!’ Emiko made an unconvincing fake bow of apology.

‘I don’t kn--’ Tsukiko let out a yelp as Emiko’s pillow hit her in the face. Lightly. ‘Right. It’s been so long, I forgot about your speed.’ She handed the pillow back. ‘Maybe if you wrote me...’

‘Don’t make me hit you again, Tsukiko.’

‘So, what have you been doing, Emi?’ Tsukiko moved over to the bed and pulled her legs up under herself. ‘Tell me everything, so you don’t have to write again so soon.’

‘I’ve been in Canada for a while. Obviously. A city called Angel City. It’s very nice.’ Emiko looked over at Tsukiko. ‘You should visit.’

‘Does that mean you’ll be staying there for a while?’ Tsukiko leaned in.

‘For a while, anyway. I’ve joined a team, there.’

‘The Guardians.’ Tsukiko nodded.

‘Yes...’ Emiko tilted her head, then smiled. ‘You were talking to

Frank, right?’

Tsukiko nodded. ‘He’s chatty.’

Emiko laughed. ‘Yes, he is.’ She shook her head. ‘I like the team. We do a lot of good work.’

‘I’m glad.’ Tsukiko’s ears dipped, slightly. ‘I was worried about you.’

‘Why?’ Emiko looked at Tsukiko’s face.

‘You were getting..’ Tsukiko shrugged. ‘Obsessed.’

‘Tsukiko...’ Emiko frowned. ‘Not this again...’

‘Emiko, seriously. Forget about him. Don’t uproot yourself again.’ Tsukiko reached out and touched Emiko’s cheek. ‘It’s doing you no good, and it’s frightening me, too.’

‘Tsukiko. What he did to us, to the others. To our parents. Do you really think I should forget it?’

‘Forgive it?’

‘No. Not really. But...’ Tsukiko stood, and opened the curtain.

Walking to the room's window, she looked over the Moscow skyline. 'I worry, Emiko. This is consuming you, and I don't like that.' Her ears drooped and rested against the window.

Emiko sat quietly, for a few moments, then she stood and walked over to Tsukiko. After standing a moment in thought, she slid her arms around her, hugging her from behind. 'Thank you, Tsukiko. For caring enough about me to worry. And I'm sorry for worrying you.'

Tsukiko smiled and patted Emiko's hand. 'I know. Let's forget about the whole subject for now?'

'Good idea.'

'But speaking of worrying about you, they said you fainted on the way in...' Tsukiko turned as Emiko moved away.

'Ugh.' Emiko shook her head. 'I don't know what happened.' She held up her hand. 'But don't worry, I'm fine, now. Clearly, I just needed to sleep.'

Tsukiko smiled. 'Good, I'm glad to hear it.' She nodded to the door. 'I've met your friends, come on, I'll introduce you to mine.' She pushed off against the wall and started toward the door as



Emiko turned. ‘But please don’t faint. I want you to make a good impress-ow. That was uncalled for.’ She rubbed her arm where Emiko had punched her lightly.

# CHAPTER 3



Emiko and Tsukiko entered the hall, where all the international heroes were gathered, for a combined dinner and ‘meet and greet’. There were a couple dozen heroes gathered, eating and chatting. Mostly in costume.

‘Perhaps we should have changed, first.’ Emiko looked around the room, and frowned.

‘Don’t worry, I think they’ll understand, under the circumstances.’ Tsukiko chuckled, and guided Emiko toward the rest of her group. ‘Emiko, these are the rest of the Japanese contingent...’

She pointed to the first. A man...or a human shaped being, in any case. His head was that of a giant raven, and he had a large pair of black feathered wings extending from his back. His hands and feet seemed normal, though he had talons on his fingers. He was dressed in the garb of a ‘*yamabushi*’ hermit. ‘This is Yatagarasu, our leader. He’s a *karasu tengu*. Yamato, this is my friend, Emiko. She calls herself Shako.’

Yatagarasu bowed to Emiko. ‘It is a pleasure, Shako-sama.’

Emiko bowed back and stifled a laugh. ‘Please. Emiko will do. Or Inoue, if you must be formal.’

‘Inoue, then.’ Yatagarasu nodded. ‘It is still a pleasure to meet you.’

‘And you, sir.’ Emiko bowed again.

‘And this...’ Tsukiko took Emiko’s hand and pulled her toward her. ‘This is Mimi Bukuro.’ She gestured to the heroine in question. A pretty young woman, she was dressed in the uniform of a *miko* and had a bag tied to her hip. ‘She collects ghosts.’ Tsukiko grinned.

Mimi bowed to Emiko. ‘A pleasure. Tsukiko has spoken a lot about you.’

Emiko bowed back. ‘Thank you.’ She looked at Mimi as she stood. ‘You collect ghosts? Literally?’

‘After a fashion.’ Mimi nodded. ‘Tsukiko likes to call it that, though.’

‘It is true, though.’ Tsukiko nodded.

Mimi shrugged. ‘I “collect”, as Tsukiko so enjoys calling it,

malevolent spirits of various types. I exorcise them, and, thereafter, can summon and command them.’ She reached into her bag. ‘Perhaps a demonstration would be useful.’ She pulled out a slip of paper, with an incantation written on it, in complicated calligraphy. She flipped it into the air, and it ignited in blue flame.

As the embers drifted to the floor, they shifted and grew, forming into the shape of a huge, two-tailed cat. A *nekomata*. The *nekomata* snarled and looked up at Mimi.

‘Be calm, Futaba. Your claws are not needed.’ Mimi reached out and stroked Futaba’s head, while the beast purred.

‘Hold it, hold it!’ The group turned as someone shouted – in English. A man, barefoot, and wearing a white, blue, and red costume, approached. He was being followed by Johnny Canuck. ‘Remember the rules. No powers.’ He had a slight Russian accent.

‘I apologize, Medved-san.’ Mimi’s accent was far thicker. ‘It simply, ah, slipped my mind, I believe is the phrase.’ She pulled out another paper charm, and began chanting an incantation, before placing the paper against Futaba’s head. The *nekomata* tensed, and then, in a burst of blue flame, disappeared.

Mimi placed the paper back in her bag. ‘I shall not do so again.’

Medved nodded. 'Very good. Thank you.' He started to turn away, but was stopped by Johnny's hand on his shoulder.

'Ah, before we leave again, I'd like to introduce the other member of my group.' Johnny smiled and gestured to Emiko, who bowed, slightly.

'Ah, yes, certainly. Thank you.' Medved nodded to Johnny.

'Ilya, this is Emiko Inoue. She calls herself Shako.' Johnny gestured toward Emiko, then toward Medved. 'And Emiko, this is Ilya Vasilevich Petrov. Medved.'

Emiko bowed slightly and extended her hand. 'It's good to meet you, Ilya Vasilevich.'

Medved grinned and returned the gesture. 'No need for formality, though I am impressed by your knowledge. It is a pleasure, but I have duties...'

'I understand, sir. So long.' Emiko watched Medved as he and Johnny left, and frowned.

'What is it, Emi?' Tsukiko frowned at her.

'There is something strange about him.' She shook her head. 'His

blood flow is strange, and his body heat isn't distributed like I'd have expected.' She shook her head.

'Well, he is a shape-shifter.' Tsukiko smiled. 'That could be it, couldn't it?'

'I suppose it could.' Emiko smiled back. 'I suppose it must be it, in fact.'

Tsukiko nodded and touched Emiko's arm, gesturing toward the food. 'Have you eaten?'

'No, I haven't...' Emiko nodded. 'Let's see what they have.'



'She's awake now.' Frank nodded to Tsukiko outside Emiko's hospital room.

'Thank you.' Tsukiko grinned and headed in. Frank frowned at the door as she closed it behind her, then shrugged, and hurried toward his assigned quarters.

It was a small, spartan, room, but certainly fine for his needs, for the week he'd be in Russia. 'Certainly fits what I imagined Russia'd be like from those old Cold War movies.' He pulled off

his shirt and unzipped his duffel bag. ‘Of course, the Cold War’s over and this isn’t Soviet Russia any more....’ He pulled his costume out of the bag and chuckled. ‘In Soviet Russia, costume packs you!’ He shook his head, as he slipped out of his jeans. ‘OK, that was lame. Good thing nobody was around to hear it.’ He lifted his arm and sniffed. ‘With nobody around, why am I talking?’ He nodded and stepped into his costume pants. ‘I should probably stop that. It’s kind of making me look crazy, and all...’ He laughed as he pulled the cord of his pants. ‘Of course, if anyone decided to call me crazy, I could just point out they’re talking to a giant monkey.’ He slipped on his top, and reached for his belt. ‘And do they really want to be pointing the crazy finger when they’re doing that?’ He belted his top shut and looked in his mirror, snickering. ‘God, this is weird, even for me. I think I must be jet-lagged.’

He stopped and looked at himself. ‘Or, maybe it’s just the worry finally getting off my brain.’ He made a face at his reflection, and burst out laughing. ‘Or, maybe I really am going crazy.’

With another laugh, he stretched, and turned back to the bed and his bag. He pulled his equipment out of his bag, then sat on his bed to attach his anklets.



Most of the other heroes – Frank assumed everybody but himself, Emiko, and Tsukiko – were in the meeting hall before Frank arrived. He looked around, and started toward the table with the food. But he stopped, when he heard his name called.

He turned toward Johnny and Medved as they approached him. ‘Johnny, Medved. Hello.’ He waved.

‘I figured I’d do a personal introduction...’ Johnny stepped to the side. ‘Ilya Vasilevich Petrov, meet Wu Ruzhong.’

Frank held out his hand. ‘Call me Frank.’

Medved shook his hand. ‘And call me Ilya.’ He looked at Frank and nodded. ‘You call yourself Sun Wukong, if I remember the roster correctly?’

‘You remember correctly, indeed. Given the circumstances, a bit surprising...’ Frank made a face.

Medved laughed. ‘I suppose so. But it is a good name. The Monkey King suits you.’

‘I like to think so.’ Frank tapped Medved on the shoulder with Jingu Bang. ‘But, I’ve been wondering since check in...’ He gestured toward the floor. ‘I mean, I know why I have bare feet.



Where am I gonna find shoes that fit these, right? But why do you?’

Johnny made a face. ‘Frank, that’s a bit rude, don’t you think...?’

‘No, Jon, it’s fine.’ Medved smiled, and looked back to Frank. ‘For much the same reason as you, my friend.’

‘Your feet look pretty normal to me, dude...’ Frank shrugged. ‘Do they make shoes tiny in Russia?’

Frank ignored Johnny’s facepalm and groan.

Medved looked around, then leaned in toward Frank. ‘I’m about to break the rules a bit, but since I’m in charge, I think I can get away with it, yes?’ He stepped back, and took a deep breath, and then....

Medved’s skin began to ripple, as the muscles and bones underneath moved, reshaped, and grew. After a moment, brown fur started to grow on all exposed skin. Finally, his face, hands, and feet reshaped.

After a few moments, where had been a somewhat average human man, stood a seven foot tall humanoid bear. ‘Do you know what the English translation of “Medved” is, Frank?’ His accent was thicker, in this form, or perhaps his ursine jaws made it harder to

Speak clearly.

‘I’m gonna guess “bear”?’

Medved laughed, and shifted back to his human form. ‘A very good guess, unless you know Russian.’

‘I can say “da”, but I don’t think that counts as knowing Russian.’ Frank grinned. ‘But, you have to admit it was pretty obvious.’

‘Da.’ Medved grinned. ‘It’s been a pleasure, Frank. I expect we’ll speak again. But for now, I must “do the rounds”, as they say.’

‘Dos vedanya, Comrade.’

Medved snorted. ‘Close enough, though I am not a Communist.’



‘Sun Wukong?’ A voice came from behind Frank as he shoved a small sandwich into his mouth –

cucumber he discovered after doing so.

Frank turned, and choked as he saw who was speaking. A tall Chinese man, in a costume based on a Chinese opera costume. Sun

Wu Kong.

The other Sun Wu Kong chuckled. 'I startled you?'

Frank nodded and coughed a few times. 'Just a bit.' He shook his head. 'This is a bit weird.'

'Mmm. I suppose so.' Sun Wukong laughed. 'Perhaps if we didn't have to address each other by the same name?'

'Mmm. Good idea.' Frank thought a moment, then offered his hand. 'Wu Ruzhong.'

Wu Kong took the hand and shook it, bowing slightly. 'Xu Wei Hau.'

'It's a pleasure to meet you, Xu.' Frank laughed. 'And a relief that you don't want my head for using the name.'

Xu laughed. 'There are three Sun Wu Kongs in China alone. One of whom is a criminal.' He shrugged.

'And, I think you have more of a claim to have a right to the name than most.'

'Eh, yeah.' Frank chuckled. 'I guess I do...'

‘But not me.’ Xu reached up behind his ear, and pulled out what appeared to be a needle.

‘Is that...?’ Frank trailed off, and Xu grinned at him.

With a flick of his hand, the ‘needle’ that Xu held was as large as a pencil. Another gesture, and it was the size of a baton. It was a simple wooden stick, though wrapped with golden rings at regular distances. After a moment it shrunk back to the size of a needle, and he slipped it behind his ear. ‘The real Jingu Bang.’

Frank looked at him for a moment, then grinned. ‘Show off.’



Some time later, Frank and Emiko crossed paths again. She waved, briefly letting go of her fork, which remained sticking out of her mouth for that moment.

Tsukiko, leaning on the table beside her, nodded to Frank. ‘Hi.’

‘Hey, ladies.’ Frank waved, and put an arm around Emiko’s shoulder. ‘Glad to see you’re up and about.’

Emiko smiled at him. ‘Thank you. I’m really feeling better, now.’

‘I’m glad to hear it.’ He leaned on the table. ‘You had me worried.’

‘You had us all worried.’ Tsukiko placed a hand, briefly, on Emiko’s back.

‘I know.’ Emiko smiled at them both. ‘I’m sorry, and thank you. But can we let it go?’ She tapped Frank on the forehead with her fork. ‘Making me feel guilty isn’t helping.’

‘Sorry, sorry.’ Frank made a face. ‘Hey, did you guys meet Medved?’

‘Yes, we have.’ Tsukiko nodded. ‘He’s a nice guy, but a bit too strict about the rules. Poor Mimi was so embarrassed.’

‘Really? He broke the rules when he was talking to me to demonstrate his powers.’ Frank tilted his head.

‘Did he? So he’s not just too strict, he’s a hypocrite, too!’ Tsukiko’s ear twitched slightly.

Emiko chuckled and patted Tsukiko’s hand. ‘I don’t think Mimi was that embarrassed.’

‘Oh, she was embarrassed. I can tell.’ Tsukiko nodded, but she seemed more calm.

Emiko shook her head with a smile, and turned toward Frank again. ‘Did Medved seem strange to you?’

Frank shook his head. ‘No, not really. Awful cheery, I guess. Aren’t Russians supposed to be all scowly?’

‘I guess not, then.’ Emiko shook her head, then chuckled. ‘I guess my head’s still a little messed up from the whole headaches and fainting thing..’

# CHAPTER 4



The rest of the night went in much the same way. Eventually, everybody retired to their rooms.

Emiko sat on the edge of her bed and gazed into her mirror, frowning. Something was wrong, and she didn't know what.

'I hate mirrors. Nothing looks right.' She fell back onto her bed and looked at the ceiling. She blinked.

'So clean. No dust.' She sat up. 'Is that it? Is it just that it's too clean?'

She sat up. 'No, that's not it.' She stood up and wandered over to her window. 'It's true, but it's not everything.' She looked out the window, and groaned.

She pulled the curtains shut and dropped to her bed again, taking a few breaths as the pain passed.

'Why can't I figure it out? It feels like it should be so ob--' Her thoughts were cut off by a noise outside her room.

Skittering. Thumping. Hissing.

Emiko came to her feet, and glanced at the chest at the foot of her bed. She shook her head and moved toward the door, and pulled it open slightly, glancing out. Whatever had been making the noises seemed to be gone. She stepped out of the room and looked around. No sign of anything. The strange cleanliness of the place meant that there were no tracks in the dust. Whatever had made the noises hadn't scraped or dirtied the floors or walls....

'Emiko?' She turned and saw Tsukiko looking out of her own quarters. 'Did you hear that, too?'

'Yes.' Emiko looked down the hallway. 'Do you know which way they went?'

Tsukiko stepped out of her room, without closing the door. She was dressed for bed, in a tank top and shorts. 'Yes.' She nodded down the hall, in the opposite direction from the way Emiko had been looking. 'That wa--' She stopped, and her ears twitched. 'Wait.' She grabbed Emiko's arm and dragged her into her room. She started to close the door, but Emiko stopped her, keeping it open a crack. The two of them peered out.

What they saw was a pair of creatures, like none they'd seen



before. Long, narrow bodies, armoured, with six jointed, insect-like limbs. A long, almost wolf-like head with large black eyes was mounted on the front end.

The pair of young women quietly closed the door and looked at each other.

‘What the hell were they?’ Tsukiko’s ears flicked, and she frowned.

‘I don’t know. But I have figured something out.’ Emiko looked at her. ‘Get dressed, we’ve got to find the others, quickly.’



Wukong and Mimi Bukuro leaned against the wall. Both of them were in pyjamas, but both were carrying their equipment. One of the creatures lay at their feet, its shell cracked open. A red skinned, horned humanoid – an *oni* – knelt over it, a spiked club in one hand.

‘I think it’s dead.’ Wukong frowned. ‘Oh, god, we just killed something.’

‘If we did, it was unavoidable.’ Mimi looked at the creature. ‘I do not believe it is dead, however.’

‘No?’

‘No. It still...’ Mimi shook her head. ‘I do not know how to describe it in English. But I can still sense life in the creature.’ She pulled a slip of paper from her bag and unsummoned the oni. ‘We need to bind the creature, for our safety.’

‘Agreed. Do you have something to bind it with, because I don’t.’ Wukong snapped Jingu Bang back to its smaller size, and peered at the creature. ‘And you’re sure it’s alive?’

‘I am positive.’ Mimi reached into her bag again, and pulled out another pair of slips of paper. ‘And, it shall be bound.’ She threw the paper into the air, and they ignited into flame. Drifting downward, they became a thick fog. Sounds, almost like the barking of small dogs, but also with a strangely human feel, could be heard coming from it.

Wukong leaned in, and narrowed his eyes. As he looked, he could see a pair of small forms inside the fog. Obscured as they were, he couldn’t tell what they were, but they appeared to be small furry animals, with long tails...each one coiled around two of the creature’s legs.

He jumped back with a yelp, as the creature began to move, and let

out a noise not entirely unlike metal being torn by a strong wind.

‘OK, the creature is alive...’

‘I told you it was.’ Mimi smiled. ‘But do not worry. The *ashi-magari* will bind it.’

‘I sure hope so.’ Wukong edged along the wall, well away from the creature, which was still, loudly, fighting against the *ashi-magari*. ‘In any case, we should get moving. See if we can find the others.’

‘Agreed.’ The two of them started down the hallway.



Wukong stopped as they came across a crossing of two hallways. ‘Wait up. There’s always something spooky around the corner in movies, so, let’s check...’ He leaned against the wall and looked over at Mimi.

‘This is not a movie, Sun Wukong.’ Mimi shook her head and leaned against the wall. ‘But, you are right. We should be sure.’

Wukong nodded and turned slowly. ‘OK, let’s see what’s out there.’ As his field of vision crossed the corner, he stopped, and let out a laugh. ‘Emiko!’

Shako and Tsukiko, both in costume, stepped around the corner.

‘Frank!’

‘Mimi!’

‘Thank heavens you’re alright.’ Wukong put his hands on Shako’s shoulders, and grinned.

‘The same to you guys.’ Tsukiko did the same to Mimi, who tilted her head in response.

‘There are these... things.’ Frank shook his head. ‘Like a cross between an ant and a wolf, only as big as a horse.’

‘We know. We had a run in with them, too.’ Tsukiko’s ears twitched. ‘What are they?’

‘Aliens, I guess.’ Wukong shrugged. ‘Ever seen that Twilight Zone episode?’

The three women looked at him, in silence.

‘To Serve Man?’

Silence.

‘It didn’t air in Japan?’

‘It would appear not.’ Mimi shook her head. ‘But should we be discussing television, under these circumstances?’

‘Point.’ Wukong glanced down the crossing hallway again, then started down it. ‘OK, no aliens that are trying to harvest our tasty, tasty human flesh down this way.’



Shortly afterwards, the group stopped at another crossed hallway. None of the corridors other than the one they were on were lit.

‘OK, aliens always lurk in darkness.’ Wukong leaned on the wall.

‘You watch a lot of movies, do you not, Wukong?’ Mimi raised an eyebrow at him, then gave him a bit of a grin.

‘Yep. Could call me a movie buff.’ Wukong grinned back. ‘But, it’s my turn to suggest we focus on the business at hand.’ he looked at Shako. ‘Emiko, can you take a look, see if anyone is coming?’

‘OK...’ Shako shrugged, and stepped, slowly into crossing. She turned, looking down each of the darkened halls. ‘I’m sorry. It’s too dark for me to see anything.’

‘What did you say?’ Wukong frowned.

‘I said it’s too dark for me to see anything.’ She began to turn.

‘That’s what I thought you said.’ Wukong held out Jingu Bang and expanded it to its full length. It drove into the back of Shako’s head, driving her forward into the next hallway.

‘Wukong, what are you doing?’ Tsukiko started forward to grab his arm, as he leapt forward to continue his attack on Shako.

Wukong brought Jingu Bang down on Shako’s back. ‘Emiko’s power...’ Another hit. ‘Her main power, that is, is enhanced vision.’ Another. ‘This is not too dark for her.’ Shako shuddered under the assault, and her form shifted into one of the alien creatures, and lay still.

‘Wow.’ Tsukiko stepped forward slowly. ‘Good work, Wuk--’ She let out a breath, as an *oni*’s club slammed into her stomach.

Mimi and her *oni* stepped forward. ‘Tsukiko would know that. She was Shako’s best friend since childhood.’ The *oni* grabbed Tsukiko by the throat and lifted her from the floor.

Tsukiko grinned, and her form rippled and shifted, becoming identical to the *oni*. ‘Clearly, we will need to be more clever.’

The alien *oni* slammed both fists into the real *oni*'s stomach, causing it to drop her and stumble back.

The alien leapt upon the oni, laughing, and drove it back into a wall.

Mimi reached into her bag, as Wukong planted Jingu Bang's tip into the floor, and flipped over it, throwing himself feet first at the combat. His foot collided with the head of one of the *oni*, causing it to stagger backward.

'Lord, I hope that was the alien...' He followed up by swinging Jingu Bang at the back of his target's knees like a baseball bat. It collapsed as the staff made contact.

'We will see.' Mimi chanted to unsummon her *oni*, and threw the paper at the one Wukong was not in combat with. It disappeared in a flare of flame. 'You chose correctly, it seems.'

'Good.' Wukong leapt on the fallen alien, and drove his fists into its face until it lost consciousness and reverted to its natural form.

He stood, breathing heavily, and looked at Mimi. 'Got any more of those fog monsters?'

'Yes.' Mimi picked up the *oni*'s talisman, and slipped it into her

bag. ‘Though a limited supply. Perhaps we should simply trust that they will stay unconscious, rather than waste them.’

‘The other one didn’t stay out that long.’ Wukong looked down the hallway, toward the sound of footsteps – running footsteps. ‘What’s that?’

Shako and Tsukiko, again, stepped into the light.

‘Oh, no, not again.’ Wukong raised Jingu Bang.

‘It’s really us, this time, Frank.’ Shako raised her hands. ‘Truly.’

‘This is really Wukong and Mimi?’ Tsukiko looked over at Shako.

‘It is, for sure.’ Shako nodded and stepped again toward Wukong.

‘Prove it’s you.’ Wukong gestured at Shako.

Shako shook her head. ‘I don’t know....’ She clapped and looked at him. ‘Ah! Lockesbury. Mary’s ceiling.’

Wukong looked at her a moment, then lowered Jingu Bang and smiled. ‘Yeah, you’re Shako.’

As the threat of attack ended, Tsukiko ran forward, and hugged



Mimi. Mimi smiled at her, and hugged back. ‘And you are Tsukiko. I should have realized the other was not.’

Shako nudged one of the fallen aliens. ‘These must be the ones who attacked us. Medved never saw me in costume, so they wouldn’t know from him....’ She looked around. ‘We need to figure out how to keep them from attacking us again...’

‘Wait.’ Wukong frowned. ‘What does Medved have to do with anything?’

‘He’s one of them.’ Shako began dragging one of the creatures down one of the crossed hallways.

‘Give me a hand?’

Wukong hurried over and took hold of the alien’s legs and helped Shako move it. ‘What do you mean Medved’s one of them? How do you know?’

‘Remember when I asked you if you noticed anything weird about him?’

‘Sure...’

‘It was because I saw something strange about his body heat and

circulation.’ She carefully opened a door in the crossed hallway, then kicked it all the way open and started dragging the creature into it.

The room was entirely empty – devoid of furniture, boxes, or anything else that would be expected to be in a room. ‘These creatures...it’s not the same, because...well, not the same body-shape.’ She dropped the alien and left the room, heading toward the other. ‘But, if you forced one of these things into a human shape, or Medved into this shape...it’d be as similar as yours or mine are to each other.’

‘So, this whole thing..’ Wukong and Shako began carrying the other alien into the same room. ‘This whole conference. It was a trap?’

‘We can’t say, for sure.’ Tsukiko followed behind them. ‘They might have taken Medved after it was set up, and just taken advantage of the whole thing.’ She eyed the fallen aliens, frowning. ‘But that seems to be a rather good guess, yes.’

Shako and Wukong stepped out of the room and closed the door.

‘So, uh, how are we going to lock them in?’ Wukong eyed the door.

‘Give me your belt.’ Shako held her hand out.

‘Wait, what?’ Wukong peered at her.

‘Your belt. I’ll tie the door to the one on the other side. At the very least it will slow them down.’

‘Ah, yeah. I guess...’ Wukong untied his belt and handed it to Shako.

Shako tied the belt around the doorknob, and trailed it across the hall, and tied it on the other side. ‘I hope that holds.’

‘So do--’ Tsukiko’s comment was cut short by a yawn. ‘Oh, gosh, sorry.’

‘It is late.’ Mimi looked around. ‘We should find some place safe to rest.’



‘This should do.’ Shako peered through a half open door, then stepped inside. ‘Hurry.’

The group hurried into the room, which was, like the one they’d left the aliens in, completely empty.

‘Yeah, this whole deal is definitely a trap.’ Wukong closed the door behind the group.

‘It sure looks like it, doesn’t it?’ Shako sat down, in one of the corners.

‘We’ll need to set up a watch schedule.’ Wukong glanced at the door, then back at the women. ‘I’ll go first, since I’m not tired.’

‘No need for that.’ Mimi reached into her bag, and stepped toward the wall. The paper ignited as she placed it to the wall. Unusually, the flame and paper didn’t reshape into the creature, as the others had.

But, after a moment, eyes, dozens of eyes, opened.

‘Holy crap, what the hell is that?’ Wukong scurried over next to Shako.

‘It’s a *mokumokuren*.’ Tsukiko smiled. ‘It’s harmless. They just watch things.’ She turned and looked back at Wukong and Shako. ‘I was there when she caught it. It was fun.’

‘This one is harmless.’ Mimi nodded to the wall of eyes. ‘Some of them can blind you. But this one is just curious.’

‘It’s creepy, is what it is.’ Wukong made a face. The eyes blinked at him. ‘Besides, isn’t it on the wrong side of the wall?’

‘Do not worry. It has possessed the wall. It can watch either side.’

‘And won’t the aliens see it?’ Wukong made a face at the eyes again. They blinked at him, again.

‘Do not worry.’ She looked at the eyes, for a moment. They closed, leaving the wall completely normal.

After a moment, they opened again.

‘Well, as long as they’re not watching me, I’m fine.’ Wukong settled on the floor next to Shako, as the eyes disappeared to the other side of the wall. Tsukiko settled not far from them, and Mimi near her.



The group slept. Wukong’s head had drooped onto Shako’s shoulder. Tsukiko’s had slipped into Mimi’s lap.

Tsukiko let out a yelp as Mimi jumped awake. ‘What is it?’ She spoke Japanese as Wukong didn’t need to understand her.

Mimi nodded to the wall. The eyes had opened on the inside, again. ‘It sees something.’ She looked at the eyes for a moment. ‘Wake Shako. They look human, in any case, but the mokukmokuren doesn’t have her ability.’

Tsukiko nodded, and turned to Shako. She gently shook her, coincidentally waking Wukong. ‘There’s someone outside. We need you to see if they’re human.’

Shako nodded and hurried toward the door, opening it slowly, just a crack. She then pulled the door open and stepped out, grabbing the leader of the group outside. ‘Hurry, come inside.’

She stepped back inside, followed by the group of three that had walked past. As she closed the door, the eyes faded outside again.

It was a group of three: a portly, mustachioed man, who looked to be around forty years old; a young woman, about twenty, who bore a resemblance to him that was no doubt familial – though she was black, and he the very prototype of the pasty Englishman; and a pale young man with a tall, purple-died mohawk, piercings, and tattoos – several of which were fairly obscene. All three were dressed for bed –

the older man in an old-style nightshirt, the young woman in a silk

nightgown, and the young man in his boxer shorts.

‘Do you know what’s going on, young lady?’ The older man turned to Shako. He had a distinctive London accent. ‘What are those bloody things?’

‘Shape-shifting aliens.’ Shako shook her head. ‘We don’t know what they want. But we do know they’ve replaced Medved.’

‘Oi!’ The young man raised a hand. ‘If these alien bastards is shape-shifters, how do we know you lot ain’t aliens?’ He had a thick accent, which was unmistakably, and ostentatiously, ‘common’.

‘Now, Syd.’ The older man shook his head and looked at the younger – Syd. ‘Be polite.’

‘He does have a point, though, Dad...’ The woman’s accent was nowhere near as thick as her fathers.

‘On the other hand, Syd, if they were shape-shifting aliens trying to trick us, would they admit the aliens were shape-shifters?’

‘You got a point, Tanya.’ Syd shrugged. ‘And I guess we can use all the help we can get against those ugly things.’ He tilted his head. ‘But then, how do they know we ain’t?’ He raised a hand.

‘Not that we are, or nothin’, but, y’know. Just gotta know we ain’t hookin’ up with idiots.’

‘Syd!’ Father and daughter scolded Syd in unison.

‘I can recognize the aliens.’ Shako pulled off her helmet. ‘It’s hard to explain, but I have different vision than most people, and I can tell the difference between them and humans.’

‘A useful power, that.’ The older man grinned. He held out his hand. ‘John Bull.’

Shako shook his hand. ‘I’m Shako. My friends are Sun Wukong..’

‘The Canadian Sun Wukong, not the Chinese one.’ Wukong raised a hand.

‘Yes, the Canadian Sun Wukong.’ Shako chuckled, and gestured to Tsukiko, and Mimi. ‘And Usa--’

She trailed off as Tsukiko shook her head gently. ‘Tsukiko and Mimi Bukuro. They’re part of the Japanese contingent.’

Bull nodded. ‘I remember them from the introductory speech before the socializing and dinner.’



‘Ah. Right. I missed that.’ Shako smiled.

Bull gestured to his daughter. ‘And this is my daughter, Britannia.’

‘You can call me Tanya. Please.’ Tanya offered her hand to Shako, who shook. ‘And this polite gentleman is Syd Viscous.’

‘Oi! Don’t be callin’ me a gentleman, there! I got a rep to maintain.’

‘Come on, Syd, your father’s in the House of Lords and you graduated from Cambridge.’ Tanya grinned at him.

Syd eyed Tanya, and his accent slipped, switching to a more posh sound. ‘Thank you, Britannia. Years of building an image down the loo.’

‘You’re still a punk to me, Syd.’ Wukong held out his costume top. ‘Here, put this on. There’s ladies present, and that tat on your back is....’ He trailed off.

‘I believe “disgusting” is an appropriate word.’ Tanya shook her head. ‘His mother would die, if she knew he had it.’

Syd smirked and put the top. ‘Well, then.’ His accent had returned. ‘Now, that’s more like it.’

‘In any case, this room is defensible, for now.’ Mimi sat down again. ‘I suggest you get some sleep, so we can work on solving our problem in the morning.’

‘A capital idea, miss.’ Bull settled into one corner, Britannia and Syd into another, and the rest of the group returned to where they had been before.



Johnny Canuck leaned on a wall. The room – the main lounge of Medved’s personal suite – was rather better furnished than the quarters the others were housed in. ‘Things seem to be going well, Ilya.’

‘Aside from your friend falling ill.’ Medved closed the door behind himself.

‘Yes, there’s that. Though she’s gotten better already, so that’s OK, then.’ Johnny shrugged and kicked off the wall.

‘Would you like a drink, Johnny?’ Medved turned toward the room’s bar, and picked up a bottle of vodka.

‘I’d love one, but I should probably sleep.’ Johnny started toward the door.

‘Too bad, but, if you say so.’ Medved put down the bottle. ‘But first, I would like to introduce you to someone.’

‘OK, if you say so.’ Johnny turned back to the room, as the door to the bedroom started to open. ‘Who is it.’

‘It is...’ Medved trailed off. ‘I think you will find this amusing, my friend.’

‘Oh?’ Johnny tilted his head. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because, it is Johnny Canuck.’ Medved grinned.

Johnny frowned and raised an eyebrow. ‘That’s....’ He scratched his head. ‘An odd coincidence.’

‘It’s not a coincidence, Johnny.’ Medved’s grin never changed.

A skittering, thumping noise came from the bedroom, and drew Johnny’s attention.

# CHAPTER 5



Shako stood and stretched. ‘I shouldn’t have slept in my armour. I ache all over.’

‘You’re wearing something under it?’ Tsukiko stretched and smoothed her hair and fur. The rest of the group was waking, and, similarly stretching, or smoothing their clothes.

‘Of course. The armour would chaff otherwise.’ She rolled her neck, and reached for her helmet, which sat at her feet.

‘Take off the armour, and sit down.’ Tsukiko nodded toward the centre of the room. ‘I’ll work out some of the knots and aches.’

‘Do we have time?’ Shako’s hand went to a lock on her armour, but didn’t open it.

‘Do you really think you can fight properly when you hurt?’ Tsukiko reached over and began unlocking Shako’s armour.

‘Good point.’ Shako smiled at Tsukiko, and began unlocking her armour, letting Tsukiko help. ‘Thank you.’ She sat on the floor,

after removing her armour to the waist, and Tsukiko knelt behind her.

Syd wandered over to Wukong and nudged him in the side. ‘That Shako. She’s a weird lookin’ bird, in’ she?’

Wukong eyed him. ‘Dude. There are only 3 people in this room who aren’t weird looking. And you’re not one of them.’ He reached up and took hold of Syd’s septum piercing, tugging it slightly.

‘I apologize for Syd.’ Britannia wandered over and tugged on one of Syd’s earrings. ‘He likes to be as abrasive as humanly possible. To go with the whole “punk” thing, you see.’

‘I can fight me own battles, Tan.’ Syd rolled his eyes. ‘Anyway.’ He shrugged. ‘She is weird lookin’. You’re weird lookin’. The rabbit chick’s weird lookin’. An’, yeah, I’m weird lookin’.’ He flicked Wukong’s nose. ‘Wanna make somethin’ of it, Monkey Boy?’

Tsukiko shook her head, and rubbed Emiko’s neck. ‘Macho posturing. It’s kind of funny, normally, but could be a problem right now. Should we do something?’

Emiko shook her head. ‘No. Neither of them is going to actually take it to blows. It’s *just* posturing. *And* Syd’s fault.’ She smiled and leaned back, into Tsukiko’s hands. ‘Wukong’s a bit of an idiot, but not that much of an idiot.’

‘Good to hear.’ Tsukiko leaned forward, sliding her arms around Emiko’s shoulders. ‘How are you feeling now?’

‘Better. Thank you.’ Emiko smiled. ‘You were right, that was a good idea.’

Tsukiko grinned and pulled herself to her feet. ‘I’m always right.’ She offered Emiko a hand.

‘Ah, yes. I forgot about that.’ Emiko grinned and accepted the hand to her feet.

‘So, what’s the plan?’ Shako began donning her armour again.

‘We could try to avoid the aliens, and make our way to the ground floor and exit.’ Tsukiko helped her put her armour on. ‘Or we could try to find out what’s happening and stop it.’ She looked at the others.

‘I vote for the second, for the record. We are supposed to be heroes, and all,’

‘Works for me.’ Wukong gave Syd’s nose ring another tug then made a levitation-assisted leap over him.

‘And I.’ Bull cracked his knuckles. ‘It wouldn’t be sporting to escape, and leave the others here.’

‘Besides, you want a fight, right, Dad?’ Britannia patted him on the back.

‘I could certainly do with a good donnybrook, come to that.’ He grinned. ‘But I believe we shall end up having that, in either case, Tanya.’

‘Yes. These creatures will attempt to stop us, whichever path we take.’ Mimi adjusted her belt and checked her bag. ‘So, it seems to me that there is no reason not to attempt to stop them.’

‘So, it’s unanimous, then?’ Britannia looked over at Syd.

‘Of course.’ Syd made a rude gesture to the door. ‘Screw the aliens.’

‘That plan seems counterproductive, dude.’ Wukong grinned at Syd. ‘Would give them a really good opportunity to kill you.’

‘It also gives a very strange view of your taste in women.’ Tsukiko

smiled at him.

‘I hate you both.’ Syd started toward the door. Emiko stopped him with a hand on the arm. ‘What?’

‘Mimi?’ Shako looked at the other woman. ‘Anything?’

‘The *mokumokuren* sees nothing.’ She nodded. ‘The hall is clear.’

‘Then, let’s go.’ Syd pulled the door open and headed out.

‘That man is so rude.’ Wukong made a face at his back.

Shako patted his back as she started toward the door. ‘That’s right, Frank. Be the mature one here, and take the high road.’

‘Oh, like I’ve ever claimed to be mature.’ Wukong followed her, and the others came closely after him.



Medved nudged the body lying at his feet with a toe. Johnny’s blood smeared at the touch. He looked toward his companion – Johnny Canuck.

‘How goes the plan?’ He leaned down and grabbed the corpse’s



arm and began dragging him into the next room.

‘According to plan.’ The other Johnny moved his hands, as though testing them, and adjusted his jacket. ‘We have lost contact with a handful of agents, but it is within acceptable losses.’ He turned to the bar and opened the bottle of vodka, pouring it into a glass. ‘The humans have lost several, as well, and from the agents we have retained contact with, I gather that knowledge of our nature has started to spread.’ He drank the vodka and dropped the glass. ‘Vile. How can they drink that?’

‘They find the sense-dulling effects pleasurable. The flavour is secondary.’ Medved sat on the couch.

‘But go on. They are learning our nature. How does that effect our plans?’

‘It aids them, at least at this juncture.’ The false Johnny leaned on the bar. ‘Those that know do not trust the others, which makes it difficult for the humans to work together – they do not trust each other, and are more likely to fight with *each other* than band together to fight *us*.’

‘Good.’ Medved smiled. ‘Well, let us proceed.’ He stood, and started toward the suite’s main door. ‘I believe we should put in a

showing, or they will become suspicious.’

‘Very likely.’ Johnny opened the door and stepped outside.



Shako peered down a hallway. ‘Someone’s coming.’

‘Human?’ Wukong peered over her shoulder.

‘Yes. The ones I can see, any--’ She pushed Wukong back down the hallway, and dropped to the floor.

‘Get down!’

As Shako and the others toward the front of the group – Tsukiko, Syd, and Mimi – dropped to the floor, an electric bolt singed the wall opposite the direction it had come from.

‘You know, I don’t think they know we’re human.’ Wukong glanced, quickly, down the hall.

‘You don’t?’ Syd smirked at him. ‘Whatever gave you that idea, mate?’

‘Sarcasm. That’ll help.’ Wukong dove as there was another blast of

electricity. ‘... Yes, I see the irony there, no need to point it out.’

Tsukiko and Emiko glanced at each other, and both of them giggled, briefly, before getting serious again.

‘One of us will need approach them.’ Mimi reached into her bag. ‘Though, if they are going to continue to shoot at us, we will have problems with that.’

‘Do you have a suggestion?’ Tsukiko looked at her.

‘I may.’ She pulled a slip of paper from her bag. ‘At least a way to protect ourselves as we try to talk sense to them.’

Another blast of electricity.

‘I say, they are rather persistent, aren’t they?’ Bull tugged at the tip of his moustache. ‘Though, I suppose that at least means they’re not planning to leave before we can speak with them.’

‘Always the optimist, old man.’ Syd smirked.

Mimi’s paper flared into flame, as usual, and formed into a humanoid shape. A wolf-like shape, its fur blue and wreathed in lightning, formed from the flame.

‘*Raiju!*’ Tsukiko smiled. ‘A good idea.’ She raised an eyebrow. ‘You caught the *Raiju*?’

‘A *Raiju*.’ Mimi reached out and stroked the creature. ‘There are many of them.’

‘I guess that explains all the stories.’

‘Precisely.’ Mimi stood, and kept a hand on the *Raiju*’s neck. ‘I will approach our attackers. *Raiju* will protect me.’

‘I’ll come with you.’ Shako stood, and placed a hand on the *Raiju*’s shoulder. ‘There are others, and they may attack with something other than lightning.’

‘A good idea. Come.’ Mimi and Shako walked into the hallway, accompanied by the *Raiju*. Another electric blast came, but was diverted toward the *Raiju*, which absorbed it without damage. ‘Please, hold your fire. We are human.’

‘Well, he’s not, but we are.’ Shako gestured toward the *Raiju*, and chuckled. Mimi looked at her, with an eyebrow raised, and she chuckled again. ‘Sorry, I think I’ve been associating with Frank for too long.’

‘I heard that!’ Wukong blew a raspberry from where he knelt out

of range of the electrical attacks.

The other group – three men and a woman – looked at them, in silence.

‘We apologize, but we assure you, we are human.’ Mimi bowed slightly.

The other group whispered amongst themselves for a moment. One of them – a Chinese man in an exoskeleton, who had been the one firing the electrical blasts at them – stepped forward, after being nudged by the woman (who was wearing a 19th century-style dress). ‘We believe you. And I apologize for attacking you. But, I am sure you understand...’

‘We do.’ Mimi nodded, and stepped forward, letting go of the *Raiju*. She gestured for the rest of the group to come forward and introduced them, one at a time.

The woman in the other group stepped forward. ‘A pleasure. And I already know John, do I not?’ She had a thick French accent, and was smiling broadly at John Bull.

He coughed. ‘Yes.’ He smiled back. ‘It has been a long time, Marianne. You look very good.’

‘*Merci*, John. An advantage of being a glorified ghost. And there are precious few of those.’ Marianne shook her head.

‘You know her well, Dad?’ Britannia looked at her father, one eyebrow raised, a slight smile crossing her face.

Bull coughed again. ‘It was before I met your mother, dear.’ He tugged at his moustache. ‘Before she was born, in fact.’ He looked back at Marianne. ‘During the war, we last saw each other, wasn’t it?’

Marianne nodded. ‘The liberation of Paris.’ She smiled at Bull again, then turned to Britannia. ‘It is good to meet you, Britannia. I knew your elder sister during the war, as well.’

‘Niece, actually.’ Britannia smiled. ‘The Britannia during the war was Dad’s granddaughter.’

The third member of Marianne’s group cleared his throat. He was a slender man in a French military uniform, and large metal blades growing from his arms, and a severe look on his face. ‘A touching reunion, no doubt, but we are likely sitting ducks for the aliens, if we stand here.’

‘Guillotin makes a good point.’ Marianne smiled, pleasantly.

‘Perhaps we should finish our introductions on the move.’

‘A point of order.’ The last of the group, also French, a young man in a more traditional superhero costume raised a hand. ‘We do not, as yet, know if both our groups have the same goal, beyond surviving this onslaught.’

‘And Foudre, too, raises a valid point.’ Marianne’s smile never wavered. ‘Our group intends to make for the exit, and call for help, before returning.’

‘Ah, that’s too bad, then.’ Bull frowned. ‘We intend to liberate this building before moving on.’

‘That is suicide!’ Guillotin shook his head. ‘A strategic retreat, and returning with reinforcements is a much wiser course of action.’

Marianne raised a hand, still smiling. ‘Now, Guy, surely there is room for both tactics, yes?’ She turned to Bull, and her smile, while it never left her face, changed. It became almost sad. ‘I agree with you, John, but I must stay with my countrymen.’

‘I understand, Marianne. We’ll speak again after this adventure is over.’ Bull grinned.

‘No doubt.’ The French heroes turned down one of the hallways.

The fourth of their group didn't follow.

'Aren't you going to go with them, son?' Bull looked at him.

'No. I do not believe so.' The young man stepped forward. 'I did not agree with the tactic of retreat, but as they were the only humans I encountered, I remained with them for safety.' He shook his head. 'But I believe that Sun Wu Kong – our Sun Wu Kong, I know too little about yours to say – and Li Xiu would agree with you, and if they live, I will find them not by retreating, but by following you.'

'It's good to have you with us...' Bull trailed off, as he thought. 'Tekno, wasn't it?'

'Indeed.' Tekno nodded. 'I will endeavour to aid your group, to the best of my abilities.'

'We have no doubt of that, Tekno.' Mimi bowed. 'The more hands, the greater our chance of success.'

The eight of them turned and walked down another hall.

'Wait a minute.' Wukong stroked his chin. 'How did Mimi end up leader? I don't remember electing her.'



‘She’s like that.’ Tsukiko laughed. ‘She takes charge, and...well, you just kind of want to let her.’ She shook her head. ‘It’s kind of like her superpower, except it isn’t. It’s just her being awesome.’

‘Tsukiko...’ Mimi glanced over at her as she unsummoned the *Raiju*. ‘You are embarrassing me.’

‘Sorry.’ Tsukiko waited until Mimi looked ahead again. Then she turned to Wukong, and mouthed ‘see what I mean?’



Wukong’s hands covered his stomach, and he looked embarrassed. ‘Sorry. Apparently I didn’t pig out quite enough at the dinner last night.’

Shako laughed behind her helmet.

‘Can we be serious, please?’ Tekno hurried ahead. ‘This is a life or death situation.’

‘All the more reason to have some fun, don’t you think?’ Wukong hurried to catch up with him. ‘Get all tense, and you’ll be too freaked to fight. Keep loose, and you’ll be ready for anything.’

‘Until you are caught unaware because you are distracted by

joking.’ Tekno looked at Wukong. ‘You are not fit to bear that name.’

Wukong stopped, and his jaw worked. He muttered something in Mandarin.

Tekno stopped and looked at him. ‘And you have proved my point with that language.’

‘Stop this. Both of you.’ Mimi stepped forward. ‘Fighting amongst ourselves does us no good.’

‘She’s certainly right.’ Bull stepped forward. ‘We should come together, now, no fighting. Why, during--’

Shako’s arm shooting up cut him off. ‘We have company.’ She gazed down the hallway they were planning to enter from the crossed paths they were at.

‘I do not see anything.’ Tekno squinted down the hall.

‘That’s because you’re not Shako.’ Wukong looked down the hall, as well. ‘If she says she sees something, she sees something.’

‘And I hear it.’ Tsukiko’s ears twitched. ‘The creatures. In their normal forms. Or, at least the bug-ish shapes.’ She shook her head.

‘In any case, they’re making the same noises they do when they walk like that.’

‘I assume they have enhanced senses.’ Tekno looked toward Mimi.

‘They do. Now, hush, and get ready.’ Mimi reached into her bag and pulled out several slips of paper.

‘Do they know we’re here, Shako?’ Wukong kept squinting into the darkness.

‘It doesn’t look like it.’

‘Good, we can surprise them, then...’ He looked back at the rest of the group, and grinned. ‘Let’s take the fight to them.’

‘Perhaps you are worthy of the name, after all. You have courage.’ Tekno nodded.

‘It is a good idea, but, I believe it could use some modifications.’ Mimi gestured for the group to gather around.



‘EULALIA!’ Wukong leapt at the first of the creatures, Jingu Bang raised high.

Tekno followed, electrical blasts flaring from each wrist. ‘Eulalia?’

‘OK, I’m a monkey, not a hare, but close enough.’

Tekno blinked, and blew a chunk out of the floor beneath one of the second creature’s legs, sending it tumbling into John Bull, who lifted it and tossed it into the third, sending the two crashing into a wall.

‘Good one, Dad.’ Britannia raised her hands, as she saw Wukong tossed back in their direction by the first creature. She caught him, easily and looked up. ‘Heading back?’

‘Totally. Vengeance shall be miiiiine!’ Wukong straightened and put his feet ahead of him as Britannia threw him back into the fray.

The four combatants waded in, each of them personally tangling with one of the aliens.

Wukong swung Jingu Bang, only to have one of the creatures catch it in its mouth. ‘Your funeral, buddy.’ He leapt, activating his anklets, to aid his jump with the levitation. Wrenching the alien’s head sideways, he forced it to topple to the side. ‘Mess with the monkey, get the...er....’ He thought a moment. ‘Banana?’

‘Didn’t think that through well enough, did you?’ Britannia

smirked at Wukong, and ducked under a creature's attack. Stepping forward, she planted her hands on the underside of its body and pushed, forcing it onto its back.

'Nope, guess not.' Wukong pulled Jingu bang from the alien's mouth, and hovered over it. 'Tekno, six o'clock!'

'Understood.' Tekno raised his left hand, and a tendril of energy extended, entangling the alien he was facing, as he turned to raise his right toward the one approaching him. An electric bolt fired and knocked the approaching alien back. Into the path of Bull, who caught it and tossed it over the others.

'Good show.' Bull cracked his knuckles.

'Yeah, we rock.' Wukong snapped his fingers. 'Poo! I should have said "flung poo"!'

'Every time you speak, you force me to reevaluate you.' Tekno looked at Wukong.

'What's the current consensus?' Wukong laid Jingu Bang in his lap, leaving it at its full length.

'Immature. But good to have in a--' Tekno's energy rope flickered and failed as the alien fought against it. 'Ah, we have a problem'

‘Yeah...’ Wukong picked up Jingu Bang and jabbed at the alien below him, as it stirred.

‘I believe this would be a good time for what they call a strategic withdrawal.’ Bull stepped back.

‘In other words, run like hell!’ Wukong pushed off against the alien, propelling himself down the hall, back the way they had come. At the same time, the rest of the group turned and ran.

The aliens, still tangled with each other and dazed, took a moment longer to get moving, but soon began pursuing the heroes.



As the heroes crossed the hallway they had reached when they spotted the aliens, a wind kicked up.

Bull’s nightshirt and Britannia’s nightgown fluttered and tore in the wind.

‘Ow, blast and damn!’ Bull pulled up his night shirt as he moved out of the wind. ‘The bloody thing cut my legs.’

‘Yes, we really should have gotten dressed before starting to move, Dad.’ Britannia peered at a shallow cut on her ankle as she leaned

against a wall.

‘Hindsight is twenty-twenty, I suppose.’ Bull tore off the lower portion and sleeves of his nightshirt, tying some strips around his injuries, and handing others to Britannia, who did the same.

There was a rattling ‘metal on stone’ noise as the aliens waded into the wind. Chips of their armour flew, and holes opened, leaking a viscous yellow fluid, and causing the creatures to cry out, in a cacophonous hissing squeal. They continued inexorably forward, despite the slow attrition to their armoured hides.

As the first pair stepped out of the wind, into the crossed halls, a blue and green streak flashed past them, colliding with the legs of the rear two. With another hissing squeal, the pair of them stumbled forward, colliding with the front set as Shako rolled to a halt in the hallway behind them.

The pile of aliens, a tangle of legs and heads and bodies, began to reshape...taking on smaller, less complex forms that would interfere less with each other.

There was a long, nasal, liquid, snorting noise, as Syd stepped into the hallway. He grinned, and snorted once more before leaning forward and spitting toward the creatures. A green-white mass of a

not-quite-liquid substance, larger than one could have expected to have come from inside Syd's head, and getting larger by the moment, flew from him to the aliens. With a slapping noise, it enveloped the creatures.

More squealing came, as the aliens struggled against the mass. But it was no use – the mass stretched and deformed with their motions, but only so much. And it was stiffening. They were trapped, and would be for some time.

‘That was utterly disgusting...’ Tsukiko stepped out of the crossing hall, and her ears twitched. ‘But I guess it makes restraining the creatures a lot easier.’

‘Yep.’ Syd snorted again, and spit another, smaller mass at the aliens. ‘They don’t call me “Viscous” for nothin’.’

Mimi followed Tsukiko into the crossing, and reached out with a number of slips of paper, speaking the chant to unsummon her spirits. As she reached into the wind it died, a half dozen flames forming before fading away.

As the wind died, Tsukiko and Wukong hurried into the hallway to help Shako to her feet.



‘Are you OK, Emi?’ Tsukiko took her left hand, while Wukong scooped her up from the right.

Shako nodded. ‘I’m fine. The *kama-itachi* couldn’t get through my armour....’

‘The aliens’ armoured skin didn’t stop the things from cutting them up.’ Wukong looked her over, frowning.

‘Yes, but they were in the wind much longer than I was.’ Shako pulled off her helmet and smiled at him. ‘I wasn’t cut, don’t worry.’

Tsukiko nodded. ‘But what about--’

She was cut off by Shako laughing. ‘And that’s not the worst fall I’ve ever had.’ She smiled at the two, before putting her helmet back on and gently pushing them away. ‘Really, I’m fine.’ She glanced at Wukong. ‘It’s not like I was stabbed, for instance.’

Wukong sighed and hung his head. ‘Point taken.’

Tsukiko looked over at Wukong. ‘You were stabbed?’

‘Yeah, a couple months ago...’ Wukong raised an arm and looked at his side. ‘It’s healed now. Can’t even see the scar, because my fur

grew over it. It was...' He poked under his fur. 'Ah, here's where it was.' He shook his head. 'Still pissed off at the little shrimp.'

'I still don't like you using that as an insult.' Shako poked him in the side near where he had been stabbed.

'Right. Have some sensitivity.' Tsukiko grinned at him.

'Now they're teaming up on me. I'm doomed.' Wukong hung his head.

# CHAPTER 6



‘Oh, God, I’m so hungry...’ Wukong made a face and stumbled on.

‘And you complain far too much.’ Tekno gave him a sidelong look, then looked to Mimi. ‘Why do you tolerate him?’

Mimi looked at Tekno briefly, then looked away. ‘He is a good fighter, and I rather enjoy his company.’

She glanced at Wukong. ‘Even if he *is* complaining too much about his hunger.’

‘We’re all hungry.’ Shako shook her head. ‘And complaining about complaining is still complaining.’

She turned to look at Tekno briefly.

Tekno frowned, but kept quiet.

Syd sniffed. ‘Monkey boy and bug girl--’

‘Crustacean. Not bug.’ Shako cut him off.

‘...Crustacean girl have got a point. Don’t think any of us’ve eat anything since the party last night.’

Bull rested his hand on his rather ample stomach. ‘True, true. And any soldier knows you can’t fight on an empty stomach.’

‘So, what I’m hearing is that we have a consensus that we should find the kitchen?’ Britannia rubbed her own stomach.

‘This is nonsensical.’ Tekno stopped and wheeled to look at the rest of the group. ‘We should not be wasting time foraging for food. We can eat after we’ve finished this.’ He shook his head. ‘I cannot believe how soft you are.’

‘Soft? *Soft?!*’ Bull pulled himself to his full height. ‘I’ll have you know, I was fighting wars before your father was a lecherous thought!’

‘Dad...’ Britannia sighed, and set a hand on Bull’s shoulder. ‘Remember what you said about no infighting?’

‘Ah, yes.’ Bull deflated and tugged at his moustache. ‘Right you are, Tanya, right you are.’ He nodded to Tekno. ‘Sorry for my rudeness, son. It was uncalled for.’

Tekno looked at him, an eyebrow raised. ‘Yes. Well. I suppose it

was rude of me to call you soft, as well.'

'That's a good man!' Bull clapped Tekno on the shoulder, causing the smaller man's knees to buckle slightly.

Tekno straightened and cleared his throat. 'I still say, however, that it would be a waste of time better used finding our enemy, to search for food under these circumstances.'

'A compromise, maybe?' Tsukiko's ears twitched slightly. 'We won't expend any effort to look for the kitchens, but if we run across them, we'll eat?' She looked around.

'Works for me, I guess.' Wukong shrugged, and looked up at the ceiling. 'And I'll shut up about being hungry if we don't find it.'

'Agreed.' Tekno nodded and started walking again. 'That past, we should proceed.'



Tekno stared in disbelief into the hall he'd just opened. 'It is enough to make me believe in a god just to assume that I have wronged them.' A kitchen, apparently fully stocked, stood between the group and the next area.

Wukong clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Hey, be an optimist. You’ve pleased this hypothetical god, and didn’t realize how much you needed food, so the god rewarded you with food despite yourself.’

‘My theory seems more likely.’ Tekno stepped into the kitchen, and the others came in close behind him.

The food in the kitchen was primarily leftovers from the previous night’s party. Wukong picked up a sandwich and opened one of the refrigerators. ‘Not much here. Guess they weren’t planning on fattening us up to eat.’

‘Clearly,’ Tekno helped himself to a sandwich. ‘They wish to replace us, and...’ He trailed off. ‘And I do not know what they plan, then.’

‘Conquest.’ Bull pulled a bottle of beer out of a refrigerator. ‘What else could they possibly want, with that method of operations?’

‘Is alcohol really a good idea, Dad?’ Britannia frowned as she chewed.

‘Certainly!’ Bull grinned. ‘I assure you, I will not get drunk, but nothing is better for a person than a good beer!’

‘It’s not 1500 any more, Dad. The water’s drinkable now.’

Bull laughed, as he opened the beer. ‘Drinkable, yes. Enjoyable, no.’

Wukong peered at Bull. ‘Were you really alive in 1500, then?’

‘No.’ Bull shook his head and took a swig of his beer. ‘I was born in 1560. Water wasn’t really more potable in 1600, however.’

‘See that?’ Wukong looked over at Britannia. ‘You added sixty years to your father’s age. That’s just mean.’ He grinned as she began laughing.



Shako and Tsukiko sat on a counter, while they ate. Emiko tapped her fingers on her helmet, which sat between them. ‘I was hoping to get to catch up with you a bit more while we were here, but it’s been so...’ She shook her head. ‘I can’t even think of a good word to describe it.’

‘Busy. Life-threatening. Exciting.’ Tsukiko looked up at the ceiling.

‘Let’s go with that last one.’ Emiko chuckled, then tapped Tsukiko’s knee. ‘So, talk quick, before we have to get going.’

‘You mean before Tekno starts complaining.’ Tsukiko grinned as that drew a giggle from Emiko, and glanced over her shoulder. ‘Boy, I hope he doesn’t speak Japanese. It’d be embarrassing if he heard that.’

Emiko shook her head. ‘But, come on. You asked me what I’d been doing, but we never got around to talking about what you’ve been doing.’

‘Right.’ Tsukiko shrugged. ‘I don’t know, it’s not very interesting. I’ve mostly been doing the same thing as I’ve always been doing.’ Her ears wagged a bit. ‘Been working with Mimi a lot.’ She made a face at Emiko. ‘I have to have someone to work with since you left.’

Emiko smacked her lightly. ‘What about Neko?’

‘She’s...’ Tsukiko frowned and her ears drooped. ‘She’s joined Kitsune and Gyuu.’

‘Why?’ Emiko turned, and frowned. ‘She wasn’t like that.’ She shook her head, and laughed a little. ‘Remember that time when we skipped school, and she freaked out? How could she become a criminal?’



‘I think it may have been my fault.’ Tsukiko’s ears had drooped almost all the way in front of her face.

‘After you left, I got kind of distant, and Kitsune...’ She trailed off and shook her head. ‘She kind of picked Neko up after I drove her away.’

‘Tsuki-chan...’ Emiko leaned over and peered at Tsukiko. ‘It kind of sounds like it was my fault.’

Tsukiko shot upright, and her ears flicked to attention. ‘No way!’ She blinked and turned as she heard the rest of the group turn. She turned red and waved a hand, briefly switching back into English for the rest of the group’s benefit. ‘Ah. No. Sorry. False alarm.’ She turned back, and cupped her hands over her mouth to stifle a laugh. ‘Oh, that was embarrassing.’

‘Yes, it was.’ Emiko shook her head. She reached out and set a hand on Tsukiko’s shoulder. ‘But it’s better than you blaming yourself.’ She frowned. ‘I don’t know what got into Neko, but she wouldn’t turn evil just because you got a bit distant.’

‘I suppose not.’ Tsukiko frowned. ‘I suppose that it’s just why I couldn’t see something happening.’

Emiko smiled. ‘She’ll come to her senses. She’s...’ She laughed. ‘She’s Neko. She’ll get guilty and give up on the life of crime soon enough.’

‘I hope so.’ Tsukiko chuckled. ‘Of course she will. She’s Neko.’

Emiko smiled. ‘That’s right.’ She nudged Tsukiko. ‘So. I left, and Neko wandered off, and then...’

‘Well, I was working on my own for a bit, kind of.’ Tsukiko lifted one leg, resting her foot on the counter, and wrapping her arms around her leg. ‘And--’ She came up short and her ears twitched.

‘Somebody’s coming.’

Shako picked up her helmet. ‘Which way?’ She turned toward the door that Tsukiko pointed to.

The rest of the group turned. Tekno raised a hand, and Wukong snapped Jingu Bang to its full length.

Bull cracked his knuckles, while Britannia merely tensed, almost imperceptibly.

The door opened and four figures stepped in. The lead was a tall, gangly man of ruddy complexion, in red and white striped pants

and top hat, and a blue waistcoat over a white shirt. Uncle Sam. Next came Yatagarasu and a young black woman in a red, white, and blue costume, of the traditional ‘superhero’

style – blue tights under a red and white striped body suit. Finally, behind them, a Chinese woman in ancient-styled clothing, and carrying a pair of swords. Her hands went to her swords when she saw the group.

‘They’re human.’ Shako relaxed. ‘Well, three humans and a *tengu*. But it’s the same Yatagarasu as before, in any case.’

‘And we know *you* are human, why?’ The woman drew her swords.

‘Li Xiu.’ Tekno raised his hands, and stepped forward. ‘Liu qi, wu si.’

Wukong scratched his head. ‘Six seven, five four?’

Li Xiu looked at Wukong. ‘A code, from training. For such an occasion.’ She put away her swords.

‘You trust these people, Tekno?’

‘Do you trust your companions?’ Tekno nodded seeming to direct

it toward Uncle Sam, specifically.

‘Yes.’ Li Xiu nodded. ‘Your point is well made.’

Tsukiko hopped off the counter and leapt toward Yatagarasu, landing gracefully in front of him, and putting a hand on his arm. ‘I’m glad you’re alright, Yamato.’

‘As am I.’ Mimi stepped up behind her. ‘I was worried.’

‘I was worried about you as well, Ito, Suzuki.’ Yatagarasu nodded to Mimi and Tsukiko in turn.

‘Ito and Suzuki?’ Wukong tilted his head.

‘Our surnames, of course.’ Tsukiko shook her head. ‘You couldn’t figure that out?’ She pointed to Mimi. ‘Ito Mimi.’ Then she gestured to herself. ‘Suzuki Tsukiko.’

‘Do you guys not have code names?’ Wukong tilted his head.

‘Yes. But Mimi’s happens to be Mimi Bukuro.’ Tsukiko grinned. ‘It makes things much easier.’

‘And Tsukiko does not use hers.’ Mimi looked at her. ‘I do not know why.’

Tsukiko looked at Shako. ‘It’s a long story.’



Meanwhile, Bull grinned and approached Sam. ‘Ah, Uncle Sam. I haven’t seen you since Berlin.’

Sam raised a hand. ‘To be completely accurate, you’ve never seen me at all, John.’ He blinked and shook his head. ‘But, I remember you, nonetheless.’

Bull tugged at his moustache, then shook his head and laughed. ‘Ah, yes. The hat.’ He clapped Sam on the shoulder. ‘I had forgotten how your abilities work.’

‘It still catches me by surprise sometimes, too, and I’ve had the hat since Vietnam.’ Sam shook his head. ‘This is the first time in almost a decade that I’ve run into someone one of the prior holders met, but I haven’t, so it blindsided me.’ He laughed. ‘One moment, I was trying to remember who you were, the next, I was remembering the night in Paris where you and Mari--’

Bull began coughing. ‘Yes. I can imagine that would be mildly confusing, certainly.’

Britannia looked at Bull. ‘Do I need to start looking for half

siblings in France, Dad?’

Bull turned red and began coughing again.

Laughing, Sam turned and looked at Britannia. ‘If you’re John’s daughter, then you must be the new Britannia!’ He held out a hand. ‘It’s good to meet you.’

‘You too.’ Britannia shook his hand.

The other woman cleared her throat.

‘Ah, manners. Not one of the powers the hat gives you.’ Sam grinned. ‘This is American Way.’

‘Call me Amy.’ She held out her hand to Britannia, who shook it, firmly. ‘It’s good to meet you.’ Then she offered her hand to Bull, who was slightly more careful about it. ‘And you, sir.’

‘Indeed. A pleasure, miss.’ Bull bowed slightly to her.



Some time later, the group, now expanded to a dozen members, sat around the kitchen, picking through the leftover food.

‘Is it safe to eat the food left by those creatures?’ Li Xiu eyed the sandwich she held.

‘Way I figure it, mate...’ Syd popped the cap off a bottle of beer. ‘It’s the same stuff they was feedin’ us last night, right?’ He tipped the bottle back, and drank deeply, throwing his head back. Lowering it with a belch, he looked back at Li Xiu. ‘So, if it was gonna kill us, it already woulda, right?’

Li Xiu looked at Syd, quietly, then took a bite of her sandwich. ‘Your logic is unassailable, even if your manners are not.’

‘Nicest thing anyone’s said to me in a while.’ Syd grinned at her, and leaned on the counter next to her.

‘So, what’s the deal with that Tekno dude? He always as grumpy a bastard as he is here?’

Li Xiu looked at Syd, the corners of her mouth twitching upward ever so slightly. ‘He is not as cheerful as Sun Wu Kong, in any case.’

Syd looked over his shoulder at Wukong. ‘Not many people are.’

‘I meant our Sun Wu Kong, of course.’ The slight turn to the corners of Li Xiu’s mouth blossomed into a full-blown smile.

American Way looked at Syd from the other side of the kitchen, then turned to Britannia, an eyebrow raised. ‘Is he hitting on her? His body language is saying he’s hitting on her.’

‘Looks like.’ Britannia shook her head. ‘What gets me, is he seems to be getting somewhere.’

‘No kidding. She seemed so dour, before.’ Amy tapped at her chin. ‘I suppose it might have been worry about her companions.’

‘And running into Tekno, she’s lightened up.’ Britannia nodded. ‘Makes sense. Not, as you can see, how most of our lot have reacted...’ She gestured to Wukong, who seemed to be attempting to make Tekno laugh. ‘But, certainly a valid way to react.’

‘Sure is.’ American Way looked back toward where Syd and Li Xiu had been talking and blinked. ‘Hey, where’d they go?’



‘Will you leave me be?’ Tekno glared over his shoulder at Wukong.

‘Not until you cheer up, dude.’ Wukong settled on the counter next to Tekno. ‘You’re being a downer, dude.’

‘I am not “being a downer”.’ Tekno rolled his eyes. ‘I am taking



this situation seriously, as should you.'

'Dude. I've met your Sun Wu Kong.' Wukong poked Tekno in the chest. 'He's pretty goofy, too.'

'He does not inflict his humour on me after I have asked him not to.' Tekno brushed Wukong's hand away. 'And he is not nearly as frivolous as you are.'

'I am not frivolous. And I am totally taking the situation seriously.' Wukong frowned. 'You said yourself I'm good to have in a fight.'

'Yes, and for that reason, I tolerate your less serious behaviour.' Tekno sighed.

'Come on, Tekno.' Wukong grinned. 'Li Xiu is alive and well, and I'm sure Sun Wu Kong is, too. So you don't need to be so worried and grumpy any longer.'

Tekno looked at him. 'I am relieved that Li Xiu is well. And I have no worries about Sun Wu Kong.'

He shook his head. 'I admit I was worried, but I am not, as you put it, "grumpy", nor is my behaviour because of my worry.' He turned. 'I tolerate your behaviour. Please tolerate mine.'

Wukong blinked. ‘Uh. Right. Sorry, then, I guess.’

Tekno frowned. ‘Where has Li Xiu gone?’ He started to leave, then turned and looked do Wukong.

‘Your apology is accepted. Now, leave me be.’ He turned away again, and left.

Wukong frowned, then hopped off the counter. Looking around, he wandered toward Shako and Tsukiko. ‘I think I’ve been a jerk.’

Shako looked at him. ‘Do you really want an answer to that, Frank?’

Wukong raised an eyebrow. ‘No. Not that it was a question.’ He climbed on to the counter next to the pair. ‘Do I annoy you guys when I act...’ He trailed off and shook his head.

‘Like an idiot?’ Shako looked at him.

He looked back. ‘I hate your helmet.’

‘I know.’

‘But, yeah. Like an idiot, I guess.’ Wukong made a face.

Shako pulled off her helmet and smiled at him. ‘And no, Frank. You’re not annoying. Usually.’

‘Usually?’ Wukong raised an eyebrow.

‘Usually.’ Shako turned away and put her helmet back on.

Tsukiko looked at her, then looked back at Wukong, with a grin. ‘You heard her.’

‘Hate that helmet.’ Wukong made a face.

‘We heard you.’ Tsukiko patted his shoulder.



Tekno frowned, as he looked around the kitchen. ‘I would expect this from some others, but not Li Xiu.’ He shook his head and opened the door to the kitchen, stepping into the hall.

He pulled up short, his eyes going wide as he found Li Xiu. Her swords lay on the floor at her feet, and she was pressed against Syd, who leaned against the wall, and had one arm around her waist. The other was somewhere Tekno couldn’t see. After a brief hesitation, he cleared his throat.

No response.

And again, louder.

The two started and separated. She straightened her costume, while he leaned back against the wall, letting his hands drop, casually, but concealingly, to his crotch.

‘Tekno.’ Li Xiu crouched and picked up her swords. ‘Are we moving, then?’ She fastened her swords to her belt.

‘No, not yet.’ Tekno looked at her, frowning. ‘Li Xiu, I am surprised by you.’

Li Xiu raised an eyebrow, looking back, steadily. ‘And what do you mean by that?’

Tekno looked over her shoulder down the hallway. ‘Do I have to remind you we are in enemy territory?’

‘We would have known they were coming. If they were to come.’

‘You did not notice me, at first.’

Syd snorted. ‘Yeah, but you ain’t an eight foot long crab louse. Even if you’re acting like one.’

Tekno looked at Syd a moment, then turned back to Li Xiu, and switched to Mandarin. ‘And, even with your situational awareness not under question, there is the question of why you chose him. Of all the potential partners--’

‘Who would you rather?’ Li Xiu laughed. ‘You, perhaps?’

Tekno frowned, and gazed at her quietly, for a few moments. ‘This is not about that.’

‘Hey, mate?’ Syd kicked off the wall. ‘I speak three different dialects of Chinese. So switchin’ to Mandarin’s not keepin’ me out of the loop.’ He changed to Mandarin. ‘And, if you are going to insult me, I would prefer it be to my face.’ Back to English. ‘Got it, friend?’

Tekno frowned at him, and turned, heading back into the kitchen.

‘So, I’m guessin’ there’s no chance of finishin’ up?’ Syd glanced at Li Xiu.

‘I am afraid not.’ Li Xiu gave Tekno a few moments, then started back toward the kitchen, Syd close behind.



Most of the group turned to look at the kitchen door as Tekno stormed back in.

‘What’s the--’ Wukong fell silent as Tekno glared at him. He glanced over at Shako. ‘*That* wasn’t my fault.’

‘No.’ Shako nodded to Li Xiu and Syd who were coming through the door. ‘I believe it’s theirs.’

‘Makes sense.’ He looked at the two. ‘Hey, you think--’

‘Yes. They were.’

‘How do you know?’ Wukong raised a hand. ‘Actually, no, I don’t want to know.’

‘If you say so. Probably for the best.’ Shako hopped off the counter and wandered toward one of the fridges.

Tsukiko leaned over and grinned at him. ‘She’s teasing. There’s nothing freaky and disturbing about how she figured it out.’

‘How do you know?’ Wukong looked over at her.

‘We’ve had the same conversation.’ Tsukiko fell silent for a moment, as a smile crossed her face. Then she looked back at

Wukong. 'It's just blood flow and stuff like that.'

'Ah, makes sense.' Wukong shook his head. 'Her powers kind of confuse me, sometimes.'

Tsukiko nodded. 'I know what you mean.' Her ears waved a little. 'But I can do the same thing to her.'

'Lucky y--'

Tsukiko's ears twitched, and she looked at the door. 'Someone's co--'

The door flew open and a blue and yellow streak came into the room. After a moment, it came to a stop, and resolved into Foudre.

Shako looked over at him. 'It's him.'

A moment later, there was movement near the floor. Soon it was clearly Marianne flowing up into the room through the floor. Her hands were pressed against her temples, as though she had a terrible headache. She was translucent and pale. 'Foudre....' She looked at him and continued, in French. 'I have asked you not to do that.'

'Sorry, Marianne, I'm not used to having to let someone keep up

with me.’ Foudre looked embarrassed by the whole situation.

‘Mariannel!’ Bull stepped forward. ‘What happened to collecting reinforcements and then returning?’

Marianne smiled as colour and opacity returned to her. ‘Ah, John.’ She smiled. ‘As I said, both plans had merit. But, I am a direct warrior, at my core, just as you are.’

‘We got Guillotin safely to the exit, then we returned, to aid you.’ Foudre looked around. ‘There’s food?’

‘Help yourself, dude.’ Wukong gestured to a tray of sandwich. ‘It hasn’t killed us, yet.’

Foudre flashed around the room collecting the leftover food.

Bull grinned at Marianne. ‘In any case, I’m glad to have you, Lass. It’s always a pleasure to fight by your side.’

‘Shall I tell Mother that, Dad?’ Britannia smirked.

‘Oh, now, dear, don’t think such things.’ Bull turned red and stroked his moustache. ‘Marianne is simply a dear old friend.’

‘That’s not what Uncle Sam says.’ Britannia stuck her tongue out



at her father.

‘Samuel never even met Mar--’ Bull stopped himself, when Britannia raised an eyebrow. ‘Oh, yes, *that* Uncle Sam.’

‘You knew which one I meant.’ Britannia grinned. ‘You never call uncle Sam “Samuel”, for one thing.

Only Grandmum calls him that.’

‘I believe she has you caught, John.’ Marianne smiled at him.

Bull laughed and tugged at his moustache. ‘I suppose so.’ He looked at Britannia and grinned. ‘But it was almost fifty years before I met your mother, and almost a hundred after I met Marianne, so--’

‘Somewhat longer than that, actually.’ Marianne looked at Bull, a touch of a laugh coming into her voice. ‘Perhaps you don’t remember, though. I was much younger, and not fighting at your side.’

Bull frowned, and stroked his chin. ‘I’m afraid I don’t remem--’ He suddenly blinked, and burst out laughing. ‘Waterloo!’

Marianne’s smile broadened. ‘You do remember.’ She shook her

head. ‘I would have hoped I had left more of an impression on you.’

‘You did, my dear, you did.’ Bull tugged at his moustache. ‘But more in the Crimea than at Waterloo.’

‘It’s a good thing I’m not a few years younger, or this would be traumatizing you realize.’ Britannia chuckled.

‘Now, now, Tanya.’ Bull pulled on his moustache, again. ‘I was married at the time. With three daughters and two sons.’

‘I have a lot of siblings....’

‘Indeed. Four hundred and sixty years is a long time.’

‘Are any of them French?’ Britannia grinned.

Bull cleared his throat and looked to Marianne. ‘Waterloo. I remember, now. You were *quite* impressive. I imagine the feeling must have been similar for the men who faced Joan of Arc.’ He shook his head. ‘Though, the whole thing didn’t go that well for you, did it?’

Marianne’s smile faltered for the first time since encountering Bull. ‘No. For thirty years, I was reduced to incorporeal form. Thank

God for Louis-Napoleon!’

‘I’ll drink to that!’ Bull turned to the nearest fridge and pulled out a bottle of beer, then laughed loudly.

‘Who would have thought at our first meeting, I’d be drinking a toast to a Napoleon!’ He snorted and raised his bottle. ‘No matter. To Louis-Napoleon!’

‘La Republique!’ Marianne tapped the bottle.

‘And the Republic!’ Bull downed the beer.

# CHAPTER 7



The group gathered, near the far exit of the kitchen. Bull, Marianne, Uncle Sam and Yatarasu stood before the door. Shako and Tsukiko stood nearby.

‘Alright, boys and girls, listen up.’ Uncle Sam crossed his arms over his chest. ‘From what we can figure out, we’re gettin’ close to the top of this tower, so, chances are we’re gettin’ close to the end of this. We’re gonna end the alien threat, or they’re gonna end us.’

Bull cleared his throat. ‘With any luck, it will be the former.’ He looked around the group. ‘No, not luck.’ He grinned. ‘I’ve fought along side most of you. Either tonight, or back in the past. I know you. I know you’re strong.’ He made a fist and hammered it into his open palm. ‘We will win this. We will win, not because we are lucky, but because we are good.’ He pointed at the crowd. ‘Not only that, but we are the good guys.’

Marianne stepped forward and held a hand up. A spectral flagpole with a red banner flapping in the non-existent breeze formed in her grip. ‘Indeed! These beasts are tyrants! We fight not only for our

own lives, but the freedom of our people!’ She raised the banner, high above her head – somehow, strangely, not touching the ceiling of the kitchen, which seemed to rise, without moving. ‘So, rise up, heroes! Rise and stand against the tyrants!’

Yatagarasu spread his wings and hit his *shakujo* against the floor, making the rings jingle. ‘We will fight. With courage. With strength. With honour. For ourselves. For our countries, our families, our friends.’ He shook his *shakujo*. ‘Even our enemies.’ He paused as some of the gathered heroes chuckled, or grunted, or otherwise reacted. ‘We will not falter. We will not fear. We will not lose.’ He hit the *shakujo* against the floor. The rings jingled, and something that felt almost, but not quite, like a physical wave flowed through the room. The group fell quiet, for a moment, then almost as one, straightened, and held themselves to their full heights.

Uncle Sam turned and opened the door. ‘Alright, then, let’s move out.’

Shako and Tsukiko hurried to the front of the group as they exited. Lead by them, and the four leaders, the group stepped out into another hallway. Narrower, and short, it terminated in a small door with a push-bar.

Tsukiko held up a hand, and pressed her ears against the door.

‘Someone’s coming from the other direction. A lot of them. There seems to be another door between them and us.’

‘Human?’ Wukong balanced on Jingu Bang while waiting.

‘Can’t really say for sure.’ Tsukiko glanced back. ‘Only Emiko can do that.’ She put her head against the door again. ‘They sound like they’re human shaped, though.’ She paused. ‘Mostly.’ She stood up.

‘Nothing that sounds like the aliens, though. If it is them, they’re disguised.’

‘Well, it does us no good to stay here, in either case.’ Bull pushed the door open. ‘Onward, and upward.’

As they opened the door and stepped into the next room – the meeting hall where the meet and greet dinner had happened the night before – the door on the opposite side flew open. The others who Tsukiko had heard filed in – a smaller group than theirs, it was lead by Sun Wu Kong. Another Nine heroes came behind him – the German, Egyptian, and Russian groups, minus Medved, but with the last American, a man in red, white, and blue armour.

Sun Wu Kong reached up behind his ear, then held his hand

casually toward the group. Two of the others – one of the Germans, a man dressed in stereotypical Norse armour and carrying a massive hammer; and a Russian man in tights with a star-shaped cut-out on the chest, the left and right arms of the star uncovering his shoulders, the top arm merely implied by the existence of his head – stepped forward to join him. Behind the rest a woman in what appeared to be a mortar, resting the pestle across her lap, floated up – her hair dishevelled, her clothes ancient and ragged, she looked the part of the hag, although she was clearly relatively young.

‘Tekno. Li Xiu.’ Sun Wu Kong looked at the other Chinese heroes.

Li Xiu shot a look toward Tekno. ‘Sun Wu Kong.’ She let her hands drop to her sides. ‘Liu qi, wu si.’

Sun Wu Kong nodded and reached up behind his ear again. ‘I’m glad you and Tekno are alright, Li Xiu.’

‘And the same to you, Sun Wu Kong.’ Li Xiu bowed slightly.

Bull looked at Shako. ‘Well? What do you see?’

‘I...’ She turned her head and weaved a bit. ‘I’m sorry, could you guys spread out a bit?’ She made a motion with her hands, to that

effect.

The other group of heroes looked to Sun Wu Kong, who looked at Li Xiu. She nodded to him. ‘Well, you heard her. They must have a reason.’

The other group of heroes spread out into a ragged line, aside from Sun Wu Kong, the two men who flanked him, and the woman in the mortar.

Shako looked them over and nodded. ‘They’re human.’ She blinked and shook her head. ‘Well, Bast isn’t, but she’s not one of them, either.’

The Egyptian cat woman tilted her head, and let out a slight purring noise. ‘Ubesti, actually, but that was an understandable guess.’

Sun Wu Kong looked at Li Xiu. ‘What’s that about?’

Li Xiu shrugged. ‘I have no idea. But I trust her and these others.’

‘Good enough for me.’ Sun Wu Kong looked over at Shako. ‘But, if you’d explain?’

‘The aliens...’ Shako shook her head. ‘They’re shape-shifters.’



‘We know this.’ Sun Wu King made a face. ‘We were attacked by one disguised as Tekno, and a pair pretending to be Donner and Jaeger...’ He pointed to the man in the armour, and an archer in black and green leathers, in the group behind him. ‘Weisse Frau identified them as impostors, before they could hurt us at least.’ He pointed to a tall, slender woman, with gently pointed ears, who seemed to be garbed in an intense white light.

Shako nodded. ‘Well, I can identify the aliens, even if I don’t know who they were imitating.’ She tapped a lens on her helmet. ‘I have very good vision.’

Sun Wu Kong nodded slightly. ‘How very use--’ He was cut off by Tsukiko raising a hand.

‘Someone’s coming.’

Sun Wu Kong grinned. ‘Even without Li Xiu’s assurance, I trust those ears.’ He frowned and covered his mouth, as Tsukiko made another shushing noise.

‘That way.’ She turned and pointed toward an upward-leading stairwell. ‘There are...’ She frowned.

‘Three people coming. One definitely alien, two...human shaped, at

least.’ Her ears twitched. ‘A fight is breaking out, I think. They’re being quiet about it th...’ She took up a fighting stance, as an alien in its insectoid form bounced down the stairs, its carapace cracking in several places.

A wet snorting noise was followed by a blob of mucous coating the alien. Syd grinned at Britannia.

‘Even from here. Me aim’s getting better, wouldn’t you say, B?’

‘Well, you didn’t hit Dad this time, so it’s better than the last time you did it from that distance when we were around.’ Britannia brushed her hair back and looked up the stairs, as human footsteps started down them.

‘Good work, Sydney.’ Medved grinned at Syd as he finished shifting away from his bear form. ‘It is lucky that you were here. It saved us the trouble of finishing him, yeah?’

Johnny came behind him. ‘Not that it would have been di--’

A slight crack of thunder cut him off, as Tekno blasted Medved.

The second group of heroes looked on in horror.

‘Tekno’s one of them!’ Medved stood, twitching, and began

shifting back into his bear form.

‘No. You are.’ Shako hurried forward, and punched him in the jaw, making him reel back. She looked at Johnny, and, with a sigh, moved forward again. There was a flash of green and blue, as her leg came up, kneeling him in the abdomen. ‘And so are y--’ Her breath was knocked out as Medved’s paw slammed into her back.

‘She’s clearly one of them, too.’ He went to bring his paw down on her head, but in a flash, she was out of his range, leaning against a wall, trying to catch her breath.

‘No.’ Sun Wu Kong looked at Medved. ‘No. That doesn’t make any sense.’ He shook his head. ‘Why wait until now, if she was...?’ He reached up behind his ear. ‘If she, or Tekno, were aliens, this would be the worst time to attack. Outnumbered, they’d stand no chance.’ His Jingu Bang extended, the tip stopping just before Medved’s throat.

‘Yes. You’re right. One or two against two dozen would be suicidal. So, if Johnny and I are aliens, why do you think we would confront you, now?’ Medved grinned, still halfway through his transformation.

Uncle Sam stroked his beard. ‘You wouldn’t. Unless your cover’s

been blown.’ He nodded to Shako.

‘And it has.’ He straightened. ‘It has. So why the hell are you smilin’?’

‘Because, my friend. The ratio is not quite what I said.’ He turned toward the stairs again, and let out one of the metallic screams so familiar for the aliens.

Tsukiko’s ears twitched. ‘Oh, no.’

‘There’s more.’ Syd slapped a palm against his forehead. ‘Of course there’s more!’

‘I can’t count how many. There are so many.’ She looked toward the stairs, then her ears twitched. ‘But they won’t fit down the stairs at once....’

‘Go! Take them out before the reinforcements get here!’ Uncle Sam dashed forward, and bull rushed Medved into Johnny, and the rest of the heroes mobilized as well. Most dashed forward, a strangely cohesive mob. But others – Tekno, Syd, Donner, Jaeger, Weisse Frau, the woman on the mortar, and the man in the starred suit – fell back, their weapons or powers being more effective from a distance.

Bull started up the stairs, while Britannia pulled Johnny away from Uncle Sam.

‘Dad, where are you going?’ Britannia threw Johnny toward the alien who was struggling with Syd’s snot-blob. He stuck.

‘Taking the fight to--’ A blue flash, and Bull flew backward. ‘What in the devil’s--’ A flesh on flesh sound, and his head snapped backward. He landed on the ground behind where Uncle Sam was struggling with Medved. Foudre knelt on top of him, his arm blurred as he punched him repeatedly, in a rapid fire fashion.

Another blue flash, and Foudre, the real Foudre, had the alien in his grasp. The two moved at a rate nobody else could follow.

Then...they stopped. They stood a moment, then one fell. As he hit the ground, it began changing into its natural, insectoid form. A metal device was fixed around its neck, which Foudre disconnected. ‘I think this is how he imitated my po--’ He dropped it with a yelp, as it began crackling with energy.

Before it hit the ground, it burst into flame – metal and plastic burning just like paper. ‘Mon dieu.’

The walls on either side of the stairwell began changing at this

moment – moving apart, widening the staircase.

‘Of course. Why wouldn’t the building be a shape-shifter, too?’ Wukong shook his head and spun Jingu Bang. ‘More of them can get down, now...’

Bull stood, and cracked his knuckles. ‘Well, bring them on!’

The aliens stepped into the stairwell. Some of them in the form of the heroes, gathered, others in alien form.

The aliens and the heroes swarmed at each other, and the battle began. Wukong and Sun Wu Kong vaulted simultaneously, on their respective staves, then brought them, as one, over their heads, and brought them down on those of two aliens. An alien disguised as Uncle Sam traded blows with the real Uncle Sam, while American Way distracted a second alien, who was attempting to aid its fellow.



A group of the aliens started toward the ranged heroes, shrieking a battle-cry. Donner brought his hammer down with a thunderous crash, and an arc of lightning jumped into the centre of the alien group, who scattered.

As they scattered, Jaeger loosed an arrow, which broke into a net, entangling an alien. Another was brought down by a ball of light and heat that came from the hand of the man in the star tights.

The woman on the mortar raised the pestle, which glowed brightly, then flashed toward one of the aliens, which collapsed, and writhed, as though wrestling with an invisible attacker.

As one of the aliens stepped toward the group, Weisse Frau seemed to grow imperceptibly, and the light robing her to intensify. The alien froze, then turned away, its head bowed.

Syd snorted, loudly, and spit a blob of goo at the last unbroken group, sticking them to each other and the floor.



The melee spread and shifted, forcing the ranged group to move, separating from each other, and moving toward the corners of the room. Shako moved toward the corner where Tekno was, and pointed. ‘She’s an alien!’

Tekno turned, spotting where Shako was pointing.. It appeared that Li Xiu was fighting with the armoured American. He frowned deeply, and raised his right arm, firing an electric blast at the alien

in the guise of his team-mate. Li Xiu screamed and fell to the ground.

She didn't change.

'Li Xiu?' Tekno ran forward, and the armoured fighter leapt at him, his shoulder connecting with Tekno's jaw, knocking him flat. He shifted into his insectoid form, and raised his forelegs, shifting them into blades. Before it could drive them home, one of Jaeger's arrows slammed into its back, throwing it off balance, before entangling it. Jaeger hurried toward the fallen fighters.

Japanese cursing accompanied a blue and green streak, which brought Shako to the ground. Another Shako, the real Shako, stood as the alien reverted to its default form. 'Nobody listen to me, if I point to an alien!'

'Or if she tells you I like to sing Justin Bieber songs!' Wukong swung his Jingu Bang, sweeping the legs from under one of the aliens. 'It was one time, and Baby is really catchy!'

Shako snickered and moved toward Li Xiu, who was coming to her feet with a groan. 'Are you OK?'

'I think so.' Li Xiu shook her head and twitched a little. 'What



happened?’

‘An accident. Tekno hit you by mistake.’ Shako helped her to her feet. ‘Can you fight?’

Li Xiu shook her head, as Shako lead her to a corner. ‘I need... I think I need to rest.’

Shako nodded and looked to Syd and Weisse Frau, who had retreated to the same corner as Tekno.

‘Protect her.’

‘Can do, mate.’ Syd spit a restraint loogie at an alien that was approaching Jaeger, who had Tekno thrown over one shoulder. ‘Oi, Jaegermeister, bring him over here!’

Jaeger dodged the fallen alien, and hurried toward the group. ‘It is simply Jaeger.’ He set Tekno in the corner and unlimbered his bow again.



Ubesti hissed and leapt at one of the aliens, her claws digging deeply, despite the armoured carapace.

The alien shrieked and tried to toss her, but she simply held tighter, and shifted her weight, forcing the alien to careen into another. She rolled off just before they collided and tumbled to the floor, in a tangle of legs.



Bull lifted one of the aliens, high above his head. ‘Britannia, over here!’

Britannia, who was grappling with another alien nodded and dropped, torquing the creature in the direction of her father, who tossed his foe at it.



Marianne went incorporeal as an alien took a swipe at her, then returned to her solid form and grabbed hold of the alien, twisting its leg. As it started to topple, it shifted form, its leg shrinking and pulling free, and steadied itself, leaping at Marianne. Who immediately went incorporeal again, letting it drop into the middle of a group of Mimi’s summoned creatures. An *oni*’s club came down on the creature’s head while a *nekomata* tore into its legs.



Tsukiko bounced off the top of an alien's head, using it to springboard into a second, bringing her feet down hard on its head. The first pursued her, but found itself suddenly stopped by a wall of force that formed in front of it. Tsukiko grinned and waved to another of the heroes – an Egyptian man in a loose white and black single-piece costume, with silver closures in the form of a clenched fist. 'Thank you, Misik!'

Misik nodded, and waved back before forming another wall behind him, stopping an alien which had, rather noisily, leaped at him.



'Sun Wu Kong, above you!' Wukong twisted Jingu Bang, sending the alien he was tangling with tumbling.

Sun Wu Kong held his Jingu Bang upright, and extended it again, catching the alien who was dropping on him under the chin, with a loud crack. He turned and grinned at Wukong. 'Thank you, Sun Wukong.

Ah! Watch your back!'

Wukong spun, bringing his Jingu Bang around like a baseball bat as he did. It caught the attacking alien and sent it sprawling. 'And

we're even.'



The last of the heroes, a small teenage Egyptian girl in a long, loose dress of pale blue, her hair and eyes the same colour turned and spun rapidly, her skirt rising and flowing as she moved. A group of the aliens was closing on her. A blue mist began to form around her. It grew thicker and rose higher, soon concealing her completely.

One of the aliens shrieked and leapt.

Its tail end was still poking out of the mist when it stopped. Its legs twitched and wiggled. It flew backwards, causing the mist to dissipate, revealing the girl... She was no longer a small girl, but rather a large creature, looking like a hybrid of human and dragon. Her scales were a sparkling blue, and an array of long, thin horns poked out from under her now thick, ropey hair. She held her hands in front of her face, and her muzzle turned up in a smile, or at least an approximation thereof. 'Yes, this will do.'

Her tail twitched and she leapt into the aliens.



The fight went on. It couldn't have been more than ten, maybe fifteen minutes, but it seemed like forever to those fighting.

Slowly, but surely, the aliens fell before the might of the heroes. Not all of the heroes were standing –

almost half of them lay, unconscious, and strewn about the floor, though all still breathed – but the aliens were reduced to a handful. Most of the still standing heroes were tending to, moving, or protecting the fallen.

Marianne pulled Foudre out from under the legs of an alien who was attempting to trample him after successfully blindsiding him. Bull grabbed the alien's rear legs and pulled it backward, as the speedster was pulled free.

Uncle Sam held one of the aliens by the muzzle, and was trying to wrestle it to the ground. 'Drop, you damn bug!' His feet slid as the alien pushed back. 'I said dro--' His eyes went wide, as two blades seemed to sprout from his chest. The alien behind him pulled its legs free, and shrieked in triumph.

The other heroes – those not currently engaged in fighting their own alien enemies – turned.

‘Sam!’ American Way ran toward him, crashing into the alien who had skewered him, knocking it off its feet. Britannia followed close behind, and kept the other alien from leaping on the other woman.

Sam coughed, blood spurting from the wound in his chest, and his mouth. ‘Sorry, Amy. Think I screwed up. Should have been watching my back.’

‘Don’t worry, Sam. They’re almost all gone. We’ll get you to a doctor, and--’ She stopped, and frowned looking him in the eye. ‘No, no, we won’t. And you know it as well as I do...’

‘Yeah, I do. Still wouldn’t have minded you lyin’.’ He smiled and started to laugh, but, instead simply started coughing blood again.

‘Don’t talk, Sam.’ Amy brushed the foam of blood away from his mouth. ‘You’ll just hurt yourself.’

So...’ She shook her head. ‘Don’t talk.’ She sniffed.

‘Good point, Amy. But I have one more thing to do.’ He touched the brim of his hat. ‘I need a replacement.’

‘We’ll find one.’ Amy forced a smile. ‘Don’t worry.’

‘No, no. It’s gotta be me.’ Sam grinned. His teeth were stained

with his own blood. ‘Luckily, I found one.’

‘Samuel.’ She started to stand. ‘I’ll get him. Stay still.’ She stopped as Sam’s hand closed around her wrist.

‘No, not Samuel. Pat--’ He coughed again, forcefully, spattering blood on her costume. ‘Patriot’s heart is in the right place, but he’s not...’ He shook his head. ‘He’s not the right one.’

‘Who, then?’

Sam shook his head and reached up, pulling off his hat. As he did so, he seemed to get shorter, and less gangly. Silently, he placed it on Amy’s head. The opposing change came over her...she became thinner, and taller.

‘Sam...’

‘Not any more. Just Jacob, now.’ Sam – Jacob – lay back. ‘You’re Sam now.’

‘Jacob.’ Amy shook her head. ‘Good bye, Jacob.’

‘Good luck, A--’ Jacob’s eyes closed. ‘Sam. Good....’ He trailed off, as others approached.

‘Is he...?’ Patriot rushed over and looked at Amy. He stood for a moment, quietly, and when he spoke, his voice was measured. ‘He... chose you.’

‘He...he did. I don’t...’ Amy trailed off, then took a deep breath. ‘I don’t know why. But he did. And...

And I’ll have to prove he made the right choice, won’t I?’

‘I’m sure you will, Lass.’ Bull placed a hand on Amy’s shoulder.

Patriot looked at her for a moment, then looked down at Jacob’s body and wandered off.

Everyone turned as a black blur entered the room, coming from the direction of the kitchen. It stopped, resolving into a person. A woman, on the short side, and quite thin, she was dressed head to toe in a tight black costume, including blue goggles – a fairly typical speedster costume. On her left shoulder was a patch showing a sword crossed with a wand, placed in a cup, which was adorned with a coin – the insignia of TAROT, the international metahuman law enforcement agency. On the right, a depiction of the Chariot Tarot card. She looked around the room, and raised her arm in front of her face, pressing a button on the inside of her wrist. ‘Yeah, they’re here. Looks like it’s just clean up, though. Will secure the



area.’ She looked at the fallen heroes. ‘We’ll need medics.’

The gathered heroes looked toward Shako.

‘She’s human.’ Shako shook her head.

‘Could I get some representatives from your groups, please?’

Bull, Marianne, Yatagarasu, Weisse Frau, Ubesti, and Sun Wu Kong all stepped toward the TAROT

agent. After being prodded by Britannia, Amy joined them. Shako and Wukong looked at each other.

‘I’ll handle this.’ Shako pulled her helmet off.

‘Probably for the best.’ Wukong pointed at the gathered leaders. ‘There’s already a Sun Wu Kong.’

‘Yes, Frank, that’s why.’ Shako stepped forward, and the group was soon rounded out by the woman on the mortar.

‘My name is Chariot. I am, at the moment, TAROT’s representative on this scene. We were briefed, if briefly...’ She paused and shook her head. ‘Sorry. We were briefed, however incompletely, by Guillotin, who will be joining us, along with the

rest of the TAROT agents, shortly. However, a more thorough report will be necessary.’ She raised a hand. ‘But, first, I will need your names.’

The group introduced themselves, in turn, giving their code names, and the countries they represented.

The woman on the mortar introduced herself as Baba Yaga, from Russia. Amy was the last to answer.

‘I’m Amer--’ She closed her eyes. ‘Sam. I’m Sam.’



Soon, Guillotin arrived, along with several other TAROT agents – a very tall man in bulky powered armour adorned, in the same colours as Chariot’s tights, with the Tower painted on the right arm; a young woman carrying a sceptre and medallion, with the High Priestess stitched into the right sleeve of her black robes, and several agents in black, sharply tailored uniforms, with patches designed after number cards of the Sword and Baton suits on the right sleeves.

The High Priestess moved around, accompanied by several of the Batons, and placing hands on the wounded, and Tower directed the

Swords and other Batons to collect the restrained aliens.

‘So, then...’ Sam shook her head. ‘Well. I’m Sam, now. That...’

‘It’s alright, miss. You don’t need to say more.’ Chariot moved aside, slightly, and raised her hand in front of her face, again, pressing the button on her wrist. ‘Chariot to Fool. Tower is incoming with prisoners. High Priestess will soon by incoming with casualties. I will follow after collecting further information about the situation.’

‘Roger, Chariot.’ Fool’s voice came over the communicator. ‘I’ll debrief you when you return.’

‘Roger, Fool.’ She released the button. ‘Thank you, Sam. Why don’t you speak with High Priestess?’

She may be able to help you adjust to...’ She hesitated. ‘Your new situation.’

‘Thank you. But, one more thing, please?’ Sam raised a hand. ‘Do you know what they are?’

‘You mean the Xenos?’

Sam nodded.

‘No idea. Yet.’ Chariot looked the aliens over as they were toted out of the room. ‘We will, after Fool and Heirophant get to speak with them. But, just yet? No.’

‘Well, thank you.’



Shako, Wukong, and Tsukiko sat against a wall, Wukong waving to the Baton who had just checked them for injuries.

‘So...’ Wukong looked at Shako. ‘Was Johnny one of them all along?’

‘No.’ Shako removed her helmet and ran her fingers through her hair. ‘They must have captured him after we arrived.’ She shook her head. ‘I do hope he’s OK.’

‘Yeah...’ Wukong stretched. ‘Seems like a nice enough guy. And Starlight apparently knew him. If he’s dead, we’re gonna have to tell her...’

Emiko smacked his arm lightly, and looked over at Tsukiko. ‘He’s really not the insensitive jerk he looks like sometimes.’

‘I resent that!’ Frank rubbed his arm where Emiko had hit him.

‘OK, if you insist. You are an insensitive jerk.’

Frank peered at her a moment. ‘I honestly should have seen that coming.’

Tsukiko laughed, then sighed. She stood and stretched. ‘Someone’s coming.’ Her ears twitched toward the door, just as a TAROT agent – a young woman with a badge representing the 1 of Cups on her shoulder came through the door.

The woman nodded to the three of them. ‘Sorry if I’m interrupting something but, there’s a transport waiting to bring you to the quarantine centre. If you’ll just collect your thi--’

‘Quarantine?’ Frank frowned. ‘Why are we being quarantined?’

‘Oh, no worries.’ The Cup smiled. ‘It’s standard operating procedure in the event of an extra-terrestrial incursion.’ She waved a hand. ‘Theoretically, they could be, knowingly or unknowingly, carrying weird pathogens.’ She laughed at the look of concern that crossed the heroes’ faces. ‘Probably not, but SOP is to be absolutely sure, y’know.’

‘Well, OK, then.’ Frank shook a finger at the ceiling. ‘But if I get space herpes, I’m not going to be a happy monkey!’ He started

toward the door.

Emiko and Tsukiko looked at him for a moment, then at each other. They followed, silently, shaking their heads.



‘We’ll see you on the transport.’ Emiko waved to Frank as she and Tsukiko headed toward their rooms, and he in the other direction, toward his.

Frank walked backwards, continuing to talk to the others, even as he headed toward his room. ‘Yes.

The transport, which will take us to the quarantine, where we will discover if we have some terrifying alien version of Chicken Pox!’

‘Don’t worry, Frank, keep that up, and you’ll scare the germs off!’ Emiko laughed and turned back down the hall. She glanced at Tsukiko. ‘You want to say something..’

‘Are you going to tell him?’ Tsukiko glanced back at Frank, then over at Emiko, as she switched to Japanese.

‘Tell him what?’

‘Please, Emi...’ Tsukiko shook her head. ‘You *obviously* like him, and even I can see he likes you, too.’

She looked over at Emiko, who was turning slightly red. ‘So, are you going to tell him?’

‘I can’t...’ Emiko shook her head. ‘I don’t know if I’m going to stay in Angel City. I can’t...’ She pulled back, startled at a small change in Tsukiko’s posture and facial expression.

‘Emiko.’ Tsukiko frowned and stopped. ‘Life’s too short to...’ She shrugged and started walking again.

‘It’s too short for “can’t”. We’ve just gotten a vivid demonstration of that, haven’t we?’

Emiko looked at Tsukiko. ‘Tsukiko...’ She frowned.

Tsukiko smiled at her. ‘It’d make me feel better, knowing you were letting yourself have some happiness.’

Emiko smiled, then stopped as they reached their rooms. ‘Alright. I’ll tell him.’

‘Good.’

‘On one condition.’ Emiko grinned.

Tsukiko raised an eyebrow. ‘What condition?’

‘That you tell Mimi.’

Tsukiko’s eyes went wide, and she reddened. ‘But she doesn’t...’  
She looked at Emiko. ‘Does she?’

Emiko nodded. ‘I can’t guarantee it won’t be like that other girl...  
what was her name?’

Tsukiko sighed and made a face, as her ears drooped. ‘Yuri. That  
was frustrating.’

Emiko nodded. ‘Right. It might go like that again, but...’

Tsukiko smiled, biting her lip, and looked at the floor, briefly.  
‘Alright. Deal. I’ll tell Mimi, and you tell Frank.’ She turned  
toward her door, her ears wiggling a little. ‘Or, I could keep you  
from chickening out by telling him for you.’ She hurried into her  
room, before Emiko could respond.



# CHAPTER 8



Emiko and Tsukiko were silent as the TAROT transport carried them to the quarantine centre. Mimi looked toward Tsukiko, occasionally, her brow furrowed, but she kept her peace. Frank, for his part, gave no sign of noticing their unusual silence, and spoke, at length, on theoretical symptoms of the hypothetical alien diseases to be on the lookout for.

Before too long, the transport landed at the centre – a former Soviet space program base north of Saint Petersburg. A young man in a TAROT uniform bearing the 2 of Cups opened the transport door and stepped inside. ‘Alright, folks, we’re here. If you could disembark in an orderly fashion, we’re right outside the dorm where you folks’ll be housed.’ He stepped closer to the front of the transport as the heroes stood and began collecting their luggage. ‘Women’ll be in the right wing, men in the left.’

Dining’s in between. Unless y’all have really caught something from the xenos, you’ll be out of here in a couple days.’ He grinned slightly at the heroes who glared at him. ‘Not that I think you have, mind.’

Frank and Emiko carried her trunk out of the transport, with his duffle laid on top of it.

‘At times like this, I bet you really regret having that heavy armour...’ Frank grinned at Emiko, who laughed, and shook her head, absently, before glancing over toward Mimi and Tsukiko, who had stopped just before the dorm.

She looked over at him. ‘Now that you mention it, I think I picked it up badly. Would you mind stopping for a few minutes, so I can rest my arms?’

Frank shook his head and they set the trunk down. Emiko sat on it, and after a moment, Frank joined her, shifting his duffle to the ground at his feet. He glanced over at her, then turned to watch Tsukiko, as she was.

Tsukiko’s ears were twitching slightly, in a nervous pattern, and she wasn’t looking directly at Mimi.

‘What are they saying?’ Frank looked over at Emiko, who shrugged.

‘They’re turned wrong to read their lips.’ Emiko smiled and curled her legs under her while she watched.

Tsukiko finished saying her peace, and the pair stood, quietly for a moment. Tsukiko continued to look at the ground, her ears drooping slightly.

Then, Mimi reached out and took her hand and replied.

Tsukiko looked up, and looked directly at Mimi for the first time since the conversation started, her ears standing straight. She said something in reply, then when Mimi nodded in reply, she pulled her into a hug.

‘Well, whatever they were talking about, I’m glad it worked out for them.’ Frank stood.

Emiko nodded and smiled. ‘Me too.’ She bit her lip as she stood.

‘Ready to get started again?’ Frank reached for the trunk, then blinked as Emiko reached out and touched his arm.

‘No, not quite.’ She shook her head, and sat down again. She looked up at him, and smiled slightly, then shook her head. ‘Can you sit down, you’re taller than me when we’re both standing, and like this it’s kind of ridiculous...’

Frank shrugged and settled on the trunk again, facing her, and leaning on his knees. ‘Sure... Any reason for bringing me down to

eye level?’

Emiko nodded and shifted to face him better, bringing herself up on one knee. ‘Yes.’ She brushed a lock of hair behind her ear, uncovering the patch of scales on her chin a little bit. ‘Tsukiko and I were talking, and she convinced me that life’s just too unsure to leave some things unsaid....’ She trailed off, and looked at him.

‘Things like what?’ Frank scratched his head, and looked back at her.

Emiko sighed and shook her head, her smile broadening. ‘Things like...’ She pulled her other leg up, so she was kneeling on the trunk, and leaned forward, resting her hands on her knees. ‘I think...’ She sighed. ‘I’ve never been good at this...’

‘At what?’ Frank tilted his head, and raised an eyebrow, drawing another sigh and a laugh from Emiko.

She reached out and took his cheeks in her hands. ‘You’re infuriating sometimes. OK, I’ll just say it. I like you, Frank.’

Frank blinked. ‘... Really?’

Emiko nodded. ‘Yes, really.’

Frank smiled. ‘I...like you too.’

Emiko let go of his cheeks and turned away, sitting down. ‘I know...’ She tapped her cheek under her eye. ‘I’m really good at reading people, remember?’

‘Oh, right.’ Frank frowned. ‘But, if you knew I felt the same way, why was it so hard to tell me?’

Emiko frowned. ‘Because, there were other things to consider, too...’

‘Like what?’ Frank looked at her, his brow furrowed.

Emiko sat quietly for a minute, then brushed her fingers over the scales on her cheek.

‘Oh.’ Frank frowned. ‘But I wouldn’t be like that. I like the way you look. Besides, I’m a giant monkey.’

Emiko looked at him and smiled. ‘I know. I didn’t really think you would, but...’ She shook her head, and fell silent again.

Frank slid off the trunk and picked up his duffle. ‘It’s OK. I understand.’ He leaned on the trunk. ‘So, does this mean we’re a couple, now?’

Emiko laughed and stood up. ‘I suppose it does.’ She reached down and took hold of the trunk. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Frank straightened and took hold of his end of the trunk.



‘So, like I said, the hairy bastard started out in Kent, see, so everyone was lookin’ there.’ Syd waved his fork toward Frank. ‘Except for me, ‘cuz I don’t much get along with Invicta, see?’ He set his fork down. ‘But, a couple weeks in, there’s rumours the bugger’d been spotted in Mayfair. Then I started looking, but, no luck, y’know?’ He snorted and leaned on the table. ‘So, anyway, I decide to stop to eat, and I hit this Chinese place in Soho. Three guesses who I ran into coming out.’ He shook his head. ‘I’m not allowed in that restaurant any more.’ He turned toward Frank again, and grinned. ‘Luckily, they deliver, and thought saving their lives was worth the occasional discou...’ He trailed off, and looked over Frank’s shoulder. ‘I’ll have to finish the story later. Got something to handle...’

‘You already fi--’ Frank shook his head as Syd stood and walked past him without another word.

‘Whatever.’ He turned back to his meal.



Syd wandered over to Li Xiu, hands casually resting in the pockets of his leather jacket. ‘Oi, Li Xiu.’

Li Xiu looked over at him, and smiled slightly. ‘Ah, hello.’ She looked him over, shifting her tray of food in her hands. ‘You look rather different, in clothes.’

‘Yeah. Most people say that.’ Syd grinned. ‘So, anyway. About what happened the other night...’

‘Tekno’s issues are Tekno’s. But he is, on the whole, sensible. Nothing will come of the argument.’ She shook her head.

‘Eh, right. Good, that.’ Syd coughed. ‘Not really what I wanted to talk about, though.’

‘Ah. Yes.’ Li Xiu looked away. ‘That.’ She started toward a table, and he followed close behind. ‘These things happen in high stress situations.’

‘Yeah. I suppose they do.’ Syd grinned over at her. ‘Then again, I’ve never had it happen, and my life *is* stress, y’know.’

‘Nor I, for that matter.’ She looked over at him.

‘’S what I’m sayin’, right?’ He reached into his pocket, and pulled out pad of paper and a pen. He scribbled something on the paper, and handed it to her. ‘So, I was thinkin’, you ever come to London...’

‘I will call you... And, if you happen to come to Beijing..’

‘I’ll give you a ring.’ He handed over his pen.



Frank cleared his throat, and leaned on the desk that a harried TAROT agent, a woman wearing the 5 of Cups, worked. ‘Sorry, ’scuse me?’

The Cup looked up and blinked at him. ‘Oh, I’m sorry. Have you been there long?’

‘Nah, just a couple minutes.’

‘I apologize, in any case. How can I help you?’ The Cup smiled at Frank.

Frank straightened and scratched the back of his head. ‘Yeah, I was



wondering if you had some information on a friend...well, a colleague.’ He shrugged. ‘We haven’t seen him, see...’

‘I thought all the heroes came in at the same time?’

‘He was captured by the aliens...’

‘Mm. I never heard about any captives coming in, but I’ll see what I can find out.’ The Cup picked up a phone and hit a button. She smiled up at Frank while waiting for an answer. ‘Hello? Ah, hello.’ She nodded. ‘Yes, one of the heroes was asking about one of the others. He said he hadn’t seen his friend since they arrived.’ She nodded to nobody. ‘Yes, I know, I’m the one in charge of their dorm, after all.

But he says he’d been captured by the xenos.’ She looked down. ‘Ah. That figures. Right. Thank you.’

The Cup hung up and looked up at Frank. Neither said anything for a moment.

‘I’m sorry.’ The Cup shook her head. ‘The two who were captured by the xenos... They found their bodies in the upper reaches of the tower.’

Frank nodded his head, frowning slightly. ‘Thanks...I figured as

much.'

'I'm very sorry.'

Frank thanked her and wandered off, thinking



'How are you holding up?'

Amy looked up from her hat, and smiled, slightly, at Tanya, who'd come over to her bed without being noticed. 'I'm better.' She set the hat aside and looked up. 'Thank you.'

Tanya sat on the edge of the bed, on the other side of the hat. 'That's a lot of responsibility to have handed to you.' She tapped the top of the hat.

Amy nodded. 'I guess you know all about that.'

'Mmm.' Tanya nodded. 'I was fifteen when I took over. It was a really heavy birthday present.' She laughed. 'Not that Dad planned it like that, or anything like that. It just happened that I got my powers, and my half-sister wanted to retire at around then. So, they sprung it on me on my birthday.' She grinned. 'Dad introduced me to the Queen a couple days later. That was weird,

since she was acting like meeting me was some huge honour, because I'm Britannia, you know? The personification of the whole country. Meanwhile, I'm this young girl from Peckham thinking "this is the bloody *Queen!*"

She shook her head. 'Then I started thinking about how I shouldn't swear in front of the Queen, even in my head.'

Amy laughed. 'Sounds embarrassing.'

'That's not even the start of it.' Tanya buried her face in her hands as she started laughing herself. 'Dad leaned over to me half way through the ceremony, and asked if I had to go to the loo, or something.

Apparently, I was making this face....'

'Oh, God, that's horrifying.' Amy bit down on her lip to stifle the laughter.

'That's putting it mildly. It would have been horrifying if I was *five*, but I was bloody *fifteen*. I swear Dad did it on purpose.' She glanced over at Amy. 'Ah, jeez. I probably shouldn't be joking like this...'

'No, no, please.' Amy smiled at her. 'Patriot's been ignoring me,

for some reason. Your dad and Marianne have been walking on eggshells around me, and I don't even know anyone else, even tangentially.' She glanced down at the hat. 'It's nice to have a normal conversation, again. Thank you.'

'Well, ok, then.' Tanya leaned back on her elbows. 'So, how did you start?'

'Mmm.' Amy picked up the hat and turned, to lean against the wall at the head of the bed. 'Well, I was about the same age as you, actually. Sixteen, but, you know, close enough.' She looked at her bags, which lay open, next to her bed, with her costume folded on top. 'I wasn't going by American Way at the time, though.'

'Oh?' Tanya looked over at her. 'What did you call yourself?'

'Nothing. I was one of those dorks that let the newspapers name them.'

'Ah, so what did they call you?'

Amy laughed. 'Nothing.' She shook her head. 'Apparently I wasn't interesting enough.'

'So, that's why you started calling yourself American Way?'

‘Not quite.’ Amy put the hat on her head, and her physique shifted, as it had before. ‘That’s when I decided that I needed to come up with a name and more memorable costume, but I didn’t come up with one right away.’

‘Then when?’

‘When I met Sa...’ She stopped and sighed. ‘Jacob. He encouraged me, inspired me, and mentored me.’

‘And that’s why.’

‘And that’s why.’ Amy smiled.

‘I’m confused about something, though...’ Tanya sat up. ‘Clearly he thought a lot of you.’

‘Apparently so.’

‘So, why were you so surprised that he chose you as his successor?’

‘His successor as Uncle Sam.’ Amy raised an eyebrow.

‘Yes.’

Amy blinked a few times, then laughed a little. ‘Well, when you hear the name “Uncle Sam”...I’m not exactly the image that comes to mind, am I?’

Tanya looked at her for a moment, then nodded. ‘I suppose not. I guess it’d be like one of my brothers being Britannia. Though, mind, Teddy would like right nice in the dress.’

‘Yes, exactly.’ Amy chuckled and pulled off the hat, and her body returned to its usual form. ‘But...that didn’t matter, so here I am.’

‘The hat won’t work with your costume, though.’

‘Nope. Gonna have to change it.’ The hat went back on, and again she changed. ‘I’m thinking I should go traditional with it.’

‘So, doing the pharaonic thing, eh?’

‘The whonow?’

‘Fake beard. Pharaohs wore them, as...nevermind.’

‘Ah, no. Not quite that traditional.’ Amy laughed. ‘Just the suit. And the hat.’

‘Too bad. I think the beard’d suit you.’ Tanya looked up at the

bunk above Amy's.

'I have no idea how to take that.'



The sun shone brightly as the TAROT transports landed in the airport parking lot, 2 days later. Robotic trolleys were waiting as the heroes began unloading.

'Convenient. I guess TAROT called ahead.' Frank helped Emiko load her trunk onto a trolley then dropped his bag on top of it.

'TAROT is efficient like that.' A young man in a TAROT uniform, bearing the 7 of Cups handed Frank the control for the trolley, then turned and gave a second to Yatagarasu, who was loading his gear onto the trolley that Tsukiko and Mimi had already loaded onto. 'The Coins make the job easier for the rest of us.' He nodded to them and hurried off.

Tsukiko stepped over to Emiko and pulled her into a hug. 'Guess this is goodbye.'

Emiko hugged her back. 'I'll write. Don't worry.'

'You'd better. I've really missed you.'

‘I’ve missed you too, and I’m sorry I haven’t written more.’  
Emiko pulled away.

Tsukiko nodded. ‘As long as you make up for it.’ She turned to Frank. ‘You! Make sure she writes!’

‘Yes, Ma’am...’ Frank saluted, then looked at Emiko. ‘Man, she got scary all of a sudden.’

‘Suzuki.’ Yatagarasu called to Tsukiko, then started toward one of the waiting planes.

‘I guess my plane’s waiting.’ Tsukiko hugged Emiko again. ‘I’m glad we got to see each other again, even under these circumstances.’

‘Me, too.’ Emiko walked with Tsukiko as she headed back toward Mimi, who was waiting for her.

‘And it was good meeting you, Mimi.’ She smiled at Mimi.

‘And you.’ Mimi bowed slightly to Emiko, then she and Tsukiko turned to follow Yatagarasu.

Emiko turned, and looked toward the tower the conference had been in. She buckled with a groan.



‘Emiko!’ Frank leapt forward to catch her before she hit the ground, Tsukiko bounding to her side soon after.

‘Emi!’ Tsukiko knelt beside Emiko as Frank helped her sit on their trolley. ‘Are you OK? What happened?’

‘I don’t know.... I just, looked at the tower and....’ Emiko fell silent, and moved her hands away from her face.

The three of them looked at each other. ‘The tower.’

Emiko straightened and looked at the tower, again, pitching into Tsukiko with a quiet moan.

‘Definitely the tower.’ Frank absently stroked Emiko’s shoulders. ‘Why would looking at the tower make you sick, though?’

‘I don’t...’ Emiko’s reply was cut off by a muted explosion, followed by a sound not entirely unlike the voices of the aliens. The three looked toward the direction it came from – the tower – just in time to see the side of one of the onion domes burst out... then a shimmering, shifting confusion overtook the domes. When it passed, moments later, the tower had changed. Or, rather, the domes had. The roof of the tower was no longer capped with metal domes, but rather an irregular organic mass, tendrils extending

down from it and covering the top several floors.

‘That may explain it.’ Frank scratched his head, an eyebrow raised and a slight frown on his face.

‘Yes.’ Emiko stood, and looked up at the tower. ‘I didn’t see it. But, I did.’

‘Are you following this?’ Frank leaned behind Emiko and looked over at Tsukiko.

‘Not really.’ Tsukiko’s ears twitched slightly. ‘Emi?’

‘I mean...’ Emiko shook her head. ‘Sorry, my head’s still a bit foggy from before. I mean, I saw it, but I didn’t perceive it. Something about it stopped me.’

‘And that made you sick, because...’ Frank snapped his fingers. ‘One part of your brain was saying you saw it, and another was saying otherwise. It’s like motion sickness!’

‘I think so, yes...’ Emiko shook her head. ‘But, even if not, whatever was causing it is gone.’ She smiled. ‘So you both can stop worrying.’

Frank smirked and looked over Emiko’s head at Tsukiko. ‘She

thinks that'll stop us. How cute.'

Tsukiko laughed and looked at Emiko. 'Email me as soon as you get back to Angel City. I want to be sure you got back safe.'

Emiko sighed and nodded. 'I will, I will.' She hugged Tsukiko. 'But don't you have a plane to catch?'

'Right.' Tsukiko gave Emiko another squeeze, then bounded off, without another word.

Frank looked toward the runways. 'So do we, let's go.'

Emiko nodded and they started toward their plane.



It was early evening when the pair deplaned.

'Frank! Emiko!' Starlight hurried toward them, though she was in civilian clothes, not her costume.

'I'm glad you two are OK.'

'Thanks...' Frank scratched his chin and frowned slightly. 'So, I guess you heard about Johnny...'

Starlight nodded. ‘From him, actually.’

Frank and Emiko looked at each other, then at Starlight.

‘Well, he had his replacement tell me, but...’

‘Whoah, whoah...’ Frank waved a hand. ‘Back up, please.’

‘Yes, I don’t understand...’ Emiko looked at Jenny, her head tilted.

‘How could he tell you...or tell his replacement to tell you?’

‘And how is he replaced, already?’

Starlight blinked, then shook her head. ‘Sorry. Johnny...’ Starlight waved her hand. ‘All the Johnny Canucks... They get their powers from the spirits of the previous ones. Don’t ask me how the first got his powers, he never told the later ones, so the one I knew didn’t know.’

The three of them started toward baggage claim, and Emiko looked toward Jenny. ‘Should we really be talking about this in our regular clothes?’

Jenny shrugged. ‘It’s not like any of us have secret identities.’ She stopped and turned to look at the other two. ‘Speaking of which... Are you two up to speaking to the press?’

‘I suppose so...a week’s a lot of time to stop freaking out, y’know?’ Frank looked at Emiko. ‘What do you think?’

‘I’m fine. And we probably should.’

‘Thank god for that, since I’ve already agreed to a press conference, tomorrow afternoon.’ Jenny turned and started toward baggage claim again, whistling idly.

END