

A Shin Tenchi Muyo/Sakuya fan fiction:

TENCHI MUYO! in love
Honor Amongst Thieves
Book Two

The Special Edition Version

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*"Face it, if crime did not pay, there would be very few criminals."
-Laughton Lewis Burdock*

Prolog

"Ok Sakuya...you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be...I just hope this plan of ours *works* Ryoko."

"It's *got to*...we're the *only* hope Ayeka has to make it out of here alive. You finished recording the message to be sent to Tenchi...in case we *don't* make it?"

"Yeah...finished it a few minutes ago..." Sakuya replies while gesturing back at the command-console of the space-ship.

"Good, we've got everything covered." Ryoko says in reply. She sighs briefly before continuing on "Looks like *this* is it. Once we open the blast-door...there's *no* turning back...its *do or die*..."

"I understand..." Sakuya says as she swallows down hard, mentally preparing for the possibility that she might die during this daring rescue attempt.

As Ryoko clenches her fists in ready preparation for the impending battle, she turns toward Sakuya who is standing next to her and says, "In case we *don't* make it...I wanted to let you know...you've been a *good* friend. I can see now why Tenchi is so taken with you...I'm *not* saying that I'm giving up on him...and I probably *never* will...but I *do* respect what he and you have together..." She says, giving her a friendly hug "I don't have many good friends...but I *do* consider

you one of them and I don't plan on losing maybe the best one I've got...so good luck out there...cover your back."

Ryoko turns back toward the airlock leading off into the massive ship Ryo-Ohki is docked to, and prepares to give the command for Ryo-Ohki to open her armored door. On the other side impact sounds are going off constantly as guards desperately try to shoot through the door.

"Sakuya...Ryo-Ohki...it's been a pleasure travelling with the both of you..." Ryoko gasps in anticipation sweating from her brow slightly, trying her best to hold back the growing anxiety forming in her gut "...here goes...*OPEN THE BLAST-DOOR!*"

The door slowly hisses open as it's constantly barraged by laser-fire from the rapidly advancing pirates. Sakuya and Ryoko jet out into the open hallway and take cover behind a nearby support strut. The two young women wait for a momentary break in fire. Their wait is short-lived as after a few moments the shots die down. Taking advantage of this precious opportunity, Ryoko teleports behind three of the guards and quickly knocks them out using her energy blasting ability. "Sakuya, are you ok over there?" she calls back to her.

"Yeah, I'm fine..." Sakuya replies as she confidently jumps out from her point of concealment and uses an energy blast of her own to take out a couple more guards. "...Piece of cake!"

"Good...you know the plan...lets split up and do our thing."

"Got it..." Sakuya says as she ducks behind a nearby beam just as another shot from the attackers whizzes dangerously past her forehead. As Sakuya stands there preparing to make it past the spacer shooting deadly fire at her, she can't help reminiscing about all the events that led up to this climactic moment. It's hard to believe that two weeks have past since Ryoko, Sakuya, and Ayeka headed off into space in order to enjoy a *Girls Only* bonding excursion, though the time to them seems tragically longer.

The intent was to strengthen their constantly growing and evolving relationships. Its funny how fate has a way of throwing wild-cards into your life just when you think all is going well.

It all began two weeks ago...

Chapter 1

After a fairly restful nights sleep, the raven-haired beauty known as Sakuya Kumashiro awakens to dreamily stare at her nearby nightstand. On it rests a very pretty crystal. This lovely gem was given to her by Tenchi as a symbol of their undying bond of love. The crystal shines and glistens while it refracts the suns morning rays, Sakuya takes this as a sign that it'll be a beautiful day.

Getting up from her very comfortable queen-sized bed to start her already perfect day, Sakuya goes through her exhaustive morning stretch-routine. Glancing over at her bedroom window she takes notice of the remarkably beautiful sunrise outside. Compelled to stop her exercise routine she immediately stops and begins staring out at the beauteous sky beyond. "Ahhhh...I just love mornings." She says to herself as she prepares for her morning bath, "There's just something so magical about them..." Picking up her clothes, and grabbing her crystal, she heads on over to the bathroom.

For Sakuya, this is the second week of her residency at the Nobuyuki and Noriko's home since her joyous return from the alternate dimension known as *universe-prime*. Nobuyuki with his architectural expertise had initially planned on living at the house with Noriko and her small daughter, but as fate would have it, since Sakuya needed a place to stay, he decided that it would be best to let her have the room that he had previously set up as his instead. Since then, he has begrudgingly moved back into his old house with Tenchi and the girls, just down the hill several meters from his recently constructed dream-home. The house is now considered the dwelling place of the Ayukawa's, Noriko and Sachiko, with Sakuya being unofficially made a member of their household.

Meanwhile, the beauty of this magnificent morning's sunrise isn't wasted on solely Sakuya's eyes. As Tenchi completes his daily sweeping duties, he also finds himself caught up in the majestic rise of the sun. "I sure wish Sakuya were here..." Tenchi mutters to himself as he wistfully begins staring off at it as though he were in a trance. "I can't believe how nice it's been since Sakuya returned and we rekindled our relationship. I just hope the other girls can someday learn to put aside their resentment toward her, and accept her as a productive member of this family without all the bickering. Don't they understand how happy she makes me feel?" he says to himself as he sweeps up the remaining leaves and prepares to put away his broom.

"Tenchi...you're *here*." Ryoko says as she appears before him via short teleportation hop as if from out of nowhere. Grabbing him in an overly familiar fashion Ryoko adds, "Tenchi, I just wanted to enjoy the sunrise alone with you. We never get to do that anymore since that interfering little *tramp Sakuya* returned and ruined *everything*..."

Ignoring the minor insult to his girlfriend Tenchi summarily replies with his usual charismatic charm "I don't seem to recall ever enjoying a sunrise with you un-chaperoned. Besides, Sakuya being here in *no way* changes how I feel about you, you *know* that."

"I just wish someone would tell that to that uppity Ayeka."

"Speaking of Ayeka, where is she, I haven't seen her all morning?"

"She and her two *logs* went to the store earlier this morning. She never told me what she was getting, and frankly didn't care so I never asked." Ryoko replies without even pretending to sound *half* interested. "So come on Tenchi how about it, let's stop by the lake and enjoy the sunrise *together*."

"I guess so...what harm could *that* do, right...?" Tenchi gives in with a warm friendly smile. Ryoko grabs him and uses her power to teleport them both by the lake.

As Sakuya completes her daily shower and finishes up getting dressed, she heads on off to the Masaki shrine to pay her daily respects to her one-time alter ego, Yugi. She usually makes the trip with Sasami, but with how beautifully this day has been going so far, she couldn't help getting a little jump-start in on it herself. It also doesn't hurt that she happens to know that Tenchi usually made his rounds at the shrine at about this time every morning, and she wants to spend some nice quality time with him alone.

Unlike Ryoko or Sakuya however, Ayeka isn't having nearly as pleasant a day as her two love-triangle rivals. For starters, the money she had brought to pay for the groceries had somehow disappeared. She suspects that somebody at the store pick-pocketed her, but as she has no leads to

plea her case, she hasn't a proverbial leg to stand on. With the money gone, she doesn't have enough cash to pay for a cab ride back home, let alone the groceries she picked out. Reluctantly she has to hitch a ride on the back of her Juraian guardian, Azaka. The trip is cold, and without a jacket or anything else on to keep her warm, it promises to be a *very* long ride indeed.

"Kamidake...do you think I'm wrong in being upset about Sakuya and Lord Tenchi's budding relationship?" Ayeka asks of her faithful servant.

"Not at all ma'am..." Kamidake responds drone-like.

"...It's just that...it's not *fair*..." she continues "Tenchi and **I** were destined to be together, and she came along and ruined *everything*." She pauses for a moment then says "Well I suppose it's not **all** bad. At least that insufferable **Ryoko** didn't fare any better. I don't know what's worse...the prospect of Ryoko getting him, or the fact that he seems to have a temporary interest in that **new** girl."

"May I make a suggestion Ma'am...?" Azaka asks.

"You may..."

"I was just thinking...just because he's dating Ms. Kumashiro doesn't necessarily mean that he'll stay with her. She's his *first* fling...statistically speaking, they almost *always* end up not working out." Azaka says.

"Yeah, maybe she's like a *new-toy*." Kamidake points out. "I've read about how human children act. Once they get a *new-toy* they get all caught up in playing with it for a while...but after they've had their fill and get bored with it, they eventually go back to playing with their other original favorites."

"You both make interesting points..." Ayeka replies as she considers their words of encouragement.

"Precisely...once Tenchi gets tired of the *new-car-smell* he's enjoying now with Ms. Kumashiro, he'll realize that you were always there for him and thus how much you mean to him. I bet he'll come right to you when he's ready..."

"...HMMMMM...I like how the both of you think..." she replies as she gives way to her maniacal styled laughter. "...She may have won *round-1*, but there's plenty of time for her to screw up and for me to win him back in *round-2*..."

Meanwhile, back at the Masaki residence at the lake, Tenchi and Ryoko are enjoying the sunrise together while safely perched upon braches high up in one of the trees. "Tenchi, I've been thinking lately..."

"About what Ryoko...?"

"About *us*."

"Meaning...?"

"It's no secret how strongly you feel about Sakuya...so I was thinking...Why don't I take her and Ayeka on a '*girls night out*' tonight. I could show her a good time, get to know her better, while also get her to get more familiar with me and how I do things. I'm not saying that we'll become friends or anything, but stranger things have happened." She says "And who knows, maybe then I'll prove to you that *we* are meant to be together." Ryoko says with a very sincere look on her face. Tenchi looks at her with a very suspicious smirk, but ultimately agrees that a night out together might actually be *good* in helping to smooth out tensions in their strained and otherwise nonexistent relationships.

"I guess so..." Tenchi agrees "...you're not gonna do anything *mean* to her are you...?" Tenchi asks trying to feel her out.

"What *me* Tenchi...?" Ryoko says while batting her eyes at him "I'm surprised you had to ask me something like that." She adds with an ever more innocent look and smile on her face than she wore a moment ago. "I know of a couple of places I've been *dying* to go to since I've been living here on earth...I think the girls will *love* it." Ryoko says as she stands up from her sitting position and prepares to fly away in preparation of her night's new plans. Tenchi just looks at her and smiles, he knows that somehow despite the obviously ulterior motives Ryoko is trying in her own special way to get along.

As Sakuya approaches the cave housing the cryogenically frozen body of Yugi, she removes her jacket and walks inside carrying a handful of purple-flowers that she's picked on her way to the shrine. Placing them on the glass case containing the young girl as though performing a memorial ritual, she begins talking to her. "Hi Yugi...I know I usually come here with Sasami but...I had something that I wanted to talk to you about today." She pauses for a moment then leans comfortably against the tube with her back. "I *know* that you can hear me...so I wanted to talk to you alone. You see...it's about the girls. I don't really think that they like me all that much, and I can't blame them for hating me...It's just that...a couple of weeks ago, when I almost died...it was *different*. *Everyone* treated me like I was a member of the family, like they cared about me. And now they all act like it *never* happened, like they've all forgotten somehow. It's like I'm back at square-one again. Normally I wouldn't care too much about it, but since I lost all my friends from Tokyo it seems as though I have no one *except* Tenchi. I'm dying to make new friends...*any* friends."

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Ryoko teleports right along side her in the cave. "Whatcha doin' kiddo?" Ryoko asks while crossing her arms nonchalantly.

Not expecting for anybody else to be in the cave Sakuya is taken totally by surprise. "...Auggggghhhh!" Sakuya screams in shock. After calming herself down a little, she manages a shaky response while placing her right hand over her rapidly beating heart, "Don't scare me like that." She exhales in relief "I'm not doing anything...just talking to an old friend." She says.

"Oh...good, 'cause I wanted to invite you to a little night-out I'm planning tonight. Just you, me, Ayeka, and empty space to do with as we please."

"What about Sasami and the others?" Sakuya asks.

"Eh, don't worry about them." Ryoko shrugs "Mihoshi and Kione are out on a deep-space mission, and Sasami's too young to go where *I'm* planning to take you." She adds with a wink.

"I don't know..." Sakuya replies sheepishly, not knowing how to respond.

"C'mon, it'll be fun...I was thinking of picking up a little something for Tenchi...if you're interested...?" Ryoko blurbs.

"You are?" she exhales in excitement. Ryoko gently nods her head in response. "...Sure, I guess..."

"Great...meet us out back in thirty minutes." Ryoko says as she teleports out of sight, hiding a sneaky grin on her face.

After Ryoko has left the scene Sakuya jumps up for joy "...Alriiiight! Maybe they're warming up to me after all." She says with a big beaming smile.

Chapter 2

Getting Sakuya to agree to go along on the trip has proven to be much easier than it was for Ryoko to persuade Ayeka to join in on the little excursion. Describing their heated verbal interchange could best be described as; confrontational. But once Ryoko explains to her the mechanics of taking Sakuya out alone without Tenchi, she happily decides to join in on the fun.

As Sakuya stands outside in the back yard eagerly waiting for Ryoko and Ayeka to pick her up, Tenchi arrives and gives her a nicely packed and prepared lunch. He's not only seeing them safely off, but also making sure that everything goes smoothly during the launch proceedings. "If *anything* goes wrong just let me know, ok." Tenchi tells Sakuya as he gives her a nice hug to help her deal with her nervousness.

"Try not to worry about me so much. I'll be *fine*." She says in response as she cuddles with him enjoying their last fleeting moments alone with one another before her departure. "Besides...I'm not *totally* defenseless y'know." she says looking up into Tenchi's eyes.

"Yeah...It's just that you're very important to me and I worry about you. I've known those two for quite a while, and frankly I'm a little nervous about this whole "*girls-night-out*" thing because I know how vindictive they can be when they're jealous...just watch yourself, ok."

"That's sweet...I'll be fine..." she says as she grabs his chin with her index finger and positions his head so that she can kiss him tenderly. "If it makes you feel any better, I have my crystal. If anything happens, I'm certain that it'll warn you of the danger."

Smiling warmly in response, they kiss.

Nearly fifteen minutes late, Ryoko finally arrives on the scene. Understandably their ship of choice is Ryo-Ohki, and Ryoko is seated firmly in the pilot's chair. Ayeka is stationed right next to her in the copilot's chair with her arms crossed in a frustrated manner. "Did you see that Ryoko...?" Ayeka asks as she spots Tenchi and Sakuya's tender moment. "I can't take it any more...somebody's got to tell that little hussy..."

"Don't worry about it." Ryoko interrupts "...before tonights over...Tenchi will be *dying* to be with somebody else..." Ryoko adds with a little conniving to her voice. "I've got it *all* under control..." They both laugh at Sakuya's expense.

Moments later after Sakuya has been safely transported onboard and the ship out into orbit; Ryoko turns toward both Ayeka and Sakuya and says firmly, "Now listen up crew. I'm the captain of this here voyage...what *I* say goes...First order of business, tonight we're headin' out to a couple of lively spaceports I used to hang out in, and maybe if we're lucky a couple of orbital-hubs. You both need to dress the part."

"...What's wrong with how we're dressed...?" Sakuya interrupts.

"*Nothing* if you plan on getting taken advantage of...stick with me kid and you'll be introduced to some of the *most* influential people in *all* the galaxy." Ryoko replies while firmly patting her on the left shoulder.

"If they're anything like you, don't you mean; space *hoodlums*...?" Ayeka replies under her breath with a devilish grin snickering as she nudges Sakuya with her elbow.

"I *heard* that little miss prissy!" Ryoko says as she turns around with an evil look of disdain on her face. "It just so happens that the ones *really* in charge of the galaxy are folks like these...people who *aren't* afraid to get their hands dirty...not good for nothing pencil-pushers and dignitaries who do nothing but discuss policies and etiquette all day."

"...Frankly it doesn't surprise me that *you'd* say something as ignorant as that...someone as *uncivilized* as *you* couldn't possibly understand all that we..." Ayeka says happily with a very large smile on her face, but is interrupted before she can complete her statement.

"*Uncivilized*...? Say that to my face!" Ryoko says as she gets up to Ayeka's eyes.

"I'll do more than that...!" Ayeka retorts as she in turn reciprocates.

"Uuuuhhh guys...Shouldn't we be trying to get along...I mean...wasn't that the whole reason for this trip in the first place...?" Sakuya reasons as she tries to break up the fight.

"You *stay* outta this...*Suzie Homemaker*..." Ryoko arbitrarily snaps back.

"...Yeah, *stay* outta this." Ayeka adds.

Looking around, Sakuya tries desperately to interfere with the impending conflict by asking Ryoko a question, "Ryoko...if you want me to wear something else...just let me know where the change of clothes is kept."

"...Huh...?" Ryoko lets out; apparently surprised that Sakuya is actually trying to accommodate her instructions. She immediately breaks off her attack on Ayeka. "...Uh...sure, it's over by the navigation controls in that small trunk over there." Ryoko is impressed. She muses that maybe Sakuya is somebody that she can be molded into the perfect little *mini* her after all.

After a few moments, both Ayeka and Sakuya are dressed into their appropriate spacing attire, and prepped for further adventuring. As Sakuya looks out one of Ryo-Ohki's view-screens she notices an unusually large space-freighter heading in their direction. On it is boldly emblazoned

the name '*Space Freighter Yukinojo*'. "Ryoko, have you ever seen a ship like this before...?" Sakuya inquisitively asks.

"Maybe...what ship...?" She replies as she turns around to get a better glance at the ship approaching in one of the view screens. "Ahhh...*That* ship." She exhales nearly reminiscing about it "I haven't seen her since I left earth with Hotsuma about seven months ago. An old colleague of mine owns that ship. She's a space pirate just like me, but she also specializes in collecting and selling rare and priceless figurines. That's her legitimate business front. Her name is Karina Masami. Hmmmm...I bet she's got something cool onboard that we could buy Tenchi."

"That would be nice..." Sakuya says with an innocent smile.

As Ryoko expertly docks Ryo-Ohki into the docking bay, she looks over to Ayeka and notices that she seems very distracted. The young Juraian princess wears a look of uneasiness on her face.

"What's wrong with *you*...?" Ryoko asks.

"I don't know...I'm getting the feeling that this whole trip was a *bad* idea somehow." She says.

"Eh...you worry *too* much princess..." Ryoko says as she shrugs it off, "...anyway, I didn't tell you...my friend here is in the possession of a *very* valuable Juraian artifact. I think you've heard of it before...it's called the *Heart of Jurai*."

"The *what*...?" Ayeka gasps as she jumps up from her seat forcefully grabbing Ryoko by her collar, shaking her about profusely. "*That* artifact belongs to the *royal family*...How did she get her hands on it?"

"That's a *long* story...I spotted it the last time I ran into Karina. I was with Hotsuma at the time...he persuaded me not to waste my time collecting it...Since then I've done a little research on that artifact. For instance, did you know that there's a legend tied to it?"

Sakuya shakes her head in confirmation that she's never heard of it.

"*Of course* I know about that silly legend...that heirloom belonged to *my* family..."

"Well Sakuya, hasn't." she says while impishly sticking her tongue out at Ayeka. "According to legend whoever gives the heirloom to another; preferably *their true love*...that person will fall madly in love with them and they *both* will have *eternal happiness together*."

"*Whatever*..." Ayeka summarily dismisses. "...we've got to get it back."

"Heh, heh, heh..." Ryoko snickers slyly. "Now you're talking *my* language." she says with a playful yet sinister grin on her face while she lets out a longer stifled laugh.

"...Excuse me guys..." Sakuya says while raising her hand "...but you're not talking about sneaking in and stealing that artifact thingy, are you?" she asks.

"Need I remind you...? You *cannot* steal something that rightfully belongs to you!" Ayeka replies in annoyance. "That thing *belongs* to my family. I will simply march right up there and *demand* that she return *my* property back to me..." Ayeka replies.

"Did you drink some *stupid-juice* this morning, Ayeka...? Honestly...you're *clueless* sometimes. That won't work. These are pirates we're dealing with. It takes a certain finesse...If you barge in there like a cowboy, *none* of us will be walking out of there alive with it...you don't know her like I do. She may be a friend, but if provoked she won't hesitate to kill us. Now c'mon, I've got a plan." Ryoko says to the girls as they huddle over and discuss their plan of action.

Moments later after the discussion has ended, they rise up and prepare to open the airlock.

Chapter 3

The airlock opens suddenly with a hiss of steam as oxygen is released into the open transport tube of the space freighter. Seconds later, a strikingly beautiful blue-haired young woman steps into the airlock tube of Ryo-Ohki and greets the crew. She immediately notices Ryoko and gives her a peculiar smile as she bows to accept the guests onto her ship. "Ryoko...on my humble ship *again*. And only seven months after your last visit. You're spoiling me." She says in lighthearted jest as she gives her old friend a warm hug. "What brings you here today?"

"I'm here showing a couple of friends a good time. I Thought I'd detour to pick up a little souvenir or two for some folks back home. And if you have any suggestions or know about any local hot-spots that I can take these two; would also be real helpful."

Karina glances at Ryoko's crew-mates for a moment before continuing on "Ahhh, yes...not a problem. Follow me..." Karina says as she gestures for the others to follow.

"Your ship is impressive." Sakuya tells her, still awestruck by the mere massiveness of the interior of her vessel. Indeed, its massive size dwarfs the presence of the arriving visitor's ship by nearly ten times.

Ryoko turns around toward Ryo-Ohki and whispers to her under her breath, "...You stay here...in case we have to make a fast getaway." Ryo-Ohki responds in her cabbit language and Ryoko turns back around with a smile on her face that would indicate that she didn't have a care in the world.

As Sakuya marvels at the ship's grand-scale, she also notices that Karina easily exudes a sense of grace and polish as she saunters silkily down the narrow metallic hallway into an even larger awaiting courtyard. This courtyard, like Karina, also reflects a fair amount of grace, and is very pleasing to the eyes. It was constructed within the hydroponics-bay of the ship in order to take advantage of the floral arrangements and artificial waterfalls that span the entire length of the approximately two kilometer deep room. Even the ceiling is equipped with a holo-projected artificial sky to keep up with its paradisiacal motif.

The design of the figurine-displays are set up in such a way as to take advantage of the landscape but not bring undue attention to themselves, and also take into account the fragrance of the rare alien-vegetation and the flowers, which are supposed to stimulate various pleasure-centers of the brain making the hapless buyer very susceptible to verbal influence making them pivotal in negotiations between Karina and her various unusual alien patrons as they attempt to negotiate price.

Stopping to admire one of such arrangements, Sakuya's eyes immediately fall upon an article that she would like to buy. "Excuse me ma'am...how much do you want for this item?" she calls out to Karina.

"Please...call me Karina..." she corrects "No need for the formalities. We're amongst friends." she says as she places a friendly hand on Sakuya's left shoulder. "You have a remarkable eye for beauty. That piece is called '*Loves First/Last Embrace*'. It was crafted of pure *Derellium crystal* on Senega, Jurai galaxy. The story on it is a bittersweet one as told to me by its crafter. It depicts two lovers as they embrace for the *first* and the *last* time. Very romantic...very tragic." She adds as if intoning it in a trance "*Normally* I'd charge two-hundred Juraian credits, but since you're an individual who can appreciate the subtleties of fine art, and you're with an old *friend* of mine...the charge is *nothing*. I will let you have it free of charge...on *one* condition..."

"Which is...?" Ryoko interrupts, stepping in front of Sakuya.

"On the condition that you do me a *little* favor."

"Now *that* sounds like the Karina *I* know." Ryoko exhales "I knew there *had* to be a catch..." Ryoko retorts "You're *too* much like me to just *give* it away...Ok, what is it?"

"You remember our old running buddy Rashida Akimoto, don't you?"

"Yes...why?"

"Let's just say...that little bastard has become a major pain in my backside lately."

"I'm sorry to hear about that." Ryoko replies unconcernedly. "...But what's *that* got to do with us, and what do you expect *us* to do about it?" Ryoko shrugs.

"Rashida has recently found himself in possession of a top-secret ship containing prototype Juraian-stealth technology. He's been using this technology over the past few weeks to wreak havoc on any and everyone in this solar system. He's been demanding that everyone pays him a tribute tax. If they refuse...he destroys their ship and takes their resources..."

"Let me guess...Rashida's been trying to strong-arm *you*."

"You got it. Up until recently we've been able to successfully fight him off...but the constant battles and skirmishes between our ships have taken their toll. I'm losing fuel, and customers are steadily being scared off. If somebody doesn't do something *soon*, I'm afraid I'll have to surrender my ship to him...*and* maybe my life."

"No way, Reena..." Ryoko summarily dismisses "Rashida Akimoto, is *bad* news...it would take *more* than *that* little trinket of Sakuya's to persuade me to go up against *him*."

"Please Ryoko...I'm begging for your help. If not for an old friend...would you consider doing it for any artifact on my ship that you might like?"

"Any artifact?" Ryoko says with a growing smile on her face as she looks in the direction that she suspects the '*Heart of Jurai*' is located.

"...I should have known..." Karina exhales as she figures out Ryoko's intentions "...you *still* want the 'Heart of Jurai'...don't you...?"

"Yep..."

Gritting her teeth Karina replies "...Figures...the last time you were here the man you were with could barely get you to part company with it...That's my centerpiece. It's *not* for sale...and I'm definitely not going to *give* it away...I meant any *other* piece in my collection."

"...Well, there you have it...no heart, *no* deal..." Ryoko says nonchalantly.

"Look...I wasn't going to tell you...but...I no longer have it...When Rashida and I last crossed paths, he stole it from me."

"What? That artifact belongs to *my* family..." Ayeka jumps in, barely able to contain herself.

"I *knew* you were Juraian...porcelain skin, exotic accent...then there's your elaborate ponytail..." Karina replies, devoid of emotion or feeling.

Sakuya steps in and adds, "Miss Masami...I understand how you must feel...loosing something *very* precious to you...something that everyone else wants...is there *anything* that we can do to help...a trade perhaps?"

Taking a few moments to think about it, Karina says to Sakuya, "You know what...*I like you*. You're polite...and modest...virtually untouched by the callousness that this galaxy of thugs puts you through. This universe could use *more* of your kind...besides, I'd rather *you* have it than sleazebags like Rashida getting their hands on it. I'll tell you what...if you can get that viper off my back for good...and get it back from him, then you can have *both* the figurine and the Juraian artifact...free of charge."

"...Wow...thank you Miss Masami..." Sakuya says with a courteous bow. By now, Ayeka and Ryoko are floored in disbelief over what they've just witnessed. Standing there with their mouths wide open, they can't believe what just happened.

"...What the...How did...?" Ryoko manages to stutter out, knowing that Karina is not normally one to be as generous or as cordial as she's being now.

"...Simple...Noriko once told me of an old saying '*You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar...*' or something like that." Sakuya replies, as she is also impressed with her own powers of persuasion.

Chuckling slightly Karina cuts into the conversation "Come...there's much I need to tell you. Follow me..." Karina interjects as she heads toward a *Grav-Lev* disk suspended in mid-air nearby. "...This leads to my conference room, I will brief you all there..."

Chapter 4

As they follow Karina to her conference room, Ryoko's sense of unease steadily mounts. She knows the true disposition of her good friend and master space-pirate Karina Masami, and she also suspects the inherent danger in a mission of this sort. Likewise, she also knows that Rashida Akimoto plays dirty. If anything were to happen to Sakuya, Tenchi might never forgive her again. She's not sure if this is a risk that she's prepared to take. So she decides to suddenly speak up. "Hey guys...I don't think that this is such a good idea...we're supposed to be out having a good time, not doing pirating missions for old cronies of mine...besides, Sakuya isn't experienced at this sort of thing. It takes skill, luck, and years of experience. If she goes against someone like Rashida, she'll definitely get herself killed." Ryoko explains. She turns to Sakuya and briefly apologizes "I'm sorry Sakuya...but I have to put my foot down. This is too dangerous for you. Next chance I get, Ayeka and you're both going home. I'll need to do this on my own..."

"...No, *please*..." Sakuya pleads as she grabs Ryoko's shoulder trying to ease her, "Don't give up on me...I can do this." She insists "We're all in this *together*." After pausing for a moment she grabs both Ayeka and Ryoko by the arm "I wasn't going to tell you this but...I've been hoping for a very long time to get friends, *real* friends. I've always hoped that you both would consider me one of yours, but I want you to know that you really *are* one of mine...*both* of you." She adds while alternately looking at both Ayeka and Ryoko. "Tenchi may be my *boyfriend*, but you and Ayeka are my *friends*...*Please* give me a chance to prove that I can be a *good* one..."

"Oh *alright*..." Ryoko concedes "Something tells me I'm gonna regret this...but you have to promise me that none of this leaves here. I don't want Tenchi hearing about *any* of this." Ryoko says sternly.

"You got it..." Sakuya says with a very confident smile on her face. "You can count on me."

"Good...then I guess you're in. I guess here is where we find out what you're made of, and if all those *new abilities* Washu-prime gave you will come in handy..." Ryoko says nervously.

"Don't worry...like I told Tenchi before we left earth, I can take care of myself..." Sakuya says as she, like the others continues to walk on down the hall.

"...How 'bout you princess? What about those two *wonder-twin* buddies of yours?" Ryoko asks as she briefly turns toward her.

"I've already taken care of it. I've remotely placed Azaka and Kamidake on temporary *sleep* *override mode*. There's no way that they can sense me in danger now. To reinitialize them back into protect-mode I'll need to physically activate the sentry *over-guard* security lockout."

"Good...then I guess we're set." Ryoko concludes as they approach the secured door to the conference room.

After unlocking the door and entering, Karina motions for the others to all take a seat. As they seat themselves, a holo-projector mounted within the head of the table begins to transmit coordinates and profiles of Rashida and his ship upon the display. "So this is the vile scoundrel who's been terrorizing the galaxy." Ayeka quips. "He's not particularly dangerous looking..." she muses "In fact he doesn't look at all like someone who's capable of doing the kinds of things that you've described Karina."

"...Hey...He looks a little bit like Tenchi...but older." Sakuya adds, trying not to interrupt the conversation too terribly.

"Don't let his *pretty-boy* facade fool you. He's a fully trained and skilled *killer*." Ryoko says. "That's one of the main reasons why Karina and I split it off with that sadistic bastard. He was *too* addicted to torturing captives for pleasure. He loved to see them suffer. Me; I did it for the excitement...Karina...a thief...but him...That stuff meant *nothing* to him, he liked to see people in *agony*...Karina and I *hated* that about him..." She says with great feeling as she stands up, clenches her left fist, and slams it down onto the table with enough force that she puts a noticeable dent on the metal tabletop. After calming down, she crosses her arms and sits back down. She adds, "...So *now* that slime-ball is into *strong-arming*...I was wondering what he was up to after all these years."

"Now this brings me to the reason why I'm so desperate in the need of your help...I told you earlier that he's extorting from local spacefarers and pirates collecting their profits..." Karina explains "...but the truth is, it goes even deeper than that. A couple of days ago, I sent spies to infiltrate his crew and learn all that they could about his plans. They were to relay those findings directly to me..." Karina gets up from the table and walks over to a large wall-sized window looking out over the show-room they were just in below. Lowering her head she says "What I found out about him will astonish you. For starters, as it turns out that Rashida is half Juraian..."

"What has *that* got to do with anything?" Ayeka asks. "You say that like it's somehow *news*...like it's a disease or something. How *dare* you...?"

"Cool your jets, Ayeka." Ryoko reaffirms "Reena didn't mean it that way. It's just...he always told us he was Senegan..." Ryoko says as she crosses her arms once more. "I guess we can add one more *lie* to the huge stack he already has piled up..."

"I'm afraid his heritage has *everything* to do with his plans." Karina answers "In fact...it hinges on it. You see...apparently he's used his contacts from his home-world to learn about the *true* power of the *Heart of Jurai*."

"*True power*?" Ayeka and Ryoko both ask in unison.

"Yes, the *true* power." She says while turning back toward them and taking a seat once more.

"5000 years ago, a scientist of Jurai created an instrument of total destruction. This device was called the *Quantum Null-Destabilizer*. According to the legend, the *Null-device* was possessed of incredible power, capable of taking a universe's gravitational-constants and decaying its theoretical constant of gravitational adhesion."

"You mean like turning a universe into some sort of unstable black-hole?" Sakuya interjects.

"How very astute of you..." Karina replies as she continues "...as Sakuya has correctly guessed, as a result of this power, an entire galaxy would implode into nothingness, leaving behind nothing but dead-space, a hole, a rift...an absolute void if you will, in place of the once thriving galaxy."

Ayeka gasps as she listens on.

"As you could imagine, the Juraian royal family was appalled by such an abhorrent creation, so they ordered that the device be separated and destroyed. A great controversy arose between two factions on Jurai; one of them deciding that the *Null-device* was much too valuable an artifact to their historical lineage to destroy, while the other took the stance that its continued existence

threatened the very welfare of the galaxy itself. Because of this, a great civil-war sprang up that lasted nearly fifty years. Both sides finally agreed upon a solution. The device would be split into 15 different pieces, and scattered all throughout the universe in hopes of permanently eliminating the threat and keeping the peace on Jurai. Over the centuries many numerous legends and stories have risen up in regards to the device and its many prime components. As fate would have it...one of the pieces has over the years been called...The *Heart of Jurai*."

"I get it..." Ryoko says as she figures it out. "...so Rashida has been traveling the galaxy robbing from other space pirates under the ruse of collecting tributary tax...when in actuality he was *really* searching for the hidden pieces..."

"Correct...and recently he's just acquired one of the two last remaining components needed to put the *Quantum Null-Destabilizer* back together. The *Heart of Jurai*. That leaves the last piece yet to be discovered...and word around the galaxy is; the last remaining component '*The Power of Jurai*' is in *your* possession Ryoko..."

"Oh no...if he isn't stopped...he could destroy us all..." Sakuya gasps.

"No kidding...as usual you have an uncanny knack for overstating the painfully obvious..." Ayeka says in annoyance, but before she can complete her sentence, a localized blue glowing aura surrounds and envelops her. After a few seconds the light grows brighter, and in a flash Ayeka disappears right before everyone's eyes.

"What the...?" Ryoko says as she rubs her eyes trying to make sure she saw what she thought she saw.

"Did you *see* that?" Sakuya points out as she gets up from her seat.

"I'm not sure what it was I saw..." Karina replies as her eyes grow really wide in disbelief.

Moment's later; Karina's first-mate Masahiko rushes into the room with an urgent message for her. He says that a communiqué via encrypted signal is being transmitted to her secure communications line.

"Alright, transfer the message directly to this conference room." She commands.

"Yes ma'am..." Masahiko replies.

As he leaves, a holographic projected image immediately transmits onto the display grid. It's to no surprise that it's Rashida. "I knew *that* would get your attention." He tells them in amusement "Before you start sending out search parties or anything ridiculous like that, I just wanted to let you know that I'm the one responsible for capturing your princess here. *Any* attempt to contact the space-police or anyone else, for that matter...will result in her being executed."

"Why *her*?" Karina asks.

"Haven't you ever heard of a bargaining chip?" he quickly replies "Having a crown princess at my beck-and-call gives me considerable power. Wouldn't you say...?" Rashida says as his transmission suddenly ends.

"Damn him!" Ryoko yells out "He's not getting away with this...not *this* time."

"So what're we gonna do Ryoko?" Sakuya asks, ready to follow her explicit instructions.

"We gotta get her back. She may be a *pain in the butt*...but she's *our* pain in the butt...and if I know that creep Rashida like I *know* I do, she's gonna need *all* the help she can get."

"You *can't* just barge in there unannounced...you'll need a plan. He'll kill both of you otherwise." Karina says as she stands up and places both open palms hands down on the table, protesting their rescue attempt. "...and he'll enjoy it as its being done..."

"Don't worry about us...I got a plan." Ryoko says as her face twists in anger and determination. "C'mon Sakuya...we're leaving."

Ryoko quickly places her hand on Sakuya's left shoulder and uses her teleporting ability to transport them both back quickly into Ryo-Ohki, who is still waiting patiently inside the docking bay. Jumping into her empty seat, Ryoko starts the blast-off sequence. Before they have a chance to complete their stepped procedures, Karina hails them over their ship's intercom and informs them that she has a couple of items to give them that might help on their journey. To Sakuya and Ryoko's surprise, Karina uses her ships transporting ray to transmit a small wooden box containing the figurine that Sakuya was admiring earlier, and what *looks* like a replica of the *Heart or Jurai*.

"Ryoko...I have given you a little *gift*...I trust that you'll know what to do with them when the time is right." Karina chimes in over the ships intercom, "...And good luck my friend...you'll *need* it."

Chapter 5

As Ryoko and Sakuya take-off from Karina's star-cruiser and prepare for deep space, they both share an uncomfortable moment of silence. The possibility is high that this is a mission they won't be returning home from, and this situation puts a somber tone on the moment preceding their launch.

Holding back her own tendency to want to cry, Sakuya silently pulls out a photograph she has stashed in her jump-suit pocket of her boyfriend Tenchi Masaki. Placing it quietly above the view-screen, she presses her left index and middle fingers to her lips kissing them, and then to the lips of Tenchi's on the picture.

The tiny snapshot of time is a grim reminder of all she's leaving behind, and of all she may never see again.

Breaking the silence, Ryoko finally puts to words what Sakuya has been staunchly trying to mentally deny this whole time; the truth of the advancement of their impending mortality. "...you know...we probably won't be making it out of Rashida's ship alive."

"Yeah, I know...don't remind me..." Sakuya replies grimly with a shaky voice, revealing that she is *more* than just a little scared.

"I wanted to give you the opportunity to back-out now while you still can. *Nobody* would blame you if you did..."

"Thanks, but...I'm in this for the long haul..." Sakuya says with her voice still shaking under the weight of her own nervousness.

Ryoko quickly places the ship on auto pilot and confronts Sakuya one-on-one, face to face. "Level with me, will ya...*why're* you doing this...?" she asks "I don't understand. Ayeka has *never* been nice to you. And I've been harsh to you in the past more times than I can count. Why are you risking your life for us when we never acted much like your friends to begin with?"

It takes Sakuya a moment to gather her thoughts but she eventually responds. "...It took me awhile, but I've only just figured it out since we arrived together on Karina's space-ship today. The way I see it, you and Ayeka just naturally fight amongst yourselves...like rival sisters...I know that my relationship with you all will never be the same...but what I said back in Dr. Clay's ship still stands. I consider myself lucky, just to be counted as one of the family. I wouldn't forsake *any* of you."

As Ryoko hears this, all she can do is lower her head in shame. Though not wanting to believe it, she is coming to realize just how wrong about her young traveling companion she might actually be.

"Ryoko...I've been meaning to ask, and I hope its not too terribly personal; but when we were on Karina's ship, you acted as though Rashida had done something to you in the past...something *horrible...and personal*." She pauses as she glances back at her with genuine concern written all over her face. "I could tell by the bitterness in your voice. You loved him didn't you, and he did something to betray that love..."

Turning around and looking up into the view-port trying to forget her past yet vividly recalling every painful memory, she reveals, "Damn it, you're perceptive. You'd make a good space pirate, y'know..." she sighs before recanting her story "...but you're right. Rashida and I were both seeing each other. I don't know about *him*...but *I* loved him with all my heart. I easily would've given my life for him...and I almost did several times."

Ryoko sits down Indian-style on the cold unyielding floor getting more comfortable. "We were together for about four years...and during that time we were inseparable. We ruled the galaxy...*no one* was as good at pirating as we were. We were a great team." Ryoko retells. "Sometime before I gave up *the life*, Karina joined our crew and quickly became my most trusted advisor, and friend. It was her that opened my eyes to what that creep Rashida was *really* about...she clued me into his lustful behavior with the other female pirates onboard our ship."

Ryoko pauses, and then continues her story. "When Washu and I were traveling through space trying to escape Ayeka two and a half years ago, I had initially planned on returning and giving the '*Power of Jurai*' the *Light-stone*, to Rashida as an engagement present. We were an unbeatable team, and *nothing* in the solar-system could come between us...so I *thought*. Before I could return to him, I intercepted an encrypted message being sent to his private quarters from inside our ship. I never found out who it was from...but I did know enough to piece together that whoever it was he was communicating with, was his mistress. With over forty-two different female pirates under my command as my crew, there was no way I was gonna find out who it was. But in any case, I had found out that Rashida had planned on stealing the *Light-stone* from me when I returned. After that he was gonna leave me high and dry so he could be with *her*. I was

furios when I found out...but instead of stooping down to his level...I decided to just keep the crystal and sell it to the highest bidder. I figured that the crystal was valuable enough to make Washu and me both *very* rich."

"...It's all starting to make sense to me now..." Sakuya muses "When I first saw his projection on Karina's ship, I *knew* he resembled..." she gasps aloud as she makes another startling realization "So *that's* the reason you and Tenchi...you *never* told him did you...?"

"No...how *could* I...? Before I got a chance to do anything about it...*YOU* showed up and ruined everything. I guess that's why I've been so down on you all this time..." Ryoko admits.

"Ryoko, I'm...sorry..." she says while placing a comforting hand on the former space-pirate's shoulder "I never meant to get between anybody. It's just that...when I met Tenchi, I couldn't help falling in love with him, he's a very *special* guy...and I know my feelings for him had *nothing* to do with Yugi's plans."

"Yeah, well..." she interrupts as she gently brushes Sakuya's hand off her shoulder "I guess it doesn't matter any more now...none of us will probably survive to see him again, anyway. I just can't believe that Rashida would do something so...*evil*...in the past he may have been power hungry and maybe even a little excessively violent...but him stooping to threaten an entire galaxy..." Ryoko says as she stares out into nothingness shaking her head displaying her utter disappointment toward her old cohort. "...Listen...we've got a lot of planning to do if we expect to get Ayeka back in one piece."

"Karina said earlier that you had something called the *Light-stone*. What is it?"

She stops to ponder for a moment "It's a crystal of immeasurable power from the planet Jurai. I mentioned it earlier. I sort of borrowed it from Jurai right before I met Tenchi to give to Rashida. To be honest, I don't even know where it is now." She admits "When I awoke from my coma at Tenchi's, it was gone."

Sakuya scratches her head at the statement of Ryoko going into a coma. "Coma...?"

"...Long story...anyway, I just assumed Ayeka took it and had it sent back to Jurai because she never mentioned *anything* about it to me since."

"If that's *true*...Rashida would've found it there by now." Sakuya postulates.

"Exactly...and if I'm right, Reena alluded to it not being on Jurai...which means, somebody *else* must've stolen it if Rashida is still looking for it. Whatever the case, we've *got* to find it...*before* Rashida does."

"So that's our mission...we've got to find that crystal?" Sakuya concludes.

"You got it! But space is *vast* kiddo...it's *not* gonna be easy, but if *anyone* can do it...*we* can. We must. Not only is Ayeka's life dependant upon it, but so is the entire galaxy."

Chapter 6

Meanwhile back on earth, as Tenchi Masaki nervously runs through several worst-case-scenarios regarding his girlfriend and the mischievous duo; Ryoko and Ayeka through his mind, he can't help but grow restless over the prospect that due to their unbridled jealousy something horrible might've gone terribly wrong. As he sits anxiously outside on his back-porch staring up into the afternoon sky, he wonders if he made the right decision in allowing Sakuya to go out into space alone with the girls. Will Sakuya be ok during this night of possible endless calamity? Only time will tell.

He lets out a deeply anxious sigh only calming down once he decides to pay his friendly neighbors Noriko and Sachiko a visit, up on the nearby hill.

The trek is relatively short, and it takes Tenchi only a few minutes to traverse the small distance. While making the walk, Tenchi can't help thinking back at how much his life has changed since he decided to temporarily move to Tokyo to train at the Tsuchida shrine. It was then that he first met Sakuya, jumpstarting the fate that he was destined to embrace. Although she started off extremely forward in her earlier pursuit of him, once she learned of his mutual blossoming interest she quickly mellowed out and actually began to grow on him on an emotional level.

Recalling the warm memories of his past, Tenchi remembers the exact moment he actually embraced his feelings and allowed himself to fall in love with her at school at the *White Phoenix Festival's* wrap party. He remembers how breathtaking she looked as the moons light shone dimly from her sculptured face and glistened from her beautiful emerald-green eyes. A magical night indeed, Tenchi lets out a small chuckle as he recalls these past memories with a cherished sense of fondness.

Tenchi's father Nobuyuki is very supportive of his romantic involvement with Sakuya Kumashiro. Now, the tables have turned and Nobuyuki has found himself in a new relationship with an equally remarkable and understanding young woman of his own, named Noriko. They've been together now for about seven months, and things seem to be going along very nicely for them as well. Noriko is a very personable woman, and brings with her, a sense of warmth and motherliness that the Masaki household sorely needs. When in an emotional jam, Tenchi finds that he can always come to her to talk, and to ask for her much needed advice regarding situations that come up in his relationship with Sakuya. Today, Tenchi has issues that he must vent to someone, and the girls at his household are all *too* biased in *his* favor to give him an impartial or otherwise honest opinion.

Tenchi arrives at the house and pauses briefly, staring at the doorknob lost in thought. After taking a deep breath he knocks on the ornately chiseled wooden door. Before long it swings open suddenly. Sachiko, Noriko's 6-year-old daughter, is always prompt when receiving visitors to their residence, and today is no exception. With a wide smile and open arms, she hugs, greets, and lets him into the house. At only 6 years old, she has already managed to win the heart of everyone in the Masaki household, including Ryoko. "Hi guys," Tenchi says as he steps into the living room placing a gentle but loving hand on top of Sachiko's head as if she were his little sister.

"Tenchi...*hi*, I'm *glad* you're here..." Noriko says as she spots him entering the room. Tenchi leans over and glances deeply into the house in the living room right at the couch seated nearby. Seated

there comfortably are his father Nobuyuki, and his girlfriend Noriko. "Have a seat." She tells him. At this Nobuyuki silently slides over on the couch to allow his only son room to relax.

Tenchi slowly makes his way into the room and sits down next to him. His father gives him a friendly crushing side hug.

"Hi son...Everything ok?" he asks him.

"Uh, yeah...I guess." He answers summarily, though not altogether convincingly.

Noriko slowly gets up from the couch and turns off the TV, giving Tenchi her full undivided attention. "Is there something the matter, Tenchi? You know you can always talk to us?"

"Yeah, I know." He replies timidly "It's just...I'm a little worried about Sakuya lately." He quickly spits out.

"She's been having a rough time." Noriko quickly replies.

"Yeah, I know..." he says as he nervously fidgets with his hands "The thing is; I recognize *what* the problem is...I just don't know *how* to work a solution."

"Hmmm...This sounds like a biggie." Noriko postulates "Have you tried talking it over with her?" she asks.

"I've tried...but I'm not sure what to say." He tells them. "But her life has radically changed...and I'm not sure if I can make her happy anymore." He admits.

"Nonsense son..." Nobuyuki proudly exclaims. "You're a *man...make* her happy..."

At this Noriko gives Nobuyuki a bemused expression as she grabs a couch pillow and smacks him over the head with it.

"There your father goes again...putting his foot in his mouth."

Nobuyuki chuckles slightly as he shrugs his shoulders. "What I say...?"

Noriko demurely bats her eyelashes at Nobuyuki, asking him to do her a favor. "Honey...could you be a dear and get us some drinks from the kitchen?"

"Uh sure..." he immediately replies as he jumps up and heads off to the kitchen.

"He means well..." Noriko chuckles as she politely blows him a kiss "Now Tenchi...please...I'm here to help. What's bothering you?"

Tenchi pauses at the statement then says "Back when she and I both stayed in Tokyo, things were different. We had our own completely different lives together. We were both a single couple, just enjoying each other's company. Things started getting too complicated once we moved back here to Okayama."

"Complicated...how so?" Noriko asks.

"For starters...Sakuya doesn't really have any friends out here. She doesn't really fit in. I know we're all like family to her here, but back in Tokyo, she was a *big* fish in a *little* pond. She would never brag about it, but she was one of *three* of the most popular girls at school...and it was a *big* school." He admits. "**Here**...She's been reduced to; a *nobody*..."

"Wow..." Noriko exhales..."You don't really believe she thinks of herself as; a *nobody*, do you?" Noriko asks.

"I don't know...I would like not to...but facts tend to speak for themselves." He says.

Noriko pauses for a moment, ponders, and then says "Ok...Here's what we'll do..."

Meanwhile back in space, Ryoko and Sakuya have been feverously trying to come up with a plan that will allow them to locate the last remaining missing piece to the *Quantum Null-Destabilizer*.

After nervously tossing her crystal given her by Tenchi up in the air and quickly catching it several times, it suddenly dawns on Sakuya that the powerful gem in her possession may pose an insurmountable problem. "Ryoko..." she says as she quickly rushes over to her grabbing her left shoulder "It just occurred to me...I don't know much about these crystals, but what do we do if they suddenly sense our danger? They aren't going to send us back to Earth, are they?" she asks innocently.

Having not thought of it herself Ryoko replies "Damnit! You may be right. We don't know very much about these things. If they *do* send us back to Earth...like it did for me back when I was out kicking Hotsuma's butt; it's all over for Ayeka."

"Do you have a plan?" Sakuya asks.

"Quiet...let me think." The beleaguered space-pirate replies as she quickly tries to formulate a plan. After a few moments of deep concentration she finally says "...I got nuthin'. Can you think of anything; bookworm?"

This time Sakuya joins her in deeply concerted thought "Give me a moment." She replies "I'll come up with something."

Just then, an instant transmission beacons on the display-screen of the navigation grid. Looking at the frequency being transmitted, Ryoko is able to ascertain that it's Karina sending her an urgent message via encrypted code.

"...Ryoko...Sakuya...this is Karina." The beautiful space-pirate intones. "Have I got good news for you...?"

"Spit it out." Ryoko replies.

"Remember those spies I told you about earlier?"

"Yeah?"

"Well they've just come through for me...**big time!**"

"What've you learned ma'am?" Sakuya asks politely.

"...Always so dreadfully polite..." she says of Sakuya "...What I've learned is the location of the last remaining piece of the device. They've told me that it lies somewhere in the Lyseum galaxy, possibly in one of the Kaspian-verge quadrants."

"I know that area..." Ryoko says "...that's in the outer rim...the only thing worth noting out there is the planet Crysillium..."

"They also have two moons orbiting their planet...but intelligence reports indicate a small mining space-station in orbit taking ferrite-cloud samples." Karina replies.

"Any word as to its owner?" Ryoko asks.

"Negative." Karina responds. "It's shape and design doesn't appear on any of our spec-charts. It's possible Rashida could be hiding the artifact there." Karina says.

"What makes you say that?" Sakuya quizzically asks as she tries to understand all that's going on between her and the two space-pirates she's in company with.

Turning her head to answer her, Ryoko says, "...because that would be the most tactically viable place to keep it. By storing it on the satellite in orbit, they'd be in a prime position to sell it quickly or make a fast getaway if necessary. Not to mention that transporting ships and cargo off-world takes up too much time, energy, and resources."

"I see..." Sakuya responds.

"Now if we're done with the little class session..." Karina coldly replies "I have more urgent news to confer. Since you left, Rashida has sent another message with even more of his ridiculous demands."

"What's it this time?" Ryoko asks as she crosses her arms in annoyance "...More money...workers...spices...weapons?"

"No, Ryoko...he just wants *you*." Karina replies solemnly after a long pause. Clearly disturbed by this latest development, Karina is barely able to forward the saved voice-message created by Rashida onto Ryo-Ohki, for Ryoko to preview. "As always, I'd be pleased to provide you with any supplies, resources, or whatever else it is you may need in order to help you along on this mission."

"Thanks Reena..." Ryoko says as she steps back leaning against the interior wall of space-ship Ryo-Ohki. Before too long Ryoko voices out with her reply "We're going to need the exact coordinates of that satellite, and we also need food supplies. If I'm correct, this voyage will take us about two weeks using Ryo-Ohki's maximum thrusters. That system is beyond our normal travel route so I'd also be grateful if you'd send us any other information that we might need to locate the station, like signal tracers, homing beacons, Juraitrium-7000 sensors, and stuff like that."

"No problem...its all yours..."

"Karina..." Sakuya adds, as she walks up to the display screen and addresses the young woman personally.

"Yes?"

"I was wondering if you could send a message to earth for me...*us*." Sakuya adds after turning to look at Ryoko seeing her countenance and taking her feelings into consideration.

"Certainly...it would be my pleasure. Who do you wish it sent to, and what message would you like for me to relay?" Karina asks kindly as her dictation robot hovers noiselessly by her head.

"Tenchi Masaki...Tell him that we're ok. Tell him that we're going on a trip for a couple of weeks and not to worry about us."

"Is that all?" Karina inquires.

Sakuya nods her head.

"No problem...I'm sure he'll understand once I explain your ship's transmitting limitations."

"Thank you...he means the world to us. We don't want him worrying." Sakuya says.

At hearing this Ryoko grows even more somber than before. As a pirate she always knew that the day might come that she would have to forfeit her life, but without anyone special to share her last moments together with, this grim possibility really hits her unusually hard.

"You can count on me." Karina says as she discontinues her transmission.

"Now that we know *where* to go to get that last piece, all we have to do now is *get* there." Ryoko says to Sakuya as she notices the former creation of the megalomaniacal Juraian mutant Yugi, remove her crystal given her by Tenchi.

Ryoko quickly questions her about her actions. "What're you doing?"

"I said I'd come up with something regarding our crystals." She says as she picks up the wooden box given her by Karina "Suppose we aren't wearing the gems anymore...?" Sakuya asks Ryoko. "You don't think they'd still be able to detect our danger, do you?"

"I don't know." Ryoko replies "...but it's worth a try."

"I figured that since the box is lined, they'd be pretty secure in here." She says while placing it safely inside and outstretching her hand to receive Ryoko's.

"I suppose it'll have to do." She says while quickly removing it, staring at it for a moment and passing it to her traveling companion. "For now they're safe, let's just hope that they stay that way." Ryoko whispers to herself, thinking of Tenchi and whether or not she'll ever see him again.

Moments later, a bright blue light appears within the ship next to the two young women, and in it materializes the supplies that Karina has promised them for their long journey.

Before them sit two large crates; one labeled 'tracking devices and miscellaneous equipment' and the other marked 'foodstuffs'. As Ryoko and Sakuya decide where to stack the supplies they've received, they're both free to wonder if this long trip is going to bring the two of them any closer.

Chapter 7

In his massive ship's main containment room, retrofitted from an old storage facility, Rashida paces back and forth as he patiently awaits the orders for his next course of action. However in the extensive retrofit the room has been heavily modified to accommodate large quantities of prisoners and slaved workers. Each small cell is designed to hold one prisoner, and consists of a small cot, a sink, and a toilet with paper, but nothing else. Several energy binders in a criss-crossed pattern, designed to act as the restraining field, protect the entryway into each of these individual cells.

Ayeka is located within one of these tiny cells. As a prisoner, Rashida has found it exceedingly difficult to restrain the headstrong young princess in any other way, due to her unusual force-field casting abilities. Using her talents, she's already attempted escape several times, each time failing just barely.

"I demand that you release me at once..." Ayeka insists to her captors "Who do you think you are? I'm the crown princess of Jurai, you have no right kidnapping me and keeping me here against my will." Ayeka yells out from inside her cell.

"I'm truly sorry princess that our accommodations are not more to your liking...however, under the circumstances, I'm afraid you've left me with few options. You've already tried to escape twice, and left several of my men in critical-care in our infirmary."

"Let me go, or you'll live to regret keeping me here!" Ayeka threatens.

"Believe me when I tell you; I do so already. But I need you *here* with *me*." Rashida replies coolly. "You're far too integral to my plans to let you go. Besides, once I've received my next set of instructions and extracted a pure DNA sample from you, I may be directed to let you go...so sit tight, this might be sooner than you think."

"DNA sample...? What's going on? Answer me!" Ayeka demands as she stamps down her left foot, insisting that she be heard.

"You're really starting to grate with your constant incessant demands princess." Rashida says as his cool demeanor slowly begins to fade. "I'm not normally known for my patience. Need I remind you, I'm merely giving you this courtesy because you happen to be in league with an old colleague and personal friend of mine? Please don't test my patience." Rashida says as he buries his face into his left hand, trying to ignore his frustration over the whole situation.

After a few moments, a transmission arrives over the comm-station in the containment room. Rashida immediately leaves Ayeka and approaches the display-screen to receive his next orders. He punches a few buttons on the holographic console and a picture comes into view. The figure on the screen has been distorted so that their features cannot be visibly verified. The person begins to speak.

"Rashida...you have the princess...good job." The person says, though their voice has also been digitally altered so as to remain unrecognizable.

"Thank you, but I told you that it'd be as easy as 1-2-3..." he says while quickly snapping his fingers three times "All we need now is the extracted DNA sample from the princess here and we can advance in our plans."

"Why have you not done so already...?"

"I can't extract a sample from a subject so soon after they've been drugged with a sleeping agent, otherwise the genetic information collected from their blood sample will be contaminated. More time is required for the genetic contaminate to pass harmlessly through her system."

"Very well..." the voice replies with brief annoyance "I've waited this long to carry out my plans. This delay won't make much difference."

"Thank you...Rashida out..." Rashida ends the transmission with a cool yet sly grin. So far things are going nicely and according to plan for the handsome young space-pirate. If things continue on the way that they have, soon he will have ultimate control over the entire galaxy.

Back on earth in the secret-lab of the greatest scientific genius of the universe, Washu Hakubi, a sudden interruption via digital-transmission is made over her sensitive communications relay grid. She immediately stops her experiment to answer the call.

Pushing the holographic activation button to bring up the visual display on the screen, she crosses her arms inquisitively as soon as she sees who it is.

"Karina...it's been a while..." Washu says as she casually leans against a dog-shaped invention once used to sniff out large sums of money for the girls "...How long has it been, two and a half years...?" she asks "To what do I owe this personal call?"

"Yes, it's been about that..." Karina says as she bows to her over the holographic display "Washu...you look good...Still as young and as vibrant looking as ever. Life on that planet has done you well."

"Yeah well...y'know...exercise, diet, and all that." Washu chuckles continuing the small-talk.

"I see." Karina says "Not to cut you off, but I'm calling you under special request. Is a gentleman by the name of Tenchi Masaki there?"

"Of course." Washu replies inquisitively "What's going on, if you don't mind my asking...? How do you know of Tenchi?"

"I'm calling on behalf of Ryoko, and the others. It's urgent." She quips.

"He's not in right now, but I can certainly relay to him a message when he returns if you'd like." Washu says as she snaps her fingers calling up her dimensional laptop, which appears right in front of her, positioning itself perfectly to accommodate the sudden necessary dictation duties.

"Very well..." Karina concedes "...the black-haired girl; I think her name was Sakuya, requested that I inform him that they'll be taking a little more time than they originally expected to spend out here in space, but not to worry. They are fine and look forward to seeing him again real soon."

"I see..." Washu replies while never allowing her eyes to leave the screen, scrutinizing Karina's every move. "Mind telling me why they couldn't relay this message to us themselves..." Washu asks with great suspicion while listening intently, appearing to ruminate over her motivations.

"No...Not at all.

They've decided to travel to the Lyseum galaxy. Sakuya said that they were gonna pick up an extremely rare and priceless artifact there from one of my remote suppliers. Between you and me...I think they're going to use it as some sort of gift-offering to that Tenchi fellow I mentioned earlier." She pauses then says "Anyway, they've already traveled too far to send a viable transmission back to earth with their limited-range transmitters, so I volunteered to relay this message for them. It was the least I could do for one of my closest friends." Karina says with a warm smile as she talks conversationally with Washu over her holographic display transmitter. "Besides, I haven't heard from you in a while and wanted to check up on you."

"Is that so?" Washu replies summarily "Hm...I know that galaxy...it's a two week voyage...and that's only one-way. That's a pretty far commute to make just to be gathering up an artifact. That doesn't sound like something Sakuya would say at all. Do you happen to know the name of this so-called object?" Washu presses on.

"Sure...it's called the '*Heart of Jurai*'." She reveals happily "Well...anyway, I have to end this transmission. I'm entering space-police territory, and that's not someplace smugglers like me wanna be caught sending messages, if you know what I mean..." Karina says with a cordial smile and a wink.

"I suppose not..." Washu replies.

"...Well, it was nice hearing from you again..."

"...Likewise."

As Washu's transmission with Karina ends, she can't help thinking that somehow, there's something off-kilter to her old acquaintance's story, something that could prove extremely important. However, knowing how naturally unscrupulous pirates often are as a means of necessity, she quickly dismisses it, going back to the experiment she was once engaged before the awkward interruption.

Meanwhile back in space, Karina is able to send Ryoko and Sakuya one last transmitted message before they're agreed upon radio-silence goes into effect, and she makes valiant use of it. "Ryoko, I've just sent Tenchi that message through our friend Washu..."

"Yeah, we know...we were monitoring your transmission Reena." Ryoko says.

"Monitored the message...?" Karina lets out in surprise "You sly dog..."

"Old habits die hard. Look...I noticed you lied about the artifact, Sakuya, and even other important details..."

"...Couldn't be helped my friend. I couldn't take the chance that Rashida might be listening in. After all...*you* were. He told us to notify *no* one. So I thought I'd play it safe."

"Yeah, but Washu's no dummy...I'm sure she realized something was up..."

"You're probably right...If you like; if you guys pre-recorded a message I could send it to them as a type of reinforcement to my story. That might allay any doubts that they may have." Karina suggests.

"Sounds like a good idea...Sahkay and I'll send it to you in a few minutes...since this is our last transmission until we complete our objective; I wanted to tell you to take care...it was nice seeing, and working with you again."

"Likewise..." Karina says letting out a warmly inviting smile. "You both take care..." Karina concludes as she presses the discontinuance button to cut off the transmission.

Turning to Sakuya, Ryoko says, "Ok now...let's record the message..."

Chapter 8

Four hours have passed since Rashida received the last transmission from his mysterious associate, and it's now time to begin the DNA extraction. Gesturing for his men to bring him the equipment needed for the procedure, he cautiously begins his approach toward Ayeka attempting to ease and comfort her regarding the medical process.

"Princess Ayeka...don't be alarmed...In a few moments my associate will return to make an extraction of a minute sample of your blood. It's fairly painless, and will only require a few seconds of your time. I *strongly* encourage your cooperation; otherwise I'll be forced to *take* the sample from you, by *any* means necessary."

"Why d'you need my blood?" Ayeka asks as she nervously backs against the wall of her cell.

"I'm actually not at liberty to say...but I promise you that you'll not be harmed." Rashida says in his most deliberately charming way, hoping to win her over by his irresistible charm and good looks. As he watches her through the energy field waiting for her answer, his associate arrives with a small needle syringe and an alcohol swab, for the wound.

"...I...don't know what you want my blood for...but as heir to the Jurai throne it's my duty as its princess to decline co-operation with pirates and terrorists."

Letting out a deep sigh of frustration Rashida responds, "I wish it didn't have to come to this..." He turns to glance at one of the guards and says, "...Do it..."

"Yes sir..."

Without hesitation the guard pulls down a control-lever on the console in front of him. Seconds later, the room eerily begins reverberating in a low-pitch hum that radiates from each of the four walls of her cubicle cell. Ayeka nervously looks around, uncertain of what to expect next. Glancing at Rashida who's standing vigil at the entryway, he lets out a stifled half-smile. Nervously anticipating the outcome, sweat begins to bead profusely on her forehead.

"One more chance princess. Cooperate. *Give* me the sample, or I flood your room with enough voltage, that you'll be begging for me to kill you."

Hesitating, while a tear runs down her cheek, Ayeka lets out meekly, "...I...can't..."

"Victor...you heard the lady. *Do it...*" Rashida pauses. Then adds, "Don't worry princess, this voltage has almost no current. It won't kill you but in the process the pain will be so unbearable, that you'll wish it did. You'll lose control of your body's functions for awhile, and when you do...I'll come in and *take* the sample from you. No fuss...no muss."

As Ayeka stands there tensing up for what she knows is inevitable, Victor the guard pushes the button to begin the electrocution process. Ayeka stares at Rashida with tears filling her eyes silently begging for him to relent, but he never does.

Then suddenly the jolt hits her. With a deafening sizzling sound, the untold volts pour into Ayeka, causing her to flail and seize about. Rashida stands there motionless as he watches the entire spectacle, seemingly enjoying every second.

After a few seconds, possibly eons from Ayeka's point of view, Rashida lifts his left index finger to signal to his guard Victor to discontinue electrocution process. Rashida pushes a button near the entryway to the cell and the energy field disappears. He calmly steps in and walks over to Ayeka who by now is lying on the floor motionless. He kneels down beside her and smugly says, "...See...I told you I'd get the sample. This whole scenario could've easily been avoided if you had just listened and cooperated."

Rolling up the left sleeve of Ayeka's space suit, Rashida swabs a small area of her arm that he prepares to take the blood sample from. He grabs the needle and places it into her arm. After a few short moments, he removes the needle containing the sample of blood, and leaves her body slumped over on the floor. "Victor...make sure to send a medic to check her out...after all, we wouldn't want anything happening to our little *meal-ticket* here. Should anything go wrong with the master plan we might be able to use her for a ransom if we play our cards right...and do it quickly while she's still stunned, I imagine that when she regains her senses she's going to be very upset..."

Back in earth's galaxy, Ryoko and Sakuya have just begun their long journey to the Lyseum galaxy. The crates housing the supplies needed to reach the space station have been carefully opened and their contents emptied so that the two young ladies can compile an inventory of all the items on hand during the trip. While Sakuya helps counting some of the supplies that were packed in the foodstuffs crate, she notices a small blip on the radar screen. Walking over to inspect it more closely she discovers that another ship is in direct course for their's. She calls to Ryoko to check it out for her.

"Who do you suppose *that* is headed this way?" Sakuya asks as she watches Ryoko man the control console and punch up the view-screen scanners.

"...If I didn't know any better I'd say that this ship looks an awful lot like Kione and Mihoshi's patrol-vessel. With everything that's been going on, I forgot that we'd be traveling through their patrol route. This could be trouble. These are the *last* two people we need to run into right now." Ryoko says aloud though really speaking to herself. "We can't let them know what's going on...Ayeka might be killed if we clue them in that there might be a problem."

"Got it..." Sakuya replies.

"Good. Just follow my lead and everything'll be fine." Ryoko says confidently. Next she hits a button on the console and a display of Mihoshi and Kione appears before them.

"Ryoko...Sakuya...We've been getting reports from Washu that something strange might be going on out here...so since we were out on patrol in this area, we thought we'd check it out and see if everything's ok." Kione says with a very serious look on her face.

"Kione, Mihoshi... You know *me*...just out and about having fun...**nothing** to be concerned about." Ryoko responds as she reclines back in the control consoles chair, placing both her hands comfortably behind her head and using them as a headrest.

"Ummmm, where's Ayeka?" Mihoshi asks inquisitively as she scratches her head looking around for her.

"You know how *she* is...she's just sulking...Said she was opposed to us going out to the Lyseum galaxy, so she's protesting by throwing one of her obnoxious tantrums. If you ask me, she's a big baby." Ryoko says with a playful smile, displaying her own nonchalant charm as she points back to the spot behind where the supplies are being stored with her thumb, implying that Ayeka is located in that area behind the boxes.

"Oh...well if everything's ok, I guess it's alright for us to let you go." Kione says. "But do me a favor and promise me that if anything **does** happen...you'll let us know...alright...?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah...nothing's going to happen with *me* here protecting the girls..." Ryoko says bragging to the young space policewomen. "You forget who you're talking to..."

"...Why're *you* so quiet Sakuya...?" Kione asks her, as a side thought.

"No particular reason..." she replies, "I'm just listening in. This whole space-travel thing is new to me and a bit overwhelming; is all..."

"Yeah...I'm showing my buddy here the ropes...y'know...how to survive in the galaxy...**space pirate style**." Ryoko adds as she throws her arm around Sakuya's shoulder and pretends to be chummy with the young woman. "I've just taught her several of the secret handshakes us pirates use. Next I was thinking of teaching her how to pilot a space-ship."

"Well...make sure that you stay outta trouble Ryoko..." Kione insists "We could get into a lot of trouble if our superiors ever found that we turned a blind eye to one of the most notorious pirates in the known galaxy, even if you have been pardoned for most of you recent crimes with Hotsuma."

"Alright...alright...I promise...sheesh!"

"Good. Well, if that's all...I'll just type in your designation-markers and ship's identity-tag into our computer and give you clearance for both sectors...you shouldn't have any trouble with any other Galaxy policemen patrolling this or the other sector from now on. Let us know how the trip turns out..."

"Ok..." Sakuya replies as she steps back behind Ryoko who resumes control of the conversation.

"Gee...I wish *I* could go with them...sounds like a lot of fun..." Mihoshi says as she prepares to sign off.

"Forget about it Mihoshi...we're on company time...we can't be seen in the company of criminals, think about how that'll make us look..." Kione replies to her with frustration written all over her face.

"Oh I know...but it's been so long since we had a vacation..."

"What d'ya mean Mihoshi...? We just got back from vacation *yesterday*..."

Watching the whole scene, Ryoko laughs and waves a playful goodbye to her friends as she switches off the screen ending the transmission. "I love those two...they always make me laugh..." Ryoko says to Sakuya as she leaves the seat and prepares to resume her inventory of the contents in the crates that they've just received. "You did good Sakuya. For a second there I thought you were gonna drop the ball and say something stupid, but you did great. Every time I think I've figured you out, you turn around and do something awesome and totally unexpected."

"Thanks...*I think*..." Sakuya says, not knowing whether to be offended or complemented by the curt statement. "Still, I don't like having to lie to them...maybe they could've done something to help."

"You heard Rashida...if we'd've tipped them off; Ayeka's goose would've been cooked. We've got this all under control. Besides...they've already helped us out in their own special way. More than they'll ever know...We'll make it up to them."

Chapter 9

Ayeka stirs in her lonely cell as she slowly regains her consciousness. Looking around, she notices that she's now lying on the small cot located within the tiny room that she's being held captive in. She rubs her sore arm in the spot where the blood sample was taken from. On her arm is a tiny bandage; apparently someone has administered first aid to the wound in hopes of preventing any future infections. She gets up from the cot and walks over to the sink to wet her face. Her whole body aches from the voltage that was coursing through her body just a short while ago.

"I wish the others were here..." Ayeka whispers to herself under her breath as she splashes the cold refreshing water onto her face. "I'd even settle for having that dreadful Sakuya here..." She pouts as she considers her circumstances. "...though...I'm not even sure where *here* is..."

Ayeka walks over to the front of the cell and peers out to the area where the security guard is keeping watch. "If I'm to escape, I must somehow make it past that guard..." she says to herself as she continues to visually survey the surrounding area "First things first...I've got to deactivate these energy binders...if only I could reach the controls..."

As Ayeka continues to search for a solution to her problems, she hears a voice whisper softly to her from the adjoining cell. "Miss Ayeka...I heard about what happened earlier...and I'm sorry."

"Who're you?" Ayeka answers back to the unknown woman in the cellblock next to her.

"...A friend...I'm here to inform you that everything will be alright." She replies.

"What's your name?" Ayeka insists.

"...Atsuko ma'am. But for now I'm afraid that's all I can tell you. I'm a member of the crew...I came in earlier and dressed your wounds."

"...Would you mind telling me why I'm here?" Ayeka asks as she angrily bangs her fist against the wall. "What's going on...why do they need my blood...and why are you being so nice to me?" Ayeka hammers on with her questions, insisting upon specific answers.

"I wish that I could be more specific...as it is, I've probably told you much more than I should. I was sent here by a friend to inform you that everything will work out fine."

Ayeka ponders for a moment then replies "Are you one of Karina's undercover spies?"

Taken aback Atsuko can barely respond to her.

"Shhhhh...Lower your voice ma'am. I don't want the guards to hear us. Listen...I'm sorry...I wish I could tell you more...but my involvement here is potentially dangerous to you."

"Were you captured trying to help me? Why're you locked-up in that next cell?" Ayeka blurts out.

"Who says I'm being held captive in this cell?" Atsuko chuckles as she provides a quick reply to the annoyed young Juraian princess "Anyway...I'm almost out of time. Just remember that your friends Ryoko and Sakuya are on their way to rescue you right now. It's a long trip here from earth...so expect to be here for a while..."

"What d'you mean; *expect to be here for a while...*?"

"I don't know if you're aware of this, but you're now in the Lyseum galaxy...*far* away from the milky-way. We're in what's commonly known as the outer-rim quadrant. At maximum thrust, I'm afraid it would take Ryo-Ohki at least two weeks to get here."

"Two weeks...!" Ayeka gasps in shock. "I'm going to be stuck in this horrid place for half a month?"

"...Well...not exactly..." Atsuko stumbles "In two days, Rashida will move you to a more comfortable room...standard protocol."

"How do you know all this?" Ayeka spits out, still unsure as to whether the girl on the other side of the wall can be trusted.

"...I have my sources. But I ask you...for your sake. Once you've been moved to the other room, Please refrain from any further escape attempts."

"We'll see..." Ayeka defiantly replies. "I'm a member of the Juraian royal house. Rashida has no right keeping me here." Ayeka says.

"Well...I gotta go..." Atsuko exhales "The guard's suspicious already...I'll be back to check up on you tomorrow...please try to stay out of trouble until then, ok..." Atsuko says as she hurries off out of the adjoining cell.

As soon as the young woman swiftly makes her way toward the adjacent exit from the room, she is immediately stopped by a second pirate-guard.

"Hey you..." the guard says to Atsuko as she approaches the door to exit the cell block "What're you doing here talking to that prisoner?"

"I'm the medic under special order from the captain. I was tasked with making sure our special prisoner is doing well...after all...she *is* a Juraian princess. Think about it...Do you want the Jurai-royal house breathing down our necks looking for whoever's responsible if anything happens to her?"

"I suppose not. You're not our usual medic...who are you? Where's Tomo?" The guard pushes on.

"I'm Atsuko." She says as she gently caresses the side of the guard's face with her left hand, blatantly flaunting her undeniable charms. For the moment the guard is so enthralled with her beauty and attention, that he makes no further issue of her questionable identity. "Tomo's fallen ill and I've been temporarily transferred up from planet-side to aid in medical duties for him until he recovers..." she adds as she mercilessly performs the infamous hair-flip.

"I...I..." the guard stutters "...Paperwork...do you have it...?" he barely lets out as his eyes never leave her provocative chest.

Carefully reaching into her tastefully hidden bra so as to deliberately provide him ample time to gawk at her striking curves, she conveniently pulls out an official looking document. "I have all my documentation right here if you'd like to see them." She quickly bats her eyes at him "If you'd like, you're welcome to call Rashida to verify my clearance codes..." Atsuko says with a smile on her face looking at him flirtatiously, not really expecting him to carry out any of her suggestions. "...or if you want...we could discuss it over dinner...after your shift..." The guard's nose immediately starts bleeding at her blatantly suggestive comment. As he quickly reaches to cover his nose to stop the bleeding, Atsuko warmly smiles and slips out the door past him.

As she leaves, Ayeka watches on in amazement asking herself "Who was that woman, and why is she helping me?" This and many other questions will come up within the next few days while Ayeka sits patiently in her cell desperately awaiting the conclusion of her stay on this ship.

Meanwhile, in Rashida's personal quarters, a conversation is already in underway between him, and his mysterious benefactor whose voice is electronically altered over the radio-waves.

"...As expected, my plan is commencing without a hitch. I have it in good confidence that the princess's two associates are currently on their way..." the voice says over the comm. desk.

"...Good...I'll be ready for them once they arrive. I was able to get a sample of the princess's blood for the genetic duplicator." Rashida replies.

"Does she suspect anything...?"

"No...I was careful not to divulge any information..." Rashida responds. He then looks down toward the floor lost in thought. His face is oddly blank.

"...Is there anything wrong?"

"...I'm not really sure. I thought that torturing the princess would somehow cheer me up...but strangely it didn't..." Rashida says with a puzzled look on his face. "I don't get the same pleasure out of it that I used to..." he admits "It all seems so pointless and empty now."

"I really don't care about your personal musings." The benefactor callously replies "Just make certain that it doesn't interfere with the mission at hand. Understood?"

"...Of course..." he replies.

"Good. Now go and prepare the device for their arrival. Everything must be ready and in place by the time they reach your ship; if it isn't...we loose *everything*..."

"Wait just one minute." Rashida interrupts "Let's get one thing straight right now. I *don't* work for you. Those smug little comments you keep making, can keep to yourself. You came to *me* for help...and it's high time you started acting like it.

I only agreed to help you because you promised me something that I could never get on my own...Ryoko."

"You short-sighted fool. You turn down the power of gods over the love of a woman?"

"Not just *any* woman...the only one that ever meant anything to me. There's nothing in the universe that could compare to finding one's soul-mate. But I wouldn't expect for you to understand that. There's no love at all in your black heart."

The person on the other side of the vid-screen just shrks it off. "Very well...suit yourself...that just means that there'll be more for me to control."

Shaking his head in disgust Rashida quickly shuts off the transmission. Pushing a few more buttons, a small slightly distorted holographic image of Ryoko appears before him as he relaxes in one of his reclining chairs. "Ryoko...I've just sacrificed a lot over you...I hope you'll show some gratitude when we finally meet. If not...que sera...it's been an adventure knowing you."

Back on Ryo-Ohki, Sakuya and Ryoko anxiously attempt to come up with a viable plan that'll allow them infiltration on Rashida's space station once they arrive in the Lyseum galaxy.

"I've linked into Karina's Juraian databank to research the *Quantum Null Destabilizer* just like you've asked me to Ryoko..." Sakuya says, "...and I found something interesting..."

"What'd you find...?"

"Nothing definite...but for starters, Karina has *really* done her homework on this artifact...it has *everything* in these notes...and I mean *everything*."

She quickly punches up several screens and scrolls through pages of paragraph until she reaches the one she's referring.

"Here it makes references to precise calculations made by various portions of the components of the Quantum Null device...it says here that without the *Light-stone* portion, that the device would become seriously unstable. Apparently the Light-stone is used as a type of conduit that aids in its cooling. It also adds that its secondary function is to act as a powerful anti-neutrino conductor. Without it...it just couldn't generate beams powerful enough to sustain an energy-field capable of destroying a planet...let alone an entire galaxy."

Clearly impressed, Ryoko whistles in awe. "Does it mention anything about the *Heart of Jurai*?"

"...Not directly...it refers to something called a Juraian *Heart-stone*, I think they're the same thing. These notes indicate that without it...the device will implode upon activation..."

"Sakuya...*that's it!*" Ryoko exclaims as she excitedly grabs Sakuya's shoulders. "That's what Karina meant when she gave us the replica *Heart-stone*. Remember when she said that 'we'd know what to do with it...?' I'm betting that that's what she was hinting at. She must've already knew about its implosion capabilities and trusted that we would somehow figure it all out...So if that's the case...? What we have to do is replace Rashida's real *Heart-stone* with the fake, and the device will blow up."

"I don't know..." Sakuya questions "If that was her plan all along, why go through all the trouble of an elaborate story when she just could've told us outright? We can't afford to be figuring out riddles, the entire galaxy is at stake."

"How the hell should I know what she was thinking? She obviously had her reasons. Maybe she figured Rashida was listening in and might've been tipped off to her plan..." Ryoko responds as she crosses her arms.

"I guess..." Sakuya concedes. "...But what about Ayeka? If we commence with the plan she'll blow up right along with it..."

"No kidding..." Ryoko snaps back "Don't you think I know that Sakuya? I've got a plan." Ryoko steps closer to her gesturing that she sit at the computer terminal in order to begin making arrangements for her ad-hoc plan. She pulls up several technical printouts of Rashida's vessel and prints up a large map of a route leading from the docking-bay directly to the ship's central reactor-core. "See, here is where we'll dock when we get there. I'll mark it in blue." She quickly pulls out a blue highlighter from the clothing trunk their civilian outfits are stored in and clearly marks the route.

"Wait...I'm a little confused." Sakuya says as she scratches her head "I thought we were headed to a space station. But you're pulling up schematics to Rashida's spaceship..." Sakuya points out in total confusion.

"That's because they're both one-and-the-same. I know Rashida pretty well; even after all these years, he still follows pretty much the same patterns. When I was still traveling with Hotsuma, I heard about a missing Juraian stealth transceiver. Hotsuma didn't pay it any mind since there isn't much money to be had in stealing untested prototype technology. But I was intrigued, so against his wishes I made a few inquiries. The only thing I found were some false rumors that a pirate was using it to pull off cloaked raids. Most of them fingered *me* as the culprit. Since that was pretty much hogwash I lost interest and eventually blew it off myself.

But now it's all starting to make sense.

Rashida often used me as a front for his illegal activities in the past. He always said that people feared *me* more. He probably started those rumors to throw everyone off his trail.

So now we find that months later Rashida mysteriously reappears strong-arming space-faring merchants, while at the same time planning to take over the galaxy with some ancient Juraian artifact capable of destroying the universe. And he also just so happens to possess a starship fitted with top-secret Juraian stealth-technology so advanced that it's far beyond anything ever achieved before.

This is just too convenient to be mere coincidence." Ryoko says as she pulls up more maps. "Check this out...if you look closely at the map, you'll notice that this area on Rashida's original ship has been cleverly reconfigured so that it'll connect up with the space station...He made it modular..."

"Wow Ryoko...you figured all that out just by looking at a few pictures...?"

"Nah...I told you I know Rashida...I know how his twisted mind thinks. He's probably thinking that by hitching up to the station, he can share supplies, crew, and resources, thus bolstering his capabilities if need be. He can also use the stealth pod to hide his and its whereabouts...he always was a real clever bastard."

"What do we do about it...?"

"Simple...all we gotta do is sneak onboard his ship, rescue Ayeka, and replace his portion of the **Heart-stone** with the fake one that we have here. Once he tries to activate it, the stone will take care of the rest."

"So what do you want me to do?" Sakuya asks, anxiously awaiting Ryoko's answer.

"Here's what we'll do. I'll meet up with Rashida and run a distraction long enough for *you* to find your way to Ayeka to rescue her. At that point both of you can make it to the ship's reactor-core and plant the fake **Heart-stone**. With your new abilities you should have no problem making it down there to the reactor past his guards. Any questions?"

"Yeah...how'll I know where to find Ayeka? What makes you think that the QND will be in the reactor-core room?"

"...If you look on the map closely you'll notice that there's an area marked on it for prisoner containment...He'll most likely keep her there considering how much a handful the princess can be, *especially* when she's angry. As far as the reactor-core is concerned, the way I figure it...if he plans on hooking the QND device to his ship and using the ship's consoles as the QND's own manual interface, he's gonna need to connect it to either the command relay interface matrix, or the ship's power-core in order to do it. The way I see it, the power-core is the easier of the two options."

"I see..." Sakuya gasps in disbelief "Still, I wish it wouldn't take so long for *us* to get there...I still can't understand how Rashida was able to transport Ayeka back to the Lyseum galaxy so quickly when it takes us nearly two weeks just to follow."

"The answer's simple. Rashida's a smuggler to the core...and a darned *good* one, at that. He has access to resources, technology, and individuals that would boggle your mind. His ship was probably heavily modified to accommodate faster-than-light transport. Even though FTL technology is highly illegal; it exists...just not on earth."

Sakuya turns away from Ryoko and stares off into the emptiness of space. "I wish that it wouldn't take so long, I really miss Tenchi. I bet he misses us too." Sakuya says. "...It's going to get *really* boring traveling all that distance with only the blackness of space to stare at all that time..."

"I told you that I had it all taken care of, didn't I? It just so happens that Karina sent us a cryo-gen suspension device. We can use it to hibernate until we get there."

Looking apprehensive Sakuya asks Ryoko. "What is it? Will we be ok...?"

"Don't worry...There's nothin' to it. I've been in cryo-sleep lots of times before. You won't even know its being done. It's perfectly safe." She reassures her.

"How does it work?" Sakuya asks.

"All I gotta do is connect it to the life-support systems in Ryo-Ohki, set the timer, and it'll put us all harmlessly to sleep...No fuss, no muss. Feels no different than going to bed at night."

"Even Ryo-Ohki?"

"Yup. Washu explained it all to me once before. Very boring stuff if you ask me, but I remember her saying something about Ryo-Ohki being techno-organic when transformed. Blah-blah-blah...bottom line, the gas should work on her. If I set her destination co-ordinates and lock them down in her onboard computer, she'll continue on to the destination spot uninterrupted until we get there. It's *that* simple."

Still scared and uncertain about the questionable procedure, Sakuya barely manages to bravely let out "OK...let's just get this over with."

Wasting no time Ryoko does just so.

As the device begins to filter the cool soothing vapor of the Cryo-gen into the chamber occupied by the two young women, Sakuya pulls out a picture of Tenchi that she has saved, and stares at it as she wistfully enters a deep cryogenically induced slumber.

Ryoko looks over at Sakuya and smiles. She never dreamed that her attempts to curry favor from Tenchi by pretending to be friends with Sakuya would fail so miserably. And as she too begins to succumb to the effects of the Cryo-gen sleeping vapor, she realizes that when this trip is finished and they are safely back at home, she and Sakuya will be closer than she ever dreamed possible.

Chapter 10

Two days have already passed since Ayeka's first escape attempts and she's growing increasingly impatient with her current living accommodations. Though she has been moved to more comfortable quarters, the state of her incarceration has her understandably deeply troubled.

Ayeka yawns as she stretches her arms and rises from her sleeping cot. One thing that she misses about being on earth is that you can easily tell the difference between the nighttime and daybreak, up in space it's not quite that easy.

Her new room is about twice the size of the cell that she was being held in previously. In it is occupied by a small desk, with reading lamp, a small sized refrigerator, a trunk for storing personal items, and a reasonably comfortable reclining chair. The sleeping cot is built for two persons, and is placed in such a way as to provide an unobstructed view of the window leading off into space. She also has a partitioned off space that is designated as the toilet area. On the wall hangs an old analog clock, though it probably doesn't have the correct time displayed. All in all, this room provides all the creature comforts of home, providing you live in an incarceration cell.

"I refuse to stay in this place any longer..." Ayeka says to herself as she tries to think up another plan of escape. "If my guardians were here I wouldn't be getting treated like this..."

Suddenly a voice comes through over the intercom patched directly into her room. "Princess, I trust that these new accommodations are more to your liking."

"Let me go...you...*hoodlum!*"

"...Princess..." Rashida replies, "...elocution...I thought all the royals were taught to use it. Such language is not very...*princess like.*"

"Come down here and I'll show you how much of a princess I really am...coward." Ayeka retorts.

"...Look, I just wanted to call a truce between us."

"A truce...?"

"Is that so hard to believe, princess? After all, I've been bending over backwards to ensure that you're being treated fairly. Believe me, it's more than our prisoners usually get."

She defiantly crosses her arms but says nothing in reply.

"I'm planning a dinner banquet in a few minutes. It's not often that we entertain royalty, so I thought that it might be nice if you joined us."

"And I suppose this is going to erase the fact that you've kidnapped me? Because if you're looking for sympathy after all you've put me through, you won't get it."

"It wasn't personal...I believe I've already explained myself quite clearly on that. And you weren't being very cooperative. My hands were tied. Listen, I never meant to hurt or injure you. So I ask again for the sake of civility; will you join us?"

"I'll think about it..." Ayeka responds summarily with a sneaky smile on her face knowing that Rashida cannot see it over the intercom.

"**Good**...You won't regret it. I have a couple of surprises in store for you when we arrive in the banquet hall. I'll be down in a couple of minutes to pick you up...for whatever it's worth, I'm sorry for having to pull you into all this..."

"Apology accepted." She says slyly.

As Rashida's transmission ends, Ayeka looks down at the doorway and notices that someone has slipped a note under the crack of the door. After everything that has happened to her so far, she's betting that it was Atsuko who was responsible for the note. For the last couple of days, Atsuko has paid her many such visits, though never making the effort to communicate with her verbally. Today however things are quite different, she's found it necessary to leave a small note detailing vital information regarding her treatment of Rashida.

"Let's see now...what does this say...?" Ayeka says under her breath, not loudly enough for her voice to be picked up over the intercom. As she reads along silently, her expression becomes cynical "Hmmmm...So I'm supposed to forgo any escape attempts I've been planning? How dare she...?" she pauses for a moment to ponder as she crumples the paper in her right hand. "For the life of me, I'll never understand how she always seems to know what I'm thinking. Whatever...besides...with my power...there's *no* way they can catch me again..." She says to herself boastfully as she smiles with deceit in her eyes. "Let them *try* to stop me. Ha...ha...ha...ha...ha...haaaaa...!" Ayeka laughs out loud.

Ayeka listens intently for the approach of Rashida as he nears the door. She will attempt to utilize the element of surprise as he opens it to enter the room to ambush Rashida. She waits in front of the door at a close distance so that she can easily reach it and overtake him when it opens.

After time she hears the door turn and the latch releases the interlocks. Ayeka clenches her fists in silent preparation of her next move. The door swings widely open revealing Rashida looking as dashing as ever in a formal Juraian uniform for the dinner engagement. This startles Ayeka momentarily as she stares at him momentarily taken aback. With the way the outfit tailors to his body she can't help but consider how much the young man looks like Tenchi. This temporary distraction surprises her long enough so that she hesitates in springing her attack.

"What's the matter Princess...is there something wrong?" He says with a concerned yet charming look on his face.

"Uh...no...I'm fine." Ayeka replies as she tries desperately to shake off her mental trance.

Rashida extends a right-hand of goodwill toward Ayeka expecting for her to follow suit. However, as the young princess regains her senses she immediately takes advantage in his lapse of judgment. With his hand extended Ayeka suddenly sends off a concussive energy blast that sends him flying across the room and sprawling unconsciously on the floor. Ayeka wastes no time using this rare opportunity to make a quick getaway through the door.

She swiftly heads down the long narrow hallway and once she reaches the nearest connecting corridor, heads immediately to the left.

Precious moments have slipped by since her escape and Ayeka intends to make good use of this time. She continues down the long passage feverously searching for the nearest landing dock, or shuttle-bay. Unbeknownst to her, this direct route toward the ships escape pods, takes her past one of the many lounges used by the pirates as a makeshift bar. Quickly spotting the hapless princess several of the guards immediately embark to apprehend her.

Quickly doubling back, hoping to evade them before they have an opportunity to pinpoint her exact location, she reaches for the nearest unlocked doorway to find an empty room to hide.

Unfortunately the first room she picks is teeming with pirates playing a friendly game of cards. Her unexpected arrival riles them up and they hastily grab for their blasters. As they quickly begin firing at the fleeing prisoner, she swiftly dodges back through the opened door. This time, however she isn't quite so lucky, as one of the guards' sets off a shot that nails her directly in her back, stunning her and knocking her out onto the floor.

Later, after Rashida has had a chance to finally regain his composure and catch up to her, he approaches the room and confronts the young heiress. "You disappoint me princess. I had hoped that you'd be civil and let bygones be bygones."

He lifts up her limply hanging head and speaks further to the unconscious princess.

"I guess I was *wrong*." Then turning toward his men he says..."Take her away...put her *back* in cooler. I don't wanna see her face again. Do what you want with her...just make sure you don't kill her..."

"Yes sir!" A couple of his guards respond as they happily drag the unconscious princess from the room toward the detention area.

"Oh...and men...make certain that she skips at least two meals a day...if she wants to turn down a feast...then let her *starve*..."

"Yes sir!"

Rashida turns around and limps down the corridor in the opposite direction. His personal quarters are not far away. With a very upset look on his face he says, "Now comes the boring part...waiting for the others to arrive...Two weeks...*dreadful*...what *will* I do to pass the time..."

Chapter 11

Two weeks have mercilessly passed since Sakuya and Ryoko began their long journey to the Lyseum galaxy, and Ryo-Ohki has nearly arrived at her destination point at Rashida's space station. Their arrival at this sector in the solar system has not gone on un-noticed however. Deep within Rashida's vessel, he watches on intently as he continues a long-standing conversation with a mysteriously cloaked figure displayed on a holo-projector next to him.

"...They're here." Rashida says.

"I can see that..." The voice responds. "Is everything in order?"

"Almost..." Rashida replies curtly "That blasted princess. She's been more trouble than she's worth. I should've just eliminated her when I had the chance. During her last escape attempt she damaged the DNA extracting replicator. My people have been working around the clock to repair it, but its *way* too advanced for my personal technicians to fix on their own."

The nameless individual grimaces in the projection, clearly not pleased.

"No matter...I've prepared for this contingency. I've had a tech flown in from planet-side. He's taking a look at it now."

"Can't we commence without the device...? We have all the QND device components..."

"I wish...unfortunately the DNA extractor is responsible for converting the subject's blood-code into a transmittable neutrino sequence, which the armband uses to construct the artificially emitted aura..."

"You better not fail me Rashida...the others should arrive there shortly...this is going to leave us no margin for error."

"Don't worry...I'm told that it'll be repaired within the hour..."

"Good...then I shall prepare for my arrival."

"No problem...Rashida out..." The young ex-lover of Ryoko says as he quickly depresses the discontinuance button on the console. Without further notice, the transmission ends abruptly.

Elsewhere, back on Ryo-Ohki. Sakuya and Ryoko are just beginning to emerge from their listless two-week long cryo-sleep. The effects of the long-term hibernation are temporary sluggishness, dizziness, nausea, and partial blindness, which Ryoko is very much aware of. Sakuya however is not.

"Augggggggh...! What's going on...I can't see!" Sakuya screams in terror as she wakes up rubbing her sightless eyes.

"Relax...you're just suffering from hibernation sickness. Your sight will return in a few minutes."

"How come you didn't tell me about this earlier...?" Sakuya says with a little aggravation and fear to her voice.

"Would it have made any difference...?" Ryoko brazenly replies as she reclines back and waits for her vision to slowly return.

"I don't know..." she snaps "I would've appreciated being told about it anyways at least..." Sakuya says as she slowly begins to calm down. Suddenly she becomes overwhelmed with nausea and vomits into a nearby supply-crate. "Ohhhhh...." she bemoans in misery while grabbing her upset stomach "Sorry about that. I don't feel so good. Can you answer me one question Ryoko? How're we supposed to know if we've reached our destination if we can't even see?"

"That's where having a sentient ship comes in." Ryoko smiles while gently petting the console next to her. "Isn't that right Ryo-Ohki? How you holdin' up girl?"

"Meooooooooowwww..." Ryo-Ohki replies.

"Good. How close are we to the co-ordinates set in your navi-computer?"

"Meow - meooooooooowwww..."

"Great...that's all I needed to know."

As the two young women struggle to regain their bearings, they both ponder over the cruel reality that their adventure is only just beginning.

"Hey Sakuya...my sight is coming back...how about you?" Ryoko asks as she carefully stumbles over to her.

"Yes...I'm starting to see a bright blur."

"Good." Ryoko replies, "Now let's make the final preparations for our mission to infiltrate Rashida's space-station and to sabotage the *Quantum Null-Destabilizer*."

As the two young women try valiantly to complete the final preparations for their daring plan, so to, Rashida is also nearing completion of all his nefarious schemes.

Nervously pacing back and forth, Rashida anxiously awaits the completion of the DNA extractor's lengthy repairs. "How long now?"

"Not long sir..." says the guard assisting the repairs technician.

"Good...keep me informed of your progress. I wanna know the second repairs are completed." He replies as he quickly heads out of the room determined to make it back to his personal quarters. "I'll be in my personal quarters entertaining a *friend*...oh...and by the way, if Ryoko shows up...see to it that she finds her way to my quarters..."

"Yes sir."

"But don't make it too easy...Otherwise she'll suspect something's wrong."

"Yes sir. What about the other girl with her? What do we do with her?"

"She's not important...like I said earlier, don't make it look too easy...make an example of her...kill her if you must."

"...My pleasure sir."

On Ryo-Ohki, Sakuya and Ryoko have completed final preparations, and are now engaged in a spectacular dogfight, as they diligently attempt to reach Rashida's space-station with their lives, and the fake Juraian artifact, intact. Five attack vessels have dispatched and are now advancing in on the heroines with a vengeance.

"Whutta we do Ryoko...they're gaining on us?"

"Hold on...I know a couple of fancy flight maneuvers. I might be able to shake 'em; otherwise we'll have to take 'em out the old fashioned way."

"...Gotcha..." Sakuya replies as she quickly mans the gunner seat, waiting for word from Ryoko to fire. "I don't know about this...maybe we can wing 'em or something...I don't like the idea of killing anyone."

"For cryin' out loud, Sakuya...these guys're tryin' to kill *us*. It's either them...or us!" Ryoko briskly replies.

Momentarily glancing back at her gunning companion she amends. "I forgot...this is all new to you. I'll tell you what...Do what you feel you must...just make sure that you disable those blasted ships...!" Ryoko replies much softer. "We've got to make it to that station."

One of the ships attacking the girls breaks away from the pack and makes a few fancy maneuvers of its own as it tries to land a direct hit, point-blank range on the duo. Ryoko gives word and Sakuya fires off a warning shot across its starboard side. It dodges the shot and makes another pass in an attempt to hit Ryo-Ohki. Ryoko makes use of her superior piloting skills and easily outmaneuvers the small attack-craft's blasts. Taking the time to aim for another shot, Sakuya fires off another blast. As the energy blast approaches the craft, the small ship suddenly explodes into hundreds of little metallic debris and particles.

"I don't get it...I didn't even hit it in a critical area..." Sakuya says in bewilderment. "How could I have destroyed it?"

Overhearing Sakuya's statement Ryoko responds "Oh no! That's just what I feared..."

"What?" Sakuya asks.

"We got Kamikaze fighters on our tail...NOT GOOD!" Ryoko says with a great deal of worry in her voice. "Sakuya...don't fail me now...take em out...! It's either them or us."

"...but that would be murder...!"

"Sakuya...LISTEN to me! If you don't do it, they'll *kill* us. In their minds they're already dead."

Sakuya reaches beside her and pulls up a pair of targeting-goggles. Placing them over her eyes she says. "I understand..."

Falling into her own personal mental-zone; Ryoko channels all her attention and focus on her piloting maneuvers. "Ok boys...show me what you got!"

As Ryoko finishes her statement, two of the attack-craft head directly toward them in a kamikaze fashion. Ryoko easily outmaneuvers them, and the two ships collide in an explosion that mirrors the first in brilliance and spectacle.

"Two more down...that leaves two to go." Sakuya says excitedly as her eyes quickly move across the display screen trying to locate the last two remaining vessels.

"Meooooooooowwww..." Ryo-Ohki interrupts as they desperately try to evade their adversaries.

"What...? What d'ya mean your sensors indicate that those ships are drones? If that's the case, we don't have to worry about killing anyone...there's no one living aboard those ships. Sakuya...take 'em out!"

"I'm on it captain..." she replies confidently.

"Meooooooooowwww..."

"I understand." Ryoko replies to Ryo-Ohki.

"What'd she say?"

"A suggestion...a maneuver. I can use it to help destroy those last two drones. Just hold on tight. This is something Hotsuma taught me while we traveled together. Just be ready with your finger on the trigger when I say fire."

"You got it." Sakuya says, as her palms grow sweaty from all the excitement and anticipation.

Ryoko hits a few buttons on the console in front of her. Ryo-Ohki slows down slightly and the other two ships appear to gain rapidly on the small crystalline vessel. As the drones approach Ryo-Ohki, Ryoko quickly pushes the accelerator to its maximum thrust potential and pulls back the throttle full-force to the left. The ship hangs a sudden steep roll to the left. The drones follow suit and begin to fire on the girls. As Ryoko reaches the apex of her thrust ratio she suddenly kills the throttle, effectively making a hard reverse. As she does so, the two drones fly past her and she uses this opportunity to instruct Sakuya to open fire. Sakuya fires at the mechanized ships and both explode into a million tiny pieces. Afterward they give each other a high-five.

"That was close." Sakuya says.

"Yeah...*too* close...I'm starting to get a funny feeling about all this."

"What d'ya mean?"

"I can't put my finger on it. It's almost like Rashida knows we're here and that he's toying with us...he was using *drones* on us for cryin' out loud...I could *easily* defeat a drone-ship, *any* day...he *knows* me better than that."

"...This is it...isn't it? Once we dock it's gonna be the point of no return..."

"Yeah...look...*don't* worry, we'll be ok." Ryoko says to comfort her friend. "You've really proven yourself capable during all this mess...we'll be fine."

"...Still...I have a funny feeling about all this...like we're all going to die saving the galaxy or something." Sakuya admits "Ryoko...if it's ok...I'd like to take this time to record a small message for Tenchi. Y'know...just in case we *don't* make it."

"I guess it'll be ok. While you do that, I'll go prepare the map and the fake artifact...something tells me that once we get there...we'll be caught in the fight of our lives, and won't have the time to do so." Pausing, then looking up, Ryoko says to Ryo-Ohki, "I'll need you to do a self-docking procedure, ol' friend...Me and Sakuya will be busy ironing out the bugs in the final portions of our plan...and by the way, if I don't get a chance to return, because of...well...you know...I just want

you to know that its been a real pleasure traveling with you. I can see why Sasami is so attached to you...you're a loyal friend. Thanks."

"Meooooooooowwww."

Chapter 12

Meanwhile on board Rashida's vessel the *Razor's Edge*; Rashida has just been informed that his DNA device has been repaired, and preparations for Ryoko and the others have now all been successfully completed.

So far Ayeka is faring no better than she was when she first arrived. Essentially confined within her small 5x5 foot cell for the better part of two weeks, Ayeka has found it extremely difficult to pass this time without having anyone to talk to.

"I command you...let me out!" Ayeka demands of Rashida...! You obviously have forgotten who you're dealing with...I'm the crown princess of Jurai...when I get out of here you'll be sorry...!" Ayeka threatens as she bangs on the wall trying to get someone's attention. "Where's Atsuko...I demand to speak with the medic now...!" She calls out, still trying to get someone to respond to her.

"I told you not to try and escape..." A voice calls out quietly from the cell adjoining hers.

Elated at the familiar voice Ayeka immediately rushes to the side of the wall to listen more clearly "Atsuko...where've you been...? I haven't heard from you in two weeks?"

"...Keep your voice down...the guard doesn't know I'm here..." she replies in whisper "Listen...Where *I've* been isn't important...what *is* important is that you learn to trust me...that said...I have *more* news for you. Your friends have just arrived in this solar system and are preparing to dock with the ship."

"They are...? ...Took them long enough. Do you know who's on the ship, if anyone else is with them...? Was there a young man with them, or two guardians who look like logs?"

"No ma'am...Tenchi, Azaka, and Kamidake are not with them. Just your two friends, Sakuya and Ryoko. Listen...I must go...the guards will be doing their rounds soon, and I can't be seen here when they do...Good luck...you're going to need it."

"You're leaving...? Will I ever get to see you again in the future?"

"...You can count on it..."

Things in Rashida's quarters are beginning to heat up between him and his mysterious ally regarding the eventual fate of his ex-lover Ryoko.

"...It's a bad idea no matter how you reason it...She's changed after all this time. She'll *never* join..."

"That's where you must trust me. Of all people...I can convince her. Just give me the opportunity...and then if she *doesn't* come around to our way of thinking..."

"...Then we *kill* her..." the voice responds resolutely.

"Agreed." Rashida looks down at his wrist-mound timepiece "...How time flies when you're stuck babysitting a spoiled princess...it looks like they've just arrived." Rashida says coldly as he changes the subject. "I'm going to pull up my display screen. It should be mildly entertaining to watch the show from up here."

After pressing a few buttons on his wrist-controller a display-screen slowly flickers on.

"Hello...what have we here?" Rashida says as he zooms in on a screen-capture of Sakuya going down one of the hallways, and nearly presses his face to the screen trying to focus on what he sees. "So they've decided to split up...how unexpected."

"Is this going to be a problem?"

"Not really...just took me by surprise. Not to worry though, I'll just send out my toughest guards to intercept that Sakuya girl...and take her out...she's *not* integral to my plans..."

"No, wait...that Sakuya character might prove useful to us somehow...besides, I like her...she amuses me...try to keep her alive."

"You can't be serious...?" Rashida asks taken aback while doing a double-take at his ally and the moving image on the screen.

"...And why not? You believe that Ryoko can be turned. Why not Kumashiro? Besides, I've been monitoring her. She has a child-like innocence and naiveté that we might be able to harness, exploit, and mold."

"Very well. I'll instruct my men *not* to kill her. I'll have them lead her *here*." He pauses "I hope you know what you're doing..." Rashida says as he turns toward his ally revealing his apprehension toward this alteration in plan.

Moments have passed since Sakuya and Ryoko have parted company in order to carry out the various functions of their segregate plans. Sakuya has to somehow make it to the detention level of the ship and rescue Ayeka, while Ryoko has opted for the more difficult chore in heading directly toward Rashida's individual quarters to head a personal distraction maneuver on the rogue space-pirate himself.

Sakuya runs down the dimly lit hallway wearing her armored space-jumpsuit for added protection with her personal backpack with the fake Juraian artifact stashed neatly inside. Needing to catch her bearings she suddenly stops to pull out the map detailing the location of the detention-block.

"Lets see...according to the map..." she says as she runs her index finger along the paper tracing out her intended route "I'm supposed to turn left down the next hallway...here..." Sakuya says to herself as she reads the map aloud. "It's a good thing Washu-prime gave me these enhanced abilities. They're really coming in handy today." She muses. She quickly folds the map back up and places it within her backpack and continues on "I can't imagine trying to make it through this confusing maze without all these new abilities to aide me along the way." She adds to herself.

After reaching the end of the hall she looks from left to right searching for more advancing guards. "I kinda like having these powers. They give me the opportunity to prove myself to Tenchi...Ryoko is a *tough* act to follow...'sides, as an honorary *Monster-Buster* I have to earn my keep." She jokes to herself trying to lighten up her mood.

Stepping out past an outcropping in the hallway that she previously used to conceal herself from the enemy fire, she makes a quick jump-roll to avoid a few more shots while she uses this opportunity to create a few extra energy spears that she throws at the guards.

"...I wish I were home..." she says as she sighs "But I gotta admit...this is kinda fun..." she says to herself.

Much like Sakuya, Ryoko is also making her way past shooting guards, though with her, she is having arguably much more fun than her companion.

"*Bring* it on...you guys are *no* match for me at all..." Ryoko calls out as she disappears right before the three guards and reappears behind them taking them out quickly. "I'm *hardly* working up a sweat here."

One of the men hastily fires at Ryoko from behind. She barely teleports out from the path of the oncoming fire as it whizzes toward her in deadly fashion. The guard stares at her for a few moments dazed; Ryoko gives him a quick wink and fires a blast of her own at him, knocking him out.

"*There* now...that was the *last* one." She says of the guard as she approaches a door at the center of the hallway marked with an unusual Juraian subscript. "This has *got* to be his room. He *always* did enjoy having his name marked everywhere." She lets out while she uses her superhuman strength to manually force open the otherwise locked door. "Rashida...you *bastard*...*Here I come!*"

Meanwhile, Sakuya is making considerable progress through the various halls aboard the ship as she searches for the ever-elusive detention-block sector. With guards chasing her, she finds it increasingly more difficult to use any of her new enhanced abilities to defend herself from their unceasing offensive strikes.

"...I *don't* understand..." she says to herself "This has *got* to be the right direction. The map indicated that I go down *this* hallway...it *can't* be wrong." She says to herself as she tries unsuccessfully dodging the various blasts from Rashida's men. Thankfully Ryoko had the oversight to provide for her an armored space jump-suit to wear, to protect her from incoming fire. As it is, Sakuya is finding herself getting hit from the blasts more often as her energy reserve is rapidly beginning to deteriorate. Deciding to take a slight break to catch her breath, she immediately begins looking around for small nooks or crannies that she can use for brief spells of cover.

She's in luck...a few feet ahead lies a large metallic structural support strut that she can use to shield her from oncoming fire for a few minutes, giving herself a chance to rest. One problem remains however, the guard following her needs to be pacified before any such rest can be attempted. Concentrating intently, she's able to quickly teleport herself right behind the guard who's presently reloading his blaster. Charging up her left-hand with powerful energy created internally, she's able to swiftly use it to stun him before he can complete his task and begin firing again.

"Whew...that was a close one..." She says while wiping the beading sweat from her brow, as she quickly heads toward the pillar and plops down behind it getting a few moments rest. Before she knows it, she can hear the disturbing footsteps of several more guards approaching as they attempt to overtake her as she rests. "...No rest for the weary..." she muses to herself as she rapidly prepares for more incoming attacks.

She quickly peers over to her right from behind the pillar blocking her from the incoming fire, and notices that a doorway is located approximately 24 feet further down the hallway. Reaching into her backpack once more, she pulls out the ship's map. "That door isn't on the map...it's supposed to be a *wall* there." Sighing in frustration she bravely presses on. "Oh well...despite the small discrepancies in the map, Ryoko's plan is going along quite nicely. All I gotta do is make it past these four and I should be home free. Once I rescue Ayeka she'll be able to help me through the rest." She says to herself. "...we replace the real '*Heart-of-Jurai*' artifact with the fake one and the chain-reaction should be enough to destroy this space-station. I just hope that we can make it back to Ryo-Ohki before that happens." she says nervously to herself gripping the map even harder.

Quickly realizing that she is running out of time, she looks down at her wristwatch and briefly speculates as to how Ryoko is handling her portion of the plan. Ryoko must somehow distract Rashida long enough for Sakuya to rescue Ayeka and plant the fake device at the reactor core. And she must do it all in a manner that doesn't alert him to her intentions. No easy task.

"All I gotta do is make it to the door in one piece. No problem..." she confidently says to herself. Jumping out into the open in an attempt to teleport over to the closed door, she is horrified to realize one of her greatest growing fears...her powers have just cut out on her. "Uh ohhh..." she gasps as she tenses up her muscles in preparation of the painful moves to follow.

Unfortunately when Washu-prime created for her this new biological-body with all its many enhancements, she was unable to harness the powerful energy-orb carried in the Tenchi-kin that she used in creating Ryoko-prime.

Forced to improvise components, Washu was able to recreate a perfect facsimile likeness of Sakuya's body utilizing DNA sampled from those powerful creatures known as *the Masu*, and an ovum extracted from her own uterus.

As powerful as these components were, they still upheld a powerful immutable secret...an insurmountable weakness. Unlike Ryoko-prime who can indiscriminately make use of her powers at any time, Sakuya is severely limited by the intent, extent, and magnitude of such expenditures. And worse still, such wholesale energy usage seriously depletes her inherent life-energy. Thus bringing home the hard-hitting indisputable truth; *to use up her power is to use up her life*.

This unique limitation couldn't have happened at a worse time.

Chapter 13

Rashida steps closer to Ryoko and purposely pours on the irresistible charm. "Ryoko...you are by far one of the most clever women I've ever had the privilege of knowing. How long has it been...one...two...three years?"

"Not nearly long enough" Ryoko curtly replies to him crossing her arms trying not to look him directly in the eyes.

"I suppose I deserve that."

"...that and a whole lot more..." Ryoko replies obviously overtaken in bitterness.

Recognizing that he's reaching her on an emotional level he pushes her further. "I figured that you were still upset over what happened that day..." he tells her as he confidently pulls up a seat next to him and sits down. "Please...take a seat. Get comfortable."

Verbally ignoring him she quickly sits down at the nearest chair across from him and stares angrily into his eyes.

"Would you like for me to explain what happened all those years ago?"

"Don't waste your breath. I already know that whatever comes out will only be more lies."

"...More stinging venom..." he replies to her warmly "You really *are* upset."

"What'd you expect, you sleazebag?" she says to him barely holding back her own tears. "I trusted you...loved you. And what'd you do...? ...betray me."

"I admit...I made a few mistakes in my youth...Some that I'm not proud of." He says while leaning in closer to her and staring deeply into her eyes. "It might interest you to hear that after you left...my life became empty...I searched the galaxy high and low for years...but never found you."

"Good..." she interrupts "Serves you right."

"Did you also know that after you left me I seriously reconsidered retiring from the pirating life? It's true." He reveals. "I had this speech all typed up and prepared for you...I was gonna go out with a bang. I intended to rob the *Great National Jurai Reserve*."

"Spare me your lies...That place is impenetrable. You'd never have made it past the front-desk."

"That's the whole point. I didn't care. I was determined to win you back by any means necessary; even if it meant facing real jail-time."

She sarcastically claps a couple of times "And that's supposed to make me forget all that you put me through?" She angrily gets up from her seat and faces off with him "I'm here for one thing and one thing only..."

"I see..." he replies calmly "I guess you've made up your mind then. I can't convince you to join back up with me...?"

"How could I even consider re-joining you when I can barely stand to even be *next* to you?" Ryoko replies. "Besides...you're too late. I've found someone else. A *real* man...and you'll never live up..." she taunts.

"So that's it...? We just part ways like nothing ever happened between us?"

"In case you haven't noticed...we've already parted ways...years ago when you cheated on me with that tramp."

Seeing that he can not dissuade her from her decision he shrugs his shoulders.

"Very well...can't blame a guy for trying..." He says as he quickly snaps his fingers. Almost immediately several pirate-guards converge out of nowhere with pistols drawn.

"Why you slime ball!" Ryoko says as she spies each of his armed men. "You were planning on ambushing me all along!" Ryoko says as she instantly teleports and reappears directly in front of him landing a punch in his face so powerful that it sends him sprawling on the floor across the room. "You don't know how long I've been waiting to do that..." Ryoko says.

Smiling slyly he quickly brushes himself off climbs to his feet and heads toward the door. "Take her down. Use whatever force necessary." Grabbing the knob he stops once more then casually adds "On second thought...she's too dangerous to let go. Kill her."

The guards take the cue and immediately start firing. Ryoko takes a jump back and disappears into the air, teleporting over to Rashida. "You've underestimated me again," she says while powering up an energy blast aimed directly at Rashida's chest. With the speed of a panther, Rashida quickly dodges with a reverse somersault back to the safety behind of his own men. As he does so the guards instantly begin blasting again. Their orders are to eliminate her. And they will stop at nothing to do so.

Meanwhile, back near the containment quarters, Sakuya is still surrounded by armed guards, and is nervously attempting to reason her way out of the situation. "C'mon fellas...You don't wanna be responsible for destroying an entire galaxy; do you?" she pleads "...Don't you have families...people you care about? They'll all die if you carry out this plan."

Saying nothing in response to her comment one of the henchmen slowly inches forward. "Surrender or we cut you down..."

Not seeing surrender as an option, she quickly comes up with a plan. Spotting a cooling duct just above the guards she raises her hands in a surrendering fashion. The forward guard momentarily lowers her pistol and reaches for her com-link to relay their success. Without even thinking Sakuya grabs the guard's hands while still clasped firmly on the blaster and forcefully aims it at the cooling duct above. Taking off two quick shots the duct explodes and sprays steaming hot coolant over three of the hapless pirates.

With one guard remaining Sakuya hastily attempts to knock her down with a shaky roundhouse kick. The female pirate swiftly blocks the move and attempts to raise her blaster to fire. Noticing

her tactic, Sakuya immediately ducks back behind the bulk-head strut she once used mere moments ago.

"There's *no* way you're getting past me...little miss do-gooder! I know karate...and Juraian martial arts." she angrily says to Sakuya as she slowly approaches. "Just give up now and I don't have to kill you..."

By now Sakuya's heart is racing and her adrenaline is running high. Figuring that she can make one last ditch effort to reach the door up ahead past the guard, she opts to make a hasty run for it.

"I can make it...I know I can...everyone is counting on me." She says to herself. Throwing all caution and reason out the proverbial window, she quickly jets out into the open hoping to make a speedy successful dash to the door. As she runs down the hall, the last guard takes steady aim and fires off the deadly accurate shot at her waist, dropping her like a stone. "Owwwwwww!" Sakuya screams as she grabs her injury, putting pressure to the blast wound. With only a couple of paces left till she makes it to the door, she bangs her fist against the hard metal floor in frustration.

"...Hurts don't it...?" the pirate smugly chuckles as she reloads the chamber of her plasma-pistol "I told you...you weren't going anywhere."

Much to her dismay Sakuya's wound is a serious one. As she lies there, quickly losing strength, blood, and consciousness, she makes one last effort to fire off an energy blast at the smug female pirate.

Believing her no longer a threat, the woman lowers her blaster while making the call to Rashida's personal quarters. While giving her progress report she briefly turns to gaze down the hallway at more approaching guards. Taking this opportunity of her lapse in judgment Sakuya concentrates as hard as she can to create one last powerful energy spear. Quickly throwing it at the pirate, she turns around just in time to see the deadly energy emission barreling inevitably toward her.

Much to Sakuya's relief the energy blast is just powerful enough to knock her from her feet and several yards down the hallway into the advancing guards. She is now home-free. Slowly climbing up to her feet, she painfully limps over to the door. Entering the room, she immediately blocks and barricades it with nearby debris she finds lying around.

"Sakuya...it's you!" Ayeka gasps as she suddenly sees the young woman arrive, barely able to contain her elation "Am I glad to see you..." she says from behind the energy binders keeping her in her cell "It certainly took you long enough to get here. Where's Ryoko?" She asks as Sakuya pushes the buttons to release her.

"We had to split up...Ryoko wanted to take care of some unfinished business with Rashida...I came to rescue you." She replies. As she stands there looking for an alternate route out of the containment block, Ayeka finally makes mention of the blood running down her arm.

"Sakuya...You're *hurt*...!" Ayeka gasps as she runs over toward her trying to examine her wound. "I may not be a doctor, but I can tell that you need immediate medical attention." She tells her.

"I'll be ok..." Sakuya replies as she loses her footing once more collapsing heavily on the floor.

"Sakuya, listen to me...you need help...you won't make it alive if I don't. There's a medic somewhere on this ship sympathetic to our cause that's been helping me. I think she might be working for Karina. If I can only find her..." Ayeka quickly muses.

"We don't have time..." Sakuya replies weakly "I have to get this artifact out to the reactor-core and replace it with the real one...I'll be alright...I just need time to recover, that's all...When I used up my powers I also weakened myself physically..." Sakuya collapses after she finishes her sentence.

Frustrated she bangs her fist against the floor once more. "Why does this mess always happen to me?" Weaker than ever, she looks up at Ayeka and admits to her "...Look, there's no need in my trying to fool myself...I'll never make it to the reactor-core in my condition...you'll have to do it for me. Here...take this map; the location of the core is marked in red..."

Ayeka reluctantly accepts the map "What's the blue dot over in the corner?" Ayeka asks quickly.

"That's where Ryo-Ohki is docked. You have to make it to her quickly after you've planted the fake...this whole ship is gonna blow up after that..." She adds while removing the tiny backpack containing the fake artifact and giving it to Ayeka.

"What about you? I can't leave you up here to die." Ayeka says in protest.

"You've got no choice...the entire galaxy is counting on us...we've got to do the right thing, no matter what the cost. Please...I'll try to make it back to Ryo-Ohki on my own...but if I'm not there when you get back...I want you to please leave without me..."

"...I...I won't leave you to die on this ship..." She says as she grabs the bag and places it around her waist. Then looking at the map before rolling it up and placing it in the bag with the artifact, she kneels down to Sakuya, grabs her hand, and tells her "I'll go and complete the mission...but when I'm done...I'm coming back for you. I won't leave you here."

"...Please...just go..." Sakuya says weakly as she finally begins losing her consciousness. Determined Ayeka stands tall ready to complete her fallen friend's mission, whatever the cost. She turns back around to face Sakuya one last time.

"Thank you for coming for me..."

"It's what family does...just promise me...that if I don't make it, you'll say goodbye to Tenchi for me-ehhh..." Before she can complete her last word Sakuya falls still. A large pool of blood collects beneath her. A single tear runs down Ayeka's cheek as she glances down at her and ponders the weight of sacrifice her traveling companion has made in order to rescue her. She hopes that Sakuya is not dead yet, but she speculates that if she follows her wishes and continues on the plan, there's no way that she'll be able to survive. She has a tough decision ahead of her.

With Sakuya unconscious due to massive blood loss, Ayeka must now somehow find a way to make it out of the cellblock and into the shaft that leads into the reactor-core. The shots being fired into the containment room door by the newest batch of pirate guards are starting to grow louder. The guards are weakening it and blasting through. It's simply a matter of time before they make it through and gun her down.

Chapter 14

Like her friend, Ryoko is also faring pretty badly, though arguably much better than Sakuya at this particular moment in time.

In space, having shootouts and blasting at enemies is what she does best, and normally Ryoko would be having the time of her life, but today is something different. Today she is forced to make a firm opposing stand against someone with whom she never fully developed closure from; her ex-fiancé Rashida Akimodo.

"Ryoko, why do you resist? Just give up this nonsense and join me...? It's pointless. You my dear are more like me than you care to admit. We belong with each other." He asserts. "You belong with someone who can appreciate you and your remarkable talents...not wasting away on some pathetic planet out in the middle of nowhere like you've been doing for the last two years."

"That's where you're wrong Rashida...I've found more happiness and contentment on that pathetic planet than you're even capable of comprehending."

"You say you've already found someone. Yet, you're way out here by yourself on the opposite end of the galaxy. Can this so-called relationship you claim to be in be all that satisfying? Here is where you belong...out among the stars." He reasons.

"My circumstances aren't perfect, I admit that. And I'd be lying if I told you that a certain part of me weren't terrified that he might choose to marry another. But I love Tenchi...regardless of whether he thinks he's in love with my good friend of mine or not..." Ryoko summarily replies with a warm smile on her face at the mere mention of his name "Nothing will ever change that. And if you're too petty to see that; then you're more pathetic than I've ever given you credit..." Ryoko says happily as she fires off a blast at Rashida who quickly blocks the shot with a small energy shield. "...And while we're at it...Why are you doing all this...? I can't believe that you'd stoop to threaten an entire galaxy just to get at a few extra bucks. Certain lines you don't cross..."

As Rashida listens to the question just posed, a wry smile washes over his face.

Ryoko awaits his answer while still fighting off his guards. With a lucky blow one of them manages to sneak up behind her and catch her off guard. As the butt of the guard's blaster-rifle strikes the back of Ryoko's neck knocking her to the ground, Rashida laughs while systematically disclosing yet another compelling upkept secret.

"Ryoko...remember all those years ago when you intercepted that message secretly sent to me from my lover aboard *The Darabond*...?"

"I'm through playing games with you...just shut-up and fight..." she tells him as she powers up her fists preparing to attack.

"Very well..." he replies smugly "I wanted to finally reveal to you just who it was that was sending that message all those years ago...but if you'd rather resort to brutish violence..."

"That was ages ago...in another life." She tells him with disinterest "It doesn't matter to me who it was anymore. I'm long past that."

"Oh...I think it does..." he muses "Especially once you see who it is..." Rashida extends his arm toward a digital-conveyor and a woman suddenly materializes into the room. As Ryoko glances at the newly arrived female she's rendered speechless as she finally recognizes who it is...it's her old friend Karina Masami.

"Hello Ryoko...I'm betting that you didn't see this one coming, though it was painfully obvious from the start." Karina says to her with a sly grin as she walks slowly toward her. Ryoko's mouth drops wide open and stays that way for a few moments before the reality eventually sinks in. "You see...I've played you and your little friends for fools this entire time..." She says condescendingly. Smugly nodding her head she continues "Yes Ryoko...It was *me* you caught seeing Rashida all those years ago. And it was also me that came up with the plan to ransom the entire galaxy." She chuckles "You've lost your edge...and now, you'll also lose your life..."

"Reena...why?" She stutters while barely being able to let out the words. "...You were my best friend..."

"Simple...I've always *hated* you. I've always despised the way you were so respected by everyone in the pirating guilds. When I joined your crew those years ago, I did so with the intention of getting close to you so that you'd drop your guard...and I'd be there to pick up the pieces of your shattered pathetic little life. I wanted to make you look the fool you always truly were. The funny thing is; my plan worked out *so* nicely...that before I knew it, you believed whatever it was I told you...no matter how ridiculous or grandiose..."

Ryoko briefly glances over at Rashida who in turn shamefully lowers his head refusing to look her straight in the eye. She wants to see his reaction to the whole conversation. "Sorry Ryoko...what can I say...Karina made me an offer I couldn't refuse...none of it was personal."

Deeply troubled and upset beyond words, Ryoko barely holds back any further displays of her emotional pain. She somehow manages to coolly ask them, "Why'd you do it? Why'd you pull me into all this? It would've been much easier to leave me out. Why the clever deception?"

"Easy..." Rashida replies, "For lack of a better term; we needed a dupe. When Karina and I realized that we'd never get the last stolen Jurain artifact past the Space-Police, we knew that we needed to get someone who could...Someone who had inside ties into their ranks...and that...was you. Besides...let's be honest...you really *are* the best at what you do. *Nobody* else could've pulled it off like you did."

"So we've been carrying around that *stupid* real '*Heart of Jurai*' the whole time?" Ryoko says as the impact of what's going on finally forces her to angrily grit her teeth.

"...Fraid so, gorgeous..." Rashida answers, "...Karina cooked up the idea of splitting up and pretending to be warring against each other. Which I think was a stroke of genius, by the way. By fooling you...we've fooled everyone. We've had that blasted thing stored away for months, holding our plans till the time was right...since security in this galaxy is so tight, we couldn't get it past their patrols. We needed a neutral party, someone that the police knew was retired...someone recently acquitted...someone they wouldn't suspect...and I must say, you and your friends did a remarkable job in accomplishing your portions of the plan...I hereby applaud your ingenuity..."

Walking up to Ryoko, Karina kneels down to look her directly in the eye and says, "...You having the princess with you was an unexpected bonus. The more we studied the technology of the Quantum Null Destabilizer, the more we realized that without someone directly related by blood to the Juraian royal family working the controls, the device simply wouldn't work..."

"...Which necessitated borrowing your friend for a little while..." Rashida adds.

"Ayeka would never help you willingly...especially if she knew what was at stake..." Ryoko says to the couple as she struggles to get herself back to her feet.

"Her cooperation was not required...and really, that's why it was so vital for Rashida to be in on my plan. A couple of years ago, before you disappeared and wound up living on that back-water planet called earth, I took the liberty of hiring the services of Washu."

"She never told me she contracted out to you..." Ryoko protests.

"Money talks...anyway, originally I contracted her to create for me a matter-replicating device, but once I saw one of her other inventions that allowed a person to genetically mimic the life patterns of another, my interest in this new device was so piqued, that I couldn't pass it up. The Mimic-Array as it is now called; had one major drawback however; this device will only work on two individuals who are genetically similar..." Karina says as she pulls a small device resembling a wristband from one of the folds of her cloak.

"...I see...and Rashida is half Juraian..." Ryoko says without any surprise to her voice.

"**Exactly**...even though he isn't of pure-blood, he's genetically close enough to successfully work the device. I don't know how, but it somehow measures the levels of Juratrium 7000 in your body. Since Rashida's half Juraian...well, you can guess the rest."

"...And since we already made a duplication field of Princess Ayeka, utilizing the *Mimic-Array*; all I've gotta do is wear the band and it'll envelop me with a sustained field of bio-genetic energy that's perfectly identical to that of your friend's." Rashida says as Karina hands him the device.

Seething over being used and lied to in such a superfluous manner Ryoko crackles with raw energy as she quickly gets up from the cold metallic floor. Someone is going to be made to pay, and with her rage as high as it is; it's going to be both Rashida and Karina.

Meanwhile back at the containment block, since Ayeka commands impressive levels of force-field casting abilities, she's decided to just go the direct approach; i.e. straight on through the front-entry gate, and right through the attacking pirate guards.

As expected, being pummeled by a nigh impenetrable force-field is more than enough to level the few lackeys that have been recently pestering the young adventurers.

Running down the hallway, she looks up and notices several wall-mounted laser turrets, but oddly enough none of them are firing at her. Surely she's created enough of a stir to have triggered the automatic security system; she ponders. "How strange..." she mutters to herself "With all the commotion I've caused I'm certain Rashida knows about my breakout...and the wall cameras are also still functioning." Stopping to find a small nook in which to conceal herself within the wall, Ayeka pulls the artifact out of the small backpack and examines it more closely. "Something's

fishy about all this...if only Lord Tenchi or Washu were here...they'd know what to do." After giving it one last look-over something inconsistent on the device quickly catches her eye. "Wait a second...I recognize genuine Juraian construction when I see it...and this artifact looks to be the real-deal."

Briefly dismissing her instincts and putting the artifact back into the backpack, she continues on down the hall. "I wish I knew whether or not Sakuya was going to be alright...it would be just my dumb luck to have finally discovered her as a friend, only to lose her seconds later." She says to herself. "If only Atsuko were here..."

Ayeka doesn't have long to ponder this hitherto uncomfortable concept. Much to her surprise, the nearer she approaches the reactor sector of the ship housing the *Quantum Null Destabilizer*, the fewer guards she finds there are on duty. In fact, the ones chasing her down the hall prior have all inexplicably disappeared.

The map indicates that the narrow hallway that she's currently strolling is the entryway into the reactor's only access port. As Ayeka creeps down the hall trying not to make any loud noises, she looks up and notices another intimidating array of security cameras and wall-mounted blaster turrets. All of them appear functional, and the cameras are even following her movements. As she observes all this, she finds it extremely bizarre that none of the blasters are firing on her. "Now this is certainly puzzling...The guards following me earlier mysteriously disappeared...like they were suddenly called off for some reason. I wonder if it has anything to do with Ryoko's distraction." She thinks to herself.

Ayeka can feel the warmth of the radiation generated by the reactor as she approaches the door concealing the room that houses it. Letting out a deep sigh she mentally prepares for the conflict she knows will be waiting for her on the other side. Reaching for the handle on the door, Ayeka gets an uncanny unsettling feeling. She can't explain it, but she somehow feels as though something bad is about to happen.

She slowly grabs the handle and unlatches the door. The Heavy metal door creaks loudly and echoes throughout the halls. Walking through into the next room, Ayeka looks to the center and sees a large cylindrical-shaped tube. Though made of solid metal the tube glows with a vibrant intensity only hinting at the raw power that it contains within. It in turn is encapsulated by a transparent material that has attached to it dozens of smaller hoses specially designed to circulate liquid coolant through it.

They're being held in place by several small interlocking clasps that span the base of the raised platform that it rests on. Each of the interlocks also contains a miniature power-meter that displays the energy field's generated power-rating. The whole thing looks like a gigantic isotope rod. If Ayeka were to speculate, she'd have to guess that she's just located the power core, and from all indications she'd be correct.

Now that Ayeka has found the reactor core, all she must do is locate the '*Heart of Jurai*', replace it with the fake device, and she'll have completed the mission. From the specifics of the operation told her by Sakuya and gleaned from studying the map intently, Ayeka is left with the impression that the Juraian artifact will somehow be connected to the reactor, so she begins looking for anything that even remotely resembles the device she has located in Sakuya's backpack.

Out of the corner of her eye she notices the glint of a small electrical device attached to the reactor near the base of the platform. The architecture of it appears to be of Juraian origin so Ayeka is certain that she's just located the QND device as well.

Slowly opening the protective casing revealing the delicate inner workings of the ancient device, she exposes its interior the '*so called*' real '*Heart of Jurai*' artifact. Confirming the highly accurate documentation located within Karina's massive information archive; connected to it is the ***Light-stone***. Ayeka gasps awestruck as she unexpectedly gazes upon this very powerful Juraian relic seated within the momentarily vulnerable Quantum Null device. As she approaches the so-called fake '*Heart of Jurai*' to remove it from the rest of the device, she notices that the crystal around her wrist, given her by Tenchi, is mysteriously beginning to glow. "How strange...why on earth is it glowing now...? Is Tenchi in trouble?" She says to herself. As she ponders the thought and continues on the brighter the crystal glows. Ayeka suddenly stops cold. Linking together all the clues that she's been mentally adding up, she's finally able to deduce the truth to what's going on in audible words. "Oh my goodness...! The one in our possession is the *real* '*Heart of Jurai*'...the *fake* is the one already in the device..." she pauses to gasp deeply in surprise "I've got to warn Ryoko."

Suddenly her whole world comes proverbially crashing down around her as she's finally caught up with by hordes of Rashida's personal henchmen. And the reality of her possible failure in this endeavor chills her to the bone. "Freeze princess...we've got you surrounded." A voice comes out from behind the kneeling young woman. Ayeka turns around slowly to find herself facing no less than twelve guards, all of whom are armed and pointing their blasters right at her.

"...Not good..." she says to herself under her breath as she stands to her feet, still holding the real artifact and raising her arms in surrender "...Not good at all..."

Chapter 15

Elsewhere, within a different dimension, two lone figures eagerly observe the events unfolding from amidst a densely darkened expanse. Though shrouded in near absolute darkness, portions of their features are still partially illuminated by the ethereal glow of the view-screen as they stare intently into it. On it displays an image of Ayeka as she holds the *Heart of Jurai* artifact in her hands. One of the figures, the shorter of the two, turns away from the image, looks at his companion and says;

"Did you see that...? The *Quantum Null* device must not be allowed to fall within their grasp..."

"...Yes, I know..." Replies the taller figure.

"...Then we must act..."

"...No not yet...let's not be hasty." The taller figure replies as he waves his hand over the viewing-device causing its image to change to that of an intergalactic view. "But the time is rapidly approaching." He quickly amends.

"Your plan...your call..." The other replies "However I do hope that it'll be soon...we've been waiting patiently for millennia...it's high-time we started seeing tangible results. Besides, we'll not be able to keep this information from the others much longer."

"That's an unfortunate truth, my friend. Things *are* escalating. But not in a manner that warrants our concern. Indeed...we have waited for a long time for these events to transpire. We have plotted it, orchestrated it...and now we find ourselves at the cusp of finally reaping the rewards of our long-lived patience. As for the others..." he adds while gently patting his companion on the back "...do not concern yourself with them. When the time comes they will find themselves blissfully unaware..."

Crossing his arms craftily the shorter entity says "The time of the reckoning is nearly at hand. They laughed at us, openly mocked us, took everything away from us...but now...they will call us *gods!*" They both laugh manically as the image on the viewer slowly fades into oblivion.

As Sakuya lies there in the middle of the floor, face down in a puddle of her own blood; her body begins to stir ever so slightly. After a few minutes of physical recuperation in deep hibernation, her body's advanced healing factor finally kicks in and begins recovering at an alarming rate.

After a few moments, she sits up dizzily and looks inquisitively around the room. Suddenly remembering what had happened to her prior, Sakuya immediately grabs for the injury at her side that she knows is still there. Surprisingly however, it has almost completely healed. Standing up she begins her first steps toward her get-away vessel Ryo-Ohki.

"I'll have to remember to thank mom the next time I see her..." she says to herself as she marvels at her newfound healing abilities. Sakuya steps toward the already open security-door to try and make her hasty escape, and nearly falls forward as the pain in her side is still too intense to ignore and even harder for her to bear. Despite being well under way with being completely healed, she isn't yet and likely still requires quite a bit more time to recuperate before she reaches one-hundred percent of her normal mobility. For now however, she's thankful just to be alive, and figures that dealing with the searing pain, is a small price to pay for having such a remarkable gift.

The detainment-room she occupies is now empty. Apparently her prior state of immobility and advanced blood-loss has done much for convincing the doggedly persistent pirate henchmen to believe her beyond hope of rescue, and leave her for dead.

Looking down at her dirty clothing, she cringes at the thought of the unpleasant cleanup she'll no doubt have to endure once she returns back home on earth in Okayama.

By now, Ryoko is well underway in causing havoc to the rogue space-pirates, Karina and Rashida. Presently, Ryoko has been able to neutralize all of their accompanying guards in the room, which Karina is not too happy about. The more she dwells on her inability to carry out the rest of her plan due to the unwanted interference of Ryoko, the more she loses her temper. Realizing this, Ryoko continues to push on her attack, wondering all the while if Sakuya has been able to fulfill her end of the arrangement.

Furious, Karina seethes in frustration as she discontinues her onslaught. So far every shot that she has purposely directed toward her nemesis has been either dodged, blocked, or evaded entirely, forcing her to angrily admit that Ryoko is more than a worthy adversary for her.

"Enough!" she yells as she snaps her fingers toward her collaborator Rashida "**You! Go...!** Start up the Null device, this little skirmish ends *now*."

"What's the matter *friend*...?" Ryoko says irreverently "...am I a little too much for you to handle...?" she adds with an angered chuckle. "I guess it was bound to happen since you were always such a *second-rate* pirate, anyway."

Hearing the escalating fight amongst the former friends Rashida heeds a hasty yet calm retreat from the room. In so doing Rashida turns and gives Ryoko a quick charismatic wink. She allows herself a quick moment to ponder the implication of such an innocuous act.

The two powerful mortal enemies stare each other down in a dramatic silenced face-off. Neither of them blinking or moving. When Rashida finally leaves the room it is Karina that initiates the first statement.

"So...it's down to you...and me...the inevitable face-off." Karina sneers as she slowly cracks her knuckles in intimidation. "I warn you Ryoko, you can't win. I've been planning this job for years, it's foolproof. Since you've left the pirating scene, *I've* been using my time wisely honing up on my skills...preparing for my ultimate battle with you while *you've* no doubt been getting complacent...sitting on some guy's couch getting fat eating his Bon-Bons."

"Shut up and fight..." Ryoko says with a phony smile continuing the false-front that this whole business has affected her less than she's letting on. "I trusted you...more than I've done with my own family. I made you a member of my inner-circle. You were like a sister to me...and you've betrayed me...spat in my face...the *both* of you."

No really concerned about Ryoko's feelings at all, Karina merely shrugs her shoulders in indifference.

"You wanna know what makes you an even worse slime-ball than Rashida? I can excuse *him*...at least he used to be a *decent* criminal...he didn't have to ride my coat-tails to get where he is today. He's a self-made man...unlike you...you boot-licker. I *made* you. You lied to me...*you* were supposed to be my *best friend*...I confided in you...you were only playing me for a fool this whole time. If that weren't enough you even endangered my friends, Sakuya and Ayeka...*him* I can forgive...but *you*...*never*..."

Karina gives Ryoko an evil smirk as she slowly lowers her blaster. "Hurts...don't it...?" she says smugly as she begins laughing evilly. After staring her down for a few seconds, she slowly opens up several top-buttons of her cloak to reveal an advanced power-harness covering her body underneath. Pushing a small button on the chest plate of her armor, the entire harness begins to eerily light up. Finally, Karina responds "I think I've adequately prepared for every contingency..."

"With an Adegan power-harness...?" Ryoko says barely holding back her laughter. "Those things are terribly underrated. Nobody that's ever gone against me in one of those things has ever won." Ryoko boasts. "...what's the matter with you?" she adds while clenching her fists.

"There you go again...smugly underestimating me like you always do." Karina confidently replies. "If you're so incredibly unbeatable to anyone wearing one of these things...lets see you put your money where your mouth is. Beat *me*...if you can..."

Saying nothing Ryoko immediately takes to flight and barrels straight toward the cocky female space-pirate with fists drawn and rage taking control. This will be a battle royal.

Meanwhile, Ayeka is having a difficult albeit enjoyable time dispensing of the hapless guards present in the ship's core reactor room. "I'm the 1st princess of Jurai...and don't you dare underestimate my power..." Ayeka says as she happily erects an energy field and uses it to push away the advancing guards in a blast-wave motion. With most of the guards taken out by only a single blast, Ayeka begins taunting the two remaining. "I know I'm impressive...so if you give up now, I promise you, you will not be harmed...too terribly...Ha...ha...ha...ha...ha..." Ayeka laughs. The two guards glance at each other briefly and then resume their unremitting shooting at her. "Very well...you asked for it..." From a specially concealed nook within her outfit, Ayeka pulls out a rectangular device. As she holds it in a defensive posture, the device suddenly creates an impressive looking energy blade that immediately transforms into a large metallic fan. "I once used this to defeat a monster komobito back on earth...prepare to face the same end..." Ayeka boasts proudly.

The guards ceaselessly continue firing as Ayeka prepares to strike with the ridiculously close-ranged weapon. Pausing only for a second to lower her shield, Ayeka swings at the guards and makes a direct hit. The two pirates fly in opposite directions as the fan-like object swats them away like common houseflies. "There...that ought to do it..." Ayeka says as she swiftly puts the device away. "I told you not to mess with me..." Reveling in her small victory, Ayeka turns to collect up her things, which are now lying on the floor. She picks up the small backpack that she has been carrying and pulls out the map. "Let's see now...I hope I'm not too late...I must warn Ryoko...she has to know about Rashida's plans..." Ayeka says aloud to herself as she searches the map for the quickest route to Rashida's personal quarters.

"...Ahhh princess..." Rashida says as he and a couple of his men promptly arrive to stop Ayeka dead in her tracks. "I hope you won't be too disappointed to learn that you are indeed too late." Rashida says as he crosses his arms and coolly leans comfortably to the side.

"You'd be happy to know that she put up a valiant fight...but in the end...she was just no match for the combined might of Karina and me."

"Ryoko...You killed her...?"

"No...not yet...but that was by design. By the time Karina is through with her, she'll wish she was dead."

"*Karina* has her?" Ayeka gasps in shock "You *must* release her. I demand it!"

Rashida chuckles warmly at the princess' apparent naiveté "Princess...I'm afraid you're not in *any* position to demand anything. After I activate the Null device...the entire galaxy will be mine to do with as I please, and I'll be in the position to make *all* the demands. But since I'm a man of my word, I'll be a gentleman and let you go, providing you hand me the artifact. We already have Ryoko and there's no reason to detain you. After all, I no longer need to worry about ransoms and things. This whole galaxy now belongs to me."

"I will not allow it...!" Ayeka interjects in defiance. "You'll have to destroy me first...and I warn you, Juraian princesses are not to be trifled with."

Unimpressed, Rashida shrugs his shoulders and agrees to settle this issue in one last battle. "By the way princess...you may find that I'm full of surprises." He removes his cape and drops it to the floor. It makes a loud thud as its ornamental decorations make contact with the metallic floor's plating.

Ayeka makes the first offensive move. Without even thinking she tries the same radical maneuver she performed on the various guards before to try and knock him over. But sadly this is to no avail. Rashida is somehow able to anticipate her every move and counteract it with an equally devastating anti force-field blast.

"How're you able to use my force-fields against me? Only Juraian royalty can harness that power..." Ayeka pants as she begins to tire.

Pointing to the little armband that he's wearing on his left wrist, Rashida smiles and says "Thanks to our mutual friend Washu creating this nifty gadget...I'm genetically identical to you in *every* way. This band envelops me in a sustained energy field that fools my genes into thinking that they're yours...no scan *anywhere* would be able to tell the difference. The only difference is in my appearance, and if I wanted to, I could even change that to mimic yours as well. There is absolutely nothing that you can do that I cannot recreate...or counter. This is how I plan on activating the Null device." He says smugly.

Determined to defeat the man responsible for so much of her and everyone else's physical and mental anguish, Ayeka quickly comes up with a daring plan. Hoping that Rashida hasn't yet seen enough footage from his closed-circuit security-cameras to know that she hasn't yet exchanged the fake '*Heart of Jurai*' artifact with the genuine article, she grabs the backpack and quickly runs down the hall. Her plan depends on him thinking that she's already replaced it. "You'll *never* get away with this..." Ayeka says, trying to sound as smug and as convincing as possible. Rashida doesn't yet know whether or not she has switched the devices, but he quickly gives chase after her anyway. With so much of his plans at stake he cannot afford to take this for granted. As Ayeka continues her exhausting run down the corridor, visions of Tenchi happily fill her head. She must succeed, the lives of countless billions now depend on her...and most importantly of all, that of her true love...Tenchi Masaki's.

Her pleasant visions of Tenchi are suddenly clouded out by equally disturbing visions of Sakuya and Tenchi together. She tries to focus past the distracting images and concentrate on the moment at hand; she needs her full attention and thinking faculties if she plans on beating Rashida.

Suddenly as Ayeka swings a quick right down one of the intersecting hallways, she runs into a dead-end. This is not the way she had hoped to end this frenzied chase.

"It's pointless to resist princess...just hand over the artifact." Rashida insists as he pants from exhaustion.

"*Never*...you just try and make me." Ayeka says as she frantically looks for another escape route. Even though she's anxious and very nearly panicked, she still manages to retain her calm composure. With nowhere else to run she slowly backs toward the wall behind her.

As she continues on she passes a small duct with a label on it that reads '*Disposal Ionizer*'. This gives her another quick idea. And with no time to re-think her options all she has to do is hurry over to the refuse duct and dispose of the artifact by quickly dropping it inside. However, Rashida also notices the duct and rushes toward her, hoping to reach her before she can carry through with

her plans. Ayeka dashes for the duct to try and open it. She grabs the latch and prepares to toss the device straight in. Rashida reaches her, but for him its sadly too late, Ayeka has quickly disposed of the artifact.

"*There...now* we'll *never* know which was the real '*Heart of Jurai*'..." Ayeka says in direct defiance of the pirate.

In shock Rashida stands there dumbfounded for a moment before verbally responding. His mouth drops wide open and he nearly falls to his knees. He cannot understand why the princess of Jurai would do such a thing to an artifact of such historic importance to the people of her planet. "What are you...*insane*? Do you know what you've just done...?" He says as he desperately tries to reach the chute to somehow retrieve the device before it falls beyond his reach. "What if that was the *real* '*Heart of Jurai*'..." Angrily gritting his teeth, he grabs Ayeka by her neck and pulls her over to him. "If that *was* the real one...then you're gonna *wish* you were dead when I'm through with you. I'll squeeze the life outta your spoiled little neck with my bare-hands." He continues back through the corridors heading straight for the reactor room with Ayeka soundly in tow. As he opens the door to enter, suddenly a small metal pipe hits him in the back of the head knocking him out and onto the floor.

Ayeka quickly turns around to spot her friend Sakuya standing there with a warm smile on her face. Ayeka quickly gives her friend a warm hug. "Sakay...you're alive! Thank goodness!"

"I figured you might need some help..." Sakuya says as she staggers out of the room and over to her friend. "C'mon, the Destabilizer will overload soon. I'm betting that when Rashida wakes...he's going to turn the device on."

"Right...we better not be here when he does." Ayeka adds. "Your wound...I thought you were too injured to go on...how'd you make it back?"

Winking Sakuya replies to her "Remember when I told you earlier that all I really needed was a little rest to recuperate...well, it turns out I was right. Weird, huh?" Looking around Sakuya asks, "Where's Ryoko, I thought she was supposed to be with *this* guy..." She says pointing down to the knocked out Rashida.

"That's a long story...I'll tell you all about it on the way...we've got to make it to Rashida's personal quarters...I think she's in trouble."

The two young women hurriedly step past Rashida's unconscious body and straight on to his personal quarters. Taking several quick series of twists and turns, they reach the doorway that they're certain belongs to his highly coveted domicile. The door is lock securely shut, and try as they might, they cannot do anything to budge it.

As they earnestly ram at the door trying desperately to get through, they suddenly hear the sound of a small explosion go off from the other side of the wall.

"Did you hear that?" Sakuya says in a horrified tone.

"Unfortunately..." Ayeka responds. "We've got to find another way to get in there. Ryoko's life depends on it." She adds.

Quickly deciding to double-back to find an alternate route inside, Sakuya quickly removes the map from her backpack and checks out the layout for it.

Suddenly her eyes widen and she looks up to address her friend next to her.

"Ah Ha!" she exclaims happily "If we head back around and take the corridor to the right we should be at the other end of the room in no time. Follow me." she says "We haven't a moment to lose."

Chapter 16

Meanwhile, Ryoko is engaged in a fierce battle of her own. With Karina wearing the advanced power harness, Ryoko has indeed underestimated her former friend and finds it very difficult to get any type of physical advantage over her.

"Where's your clever remarks **now** Ryoko...? What's the matter...afraid that you're gonna loose to a *second-rate* space pirate...?"

"Don't flatter yourself Reena...you'd have to be a ***much better*** pirate to even ***reach*** second-rate status..." Ryoko replies back as she throws a punch that connects into Karina's left jaw, sending her flying into the nearby wall.

Karina quickly pushes off from the wall and propels herself back toward Ryoko with her fist clenched and ready to strike. "Not bad...I suppose...but try doing that again." Karina says as she makes a direct hit on Ryoko, and follows it up with an immediate uppercut to the stomach. Ryoko winces in pain as she endures the powerful counter-punches.

Taking advantage of the opportunity Karina has afforded her by her close proximity; Ryoko grabs hold of her wrist tightly and spins her around with remarkable force. As she lets her go planning for her to slam into one of the nearby walls, she powers up an energy blast and releases it at Karina full force, thus accelerating her speed and increasing her potential force of impact.

As Karina recovers from the blast a little charred, she responds, "That was a dirty shot Ryoko...Have you no honor...I thought we both agreed to go this battle with only our bare hands?"

Ryoko smiles and says, "...No less honorable than what you've done to me all these years...I thought it appropriate to give you a little taste of your own medicine."

"...touché..." Karina says with hatred in her eyes, patronizing her. "Too bad you squandered your only opportunity to finish me off when you had the chance...now that I know the rules have changed...you'll never get the opportunity to do so again. I have a little suggestion for you the next time you decided to break the rules giving you the upper hand on me...if you get another opportunity to defeat me like you just had, I advise you take it...because if the roles were reversed I assure you, I will *not* be as merciful."

Meanwhile back in the reactor room, Rashida slowly awakens from his head-trauma induced daze. As he pulls himself to his feet he gingerly rubs the sore spot at the rear of his head. "...Till we meet again princess..." He says under his breath.

The room suddenly fills with dozens of his loyal personal guard, all of whom awaiting their next direct orders. "I have personal business to attend off-ship." He briefly surveys the room and singles out one of the pirates standing at the rear of the crowd. "Akita..."

"Sir?" the young man replies.

"I'm temporarily placing you in command. Can you handle it?"

"Yes sir..." he quickly replies as his nervous expression quickly fades away and is replaced by an excited one.

"Good. Here are your orders...and I want you to follow them to the letter..."

Meanwhile back at the surrounding area of Rashida's personal quarters, Ayeka and Sakuya are valiantly attempting to reach the alternate entrance of the captain's private domicile but are however not faring too terribly well in the endeavor. As they search the hallway for the correct route spelled out on their map, they luckily run into one of the few occupants of the massive vessel willing and able to help them; Atsuko.

"Atsuko...Am I glad to see you..." Ayeka says in relief as they quickly hurry over to her. "What are *you* doing here...?"

"Helping you..." she says while briskly leading them down another isolated path "I have my reasons and can't tell you what any of them are...but I have your best interest at heart." She summarily admits "Follow me I'll lead you to Rashida's quarters."

"Thank you Ms..." Sakuya says to the young woman though still not sure whether or not to trust her completely. She just can't shake the feeling that she's seen her somewhere before. Stopping briefly Sakuya stares at her for a moment and with a hint of recognition peers deeply into her eyes "You look familiar...do I know you from somewhere?" she innocently asks.

"No ma'am...you've never met me before..." Atsuko says nervously while quickly covering up her face once more with her makeshift veil "...but we *will* meet up again." She says politely with a sense of reverential respect for Sakuya. "Please...promise me that you'll all leave really soon. The ship will go nova in five minutes." She reveals to them.

"That's exactly what we've all had in mind." Ayeka says as she and Sakuya continue to follow the girl down the hall. "All we have left to do is grab Ryoko and run..."

Leading them to a small door located one floor down; Atsuko pulls a small key from a concealed pocket in her cloak and hands it gently over to Sakuya, staring her warmly in the eyes. She tells them that the stairwell on the other side of the door leads directly to Rashida's quarters and to be extra careful.

"Come with us..." Ayeka asks of the young woman. "We could certainly use your help..."

"I can't...our destinies lie along different paths...Don't worry about me...I'll be fine. I have another way off this ship." Atsuko replies "We'll see each other again."

"And don't worry about us...we'll be ok..." Sakuya says as she hands the key over to Ayeka.

As her eyes quickly fill with tears, Atsuko suddenly gives Sakuya a crushing heartfelt hug, turns and runs down the hall never looking back. The two girls are deeply bewildered. "What on earth was *that* all about?" Ayeka asks Sakuya. "She acted like she knew you..."

"I don't know...I've never seen her before..." she replies while shrugging her shoulders "...but it feels like I *should* somehow..."

"Well anyway...enough about that. We've gotta save Ryoko. C'mon!" Ayeka says, as she hustles up the stairs.

Meanwhile in the room of Rashida currently being used as a battlefield by the two feuding former ally space-pirates Ryoko and Karina, are still in mid stride of a battle royal.

However more experienced and obviously more powerful, Ryoko is woefully out of practice and therefore losing steam fast. Karina on the other hand is having all of her natural abilities artificially augmented to match Ryoko's, so she has yet to feel any fatigue from this continuing mêlée.

"I'll destroy you..." Karina shouts as she angrily grits her teeth in utter disdain. Lifting her energized arm and expelling an energy-force at Ryoko from her fingertips designed to cause her extreme pain, she misses this clear-shot leaving Ryoko free to smugly taunt her further about her constant failures.

Ryoko retaliates with a blast of her own. The energy spike soars through the air and strikes Karina dead-center in the energy-coupling of her power harness, shorting it out. "Uh oh..." Ryoko patronizingly says as she sees Karina's power source quickly flicker and die. "...After all that smug little talk about you showing me who's the *better* pirate...you get egg on your face. Looks like you lose...*Friend*." Ryoko adds with a tired yet satisfied look on her face.

"That's what *you* think..." Karina says as she pushes another button on her harness causing a beeping sound to begin. "You see Ryoko, you think you've defeated me...but all you've done is to royally *piss me off!*" she angrily replies. "Fine, I'll admit. You beat me...but your victory will be short-lived. I planned for this unfortunate contingency. I would rather die than to let you walk out of here alive." She adds. "This power-harness is equipped with *Corbite-Norillium*, the most potent plastic-explosive this side of the galaxy."

"What?" Ryoko barely chokes out as she slowly begins to float backward in anxiety. "Listen...don't be hasty...I'm sure that we can work something out..." she bargains.

"You're not talking yourself outta this one...*mentor*..." she says mockingly "In twenty-two seconds you *die*..."

Just remember as your time slowly ticks away, ebbing ever so closely toward your impending doom...I will no longer live under your shadow."

No sooner than these words leave her lips, Ayeka and Sakuya suddenly burst into the room in grand spectacle, prepared for battle.

"Ayeka quick...she's got an explosive-device strapped to her chest. Take Sakuya and get out of here. I won't risk both of you dieing on my account. It goes off in fifteen seconds." Ryoko calls

out, unable to reach them with her exhausted and injured body. She quickly falls to the ground as she can no longer sustain flight in her fatigue.

"Nonsense..." Ayeka quickly replies, "We'll not leave you...we're a team."

Ayeka and Sakuya quickly run over to Ryoko who is lying on the ground several feet away from Karina. As the countdown decreases, Karina lets out a sinister laugh believing that the blast will indiscriminately consume them all and she revels in the grim foreknowledge. However, much to her chagrin both Ayeka and Sakuya erect localized force fields that completely surround and protect the trio.

Just before the blast goes off Karina's happily crazed smile disappears and is replaced by a look of sheer shock and disappointment.

"Noooooo!" she yells out as the deadly blast finally goes off, engulfing her in its unforgiving plume of flames. She never has a chance to complete her sentence. She is instantly vaporized in the inferno.

Emotionally choked up, Ryoko looks over toward Karina's earthly remains, notices the smoldering charred spot on the deck where her friend once stood and finally allows herself the luxury of grief. Mourning a woman who long ago was the only family she had, and her only friend. Shedding a tear for her, Ryoko decides to give her the dignity of paying her a respectful moment of silence. Karina may not have considered Ryoko her friend, but Karina was certainly hers. For the remainder of her life she will choose to remember her; not as a misguided megalomaniacal despot, but as an unfortunate friend who tragically died before her time.

Moment's pass as the blast waves finally subsides and the two force-field yielding young women at long last decide it safe to lower their shields.

Finally clear to ask her any number of questions, the confused young women approach Ryoko and ask her about Karina's involvement in Rashida's devastatingly malevolent plans.

"...It's a long story." Ryoko says with a sigh, "C'mon, let's head back to Ryo-Ohki...I'll tell you all about it once we're safely aboard Ryo-Ohki and on our trip back."

The girls help Ryoko up to her feet and begin their trek toward the docked Ryo-Ohki.

"Wait..." Sakuya lets out as she stops the others. "What about Atsuko?" she asks "We can't just leave her here. She helped us...she'll die when this ship goes up." Sakuya pleads.

"Who's that?" Ryoko asks.

"One of Rashida's crewmen..." Ayeka summarily replies "...she was nice...weird...but nice. In fact..." she says as she eyes Sakuya suspiciously "She looked a lot like Sakuya."

"HMMMMM..." Ryoko says as she mentally recalls all the members of Rashida's ship's manifest. "I'm pretty familiar with every one of his crewmen...I don't seem to recall anyone by that name matching that description." Ryoko says.

"Odd...very odd." Ayeka says as Sakuya turns around to look behind.

"Well...whoever she was...I'd like to thank her..." Sakuya says to the others.

"She was pretty knowledgeable about everything going on around here today..." Ayeka says to comfort Sakuya. "She said she had a way to get off this ship... I'm sure she's long gone by now."

"I suppose" she says, somehow sensing that Ayeka might be right about her.

Meanwhile further down the hallway, unseen to the trio of battle-weary beauties, Atsuko is listening in on the entire conversation. She lets out a warm smile and says quietly, "Don't worry...we'll get a chance to meet up again...I promise." Just then she's enveloped by a thin stream of light and quickly disappears off into nothingness.

The girls finally make it to Ryo-Ohki.

"Meooooooooowwww..." she says to the trio.

"Hey...we did our best..." Ryoko answers smugly "Besides...we got the job done, didn't we? I didn't see *you*, stepping out to help any of us..."

"Meooooooooowwww..."

After a few short moments, Ryo-Ohki takes off from the ships docking-bay and off into deep space heading straight for earth. They all rush to the starboard side of the cockpit to gaze out the viewport to Rashida's beleaguered vessel beyond. They gasp in expectation of the next anticipated outcome. Before they can even blink in the next instant Rashida's ship suddenly explodes into a gaseous nebula of metallic dust and debris.

"All those lives..." Sakuya somberly says of the pirates left behind.

"Yeah, and I knew a lot of them..." Ryoko grimly admits. "Some of those guys were good personal friends of mine..." she adds.

"Well...thank goodness *we* weren't on that ship when it went up." Ayeka says. "Do you think Rashida could've survived?" she asks rhetorically.

"You can bet on it..." Ryoko replies confidently "He was one of the best. We'll cross paths again." Ryoko says as she gazes off into space recollecting all the good times she shared with him with a slight grin on her face.

Ryo-Ohki interrupts the momentary silence by saying, "Meooooooooowwww..."

"Yeah...thank you...we missed you too" Sakuya replies with her child-like innocence returned. "Y'know what guys...?" She says to Ayeka and Ryoko with a beaming smile, "...We make a pretty darn good team, don't you think?"

Smiling as well though refusing to turn to face her as she responds, Ryoko says, "...Well...maybe...we'll talk about that while we make our way back home... You called us *Monster Busters* a while back in Okayama during our Tenchi anniversary. If that's the case, you're as much one now as the rest of us...welcome aboard teammate." Ryoko says with a growing smile on her face, holding out her hand for a hearty shake. Ignoring the gesture, Sakuya rushes past the extended hand and quickly gives her two traveling companions a big crushing hug. Ryoko and

Ayeka are barely able to break her steely grip to breathe. "Well, we gotta set a course for home, Tenchi and the others will be worried sick about us by now. I can't *wait* to get back and tell them all about the adventure we've just had..."

Confused, Sakuya interrupts "...but you said earlier that we shouldn't..."

"...forget what I said earlier about not telling Tenchi of our exploits on this journey." Ryoko quickly interrupts back "I want *my* man to know just how awesome his future wife really is." She says of herself while smiling from ear to ear.

"I for one must say...you did *good* Sakuya. You pulled your own weight nicely. Both of you saved my life, and we all managed to save the entire galaxy as well. Tenchi would be proud of you...of all of us. And I for one am proud to call you my friend." Ayeka says as she smiles warmly at Sakuya.

"Really...?" Sakuya says with all smiles.

"...Yeah...*really* kiddo." Ryoko adds. "I guess you've proven once and for all...that you *are* one of us...you no longer have to worry about me...we're friends..." she says while playfully punching her in the arm.

"And that goes double for me..." Ayeka says with a beaming smile.

Ryoko turns around from her piloting and adds with a smile, "...but don't let it get to your head...just because I *like* you, *doesn't* mean that I like you being with Tenchi..."

"Ditto..." Ayeka says with a playful wink. "As long as Tenchi isn't an issue...you're ok with me as well."

Sakuya hugs them in response. "...*Friends*..."

Happy to finally be counted by the girls as a member of the family, she lets out a deep sigh of relief. On the floor next to her, sits the wooden box that once held the '*Heart of Jurai*'. Picking it up she opens it to reveal the crystal figurine Karina had gave her. It is beautiful. Taking it out of the box and holding it closely to her heart she can't help thinking that it would make an excellent gift for Tenchi when they finally reach home.

Before setting the final course corrections, Ryoko stops to ask the others "Say you two...wudda you say we make a little detour before we head home to Paradise-Cove. It's a nice little spot to sit back and unwind, and with the month we've just had...we're going to need it."

Smiling and nodding in reciprocation they all agree.

"Good...Paradise cove it is." Ryoko concludes "...don't worry we won't even have to stay long. A couple of hours of pampering there and I promise you, you'll feel like a new woman."

"Well in that case...sign me up..." Sakuya beams as they all share a lighthearted moment of laughter, ready to face whatever new challenges await them.

Elsewhere in a dark dimension, two shadowy figures conclude watching the events transpired over in the Lyseum galaxy, and they seem very pleased with the outcome of things.

The tall figure turns to his shorter cohort and says "Ahhhh...at long last...it's done. The waiting is finally over. The first key-event has just occurred."

"Are things properly set into motion?" The shorter figure says while still looking down upon the watery display screen.

"Indeed they are, my friend. All that remains now is the completion of key-event number two, and things will finally have been primed for us to carry out *our retribution*..."

"...Then Justice will finally have been served..." the short figure says in anticipation of his friends next words "In just a little while...*all* those responsible for trapping us here, will soon pay for their crimes against us..."

"Yes...soon they'll *all* rue the day they crossed paths with the collective genius of *Gemini and Yoshino*."

...To Be Concluded...