

## *SEVEN*

“WHAT!!!” Hidishi yelled. “You let those kids beat you!”

“I’m sorry, Sir,” the guy replied trembling, “but they were too strong for us.”

“TOO STRONG?!!!” Hidishi yelled. “I’LL SHOW YOU STRONG!!!”

Hidishi extended his hand. The guy’s eyes widened as he felt a sharp pain. Blood oozed from both sides of the guy’s body. Hidishi removed his hand. The guy dropped to his knees, falling face first. Hidishi wiped the blood off his hands, asking his secretary to send in a cleanup crew. Just then, someone knocked on the door.

“Enter,” said Hidishi.

It was his secretary, carrying a manila folder in her hand. She was tall, pretty, and didn’t take anyone’s bullshit. She wore professional business attire and kept her brown hair in a bun.

“Sir, here’s the DNA results you wanted from Sgt. Gregs,” his secretary replied.

She made her way to Hidishi’s desk and placed the manila folder on it. Then, she took a few steps back. Hidishi took the manila folder and carefully read the contents. A smile spread across his face.

“Also, your reinforcements have arrived,” his secretary said.

“Excellent and in good time,” Hidishi said. “Send them in.”

“Right away Sir,” she said as she closed the door behind her.

A few minutes later, five guys dressed in black jumpsuits stood in front of Hidishi. A huge smile spread over his face as he looked at them.

“You guys must be the best of the best?” he asked.

“YES SIR!” they shouted in unison.

“Excellent,” Hidishi said grinning evilly.

Clattering sounds filled the back alley. From an outside perspective, one female was surrounded by five brawly men. But from the inside, it was a bad idea.

This young girl had all the right curves in all the right places. Her mocha complexion made her look a little Hispanic. She had dark brown shoulder length hair and dark brown eyes. She wore blue jeans shorts and a baby blue tank top with a yin-yang symbol on the front.

She dashed forward and hit the nearest guy in the face with her knee. Blood squirted out from his broken nose as his body let gravity carry him to the ground. Pissed, another guy stepped up with a jab. She dodged and countered with a left hook. He clenched his stomach as he fell to his knees.

“Hmph, barely a warm-up,” she said.

The remaining three stared at her, each with a pulsating vein on their forehead. They teamed up and quickly charged towards her. She leaped forward, stepping on one of their faces. The extra boost flew her into the air. She could see over the rooftops, feeling she could grasp the moon in her hands.

“KICUNE!!!” the young girl shouted.

Suddenly, light began to swirl around her as she plummeted back to Earth. The light crashed into the ground and quickly dispersed, revealing someone different.

The young girl’s transformation was like, damn! Her body was covered in golden yellow fur with white fur around her chest and abdomen. She stood in a tiptoe position and had a bushy yellow tail with a white tip. Her nose and mouth had

extended out and her ears had moved to the top of her head. She had green eyes, a small black nose and razor-sharp claws. Even her clothes made her furry body look fine.

The three guys froze in terror. She grinned as she leaped into the air, crossing her arms over her chest.

“NEEDLE STORM!!!” she shouted.

Instantly, a shower of needle-shaped energy came crashing down onto the guys. They dodged but couldn’t keep up with the fast pace. The needles hit their marks. Tiny explosions filled the back alley as the guys flew in different directions.

“So, are you guys ready to talk?” she asked, towering over their bruised bodies.

Rosa and Tracy were at *Macy’s* shopping for the Spring Dance. Although Rosa and Tracy were classmates, they never spoke to each other in Gym class. It was after Tracy’s first date with Mark that they got to know each other and quickly became friends.

“This blouse will go nicely with this skirt,” said Rosa picking out a red long-sleeve blouse from the rack.

“What do you think of this outfit?” asked Tracy holding khaki pants and a black tank top.

“Girl, it’s cute, but you need something better.”

Rosa showed Tracy a black skirt with a blue off-the-shoulder blouse.

“I think Mark will like that better,” Tracy replied with a smile.

Silence filled the air. Then, Tracy asked Rosa a question.

“Hey, why did you choose Andrew as your date?”

“I told you before: the other guys in our school are jerks.”

“Maybe, but is that the real reason?”

Rosa averted her eyes and didn’t answer.

The young girl arrived home to find her mother sitting on the couch in her robe. She looked at her mother and quickly averted her eyes. She could feel a lecture rising from her mother’s throat.

“Where were you? It’s already eleven and way past your curfew.”

“Mom, I...”

“Don’t ‘Mom me’, Shanta Shepherd! I know you’ve been going out and fighting those thugs. Just ‘cause you got some strange powers doesn’t make you a superhero.”

Mrs. Shepherd looked like an older version of Shanta. She was the same height as Shanta and had the same mocha complexion. Even the dark brown eyes, semi-wide nose, and shoulder-length black hair were the same.

“You expect me to hide my powers and never use them?” Shanta asked angrily. “You were there when Madam Renee gave them me.”

Mrs. Shepherd began to recall the event in her mind...

It was a cold winter night ten years ago. The snow had fallen the night before and the city sweepers hadn't made their rounds yet. On their way towards the grocery store, Mrs. Shepherd noticed a figure slowly approaching them. It was Madam Renee, but she was walking instead of sitting in her chair. Shanta, who was holding Mrs. Shepherd's hand, couldn't stop staring at Madam Renee. It almost felt like meeting a celebrity for the first time. Madam Renee stopped and stared back at Shanta through her dark shades. Mrs. Shepherd stepped in front of Shanta, glaring at Madam Renee.

"I mean you no harm, Mrs. Shepherd," Madam Renee said with a smile.

"How...do you know me?" Mrs. Shepherd asked with an astonished look.

"Your child is one of the chosen few to save this world," Madam Renee answered. I know it is hard to believe, but it is the truth. A dark force is slowly approaching. There is no time to waste."

Quickly, Madam Renee pulled out a deck of cards from her pocket. She shuffled the deck. She slowly pulled out a card from the deck and revealed it to Mrs. Shepherd. It was a picture of a fox. Confused, Mrs. Shepherd took the card from Madam Renee's hand.

"Please, give the card to Shanta," Madam Renee insisted.

Mrs. Shepherd did what she was told. Shanta held the card in her tiny hands. Instantly, a swirl of light surrounded her. Mrs. Shepherd stepped back, shielding her eyes from the intense light. Cries of pain rang in Mrs. Shepherd's ears as she heard Shanta screaming. Try as she might, she couldn't progress further to save her daughter. The light faded. Mrs. Shepherd ran towards Shanta, who was lying on the ground face first. She held her in her arms. Shanta's eyes fluttered and opened. Mrs. Shepherd embraced Shanta tightly.

*Even after all that, I still can't get over the tattoo,* Mrs. Shepherd thought as she slowly came back to reality. "Just be careful, okay? You know I hate worrying."

"I know, Mom," replied Shanta and kissed her mother on the forehead.

Three days came and went. Soon, the School Dance was only five hours away. Andrew waited anxiously for the bell to ring for the two o'clock dismissal in his Algebra class. He looked at Rosa for a moment and then back at the clock. The

bell rang loudly as everyone scrambled out of the seats. As Andrew placed some of his books into his locker, he couldn't help but think about Rosa.

*She is pretty, but will she enjoy dancing with me?*

Andrew knew he acted differently around her, like he didn't want to be bothered by her. But Andrew just didn't know how to tell her how he felt.

"Yo, Drew, you ready for tonight?" a voice called out to him.

It was Josh with a huge grin. They bumped fists.

"Kinda," Andrew replied shyly.

"Aren't you going with Rosa?"

"Yeah..."

"Dude, you are so crush'n on her, right?"

"S-Shut up, man!"

"Dude, it's cool. I think Rosa's a sexy chick too. You should totally hit that."

"Josh, stop saying childish things," another voice called out.

It was Emily. "Andrew, I think it's cute that you like Rosa. You should tell her how you feel."

"But...I..." Andrew started.

"Just let it come out natural," Emily replied with a smile. "I'm sure she likes you too."

"I hope so..." Andrew said with a sigh.

Andrew got home, placing his backpack down on the bed. He quickly took a shower. Andrew wiped away the steam from the mirror, staring into it. He really wondered if Rosa really saw him more than a friend. He sighed as he put on a yellow-

collared shirt with blue horizontal stripes, blue jeans, and his new Tims he bought last week. Andrew walked to the kitchen to get something to eat. The smell enticed his nose as Lily had already made dinner for everyone.

“Thanks,” Andrew said with a smile, “It looks great.”

Lily smiled back. “Eat up before it gets cold.”

William came into the dining room wearing a blue-collared shirt with gray horizontal stripes, blue jeans, and blue and yellow *Reeboks*. He even combed his raggedy brown hair.

“You look tight, Will,” Andrew said before he ate another bite of his food.

“You too, Drew,” William replied. He moved closer towards Andrew. “So, I heard you’re taking Rosa to the dance.”

“You are? That’s great Drew!” replied Mike walking into the kitchen. “You and Rosa make a cute couple.”

Andrew stopped chewing and ignored Mike’s last comment. With a mouthful of food, he said to William, “Yeah...so?”

“Oh, nothing,” William answered. “I just wanted to know if it was true. Oh yeah, you might want to hurry up since you’re picking her up, right?”

Andrew looked at his watch: he had ten minutes before he picked Rosa up. Andrew rushed to the bathroom and quickly brushed his teeth. He put some cologne on his neck. He took one last look at himself in the mirror. With enough satisfaction, Andrew jogged towards the door. He kissed Lily goodbye and ran outside the door.

Andrew arrived at the Sanchez apartment with two minutes to spare.

The Sanchez’s tenth floor apartment is like the Roberts’ apartment: small yet comfortable. Andrew didn’t know if they redecorated since the last time he came over, which was around age ten. He mostly remembered the living room. It was the same size as his, but it had beige carpeting. Ms. Sanchez always kept her rosaries in her oak cabinet, which was on the left

side of the room. The TV and couch were on the right side and were tilted a little. The bathrooms were always clean while Rosa's room was always dirty.

Andrew rang the doorbell and waited for someone to open the door. A few seconds later, Ms. Sanchez opened the door.

Ms. Sanchez looked like an older version of Rosa. She was the same height as Lily and was a little plump. She had brown shoulder-length hair and hazel eyes.

"Rosa will be out shortly," she said sweetly. "Please, come in, Andrew."

Andrew stepped inside. It was the way he remembered it. Minutes later, Rosa walked out of her room.

"Aren't we sexy tonight," Ms. Sanchez said in a slick tone.

Man, Rosa looked hot. Rosa wore a red long-sleeved blouse showing her belly button and some cleavage, a blue jeans skirt that made her butt look bigger, and her blue shoes. She even wore red lipstick to match her outfit. Not only that, but her hair was up in a bun which made her hazel eyes glow a little more.

"You look hot," Andrew said bashfully.

"You don't think it's too much?" she asked, not listening to him.

"Oh no," he answered with a flushed face. "It's just perfect."

As they walked to the gym entrance, Rosa held Andrew's arm. His face turned bright red. Once inside, they stood there in awe looking at the decorated gym.

It was awesome. Streamers and balloons hung everywhere. Over in the left corner was the DJ playing the hottest hits. In the middle of the gym was a huge disco globe that glistened all over the place. Even the colored spotlights added a nice touch to the décor. The gym was crowded with people, even though most of them were sitting down talking. When the music got crunk, everyone got up and danced.

Andrew quickly found Mark and Tracy on the dance floor. Boy, were they having fun. They were bumping and grinding to all the hits. He even saw Josh trying to impress this cute girl with his moves. To his surprise, Josh managed to get the girl to dance with him longer. Emily, who wore a pink halter dress with a white cardigan, waved to Andrew and Rosa.

They waved back and stared at the dance floor. Andrew looked at Rosa, asking her if she wanted to dance. She nodded, leading Andrew to the dance floor. As Andrew danced with Rosa, he realized he wasn't half-bad.

"You're getting better," she said to Andrew as they continued to dance.

"Thanks," Andrew said trying not to lose his concentration.

As the night went on, Rosa and Andrew danced to almost every song the DJ dished out. Even William joined in, dancing with a girl in his class. The place was jumping! But when the DJ said it was time to find that special someone for a slow song, Andrew immediately freaked.

"I uh...I uh..." he managed to say.

"What's wrong?" Rosa teased. "You're not afraid to dance a slow song with me?"

"Me...noooo," Andrew answered trying to act cool.

"Good, now I want you to lead," she said smiling.

Andrew gulped. "Sure."

He placed his hands on her hips. She wrapped her arms around his neck. Andrew began to feel flush. Rosa rested her head on his shoulder, turning Andrew's face into a tomato. As the music played, Andrew led the way. Suddenly, he felt calm.

Andrew wrapped his arms around Rosa's hips and let his body get closer to hers. Her face grew hot. Andrew wasn't sure where he got the courage to do this, but he liked every minute of it.

Meanwhile, in a black sedan, the five guys in jumpsuits waited for the right moment to strike. One of the guys looked at his watch.

He nodded. "Let's make this fast."

As the song continued to play, Rosa and Andrew looked into each other's eyes. Andrew smiled.

"What?" she asked in a sweet voice.

"You're so beautiful," Andrew answered. "And I can't take my eyes off of you."

Rosa's face turned red. *Why am I so nervous? Is Tracy right: do I really...?*

She gave Andrew a warm smile. Andrew smiled back. Soon, they both slowly leaned their heads forward, and closed their eyes. Andrew couldn't believe he was going to kiss Rosa. BAM! The gym doors flew open revealing the five guys in jumpsuits. Rosa held Andrew tightly as the guys walked closer to the dance floor.

From the looks of these guys, they were elite. Mark and Andrew knew Hidishi sent these goons to stop them. The only problem was how were they going to transform without everyone knowing?

"We're looking for two high-schoolers who can meta-morph," the leader said. "Have you seen them?"

Nobody answered. Nobody had a clue what they were talking about. Tracy and William both glanced at Mark and Andrew.

"I'll ask again nicely," he said angrily. "Where are they?"

"Dude, what the hell are you talking about?" Josh asked, looking confused. "And what's meta-morph? Is that some code word for selling drugs?"

The leader sighed. "Look, have you seen them or not?"

Josh shook his head. The leader looked around. Everyone was shaking their heads.

"I guess they haven't seen them," the leader said, shrugging his shoulders. He looked at his team. "We can't have any witnesses. Torch the place, Flameboy."

A short skinny kid with black spiky hair, a long face and dark brown eyes stepped forward from the group and instantly lit his hands on fire. He raised his fiery hands towards the ceiling and began firing flames. Everyone ran for safety, screaming at the top of their lungs. Soon, Mark, Tracy, Rosa, William, and Andrew were the only ones left.

"That was easy," said Flameboy as he extinguished the flames surrounding his hands.

"William, take the girls to safety," Andrew said still focusing his eyes on the group.

"On it," replied William.

"Are you crazy!" Rosa exclaimed, still holding onto Andrew. "You can't fight them."

"Don't worry about me," said Andrew, looking back at her. "I can take care of myself."

“You better go too,” replied Mark looking at Tracy.

Both William and Tracy quickly grabbed Rosa.

“Come on Rosa, let the boys handle it,” said Tracy. “I know they can take care of themselves.”

Rosa looked at William. William nodded, agreeing with Tracy. Once William, Rosa and Tracy left the gym, Mark and Andrew were ready for business.

“Who the hell are you guys?” Andrew asked.

“We are the Meta-Morphic Five,” the leader said.

“Well, at least their name is original,” said Mark sarcastically.

“I’m Big C,” the leader said. He introduced the rest of the gang by size. “Next to me is Rampage, Gyro, Sparks and you already met Flameboy, the youngest of the group.”

Big C was as tall as Shaq and was very muscular. He had brown hair with bangs that hung over his ice blue eyes. His long face made him look older even though he was a teenager.

Rampage was the heaviest one in the group. Even though he was made of muscle instead of fat, he still looked like a giant ball of blubber. He was bald, had a round face and brown eyes.

Gyro was a weird guy. He had long blue hair that covered his brown eyes and smiled, in a psychotic way.

Sparks was the quiet one. He had white spiky hair and a small face. His eye color was a mystery since he had very narrow eyes.

“The name’s Mark and this is Drew,” replied Mark. “AKA Pansā”

“And Ōkami,” Andrew filled in.

Andrew and Mark quickly meta-morphed. With their claws ready, they waited for the Meta-Morphic Five to strike. To their surprise, the Meta-Morphic Five just stared at them.

“Haven’t you seen a were-panther and a werewolf before?” asked Mark.

“We were expecting a challenge,” answered Big C. “You guys are weaklings compared to us.”

“Say what!” Andrew exclaimed.

“You wanna start something?” Mark asked, raising his claws. “We can take you on.”

“I don’t think so,” replied Big C. “You wouldn’t last five minutes with us.”

“We’ll see,” Andrew said sounding confident.

“Sparks, I want you to fight these punks,” Big C ordered.

Sparks stepped forward. Electricity surged around him. He looked at Mark and Andrew and grinned evilly.

“Give up or face my wrath,” he said.

“We’ll wait for you outside,” replied Big C as he and the others left the gym.

“C’mon Mark, let’s show him what we can do,” Andrew said dashing towards Sparks.

William, Rosa, and Tracy were hiding in the Home Economics classroom. They had the door locked and kept their heads down.

“What the hell just happened?” Rosa whispered. “And why are you guys so confident in Drew and Mark?”

“Well...uh...” William began.

“I just am,” Tracy replied. “You should always have faith in your man.”

Rosa’s face became flushed. “Drew’s not my man!”

“You sure?” William asked. “From what I saw, you two were about to...”

Rosa quickly covered William’s mouth, as she glared at him. William began to panic.

“Say anything else about it, and I’ll kill you myself,” Rosa said in an almost demonic voice.

William nodded frantically, with beads of sweat running down his face.

Andrew threw the first punch. Sparks vanished. They couldn’t find him. Mark turned around and saw Sparks leaning against a wall.

“You’re doing it all wrong,” he said grinning, “Let me show you how it’s done!”

He opened his narrow eyes, revealing his colorless eyes. Instantly, Sparks was behind Mark and Andrew. BAM! They both felt a hard blow to their backs. Their bodies became weightless, gliding across the gym floor. They both somersaulted to regain balance. They dashed forward.

Mark began the assault with several punches. Andrew came in with some kicks. To their surprise, Sparks blocked all their attacks. BAM! SMACK! Mark and Andrew skidded on the ground and crashed into a wall. They both got up slowly, gnashing their teeth. This time, Andrew led the attack. He tried slashing Sparks, but Andrew couldn’t touch him. Sparks’ movements were so fast, it was like Andrew was fighting light. SMACK! Sparks kicked Andrew in his chin, making him fly into the air. With no time to react, Andrew felt a hard blow to his back. He came crashing down. The gym floor cracked, and a cloud of debris rose into the air. The debris settled with Andrew face first on the floor.

“SHADOW FANG!!!” Mark shouted as the worm-like shadow rose into the air.

Sparks stretched out his hand and blocked the attack, splitting the shadow into five smaller shadows. The ceiling turned into Swiss cheese. With the same hand, Sparks fired a jolt of electricity at Mark. Mark cried in pain as his body began to feel numb. Soon, his body couldn’t take much more. Mark fell to his knees and de-transformed, falling face first onto the gym floor. Sparks laughed hysterically. His laughter woke Andrew. With blurry eyes, Andrew could make out Mark’s

body. He clenched his fists tightly and gnashed his teeth. Anger overwhelmed him. He stood up, placing all his weight onto his left leg.

“You bastard!” Andrew shouted. “Try this on for size! STRIKING CLAW!!!”

Andrew jumped to the air with his glowing claw, outstretched towards him. Sparks immediately reacted with a jolt of electricity. The jolt hit Andrew, but his glowing claw kept pressing on. It was like his body wanted him to go through Sparks’ attack despite the pain he was in. All Andrew knew, he wanted to get Sparks for hurting Mark.

*What! Sparks thought. I can’t lose to a runt like him!*

Sparks added more electricity to his attack. It pushed Andrew farther away from him. With Spark’s added power, Andrew’s body couldn’t keep up with this struggle. Andrew cried in pain as Sparks’ attack surged through his body. Andrew crashed into the ground hard cracking the gym floor. He slowly got up trying to keep his eyes focused on Sparks. Electricity discharged from his numb body, as his body grew tired. Andrew de-transformed, collapsing to the ground face first. Sparks walked over to Andrew and towered over him.

“What does the boss see in you?” Sparks asked the unconscious Andrew while making a face.

Sparks left the gym and headed for the main entrance. As he passed the Home Economics classroom, Sparks heard a loud gasp. He peered inside and saw a foot sticking out from behind one of the stations.

“What do we have here?” Sparks asked himself.

He raised his hand and blasted the door down. William, Rosa and Tracy shrieked in terror as Sparks entered the classroom. They quickly split up, trying to reach the classroom door. Sparks looked at them evilly, knocking the girls out with a small jolt of electricity. William, on the other hand, made it out of the classroom. Sparks grabbed them by their waist and began hovering towards the main entrance.

Back on the gym floor, Andrew tried to get up. Soon, William met up with Andrew. He was out of breath.

“Drew...that guy...took Rosa and Tracy away...!” William cried out, in between breaths.

Andrew was stunned. Despite all their efforts, they couldn’t save the ones they loved. Out of anger, Andrew slammed his fist into the ground.

## *EIGHT*

On a nearby rooftop, Shanta watched the black sedan drive away from the school. Quickly, she transformed and followed. Leaping from roof to roof was nothing for her as she stealthily tailed the sedan. Suddenly, a nearby neon sign

began shining brightly. Shanta shielded her eyes from the intense light. The light faded. Shanta looked down at the street. No sign of the sedan.

Shanta smirked. *They sensed my presence, from this distance. Looks like I'm up against some strong people...*

*"Head to my place ASAP,"* Madam Renee said.

"What for?" Shanta asked.

*"Now's the time to meet the other members,"* Madam Renee answered. *"You all must train in order to beat the true enemy."*

Shanta nodded as she headed for the Fortune House.

Mark woke up to the sound of Andrew's voice. He sat up and looked around the gym. Even William was there.

"What happened?" Mark asked. He looked at William. "Where's Tracy and Rosa?"

William hung his head low.

"They...got captured..." Andrew answered in a low voice.

Mark was pissed. "Aw, hell na!"

Andrew clenched his fists tightly. "If only we were stronger..."

*"I can help you with that,"* a familiar voice said.

"It's the old lady who gave us our powers," replied Mark.

*"Watch your mouth!"* Madam Renee exclaimed angrily. She calmed down. *"You need training. Those men you fought are four times stronger than you two. You boys need to train, using the Inter-Dimensional Gateway."*

"What the hell is that?" Andrew asked.

*"You'll know soon enough,"* she answered.

Her voice vanished. Mark and Andrew stared at the ceiling for a moment before they looked at each other. William cleared his throat.

"Who were you two talking to?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"The lady that gave us our powers," Mark answered. "Anyway, you should go home where it's safe."

"Mark's right," Andrew chimed in. "From here on out, this matter involves only Mark and I."

William didn't like the sound of that. However, he understood the situation and trusted both Andrew and Mark.

"Just be careful," William said before leaving the gym.

Moments later, Mark realized where they were heading.

"Great, just what I need, to go back to her little pet shop of horrors," Mark said sarcastically.

Andrew chuckled and said sarcastically, "Do you want me to hold your hand?"

"I ain't scared, a'ight," Mark replied.

"C'mon fierce warrior, let's go the Fortune House," Andrew said helping Mark up from off the floor.

The Meta-Morphic Five drove up to Hidishi's hideout with both Rosa and Tracy gagged and blindfolded. The security guard let the guys in. He quickly phoned Hidishi of their arrival.

"Excellent," Hidishi said with a grin.

Hidishi put down the phone and waited for them to walk in his office. A few minutes later, the door opened. The Meta-Morphic Five formed a straight line in front of Hidishi.

"We have defeated those kids, Sir," Big C said. "And we brought you guests."

"Well, this is great news," Hidishi said smiling.

"Uh, what should we do with them?" Big C asked.

"Lock them up for now," he answered. He looked at Rosa and Tracy with an evil grin saying, "I have big plans for them."

Mark and Andrew arrived at the Fortune House. They walked in, looking like two bums begging for money. Their clothes were torn, their bodies ached, and they were tired. Madam Renee gave Mark and Andrew new clothes: like the ones they had on and fed them food. As they ate, Madam Renee explained to them what the Inter-dimensional Gateway was and why they had to use it.

"So, we're going to another planet to train?" Andrew asked, trying to understand all of this. "What, are we in some kind of Anime cliché?" Mark asked sarcastically.

"I don't understand your question, Mark," Madam Renee answered. "But know you will train there for three months."

"THREE MONTHS!" Mark shouted. "We don't have that much time to train. By then, Rosa and Tracy would be dead!"

"Three months in their time is equivalent to nine days in ours," Madam Renee explained, calmly. "You will have plenty of time to rescue the girls."

"Where is this place?" Andrew asked.

"On the planet Macu, thirty light years away from Earth," she answered. "The planet is divided into five huge regions. You will stay with the Nebtans in the central region of the continent, known as the Forest Region. They are a strong, friendly race that live like the Ancient Japanese. Even their language is exactly like the Japanese, except for their dialect. A good way to view their dialect is a New Yorker speaking Japanese. They can teach you how to master your powers. Also, I have taught them many of our Earth customs. You might be surprised to see what they have learned."

"What about our parents?" Mark asked. "They're going to know we're gone."

"Not to worry, I have already taken care of it," Madam Renee answered. "Even William has helped out on the matter."

"Hope so," he said folding his arms.

"When do we leave?" Andrew asked.

"In four hours," she answered. "Get some rest, you guys need it."

Madam Renee led them upstairs to her spare rooms, in a huge attic. Mark and Andrew picked a room, jumped into the bed, and drifted off to sleep. Four hours later, Madam Renee woke them up. She quickly prepared the gateway. The gateway was a huge stony circle with zodiac symbols that hung a few inches above the ground. Madam Renee had to place a small

ramp in front of the gateway, for Mark and Andrew to walk through it. As they came downstairs into the basement, they saw another person standing next to her. Mark's eyes widened as he realized who it was.

"I can't believe she's here," Mark said smiling.

"Who is it?" Andrew asked.

"Shanta, my cousin," he replied.

"Sup, Cuz!" Shanta exclaimed as she hugged Mark.

She looked at Andrew asking, "Who's this guy?"

"Oh, that's Andrew, my homie. You can call him Drew."

"So, I heard you can meta-morph too. And here I thought I was the only one in our family who could."

Mark and Andrew's mouths dropped.

"You...can meta-morph too?" Andrew asked.

"Yeah, I meta-morph into Kicune, the Japanese fox," she answered.

"Does Aunty and Uncle know?" asked Mark.

"Just my mom," Shanta answered. "Mom was there when I received it, but she doesn't like it, even to this day. Although, she told my dad that the tattoo on my thigh was a birthmark."

"So that's why you always wore shorts to the pool or the beach!" Mark replied, with a surprised look. "And here I thought..."

"Enough with the chitchat, you guys have work to do," Madam Renee interrupted, staring at the open gateway.

"She's right, we have to train hard in order to defeat those guys," Andrew said.

"Then let's kick some ass!" Mark shouted as he walked through the gateway.

"Wait up yo!" Andrew exclaimed following behind.

"I'll take care of them," Shanta said to Madam Renee before walking through the gateway.

"We have to get out here," Rosa said staring at a small window in a large room.

"Don't worry," replied Tracy, "Andrew and Mark will save us. I know it."

Rosa smiled a little as she stared at the floor. She thought about Andrew for a moment and how she nearly kissed him. Her face grew hot. Rosa couldn't believe she was falling in love with Andrew, the guy who used to take baths with her and always needed her protection when they were kids. She stared at the crescent moon from the small window for a moment.

*Please be safe.*

Mark, Shanta and Andrew arrived on planet Macu within seconds. They stood there in awe looking at their surroundings. This was a beautiful planet. It was like the rainforest on Earth, but lusher. There were unknown animals of different sizes, colors and species. The water was crystal clear and was filled with sea life. Even the fruits here looked different.

“So where do we start?” Andrew asked, looking for a clear path.

“Over there,” Shanta answered pointing to a path going into a forest.

As they walked through the dense forest, red eyes popped everywhere. Even though they were scared, they kept their faces composed. Suddenly, a huge creature jumped in front of them.

It was a creature that was part reptile and part human. It had a Komodo Dragon’s head, green scales, bulging muscles and a tail with spikes at the end of it.

“What the hell is that?” Andrew asked with his eyes wide open.

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to find out,” Mark answered with his eyes wide open.

Shanta shook her head. “Boys...guess I’ll get rid of it.”

White light illuminated the forest. Even the creature had to shield his eyes. The light faded. Both Mark and Andrew’s mouths dropped. It was their first-time seeing Shanta in her were-fox form. Shanta jumped into the air. She crossed her arms over her chest as she smirked.

“NEEDLE STORM!!!” she shouted as she stretched out her arms.

A hailstorm of white energy came crashing down onto the creature. A smoke cloud filled the air. Shanta landed onto the ground thinking the creature was destroyed. The smoke cleared, but the creature was still standing. The creature opened his mouth and lashed out his tongue at Shanta. Shanta dodged and attacked. Mark and Andrew knew she was in trouble. They both transformed, giving her a helping hand.

“STRIKING CLAW!!!” Andrew shouted.

“SHADOW FANG!!!” Mark shouted.

Both of their attacks knocked the creature backwards. They bumped fists. The creature got up, lashing out his tongue at them. They all dodged, watching as a tree turned into dust.

“We have to cut that tongue,” replied Shanta.

“How?” Andrew asked.

“Someone has to be a decoy while the other two cut the tongue,” she answered.

“You ain’t getting me to do it,” replied Mark. “You know my people don’t mess with animals in the wild.”

Andrew raised his eyebrow. “You are so pathetic...”

Andrew sighed as he dashed towards the creature. He punched it in the face. The creature stepped backwards. It used its spiky tail to smack Andrew into a tree. The creature opened its mouth, lashing out its tongue at Andrew. Andrew shut his

eyes. SLASH! The sound of sliced tongue filled Andrew's ears. The creature screamed in pain. Andrew opened his eyes, staring at the decapitated tongue.

"Hey Drew, wanna finish the job?" asked Shanta.

"Oh yeah!" Andrew exclaimed as he rose to his feet.

He dashed forward to the wounded creature with his glowing claw.

"STRIKING CLAW!!!" Andrew shouted as he thrust his claw through its body.

Blood squirted everywhere. Andrew pulled his claw out of the creature's body, watching the creature fall to the ground.

Andrew flicked the blood off his claw before he de-transformed. He walked over to them.

"That was tight Drew," Mark said, bumping fists with Andrew.

"I agree, but we have to find the Nebtans," replied Shanta.

Suddenly, a small giggle echoed in the trees. They looked around trying to pinpoint the sound. Out of the trees, came a small boy wearing a dark blue sleeveless garment. He had a small face with huge eyes, a small nose and an innocent smile. His black hair was in a ponytail with small bangs that covered his forehead.

"Aw, he's so cute," replied Shanta waving at him.

"Yeah, but what's up with the spots on his cheeks and arms?" asked Mark pointed out. "He trying to be a cheetah or something?"

The small boy ran towards Mark, hugging his leg.

"Aw, he likes you," Andrew said sarcastically.

"I see..." Mark mumbled.

"Maybe he can help us find the other Nebtans," Andrew replied looking at the small boy.

The small boy spoke to them in Japanese. Andrew didn't know what he was saying, but the small boy kept on pointing towards the path.

"I think he wants us to follow him down the path," Andrew said looking at both Mark and Shanta.

The small boy grabbed Mark's hand, signaling him to follow.

"Lead the way, Kid," Mark said.

As they walked down the path, the forest started to clear. Rays of sunshine poked through the dense trees. They exited the forest. Their mouths dropped in awe.

"This place is beautiful," replied Shanta with a smile.

Standing in front of them was a huge stony temple with an area of about 80,000 acres. Suddenly, a crowd of Nebtans surrounded them. Some stared at them while others talked amongst themselves.

"Welcome friends," a voice said from the crowds, stepping forward.

"Wow! He's hot!" exclaimed Shanta with her eyes wide open.

“Down Girl...” Mark said trying to act cool.

“My name is Ching, I’m King of the Forest Region,” he replied. “Welcome to my kingdom.”

“Say what!” Andrew exclaimed.

Ching was a handsome young man, around the same age as our heroes. He was an inch taller than Andrew and was toned. He had short black hair with small bangs, a long face, dark brown eyes and a smile that seemed to twinkle whenever he smiled. Ching wore a black garment like what Ancient Japanese Buddhist priest used to wear. His crown was thin and circular, with a large red diamond in the center.

“I know I’m young, but I’m the only male in my family to take the throne,” he said.

“You know why we’re here, right?” Andrew asked.

“Yes, Madam Renee told me everything,” said Ching. “We will help you in every way we can.”

He smiled. Instantly, his mouth twinkled.

“Is his mouth supposed to do that?” Mark whispered to Andrew.

“I don’t know,” Andrew answered shrugging his shoulders.

“Thank you for your kindness,” Shanta said holding Ching’s hand. “Let me know how I can repay you.”

Mark grabbed Shanta’s ear and pulled her away. Ching stood there, baffled.

“You’ll have to excuse them,” Andrew said feeling embarrassed.

Ching led them into the temple, where the Nebtans lived. Many of Ching’s servant-girls, who were wearing short-sleeve kimonos, smiled at Mark and Andrew. They giggled amongst themselves. Of course, Mark enjoyed the attention.

“Yo Drew, these cheetah girls love us man,” he said grabbing Andrew’s shoulder.

“Don’t you have a girl?” Andrew shot back. “Remember her?”

“I do remember Tracy,” Mark replied with a sigh. He looked at Andrew and grinned. “What, are you afraid of losing Rosa to a girl from another planet?”

Andrew face felt flushed. “Rosa and I are just friends...”

Mark gave Andrew a look that said he was lying.

“These are the guest rooms, you are welcome to choose any room you would like to stay in,” Ching said. “My servants will call you for lunch in thirty minutes.”

Ching left. Mark and Andrew chose the rooms next to each other while Shanta chose the room across from them.

The rooms were amazing. Every bed was made from oak trees and draped in silk cloth. The floors were made of black marble. There was a closet in the upper right-hand corner filled with garments of different colors. Over the bed was a huge tapestry of a dragon. The walls were made of stone with a small window on the left side of the bed.

Andrew went into the closet and pulled out a blue garment from off the rack. He noticed a drawer at the bottom of the closet. He pulled it open and found several pairs of moccasins. Andrew changed his clothes and put his “Earth” clothes into the closet. Suddenly, a knock came upon the door. Andrew opened the door. One of the servant-girls was standing

before him. She signaled him to follow her to the dining hall. She kept on looking back at Andrew, smiling and giggling as they walked. This girl was hot, but Andrew couldn't stop thinking about Rosa.

They arrived at the dining hall. Both Mark and Shanta were already eating.

"What took you?" Mark asked and ate a piece of meat.

"I was just admiring my room," Andrew answered as he sat down next to him.

Another servant-girl came out of the kitchen and brought Andrew his food. Even though Andrew didn't recognize anything on his plate, the food smelled good. He grabbed his fork and knife and dug in. His eyes widened as the taste reminded him of steak and chicken. Andrew wolfed down his food since he hadn't eaten for nearly half the day.

"The food was delicious," Andrew said rubbing his stomach.

"I'm glad you like it," replied Ching.

"Uh Ching, I got a question," said Mark.

"What is it?"

"Why do the children and servant-girls have spots on their cheeks and arms?"

"With our race, every child, boy or girl, is born with spots all over them. The spots symbolize our connection with animals and how we are one in the same. Unlike your planet, we do not see ourselves as superior beings. We treat everything with respect and equality. I believe you call it Animism."

"So, what happened to your spots?" asked Shanta.

"My spots vanished when I turned sixteen," he answered. "Males lose their spots around the age of sixteen while females keep theirs. Their spots change from black to blue at age fourteen. When that happens, the males must find a bride. Many of the women here have changed their spot color, but not one I like."

"Why?"

"I don't want to marry someone that I don't love or understand."

Shanta smirked.

After lunch, Ching showed them around the temple. There are so many rooms within the temple even Ching didn't know what some of the rooms were. What caught Andrew's attention was the courtyard. It was about the size of three football

fields. There were trees planted everywhere and the grass was lush and green. The courtyard reminded Andrew of Central Park, only it was cleaner and had no muggers.

As Ching continued the tour, Andrew noticed two young girls, one was wearing a purple kimono and the other was wearing a light blue kimono. They were walking towards the courtyard. Ching ran towards them. Minutes later, he brought them over to Mark, Shanta and Andrew.

“These are my sisters, Hibika and Aiya,” he said introducing them.

Hibika was the older of the two sisters, being younger to Ching by a year. Even though Andrew had just met her, her aura reminded him of Rosa. She was the same height as Andrew, had long black hair, dark brown eyes and wore a purple kimono.

Aiya was the younger sister. Even though she was sixteen, she looked like she was in middle school. Aiya was two inches shorter than Andrew, had long black hair in pigtails, and dark brown eyes. Of course, Aiya was wearing a light blue kimono.

“My name is Andrew,” Andrew replied introducing himself, “and this is Mark and next to him is Shanta.”

“It is nice to meet you all,” Hibika said in a sweet voice.

“Would you like to join us with our tour around the temple?” asked Mark.

“I’d love to,” she answered sweetly.

“Ching, did you show them the garden yet?” Aiya asked in a babyish voice.

“Not yet,” Ching answered. “We’re heading over there now.”

“You’re going to love our garden,” Aiya replied to them.

Mark, Shanta and Andrew were amazed at the size of the garden. The garden was in a dome-shaped greenhouse behind the courtyard. Most of the men worked here in order to keep the temple’s food supply in stock. Inside, were trees filled with fruits, various plants, and strange vegetables. One Macuan tree was filled with blue-green swirled fruit that tasted like apples. Of course, Mark was interested in the Macuan vegetables, particularly the orange lettuce.

“As you can see some of our fruits and vegetables taste like yours,” replied Ching picking up a Nebtan fruit. He looked at Shanta. “Would you like to try it?”

“I’d love to,” answered Shanta taking the fruit from Ching’s hand gently.

Shanta bit into the fruit and began to blush.

“This is the best fruit I’ve ever tasted,” she said with her hand on her cheek.

Ching smiled. Another twinkle came out of his mouth.

“Wish my mouth could do that,” Mark whispered to Andrew.

The tour concluded with dinner. Once again, Andrew didn’t recognize anything on his plate. Hungry, he wolfed it down and asked for seconds. Even Hibika was amazed. Mark, on the other hand, tried to eat his food but felt a pair of eyes

staring at him. He looked through his periphery, noticing Ayia silently gawking at him. Nervous, he managed to finish his plate. Of course, Shanta continued to talk to Ching, asking him about Macu and his people.

“If you go by Earth’s time, we are ten years older than we appear,” Ching explained. “We Nebtans age very slowly.”

Shanta was intrigued. “Is it because of your DNA or something else?”

“Both actually. Our DNA makes us age slowly by about seven years. But according to our Nebtan scientists, the fruits and vegetables we consume also have an anti-aging compound in them, slowing our aging by another three years.”

“So, if my friends and I continue to consume your food, would we also slow down our aging?”

Ching rubbed his chin. “I’m not sure. But I guess it’s worth experimenting.”

Shanta grinned with delight. Yup, dinner time was lively.

That night, Andrew decided to take a bath. According to Ching, there was a hot spring for everyone in the temple (and a private hot spring in the temple for Ching, Hibika, and Aiya). Andrew walked down the hall, holding a towel, a washcloth and soap bar in his hands. For five minutes, he searched aimlessly for the hot spring, passing the public hot spring several times. Finally, Andrew found it located near the dining room, on the east side of the temple. There was a large door with the words *For The Royal Family*, written in Japanese. Andrew looked at the door, before walking in. The changing room

was very large. Andrew quickly took off his clothes and placed the towel around him. He stepped out of the changing room and into the enclosed hot spring.

The hot spring stood in the center with tiled floor surrounding it. Just above him was a very high glass ceiling and the stony walls added a nice touch. There was even a stone divider, separating the hot spring. The place seemed empty. Andrew approached the steamy water.

Suddenly, the water began to bubble. Andrew stopped to examine the bubbles. With a splash, Hibika rose out of the water. Her voluptuous body exposed every blue spot she had to him. Andrew's eyes widened and his nose bled.

"Oh...my...God..." Andrew managed to say.

Hibika screamed as she covered herself in the water. "Get out, you pervert!"

"I didn't mean..." Andrew started but was hit in the forehead with Hibika's soap bar.

Andrew fell backwards, crashing to the ground with a huge red lump on his forehead. Hibika clapped her hands, calling for the servant-girls. They came and immediately carried Andrew, who was still dazed, back into his room.

A shadowy figure sneaked down the hall and had picked the lock in Mark's room. They got into Mark's bed with Mark sleeping in it. Mark turned over, holding the person in his arms with a smile on his face.

The next morning, Andrew woke up in his bed with a headache.

"That girl can throw," he said rubbing his bruised forehead.

Andrew got out of bed. He went to Mark's room. Andrew rapped on the door. The door slowly opened with each rap.

*That's odd,* thought Andrew as he looked around the room.

Mark slowly woke up. He was shirtless. He saw Andrew standing by the door.

"How'd you get in here, Drew?" he asked rubbing his eyes.

"The door was unlocked," answered Andrew.

"That's impossible," replied Mark placing his right hand on the other side of the bed. "I know I..."

Mark gently tapped the bed with his right hand. He felt a body. Mark jumped up, holding onto the chandelier. It was clear to Andrew that Mark slept only in his underwear. Andrew pulled the covers off the bed. Andrew freaked when he saw Aiya sleeping in Mark's bed. At least her nightgown was still on.

"I didn't do nothing," replied Mark, who was still hanging onto the chandelier. "I don't do kiddie love, yo!"

Suddenly, Aiya woke up as her left nightgown strap fell off her shoulder. "Good morning, Andrew. Where's my lover?"

Andrew pointed to the ceiling.

"How the hell did you get in my room?" Mark asked.

"I picked the lock," she answered with a smile. "Nothing can come between us."

"Dude, she's got a major crush on you," replied Andrew. He started to crack up.

“Not funny, Drew,” said Mark.

Suddenly, Hibika entered the room. “Aiya! What are you doing in here?”

“I wanted to stay with my lover,” answered Aiya.

“Why do you want to stay with him?” Hibika asked, pointing at Andrew.

“Not him,” replied Aiya. She quickly pointed at Mark. “Him. Mark is the sexiest guy I’ve seen in my life, and I want to marry him.”

“This is what I get for being sexy,” Mark said sarcastically.

“Aiya, Mark is an Earthling who probably has a lover on Earth,” replied Hibika. “You can’t marry him.”

“So, what!” Aiya shot back. “It is destiny that brought us together. You can’t defy destiny. If you will excuse me, I’m going to take a bath.”

Aiya winked at Mark and headed for the hot spring.

“That child has some serious issues,” replied Mark.

“Poor Mark,” said Shanta, who came out of her room, “can’t even handle a little crush.”

“Shut up Shanta!” Mark exclaimed.

The chandelier hinges came apart and he crashed onto his bed.

After breakfast, Ching told Shanta, Mark and Andrew that today began their training, and they would be trained under Master Dao. Ching said he would teach them Animism. Learning it would take months, but they were ready for the challenge.