Summary

The biggest problem Mirai faces is trying to join the boys-only kendo team. Scratch that--the biggest problem she faces is when her town unexpectedly merges with another dimension. The Digimon that live there are equally upset, so Mirai teams up with them and kids around the world to shut down the holes as they appear.

But there's a problem--the cause is a war that's tearing the Digimon apart. Actually, there's lots of problems: the leader is hiding something, and a human is working for the bad guys, who might not be bad. And Mirai still has to worry about kendo.
“You can’t, you can’t! There’s absolutely no way you can!”

Mirai Watanabe drew herself up to her full height, not that much below the third-year captain’s, and looked him in the eye. “I can too! I already have all my equipment,” she pointed to each in her bag in turn. “Face plate, chest plate, wrist guards, uniform, shoes, practice sword. And even a wooden sword for practicing my forms. So, please let me join the kendo club already!”

“I said no and I mean no!” The captain folded his arms. “There’s no way a girl will ever be able to do kendo.”

She shot a look at the club sponsor, hoping for some backup, but he only waved a hand. “The boys have to start practice now, Mirai-chan, so maybe you could try again tomorrow?”

“Don’t encourage her, teacher,” the captain muttered.

Her look turned into a glare, and with a huff, she tossed her bag over one shoulder, storming away. As she exited the school grounds, the storming turned into a trudge down the sidewalk to the bus stop. She had so hoped that things might have been different once she entered middle school, but here she was on her last year and still no luck. And getting into the high school club was going to be even worse. “This is the worst day ever,” she sighed. Around her, the mundane sounds of the cars on the road and the breeze through the cherry trees continued without so much as a pause, drowning her disappointment in their mundaneness.

At length, the bus trundled down the road, and she took a seat toward the front, tucking her bag under her seat. Tuning out the mundaneness of the afternoon commuters getting on and off, she fiddled with her phone, checking on her online games. It didn’t take long before that, too, failed to entertain, and she turned her attention to the scenery passing by outside.

Fukuoka was such a new city, she thought, staring listlessly at the Western-style buildings they passed. So modern, so Western, it was as if a tiny piece of Tokyo had been dropped among the rice paddies that still littered the outskirts of town, where she and her mother lived. Maybe she would go out to the mall, or just take a walk after she dropped her bag off, she thought as she dug her goggles out of her bag, putting them in their familiar place around her neck, dangling around her collarbone. It’d help cool her head.

The bus came to a stop, hard enough to jolt her forward, and she got to her feet, the sounds of confused passengers around her. “Everyone calm down!” the bus driver called from the front. “I’m calling headquarters now.”

Now curious, Mirai hopped onto her seat, peering over the heads of the adults. It only took a moment for her to understand the sudden confusion and alarm around her, and to catch it herself.

Ahead of them, Fukuoka had been ruined. The road which had only been repaved last year was half-broken, half filled with weeds. The modern buildings’s big, open windows were now smashed or boarded up, with not a light on as far as she could see. A thick mist blanketed it all, concealing any movement or signs of life. Mom! “Excuse me, sir!” Mirai shouted as she snatched her bag. “I’m getting off here!”

“Ah, little girl? I don’t really think you should--”

“Filial piety calls!” she shouted, pushing at the doors until they opened, bolting into the mist.
There was no sound inside the mist, only the sound of her breath and the harsh pounding of her feet against rock and concrete. It was thick enough to where she couldn't see more than a few feet ahead; even so, the mist swirled in unpredictable movements, as if things were lurking just beyond her sight. There were no road signs, and even the landmarks didn't look the same. Was she going to even be able to find her house?

Counting her steps and the number of streets - the only clue she really had - she ran until she almost slammed into a crumbling wall, that of the side of an apartment complex. Her apartment complex. Bolting up the outdoor stairs, she paused and looked over the railing, peering into the fog.

In the thinner air, the shapes below were clearer - she could make out the heads and torsos of men(?) in gas masks and something akin to biohazard suits, but with spikes on their rubber helmets. And some of them were carrying guns. Guns?! Mirai gasped in surprise, then ran for her door, all but flinging herself inside.

In stark contrast to the ruined, foggy atmosphere outside, the inside of the apartment was perfectly normal. The same old sets of shoes by the door, the same old pictures on the walls, the same old smells of a rice dinner coming from the kitchen. Grimacing as she fought with her shoes to get them off, she shouted toward the kitchen, "Mom?!"

"Yes, dear?" Her mother's voice sounded calm, normal.

She extracted her bamboo sword from her bag, as well as a strap-on sheath that fit around her torso. A frivolous purchase that made her feel more powerful at the time, now surprisingly useful. "Uh, Mom, don't go outside," she said as she all but hurled the bag back into her room. "There's some weird guys outside, so lock the doors and definitely don't go out."

"Some weird guys? Should we call the police?"

The police! Mirai grabbed for her phone, but there was no signal showing. The hallway phone returned no dial tone, either. This is bad, this is bad. "Uh, I already called them! Look, just stay inside, whatever you do!"

"Mirai-chan? Are you going back out again?"

"Gonna check on Rina-chan!" She slammed the door shut behind her, hoping her mother would comply. Tucking her phone into a pocket, she leaned over the railing again, taking a look below. The suit-clad strangers didn't seem to have taken any notice of her, but a few had turned toward the stairs, making their way toward the building at the same pace as the rest. "Oh, no you don't," Mirai said, drawing her wooden sword as she made her way to the stairs.

The first of them was just coming to the stairway entrance as she reached the bottom flight, bringing the sword around to point at his face. "Don't take another step!" she ordered. "This place is off limits."

They turned their heads to look at each other, and then turned back to her. A couple of them raised their guns. With a yelp of surprise, Mirai jumped off the back end of the staircase, landing in the bushes below. No shots came, and she peered out from her foliage base. The creatures were making their way toward the staircase again. "I said stop!" she shouted, taking a downward swing at his head.

To her surprise, the man folded like deflated rubber, leaving nothing but a suit in place. She stared in horror, but the gun-toters were already raising their guns again, and the fear of being shot prompted her forward, striking first one way and then the other, sending the guns dropping to the
ground. Now she was in the middle of them, and she used all the muscle behind her taller than average frame to swing, aiming for the heads. Rubber suits collapsed around her, until nothing further moved. Out of breath, she looked around, waiting to see if more would come.

They did, emerging from the mists one after the other, like monsters of the sea coming ashore. Mirai held the wooden sword out in front of her, noting that if any more of them had guns, she was in trouble. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw one barrel raise to point at her.

Before she could react, hands grasped her from behind, covering her mouth and pulling her back. She tried to pull away, but the grip was too strong to break. *I'm sorry, Mom. Going to see Rina-chan was actually a lie.*

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"Be quiet now; I think she's coming around."

The air in this place smelled cool and clean, but damp, and the lighting was no longer foggy. Sitting upright, she reached for her sword, not finding it in her grip. "Be calm," the voice that had spoken addressed her. "We're not your enemies."

She turned her head, and found herself face to face with a little girl, something like three or three and a half feet tall, dressed like something out of a Chinese history book - a practical but intricate Chinese kimono and flat slippers, her black hair done up in buns. "I'm sorry about treating you roughly," the girl said. "Are you hurt?"

"She should be, after attacking a bunch of Troopmon by herself," a voice further back said. "Are all humans this crazy?"

"Sh," the girl scolded.

"I'm not hurt," Mirai said. "Where's my sword?"

"I have your sword," another voice said. "Do not worry. It will be returned to your possession, as long as you do not use it against us."

She turned to look at the speaker, and then let out a blink of surprise. The speaker was a kid in a cat costume - more like a lion, really - white with blue armor. "Our apologies for your unpleasant treatment," he said. "It proved necessary to rescue yourself from the Troopmon. Rest assured that you are our guest."

"...Why is that guy in a cat costume?" she asked the girl. "And why does he talk like a samurai?"

"Costume?" the girl echoed.

"Samurai?" the cat said at the same time.

"You'd think the girl'd never seen a Digimon before," the other voice said, and something flapped into view - a bat with a large ground body, all white, big eyes watching her as it hung from the ceiling.

"You've never seen a human before, so pipe down." The girl turned back to Mirai. "Allow me to explain. You seem to be under the impression that we are children in costumes. I assure you, that is not the case. We are all Digital Monsters, as are the creatures you fought."

"Those rubber suit guys were monsters?" Well... it did explain the deflating part. "Okay, so all of
"You are monsters? What's your connection to what's going on outside?"

The girl--monster--smiled. "You're surprisingly quick to adapt. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Youseimon. This is my second, Spadamon, and IcePicoDevimon," she pointed at the cat, and then the bat. "You are?"

Youseimon? Like a fairy? "Mirai. Watanabe Mirai."

"Mirai, then. The overlaid atmosphere you see outside is a Digizone - a partial meld between your world, and our Digital World," Youseimon explained. "We can set it back to normal - but we need your help. Will you assist us in restoring your town?"

"That was all you had to say. Where's my sword?"

The cat, Spadamon, walked over to her, holding it out in both hands reverently. "Your sword, my lady."

She slid it back into its sheath. "Okay, let's go."

Youseimon smiled. "Quick to adapt and quick to action, are you? Follow me."

The room they had been in - it had been a cave, just like it smelled - opened into a narrow hallway, short enough to make her worry about hitting her head. "Youseimon!" someone hailed her - this one a red, four-footed, furry creature with a peacock-like tail. "Kokuwamon says the Digizone's stabilized as we expected it might. Is this the human?"

"Yes, the one that fought the Troopmon and survived," Youseimon said with a gesture toward Mirai. "Mirai, this is Elecmon, another of my teammates."

It eyed her askance. "Is it crazy or just lucky?"

"Hey!"

Youseimon let out a little laugh. "Perhaps a bit of both. This way, Mirai." As they walked, Youseimon continued, "The way to separate the Digizone is to take down the control towers. Individually, you and I lack the power to destroy the tower and its guardian; together, we should be able to do it, if you'll enact a contract with me."

"A contract? You want me to sign something?"

"Nothing so formal. I'll give you a bit of my code, and you'll be able to support me in battle. Do you have an electronic device of some kind on you? A computer, a phone?"

She pulled out her phone, handing it over. "This will do," Youseimon said, touching a finger to the screen. It responded by turning red, letting off a glow. "Red, huh," she murmured before handing it back.

"So what did you do?"

"I've loaded a part of my program onto your phone. That should be good enough." The entrance to the cave loomed in front of them, the gray light pouring in around the bars that she was pretty sure was a grate. Were they just in the sewers, then? Pausing at the entrance, Youseimon pointed ahead of them. "You should be able to see the tower from here."

She could see the ground slope downwards toward buildings that looked as ruined as the ones she
could see so far. In the background, one object did not fit in with the rest of the landscape - a black obelisk towering above the other buildings. "That's the control tower there?"

"You can take that thing down? Cause I don't think hitting it with my sword's going to work."

"They don't call us 'monsters' for nothing. The Troopmon have been spread out, but probably won't attack if we don't initiate the contact. We'll make a run for it. Can you make it that far?"

"This'll be a light jog for me. Let's go." Mirai hopped out of the tunnel's mouth, half-sliding down the slope, Youseimon right behind her. Hitting the base of the choppy concrete, she set off at a run, quick but not so fast that she couldn't watch her footing. "Can you tell which way to go in this mist?"

"Just keep going straight ahead," Youseimon said as she ran beside Mirai, her shorter legs somehow keeping pace. Ahead of them and on either side, she could see the swirls of mist that she guessed were Troopmon, but true to Youseimon's word, none of them bothered coming out to greet them. "We're getting close."

Then just in front of them, the terrifying gas masks turned to look at them, barrels raising from the mist. Mirai let out a shout as she brought the wooden sword out of its sheath and in a straight swing down on the Troopmon's head. It crumpled with a flutter of rubber. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Youseimon launch several needles from her wide sleeves, sending another fluttering. "Keep moving!"

"Got it!" She ran, only taking a swing at whatever came too close, too hyped up on adrenaline to see if they were taking aim at her. In front of her, the fog got thinner, and lifted altogether, leaving them in front of the tower. From far away, it had looked tall, but not nearly as massive as it turned out to be now that it was in front of her. Mirai hoped that Youseimon had more up her sleeves than needles. Like a jackhammer.

"Moooooose!" The bellow came from their right. Mirai turned to see a gigantic blue and white moose bearing down on them. "How dare you, moooose. Strange humans all over my zone, this way and that. How am I supposed to maintain order, moooose?"

"What is that, Youseimon?" Mirai asked, keeping her sword in front of her.

"That's Moosemon."

"I guessed that!"

"Most likely, he's the boss of this area," Youseimon continued. "We'll have to take him down in order to get to the tower."

"Great. And me without my shotgun," Mirai muttered, wondering if anything less than a tank would have an effect on the large creature. Somehow, she didn't think her wooden sword was going to cut it.

"Moooooose! I'll have you know that I am not afraid of any of your little human tricks," it shouted at her, turning in her direction. "You are mere grass underneath my hooves!"

"Yeah, well... ...same goes to you, pal."

"Mooooose! How dare you!" Its hooves tore into the ground as it charged toward her. Just when she was thinking it may have not been a good idea to taunt the moose, Youseimon placed herself in front of Mirai, launching several needles at its face.
"Left!" she shouted as Moosemon tripped, crashing and skidding toward them.

She leapt, making an awkward but usable landing on the broken concrete. Youseimon tossed another handful of needles at it, but that only seemed to make it more enraged as it charged toward her, headbutting her hard. "Youseimon!" Mirai shouted in alarm, making her way toward her. That little body couldn't have withstood that impact....

But Youseimon got to her feet, looking a little winded but standing without a sign of pain. "Tch. You big oaf," she said to the moose.

"Moooose! How da--"

"How dare I, yes. Are you a Digimon or a broken feedback loop?" She collected a few needles between her fingers, holding them until they glowed. "Sparkle Darts!"

This time, when the needles impacted, they let off small explosions of light, sending the moose careening onto its side. Pulling itself up from the awkward position, it shouted, "Antler Shadows!" The massive antlers on top of its head flashed, sending a pinpointed burst at Youseimon, who was knocked through the nearest wall.

"Youseimon!" Mirai ran to the wall. This time for sure, she was either going to need to prepare first aid, or CPR. Or a coffin.

Inside the half-crumbled building, Youseimon sat up, one hand to her side. "Don't concern yourself with me. I'm tougher than I look. But as I thought, I can't take him alone."

Noise made her turn back to the outside. Moosemon was getting up, turning toward them again. "He's coming."

"I know. It's your turn this time, partner. Time to show me what you've got."

"Eh?!" She turned back toward the moose. "I need a rocket launcher for that, not a wooden sword!"

"No, not that. Use the D-Tai," Youseimon said, wincing as she got to her feet. "Focus the power of your human emotions through the D-Tai. Send me your power. Now come on!" she shouted as Mooseemon began charging. "Show me that red, burning passion of yours!"

Time seemed to slow. Mirai pulled her phone out, cradling it in both hands. She thought about the city, about the places in it that she liked, of the people in it that she cared for. My classmates... Mom.... And then she thought about the tiny figure in front of her that was fighting so hard to protect it.

In her hands, the phone began shining a red light, and Youseimon's skin took on the same glow. "That's more like it," she said as she pulled out another set of needles, which took on the same red glow. "Burning Sparkle Darts!"

They streaked toward Mooseemon like fireworks, engulfing him in a burning red that was impossible to avoid. A surprised, enraged cry of "Mooooooooose!" could be heard from the inside, and then the light faded, leaving nothing behind.

"You got him?" Mirai asked, leaning against the broken wall.

"We got him," Youseimon said with a nod. Giving her a soft smile, she added, "I've got a good eye for humans, after all. Well done, partner."
It wasn't just the praise, or the phone that still felt warm in her hand. It was the word 'partner' that ignited that same red glow inside her chest, making her feel as if she'd accomplished something. "Well," Youseimon said at last, breaking the eye contact, "once we get that tower taken care of, the city should return to normal."

Mirai nodded, putting away her sword, and then held out her hands for Youseimon. "Here. Let me."

"I'm not a child," she objected, but accepted one hand, pulling herself out of the wrecked building.

"Youseimon!" The voice was Spadamon's, and he came down the hill with two others she didn't recognize - a white cat with a long tail, and a cloaked figure about Youseimon's height with a witch's hat. "Youseimon, you are not hurt? The boss?"

"Taken care of." Youseimon gave Spadamon a thumbs up. "And never been better. I told you this idea would work."

"If you say so, I must concede the point."

"Tailmon, Wizarmon," Youseimon addressed the other two, "can you take care of that tower?"

"Understood," both said in unison, moving toward it.

"Spadamon," Youseimon addressed him. "I'll be out of the loop for a while. As we discussed, you're in charge when I'm not around. Continue with our plan. Don't take unnecessary risks while I'm gone."

"...As you wish," he said, clearly reluctant. "I will not let our comrades fall to the King."

Mirai turned as she heard a shout of "Neko Kick!". As she stared in surprise, cracks appeared up the black spire. Another shout, this one of "Thunder Cloud!", and lightning hit the weak spot, crumbling it apart, the tip falling to the ground.

"Remind me not to make your cat mad," Mirai muttered to Youseimon.

"So noted."

"Take a look!" Spadamon said, pointing. On the horizon, the fog was already starting to lift. "As expected, the two worlds are separating again."

"Then I'll be going as well." Youseimon grasped Spadamon's paw in both her hands. "Take care, comrade. Until we meet again."

"Yes. May the goddess of fortune shine upon both of us."

As Mirai watched, the lifting of the fog and the Digizone picked up speed, until it was rushing at them like an oncoming wave, the ground turning back to immaculate sidewalk under her feet. And then it was clear skies, the sounds of birds, the new buildings. At first, she saw no people, but then they gradually began to come out of the buildings, cautiously. Feeling the afternoon sun on her face, she wondered if it might have been a dream.

Small hands folded around her own. "Well, then, Mirai. You're probably tired from all that excitement, so shall we retire for the day?"

"...Youseimon?" Mirai looked around, and then back at the Digimon, kneeling in front of her. "You
didn't go back to your world?"

"Not at all. Since we're partners, we'll need each other's help to face the challenges ahead. So I'll be staying with you." Youseimon gave her a smile. "Please take care of me."

"...Ehhh?!"

And thusly, the adventure of Mirai and her partner Digimon, Youseimon began, and the city of Fukuoka was peaceful once more. However, this would only be a taste of the challenges that would lie ahead....
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

Mirai Watanabe, an ordinary third-year middle school girl. Before her eyes, her beloved city of Fukuoka turns to ruins, filled with strange monsters moving in the fog. Rescued by Youseimon, a Digital Monster, Mirai and Youseimon become a team and defeat the Digizone boss, Moosemon. But what place will they venture to next?

The street looked normal, but Mirai couldn't help but check over her shoulder as she reached her apartment complex. Hopefully, her mother had taken her advice and kept the door shut while she was gone. Fumbling for the key, she opened the door, peering inside. Everything looked the same as she had left it, right down to the indoor slippers she'd tossed aside in her haste before. "Take off your shoes," she instructed Youseimon in a whisper, "I'll find you some socks. Mom?"

"Oh, are you back already?" Her mother was now in the living room, with the television on. "Hey, they were talking about weird things going on outside on the television. Is that what you were talking about? Something about the fog causing lots of people to see things?"

"Oh, uh..." Was that what they were calling it? "Yeah, something like that."

"How was Rina-chan?"

"Uh? She's fine, she didn't go outside. Everything's fine now." She went down the hall to fish a pair of socks from her room. When she came back, mere seconds later, her mother was in the doorway, looking down at Youseimon, who looked back up at her. "Ah! Mom!"

"You didn't tell me you brought home a friend," her mother said, kneeling by the Digimon. "Where did you come from, dear?"

"Ah-" Mirai struggled to come up with an explanation. "Ah- Zashiki-warashi! She's a zashiki-warashi!"

Her mother blinked. "Good afternoon, Mirai's mother," Youseimon said, giving the woman a curtsy. "Fortune and blessings be upon your house!"

"Why, thank you."

"Since she's a zashiki-warashi, it's okay if she stays, right?" Mirai pressed. "I'll pull out a spare futon in my room, she won't take up much space, promise."

"Well, when you put it that way, how can I say no? Go wash your hands, warashi-chan, and we'll have dinner."

"Thanks Mom!" Mirai helped Youseimon put on the socks before opening the door to her room again. "Come inside here. I'll have to use a full futon, I guess, even though it would be too big for you..."

Youseimon stepped inside the door as Mirai pulled a futon out of her closet. The room was quite small, with the desk and bed being the main pieces of furniture in the room. A bulletin board with a few pictures pinned to it hung near the door, and the color scheme of the room was pink and white. "It's so unexpectedly girly," Youseimon said.
"What do you mean by that?" Mirai glowered at her before setting the futon on the floor. "Good, it looks like it'll fit. It'll probably be better if you sleep at this end, that way it's harder for me to step on you in the dark."

Youseimon was more interested in her desk, peering at the objects collected on it. "You have a computer! Look at the picture frame," she said, taking the latter and holding it as the digital frame flipped pictures. "Who's this?"

"Ah? That's my friend Rina-chan. We go to school together. Oh, and this is us with Sayo-chan. She used to go to school here too, before her family moved back to Kyoto." Mirai went back to the closet, pulling out blankets. "Why did you stay with me, Youseimon? Is that monster... going to come to Fukuoka again?"

"No, I don't believe so. But they will come to other places. It's certain there will be another Digizone, most likely in the near future." In an instant, Youseimon's face had shifted from lighthearted curiosity to complete solemnness. "When it comes, I'll need your help."

"There'll be another? How many are we talking about?"

"In our world—the Digital World—there are 108 of those towers, each ruling over a different area. How many of them will surface here, I can't say."

"A hundred and eight?" Horrifying images of Fukuoka being devastated by the ruined zones filled her head. "We have to deal with that many?"

"Not necessarily. I don't expect that all of them will show up at all, let alone at once. That D-Tai should be able to tell us when and where the Digizones show up. That's part of its design."

"The D-Tai?" Mirai pulled her phone out of her pocket. It looked the same as always, except that there was a new icon, a red one. "This is the D-Tai?"

"Correct. The D-Tai is a program made to counter the Digizones and restore peace to our Digital World. It should have several functions relating to that effort."

"Ah, so it's like an app?" She touched the icon, scanning through the options it presented. "Alerts for emerging Digizones... alerts for other D-Tai users... Looks like this thing has a number of useful functions, huh?" She put the phone back down on her bed. "These Digizones... Why is your world trying to merge with ours?"

"That's... a good question. We don't have any desire to control or live in this world of yours," Youseimon told her. "We only want to take back our own world from the King who controls it."

"Hm. So your world is ruled by a king? What kind of Digimon is he?"

Youseimon's face fell at the question, her eyes downcast. "The King... Ashurimon is the one that carved our world out of the Sea of Chaos. He used to be a kind and wise king, so I'm told, but..."

"Mirai-chan! Warashi-chan!" her mother's voice came from outside the room. "Let's have dinner!"

"Coming!"

Her mother already had the table set when the pair arrived, with three chairs pulled up. "It's so nice to have company over for dinner. Meals are always better with more people," she said cheerily.

"Thank you for having me over, Mirai's mother."
"You're very welcome, warashi-chan. Is that what you prefer to be called?"

"I don't mind." She took a seat as Mirai scooped her some rice, setting in in front of her. "Thanks for the meal."

"So, how was your day at school?" Mirai's mother asked her as she passed around the meat.

"Ah, oh... it was nothing special, really," she said with a sigh.

"Did something happen? How did your club tryout go?"

"Don't worry about it! I'll just have to try again tomorrow!"

"You're certainly the determined type, aren't you?" Youseimon asked, smiling.

"That's our Mirai-chan for you. She gets that from her papa," Mirai's mother said.

"I see. That's good," she said, more to herself than to the table. "We'll... be needing that."

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Her phone was beeping. With a groan, Mirai rolled over in bed, giving it a halfhearted swat. "Shh. It's still early..."

"Mirai!" Youseimon's voice caused her to sit up straight. The Digimon had Mirai's phone in her hands, examining it. "We need to go. It looks like another Digizone has emerged."

"Another already...?" Mirai groaned, fumbling about for her things. "Where is it at? Lemme see. Hopefully it's close." Pulling up the D-Tai's map, she zoomed in and out before she finally managed to identify the landmass the blinking dot rested in. "Kyoto! It's in Kyoto?"

"Let's get going, Mirai," Youseimon said. "We'll meet up with my people once we're there."

"Youseimon! We can't get to Kyoto! That's four hours away by train, and the train is expensive! There's no way we can make it there!"

"No, we should be able to make it if we use the D-Tai. As I told you, it's a tool to counter Digizones. It should take this fact into account."

"What's it going to do, give us a discount?" Even as she spoke, she threw her goggles around her neck, flipping through the options. In the previous choices she had skimmed the night before, one jumped out at her - the "Internet Transport". "What about this?"

Youseimon looked at it as Mirai put on her sheath and wooden sword. "I see. That makes sense. We'll be able to use your human Internet as an intermediary between my world and yours, and reduce our transit time."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It'll be easier to use than explain. Are you prepared?"

Sword, phone... Mirai tucked her wallet into a back pocket, then took the phone back in her hand. "I guess we've got no choice but to try it. Internet Transport, go!" She touched her finger to the button.

Nothing happened.
Mirai lowered her phone, and the pair stared at it for a moment. "I suppose you need to input your destination first," Youseimon pointed out.

"Uh, right. Kyoto, Kyoto," she mumbled as she typed, then held the phone up again. "Let's try this again! Internet Transport, go!"

Out in the hall, Mirai's mother paused at the light coming from underneath the door before knocking. "Mirai-chan, I've got breakfast ready," she called before opening the door. Inside, the room stood empty. "How strange. I wonder if she went out already?"

"Huh," Youseimon commented. "So this is the human city of Kyoto?"

"This is most certainly not Kyoto!" Mirai shouted. Checking the D-Tai, she added, "But it says we're here. This is Kyoto. Are we inside the Digizone?"

"Seems that way. I guess the Internet Transport isn't very exact on where it dumps us," Youseimon said. "So Kyoto isn't like this?"

"Not at all." Mirai looked around at the steel buildings that penned them in from almost all angles. Even the road beneath their feet was metal, and through it she could feel reverberations as other things marched along elsewhere in the zone. Wiring and control panels were cast about haphazardly, leading here and there with no logical sense behind where they were going. "This isn't Kyoto at all. Kyoto is an old, beautiful city. Not like this... mecha mecca!"

"I'm familiar with this zone - at least, I was when it was in our world," Youseimon said. "It seems that the Digizones conform themselves to a degree to the human world's buildings."

"What should we do? About all the people that are here?"

"Let them fend for themselves. I don't think the Digimon on patrol will attack them unless they attack first. It would be difficult for us to organize any sort of evacuation, as well."

"Then I'll call the police," Mirai resolved, pulling out her phone again. Only static came from the speaker. "The connection won't go through... Just like Fukuoka, huh."

"The Digital world is data-based. It's highly likely that that will cause interference with the electronic devices in this area." Mirai could only pray there weren't any old ladies with pacemakers or something similar around. "You said your friend lived here, right?"

"Yes, Sayo-chan. Should we look for her?" Mirai turned her head back and forth, but saw no humans in the area.

"Is this a place where she's be? If she's outside the Digizone, she should be fine."

"I don't know. I don't know anything about Kyoto's street-level geography beyond the basics," Mirai sighed.

"Then I suggest we get in touch with my people," Youseimon suggested. "We could send out a few of our reconnaissance people to look for her, if you're worried."

"Thanks, Youseimon." Mirai followed as Youseimon looked around, then led the way through the metal streets, her footsteps so light they were almost completely inaudible. Mirai tried to make hers the same.
"Youseimon!" The shout came from inbetween one of the buildings, and then a white dog came running toward them, followed by a rabbit-looking creature and a child in a black jester suit. "We found you. Have you been well?"

"Perfectly so, though I wasn't expecting another Digizone this quickly. Where's Spadamon?"

"He has some of the group with him, causing a distraction. Tailmon and Wizarmon are heading for the control tower."

"I see. Mirai, let me introduce you," she said. "This is Labramon," she getured to the dog, "Prairiemon," then the rabbit, "and Impmon," then the imp. "They're more of my teammates. Labramon, I have a task for you- get your recon people together. I want you to look for a human girl named Sayo. She's about Mirai's size, with pink hair and glasses."

"Understood," the dog said with a nod.

"Then I'll go with you," Prariemon said. "It's dangerous to go alone."

"Impmon, I want you to join up with Spadamon and tell him I'm here. We're going to head for the tower. Any word on the guardian of this area?"

"The boss is a Cyclomon. Be careful," Impmon said with a nod as he ran off, Labramon and Prariemon setting off in a different direction.

"Thanks, Youseimon," Mirai told her. "I appreciate it."

"It's nothing. Let's join up with Tailmon and Wizarmon. Probably, the boss will be in the area."

"Tailmon and Wizarmon... Those are the two from before, right? The white cat and the cloaked guy?" Mirai asked as she broke into a run, following Youseimon.

"Yes, that's them. They're some of my better fighters. Unfortunately, we don't have a lot of high-level people on our team at this point. Those we did have are largely destroyed."

"Oh... I'm sorry."

"Don't be. If we can win this war, they can be restored. Like I said, we're data."

"Oh... I see. So what's this Cyclomon like? Do you know?"

"Only in general terms. Check your D-Tai. It might be able to tell you more."

Mirai dug her phone out, flipping through the app. Inputting the name as best she could guess as to how it was spelled, she waited for the results to pull up. "Cyclomon," she read aloud. "Adult level, dragon-man type, Virus attribute. It is a one-eyed Digimon with an abnormally strong right arm. Its special attack, Hyper Heat, uses an extreme temperature which can melt anything." Mirai looked at Youseimon. "I didn't understand half of that."

"Hm, I see. So the right arm will be the thing to watch out for." Youseimon pointed ahead of them. "There's the tower."

The area of the tower had already seen a fight, with gouges and dents in the metal walls and burn marks scarring them further. In front of them, Tailmon and Wizarmon lay on the ground, injured. "Tailmon! Wizarmon!" Youseimon placed herself inbetween the beast and her two allies. "That's as far as you go, Cyclomon!"
"Ha! I think not." Cyclomon was larger than the entry had led her to believe - a massive yellowish creature, something like a reptile with a metal mask, that towered over them. "How convenient that the rebels have come to me to be killed, instead of me having to hunt you down."

"Youseimon," Tailmon lifted herself up partway. "Be careful. This guy isn't ordinary!"

"Are they ever?" She reached into her sleeve, drawing out some of her needles.

"Oh? I don't think you want to be doing that," Cyclomon laughed, reaching a claw over behind one of the buildings. A couple of machine creatures pushed a girl into his waiting claws, and he lifted her up. "Unless you don't care what happens to this human?"


"I don't care what a rebel thinks."

Mirai gasped as she got a look at the girl in his claws that cried out as she was squeezed. "S-Sayo-chan? Sayo-chan!"

The girl turned her head, gasping as Cyclomon squeeze. "M-Mirai-chan? Is that really you? What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to save you now, Sayo-chan, so just hold on!"

Cyclomon let out a bellow of laughter that echoed across the buildings. "You? A pitiful human, trying to rescue someone from me? You're a hundred years too early."

"And you're a thousand years too early for this beautiful city!" Mirai shouted back. "Just what do you intend to do with Kyoto and the people here?"

"Kyoto? I don't care about this place or its people. My job is to crush the pathetic rabble like the ones before me."

"You..." Mirai reached a hand toward her sword. "For that reason, you've done this to Kyoto...!"

Youseimon touched her hand to Mirai's. "Not yet. We'll put your friend in danger. Wait a bit."

"But."

Youseimon didn't answer, walking forward, and Cyclomon let out another bellow of laughter. "Hahaha! Giving yourself up? That's just what I like to see!"

"Mirai-chan!" Sayo cried out as Cyclomon lowered his head, flames flickering out of the sides of his mouth. "It's dangerous!"

"Hyper..." Mirai put Tailmon over her shoulder, throwing her other arm under Wizarmon's arms as she dragged the pair away. "Heat!"

"Youseimon!" Tailmon cried out as flames enveloped the area, licking past them into the alley where they had taken refuge. "I've got to go help her!"

"We can't," Mirai hung her head at those words, "we have to wait. She said so. Because he'll hurt Sayo-chan."

The flames died down, and Youseimon was still there, but clearly injured, dropping to one knee. Burns scoured her clothing and skin. "How fitting that the great rebel is done in by such an exalted
person as me," Cyclomon laughed as he bore down on her. "Praise me with your last breath, for it is I that will send you to your grave!"

Sayo let out a scream, and Cyclomon laughed as he gathered flames to his mouth. Mirai clenched a fist as the laughter echoed around her, until she could take no more. "You stupid dirty one-eyed lizard!" she shouted, stepping out of the alley. "Stop laughing!"

The flames died down as he looked at her quizzically. "You call yourself the servant of a king? You're nothing but a stupid, cowardly thug. Is this how a King's army acts? If so, it deserves to perish."

"The words of a rebel," he snorted, drawing in the flames again. "They mean nothing to me-"

"Retriever Bark!" The air ripped in a wave toward Cyclomon's head, smashing into him, causing him to stumble.

"Hare's Ear!" The Prairiemon from before smashed its ears down on Cyclomon's left arm, forcing him to drop Sayo. Labramon leapt to her, the girl landing on his back. "Nice catch, Labramon!"

"Get the girl out of here!" Youseimon shouted to them. "Mirai! Let's show this coward how a rebel army does things!"

"You got it!"

Her phone's screen glowed red, covering Youseimon in light, and the Digimon threw the needles in her hand. "Burning Sparkling Darts!"

Cyclomon let out a roar as he was engulfed in the red explosions. But then the air cleared, showing him barely affected at all. "No way!" Mirai got out.

"We told you he's not normal!" Tailmon ran past her, punching at its face with her clawed paws.

The light faded as Youseimon sank to her knees. Had they pushed her too far? Mirai ran over to her, helping support the smaller Digimon. "Youseimon! Are you all right?"

"Tch," she wiped at an injury on her cheek. "Is this the true limit of my ability?"

"It can't be. There has to be something else we can do."

Youseimon looked at her, and then past her as Wizarmon stumbled over, leaning on his wand for support. "Youseimon," he addressed her, "your benefactor said this might happen. He asked me to tell you to draw on the power of the Digizone itself to gain a greater ability. Use the Digizone Influence!"

"Digizone Influence...?" Mirai looked at her phone, flipping through the menu. "There's an option for it! Youseimon, should we give it a try?"

"What have we got to lose? Tailmon can't distract him forever." Youseimon got to her feet, and her small back silhouetted against the massive Cyclomon somehow made her look like a giant herself. "Let's give it a shot."

Mirai nodded, then held the phone toward Youseimon, hitting the button with her thumb. "Youseimon! Digizone Influence!"

This time, the light was not red, but a pure white that lit up the entire area, enveloping Youseimon
completely. "What is this?!" Cyclomon shouted.

In front of Mirai, Youseimon's silhouette took in the white light, and then that silhouette began to change shape. She became taller, her hair loosed from its buns into curly ponytails, butterfly wings springing from her back. With a flick of her wrist, the light shattered apart, leaving behind a completely different person. "Digizone Influence to... Faimon!"

"Faimon...?" Youseimon had been cute, but this new form was pretty, looking as if she could have stepped off a stage. Her kimono-like outfit now had a wide obi with a trailing bow, colored like a rainbow, her knee-high boots white like her outfit. The sleeves were split at the shoulder seam, exposing her bare shoulders. She wore bracelets in a rainbow of colors on both hands and around one ankle. But the face, although older, still looked the same.

"She's done it," Wizarmon said from beside Mirai. "She's used the power within this Digizone to gain a new form."

"Gain a new form?" Mirai looked back at Youseimon-no, Faimon-and the stunned Cyclomon.

"Yes. We Digimon can change forms-evolve-under certain circumstances. But it's difficult to do normally, let alone here in a different world. Digizone Influence borrows the power of her world."

"Faimon, huh," Cyclomon spoke, his single eye narrowing. "It doesn't matter what you change to, I'll still burn you alive. Hyper..."

"Like I'll let you do that!" Faimon flicked her wrists, catching some of the bracelets in her hands. "Fairyland Chorus!" With two sharp movements, she cast both sets of bracelets at the Cyclomon, the jewelry turning into rainbow-colored beams of light.

Cyclomon let out a scream that echoed all around as he fell backwards, dissolving slowly into sparkles. "No! How can this be?" he groaned before completely disappearing.

Nearby, Tailmon got to her feet, smiling at Faimon. "Looking good, Faimon."

"Thanks. Let's finish this tower while the time is right."

Tailmon nodded, and the two crossed the remaining distance, attacking the tower. Mirai shook herself, going in the direction she'd seen Labramon and Prairiemon take Sayo. "Sayo-chan! Are you all right?"

The spectacled girl was seated next to Prairiemon, but got to her feet as Mirai approached. "Mirai-chan! You're all right!" Sayo sobbed, clinging to the other girl. "I can't believe I get to see you again in this sort of situation!"

"You'll be all right," Prairiemon told her as the tower behind them crumbled. "Your human town will return to its former self in a few minutes. Things will be fine now."

Sayo nodded, rubbing at her face. "Thank you, Prairiemon-san. Thank you for saving me."

The Prairiemon responded by hiding its face behind one of its ears. "Aww... no need to thank me."

As she approached, Faimon's silhouette lit up, and then she was Youseimon again, coming to a stop next to the two girls. "Well done, Mirai," she said. "We've succeeded again."

"Yes!"
"Kyoto really is a pretty city," Mirai said, swinging her legs as she sat on the bench, inbetween Sayo and Youseimon. "I'm glad things are back to normal."

"I'm glad you could come here," Sayo said. "I really missed you and Rina-chan. To think that such a thing could happen... And then you recused me."

"I didn't really do much of anything," Mirai protested. "It was Youseimon's friends who helped you out."

Sayo peered around Mirai, looking at Youseimon, and the Digimon looked back. "Thank you," Sayo said sincerely to Youseimon, bowing her head. "I'm in your debt."

"I don't keep debts," Youseimon said with a slight wave of one hand. "Pay it forward to someone else."

"Youseimon-san... I thought those monsters were scary, but you and your friends really are kind, aren't you?"

"That's the kind of world we want to create," Youseimon said, closing her eyes. "There'd be no point if we didn't start now. I'm glad... that your city is undamaged. It's really quite lovely."

"You'll have to come see it during the flower viewing, then." Sayo held out her hands. "If you come, I'll save you a blanket."

Youseimon looked at her hand, and then accepted with a smile. "Then I'll see about holding you to that offer some day."

"Youseimon, we'd better get going," Mirai told her. "I didn't tell Mom we were going, so she might get worried. Sayo-chan, I'll come visit again, okay?"

"Want me to walk you to the train station?"

Mirai held up her phone, and gave her friend a wink. "I think we'll take the express route home."
Andre and the Pearl of the South!

Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The ordinary middle schooler, Mirai Watanabe, having made a new partner with Youseimon, is told about the 108 zones of the Digital World and of their evil King, Ashurimon. Kyoto becomes the target of the next Digizone, warping from an ancient town to a mechanical nexus. Traveling with the D-Tai to Kyoto, Youseimon faces Cyclomon, who holds Mirai's friend hostage. Mirai and Youseimon's strong feelings come together to unlock the Digizone Influence, which changes Youseimon into the powerful Faimon. Faimon triumphs over Cyclomon, but what place will they venture to next?

"Waaa! This game thing is so cool!"

Mirai looked up from her phone, pausing as she scrolled through the features of the D-Tai. "Honestly, you're like a kid. Though I guess Digimon don't really get to play with DSes, do they?"

"These 'pocket monsters' are so fun! And there's so many of them! If only they were Digimon, maybe they could be our allies, too," Youseimon said as she rolled over on the bed, swinging her legs contentedly as she played the video game.

"There's some sort of irony to you saying that, I'm sure." A knock on her door made her turn her head. "Come in!"

"Mirai-chan~" Her mother poked her head around the door. "I have a present for you and you'll never guess what it is~"

Mirai blinked, then looked to Youseimon, who looked back. As if that would give me a clue. "What is it?"

"Ta-da!" Her mother held it out between a finger and her thumb. "It's your very own credit card! Now you'll never have to worry about having to carry cash around all the time, and you can use it for big things like going to Kyoto to see Sayo-chan. I know you've been talking about going."

"Eh heh. I kind of didn't tell her I went to see her yesterday. I'm not sure what the occasion is, but thanks," Mirai said, taking it. "It'll be useful."

"Won't it though! And don't worry, Mama promises not to look at what you buy~" Clearly pleased with her gift, Mirai's mother left the room again, shutting the door.

"What's a credit card?" Youseimon asked her.

"You can use it in place of cash to buy things. It's really quite useful," Mirai explained. "Anyway, so I was-"

In her hands, the phone began beeping. "Digizone?" Youseimon asked, instantly in battle mode as Mirai flipped back to the D-Tai.

"Looks like it. But I don't know where this is..." Mirai frowned, putting the phone down and pulling up her computer, using it to compare with the bare-bones map in the D-Tai. "Here... I think this is it. What do you think?"

Youseimon studied the two maps. "Looks about right to me. Where is this?"
"Um... It's Atlanta. In the United States."

Tall buildings. Streets filled with cars. The occasional greenery poking through the buildings. In many ways, the American city of Atlanta was much like Fukuoka. And then Mirai looked down to the street level, and it became apparent that Atlanta was very, very different from Fukuoka.

People were swarming in and out of the buildings, people of all different types. Men and women, some in Western dress, others in fashions she couldn't identify. On the corner, a group of girls with their hair dyed and short shorts and midriffs. Down the street, a man with incredibly dark skin leading a horse-drawn carriage. Coming out of the closest building, a man in a camouflage outfit, on crutches. Another man across the street with a sign. "There's so many different people," she let out with a gasp.

"I don't see anything resembling a Digizone," Youseimon told her. "What does the D-Tai say?"

"Um..." She checked. "It's nearby. We must be in the right city, at least. I wonder how far it is?"

"How big an area are we searching? This could take a while."

"Let me see." She flipped back to her phone's browser, pulling up information on the city. "Atlanta, Atlanta... Twenty seven thousand square kilometers?!"

"That's a lot?" Youseimon asked.

"That's bigger than Tokyo! This could take days, if not weeks," she groaned.

Youseimon looked around, taking a second view of the city with hands on her hips. "You humans really like to spread out, don't you?"

"It's not like this in Japan!"

"Calm down," Youseimon told her. "If the Digizone's already shown up, chances are someone on the news is talking about it. Can you find anything?"

"Um... I don't really know any American news sites..." She went back to her phone anyway, trying to find something.

"Excuse me," a voice said from behind them, addressing them in English. "Are you lost?"

She blinked, looking up at the speaker. He was tall, although she wasn't sure if he was tall for an American or just tall compared to her, and although his complexion reminded her a bit of her own country, the face of his shape did not, nor did his dark brown, wavy hair. "You seem like you're looking for something."

"Ah..." Oh, she could only hope that her English was up to this task. "Strange places! We're looking for a strange place!"

"A strange place?" He raised both eyebrows. "Atlanta is full of strange places. Any strange thing in particular?"

Mirai looked to Youseimon. "I'm... not really sure," she admitted. If there was a pattern in the Digizones, she wasn't sure of what it was.

He looked at her curiously. "It would help if we can find a local news site," Youseimon addressed him in English. "Do you know of any that cover breaking news?"
"Mm, not really. Oh, but we could just turn on the news," he offered. "If you're looking for something that's breaking, that'd probably be a better bet. If you don't mind, we could check at my place. I live just a couple of blocks away."

Mirai looked at Youseimon, and the Digimon bowed to him. "Thank you, we'd be in your debt."

"It's not a problem," he said, waving one hand. "Don't worry, we'll find the place you're trying to get to. So, what's your names? I'm Andre Harris."

"Watanabe Mirai... I mean, Mirai Watanabe. And this is..." She looked down at Youseimon, wondering what to say. 'Youseimon' didn't really sound like a human name, and she doubted he'd buy the zashiki-warashi story.

"I'm Youko," Youseimon said with a curtsy. "Pleased to meet you."

"Mirai and Youko, then, It's a pleasure," he said with a smile.

The building he led them to, although the architecture was Western, reminded her a bit of home with its size, a tall but snug house nestled in among other similar houses. "We're up a floor, so watch your step," he warned as he opened the door. "Mom, everyone, I'm back."

The sound of little feet across the floor approached them, and two girls around eight or so came running over. Both stopped in their tracks and stared with wide eyes at Mirai. "Jane, Kat, this is Mirai and Youko. Mirai, Youko, these are my younger sisters- well, two of them, anyway. Sveta?"

Another girl she guessed was Sveta appeared around the door. Sveta and Andre didn't resemble each other much, she noted; Andre was well-tanned, but Sveta was pale enough to make a yamato nadeshiko jealous, and she had a sculpted face, instead of Andre's rounded one. "You brought a girl home? That's gutsy of you."

"She's lost, I'm just giving her some help. Is Mom still working?"

"Yes, and heaven help you if you interrupt. I hope for your sake you found what she wanted."

Andre held up a plastic bag he'd been carrying in response. "Give me just a moment, Mirai. Mom!"

Mirai couldn't help but peek around curiously as Andre entered the living room. At the back of it, she could see a desk, and at that desk was a woman not quite old enough to be classified as middle aged, typing as if each key was a stab to her enemies. She turned as Andre spoke, and Mirai tried not to stare. Andre's mother was someone that could draw the eye: hair similar to Andre's pulled back in a long ponytail, a baggy T-shirt not quite hiding her tall but well-built figure, an eyepatch over her left eye that was only part of the draw to her expressive face. "You found the good stuff? Excellent," she said, accepting the bag. "So who's your girlfriend?"

"Nothing like that. This is Mirai, I'm just helping her find where she's going."

"Mmhmm. If you need 'em, condoms are in the bathroom, and make sure you shut the door."

"I said it was nothing like that," Andre sighed, more exasperated than embarrassed.

"Mmhmm. By the way, if you make her cry, I won't forgive you."

"No, no, it's fine, don't worry," Mirai protested, waving her hands. "I'm sure he wouldn't-"

"By the way," she continued smoothly, "if you make him cry, I'll kill you."
Mirai took a step back, with no doubt in her head that the American could do it. "I definitely won't."

"Mother!" Andre took Mirai by the arm, leading her away. "Stop tormenting our guests. Don't you have a deadline?"

"Ah, fuck! Don't remind me!"

"Ah," Mirai managed as she was dragged away, Youseimon following on her heels. "Your mom-"

"Don't let her bother you," Andre said as he opened the door to a room. "Her job makes her a little eccentric. If you'll wait here just a second, I'll bring you some tea."

Tea! She didn't know Americans drank tea. Perhaps this place wasn't as strange as she thought. The inside of the small room, probably about the same size as hers, was similarly furnished with a desk and bed, but that was where the similarities ended. His room had calming, darker colors, broken up by the presence of posters on the walls advertising giant robot shows she was passingly familiar with, and others with spaceships that she wasn't familiar with. Figurines were displayed carefully on wall-mounted shelves and on the desk, which held a computer and a small television. Everything was neat and orderly, the opposite of what she had been led to believe a boy's room would be like. "Sorry about the wait," he said, bringing in a couple of glasses filled with a cold, amber drink. "Here you are."

"... What is this?" she asked, taking a sample sip. The drink was cold and tasted somewhat like tea, but was almost too sweet.

"Huh? It's tea, sweet tea?"

"It's not like the tea I know," she said, taking another curious sip.

"Oh. Is it too sweet? I try to keep ours on the light side, but the southern standard for sweetness is enough to stick a spoon upright in."

She tried to imagine that, and boggled. "N-no, it's fine. It's different," she said, becoming a bit bolder in her drinking. Youseimon seemed to have no problem with downing the glass. "You like that show?"

He looked up to see her pointing at one of the giant robot posters. "Ah, yeah, I like science fiction kind of stuff. Especially the classics. Not that new stuff isn't good, but the classics are like a window into the past, you know?" Seemingly embarrassed, he turned away, turning on the television. "You can go ahead and sit on the bed if you like. Let me just see what the-"

He paused on one channel, the reporter shouting in English too rapidly for Mirai to catch all the words. She caught 'strange', 'unknown', and the image of the snowy field behind her with figures moving in the blizzard was enough. "There!" she said, pointing at the television. "There, where is there?"

"Uh..." Andre studied the picture, listening to the reporter babble. "That's the Little Five Points area... Have the zombies come at last?" he added.

"Little Five Points. I see. Thank you very much, Mr. Andre, I really appreciate it," she said, giving him a bow.

"Ah, you're leaving?" He paused to grab a bag by his desk before following her out into the hallway. "Do you even know where you're going?"
She paused in her steps. "Well, that's..."

"I'll show you where it is," he said, waving for them to come with him. "If you're in a hurry, we'd better take the train. You can explain what's going on along the way."

Mirai looked at Youseimon. "Can we tell him?" she asked in a whisper.

This was met with a shrug. "I don't see why not. Let's go."

A few blocks of walking later, they were on a train, heading south. "So what was that snowstorm on the television?" Andre asked, glancing around to see if anyone was nearby. "You said that's the place you needed to go. Why is that?"

"It's... a strange place," she said, not sure of what he'd believe. "We're going to try and turn it back to normal. No, we will turn it back to normal, so don't worry."

"A strange place? How are you going to turn it back to normal?"

"It's a temporary merging of the human world with the Digital World," Youseimon spoke up. "The merge will be reversed once we've ripped out the evil underpinnings holding it here."

"I see. What causes it to merge? What underpinnings are these that you're going to be removing?"

"We're not sure," Mirai admitted, "but they go away if we destroy the tower. But we'll probably run into trouble on the way, so you should stay out of the Digizone once we get there."

"No, I'll come with you," he said, shaking his head. "I know my way around downtown."

"It won't be your downtown anymore," Youseimon said as the train came to a stop, and Andre stood.

As they approached the exit, Mirai could already tell the difference. In Andre's neighborhood, the temperature had been pleasantly warm, but now it was bitterly cold, with a bit of snow blowing down the steps. "What the hell?" Andre asked as people came running down the steps, trying to get away from the exit. "We never see this kind of weather! Well, except that one time, but that was El Nino's fault."

Mirai shivered, suddenly wishing she'd brought a jacket. At least she'd had the sense to wear jeans instead of a skirt. Getting to the top of the steps, she looked around.

The buildings were buried under piles of snow, so much that she couldn't even see the light from windows shining underneath. They had all become nothing more than silent white monoliths, frozen in time. Somehow, thankfully, the entrance to the subway had remained open. "Oh, this is bad," Andre said from beside her as he fished through his bag, pulling out a belt.

"Do you not get a lot of snow?" Mirai asked as she looked around for any signs of life. A few people staggered among the snowbanks, making for the subway.

"Georgians can't handle one foot of snow, let alone a hundred. And I'm worried about the people in the buildings. The buildings could collapse under all that snow, or they might be suffocated..."

"It's going to be difficult to move around in all of this," Youseimon said, hopping lightly onto the top of the snow. "Especially for you two. We should keep a low profile while we look for the tower, or until we can meet up with my people."
"Your people?" Andre asked.

"Yes. I have comrades working in the Digital World to help these issues." Youseimon ran ahead of them, looking this way and that.

"Oh, this is going to be icky," Mirai groaned as she stepped into the edges of the snow. Thankfully, it was still low enough in the streets that she could actually lift her legs to take steps instead of having to push through, but it didn't take long before she could feel the cold in her legs. "I wish I had snowshoes."

"I wish I had a snowmobile." Andre hauled himself onto a car, offering Mirai a hand up. Taking a look around, he pointed. "What's that?"

She looked. Not that far away, she could make out something only slightly darker than the snow itself, looking somewhat like those club-wielding monsters from foreign films. And at its feet, she could see something black, about the size of Youseimon, with a feline face contorted in pain. "Hey, stop!" Andre shouted in alarm as the goblin creature raised its club.

So much for keeping a low profile. The creature let out a roar and tromped through the snow toward them, club raised high. "Oh, yeah, the D-Tai," she mumbled to herself, pulling it out and pointing it at the creature. "It's called a SnowGoburimon. It's a Child rank? It might not be that tough."

He glanced over at her. "Does whatever you're looking at give any sort of weakness?"

"Uh..." She looked up as the creature bore down on them.

"Going for the eyes then!" He grabbed at his hip, then raised both hands, pointing a gun at the creature's face. She saw something shoot out of the barrel, and then the SnowGoburimon let out a roar of pain, clawing at its own face.

She stared at him. "Americans really do all carry guns!"

"It's just a pepper spray ball," he said, taking her hand. "C'mon, let's go while he's incapacitated." He pulled her to the car roof, then let go as he leapt out into the snow, landing with a 'poof'. "Hey, you all right?" he asked as he approached the black cat. "Hang in there."

"Here, let me," she told him as he moved to pick the cat up. "You need your hands free in case he calls for help." The cat felt like ice in her arms, his body only having a bit of warmth. Was that because he was a monster, or because he was dying? "We need to get him warm."

"We need to get away, too." He pulled her around the corner, taking in the street at a glance. "There. Someone's left their car running. We'll hunker down there."

She followed him to the large vehicle, and he gave her a hand climbing in to the front seat. He hopped in the back himself, motioning for her to pass him the cat. "Stay down low," he instructed, putting the gun back at his hip.

"Okay. I'll see if I can contact Youseimon." She opened up the D-Tai again, hoping for some sort of communication function.

Yanking the decorative blanket off the back seat, Andre covered both himself and the cat with it, keeping his body pressed against the injured creature. "He looks like he's been hurt, but I don't know how to do first aid on a guy like this. Is Youseimon your friend Youko's name?"
"Ah... yes. She's a member of this world, too. She might know how to help him." She ducked down into the passenger side's footwell as she heard tromping steps outside. Ah, there was something on the D-Tai - "Partner Communication". Opening it, she began writing a text to Youseimon.

On the back seat, the cat stirred, then sucked in a surprised breath. Andre put a hand to his mouth, listening carefully. "Shh. They're still out there," he warned in a whisper.

The cat blinked, then looked at Mirai, large green eyes unsure. "What kind of Digimon are you guys?" the cat asked after the noise had died down.

"We're not Digimon, we're humans," Mirai said. "You're in an overlap of the human world with the Digital World. Youseimon's on her way," she added to Andre.

He pulled out his own phone, checking it. "I don't have a signal here, are you sure?"

"It looks like somehow the D-Tai can connect here," she said, poking her head up to look around. "Even though there's no reception inside these things."

"You guys saved me?" the cat asked as he sat up, shivering.

"Stay still," Andre told him. "You're hurt and I don't know how badly."

"This level of injuries is nothing," the cat replied. "But I'm grateful to you. I'm Milomon. What are your names, humansmons?"

"Not humansmons, just humans," Mirai said with a smile. "I'm Wa-er, Mirai Watanabe. Nice to meet you, Milomon."

"And I'm Andre Harris. Call me Andre," he said. "Don't worry, you'll be safe here."

"Weird names. Anyway, I got no interest in being safe," he said, folding his arms. "Thanks for your help and all, but I gotta go."

"You're in no shape to do that," Andre said, holding Milomon close so the cat could warm up.

"I told you, this level of injury-"

"Youseimon!" Mirai opened the door, waving to her partner, who came bounding over the snow like a rock skipping across a lake. "Did you have any luck finding the others?"

"No, I came back when you sent me that message. I thought I told you to stay put," she said with a sigh. "Well, I suppose it's fine. Can you travel? We'll have to search for the tower ourselves."

"You're looking for the tower?" Milomon spoke up from the back seat. "Why?"

She glanced over at him. "We're destroying it."

"Then we're on the same side," Milomon said, getting to his feet with some difficulty. "I can show you where that tower is. But in return, you gotta help me."

"Help you with what?"

"The lord of this area is a guy named Hyogamon," Milomon told her. "He's holding a friend of mine hostage at your tower. You distract that goon for me while I rescue my friend, and I'll lead you there."
"I would probably have to do that anyway, so it shouldn't be a problem. Which direction do we go?"

He hopped out, landing in the snow, and then sank into the snowbank with a cry as he dropped to one knee. "That's why I told you you're not in any shape to move," Andre said, landing in the snow next to him. "Here, climb onto my back. We'll be able to travel faster that way."

Milomon looked at him, then obligingly crawled onto Andre's back, digging his claws into the boy's T-shirt. "You're a pretty easygoing guy, aren't you?"

"Come to think of it," Mirai said as she hopped out of the car, shutting the door. "You're really calm about all of this. I mean, finding monsters right in front of you, you didn't panic at all."

"My mom always told me to keep calm," he replied, touching a hand to his gun to make sure it was there. "And besides, truth is usually stranger than fiction."

"Go that way," Milomon said, pointing around Andre's shoulder, and the two humans began stepping gingerly through the snow, Youseimon following across its top.

"So what's your friend like?" Andre asked Milomon as they walked.

"His name's Kudamon. He's still a kid, so he can't take care of himself. I gotta protect him, since I'm older."

Youseimon looked over at him, and smiled slightly. "Aren't you still a child, yourself?"

"Huh? I don't need to hear that from another Child-level Digimon, thank you very much!"

"You're a child-level?" Mirai asked Youseimon.

"I've been around for quite some time, so it'd be unwise to judge me by my power level."

Youseimon kept her eyes forward.

"We'll help you rescue your friend," Andre told Milomon. "So don't worry. You take it easy."

"You... You're a real good guy, aren't you?"

"Well, I know what it's like to have younger siblings."

"I can see the tower up ahead," Youseimon said. "Where's your friend being held, Milomon?"

"In front of the tower, in the big flat area," Milomon said pointing. Mirai squinted, and could just make out something that looked similar to a stockade. "They're trying to make an example out of him, because...well, it's my fault. I tried to break him out, but..." Milomon's claws dug into Andre's shoulders. "What kind of world do we live in where doing this to a little kid is okay?"

Youseimon looked over at him, and her expression was sympathetic. "We'll rescue your friend. Then, if you like, you can join with our people. We're running a resistance to the King. It's dangerous and it's hardly a comfortable life, but there's food to eat and safe places to sleep."

Milomon let out a soft chuckle. "I doubt there's any place safe in this world. But thanks for the offer."

"It's big and open," Mirai said. "It'll be hard to approach. And they've probably got some people lying in wait for us. How should we go about this?"
"They expect us to try and rescue Kudamon," Youseimon said, "so let's do what they're not expecting us to do. Mirai, you and I will attack the tower directly. That should draw out the boss. While we have his attention, Andre, you and Milomon rescue Kudamon."

Andre nodded, giving her a smile. "Leave it to us."

"Good. Then we'll part ways here. Stay low until you see Hyogamon come after us. Don't move before then. We have a few tricks up our sleeves," Youseimon told them. "Come on, Mirai."

She followed, already feeling tired from the sludging through the snow. "It's difficult for me to move around well. What should we do?"

"I'll guard you with long-range attacks," Youseimon said. "I think you should get to a place where you can move around well enough to defend yourself. Like on top of one of those vehicles."

"On top of the cars?" Mirai looked, and sudden inspiration came to her. "Youseimon, wait. I think I have an idea on how to draw them out."

Over in the street where they had parted ways, Andre hunched down beside the car, dearly wishing he'd thought to wear pants instead of shorts. "Are you all right?" Milomon asked. "You don't look so good. You look cold."

"Speak for yourself," Andre said with a smile. You should take better care of yourself, or your Kudamon will worry."

Milomon blinked, then managed a smile himself. "Never had someone tell me that before. And I guess I probably do worry him. I remember the day I first found his Digi-egg... I wasn't that old, myself. You know, you humans are all right."

"I think we're not that different, even though we don't look the same." Andre straightened up as sound reached his ears. "Is that a car alarm?"

The SnowGoburimon were filling the streets, looking around in utter confusion at the noise that emanated down the streets, a cacophony of blaring. "Sorry," Mirai muttered an apology to the drivers whose windows she'd broken, clambering onto a car close to the tower. "Youseimon, go!"

The Digimon hopped up, bouncing off her shoulder, pulling forward her darts as she leapt at the tower. And then snow came down upon her, blowing harshly. "So the rebel came to my zone, huh?" a raspy, snarling voice called to them from above. "Well, I don't mind finishing you."

"If you think you can try, be my guest," Youseimon said, launching the needles in the direction of the voice. They clattered against a large icicle that was gripped in a meaty hand, falling uselessly to the ground. Youseimon landed on top of a postal box, crouched as her opponent landed.

Hyogamon was well over the height of Mirai or most humans, an oni-like figure with large, curved teeth and an icicle club clutched in one hand. With a shout of "Ice Konbou!" he brought said club down in the snow, sending icicles shooting toward them.

"If you think you can try, be my guest," Youseimon said, launching the needles in the direction of the voice. They clattered against a large icicle that was gripped in a meaty hand, falling uselessly to the ground. Youseimon landed on top of a postal box, crouched as her opponent landed.

Youseimon let out a grunt as she threw her darts to deflect them away from Mirai, grunting as one glanced off her shoulder. "Mirai, let's Digizone Influence!"

"Right!" Mirai held out her phone, the screen glowing red, and the white light filled Youseimon's form, forcing Hyogamon to avert his eyes. But the form that emerged wasn't the one that Youseimon had assumed in Tokyo, but a different image altogether. She was about as tall as Faimon, but her clothing was a great deal simpler and more Western, her top half covered with a
tube top and the bottom with a many-layered, frilled skirt, looking almost as if she was wearing a rose, only colored in green. Her hair was pinned up into a single bun, and she carried a wand in one hand. "Youseimon, Digizone Influence to Spirimon!"

"Spirimon?" Mirai questioned as her partner charged into battle.

Down in front of the tower, Andre had made his move once he saw Hyogamon charge after Youseimon. "Kudamon!" Milomon shouted as they reached the stockade. Kudamon was a snakey creature with a foxlike head and paws, bits of golden light coming off his ruptured skin. "Hang in their, Kudamon! You'll be all right now, don't die on me!"

"Big brother Milomon...?" Kudamon looked up, and his foxy face twisted into a smile as Milomon brought his claws down on the lock holding the stockade closed. "Oh... I knew you'd come."

"Kudamon, hang in there!" Milomon clutched his friend to his chest, shivering. "Don't you leave me!"

Andre put his hand on Milomon's large paw, then took Kudamon in his own hands. "Let's make it work," he said, pulling off his T-shirt and wrapping the Digimon in it. "You'll be all right, Kudamon. Everything is fine now."

The fox rubbed its head against Andre's bare chest. "Andre, you..." Milomon began, watching Andre let out a shiver as well.

"It's fine, Milomon. It's April, and only idiots catch colds in the spring," he said with a smile.

"Even so, you-"

"I said it's fine. I was the one who decided to follow Mirai here, and I chose to do this, too. I know it seems strange, but my mom raised me to help someone in need, even a stranger. I just can't turn my back on you."

Milomon looked at him, and then turned in surprise as the area behind them lit up with white light. "The light of evolution...?" he questioned as he saw Spirimon and Hyogamon do battle.

"Pixie Dust!" Spirimon shouted as she cast a white beam from her wand, engulfing Hyogamon in its purity.

The ogre let out a scream as it crumbled to data. "Big brother, forgive me...!"

"Big brother... Oh, dammit!" Milomon turned, running toward Spirimon. "Watch out! That was the younger-"

"Hyogan Nage," came a deep voice from above, and large hail-like snowballs pelted down from above, filling the whole area with the snow equivalent of a meteor shower. Andre let out a cry as one hit his shoulder, knocking him to the snow, and Spirimon also cried out as she fell under the pelting of the harsh attack. "You'll pay for your rebellion with your life," the elder Hyogamon said as he landed on the ground, surprisingly light for his size.

"Don't think I'm so easy," Spirimon spat. "Pixie-"

"Hyogan Nage." The ice pelted at her again, knocking her back against a wall with enough force to crack it. Spirimon let out another cry as she crumpled to the ground.

"Spirimon!" Mirai shouted in alarm, and then screamed as the ice broke the windows above her
Milomon watched, clenching one of his paws into a fist. "Andre!" he said, turning and running back to the human, who was leaning against the stockade for support. "Andre, make a contract with me!"

"A contract?"

"Your electronic doohickey, hand it to me!" Milomon held out a paw. "I know it's selfish of me to ask, because it means dragging you into my fight. But if we combine our strength, I know we can absolutely save everyone!"

Andre looked at him, then pulled it out, holding it out to Milomon, who put a paw on top of it. "Your kindness," Milomon murmured. "I can feel it flowing into me. Let's do it, Andre! Let's save everyone!"

The human boy nodded, holding onto the phone, which let out a soft green glow. Milomon ran for the Hyogamon, Andre following. "Go for the eyes, Milomon!"

"Catscratch!" Milomon shouted as he leapt for Hyogamon's face, drawing his claws down, cutting deeply. Hyogamon let out a wail, swinging his club wildly. "Spirimon, can you stand?"

"I'm not out of this yet," she said, getting to her feet.

"Then let's finish this guy! Cat's Meow!" Milomon opened his mouth, shooting a black fireball at Hyogamon's face.

"Pixie Dust!" Spirimon wound her white attack around Milomon's black, and the two attacks hit dead on, vaporizing the elder Hyogamon into the same dust as his younger brother. That done, Spirimon stumbled backwards, leaning against a car as she changed back to Youseimon.

Milomon looked down at his claws as Andre caught up with him, panting for breath. "You got him! Are your injuries okay?" he asked.

He grinned, giving the human a thumbs up. "Never been better!"

Youseimon managed to get to her feet, jumping up to a building near the tower. Letting out a sharp whistle, she waited. Labramon and Prairiemon were the first to find her, calling to her from below. "Labramon, where's Tailmon and Wizarmon? Tell them we need this tower down, fast. Prairiemon, take care of Kudamon. He's injured."

"Understood, boss!" Prairiemon held out his hands for the bundle in Andre's hands, and he slowly relinquished the injured Digimon. "You're among friends now. We'll have you better in no time!"

"Milomon," the fox groaned, reaching out a paw. "Big brother Milomon!"

The cat put his paw on Kudamon's. "It's okay, Kudamon. You can trust these people. I've got some things I have to do now, so we have to part ways for a bit. Just you wait. I'll make the Digimon World a safe place, and when I do, I'll come back for you."

"Milomon...!" Kuramon's voice sounded as if he were ready to cry.

"You have to be strong now, Kudamon. You want to see it too, right? That peaceful world. Take care of your body, and do what you can here." Milomon released Kudamon's paw, stepping back and letting Prairiemon take him away.
"We'll do what we can," Youseimon said to Milomon.

He nodded, turning back to Andre. "Andre... I want to come with you. I want to fight with you. Let's work together to save both our worlds."

Andre smiled, nodding. "But if you don't have a D-Tai, you can't stay in this world once the tower's gone," Mirai pointed out, looking to Youseimon for confirmation.

"By D-Tai, do you mean this?" Andre held up his phone, pointing to the green icon on it. "It seems similar to yours."

Behind them, a cracking noise signalled the end of the tower, black pieces of obsidian showering down like sparkling rain. "It's green?" Mirai questioned, looking to Youseimon.

"It means he's a reliable guy that I can depend on," Milomon said, hopping onto Andre's back.

"I'm not surprised," Youseimon said to Mirai. "My benefactor most likely released the D-Tai program to others as well. They may not even be aware of it," she added, looking at Milomon. "So then, can we depend on you?"

Milomon and Andre nodded in unison. "Let's change this rotten world of ours, Youseimon. Even if it's only a little at a time, let's make it a place where our friends can grow up without having to fear."

Mirai looked to Andre, and then gave him a bow. "I'm sorry to impose on you, but please take care of us in the future."

"I look forward to it."
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

An ordinary middle schooler, Mirai Watanabe, and her new partner, the Digimon Youseimon. In search of their next Digizone, they come to Atlanta, a city deep in the United States. With a local boy named Andre Harris, they set foot in a snowy wasteland and rescue a strong-willed Digimon, Milomon. Against the boss Hyogamon, a new Digizone Influence, Spirimon, but even that is not enough. Milomon and Andre's determination come together to form a new power and a new partnership. But what place will they venture to next?

"Ninety-nine... one hundred." Mirai lowered the wooden sword, wiping at her brow. "Okay, now for the next strike..."

Youseimon looked up from her contemplation of the rice field. "You're doing more even when it's this early? You take that sword very seriously."

"Well, I can't Digizone Influence like you can, so I have to do what I can," she said, taking a seat next to Youseimon. "It's the only way I have to defend myself. Plus, I've always liked swords." Youseimon tilted her head, curious, and Mirai continued. "My dad is away on business a lot and mom works from home, so I watched a lot of samurai films and such when I was young. I always thought they way they moved with the sword was so beautiful. And I'm not really that girly, so that's the best way I have to be pretty."

"I don't really get it."

"Well, that's okay, I suppose." Mirai got to her feet again.

Youseimon turned to Mirai's bag as something began beeping. "Mirai, I think that's your phone. Is it the D-Tai?"

She opened the bag, pulling out the phone. The screen was glowing red. "Uh-oh, I think it is." She tapped on the screen.

"Mirai?" Andre's voice came through the phone's speaker. "Can you hear me? Are you sure this is working, Milomon?"

"Hey, don't look at me for answers, I got none."

"Andre-san! Er... Andre," Mirai said in surprise, trying to switch her brain into English mode. "Can you hear me?"

"Ah, good, there you are," Andre's voice said. "I've been poking at this app to see what it can do, and it's telling us another of those weird zones has popped up again."

"Really? Let me see..." She opened the alert function. "Ah, you're right. I wonder where this is,"

"It's a city called San Francisco. It's located here in the United States," Andre told her. "Milomon and I were going to go take a look. Do you want to meet us there? It's not late there, is it?"

"No, it's early. I'll be right there," she promised, picking up her bag.

"Then I'll meet you there."
Mirai nodded, turning to Youseimon as she tossed the bag over one shoulder, tucking her sword in its sheath and her phone in a pocket. "Let's go see this San Francisco place, then."

Unlike Atlanta, when Mirai and Youseimon arrived in San Francisco, they landed in the Digizone directly. Mirai was pretty sure of this; as weird as America seemed to be, she didn't think it included giant toy blocks and plush bears. "Let's look for Andre and Milomon first," Youseimon said, "and then we can try and locate our allies, and our enemies."

Mirai nodded, running a hand over a toy car. Upon closer examination, it seemed to have been subjected to some rough play, with scratches and dents all over. She was just peering to take a look at what she thought might be a burn mark on it when she heard Andre's voice. "Hey! Mirai!"

She waved as Andre approached. Milomon bounded next to him, easily bouncing off the padded surfaces. "Man, I should've brought some flowers," Andre commented. "Though this doesn't exactly look like San Francisco. Do all these Digizones look strange like this?"

"That's a good thing," Youseimon told him. "Places that stick out are easier to find."

"Why would you bring flowers?" Mirai asked, wondering if this was some American custom.

"You know, like the song... oh. You probably don't know. It's an old song. Mom listens to this stuff all the time." He tucked his hands in his pockets. "So how do we turn San Francisco back to normal?"

"We need to find the tower in this region. Hopefully, my people will have already located it. We just have to locate them," Youseimon said. Turning up to Milomon, who had crawled up the side of one of the plush blocks, she called, "What do you see?"

He pulled himself onto the top easily, looking around. "Ah, I see the tower," he said, pointing. "It's over in a big open area. I think I see the sea beyond. And some reddish-colored bridge."

"That must be the Golden Gate bridge," Andre said, pacing a few steps. "That gives me an idea of where we are, at least. Phew. At least this mess wasn't dropped downtown."

"Come to think of it, it's awfully quiet," Mirai said. "Shouldn't there be people?"

"If this is anything like the snowstorm in Atlanta, they're probably all staying inside," Andre said. "Seems like everything was normal once you got inside."

"Guys, that's not all I see," Milomon called down to them. "That tower's guarded."

"That's not surprising."

"Yeah, but I mean a whole bunch of 'em. Look like Tankmon," he said, ears twitching.

"You've got good eyes," Andre said. "I have a feeling I know what a tank-mon might entail, but tell me."

Mirai flipped on the D-tai, inputting the name. "Here we are," she said, holding the phone out so Andre could see. "They're Adult level."

"How many are we talking?" Youseimon asked as Milomon climbed back down the block.
"Good pile of 'em. Twenty, maybe more?"

"We're really out-powered here," Youseimon said, "even if we meet with my people. Well, let's try and get closer and scout the area."

Milomon hopped onto Andre's shoulder, nearly knocking the American boy over. "Sounds like a plan."

"Do you know a lot about this area?" Mirai asked Andre as Youseimon started in the direction Milomon had indicated. "San Francisco, I mean."

"Not really. Mom was looking up some stuff for one of her projects on it once. I think this general area's called Haight-Ashbury or something like that. What about this Digizone? Do either of you know anything about it?"

"I've heard of it, but I've never been here before," Milomon said.

"Sorry," Youseimon said with a slight shrug. "I know about as much as you do. I'm relying on my people to do the scouting."

"The ones we met before, right? The ones taking care of Kudamon?" Milomon said. "Do you suppose he'll be with them?"

"My people keep our young and noncombatants out of harm's reach. So he probably won't be with my scouts, but he'll be fi-"

"Sh," Milomon said suddenly, ears perked. "I hear Digimon approaching. Mechanical ones."

"That could be trouble," Youseimon said. "Let's-"

Mirai heard the humming before she saw the round Digimon fly over a giant stuffed doll, their eyes turning toward the group. "Hey! There's some over here!" one of them shouted.

"Um, maybe we should move?" Andre suggested.

Youseimon threw a set of darts at them, knocking them out of midair. "The best defense is a good offense," she said. "Let's run."

Andre grabbed for Mirai's hand, and she ran, keeping pace with him easily. Milomon ran ahead, looking around for some nook or cranny they could duck into. "I don't suppose San Francisco has any more of those convenient underground tunnels, do they?" he called.

"Not that I know of around here. This is by the sea, so anything underground would flood pretty easily," Andre said. "The water table-"

Something above their heads exploded, showering them with debris. "Damn," Youseimon muttered as she threw another dart, following behind Mirai. "We could fight them, but I'd rather save our strength."

"Over here!" called a female voice, and Mirai turned her head. Next to one of the large structures they were passing, this one shaped like a giant jack-in-the-box, a crack had appeared. Without thinking twice about it, she yanked on Andre's hand, dragging him toward the crack, their Digimon right with them.

The crack shut behind them, and Mirai blinked, trying to adjust to the dimmer indoor light. Like it
had been in Fukuoka, the inside of the jack-in-the-box appeared to be an ordinary cafe, with people seated at the tables. Digimon were also present in number, curled up on the floor and seated on tables. "Are you all right?" a woman's voice asked. "Thank goodness you made it over here."

"I think so." Mirai looked up at the speaker. She was older than Mirai was, clearly American, tall with long blonde hair. "Thanks for helping us."

"It's not a problem. Everyone has to do what they can in times like this, right?" She smiled, moving back toward the bar at the back of the room. "Want something to drink?"

"What's that smell?" Milomon asked.

"Coffee," the older girl said with a smile. "Want to give it a try? I make great coffee."

His ears perked as he followed her to the bar. "How long has the area been like this?" Andre asked the woman.

"Not that long. Right now everyone's just hunkering down, waiting to see what will happen. I haven't seen many people running around outside, let alone with Digimon in tow. You must be pretty brave," she said as she turned to the machine on the counter behind the bar.

"You know about Digimon?"

"Just now, when this all started." Vines appeared next to her, offering her a couple of cups. "Is that the case for you, too?"

"I'm not that much more informed than you," Andre said.

"Drat. I was hoping someone might be able to tell us what's going on," Saffron said. "Harley, anything new on the news?"

Mirai didn't even see the man seated on the back counter until he shifted in response to the question. He seemed tall, like Saffron, all legs and long arms, but in the dim light, she thought his hair was probably dark, unlike Saffron. "No, nothing. No one seems to have a clue what's going on. Want me to check the next group of talking heads?"

"We can tell you." Youseimon, struggling with peering over the high bar, finally hopped onto it, seating herself next to a wolf-like Digimon who yelped at the disturbance. "This is a merging of your human world with our Digital World."

"This one keeps mentioning this Digital World," Harley said, gesturing at the wolf-Digimon (Gazimon, Mirai noted after checking the D-Tai) who was now nibbling some sort of pastry and pointedly ignoring Youseimon. "But what exactly is that?"

"Mm... It's similar to your world in some ways, I suppose. But data is the basis of our world, not matter."

"That... really opens up more questions than it answers. How is a world of data combining with a world of matter? And why, for that matter? How are creatures of data even here?" He hopped off the counter, poking the Gazimon in the forehead.

"Don't ask me. What, do I look like a Wisemon?"

Youseimon shrugged. "That, I can't answer. But we're here to stop it."
"Now we're talking," Harley said. "No offense to you guys, but San Francisco is weird enough without you. So what do we have to do?"

"Hey, you're bowing out on me already?" Gazimon complained.

"Nah, you're cool." Harley reached over, ruffling the Gazimon's ears.

"Did you see the tower surrounded by Tankmon?" Youseimon said to him. "We have to destroy that tower."

"You're going up against the Tankmon?" The vines from before pulled the Digimon attached to them onto the counter, revealing a small Digimon with a flower-bud head. (Floramon, according to the D-Tai.) "You shouldn't. That's really dangerous."

"You're familiar with them?" Youseimon asked.

"Yes, they moved in a few months ago at the King's request. They're horrible," the plant Digimon sighed. "They bully all the local Digimon. That's why we're all hiding out here. If Saffron hadn't hidden us..."

"Anything for a new friend, right?" Saffron smiled at her.

"So you're familiar with this area?" Youseimon asked Floramon. "What's the area around the tower like?"

Floramon blinked. "You're serious? It's just a big blank space for a good distance around. Just plush ground. But you're not really going to try and face all those Tankmon, are you?"

"I'd like to, but without my allies, the two of us really aren't enough." Milomon looked up from the coffee at the mention of allies, licking a few drops off his face. "We need to get some of them away from that tower, somehow."

Mirai pulled out her phone again, fiddling with the D-Tai. "Ooh, I don't think that was there before," she commented, clicking on a new option in the menu. It unfolded into a grid with several dots clustered around its center, and more around the edges. "That's new."

"What is that?" Harley asked, leaning over the bar. "Some kind of radar?"

"It's this thing called the D-Tai," Andre explained. "It allows us to form contracts with our partners and support them."

Harley frowned, then pulled out his own phone, flipping through the screens. "I was wondering when I installed that. So it's actually to do with this digital world? Strange."

"Oh, I have it too," Saffron said, looking at her own phone. "This thing, right?"

"Yeah, but mine is red," Mirai said. "Why is yours orange?"

"Ooh, so they come in different colors?"

"Huh," Harley said. "So this thing is a radar. I think it's showing us where the Digimon are," he said, counting the creatures around the room. "Would be more useful with a map overlay function, though. I wonder if it's programmable."

"Hold on," Saffron said, peeking over his shoulder. "We can use that, can't we?"
"Use it? Use it how?" Andre asked.

She gave him a smile and a wink. "Want to play a war game?"

Tower duty was the worst, the Tankmon thought to himself as he listened to a few of his comrades play a rock game that only they and perhaps some Gotsumon would understand. "I'm bored," one of them complained at last. "No one ever comes out here. And I'm tired of Rocks, Rocks."

"Let's play Quartz and Diamonds instead," another suggested.

"I don't want to play Quartz and Diamonds. It's boring."

"Rocks, Rocks is boring, since you always win."

"Well, Quartz and Diamonds is boring since you always-"

"Hey, hold up," the Tankmon interrupted the other two. "You hear that? Something's coming."

They listened, and at length they could hear a rumbling, something that could have passed as one of their own-if they had a terrible cold. "Someone's coming!" one of them said, pointing with its cannon arm.

The thing that rumbled into view didn't look like much, a bony four-wheeled machine-type just like they were, with a humanmon inside its cage. And on top of it, a Floramon. "Hey, you Call of Duty rejects!" the humanmon shouted at them. "Your mother's a garbage truck and your father smells of burning rubber!"

"Hey!" one of them yelped. "My dad's sensitive about that!"

The Tankmon sighed. "A couple of you go take care of them. Just blow them up and get back here."

"Roger!" A couple of them rumbled off toward the wheeled machine, which took off as they got close. The Tankmon sighed, and went back to listening to his idiot companions argue over rock games.

Then something else rumbled, coming from a different direction. This machine-type was only two-wheeled, another humanmon and a Gazimon on its back. "You despicable villains! We've come to take care of you once and for all!"

"Oh, for- You three, go get him!" The Tankmon settled back grumpily, glaring as the others gave chase to the fleeing two-wheeler.

"For Yggdrasil and country!" came a voice from behind them, and several more Digimon came running over the ridge, waving bits of cloth. "Cry havoc and let slip the Dobermon of war!"

"This and that and everything today!" Tankmon shouted irately. "You lot, go get them!"

Several of the other Tankmon let out shouts, chasing after the group, who went fleeing just as quickly as they had come. Just when things had gotten quiet and settled down again, two more humanmons came from yet another direction, one waving a sword and the other a gun. "Tankmon? More like Stankmon!" the gun-holding humanmon yelled. "Come and get us, jerkfaces!"
The Tankmon shot his companions a weary look, and a couple others rumbled off toward the humanmons, who ran away. At last, he had some quiet-not even the pair of arguing idiots were still around. Then the Tankmon realized that of the group that had been with him, only five others were still around the tower. What was keeping the rest of them? Surely at least one of those idiots had been taken down.

And then he heard it, overhead. The rumbling of a toy plane, soaring toward them, over their heads and straight for the tower. He raised his cannon arm, the others following suit, and they fired as one, blowing the plane out of the sky. So that was their objective? Well, mission failed.

Except not. Out of the top of the debris, a glider emerged, two Digimon clinging to its underside. While the Tankmon stared at having yet another diversion, the pair of them released their attacks, cracking the tower's surface. "Argh! You little sneaks!" He raised his arm cannon again.

The rumbling came over the hill again. "Hey, you Tankmon! Your mama's so rusted, everyone thinks she's naturally red!"

"Are you kidding me?" The four-wheeled cage was back, the humanmon shouting at them again. "Go away, I don't have time for-"

Another explosion sounded above him, raining debris down as the two Digimon above impacted on its side. Before he could fire again, the second attack blasted another chunk out of the tower, sending the upper half of it tilting, then crashing down. "That's... That's not fair," he protested.

On the hill, Saffron brought her Jeep to a halt a safe distance away. Several of the Digimon from her shop were recovering from their flight from the Tankmon who were now lost among the brightly-colored streets. "Operation 'Lure the Tiger from the Mountain' was a grand success," she told them with a victory sign. "I knew all my eclectic reading would come in handy one day."

Andre and Mirai joined her soon after, pausing to catch their breath. "I didn't think that would work," Andre said, wiping at his brow. "I'm impressed. Sure you don't want to come help us the next time this happens?"

"I'm a pacifist," she said with a smile.

"What I'm interested in is this D-Tai thing," Harley said as he joined them, Gazimon perched on his motorcycle and playing with the handlebars. "What all can it do? Mobile's not my strong suit, but I know the languages well enough that I could probably dissect it."

"There goes the Digizone!" Floramon said, hopping into Saffron's arms. "I don't want to go back! I'm staying here!"

"Can they do that?" Harley asked Mirai and Andre.

They looked at each other, and shrugged. "Hasn't been a problem yet."

"Yesss," Gazimon cheered from the motorcycle. "We're staying over!"

"There's a lot we don't know about the D-Tai as of yet," Youseimon said to Harley as she and Milomon popped up over an oversized doll. "If you think you can learn something from it, I'd be very interested in what you could tell us."

"And vice versa. Let's set up an email list. No, a forum," Harley said. "It'll take me fifteen minutes tops to get us a private little place where we can compare notes. Give me your emails so I can send it to you when I'm done."
"Well, isn't it cool that we got to meet some new friends at least, Andre?" Milomon said, jumping onto Andre's shoulder.

"Oh, look," Saffron said, pointing out from the bridge. "The fog is lifting!"

"So it is," Harley observed. "Goodbye, Karl. Til next time."

Four humans and their Digimon partners stood by the side of the road, admiring the afternoon sun off the picturesque waters. It was Mirai that eventually broke the silence, the question on her tongue no longer able to be withheld. "You named your fog 'Karl'?"
The Five Celestial Generals! Fight on, Milomon!

Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The ordinary children, Mirai and Andre, along with their partners Youseimon and Milomon, come to San Francisco, the City by the Bay. The peaceful city is split by a war within the Digizone as the rebels fight against the armies of the Digimon King. Two natives of the city, Harley and Saffron, have met up with the Digimon Gazimon and Floramon. Four humans and four Digimon put their power together to defeat the impenetrable Tankmon and restore the city. But what place will they venture to next?

Towers dotted the horizon around them. As was to be expected, Nergimon thought to himself as he turned away. It was only when the towers weren't there that the King's program began to break apart. "The bugs in the system seem to have gotten worse, Nabimon."

"Proof that they are inferior, flawed programs." The speaker pulled away from its position on the wall. Mardukkimon was a figure so wrapped in cloaks, even down to the scarf around its mouth, that determining its gender was impossible. "But wrinkles must be ironed. Nabimon, what does His Highness wish us to do?"

"Is it that big of a deal?" Ishtarimon stood up on her four lion paws, then crossed her arms. Some might have considered her Centaurmon-like figure attractive, draped in white and golden armor. Touching a hand to her tiara, she added, "They're just bugs. You don't scrap a program for one missing line."

"No, I agree with Mardukkimon." Ninurtimon flexed his own lion paws from his casual laying position on the floor. "That these bugs have persisted for this long is a travesty. Nabimon! I know you're listening."

"Yes, yes, of course." The smallest of those gathered, Nabimon appeared to be ordinary: a bearded human-like figure dressed in simple robes. Anyone who assumed that to be the truth, though, would be headed to their death. "Since all five of the Celestial Generals are assembled, shall we discuss the issue?"

"I don't want to be bothered with a bunch of insignificant bugs," Ishtarimon said with a wave of one hand. "Let someone else handle them."

"With all due respect, Ishtarimon," Mardukkimon spoke up, "someone else has been trying to handle them. They've failed."

"Then what are you suggesting?"

"I think," Nabimon spoke up, "that we need to handle the matter ourselves."

That got the attention of everyone in the room. "Surely not. Isn't that using a Vikaralamon to crush a Tsumemon?"

"Overkill or not, it's better to overdo it than underdo it in this case," Mardukkimon countered.

"Well, if you're worried about overdoing it," Ninurtimon said, "send Nergimon. That will be more of a fair match."

"Watch your mouth, Ninurtimon." Nergimon gave him a glare, but knew he couldn't do anything to
stop the potshots - the unavoidable truth was that out of the five Celestial Generals under the king, it was he who was the weakest. *Damn... Just because I'm not a Ultimate...!*

Nabimon looked over to him. Despite the fact that his face was visible, it gave away nothing. "You have an objection, Nergimon?"

"If the five Generals are agreed, I have no objections to it," he replied, bowing slightly. "I look forward to the opportunity to serve His Highness."

"By all means, if you want to," Ishtarimon said with a snort. "Have fun. I've got better things to attend to."

"Because there must be so many more important things than protecting the integrity of Lord Ashurimon's program," Mardukkimon commented.

"What was that, mage?"

Nabimon raised a hand. "Do you have an objection to this plan, Mardukkimon?"

"I do not."

"Then we're agreed." Nabimon looked at Nergimon, his gaze piercing. "Do not underestimate them, Nergimon. The old legends speak of great powers that are unlocked when Digimons and humans are as one. You would be wise not to let them work together."

"I'll keep that in mind." Nergimon gave a bow, turning away from the rest of the group. Not that he thought a bunch of human and Digimon children would be cause for worry, but there was no sense in risking the slightest harm by not going in with a plan.

*I'll show all of you. These glitches will be nothing but bytes under my heels...*

"I thought Mexico City was supposed to be dry!"

Mirai huddled under a large tree, shaking out her shirt as best she could. "Actually, Mexico City gets a lot of rain during the summer months," Andre told her as he looked around, taking in the rain-soaked landscape. "Though it's too early for that. Even so, we must be in the Digizone. The trees everywhere look more like a jungle than the mountain lake Mexico City's set on." He sighed. "What a shame. I was hoping to be able to look around while we sought out the Digizone."

"You know a lot about Mexico City," Mirai said.

"Well, they are our neighbors. Well, Mexico is, anyway. And I have some Mexican blood, so I'm a bit interested in the heritage."

"Well, it's not like we have to leave right away afterwards," she pointed out. "You could look around once we've neutralized the Digizone."

"Mmph. I suppose that's true. Well, it doesn't seem like this rain's going to let up," he said with a sigh. "I guess we'll have to be wet."

"Ugh. I hate monsoons," she sighed as she followed him, the pair making their way to another set of trees. "By the way, how did things go with Milomon? I meant to ask in San Francisco."

"How did they go?"

"Did your mom get weird or anything? What did you tell her?"
"...I told her the truth? My mom's always been weird," he said with a shrug.

"...and she believed you?"

"Her job makes her believe a lot of stuff. At any rate, she's not really opposed to strays, so she's fine with Milomon as long as he doesn't make a mess or anything."

Mirai looked over at him. "What does your mom do, anyway, that makes her so weird and believe in a Digital World with monsters who can talk and use magic-like abilities?"

"She's a novelist."

Mirai blinked, wondering what on earth was in America's novels that prompted that sort of person as a writer. As they took shelter again, Youseimon and Milomon approached, both equally wet. Milomon looked highly displeased, clinging to the tree trunk and shaking himself off. "Whose idea of a good zone was this?" he grumbled. "Andre, let's clear this place and get out of here. I want to be dry."

Youseimon didn't look any more pleased at being wet, but kept it to herself. "I wasn't able to find Spadamon or any of my associates. This is a very quiet zone. I'm a little worried, so I'd like to have backup."

"Wouldn't it be less of a problem if it's quiet?" Andre asked her.

"It would if I thought it was supposed to be that way. The Digital Zones are never quiet. They're all populated, but this one..."

"Ah. I see your point. Then let's do some reconaissance." He pointed to the tower in the distance. "Milomon and I will go investigate the tower and see if we can find out anything about its guardian. You two go look for our backup." He looked at his phone, which had managed to stay dry inside his pocket. "I sent Harley and Saffron a message, but either they didn't get it or they're not coming. So let's rely on Youseimon's allies."

"I agree with that," Mirai said. "Youseimon, let's see what we can do."

She nodded in agreement, and the pair set off through the rain, quickly vanishing into the downpour. "Will they be all right?" Milomon wondered.

"We both have our D-Tais. We should be able to find each other and communicate, should we need to." Andre tucked it back into his pocket. "Well, shall we?"

Milomon made a face at the rain, but gave his partner a thumbs up. "Well, we aren't getting any drier. Let's go find us a boss."

The buildings that Milomon could only assume made up the human city were still there, but heavily covered in moss and other growing plants, as if the city had been abandoned and left to be reclaimed by nature. Most likely, the humans in this area were staying inside, both by choice and by lack of a viable option to leave, similar to the snowed-in buildings of Andre's hometown, Atlanta. Milomon couldn't help but smile to himself as he thought back to that time. *In a place where I never expected to find it, the me who was without hope found someone I can rely on. Andre... you're a good partner.*

As they got closer to the tower, there were no signs of either human life or Digimon life, and not even so much as a rat in the streets. Which was a shame - all this rain was making him hungry. "It really is unnaturally quiet," Andre murmured to Milomon. "Do you see anything?"
"Not yet. You wait here, Andre," Milomon instructed. "I'll slip through their perimeter and take a good hard look at everything."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Please, I am the master of stealth." Without waiting for a reply, Milomon slipped into the shadows, his black fur blending effortlessly with the long stretches of darkness created by the everlasting rain and the lack of sun. He'd always been good at this sort of thing, from the time he was a child. Slipping into places, listening, waiting for information. Just like he used to do...

Stop thinking about that. Now isn't the time, he scolded himself as he got close to the tower, flattening himself against the ground. Large and impressive, it stood completely unguarded, the surface slick with rainwater. There isn't a soul out here, Andre thought to himself as he crept closer. No guards, no nothing. I wonder if I can destroy this tower by myself... That way we could all look around and relax a bit. It would be disappointing to miss a chance to see how Kudamon was doing in his new home with Youseimon's allies, but he was sure the fox kid was doing fine. He crept closer, green eyes flicking over the tower, trying to determine if there were any traps. His whiskers twitched.

One shot, he thought, if I hit it hard enough with just one shot... I should be able to take it down. Where would be the best place...?

As he reached a paw out to touch it, claws closed around his throat, pulling him back. "Well, what a surprise," a voice said in his ear. "Of all the bugs to wander here, it turns out to be you."

He froze at the voice. There's no way he could be here...! He twitched, trying to free himself, but the claws only tightened until it was difficult to breathe.

"Now, now, I'll have none of that," the voice, the familiar voice, told him. "I have need of you, so you can decide to do my bidding dead, or alive. Your choice."

He let himself fall limp in the claws' grasp, looking up at the terrifying bird-like head, at the massive-clawed paws that held him. "Nergimon," he mumbled, feeling his stomach sink.

"And here I thought you would stay quiet in Hyogamon's territory, after what you did. Alas, you never were particularly good at self-preservation," Nergimon commented. "Let's see if that's changed. Who all came with you?"

"The dumpling man and his friends," Milomon got out. "The butcher, the baker, and the Candlemon maker."

"How very droll of you, Milomon." The claws tightened, digging in deep to his skin. "Let's try again. Who did you bring with you? Is it Youseimon?"

He bit down hard on his lip, trying not to scream. If he screamed, Andre would come, and he'd be in danger. Andre... I'm actually pretty terrified right now. I want you to save me again. "What do you want with us, Nergimon?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm here to eliminate the bugs in Lord Ashurimon's program."

"Digimon aren't 'bugs', Nergimon. Isn't it normal to have hopes and desires?"

"Hopes and desires? I don't think you've earned that right, bug." Nergimon pulled Milomon's head back, threatening to snap his spine. "Fine, we'll have it your way. Now I just have to determine if I'll kill that human before, or after."

"Don't you lay a hand on Andre...!"
"Then I suggest you give me a reason not to," Nergimon hissed, pulling Milomon close. "Let me make this clear. The humans are not part of this program. I'm fine with letting them return to their world, as long as they stay there. It's only the bugs like you that must be terminated. And let me assure you, you will be terminated."

The claws pierced his flesh, and Milomon's back arched, no sound able to escape from his throat. From those claws, he could feel darkness flowing into his body, interfering with his code. *No... don't touch my memory data!* he silently pleaded as he felt the darkness scratching at his thoughts, clutching his memories of his past. "You might be yet worth saving," he could hear Nergimon's voice, "as long as I get rid of this errant data."

The claws released him, and Milomon sagged to the ground, gasping for breath and shivering. "Tell Youseimon that there's no boss in this area and that the tower is unguarded," Nergimon told him, stepping back. "That is my condition for letting your human partner live."

The shadow over him vanished as Nergimon retreated, and Milomon pulled himself to his feet, his limbs still trembling. The tower stood behind him, so close... but he knew that any attempt to defy Nergimon's program would be futile. Making it to the nearest building, he leaned against it, unable to stop shaking. *He's going to rewrite me... he'll kill the others... he's a Perfect, I can't defy him!* It had been like that the last time, too, the time he had been sentenced to the icy hell of Hyogamon's domain. *Damn it all!*

After some time, his limbs finally stopped their trembling, and he got to his feet, walking back to where he had left Andre. "You took your time," Andre said with a frown as he motioned for Milomon to join him under the awning where he had taken shelter. "Did something happen?"

"No. There's no boss there at all," Milomon said, cringing on the inside at the lie. "I went looking for traps, but none of those, either. Do you think something happened here?"

"Who can tell? Let's go meet back up with Mirai and Youseimon, then, and tell them." Andre turned his back toward Milomon. "Here, hop on. I'll run us there. You must be tired."

He reached out a paw, then pulled it back. "No, I'm fine. I'd rather walk."

"You sure? Lots of puddles ahead."

"Hey, I'm not so weak that I can't handle a few puddles." His second lie for the day.

When they reached the tree they had originally left, Mirai and Youseimon were already there, with Spadamon and Elecmon. "Milomon says there's no guardian or traps around the tower," Andre told them.

"Then let us terminate this tower while we have a chance," Spadamon said. "Against a spire, we four should be more than adequate."

"Great! Then we can still look around afterwards, Andre," Mirai told him with a smile. "Let's go take down a tower, everyone!"

Milomon lagged back as the rest of the group moved toward the tower. As the tower came into view, Andre noticed Milomon walking behind. "Milomon? Did something happen?"

"Ah?! Wh-why would you think that?"

"You've been acting strange. Do you want to talk about it?"
"No, it's not... it's nothing." Another lie, another one that made him feel miserable. Maybe, after this, having his data rewritten would be a mercy.

"That's not the face of someone who's bothered by nothing." Andre stopped walking, kneeling by Milomon. "What happened?"

He wiped at his face with an arm, trying to stop the stinging in his eyes. "Andre... you're really a great human. Even though I haven't known you for that long, I really think so. I wish I could be more like you."

Behind them, a blinding burst of light lit up the area around the black tower, and Andre turned in alarm. "Mirai! Youseimon!"

"No, wait!" Milomon paused, then ran after him.

"There was a trap, wasn't there?" Andre said, drawing his gun from his holster and holding it in both hands. "Who threatened you? I'll make him regret messing with my partner. Now I'm pissed."

"Andre, no!" The boy paused at the outburst. "Andre, please... he'll kill you. At the least, I want to save you. Please don't go."

Andre gave him a soft, sad smile. "I don't want to die, either. But that's why I'm going."

Milomon let out a gasp, then followed as fast as he could, the pair reaching the tower's plaza in unison. Ahead of them, Youseimon, Spadamon and Elecmon were all cast on the ground, clearly injured. "Mirai!" Andre shouted in alarm.

"Be careful!" she shouted back, sword in one hand. "This guy's tough!"

"Tough? Of course I'm tough," Nergimon spoke as he descended from within a beam of light, stopping in front of Mirai. "Your digital device. Hand it to me, and I'll let you live."

She held out her sword, taking a defensive stance. "What do you want with it? Are you the boss of this area?"

"Hardly anything so low. I am Nergimon, the Mars Solstice, the first of the five Celestial Generals under Lord Ashurimon. You and your feeble glitches are nothing before me. Now, your digital device, unless you wish to die."

Next to Milomon, Andre fired off a shot, and then another. One shot hit Nergimon's shoulder, exploding in a burst of pepper spray, and the other hit more solidly on his beak. "Human, I see you are taunting Death itself," he said. "I will be happy to oblige."

"Andre!" Milomon cried in horror.

"Mirai!" he shouted. "Buy me a bit of time!"

"Would you like a side dish of miracle to go with that?" she asked sourly, but raised her sword, charging at the larger Digimon.

Andre kept the gun in one hand, kneeling next to Milomon, heedless of the rain that poured on both of them. "No, Andre," Milomon whimpered. "Run away... I don't want him to kill you..."

"C'mon, what's this, partner?" Andre put a hand on his head, ruffling his ears slowly. "Talk to me. Did he say something to you?"
"Andre, he's one of the five Celestial Generals, the most powerful Digimon in the Digital World. We don't stand a chance."

"Mmph, so they don't play around, do they? But then again, neither do we. C'mon, Milomon. Let's work together like we did before and take this guy down."

"You don't understand what he's capable of, Andre. I know... I defied the Celestial Generals once. That's why I almost died in that snowy land. Why won't you at least let me save you?!"

Andre's expression softened into a smile, and he pulled Milomon close, hugging him. "Even now, when you're scared to death of that guy, you're still worried about others, aren't you? That's one of the things I like about you. It's okay to be scared, Milomon. I'm not exactly the brave type, myself. Bravery isn't why we became friends. It was because we both wanted to save as many people as we possibly could. To protect both our worlds. So, let's be terrified together, and then do what we came here to do. Let's not lose sight of our goal."

"Our goal..." Kudamon, the tiny life that had by chance come to his paws, came back to his mind. Behind them, Mirai let out a cry as she was slammed across the pavement, hitting against a wall. "Mirai?!" Andre called in alarm.

"I'm fine!" she got out, using her sword to push herself back to her feet. "I'll definitely hold him off for as long as you need!"

Andre raised his gun, but a black blur passed his arm as Milomon leapt for Nergimon, claws extended. The larger Digimon swatted him out of the air, pounding him into the pavement with a hard blow. "Milomon!" Andre shouted.

"Your sense of self-preservation really hasn't changed, after all," Nergimon said. "I wonder if pain can correct that flaw of yours."

"Ha! What pain?" Milomon spat out as he forced himself back to his feet, golden dust trickling off his limbs. "I don't care about pain. All I care about is getting back up and standing between you and the people I care about. As many times as it takes!"

Nergimon glared at him, raising one paw. "Those damned glitch eyes of yours...! Even your stupidity must have a limit!"

Andre raised his gun again, but paused as green light poured from his pocket, the phone practically shaking with the light coming from it. "It's unlocked!" he said in surprise.

"Eh? What's unlocked?"

Andre held out the phone, his thumb on the D-Tai's icon. "Milomon... Digizone Influence!"

Nergimon took a step back in surprise, narrowing his eyes. "So this is the false light of evolution Nabimon warned me about?" he muttered.

Andre could only stare as a taller figure emerged from the light, still on two feet, but long-limbed and panther-like. He now wore a dark green tunic and triangular archer's hat with a feather, and carried a bow and quiver of arrows on his back. "Milomon, Digizone Influence to Robimon!"

"Robimon!" Andre shouted, holding up the phone. "Waste that guy!"

"You don't have to tell me twice!" Robimon drew his bow, plucking the string before putting an
arrow to it. "Charity Arrow!"

Nergimon swatted it away, lunging at Robimon, who leapt away nimbly, landing on the roof of a nearby building. "Mirai!" Andre called to the girl. "How's Youseimon?"

"Still alive and kicking," Youseimon answered for her, pushing herself to her feet. "Let's take advantage of his distraction, Mirai. Digizone Influence me!"

"Got it!"

Nergimon turned at the white burst of light behind him, but Spirimon had already taken to the air. "What about the other two?" Andre asked as he joined Mirai. "Are they all right?"

"I wouldn't say we're all right, but our data will repair itself," Elecmon groaned as he got to his feet. "Spadamon?"

"I will survive. More importantly," he looked up at Nergimon. "We have acquired quite a problem."

Spirimon swooped back down as Robimon drew Nergimon's attention with more arrows. "I have an idea. Spadamon, Elecmon, here's what I want you to do."

Andre took a step back as Spirimon finished with her quick explanation and took off, going back to Robimon. "Think this will work?" Mirai asked him.

"Would take a miracle. So, let's hope for a miracle." He held his phone aloft, and Mirai joined him with her own, the pair holding them up against the rain.

Spadamon jumped up onto the rooftop of a building, then leapt at Nergimon's face just as he turned to follow Spirimon. Slashing with his blade at the larger Digimon's eyes, he clung to a piece of shoulder armor, trying to get in a second shot as Nergimon screeched in pain. As he did so, Spirimon lifted Robimon from the roof, holding him around the waist with both hands. "I hope you're not going to object to our plan at this stage."

"Relax, will you? I feel like I can do anything right now." He pointed his arrow as she lifted him higher, then let him go.

"Elecmon!" Spirimon shouted as she raised her wand.

"Sparkling Thunder!" came a shout from below, and the heavens opened up in a bolt of lightning, striking her wand. Gritting her teeth as she pointed it downward, she added her own shout, "Pixie Dust!"

The crackling white energy descended toward Robimon as he fell, and he drew it to his arrow, winding it around as he took aim at the top of Nergimon's head. *I feel invincible right now, he thought as the power of Spirimon and Elecmon swirled around him. We really can save everyone! I'll prove it to you, Nergimon!* he shouted as his own body took on a green glow, all three powers being sucked into the arrow. "Unyielding Charity Arrow!"

The united power loosed toward Nergimon, striking him square on the head. He only had time for a shriek as his data dissolved into golden dust, for a brief thought that Nabimon had been right about the power of Digimon and humans. *This power... will surely threaten our lord in the future. Lord Ashurimon...!*

Robimon landed in a neat crouch where Nergimon had been standing, returning to Milomon as he...
stood among the vaporizing gold dust. "Milomon!" Andre shouted, running for him.

"Andre!" Milomon threw himself into his human's arms, clinging tightly and laughing. "Did you see, did you see? We did it! And even though he's a Perfect level!"

"Of course," Spirimon said as she landed, reverting to Youseimon. "Even small flames can come together to make a wildfire."

Milomon's mood sobered up as he looked at her, letting himself down from Andre's arms. "Youseimon... I'm sorry. I... knew it was a trap, but I kept it from you."

"Well," she gave him a shrug. "Don't do it again."

He looked at her, and then grinned. "Right, right. You got it, boss-type."

"Well, it all worked out for the best, didn't it?" Mirai said, smiling. "You guys learned how to Digivolve Influence. So let's knock this tower out and go sightseeing, okay?"

Mardukkimon stood at the window, raising a hand as a bit of stray code returned to its place underneath the robes and cloaks. "My sources tell me," the general stated to the others, "that Nergimon has perished."

"Surely not," Ishtarimon said, pausing in her brushing of her long hair. "He's a bit wimpy, but he's still one of the Celestial Generals."

"Well, I wouldn't be surprised," Ninurtimon spoke up. "He was only a Perfect, after all."

"Mardukkimon is correct," Nabimon said as he entered the room, all eyes turning to him. "The bugs have killed Nergimon."

"Why, those impertinent... Ooh!" Ishtarimon yanked on her own hair.

"Nabimon," Ninurtimon spoke up, "allow me to go dispose of these glitches. I was not fond of Nergimon, but he was a Celestial General. I will make sure no one further will be foolish enough to try such a thing."

"No," Nabimon said, "you would lose."

"I-I would, Nabimon?"

The sage nodded. "All of you, have a little patience. I think... perhaps a different methodology should be used against these bugs..."
But Where Has the Beach Gone? Paradise in a Pinch!

Previously on Digimon Travelers...

Mirai and Andre travel to a Mexico City besieged by rain. One of the five Celestial Generals under the Digimon King, Nergimon, prepares to destroy the children and their partners. Nergimon threatens Milomon with overwhelming power, forcing him to lead the others into his trap. With Andre's help, Milomon overcomes his fear and remembers his desire to protect as many people as he can. The first general falls to their combined attack. But what place will they venture to next?

Youseimon stood in Mirai's door, watching as shirts and socks were flung past her face. "What are you doing, Mirai? Did you lose something?"

"No, I'm looking for something in my summer clothes... Ugh, no." She held up her school-issue swimsuit, making a face. "I got it last year when I was taking summer break with Rina-chan and Sayo-chan, we stopped in that cute store... Ah! I found it!" She pulled out a two-piece bathing suit, pink with red frills, holding it up against herself. "The size should still be fine. I'm so glad I found it!"

"That's all well and good," Youseimon told her, "but a Digizone's appeared."

"Oh, I know. Harley and Saffron sent me an email earlier."

"Then why... Were you waiting for me?"

"Because it's in Hawaii!" Mirai unearthed a towel, shoving it in her bag.

"Hawaii...? Is there something special about that?"

"Oh, that's right, you don't know about Hawaii. Warm air, white sand, beautiful ocean as far as the eye can see... If you're going to Hawaii, it's got to be the beach!" Mirai tossed the bag over one shoulder, picking up her phone. "Okay, now I'm ready. Let's go clear the Digizone!"

"Well, I'm glad you're fired up, at least," Youseimon sighed.

What they arrived in, however, was not white sand or beautiful oceans, but thick green sludge that clung to the bottoms of their shoes, producing a colossal stink. "Ugh!" Mirai groaned, shaking her foot. "What is this?!"

"Mirai!" A hand waved at her-Saffron and Harley, along with their Digimon, were on a higher ledge, back to back as they faced off against some Digimon Mirai couldn't see. "Be careful! It's awful up here."

"Hang in there, I'm coming!" She hopped up the slippery ledges, Youseimon following with light footsteps. As she got to the top, she could see that Andre and Milomon were also there, as well as the things that were attacking them. Golden, oddly shaped, and with a smell that defied any sense of decency, this was clearly a Digimon that was the Digital World's way of making a rude gesture to the beautiful place of Hawaii. "What are these things?" she wondered, tapping on the D-Tai.

"Sukamon," it read. "Adult level, Virus type. This Digimon is believed to be formed from
excrement that was not properly taken care of. It spends its time in the sewers. Naturally, it never bathes."

Andre was pointing his phone at the creatures too, studying the information. "Huh. So Digimon like this exist, too."

"Why do you sound so happy about it?"

Saffron swung a pipe at one of them that got too close, and Floramon swatted at it with her vines. "How horrible! How could they do that to a beach?"

Harley ducked as one of them threw something pink and smelly at him. "Never mind their motives. What's important is to find the tower and take it down, right?"

Mirai met Saffron's eyes, and both nodded. There was no way either of them were going to tolerate this fetid place for longer than necessary. "Milomon! Get to higher ground and see if you can find it," Andre instructed.

"You got it, partner!" The cat leapt, bouncing effortlessly up a series of ledges, pausing at the top to look around. "Over that way. You'll have to come around this big ledge here and then go that way," he pointed as he spoke.

Saffron looked to Mirai. "Let's go, Mirai!"

"You got it, Saffron! Let's go, Youseimon!" The pair took off at a run, followed closely by their humans.

Andre let out a sigh through his nose. "What's their big rush?"

Harley joined him, Gazimon attempting to wipe off his paws. "You ever had a girlfriend, Andre?"

"Hm? No, I haven't. What does that have to do with anything?"

"A word of warning for when you do: there will be many times, such as this, when we mere mortals are unable to comprehend the mind of a woman." Harley gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Let's follow them, we don't want them to get in trouble without us."

The sludge rivers got wider as the girls went in the direction Milomon had indicated, and then opened up into a vast green lake with a smell that was strong enough to make their eyes sting. "Ugh!" Saffron groaned.

Mirai pulled up her goggles from around her neck, putting them around her eyes, and then shook her head. "As I thought, they don't do anything. What is causing this stench?"

"Saffrooooo," Floramon groaned. "I don't feel so good."

"Poor baby. You're used to clean air and sunshine," Saffron said, touching the Digimon's head in sympathy. "Let's get rid of that tower and we'll all go home."

"Ho ho! I don't think you want to do that!" Mirai and Saffron turned as something began rising from the lake, green sludge sliding down its sides. It looked similar to the Sukamon, but silvery and much larger. "Welcome, ladies, to my lakeside paradise. I am PlatinumSukamon, the gracious host of this place. May I invite you to come inside my lovely resort, where I can interest you in some gourmet Sukamon delicacies and the Sukamon hot springs?"
"...Is that guy hitting on us?" Mirai asked Saffron.

"Oh my god. I think I'm going to be sick," she groaned.

Floramon turned a glare to PlatinumSukamon. "Hey, you! Don't you dare lay a finger on my Saffron! You're a hundred, no, a thousand, no, a million billion years too early! And she already has a boyfriend!" She flung her vines out at the offending Digimon.

"Ho ho!" PlatinumSukamon caught the vines in one hand, pulling Floramon into the lake. "I like them feisty. You're not so bad yourself!"

"Saffron, help!" Floramon cried out. "I'm going to die of stink!"

"Youseimon!" Mirai held up her phone.

Youseimon burst from the white light as Spirimon, pulling Floramon from the lake and lifting her up into the sky. "Pixie Dust!" she shouted, but the white light bounced off harmlessly.

"Mirai!" Andre's voice behind her. "We're here to help. Milomon, Digizone Influence!

"You got it, partner!" The white light surrounded him as well, but when he emerged, he wasn't in the form he had been last time. Now his build was slightly thicker, calling to mind more a tiger than a panther, but still in the same black fur. He wore a black suit, somewhat like a magician's, complete with top hat and a little half-cape covering one shoulder. "Digizone Influence to... Kaitomon! Oh? This is different."

"They seem to be, sometimes," Mirai told Andre. "We don't know why yet."

Harley paused by Saffron's shoulder, his expression thoughtful as he studied Milomon's new form. "Spirimon! I've got an idea, give me some backup!" Kaitomon shouted as he circled around the lake toward PlatinumSukamon.

"I don't want any boys, even if they are pretty!" PlatinumSukamon shouted, rearing back its arms to throw more pink sludge.

"Oh, no you don't!" Floramon shouted from Spirimon's arm, lashing out with her vines and catching both of PlatinumSukamon's arms, pulling them back. "Let me down there, Spirimon, I'll hold him!"

"Ho ho! You really think you can?"

"Hey, don't pay her any mind, I'm your opponent," Kaitomon said with a grin. "Think you can afford to take your eyes off me?"

"I told you, I don't want any men!"

Kaitomon pulled off his hat, producing a double-barreled pistol in an old style. "Phantom Shot!" he said, and two black bullets punched the enemy Digimon right between the eyes, knocking him backwards.

He got back up, cracks all over his face as he glared at Kaitomon. "You little goody two shoes, c'mere and take what's coming to you!"

"How about you do that?" Spirimon swooped in just above Kaitomon's head, wand pointed at the cracks in PlatinumSukamon's face. "Pixie Dust!"
PlatinumSukamon cringed, but Youseimon's shot was directed at the tower, showering them with bits. "We'll let you go this time, but in the future, try not to be the enemy of women." Spirimon said.

"Hear hear!" Floramon chimed in.

A short while later, the putrid lake had been sent back to whatever dark corner of the Digital World it had come from. That left the promised white sand, glowing sun, clear ocean water, and two girls looking for a place to change.

"Ta-da!" Mirai pushed open the curtain to the changing stall, stepping back onto the sand. The bathing suit fit just as perfectly as it had last year. It made her feel as if she were sparkling.

"Oh, looks good, Mirai," Harley said, giving her a thumbs up.

Andre nodded agreement. "It's really cute."

"You think so?" Truly, she had hit a peak in the summer of her youth.

"I'm ready!" Saffron stepped out from the stall next door. The blonde wore a silvery bikini, complemented with a colorful sarong. She flipped her long hair over one shoulder in a graceful motion. "How is it, Harley?"

"You make me wish it could be summer year round," he said, taking her hand.

"Saffron, are you a model or something?" Mirai asked, admiring the other girl's figure. Americans were so pretty.

"Oh, nothing like that," she laughed, waving a hand. "Just your run of the mill coffee shop barista. Well, let's go take in some sun, everyone!"

The beach, most likely because of the recent Digizone, was empty of other people, so it was the work of a moment to find a spare umbrella and stretch out. The four Digimon immediately took to playing in the sand and the shallow waters, eager to discover all the wonders of the unknown paradise. "But for their appearance, you'd think they were just another group of children, playing at the beach," Saffron said as she laid back on her towel.

"It's good to take a moment to relax every now and then," Andre said from under the umbrella, sipping at a canned drink. "They've gone through some difficult times."

"But you've gained a new power out of it," Harley said from beside him. "You pulled off that Influence thing; you didn't use it before, in San Francisco."

"Yeah." Andre held up his phone, looking at it. "The option just appeared all of a sudden."

"We don't have any such option." Saffron sighed. "I wonder if I'm holding Floramon back. Maybe... she wants to fight? But I don't want to be involved in battle."

"You did pretty well here," Andre offered.

"Yeah, but... polluting the beaches is different. That deserves punishment."

"Not everyone wants to fight," Youseimon said as she approached, shaking some sand off her sleeves. "And not everyone should fight. There need to be those that can take care of others, too. Mirai, can we try one of those drinks?"
"Here, Youseimon," Saffron rolled over and pulled her wallet out of her purse, handing the girl a few dollar bills. "The machine won't take Japanese yen, so here you go."

"Oh, Saffron, you don't have to-"

"Please, this one is on me. Consider it thanks for what you've done for San Francisco and elsewhere," Saffron said as the Digimon scampered toward the machine.

"Even if we don't fight, there are still things we can do," Harley said. "I've been analyzing this D-Tai program on my phone and Saffron's phone. Speaking of which, would you mind if I borrowed one of your phones?"

Mirai handed hers over, and Harley plugged a cable into it, hooking it to his own phone. "How much do you know about this D-Tai program, Mirai, Andre?"

"Nothing, really. Youseimon was the one that gave it to me."

"What about the D-Tai?" Youseimon asked as the group returned with their drinks, the Digimon seeming puzzled at how to get the cans open.

Harley held out a hand, cracking them open one after the other. "What do you know about it?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. The program was designed by my benefactor - he's distributed it to the Digimon of the Digital World in hopes they might be able to form partnerships with humans."

"So it's not just about fighting?" Saffron asked, sitting up.

"Whether it is or not, who really knows? My benefactor is a Digimon of many layers. It's hard to say what his motivation is."

"Is this program... self-evolving?"

"It probably is," she said with a nod, taking a sip of the drink, starting at the fizziness. "It would have to be, to avoid forceful deletion by the armies of the King."

"That makes sense. It seems that while the core part of the program is the same, it has wild fluctuations in the program for each iteration of it. Each of our versions is so wildly different, I can see how it would be difficult to develop a defense for it. It also seems well-rooted in our phones' programming. Nothing short of a full memory wipe or replace would get rid of it, I think. And it seems the 'Influence' option exists on mine and Saffron's, but we can't access it for some reason. Andre, Mirai, what did you do to unlock it on your D-Tais?"

"Um..." Mirai looked at Andre. "We just... really wanted to be stronger and defeat our enemies, I guess. We wanted to protect the things that were important to us."

"You mean it responded to your mental state?"

"That's what it's designed to do," Youseimon told him. "Because human emotion amplifies our power."

"Why is that? How does a phone even read the emotional levels of its user?"

She shrugged in response. "I don't know. Old legends and rumors are all we have to go on, and even those are constantly repressed by the King."

"Hm. I see. Thanks, Youseimon." The Digimon ran back to the beach, leaving the empty cans
behind. "Although I suppose it's no more ridiculous than believing a digital world exists and that creatures live in it."

"Still, if we knew more about the D-Tai, we could probably handle the Digizones better," Andre pointed out.

"I agree. So I'll continue to study what I can of them," Harley said. "Come by whenever you get an upgrade to them and I'll see if I can identify a pattern. Speaking of which, I think you said earlier that your Influence was different this time?"

"Yeah... When we were in Mexico City, Milomon changed into Robimon, but here, he became Kaitomon. I'm not sure what the pattern is."

"Has it been that way for you?" Harley asked Mirai.

"Yes... In Kyoto, she was Faimon, but over here in America it's always been Spirimon."

"Hm. I wonder if it's related to the real-world location they're in. That would make sense by the name," Harley mused. "They're influenced by the Digizone; presumably, they draw some sort of power from it. The sample size is too small to tell, though. I'll put together some data on it based on your past Influences and see if I find the pattern."

"We've also been watching ours and international news," Saffron added. "Since all of the locations have been so far apart, everything's been treated as mass hallucinations or large-scale pranks. But there's already been a few spots on the internet that have sprung up to discuss them. Some are convinced these things are real."

"Well, they are," Andre said. "I wonder if the Internet could be useful to our cause?"

"Then why don't we find out?" Harley said. "I'll start up a website, add a public section to our little forum. I'll put down everything we know-exempting things like your names and so on-and see what people have to say. There are better programmers than me out there that might have some insights on how the D-Tai works, for one. And we might find other people with D-Tais as well."

"Do you think there might be other people with Digimon out there?" Saffron wondered. "That would be so nice."

"It's already nice," Mirai said, sitting up. "After all, we were lucky enough to meet you and Harley, Saffron."

"Andre! Mirai!" Milomon called from the shoreline. "Come play with us~"

"Okay!" Mirai stood, brushing herself off, and took a moment to admire the sunlight on the water. Even with the pain and fear, some good things had come of their journey so far.
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The children, Mirai and Andre, receive a message from their allies Saffron and Harley about a Digizone in Hawaii. The picturesque beaches have been turned into a sludge wasteland by the Digizone and its boss, PlatinumSukamon. Spirimon, Kaitomon, Floramon and Gazimon come together to clear the Digizone. Harley and Saffron, who are unable to Digizone Influence their partners, decide to focus their talents on dissecting the secrets of the D-Tai and gathering allies. But what place will they venture to next?

The teacher was talking about world geography, so in light of her recent travels, Mirai really felt she should be paying attention. However, in light of the fact that she'd now visited two states of America and knew three people from that country, talking about the basics felt a little inadequate. Maybe I'll review some English vocabulary, she thought to herself, eyeing her bag with her dictionary in it. I've managed to keep up with the others thus far, but what if they use a word I don't know? Or maybe I should try some drills?

Her phone was vibrating. She jumped at the sensation, then looked back at the teacher. His back was to her, and so she slipped it out of her bag, opening it up. The D-Tai icon flashed red - a sign of a Digizone. In other words, my worst nightmare. She slipped it in her pocket before standing up. "Teacher!"

"Watanabe-kun?" He blinked at her. "Is something the matter?"

"I... I've caught the plague!" she blurted out. "Permission to go to the infirmary, please!"

He blinked again, stunned, and pointed to the door. She bolted out of the classroom, all but slamming the door behind her. "Mirai," Youseimon's quiet voice came from a window. "I brought your bag."

"Thanks!" She tossed Youseimon the phone, pulling out her sword and belt. "Is Andre already there?"

"He says it's in Quebec City, in Canada. I'm putting in the address. He'll meet us there," Youseimon said.

"Great, then let's go."

"It's dark," Mirai said.

"We're further north, so the sunset comes sooner here," Andre explained as he came over to her, Milomon in tow. "Down south, we'd still have sun for another half hour or so."

"I mean, I wasn't expecting it to be night," Mirai explained. "I guess I'd never thought about it since the other Digizones have still been in daylight."

"Oh, I see your point. Japan's like twelve hours behind us, right? I hadn't thought about how difficult it must be to coordinate people around the world," he admitted. "Now I wonder what will happen if one comes in the middle of the night for one of us. I suppose it's inevitable."
"I guess we'll cross that bridge when we get there. Do you see any signs of the Digizone?"

"No, though I just got here. Shall we look around?"

"Andre," Milomon spoke up, "how about me and Youseimon scout around? We can cover ground faster than you. We'll come back to you in a few minutes."

"Okay, that sounds fair enough. Mirai, let's try asking around," he said to her as the pair of Digimon darted off. "There must be some area where something strange is happening, just like in Atlanta."

She nodded, shivering. It was colder here than in Fukuoka, and she was in her school uniform, without even her jacket. *I need to remember to put some warmer clothing in my Digizone bag. You think I would've learned after Atlanta's snow Digizone.* "Some of the buildings are weird," she commented, looking at the older buildings which were some sort of Western style she couldn't identify, nestled among the modern buildings. "And the signs are printed in something other than English."

"That's French, I think. There are some parts of Canada that have a lot of fluent French speakers," Andre told her. "But they should be able to speak English as well. Let's try someone. Excuse me!"

The girl he hailed was close to their age, probably a few years younger. "Quoi?" the girl said as they got close.

"We're looking for strange things in this town," Andre told her. "Has anything strange happened today?"

She looked at him, and then very firmly, told him, "Yes!"

Andre smiled at her. "Great, that's great. Could you point us in the direction where the strange thing was? Or tell us where it might be?"

Just as firmly, "No!"

That dampened his spirits. "Oh, I see. Could you tell me why not?"

She tilted her head, and then with perfect seriousness, said, "Toaster?"

"I don't think she understands you, Andre," Mirai said. "Do you speak French?"

"No, I only took Spanish. Which is similar, but probably not similar enough." Andre sighed, giving the girl a wave. "Sorry to have bothered you."

"Should we try someone else?" Mirai asked as the girl left.

"It couldn't hurt."

Unfortunately, it seemed that the "yes, no, toaster" combination and variations of it were the limits of spoken English in their surroundings. Milomon and Youseimon returned after a few minutes, unsuccessful in their search. "What do you think we should do, partner?"

He put a hand to his chin, looking up for inspiration. "There's a higher part of the city there," he said, pointing upward, where a wall was visible. "If we go higher, we might be able to get a better view of the city."

"That sounds like a good idea," Mirai agreed. "Let's go, Youseimon."
As they approached the walled portion of the city, the buildings inside became more visible. All of them seemed to be in the older style, and Mirai thought that even with the foreign look (or perhaps because of it), they were beautiful, their stone facades well-worn but more than capable of withstanding the ravages of time. The buildings felt loved, warm, and lived in.

Ahead of them, Milomon and Youseimon both stopped, looking around. "Something the matter?" Andre asked.

"There's the presence of a Digimon nearby," Youseimon said. "We should find it."

Milomon nodded agreement. "It could be where the Digizone is, partner."

"Or it might be Youseimon's allies," Mirai said. "Lead the way, you two."

Youseimon led the way, Milomon staying on all fours as he ran with her, for all the world a little girl and her cat. Andre and Mirai followed, cutting their way through the crowds at a slower pace. The pair of Digimon cut around a corner, up some stone steps, across a cobbled street- and then she saw the girl with slate blue skin and long dark hair, around Youseimon's size, that ran from them as they got close. "Hey! Wait!" Youseimon called as she darted behind a building.

Mirai and Andre caught up just as Milomon and Youseimon tumbled back out from around the corner. The girl was curled up in the arms of another person, a well-built boy a couple of years older than her with short reddish hair. "Oh, there's more of them," he commented. "Can we help you?"

"Ah, is this Digimon your partner?" Andre asked him.

"Partner? Sure, we'll go with that," he said with a smile. "You aren't from around here, are you?"

Mirai shook her head. "No, I'm from Fukuoka, Japan, and Andre's from Atlanta, America. We're looking for-"

"Felix," he interrupted her. "Felix Chevalier. That's my name. And this is Rusalkamon," he added, putting a hand on the girl Digimon's head. "Your names?"

"Oh!" Mirai bowed quickly, hoping to hide her embarrassment at her rudeness. "Mirai Watanabe. My partner is Youseimon."

"Andre Harris, and this is Milomon."

"Nice to meet the both of you, especially when you came from so far away," Felix said with a smile. "You must be tired, why don't you come have a break at my house? It's not far."

"I'd like to, but we're looking for a Digizone," Mirai told him. "Have any parts of the city turned weird?"

"Hm... Maybe. We'll check the news when we get back to my house," Felix said. "This way."

"Do you think this is a good idea?" Youseimon asked Mirai, keeping her voice low enough to not be heard.

"It's the same sort of thing we did in Atlanta; I don't see why not."

The little house, nestled among other little houses along the street, looked cozy and inviting, a picture of welcoming nestled within the city walls. "Hey, Alexa!" Felix called as he entered,
Rusalkamon still in his arms. "Has Dad come home yet?"

"No, not yet." Footsteps came from the back of the house, a ginger-haired girl appearing at the base of the stairs. Unlike Felix, Alexa was athletic, and taller than even Mirai was, but their faces had the same shape. "Did you bring home more strays, Felix?"

"Who's a stray?" Milomon grumbled, his tail puffing up.

"This is Mirai Watanabe and Youseimon," Felix introduced them, "and Andre Harris and Milomon. They're my friends, so don't be rude."

She eyed them, but relented. "I see. Nice to meet all of you. Come on in, I'll make you some tea."

"Sis loves her tea," Felix told them with a smile. "Best to go along with it."

"I heard that!"

Tea! Mirai decided she liked this siblings already. On the other hand, though... did Canadians drink real tea, or the strange tea like Andre did? She glanced at his face, but he seemed to know no more than she did. Both Felix and Andre left their shoes on as they crossed the living room, so she kept hers on as she followed.

Felix led them to a kitchen painted in cheery colors, whites and yellows, with plants in cute painted pots along the windowsill. Their footsteps on the stone floor had a strange little echo as they gathered about the small round kitchen table. Felix gestured for them to sit as Alexa passed behind him, pulling out cups from the cupboard and turning on an electric kettle. "So this Digizone you're looking for, what is it?"

"It's a portion of our Digital World which has merged with your human world," Youseimon said as Mirai sat, pulling the Digimon into her lap.

"Hm. So what's this Digital World, then?"

"It's as it sounds, another world," Milomon pointed out, taking his usual position on Andre's shoulder. "What would you expect it to be?"

"It's the place I come from, Felix," Rusalkamon spoke up, nibbling on a cookie from her position on Felix's lap.

Youseimon nodded agreement. "Are you familiar with Digimon, Mr. Felix?"

"Call me Felix. And not at all," he said, smiling.

"Well, Rusalkamon, Milomon, and myself are all Digimon," Youseimon told him. "Milomon and I have teamed up with humans for the purpose of returning the Digizones to normal - that is, unmerging our two worlds. Naturally, if two worlds are pushed together so suddenly, it's hard on both the Digimon and the humans."

"Hm. So how do you unmerge the two?"

"Once we destroy the control tower in each Digizone, things return to normal," Mirai told him. "So don't worry about your city. It'll be fine."

"You just destroy a tower? That seems rather simplistic for a merged world, doesn't it?"

Mirai blinked. She hadn't thought of it in that way. "Well..."
"So, another question," Felix said as Alexa set a pair of teacups in front of each person. "What causes these merges?"

"We don't know yet," Milomon said, reaching for a teacup. "They just kind of happen." Mirai picked up a cup, herself.

"You think they just happen at random? I doubt that," Felix said. "What about your solution? If you don't know what causes them, how did you figure out how to make them go away?"

"Well, that's..." Milomon looked to Youseimon.

She looked up without blinking, gazing back at him. "Coincidence. We have other reasons for removing the towers."

"How very interesting this whole situation is." He sipped at his own tea, Rusalkamon also picking up her own cup. As Mirai watched, she held the cup in both hands, taking a sip. Her face fell into an expression of bliss as she held the cup contently. Mirai couldn't help but smile. Whatever she might have thought of Felix, she was sure that Rusalkamon wasn't a bad Digimon.

"Thank you for the tea, Miss Alexa," Andre said to the older girl. "It's quite excellent."

"Isn't it? That one's from a little place down the road," Alexa said, showing him the package. "You try a lot of teas?"

"Mostly the southern variety, but I could be made a believer."

"So Felix," Mirai said to him. "Has any part of the city turned weird? Have you heard anything on the news?"

"Actually, now that you mention it, there's a part of the city that's turned to desert," he noted, "it's really quite strange."

"That must be our Digizone," Youseimon said, jumping down from Mirai's lap. "Could you tell us where it is?"

"I'll show you. I don't mind."

Alexa paused in her conversation with Andre, scowling at her brother. "You'll do no such thing. I'm not letting you wander into something dangerous."

"It won't be dangerous, and even if it was, I'd be careful. Nothing to worry about."

She gave him a look, then folded her arms. "I don't believe you. You try leaving, I'll pin you to the floor."

"You're no fun." Felix let out a sigh, standing up. "I'll draw you a map, then."

"Thank you, Felix," Mirai said as he pulled out pen and paper, sketching out a rough map. "Don't worry about a thing. We'll definitely return this beautiful city to normal."

A few minutes later, Andre had a few bags of tea in his bag and Mirai had the map in hand, pointing the way. Several blocks later, she could see the sand first, the white stuff that blew into the streets. It could only be mistaken for snow for a moment before its real appearance became clear, stinging against their skin as the wind blew. "Whew, it's getting hot," Andre said as he put on his belt with holster. "Let's get this sand out of here."
She nodded, pulling out her sword, and they walked forward together. The area opened up, the buildings transformed into pyramids sticking out among the sand. Above, the sun blazed hot and angry. "What is the sun doing out?" she wondered.

"This is the Digizone," Youseimon said. "We should expect anything to happen."

"Partner!" Milomon said, pointing. "We've got Meramon incoming!"

Mirai pulled out her phone, pointing it at the incoming Digimon. "Meramon, Adult level, Data type. A Digimon whose body is shrouded in crimson flames," it read.

"Tell me something I don't know!" she muttered. "Youseimon, let's Digizone Influence."

"Hold up," Andre said, putting a hand on her arm. "There's a lot of them and we need to save our strength. Let's just get to the tower as fast as possible."

"How do you propose we do that, though?"

He looked around for inspiration, and his eye fell on a snowmobile parked outside one pyramid. "There. We'll take that. Run!"

The two Digimon followed on their heels as Andre half-dragged her toward the machine. "You can drive a snowmobile?" Mirai asked as he looked it over, finding the key.

"Well, it can't be any more difficult than a four-wheeler," he said.

"You can drive a four-wheeler?"

"Well... I've driven one once or twice?"

She let out a whimper as the machine started. "You're not going to hit anything, are you?"

"I give it like a thirty percent chance." The machine took off with a roar, zipping past the surprised Meramon. "See? Not too hard!" he shouted over the noise of the engine.

"Are you sure? Should it really sound like that?"

"Partner, we're slowing down!" Milomon shouted back to him from the end of the machine.

He said something she didn't understand, but the tone of his voice made it clear he wasn't pleased. "I guess it can't run on sand after all. Where are the Meramon?"

"Coming up behind us, partner!"

"And here I was hoping to avoid a fight." Andre let the snowmobile skid to a stop, turning to face the incoming Meramon.

A bucket full of water went sailing over the Meramons' heads, turning upside down on one unlucky Meramon and dousing him with water. "Hm, that wasn't as effective as I thought," Felix said to himself as Youseimon's allies swarmed around him, setting themselves on the Meramon. "I'll have to make a note. Oh, I found these guys on my way; they're friends of yours, I take it?"

"Felix!" Mirai said in surprise. "I thought you were staying at home."

"What, and miss this? I'll apologize to Sis later."
"Youseimon!" Spadamon appeared on top of one Meramon, pinning it down, paying no mind to the flames. "Go! Please allow us to handle these simple foes!"

"Understood. Milomon, let's go," Youseimon said to him.

"You got it. Let's go, partner!"

Mirai barely noticed the hot sands as they ran, Felix following at a slower pace with Rusalkamon clinging to his back. "Is that the control tower?" he asked, pointing to the black spire in the distance.

"Yes, that's it."

"Hm. Not as impressive as I thought."

"Looks like the boss is coming out to greet us," Youseimon said. "Mirai, Digizone Influence!"

Andre and Mirai both nodded, selecting the option on their phones and holding them out. Spirimon and Robimon emerged from the light, rushing the BlueMeramon in front of them headlong. "They changed!" Felix said, sounding surprised for the first time. "Can you do that too, Rusalkamon?"

"I-I suppose so? It looks kind of scary though..."

"Rebels!" BlueMeramon shouted as he threw blue flames at them. "Cease your disturbance of the peace at once and surrender!"

"You're the one disturbing the peace!" Spirimon said, dodging the flames in the air. "Pixie Dust!"

"Charity Arrow!" Robimon added his attack.

BlueMeramon scowled, increasing the power of its flames. The two attacks hit the fire and burned, causing no effect. "My turn," he said, tossing more blue flames. "Cold Flame!"

The flames came at such a speed that Spirimon and Robimon couldn't dodge, both being thrown back. "You don't really seem to have a lot of strategy," Felix observed. "Do you know anything about this Digimon?"

Mirai checked the D-Tai. "BlueMeramon," she read aloud, "Perfect level, Data attribute. It's a Perfect level?!"

"What does that mean?" Felix asked.

"It's a level above Adult," Rusalkamon explained to him. "They're underpowered for this fight."

"Hm. Does your phone have anything else?"

"Um... Just that its flames burn hotter than Meramon's. What should we do? If only we had a source of water," Mirai fretted.

"Or a good fire extinguisher," Andre added.

Felix closed his eyes, then looked up at BlueMeramon. "No, that won't be necessary. All we need to do is avoid his attacks and make him take our own."

"Yeah, but that's easier said than done," Andre told him.
"In this case, it's easier done than said. Rusalkamon," he said to the Digimon on his back, "can you do it?" She looked at him, her hair covering up part of her face and hiding her expression, but then she nodded. "Then do it."

Straightening up, Rusalkamon held out her hands, spreading them apart. "Night Falling!" she said. In an instant, the world was turned black, so black Mirai couldn't even see her hand in front of her face. In fact, there was only one thing lighting up the area now - BlueMeramon itself. "Attack him now, Robimon!" Andre shouted.

"Go, Spirimon!" Mirai added.

"And both of you go," Felix said, giving Mirai a push. "Or he'll track you by sound."

"Charity Arrow!" BlueMeramon let out a cry as the attack impacted his shoulder from behind. He turned to attack, and then slipped, falling down.

"He's melted the sand under his feet," Felix's voice observed. "Into glass. How very convenient."

"Robimon!" Spirimon shouted to him. "Let's combine our attack!"

"Got it!"

"Cold Flame!" BlueMeramon tried throwing flame at the sound, but the attacks hit nothing. Just as he went to get to his feet, the combined attack of Charity Arrow and Pixie Dust struck him squarely in the chest, knocking him back to the ground in a burst of gold dust, the rest of his body disintegrating.

"We did it!" Mirai shouted as the darkness lifted, turning back into the blazing sun. "We beat him! Thanks for your help, Felix, you were awesome. Rusalkamon, too!"

She hid behind Felix's shoulder with a blush, but didn't seem displeased. "Well, it seems unfair to make two foreigners do all the work to save our town," he pointed out. "So we just take down that tower, now?"

"Yeah. Spirimon!" The fairy was already moving toward the tower, Robimon behind her. "It'll be back to normal in a few minutes."

"Good to know. So you two go around doing this sort of thing?"

She nodded. "We have a website and a forum and if you've got the D-Tai program, you can find out when the Digizones happen, too."

"D-Tai?" He pulled out his own phone, comparing it to hers. "Ah, you mean this strange icon here? So that's what that is." He tucked it away. "I have many more questions for you, but if Sis catches me out of the house, she might just kill me, so shall we just get that website address for now?"

Mirai smiled, then rattled it off from memory. "Well," Felix said afterwards, "I look forward to a long and interesting relationship with the two of you. Goodbye, for now."

Andre watched him leave, one hand on his hip. "Did we just gain an ally? Or a very interested spectator?"

"Is there anything wrong with either? He helped us out." Mirai tucked her hands behind her head. "It's nice to have more associa-Oh no!"
"Oh no'...?"

She looked at him guiltily. "I, uh, kind of skipped out on class to get here. I hope I'm not too late in coming back..."

He laughed. "This time zone difference is going to take some getting used to, all right. Get going!"

"Yes!"
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The ordinary children, Mirai and Andre, and their partners Youseimon and Milomon arrive in Quebec City, in snowy Canada. Here, they struggle with the language barrier until they reach the Old City and meet Felix, who has a Digimon of his own, Rusalkamon. Felix is very interested in the appearance of the Digizones and asks many questions. With his assistance, Mirai and Andre find the Digizone, a desert-like place run by the Perfect level BlueMeramon. Spirimon and Robimon are rebuffed by his attacks, but Felix's assistance helps them win and restore the city to normal. But what place will they venture to next?

"I thought Rio was supposed to be about carnival!"

Mirai hauled herself onto the next level of floating rocks, pausing to catch her breath and look around. Below her, she could see Spirimon in flight, chasing after the boss of the area, who was bouncing from rock to rock. "Andre! Robimon! Targetmon is over that way!"

"Roger that!" Andre pulled himself up onto another rock nearby, trying to take aim with his pepper gun. Giving up after a moment, he shouted down, "Robimon! Can you restrict his movements?"

"Understood, partner!" Robimon jumped from rock to rock, drawing an arrow from his quiver. "Sherwood Snare!" he shouted as he released the arrow from his bow, the simple bolt unfolding into a net which neatly snagged the monkey Digimon.

"Hey!" Targetmon clapped the shoes on his hands together in irritation. "That's not fair!"

"What's not fair is what I'm about to do to you," Spirimon told him, pointing her wand in his direction. "Pixie Dust!"

"Leave the tower to me, Spirimon," Robimon said over Targetmon's indignant howls.

"Ah!" a voice behind Mirai spoke up, and she turned to see Felix clambering onto the rock with some difficulty. He slipped, and she ran over to give him a hand. "Did I miss most of it? Sorry about that. If Sis knew where I was going, it'd be impossible to get away. Oh! So that one disintegrated, just like BlueMeramon. Is that their 'death', I suppose?"

"They all do that," Mirai told him. "Oh, we'd better get down. Judging by how high we are, we'd be lucky to end up on someone's roof."

"I'm coming, Mirai," Spirimon said, taking her by the hand. "Ah, Felix is here too." Taking him in her other hand, she glided back down to the ground.

Felix put a hand to his chin after he'd been released, looking back up at the rocks which were starting to vanish along with the rest of the Digizone. "So this stage was floating rocks, huh? I wonder what determines what kind of Digizone shows up where."

"Stage?"

"You know, like a video game level? The structure of these Digizones is something like a platformer. You get to the end and battle the boss."

Spirimon landed next to Mirai, changing back to Youseimon. "If you think this is a game, you
"I'm not questioning the gravity of the situation, I'm observing its uniform nature," Felix told her. "Don't you think it feels a little too artificial? If all it took to win a war was going to place after place, doing the same thing, people would be going to war more often."

Youseimon didn't answer. "We don't really know much about the Digital World, Felix. Perhaps it's natural that the structure be artificial. Um, if that makes sense," Mirai said.

"You game, Felix?" Andre called as he walked over, joining the other two, Milomon perched on his shoulder.

"Not really, but I like to watch. The programming aspects of video games interest me. You'd be surprised at the number of games you can clear in under six minutes by breaking their coding, for example."

"I'd better get back," Mirai said to Andre. "It's late where I am. Felix, is something wrong?" The older boy was looking off into the distance.

"Oh, no, it's nothing," he said with a wave of his hand. "Well, then, I guess I'll see you at the next Digizone." Giving them a wave, he flipped on the Internet Transport, vanishing.

"He sure seems like the type to do as he likes," Andre observed. "Well, I'll see you next time."

At the top of the building Felix had been gazing at, red eyes stared down at the group of humans and Digimon parting ways. The eyes belonged to a small Digimon that resembled both a bird with its feathery arms and springy legs, and a reptile with its scaled head and toothed mouth. "We didn't need to do anything this time, Lady."

"So it seems," the figure behind it said.

"They're leaving; do you want to go talk to them, Lady?"

"There's no need for that. If there isn't an enemy to defeat here, then we're wasting time. Let's go, Raptomon."

"So then what happened next? Tell us, tell us!"

"Well," Milomon leaned in towards his captive audience, looking to the twins, and then to Sveta. "We finally spot the tower, and we're leaping from rock to rock, here, and there," he bounced around the living room furniture in demonstration. "And then we see him."

"Who, who?" Kat clapped her hands together.

"Why, none other than the dreaded, the terrible, the stinky Targetmon!" Milomon spread his paws wide as he stepped back. "Imagine a pink monkey with greasy black chest fur, and he's wearing a visor over his eyes, like this." He passed a paw along his face in demonstration. "And he has shoes on his hands."

"Shoes on his hands? What a positively absurd person this Targetmon must be," Jane said, folding her arms in contempt for the defeated enemy.

Next to Sveta, Andre's mother chewed on a pencil before jotting something down. "Absurd, but it's
different at least. I might be able to use that. Everyone does floating rocks. Any guesses as to why the shoe-on-hands fetish, Milomon?"

"He's stupid?"

She chewed on the pencil again. "Any other guesses?"

"He's not really a friend of mine... Sorry, Jezra."

"Hey, Milomon," Andre called from the kitchen as he inspected the last of the dishes for spots, "don't call my mom by her first name."

"But Jezra is Jezra... Besides, it's a nice name, even if you humans don't end your names properly."

She pointed the pencil at Milomon again. "Theories on the name ending fetish?"

"What's a 'fetish'?"

"Continue the story, Milomon!" Kat insisted. "What happened next? Did you beat him up?"

Sveta looked up as a soft beeping came from across the room. "Big brother, your phone's ringing."

"That's not my usual ringtone." Andre picked up his phone, noticing the D-Tai's icon flashing. Touching it, he blinked in surprise as Harley's face became visible in a little square on the screen. "Harley?"

"Oh, hey, I got it to work after all," he said, looking over to something off-screen. "Hold on just a minute, I'm reaching the others."

Andre gestured for Milomon to follow him to his room. "Ah, Mirai?" Harley said, and her face became visible on the screen. "Are you available?"

"It's rather late," she mumbled as Felix's face popped up in a separate box.

"Oh, you're conferencing us through the D-Tai?" Felix remarked. "How useful. Are you the Harley I've talked to in the forum?"

"That's me. Saffron's asleep right now, it's damn early here. So I'll have to introduce you later. Did you three get the notice about the new Digizone?"

Felix nodded, Mirai shook her head. "I haven't been near my phone yet this morning," Andre said. "Where is it at?"

"Hold on, I'm running my mapping analysis on it," Harley said, stifling a yawn. "If this works out, I'll transfer it to your D-Taís next time I see you."

"You can do that?" Mirai said in surprise.

"You can do anything with the right programming skills. Ah, got it. Lisbon, Portugal is your destination. Also, in analyzing how the Transport works, if you all put in exactly that - 'Lisbon, Portugal' - you should all arrive at the same place. Similar to the mapping programs on the internet, it ties a city to one particular coordinate."

"All right. I'll meet you there in just a minute," Andre said to Felix.

"Understood. I'm looking forward to working with you again."
"I'll leave you to it," Harley said, "this is a tired even coffee won't fix. I'm going to crash for a while. Mirai, you must be tired, too."

"I'm fine, I'll meet you two there," she said, and then her window blinked out.

Andre tapped the icon, and the other windows vanished as well, the call ending. Leaning out his door, he held out a hand to Milomon for his bag. "Mom? Milomon and I are running out for a bit."

"Aww!" came Kat's voice from the living room. "I didn't hear how the story ended!"

"Be a good girl, Kat," Milomon called to her, "and I'll tell you another when I get back. Okay?"

"'Kay!"

Mirai and Felix were already there when Andre arrived. Youseimon was nowhere to be seen, but Rusalkamon was in her usual place by Felix's legs. "Isn't this peculiar?" Felix remarked. "It should be mid-afternoon here. Yet it's terribly foggy and not sunny at all."

"We're probably already in the Digizone," Mirai said.

"Hm. So you're saying that the Digizones always take a form that is counter to some characteristic of the local area?"

"That does seem to be the pattern, doesn't it?" Andre said. "Atlanta and snow, Quebec City and hot, San Francisco and toy-filled, Hawaii and dirty... Although I'm not sure Rio and rocks fits into that."

"Hm. Do either of you know anything about the layout of the Digital World?" Felix asked Milomon and Rusalkamon.

She shook her head, but Milomon shifted his feet. "If you mean the general layout, there are currently 108 zones carved out of the Digital Sea. If you mean what order they're in, then no."

"Youseimon mentioned 108 zones before," Mirai said.

"What do you mean, carved out of the Digital Sea?" Felix asked.

"What do you mean, what do I mean? I mean exactly that. The Digital Sea is chaotic data--noise. The zones are data that're organized into separate programs."

"Hm. So the 108 isn't a fixed limit, is it? In theory, you could carve out more from the Digital Sea? Or is it at its upper limit?"

"No, the Digimon are trying to construct beyond the 108," Youseimon said as she returned. "According to legend, it used to be that all of the Digital Sea was a solid Digital World, without the separation mandated by fractured zones, before the goddess of chaos brought ruin upon it. But now probably isn't the time to discuss mythology."

"Did you find Spadamon and the others?" Mirai asked.

She shook her head. "No, but this place is crawling with Evilmon. We'll be hard-pressed if it comes to a battle."

"So it's better if we keep a low profile. Did you see the tower?"
Youseimon pointed. "It's quite some distance away. Since we don't know this place, it'll be difficult to stay undetected."

"I wonder something," Felix said to himself, tapping on his phone.

"We don't get reception inside a Digizone," Mirai told him. "Nothing that sends data seems to work right."

"That's not quite true. The D-Tais all function properly inside a Digizone." He pressed something, tapping his foot. "Hopefully he's still awake."

"You mean Harley?" Mirai peered over Felix's shoulder as Harley's face appeared on the screen.

"Christ on a cracker, you three," he grumbled, rubbing at his face. "You're aware it's like six in the morning for me here, right? And I am not a morning person."

"Harley, I'd like to borrow your mapping function," Felix said to him. "Can you track our locations through the D-Tai?"

"Uh, probably. Let me try something here." There was the sound of computer keys off-screen. "God, you morning people. Okay, I have your location, Felix. What do you need to know?"

Felix looked up, and then made a face. "Merde. I can't tell cardinal directions in all this fog. Mirai, walk in the direction of the tower and open your conference call with Harley." She nodded, doing as she was instructed.

"So I take it you need to know something about this direction?"

"Yes. I'd like to see if you can map out some routes along that way, but through Lisbon's subway system."

"Their subway? Uh, hold on."

"Guys," Milomon hissed to them. "We got Evilmon moving this way. We need to take cover."

"Well, for starters, there's a subway station entrance, it should be off to your..." Harley turned, trying to visualize the directions. "Behind and left, about fifty feet. Take that for starters."

"Understood." Felix waved Andre and Milomon over, and the group quickly located the stairs leading down.

"Down there, behind the escalator," Andre said, pointing, and the group took refuge underneath, listening to the sounds above.

"Okay, I have a few routes for you, depending on how far you want to go," Harley told them. "I'm sending it to your D-Tai, Felix. Will that be good enough?"

"Perfect, thanks." Felix scanned his phone, then tucked it in his shirt pocket. "This way, everyone."

The subway station was largely empty, but there were people huddled around here and there, clearly reluctant to go aboveground where things had gotten so strange. "Even though we're in the middle of the Digizone, things down here are normal," Andre said, looking around. "Though, uh, colorful perhaps."

"Based on my own observations and what Harley's told me, it appears that a Digizone is like an overlay," Felix told them. "So the insides of buildings and undergrounds aren't affected. Hey," he
called to a nearby group of people. "Ter os trens em funcionamento?"

"Não," one called back.

"The trains aren't running," Felix told the rest of the group, "so let's walk along the tracks."

"You speak Portuguese?" Andre asked.

"Oh, yes. Languages are a bit of a hobby for me."

"How many languages do you speak?" Mirai asked as she lowered herself down onto the tracks.

"English and French natively, Portuguese, German, and Italian fluently. I'm studying Russian right now," he added, "and thinking of Mandarin Chinese somewhere down along the way."

"Wow," she said in surprise. "How do you keep them all separated?"

He shrugged. "I guess all the vocabulary plays nice and stays in its own pen? Well, let's get going."

They walked along the tracks through a dark tunnel that seemed to stretch for miles, without a sound except for the soft patter of their own footsteps. Lights were strung at regular intervals, providing some sort of reassurance that they were moving forward. No one spoke, partly out of fear of attracting trouble, and partly because the tunnel itself seemed to forbid the idea of talking. Gradually, the end of the tunnel lightened, and then opened up into another station. "Let's check and see if we can find the tower from here," Felix said.

Andre pulled himself up from the tracks, Mirai right behind him, and then the two pulled the heavier Felix onto the platform. From there, it was a short flight of stairs up to the street. Milomon went ahead of the group, almost invisible as he slipped outside. A mere minute later, he was back inside. "It's close, it's real close! Just that way, over a few buildings or so," he said, pointing to the outside.

"Great, let's go." Mirai stood up, looking back to Felix. "That was some good thinking, using the subway."

"Oh. Thanks. I'm not so much on the brawny side, so thinking's what I do."

The street opened up before them, with the tower prominently standing before them. No other creature, human or Digimon, was in sight. "Good," Youseimon said, "let's take the tower out before-"

"Darkness Spear!" Youseimon jumped at the call, her sleeve ripped through by a black spear that retreated almost as fast as it had come.

"What was that?!" Andre said, looking around.

It was Rusalkamon that spotted the enemy first, pointing up. "Up on the tower!"

"Oh ho ho!" A female figure was perched at the tip of the tower. As they watched, she descended, coming to a stop close enough for them to see her, but far enough to be difficult to hit. "Well, well, boys and girls, did you come to dance for my amusement?"

"Who's this chick?" Andre asked.

"I don't know," Mirai said, "but I don't think I like her."
Youseimon and Rusalkamon nodded immediate agreement. Felix looked at her, then pulled out his D-Tai, silently studying its information. "I'm LadyDevimon, the boss of this area. You little children weren't thinking of trying to take out my tower while I'm not around, were you?"

"Mirai," Andre said to her, "let's Digizone Influence."

She nodded, holding out her D-Tai. Before them, Milomon and Youseimon became Robimon and Spirimon. "Pixie Dust!" Youseimon said, launching a quick attack.

"Charity Arrow!" Robimon added, adding his power to hers.

The attack struck head on, and LadyDevimon held out a hand, stopping it. "I didn't recall giving you permission to attack," she remarked. "Now isn't this unusual? A thief, a little goody-two-shoes, and a pretty girl like me all holding hands. Just what do you think you're going to accomplish together? Tigers shouldn't hang out with antelopes," she said, descending and stopping in front of Rusalkamon. "Why don't you ditch those losers and come with me, dear?"

Rusalkamon took refuge behind Felix, who held out an arm in a protective gesture. "N-no! Go away, please!"

"Is that any way to behave towards me? After all, we're the sa-"

"No, we're not!" Rusalkamon shouted, throwing out her hands. Darkness fell, covering LadyDevimon in a black sphere. Andre and Mirai backed up hurriedly to avoid being caught in the darkness, Robimon and Spirimon following suit. "I'm not like you at all!"

Robimon drew back another arrow. "Spirimon, let's get her while we can."

Before either of them could loose another attack, her long arms shot out of the darkness, locking around Felix's throat and slamming him against the nearest wall. "Oh, I think you'll come to agree with me soon enough," LadyDevimon said with a purr, looming over the Canadian boy. "You'll feel it in your blood while I take care of this kid."

"Felix!" Rusalkamon shouted in horror, running to LadyDevimon and yanking on one of her arms futilely. "Let him go!"

"Charity Arrow!" Robimon shouted, letting one loose at LadyDevimon's back.

"Pixie Dust!"

"What, you two are still here?" She frowned at the pair of them, letting her wings swat the attack aside. Holding out one hand in their direction, she said, "Darkness Wave!"

A wave of black flitting shapes-bats?- flew toward the two Influenced Digimon, shoving them back and showering them with black energy. Andre let out a little growl, taking aim at LadyDevimon's head with his pepper gun. "LadyDevimon!"

She turned, but as she did, another voice called out from above, "Spotlight Bomber!" Beams of light shone down upon LadyDevimon, piercing her skin like a rain of needles. The black Digimon let out a scream, finally releasing Felix as she clutched her arms, trying to get out of the rain of light.

Mirai looked up as a black shadow passed over their heads, the silhouette reminding her of a jet plane. Is that a Digimon?
"Now to finish her," the same voice said. "Supersonic Missile!"

The air itself rippled, and something slammed into LadyDevimon with such force that she didn't even have time to cry out, vanishing into golden dust all at once. The shadow circled around, leaving the area, and Mirai thought she caught a glimpse of a human on top. "Was that another person with a D-Tai?" she wondered.

"Wonder why they didn't stick around," Felix noted, rubbing at his throat. Rusalkamon threw herself onto his lap with a sob. "Shy, maybe?"

"Whatever the reason, they saved us," Andre said. "I guess we'll have to leave it at that for now. Hey, you okay?"

"No harm done." He patted Rusalkamon's head. "I guess I'm more popular with the ladies than I thought."

"It's because I'm a Dark-type," Rusalkamon murmured. "She went after you because of me."

"You know, this is the part where you're supposed to agree that it's because I'm handsome and charming."

Andre let out an amused snort. "Let's take out this tower and go home, everyone."
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The children, Mirai, Andre, and their new ally, Felix, do battle in Rio de Janeiro. It isn't long before they are called to a new Digizone in Lisbon, Portugal. The city is covered in an evil aura and troops of Evilmon, and it is Felix that suggests they avoid fighting by using the subway tunnels to travel. Before they can destroy the tower, they are hard-pressed by LadyDevimon, who tries to drag Rusalkamon into the darkness. Just as things look grim, they are saved by an unknown Digimon and human. But what place will they venture to next?

"You don't look very awake," Felix observed. "Sure you don't want to go home?"

"I'm fine," Mirai reassured. "I'm starting to get used to it."

"Well, I can understand why you would want to stay," he said, tucking his hands behind his head. "It's not every day one's in Rome, one of the most important cities in the world's history."

She looked around, not sure where to see the history Felix talked about. To be sure, they were standing right next to a huge round stone structure that made her think of a stadium, the stone looking so old that it was a wonder it wasn't crumbling. The city was very open, she noticed, with a lot of green space - at least, around the portion they were standing in. "It kind of reminds me of the walled city in your hometown, Felix."

"You mean the Old City? No, no, Roman architecture is really different," he said with a wave of his hand. "And these buildings are well over a thousand years older than what's in the Old City. Like this Colosseum," he gestured at the building next to them, "was built sometime in the first century AD. That makes it close to two thousand years old."

"And it's still standing?" She looked at him in surprise.

"One of the things Rome was known for was their progress in architecture. They built things like roads and aqueducts, which were unheard of at that time - and they did them very well. I take it you haven't studied a lot about the Roman Empire?"

She squirmed under his gaze. "The Western cultures all kind of blend together for me."

Felix scowled, but Andre laughed. "I can't say anything. In America, there's plenty of people that say the same about Asia. Most couldn't tell you the difference between China and Japan if you hit them upside the head with it."

"Well, that's well and good for your country, but in Canada we like to have a little more depth in our studies."

"I bet that's not the case. Mom always liked to say that ignorance has no borders."

Mirai tried not to feel as guilty as she did over the fact she'd unintentionally sparked an argument, although it didn't seem that Andre and Felix were actually mad at each other. "History aside," Youseimon spoke up, "we need to look for the Digizone. Any guesses as to where it might be?"

"No, but I have an idea," Felix said. "Let's take a tour. There are plenty of tour buses around. We can learn a bit about the city and also be able to scope out the lay of the land and any possible signs of a Digizone."
"You just want to look around," Andre said.

"I think that sounds like a good idea," Mirai spoke up quickly. "Let's try that."

"Ah! It's Youseimon!" The Digimon turned as she heard her name, blinking as she saw Tailmon and Wizarmon running toward them. Tailmon leapt at Youseimon, knocking her over and nuzzling her much as a cat would. "See, I knew I could find her." Wizarmon continued, tucking his staff away beneath his cloak.

"Where did you two come from?" Mirai asked.

"And don't you think it's a bit dangerous wandering around in a human town?" Milomon said with a frown. "Someone might see you."

"I think it's a bit late to worry about that, Milomon," Andre said with a smile.

"Huh?"

"It's not a problem," Tailmon said, flicking her tail as she sauntered around Mirai's legs, rubbing against them. "We just look like a kid in costume and his pet cat. Nothing to worry about."

"You came from the Digizone, right?" Youseimon asked Wizarmon. "Where is it?"

"We did, but..."

"But?"

"We got separated from the others and were in a fight," Tailmon told her. "We must have been near the edge of the zone when it emerged in the human world. When we woke up, we were here."

"Where did you wake up?" Felix asked. "That might give us a clue."

"It's down that way," Wizarmon said, pointing to the south. "We weren't able to find any sign of the Digizone, but perhaps other eyes will be able to see what we cannot."

"Then let's go," Mirai said with a nod. "We haven't any better leads at this point."

Wizarmon fell into step alongside Mirai, pointing ahead, and Tailmon walked alongside Youseimon, ears alert. Milomon dropped to all fours as well, falling into step alongside her. "So you're Tailmon. I don't think we've gotten a chance to talk before. Thanks for your help back in Atlanta."

"Atlanta?"

"Ah, well, Hyogamon's domain? I guess I've gotten used to thinking of it as the human city already," Milomon admitted. "Do you know how Kudamon is doing?"

"Oh, the little kid? Fit as a fiddle. He mostly helps out with the children, keeps them entertained."

"Oh, is he? That little punk's getting a bit more responsible without me around."

"You miss him?"

"Of course I do." Milomon's ears drooped, but then he smiled at her. "I'm doing this for him, among other things. I'll see it through. By the way, you're pretty strong, aren't you? Taking down a control spire by yourself."
"Well, I am an adult level, kitten. Don't get too ahead of yourself."

"Huh, you're an adult? So does that mean I should be calling you big sister? Or perhaps auntie?" Milomon asked, grinning.

"Tailmon," Wizarmon spoke up. "Please keep your eyes peeled for signs of the Digizone."

"You don't have to tell me, I already know that," she sniffed.

"Ah, it's a shame we're going south," Felix sighed. "We could have gotten a chance to see the Vatican if we'd gone the other way."

"Vatican?" Mirai echoed. "You mean that churchy thing?"

"It is not just a 'churchy thing'. The Vatican, in addition to being the smallest recognized sovereign state in the world, is the home of the Pope and the Catholic Church. It should tell you something about how important it is globally, to know that it's the only non-government entity recognized as a separate state, even though it exists entirely within the walls of Rome."

"The Catholic Church, huh... I guess Rome really is important."

"See, you understand," Felix said to a nod.

"Well, it seems to be important to you Westerners, anyway," she added with a finger on her chin. Andre laughed at Felix's expression. "She's got you there."

"Felix, Felix," Rusalkamon tugged on his pant leg. "What's a Catholic Church?"

"Ah... I guess Digimon don't have religion, do they?"

"We have holy and dark Digimon," Youseimon told him, "though I suppose that's not quite the same."

"Well, 'holy' is perhaps getting close."

"A holy city, huh..." Rusalkamon looked out at the buildings they walked by. Felix paused, letting himself fall back behind the group. "Does that bother you?" he asked her. "Are you still thinking about what that LadyDevimon said?"

"I-I'm not like her. But..."

"Don't let it worry you," Felix said, ruffling her hair. "It's just human religion."

"I suppose so..."

A shout from ahead made them both look back to the group. The rest of them had stopped, and Wizarmon and Tailmon's voices reached them easily. "Oh dear," Felix sighed. "Looks like we're missing something interesting."

"What's gotten under your hat, Wizarmon?" Tailmon was saying as they rejoined the group. "Since when did it become a crime to make a little small talk?"

"I'm just asking you to focus is all! It's important that we find the Digizone before the boss realizes our group's here! What are they going to do if we're attacked and none of us are there?"
"I can focus just fine and talk at the same time. It's your complaining that's making me lose focus, if anything!"

"Are you even considering what I'm saying?"

Youseimon stepped firmly between the two, giving them both a quick flick in the forehead. "Both of you, cool your heads. Now, take a good look around; are we close?"

"It's the general area," Tailmon said after examining their surroundings. "If you want more specific, I could trace our path."

Andre examined his D-Tai. "It still shows that we're close, but I'm not seeing anything. What about you two?"

"Do you know anything about this place, Felix?" Mirai asked him.

"Oh? Interested in this area's history, too?" he asked with a smile.

"Well, I just thought if maybe we knew where we were, we might think of something."

"Ah, I see. Hm... That's the city's wall ahead of us, and that looks to be the beginning of Appian Way. I don't know as much about it since it's outside the city walls. It's known for its gardens and catacombs, I believe."

"Catacombs? What are those?"

"Well, they're this-" Felix paused, putting a hand to his chin. "Hold on, I think we're on to something. Everyone, let's take a tour of the catacombs."

"You want to see the catacombs? At a time like this?" Andre frowned. "What's so compelling about a bunch of graves?"

"Graves?!" Mirai squeaked.

"Just trust me. C'mon, let's grab a cab."

It wasn't long before they were outside of Rome itself, along the Appian Way, looking down into the pathway leading into the catacombs. "It's so creepy," Mirai whimpered.

"Well, they won't bite. You don't believe in ghosts, do you?" Felix asked.

"Of course I do!"

He smiled, putting a hand on the wall. "Okay, forget I said anything, then."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Watch your step," Youseimon instructed. "The air down here feels damp. The steps could be slick."

"Not a problem for me~" Tailmon declared as she bounced down the steps in a few agile leaps. "Try to keep up if you can."

"You're on!" Milomon emulated her steps, tearing through the dirt after her.

"Youseimon," Tailmon called back to her. "I'll go scout ahead."
"I'll come with you," Wizarmon offered.

She bristled at him, arching her back. "You stay there."

"Hey, wait for me!" Milomon shouted as he followed her into the darkness of the tunnels.

Wizarmon let out a sigh as he watched them. "Must be nice to be a cat," he said, so low Mirai almost couldn't hear him.

Andre looked over at Wizarmon. "Did Milomon do something wrong?" he asked directly. "You seem to be angry at him."

"Shouldn't you be off catching your partner?" Youseimon said. "Felix, Rusalkamon, can you go help him rein those two in? We'll watch your backs."

Felix glanced over at Wizarmon, then gave Youseimon a nod. "Understood. Let's go, Rusalkamon. I'll tell you a bit about this place's history."

Now Mirai was left alone with the two Digimon. Youseimon looked over to Wizarmon. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

"I'm not angry at him. He hasn't done anything wrong." Wizarmon let out a sigh, looking to the floor. "I guess I'm angry because he's doing everything right."

"In regards to Tailmon, you mean?"

"He talks with her so easily. I never get to see that carefree side of her. She's always been business with me. Even though we act as one in battle, when we're alone, I..."

"You've always been together, even before I met you," Youseimon said, touching a hand to his shoulder. "Why do you think that's going to change just because Milomon's here?"

"It's not that. I don't think she's going to change, either. I just... want her to look at me. Sometimes, I feel like she hasn't done that since the day she saved my life. Tailmon... always stands so tall, so proud. I've always admired her from the back."

Mirai crouched next to the pair of Digimon, looking at Wizarmon. "I don't really get it, but... If it bothers you, why don't you just talk to her?"

"I wonder if I have that right."

"You definitely do," Mirai reassured him. "Didn't you say it yourself? You act as one in battle. Just like Youseimon and I do. A partner always has the right to look each other in the eye."

Wizarmon looked at her, and behind his cloak, he seemed to smile. "I'm starting to see why Youseimon chose you, Mirai. Let's catch up with the others. We still have a mission to accomplish."

They ran through the tunnels, but the rest of the group hadn't gotten too far ahead. "Mirai?" Andre said as she approached. "You should look at this."

"It's... not dead bodies, is it?" Mirai rounded the corner, taking a look, and then her jaw dropped.

Ahead of them spread a massive layer of clouds, firm enough to walk on, framed in an endless blue sky, as if the tunnel's mouth was a doorway to a painting of a blue sky. "It's massive," Mirai got out. "This is the Digizone?"
"I suppose it makes sense," Felix observed. "The catacombs are underground, but this appears to be above the clouds."

"How does that make sense?"

"The Digizones take on a quality opposite the area they manifest in, right? I thought that when we couldn't see it, it might be down here. This, too, is a part of Rome, or at least it's considered as such. Wow, I wonder how the physics of this place work."

Next to him, Rusalkamon knelt by the cloud layer, poking at it. "Felix, what is this?"

"It's a cloud... I suppose." He reached a foot forward, giving it a test step. "Seems solid enough to walk on."

Rusalkamon mimicked the gesture, then stepped on it with both feet. The movement bounced her, and she fell back with a few more bounces in the clouds. "This... is kind of interesting!"

"Seems like fun," Mirai said, taking a step onto the clouds. "Whoa, it's kind of wobbly!"

"Don't go too far," Youseimon instructed, even as she stepped onto the clouds. "We need to wait for Tailmon and Milomon to return first. And there could be enemies lurking about."

Rusalkamon jumped down on the cloud, bouncing higher. Letting herself bounce around until it petered out, she flopped back on the clouds, letting out a blissful sigh. Then she opened her dark eyes only to look into a pair of pale blue ones, framed by pink. "Hey, is that fun?" the eyes asked her. "You look like you're having fun."

Rusalkamon let out a squeak in response, sitting upright. The eyes belonged to a girl a bit older and taller, dressed in white with a large pink rabbit-eared hat. "Hey, show me how to do that," she urged, holding her hands in front of her chest in anticipation. "You'll show me, won't you?"

"I- I-" Rusalkamon looked to the rest of the group for help.

"An enemy?" Youseimon muttered, reaching into her sleeve.

Felix held out a hand. "It'll be fine. Go ahead, Rusalkamon."

Rusalkamon waved her arms in a sudden panic. "I- I should?"

The girl in front of her mimicked the gesture, grinning broadly. "Hey, hey, what's your name? I'm Sistermon Blanc."

"Sistermon Blanc?" Rusalkamon echoed.

Mirai pulled out her phone, pointing it at the newcomer. "Sistermon Blanc," it read, "Rookie level, Vaccine attribute. This girl, who wears a white rabbit, is considerably shyer than her older sister, Sistermon Noir."

"Doesn't seem that shy to me," Andre said, looking over her shoulder.

"Maybe it's the company," Felix said as he watched the pair tentatively bounce on the clouds, squealing with delight as they discovered each other's bounces made them go higher.

"Felix, Felix!" Rusalkamon urged him. "Come help us bounce!"

Sistermon Blanc ducked behind Rusalkamon as Felix obligingly approached. "Who is that? He's so
"That's Felix. Felix is the nicest, kindest human in the whole world," Rusalkamon reassured her.


"Yep! Felix is nice, you'll see," Rusalkamon said, pulling her new friend by the hand.

Felix smiled as Sistermon Blanc inspected him from every angle, always keeping Rusalkamon between the two. "Well, I don't know about how nice I am, but I won't bother a friend of Rusalkamon's. Please be sure to get along with her in the future."

The white-clad girl's eyes shone as she gave him an eager nod. "Yes!"

"Youseimon!" Tailmon and Milomon were racing across the clouds, their footsteps light and sure. "We found the tower," Tailmon told her. "It's not too far and it looks like most of their forces are spread out fighting ours. Let's hurry."

"Did you find the others?" Youseimon asked as she followed behind the two cats, the humans behind. Rusalkamon took Sistermon Blanc's hand, pulling her along.

"We didn't, but our tower is the priority. We can help them after we've helped you."

"Are you going back to the church?" Sistermon Blanc asked.

Milomon looked at her. "It's near one of those churchy things. Why do you ask?"

"I don't want to go back there," Sistermon Blanc said, hanging her head.

"Was someone mean to you?" Rusalkamon asked. "Felix can take care of them for you!"

Sistermon Blanc shook her head, the ears on her had flopping this way and that. "I... had a fight with my sister."

"Sistermon Noir?" Mirai guessed.

"It's okay to have fights with your siblings once in a while," Andre told her. "The important thing is that you talk things through afterwards. Have you gotten to talk to your sister yet?"

"My sister won't listen to me," Sistermon Blanc said with a sniffle. "She never even looks at me. I don't think she likes me anymore."

It was Wizardmon who touched a hand to the girl's shoulder. "You might feel that way because you fought, but I don't think it's because she doesn't like you. Sometimes, it's hardest to see the people we're closest to."

She looked up at him, teary-eyed. "We'll be there with you," Rusalkamon assured her. "You're really lucky to have a sister. Let's go talk to her."

"Rusalkamon..." Sistermon Blanc clung to Rusalkamon's hands. "You're so nice, Rusalkamon. Hey, we're friends, right?"

"Sure we are!" Rusalkamon said with a smile.

"That's the first time I've seen her smile so much," Mirai said to Felix.
"She probably has a hard time making friends because of people like that LadyDevimon. Digimon that think that because she's a darkness type of Digimon, that she must be no good."

"Being dark doesn't make you evil any more than being holy makes you good," Youseimon stated, walking ahead of them. "The King... is also a Holy-type Digimon."

"Really? I didn't know that. It must make it all the harder on Rusalkamon," Felix said. "Well, I hope you'll continue to be friendly with her."

Youseimon looked up at him. "I've improved my opinion of you a little."

"Haha. You mean it wasn't already great?"

The 'town' that Milomon and Tailmon led them to, if it could be called that, seemed to be built entirely from clouds, just as bouncy as the 'ground' they walked on. "There aren't any human buildings under the ground, so I wonder if those buildings are a part of the Digital World?" Mirai said.

Andre pointed up above a cloud building. "It's over there. It's really close. Must be just around this building."

"Well, why go around?" Youseimon jumped, propelling herself over the building, Wizarmon and Tailmon following suit. Mirai let out a snort, but followed as well, leaving the rest of the group no choice but to bounce over the roof as well. "Mirai, let's go!" Mirai readied her phone, Andre doing the same next to her, and ahead of them, Spirimon and Robimon made for the tower, flanked by Wizarmon and Tailmon.

"That's as far as you go!" cried a voice as a hail of bullets stopped them all in their tracks. A woman dressed in black, flanked by several flying horse Digimon, pointed two guns at them. "Rebels, surrender at once!"

"Wait, big sister!" Sistermon Blanc let go of Rusalkamon's hand, darting out in front of the evolved Digimon. "These people aren't bad people. They're my friends!"

"Blanc!" The older woman, who must have been Sistermon Noir, took a step back. "Blanc, what are you doing? Get over here before they hurt you!"

"They won't hurt me! They're my friends!"

"They're lying to you, you foolish girl! They just said that so you'd bring them here!" Sistermon Noir turned a cold, furious look toward the other Digimon. "How dare you deceive my little sister...!"

"It's not a lie!" Rusalkamon shouted. "Sistermon Blanc is my friend! We said we were friends!"

"You little...!" Sistermon Noir leapt off the building, pointing both guns at Rusalkamon. "Bless Fire!"

"Rusalkamon!" Spirimon said in alarm, then grimaced as the flying Digimon set upon them. "Damn it, out of my way!"

Rusalkamon cried out in pain as the attack caught her square in the chest, knocking her back. "Big sister, please stop it!" Sistermon Blanc shouted. "Why won't you listen to me?"

Felix placed himself between Rusalkamon and Sistermon Noir, his calm expression a sharp
contrast to Sistermon Noir's anger. "You should listen to your sister," he said. "We don't want to hurt either of you. The tower is our only objective."

"It's my duty to guard that tower." Sistermon Noir pointed one of the guns in his face. "Don't presume to tell me how to handle my sister."

"This Digizone, if it remains in place, could destroy over two thousand years' worth of history," Felix said. "That's a problem."

"Not my problem. Surrender, and you can take it up with my boss."

"Big sister, please stop." Sistermon Blanc begged, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Why do you have to fight each other? Just when I finally made a friend...!"

"I said be quiet, Blanc!"

Felix's eyes narrowed. "I have an older sister, too, you know. She'd be ashamed if she acted half as poorly to me as you do toward your sister."

"I don't need a dirty human's opinion!" Sistermon Noir drew back, and pulled the trigger. "Bless Shot!"

"Felix!" Rusalkamon screamed.

Sistermon Blanc leapt in front of Felix, drawing a trident as she did, pushing the guns away from them with it. The shot narrowly avoided him, going over his shoulder. "Felix!" Rusalkamon cried in relief. "Sistermon Blanc!"

Sistermon Noir drew her hand back, striking Sistermon Blanc across the face and knocking her to the ground. "Get in the church," she ordered, voice flat.

Sistermon Blanc looked up at her, clutching the injured spot, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Well, Rusalkamon," Felix said as he drew his phone from his pocket. The screen glowed with a deep purple color. "Are you fired up now?"

Rusalkamon looked at him, then pushed herself to her feet, standing next to him. "Yes!"

"Then let's teach her a lesson in how to treat people," Felix said, holding out the phone. "Rusalkamon, Digizone Influence!"

"Yes!" White light engulfed her, drawing out her form into a taller, more womanly figure. A black dress draped across her form, a butterfly-shaped bow at the back, tinged with the colors of a fire. Her hair was pushed away from her dark eyes, falling down past her waist, to her knees. In her hands, she held a spindle of thread. "Rusalkamon, Digizone Influence to Mouramon!"

Sistermon Noir took a step back in surprise. "You evolved? No, this isn't evolution, but..."

"Your violent way of contending with other people," Mouramon said, drawing the thread in her hands tight. "I'll make you regret it."

"Ha! I'd like to see you try!" Sistermon Noir pointed the guns at her. "Bless Shot!"

"Lençol de Divisão!" Mouramon drew the thread out in front of her, forming a shield, letting the shots splash off harmlessly. "Now it's my turn. Harrespil Encantada!"

Sistermon Noir tried to back away, but a circle of stones sprang from the ground, hemming her in.
Thread lashed out from stone to stone, binding her in place. She let out a cry as the thread squeezed her. "Damn you...!"

Mouramon approached, pulling the thread tight. "Rusalkamon!" Sistermon Blanc cried out from behind her. "Please, don't hurt my sister!"

She didn't answer right away, but relented at last, lowering her thread. "I won't hurt her, Sistermon Blanc. Because... we're friends, after all."

"Rusalkamon...!"

Felix looked up as Wizarmon managed to break through the Unimon troops, hitting the tower with lightning. It cracked, and then shattered into shard, raining down like ink across the pure white clouds. "It's over," Mouramon said, releasing Sistermon Noir from her attack.

"Damn you, rebels! At the least, I'll take you down!" Sistermon Noir stepped back to fire at Mouramon.

Spirimon pushed one gun down, looking at her. "Don't be petty. You should think of your sister's well-being."

"Is that a threat, rebel?"

"I know what happens to guardians who fail to guard their targets," Spirimon said. "There's no reason to fight further. Rather, why don't you come with us? At the least, you'll be able to survive."

"You're asking me to betray the King?!"

"I'm asking you to think about your little sister." Spirimon turned toward Sistermon Blanc, who was being helped to her feet by Rusalkamon. "Don't throw her feelings away."

"Blanc..." Noir closed her eyes, gritting her teeth.

"The tower's gone," Rusalkamon said, looking up at where it had been.

"Now we don't have any reason to fight, right? We can be friends and have fun together again," Sistermon Blanc said.

"Yes, but... once the Digizone finishes separating, you'll be in the Digital World. I have to stay with Felix," Rusalkamon said. "I need him, and he really needs me, too."

"But... that's not fair. After we finally got the fighting to stop," Sistermon Blanc said, tearing up again.

"Say, Sistermon Blanc. We're friends, right?"

"Yes! We're definitely, definitely friends forever!"

Rusalkamon smiled, tears coming to her own eyes. "We'll play again together someday. Someday soon. I promise that we will, Sistermon Blanc."

Around them, the Digizone faded, and Rusalkamon let go of Sistermon Blanc's hands, stepping back. She didn't say anything further as the other Digimon girl vanished before her eyes. Behind her, Felix walked to her, placing a hand on her head. "You did very well, Rusalkamon."

She rubbed at her face with an arm before turning to face him, giving him a bright smile. "Let's
work harder in the future... Felix."
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The children, Mirai, Andre, and Felix, seek out a Digizone in the ancient city of Rome. Tailmon and Wizarmon provide assistance, but Milomon's friendliness with Tailmon creates a rift between two old partners. Felix's insight helps them find a sky Digizone within the catacombs. There, Rusalkamon makes a friend in Sistermon Blanc. The tower is guarded by Blanc's elder sister, Sistermon Noir, who has harsh words for the rebels and rejects Blanc's desire to make peace. Rusalkamon, upset by the danger to her new friend and to Felix, Digizone Influences to Mouramon, stopping Noir in her tracks. In the end, the two friends pledge to see each other again. But what place will they venture to next?

The land outside was so barren, Impmon thought to himself, that it was a wonder anyone wanted to fight over it. There were only 108 zones within the vast Digital World, so he supposed they should be happy for what they had, and yet... When I look out at the lifeless rocks this strip of dirt is made out of, it makes the fighting seem that much sillier.

"Ngah." Next to him, Kokuwamon clacked his mandibles together. The beetle-like machine Digimon had been at work for most of the morning, but didn't have anything to show for it yet.

"Something the matter, Kokuwamon?" Impmon asked, hopping off his perch at the cave's entrance. "Maybe you need a light?" He drew a little flame to his fingers, wiggling it under the machine Digimon's eyes.

Kokuwamon made another disgruntled noise, turning with a clunky motion to face Impmon. "Impmon, hello. What is the situation outside?"

"Same as it was, more fighting going on. Are you sure this is where we should be? It'd be nice if Youseimon would hurry up and come shut it down," he said, glancing to the entrance of the cave.

"99% probability. Would you like me to run more tests to ensure accuracy to a further degree?"

"No, it's fine." Another wiggle of flame under Kokuwamon's nose - or, well, the general area of his face where a nose would be. "Sure you don't want some flame? It's pretty awesome~"

"You should not tease him, Impmon," Spadamon said, approaching from the cave's rear. "Kokuwamon's work is important. It is best to not distract him."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Impmon said, turning on his heel and tucking his hands behind his head. Still facing away from Spadamon, he continued. "Any word from the boss yet?"

"No. I have impressed upon her a need for reliable communications between the human world and the Digital World. I now can only hope that she is successful in efforts to gain such a connection. What of the battle outside?"

"Oh, have you seen it?" Impmon walked back to the entrance, leaning against the wall as he let Spadamon stand next to him. "Angemon versus Devimon. A classic, right? Who do you think will win? I'm giving even odds for the Angemon, two to one for the Devimon. Ten to one says they wipe each other out, and a hundred to one says they all sit down and play Minesweeper instead."

"Something is bothering you, Impmon?"
"N-nothing in particular," he stammered out, caught off guard. "What makes you ask a strange question like that? Weirdo."

"You tend to talk and joke in excess when something is on your mind."

Impmon turned to look out at the battle again. Right now, neither side appeared to have a clear advantage, both doing damage, gold flecks of data streaming from the battlefield like a reverse waterfall. "I wonder about myself sometimes. What I'm doing here, you know?"

"If anything, I should be the one questioning my place. You were there from the start. Do you feel that you are lacking in purpose somehow?"

"Mmm... Maybe something like that. I just find myself doubting sometimes whether I'm fit to be by her side."

Spadamon didn't have to ask who he was talking about. "Why would you think something like that? Perhaps of all those gathered here, you are the one she trusts the most."

"No, it's more like... I've always known she'll be one to walk in the light. You just watch, Spadamon; one day, she'll be the light of the entire Digital World. But I'm not really the kind of guy to stand in the light, you know?"

"I am afraid I am not quite understanding you."

Impmon looked back out at the battle. The tide had turned; now, the Angemon were overwhelming the Devimon, scattering them into digital dust. "You know, Wizarmon's told me some of the old legends he's unearthed. You know how many times those two types have clashed?" he asked rhetorically, gesturing to the battlefield. "But it's not a rivalry or driven by hate. It's simply that every time the Devimon show up, the Angemon inevitably arrive to stop their ambitions. Whatever they may be."

"The Devimon may not be our allies," Spadamon said, "but they fight from the same shadows we do."

"I know." Impmon hopped up on a rock, sliding down past the entrance.

"Where are you going?" Spadamon called after him, looking around for potential trouble.

"Don't worry, I'll be back soon." Impmon waved a hand without turning around, sliding his way down to the battlefield.

By now, the Angemon were withdrawing, cheering on their victory, exchanging friendly words and slapping each other on the back as they stood among the dying Devimon who evaporated all around them. Impmon wasn't sure if his disgust came from just their actions, or from a deeper dislike of the holy Digimon. The field was that of total carnage - soon, even the bodies wouldn't remain, as their data was drawn through the air to the central zone. I wouldn't wish that fate on even these Angemon. Not that they'd change much, probably.

Nearby, one of the Devimon on the field was crawling, trying to get away, pulling himself along with his long arms as data streamed from his wound. Impmon looked around, then grabbed the larger Digimon's arms, tugging him behind a rock. "Let me see it," he said in a hushed tone, "not that I'm a doctor or anything. But I'm pretty good at cauterizing wounds," he added with a grin and a flick of fire off his fingers.

"Where'd you come from, brat?" The Devimon managed a weak grin in return. "This isn't a good
place for you to be playing hide and seek."

"I'm not a child. Well, okay, I am a child, but I'm not childish." Impmon folded his arms. "You want my help or not?"

The Devimon winced as he forced himself into a sitting position, leaning against the rock. "You'd do better to run, brat. We weren't expecting to get out of this alive anyway."

"Don't tell me what to do." Impmon looked back up the way he had come, wondering if it was possible. Easy enough for him to remain unseen, but dragging along the much larger Devimon would be a task. Maybe he should go get Spadamon's help.

As he considered the possible options, a blast smashed against the rock behind them, sending chips flying at Impmon's face. "Over here, sir!" one of the Angemon called. "There's a Devimon and an Im-"

"Tch." Impmon flung a burst of fire into the Angemon's face, grabbing the Devimon's arm. "Let's make a run for it."

Devimon gritted his teeth as he pushed himself onto his feet, leaning heavily on Impmon. Another blast in front of them took out more of the rock, and Impmon turned with a yank, trying to decide where to go. He couldn't lead them back to the cave, but there had to be some place they could hide...

An Angemon landed in front of them, pointing his staff at the pair. Other Angemon flapped down all around them, ringing them in. "I see we missed one," a deep voice said as another angel Digimon landed in front of them, this one with razor-blade wings.

Oh, fiddlesticks, I'm in for it now, Impmon thought.

"Our apologies, Sir SlashAngemon," one of the Angemon said. "We'll dispose of them now."

"Just a moment." SlashAngemon turned his helmeted head toward Impmon, and the much smaller Digimon tried not to sweat. "I don't recall seeing you in this army. Where did you come from?"

"Just passing through," Impmon replied, waving a hand in a casual gesture.

"Just passing through, and yet you stopped to help a traitor to the King?"

"I'd help an Angemon, too, if they were getting hurt," Impmon replied. "I don't like seeing Digimon die."

"Such impertinence!" one of the Angemon exclaimed. "As if we'd take the help of a devil Digimon like yourself!"

"I don't trust what you say," SlashAngemon said, pointing one of his swords at Impmon. "I'll give you one last chance to tell the truth. You're working with these Devimon, aren't you? Where are the rest of your forces?"

"You're wrong," Devimon got out, dropping to his knees as the leaking data became worse. "None of us... ever seen this brat before. Why... would we have a brat in our army?"

"I'm not convinced." SlashAngemon turned his sword to Devimon, the blade taking on a white light.
"Run for it, brat!" Devimon shouted as he got back to his feet, throwing out his claws at SlashAngemon. He couldn't complete the action in time as SlashAngemon shouted, "Holy Espada!" and white light descended upon the pair of them.

Holy energy filled his body, tearing and corroding, filling his vision with nothing but whiteness. Impmon was barely aware of the sensation when he hit the ground, could barely see the shadows moving around within that white light. Somehow, though, the fuzzy outline reminded him of Youseimon, standing tall and proud. Youseimon... don't let them take me back to that place. Don't let me forget about you...

Pain. He'd never been that fond of pain; it felt unpleasant, to say the least, and generally wasn't worth whatever you did to earn it. But in this case, he was glad for the pain, for it brought him back to awareness. Impmon sat up abruptly from the pallet he'd been laying on, looking around with wide eyes. I'm not back there, am I? I'm still... me, right? No, he realized, this place looked different - poor and shabby, and with a clear view of the sky outside. That alone was enough to reassure him, to confirm that he'd somehow survived an Ultimate-level's attack. Having said that... where am I?

With a start, Impmon realized he was being watched. A human-like Digimon with his face covered by a lizardlike hat was peering at him from around an open doorway, blinking as he stared unabashedly. "Who the heck are you?" Impmon demanded, then winced as his injuries hurt all over again from his movement.

The boy ran off without a word, leaving him alone again, but not for long. An older Digimon, this one with a definite female shape, entered the doorway with the boy behind her. "I see you're finally awake," she said, putting one hand on her hip. "We thought you might not make it after all."

"Who are you?" he asked. "Where is this place?"

"It's a place where the King's army won't find you. And I'm Mervamon, and this is Ignitemon," she added with a gesture to the boy. "You are?"

"Impmon," he said, pain shooting through his body again. "You... saved me from that SlashAngemon?"

"Yes, my partner and I did," she said with a gesture over her shoulder.

Everything came back to him in a rush. "With me... there was a Devimon... did he..."

Her expression fell. "I'm sorry, he didn't make it. Was he a friend of yours?"

"No." Impmon looked down at the sheet clutched in his hands. "I didn't even know him."

"You nearly got yourself killed for someone you didn't know? That's gutsy of you."

"Didn't you do the same?" he pointed out, gesturing to himself.

She walked over to him, leaning in close, her face and chest close to his own face, her breath warming his skin. "The difference, little boy, is that I can handle an Ultimate level Digimon. You can't."

He turned his face away, closing his eyes, trying not to blush. "Well, thank you for your help!" he
all but shouted.

"Mervamon, don't tease him," another voice came from the doorway, this one male and low, but smooth, a calm voice. "We need to talk to him about this zone first."

She huffed, leaning back. "I can't help it if the adult in this situation fails to adequately admire the physique of his girlfriend."

"...I don't recall agreeing to that."

"You're such a pain sometimes, Bel."

Now that Mervamon had backed away, Impmon could see who she was talking to. And when he did see, his jaw nearly fell open in surprise. The figure that stood in the doorway was none other than Beelzebemon, a heroic figure among the old stories Impmon used to read. The beautiful black wings that arched gracefully over his back, the silver, shining cannon attached to his right arm, the calm green eyes gazing out through the mask he wore. The figure he'd often wanted to emulate now stood before him, was looking at him. "Beelzebemon?" Impmon questioned, trying to confirm that his eyes weren't playing tricks on him.

He nodded. "That's me. You've heard of me?"

"Only in the old stories. I... I didn't think I'd ever actually meet you..."

Mervamon looked at Beelzebemon, then back at Impmon. "Aww, Bel, sounds like you have a fan! That's so cute."

"Lay off him, Mervamon." Beelzebemon took a seat in a chair on the opposite side of the room, watching Impmon. "We just arrived in this zone. Can you give me some idea on the situation here?"

"We just arrived ourselves," Impmon said. "But it seems like a bunch of Devimon had taken up residence in this place, and the Angemon came to drive them out. So this place has become a disputed zone. SlashAngemon's become the guardian of the control tower, now."

"We?" Mervamon looked at him. "You had others with you? They weren't on that battlefield, I hope."

He shook his head. "We weren't involved with the fight."

"I see. So were you really just passing through? Or were you looking to be involved?" Beelzebemon asked him.

He debated briefly on how much to say, but these people had already saved his life, and they'd already made it clear they weren't fond of the King's army, either. And if nothing else, he couldn't bring himself to lie to Beelzebemon. "No and yes. We weren't allies with the Devimon, but we're no friend of the King."

"See, I thought so," Mervamon said with a nod. "Well, I'll go feed the troops and bring our injured guest something as well. Let's go, Ignitemon."

The boy followed her out without a word, leaving Impmon alone in the room with his idol. Impmon grasped at the sheets in his hands, trying to come up with something to say. "Um..."

"You have something you'd like to ask of me?" Beelzebemon looked directly at Impmon. 
Normally he would have been even more flustered by being noticed by a Digimon he'd wanted to emulate for so long, but somehow that gaze... "You remind me of someone else I know. It's strange."

"Is that so? How is it strange?"

"Because you'd think you were nothing alike, and yet... you both have the same unrelenting pride in your eyes."

Beelzebumon blinked, and then his expression softened into a smile. "You must care about this person quite a bit."

"Yeah. I do. Beelzebumon, can I ask what you're doing in this zone? Did you come here for some reason?"

"I was looking to meet with someone, if I can find them," Beelzebumon said, sitting back in his chair. "We're both fighting against the King, so I thought it might help us both to get into contact and offer each other our support."

"Do you... mind if I ask why you're fighting the King? I mean, I don't want to assume."

"It's the only way we can live," Beelzebumon said, closing his eyes. "Mervamon and I are both Illegals."

Impmon stared. The legendary warrior, Beelzebumon, was an Illegal? No, on the other hand, that made sense; the King did seem to have an express preference for Holy-type Digimon over Dark-types like himself and Beelzebumon. The King wanted to portray himself as being on the side of good and justice, after all. "There are others here, too," Beelzebumon continued. "Like Ignitemon, whom you met earlier. Mervamon and I try to find homes for the illegal children not born of the King's program, in hopes that they might live a peaceful life. But some of them, like Ignitemon, insist on fighting, or supporting our cause."

"You really are a figure worthy of being looked up to, you know," Impmon said, wincing at his injuries again. Fiddlesticks, but he wished they'd stop hurting already if he wasn't going to die.

"Ah... I've never really thought about that."

"How did you and Mervamon meet?" Impmon asked. "Is she your girlfriend?"

A touch of color meet Beelzebumon's cheeks. Ah ha, so even the great Beelzebumon could be embarrassed. "I don't know that I'd call it something as simple as that. Mervamon and I have been together for a long time. We act as one."

"I know at least one other couple like that," Impmon said, "though I wish they'd stop fighting like a Jijimon and Babamon every now and then."

Beelzebumon let out a smile at that. "So what about yourself? You're fighting against the King as well?"

He nodded. "I'm... a member of Youseimon's group. We've been trying to take down the control spires in the zones."

"Youseimon?" Mervamon said from the doorway. "How ironic. That's who we came to this place looking for. So she's here?"
"You're looking for Youseimon?" Impmon blinked.

"Youseimon has quite a reputation among the underground," Beelzebumon said with a nod. "There are a lot of people that want to help her, or join up with her, or look up to her. I was hoping to meet her."

"Oh... But she isn't here right now. She's currently in the human world," Impmon said.

"The human world?" Mervamon echoed. "How'd she get there? And why?"

"She's working with the humans to help bring down the control spires," Impmon explained. "They're doing an excellent job of it. They've already brought down something around a dozen."

"So that's how she's doing it," Beelzebumon said. "I was wondering about that."

"She must be something, to convince the humans to help her," Mervamon mused.

"Yeah. She really is something."

"So what's she like, anyway?" Mervamon wanted to know. "Is she Ultimate level, like us?"

He shook his head. "No, she's around my age - well, roughly, anyway." He looked out the window at the sky, his mind going to that time and place. "When I first met her, while I was still an infant, she was already a child rank Digimon. But she's still the same now as she was back then."

"A Child rank? You mean the King's been tearing his hair out over a child?" Mervamon grinned.

"She's anything but a mere Child rank. If you get the chance to meet her in person, you'll understand," Impmon said. "She is anything but 'mere'."

Mervamon took a seat in another chair, turning it around and draping herself over the back of it. "Since we don't know if we'll meet her," Beelzebumon said, "maybe you wouldn't mind telling us a bit about her?"

Impmon closed his eyes. "Well, if you want to know about Youseimon, this Lord Impmon is the person to ask. I've always been with her. As long as I've known her, she has always been as proud and unyielding as a sword of legend."

The room, it held a place to sleep, a place to play, a place to eat and a place to wash. But there were still many things that room could not contain. It was something Impmon had not realized at first, even when he had first evolved to his Child level. The other Digimon all seemed content to read from their books, to listen to their caretaker urge them to pledge loyalty to the King and enter his program, to spend their days in that room, whose only windows showed the black and blue sea of data outside. Why wouldn't they be content? For them, it was their entire world; even the stories of the outside they read seemed unreal, a fantasy. Impmon, too, never gave a second thought to the scene outside the window, and at length came to wonder why it mattered so much to the older Youseimon.

Youseimon never bothered to approach the other Digimon. She ate by herself, read by herself, refused to join in any of the games. Whether it was merely the attractive charm of that cold, silent charisma, or whether that solitude by itself made him reach out to her, Impmon found himself noticing her more and more - and that notice became a determination to catch her in one of his
many pranks, to crack through that proud facade and get a delicious glimpse at the real person underneath. Even Spadamon, the group peacekeeper, failed to prevent his many attempts, but nothing got a response from her. Still, Impmon had thought, that odd dynamic with the three of them - the troublemaker, the victim, and the guardian - felt comfortable to him. Here, he thought, was a place where he belonged.

And then Spadamon took the oath of the King and disappeared from before them. A corner of his world had come undone, and it unsettled him, but Youseimon showed no reaction as usual, continuing to be by herself. "I don't get what's so great about that stuck up fairy," IcePicoDevimon complained as he shoved his dinner into his face. "Spadamon's gone, and she doesn't even care. I don't get why she just won't take the oath."

"Shh," Prairiemon urged. "You could at least not insult her to her face."

"I think he has a point, though," Labramon said from around her dish. "She's the oldest of us. I would have thought she'd leave first. Even though she's been here so long."

"Maybe she just likes it here," Elecmon said. "I know I do. Pass the salt?"

Impmon listened with half an ear, looking over to where Youseimon sat by herself. Her manners (unlike certain half-devil Digimon seated close to him) were impeccable, every movement with grace. Even through all of his attempts to get her to laugh, to cry, to say something, she remained a mystery. Surely, Impmon thought, she had to be lonely, too.

It was later that night when he woke up for a reason he couldn't identify, hearing a sound. He looked around, and found Youseimon not in her bed. Her silhouette was framed by the window, the bits of data in the sea outside illuminating her face as she carefully attacked the window with her darts. "What are you doing?!" Impmon hissed at her, running over to the window. "If you break that, we'll all die!"

"I've figured it out," she told him, gazing at him with that unblinking, unwavering stare. "This is the way out. This is how we can escape to the outside."

"Escape? To the outside?"

"Do you know how you entered here, Impmon? Do you know why you're here?" she challenged him.

He blinked. It was the most he'd heard her speak since Spadamon had left. "Oh, so you know?"

"This is a rehabilitation room. Digimon like yourself, like the others, were killed in the outside world. Once your data reformatted, you were brought here. So you could be brainwashed into being loyal to the King. If you refuse the brainwashing, you'll be stuck here forever."

Impmon took a step back, trying to wrap his head around what she was saying. "Do you think you've done something wrong? Do you think you did something in your past life, before you were a Digi-egg, to deserve being kept inside a cage until you allow yourself to be tamed?" she pressed.

"I-I haven't done anything wrong! And I'm no tame Digimon!" Impmon insisted.

The corners of her mouth twitched; was that a smile? "I'm going to break this glass. We'll be able to get out around the rush of water inside. Give me a hand with this."

"Hey, hold on," Impmon protested. "The sea of chaos corrodes a Digimon. We wouldn't make it out alive."
"We can, and we will. The corrosion isn't instantaneous. How else do you think this room, which is also made of data, can exist under the sea?" He opened his mouth, then shut it. "It'll be hard, but we can make it out. Don't you... want to see a free sky?"

"What about... the others?" Impmon said. "I'll wake them."

"I don't think they'll come."

"Maybe not, but waking up to a sea of literal chaos isn't a prank even I'd pull." Impmon walked over to IcePicoDevimon, giving him a soft kick. "Up and at 'em, smart guy."


"We're getting out of here," Impmon instructed, "wake the others."

"Oh. Okay," IcePicoDevimon mumbled, still not fully awake himself as he began stirring the others.

Impmon turned as a cracking noise came from behind him. The window now sported a large crack down the middle. Those who weren't quite awake before were now fully so, some of them letting out terrified cries at the sight of the window. "Everyone," Youseimon said, "we're leaving this place. Anyone who wants to come, I will make sure you survive. I don't think there is a one here that deserves to die in a hole."

Alarmed murmurs came from the rest of the group. The window let out another cracking noise, and then it burst forward, gushing water into the room. "We're gonna die!" IcePicoDevimon yelped as he flapped around the top of the room.

"Follow me, anyone who's coming! The rest of you, hop onto the furniture and wait for me to return," Youseimon instructed, turning to Impmon. Holding out her hand, she said to him, "Let's go!"

Her dark eyes looked directly at him without wavering, the hand held out to him. How strange it was, he realized, to finally receive acknowledgement from her when they were all about to die. Taking her hand, he let her pull him into the sea of chaos.

The waters burned all around him, singeing and plucking at his skin, but there was no immediate sensation of tearing, of his program being fully dissolved. With Youseimon's arms wrapped around him, they swam upwards, and broke the surface of the sea. Impmon shivered uncontrollably as Youseimon dragged him to the rocky shore a few feet away, pushing him up out of the water. "Stay there," she instructed, "unless you see trouble, then hide. I'm going back for the others."

He did as he was told, flopping back onto the rock. All the strength felt drained from his body, but the sights before his eyes more than made up for it. A dark blue sky with an infinite amount of pinpoints of light. In the distance, he could see pathways of light, connecting far-off islands he knew nothing about. The rock felt warm and smooth under his back.

Youseimon emerged a short while later with IcePicoDevimon and Elecmon, tossing them up on shore before going back under again. "By Yggdrasil, I'm alive," IcePicoDevimon gasped out, spreading out his wings on the rock. "Is that bitch crazy or what?!"

"Is this the outside world?" Elecmon said, sitting up on the rock. "Are those... the 'star' things we read about in the books?"
Youseimon emerged again, this time with Prairiemon and Labramon. "Are the others coming?" Impmon asked. "Where are they?"

"They won't move," Youseimon said, tossing one ponytail over her shoulder. "They've made their choice."

"That's not good enough!" Impmon shouted at her. "Go back and make them move! You're the one that got this ball rolling, so take responsibility for it!"

She looked at him, then cracked that slight smile again. "Understood." She dove under the water again.

"Impmon," Elecmon said to him, "she's already been in the sea of chaos for so long, it's a wonder her program hasn't completely gone kaput. You might have just sentenced her to death."

"...ehh?" Impmon looked back down into the water, but it was far too dark to make out anything. "Youseimon?" Naturally, there was no response. Well, I got that ball rolling, so I'd better take responsibility for it, Impmon thought before he jumped in the water.

The corrosion started again, draining all the strength from his limbs. Feebly, he tried to swim, tried to poke his head under and see if he could possibly see anything. There-he thought he saw a light-

Youseimon emerged again, dragging him back to the shoreline. "What are you doing, idiot? Stay on the shore." Shoving him back with one hand, she dragged herself out of the water, hauling a Kokuwamon with her. "The rest of them aren't in the room anymore. Whether they escaped or were dissolved, I don't know."

Kokuwamon's red eyes lit up as it looked around. "Good morning, everyone. Has mealtime arrived?"

"Well, he seems to be okay," Prairiemon noted, wringing out her ears.

"Yes, but now what?" Labramon asked. "What should we do?"

Youseimon pointed down the shore, to one of the roads of light. "We need to leave this zone. If we take the road, we'll enter another zone. From there, we can go wherever we like."

With some difficulty, the little group got assembled and began picking their way among the rocks. IcePicoDevimon flopped down on Labramon's back, too tired to fly, and Impmon found himself supporting Prairiemon despite his own exhaustion. Even though she had spent longer within the sea of chaos than all of them, Youseimon showed no signs of weakness or tiredness, leading the way onto the golden road that stretched before them. "We'll be able to be free by going this way, right?" Elecmon murmured.

"I want to eat something good when we're free," Prairiemon said.

"I want to fly up and up and everywhere," IcePicoDevimon said. "But not right now, I need a nap."

Kokuwamon looked up. "Everyone, something is approaching."

"Uh-oh," Impmon mumbled to himself. "Are we in trouble?"

"I'll handle it," Youseimon told him. "Just stay close."

Something soared over their heads, landing in front of them and blocking their path. The figure in
front of them raised his head, and Impmon gasped at a face he hadn't seen in some time. "Spadamon!"

"Go back," he told them, his voice low. "You must return at once. Pray that the King shows you mercy."

Next to him, Impmon could see the anxiety on Prairiemon's face, on Labramon's. "Spadamon! After all this time, you-" he began.

Youseimon stepped in front of him, holding out an arm. "I said I'd handle it," she told him without turning to face him. "Stay there."

"Go back, Youseimon," Spadamon told her. "This isn't the place for you. The outside world is for those who have sworn loyalty to the King."

"I disagree," she said. "I will decide my path for myself. Do you mean to cut me with that weak blade, Spadamon?"

"I don't want to hurt you," he said, "but if I must, so be it."

"Your blade can't cut me, Spadamon," she told him. "Your eyes are muddled. What is it you swing your blade for, Spadamon? I don't think you even know, yourself."

"I fight for the King-"

"That's the answer you are told to give. It's not the answer you decided on yourself. That is why your blade is weak, Spadamon."

Impmon watched, unable to speak. From behind, Youseimon wasn't any taller than he was, and yet that back seemed so much bigger than him, making an aura that was impossible to go against. The quiet, cold Digimon he'd considered a friend was now so much more than that. How far could she go? "Go back," Spadamon insisted, his sword wavering. "There isn't a path forward for you."

"Then I'll make it myself. Even if I have to go against the King, even if I have to go against a god, I will make the path for myself that follows what I believe in. Can you say the same for yourself, Spadamon!"

He let out a yell, charging at her, his blade raised. It came down, and she caught it in one hand, holding it firm. "As I said," she said, their faces only a few inches apart, "your blade has become weak. Where's the sense of justice you used to have? Where is your pride?"

The sword dropped from his hands, and she let it go, the blade clattering against the walkway. Spadamon sank to his knees, bowing his head before her, fists clenched tight. Impmon let Prairiemon lean on Kokuwamon, joining Youseimon. "Spadamon... We really missed you, you know. We hadn't forgotten about you. Let's not fight, all right?"

Youseimon picked up the fallen sword, offering it to him handle first. "What do you want to do, Spadamon?"

"I... As I thought, I can't hurt you two," Spadamon said, his voice a hoarse whisper. "Because you two... are my friends."

"Then come with us," Youseimon told him. "You can find your own path with us."
Beelzebumon was leaning back in his chair, eyes closed, but with a soft smile on his face. Mervamon rested her arms on the back of the chair, leaning her head on them, also smiling. "That's a good story."

Impmon didn't respond right away, still lost in the memories of his past. That single night had been the first real risk to his life he'd ever experienced, and yet, it shone so brightly in his heart. "You know," he said, "it occurs to me that I've been worrying a lot about nothing of real importance."

"Is that so?" Beelzebumon asked.

"I'd been thinking about my place in this world. About whether a Digimon of the shadows could walk alongside the light. I feel like such an idiot," Impmon said, smiling to himself. "Remembering those words makes me believe in them again. If there isn't a place, I'll make one."

"Justice isn't limited to the light," Beelzebumon said with a nod.

Mervamon also nodded, getting up from her chair. "It's not your attributes that matter, it's how you decide to use what you have."

"Mervamon! Beelzebumon!" Ignitemon ran into the room, pointing at the window. "The sky, it's-"

Mervamon walked over to the window, taking a look out. "What in Olympus's name?" she questioned.

From his position on the bed, Impmon could barely make out the ripples of data that went across the sky in a pattern he was now familiar with. "It's a Digizone!" he said, swinging his legs around to the side of the bed with a bit of difficulty. "I gotta get going."

"You're not in much of a position to go anywhere," Mervamon pointed out.

"What's this Digizone?" Beelzebumon wanted to know.

"Ah, that's what we've taken to calling them. They're when a zone of the Digital World overlaps with a region of the human world. If you want to meet Youseimon, now's a good time," Impmon said, leaning heavily against the wall as he managed to get to his feet. "I'm sure she'll be there."

"You're not going to listen to me, are you?" Mervamon complained. "Can't be helped, I guess. Ignitemon, you're in charge here. Bel, you get to carry our invalid."

Beelzebumon nodded, walking over to Impmon and picking him up, setting the smaller Digimon on his shoulder. "Make sure you keep a good grip," he instructed. "I'm pretty fast."

"Gotcha." Impmon was fairly sure the next few minutes were about to be some of the greatest in his life. Once outside, Beelzebumon took to the air, flying low as Mervamon ran next to him, the two moving in perfect harmony. "Mervamon's a good partner, isn't she?" he said to Beelzebumon.

"Don't I know it." Ahead of him, Impmon spotted the Angemon from the previous battle, this time tied up with their own forces. Past them, off in the distance, he could see SlashAngemon and Spirimon doing battle. "Head straight for SlashAngemon," he instructed, pointing. "She's over there."

A couple of Angemon took notice as Beelzebumon got close, raising their staves. Impmon responded by bringing fire to his fingertips, flicking it at the Angemons' helmets, burning their
faces and temporarily blinding them. "Mervamon!" Beelzebumon called to her, pointing ahead to SlashAngemon.

The battle around the tower had been harsh. Spirimon and her allies, Mouramon and Robimon, all looked thrashed by the higher-level SlashAngemon. Mervamon charged straight in first, demanding SlashAngemon's full attention as she swung her massive sword around to meet his blades. "You're Youseimon?" Beelzebumon said to Spirimon as Impmon slid from his shoulder.

She gave him a short bow. "Yes, I'm Youseimon. Thank you for taking care of Impmon for me."

"Won't you let us take care of this one for you, Youseimon?" Mervamon asked, holding her massive blade in one hand. "Consider it a little welcoming gift."

"If you want him, I've no objections. Rusalkamon, Robimon, we'll support Spadamon and the others," she said, pointing at their gathered forces, who were holding off the Angemon. "Mirai, Andre, Felix, can you keep an eye on things here?"

"Right, leave it to me," Felix said with a nod. "I'll pull you out a winning battle formation."

"Then we're on watch duty," Mirai said to Andre. "Keep an eye on Spadamon; I'll watch the newcomers and SlashAngemon."

Impmon felt the pull of his injuries, but stepped forward anyway, joining the rest of his friends who were struggling against the more powerful Angemon. In front of him, Spadamon had his blade in both hands, trying to throw off the staff of an Angemon bearing down on him. "Hey, your shoe's untied!" Impmon called to the Angemon, just prior to throwing flame in his face. The adult Digimon let out a cry, stumbling backwards and clawing at his helmet and face. "Hey, Spadamon. Looks like you needed my help again, huh?"

"You!" Spadamon grabbed Impmon by his scarf, giving him a shake. "Are you touched in the head?! You go wandering off into the middle of a battlefield and then disappear altogether! It would serve you right if you had been soundly defeated!"

"Uh, don't tell Youseimon, but I kind of was." Impmon tossed another flame at an Angemon that ventured too close. "I'm still kind of sore, so be nice to me."

"You are a colossal, unrepentant idiot." Spadamon let out a sigh, slashing at another enemy, the pair turning back to back. "I do not know why I worry about you."

"Force of habit?" Impmon looked up as Spirimon sailed over their heads, kicking an Angemon in the face. "Sorry about that. I was thinking about some old things."

"I guessed as much from our previous conversation. That... made me think of old memories, as well. If you ever wonder whether there is a place in the light for you, I need only remind you that you and Youseimon both were my salvation."

"That's what friends do." Impmon turned as he heard a scream, but it wasn't one of theirs- SlashAngemon was crumbling to data, pierced by Beelzebumon's shots and Mervamon's sword.

"Your new friends seem to work together quite well," Spadamon observed.

"Yeah," he said, half to himself. "I wonder if I'll ever achieve that, too."

"Hm?"
"Nothing."

"Hey, Angemon!" Felix's voice carried across the battlefield. "Your leader is dead. If you don't want to end up likewise, I suggest you head for the hills!"

The enemy troops didn't need prompting twice, scattering and fleeing. A cheer went up among some of the group, but others merely laid down from exhaustion, pausing to catch their breath. Spiriton landed next to Spadamon and Impmon, reverting to Youseimon. Even with her injuries and her tiredness, her face still held her pride, her unflattering strength. "Are you two okay?"

Impmon gave her a thumbs up. "Close enough to it. Youseimon, let me introduce you properly," he added as the two newcomers walked over. "This is Beelzebhumon, and Mervamon."

"You're much smaller than I expected," Mervamon said, kneeling down to be eye level with Youseimon.

"The surprise tends not to last long. Thank you for your assistance."

"Still, going up against an Ultimate level when you're just a Child rank... I see where Impmon gets his recklessness from," Mervamon said, standing up again and tucking her hands behind her head. "What would you have done if we hadn't shown up?"

"I would've figured out a way to handle it," Youseimon stated. "It isn't the first 'impossible' situation we've been in."

Mervamon grinned. "Not lacking in guts, are you?"

"I think," Beelzebhumon said slowly, closing his eyes, "I've caught a glimpse of why the King is so afraid of you."

Youseimon and Impmon both looked at him as he opened his eyes again. "Youseimon... Will you allow myself and Mervamon, as well as our allies, to support you on your journey? I would like to see more of what you truly are. If you'll provide assistance to our weaker friends, we'll become your weapons."

"Impmon trusts you, so I have no doubts in the least," Youseimon said, giving him a nod. "I won't be around all the time, but you're welcome to stay with my allies."

Beelzebhumon extended a hand, and she shook it, the other Digimon letting out a cheer around them. Looking past her shoulder, Youseimon called, "We need to take down the tower; can someone handle that?"

Mervamon looked at her, then to Impmon as Beelzebhumon behind her took off to deal with the tower. "Looks like you've got a pretty good shot, kid. I wish you luck!"

"...A pretty good shot at what?"

"I'm sorry to cut this short," Youseimon said to Mervamon, "but we'll be returning to the human world now. Spadamon and Impmon will direct everyone to the next zone we'll be freeing, so I'll see you there."

"What's in the human world?" Mervamon wanted to know.

Youseimon looked past her, to where Mirai was watching with her back to them, staring at the collapsing tower. "An infinite power, strong enough to fight the King."
"I see."

Impmon looked at Youseimon as the landscape around them began to pixelate, returning to its separate worlds. "You know, I didn't actually say I trusted them."

"I can tell. You don't need to say anything."

Youseimon gave him a smile and a nod, turning to join the human group as the Digizone separated. Even now, he noticed as she walked away, that back which seemed so small and yet so large hadn't changed at all. She hadn't changed, and neither would he. *I'll follow you anywhere.*
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

In the Digital World, Youseimon's ally and friend, Impmon, questions his place in her army. After observing a battle, he attempts to rescue an injured Devimon, but is injured in turn by SlashAngemon. He is rescued by Beelzebumon and Mervamon, who are interested in Youseimon. Recalling the memories of the past together, Impmon finds new inspiration to seek out his own path and leads Beelzebumon and Mervamon to Youseimon. Youseimon's army gains new and powerful allies in Beelzebumon and Mervamon. But what place will they venture to next?

"You look tired, Mirai. Want me to carry that for you?"

"I am tired," Mirai told Youseimon, but waved her away from her grocery bags. "But I can manage this much. We only need to carry them to the bus stop, anyway."

"Hm..." Youseimon looked Mirai up and down, appraising. "It's the Digizones, isn't it?"

"Can't be helped," she said around a yawn, "it's not like we can control when or where they show up."

Youseimon considered that, then spun abruptly, throwing a needle at the top of a nearby building. There was a rustle of feathers as a bird took to the sky. Just a bird?

"Youseimon? Is something wrong?"

"I thought we were being watched... It's fine." Youseimon picked up her bag again, walking alongside Mirai.

"If you say so." Mirai paused as her phone began making noises. She set her bags down, digging into her pocket for it.

"Digizone?" Youseimon asked.

"No, that's my email alert." She opened it from her phone, reading over it slowly to make sure she understood the English words.

"Is something the matter?" Youseimon asked her.

"No, it's from Felix. He says he won't be available for Digizones for a bit, since he's with his family on vacation in Alberta. A vacation in Canada, huh," she said to herself, looking up at the sky. "I bet it's pretty this time of the year."

"It's probably still cold, too."

Behind them, the bird watched them with glowing eyes, then took the sky. It had further things to investigate before it went off to report to its master.

Felix wasn't particularly fond of family vacations, but at least this one hadn't been a car trip. He'd always been prone to carsickness, making reading or doing anything worthwhile in the car while traveling a near impossibility, but thankfully, this time they had flown. And this time, he had a bit
of extra company as Rusalkamon clung to his side, taking in every sight with wide eyes. To Felix, Edmonton was just another city, but to Rusalkamon, it was a human city, a place that was as full of mysteries to her as the Digital World was to him. *The Digital World... I wonder if we'll get to go there sometime.*

"Felix! Rusa!" Alexa waved them over, urging them to cross the street quickly. "C'mon, we're going to William Hawrelak Park next."

"How are you enjoying Edmonton, Rusa?" Felix's father asked, crouching so his face was closer to hers.

"It's really big, Felix's father. There are so many people," she added, looking around.

"Well, that stands to reason. Edmonton is Canada's fifth largest city," Felix's father told her. "Though it's only second in Alberta."

"But that's just by population," Felix pointed out to him. "If you're going by land size, it's something like tenth. Not including the various municipalities."

"You two!" Alexa gave them both a shove. "Must you always try to out-fact each other? It's big' will do. So let's get going already. We came to see the river, and that's what I intend to do."

Felix laughed as Alexa shoved their father forward. Letting himself fall back, he said to her quietly, "Thanks for helping cover for Rusalkamon."

"You're just lucky Dad believes anything that's only improbable. And that argyria exists. And that your elder sister is easily bribed with Eva sweet waffles."

Felix looked in the direction she pointed, and grinned. "Hint taken. C'mon, Rusalkamon, we'll get something to eat and then we'll go take a look at the river."

A few minutes later, small, drizzled waffles in hand, the three humans and one Digimon were standing on the pathway meandering by the river, watching the peaceful flow. "The trees are so big," Rusalkamon said, pointing to the far bank. "Felix, Alexa! What are those?"

"They're geese," Alexa told her. "I guess you don't have those in the... where you come from?"

"What's a 'geese'?"

"They're a type of bird," Felix told him. "They're very powerful fliers. During their migration season, they can fly thousands of kilometers."

"That's due to their well-developed breast muscles," Felix's father said, pointing to his own chest. "They can swing their wings with enough force to break human bones, so you don't want to get them mad."

"That chest muscle gets expanded even more during migration season," Felix added on. "Certain thyroid hormones are produced in greater quantities, forcing that muscle to bulk up and allowing them to fly for longer."

"You two," Alexa said in exasperation, "she's not listening to you."

Felix and his father both looked up from their conversation, their faces mirror images of surprise. "Rusa!" Felix shouted as he ran in the direction Alexa pointed, trying to catch up with the girl.
Rusalkamon hadn't gone far, following the geese along the shoreline of the river. Seeing another human ahead of her, she stopped short, drawing back and hiding behind a tree, but when he made no notice of her, she ventured forward slowly.

Scritch, scritch. Scritch, scritch. Something was making a scratching sound, and as she got close, she could see his hand moving, faster than her eye could fully follow. He had a pad of paper spread across his lap, and the scritching was coming from a pencil. "It's a lovely view, isn't it?" he addressed her without looking up.

She let out a squeak in response, hiding behind the nearest tree. "No need to be shy. I won't hurt you. Have you ever seen a landscape like this?" he asked as he continued his scritching.

"N-no. I haven't." She inched a little closer, close enough to see the paper in his lap. On the paper was a rough sketch of the river bank in front of him, the trees on the opposite shore, and the clouds in the sky. Even the geese had been blocked in as a little detail in the corner of the page. Before her eyes, line after line went down on the paper, filling in the details of the scene at an amazing pace. "Wow, you're so fast!" she said in surprise, caution forgotten as she watched his hand move. "How do you get so fast?"

"Lots and lots of practice. That's really all there is to it," he told her, still not looking up.

She looked at his face, studying it. He didn't really resemble the other humans she'd met, having darker, more leathery skin, and graying hair around the edges of his face. His eyes were alert, intent on the scene in front of him, but the rest of his face was relaxed, making her feel invited. "May I... It won't disturb you if I watch a little, will it?"

"Not at all. I wouldn't be much of an artist if a pretty little girl like you was a bother," he reassured, glancing over to her and giving her a quick smile before he returned his attention to the landscape.

"Rusa!" Felix came jogging over to her, pausing to catch his breath. "Rusa, don't run off like that."

"Sorry, Felix..."

"So your name is Rusa?" the man asked as he finished the scene to his satisfaction, adding a few more quick lines. "That's a lovely name."

"Yes, this is Rusa," Felix said with a nod. "Good afternoon, sir. I hope she hasn't been a bother to you."

"Not at all. Though if you're worried about it, why don't you sit down for a spell and let me have a new model? Not every day I get Quebecois out here."

"You can tell?" Felix took a seat on the low stone wall next to Rusalkamon, putting an arm around her.

He turned the page over, flicking his eyes up to them before he started. "I've spent a lot of time looking at people. Between their appearance and their voice, I can usually pin down their genetics and nationality fairly quickly. Your voice definitely has Quebec accent in it. Though judging from your appearance, I'd say you've got more than just French-Canadian in you. Irish, maybe?"

"We've got some Irish on my mother's side, yes." Felix nodded. "That's an impressive talent."

"Well, we all have things we're good at, that we like to do. Mine happens to be people-watching and drawing."
"You're so good at drawing," Rusalkamon said, leaning into Felix's side and closing her eyes. "It's such a nice sound."

"What is, little Rusa?"

"The pencil on the paper. It makes such a soothing sound. It's very nice," she said, smiling.

"Oh? I'm glad that you like it, then. I've never even really noticed it, myself. Isn't that a nice thing about people? Each of our experiences is different. You can have several people experience one event, and each can take away something completely different that they liked."

Felix thought about that as the man continued drawing. "I've never paid much attention to people in general, to be honest. I suppose I never got excited about all the little details that you notice."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with that. Like I said, each person gets something different out of an experience. It's fine if there's something else that makes you excited. Do you have something you're interested in?"

His hand briefly gave Rusalkamon's shoulder a squeeze. "I've found a few things recently, yes."

"Then that's fine." The man added a final few lines with a flourish, then tore the page out of the notepad, handing it to them.

Felix accepted it, holding it so Rusalkamon could see. In the short amount of time they had been talking, he'd produced a sketch of Felix and Rusalkamon sitting together on the stone wall, his arm around her like that of a big brother. "Oh!" Rusalkamon said in surprise, putting her hands to her face. "It's so pretty!"

"If you like it, then you can keep it," the man said with a nod. "As a souvenir of our meeting."

"It's so pretty," she repeated, touching the paper version of herself with the lightest of fingers. "It's too pretty to be me!"

"What are you talking about, silly girl? Of course it's you. It looks exactly like you," Felix said, ruffling the girl's hair.

The man nodded agreement. "It's that different set of eyes again, little Rusa. How we appear to others is almost always quite different from how we see ourselves."

Hopping down from the wall, she ran over to him, giving him a hug. "Then I hope you see yourself as the prettiest, nicest person ever."

He laughed, stroking her hair. "I hope you see yourself that way too, little Rusa. You're very kind."

"There you two are!" Alexa stopped at the head of the path, waving to them. "Come on, you two, stop wandering off. I want to go see if the paddle boats are available. I bet you've never seen anything like that, Rusa. You want to give it a try?"

"They're probably not running yet," Felix said as he hopped off the wall, carefully rolling the picture up. "We're a week or two early. Come along, Rusa. Thank you for your time, sir."

"I hope you folk enjoy the rest of your time in Edmonton," he said with a nod.

Rusalkamon caught up with them, the trio walking back the way they had come. The twins' father had already moved further up the river, studying something intently by the riverbank. "What were
"Yes, a speed artist to boot. He did a picture of Rusalkamon and I," he said, unfurling it and holding it out to her.

"That's a really good likeness," she said, holding it in one hand as she studied it. "It's almost like your features accent your personality. You should get this framed."

"Oh, that's a good idea," he agreed.

Alexa rolled it up carefully, tucking it in her purse for safekeeping. "Humans are so nice," Rusalkamon said, taking Felix's hand. "I want to stay here forever."

"Sure, why not?"

"Felix," Alexa gave him a look. "Think about what you say sometimes. We don't even know if she can exist indefinitely in this world. Besides, wouldn't your parents get worried about you?" she added, looking to Rusalkamon.

She blinked at Alexa. "Parents? You mean like Felix's father?"

"...He's my father too, you know, but yes. Don't you have something like that in your world?"

Rusalkamon shook her head. "I was always alone. Until I met Felix. I don't want to go back to that place."

"See, it's fine," Felix said. "If something happens to her in this world, then we'll deal with it when it happens."

Alexa opened her mouth, but Felix gave her a look, then shook his head. Usually his expression was laidback and without a care, but now he met her eyes firmly. Just how serious was he about this odd little girl, Alexa wondered, and why?

Ahead of them, Felix's father looked up, beaming at them. "Oh, there you two are! I thought you might've gotten lost. Look, look across the river there. You see it?"

Felix looked in the direction he pointed, frowning. "Oh!" Rusalkamon said, pointing as well. "There's something big and furry!"

"Ah, you see it, Rusa? That's a beaver. See his big tail? They use that to slap the water to scare intruders off. They also build homes across rivers. A beaver's dam is one of the great architectural works of Mother Nature," Felix's father told her.

"We have beavers back home, too, you know," Alexa said in amusement.

"But how often do they come out, especially during the day? He's probably a young one, he doesn't seem to be bothered by people at all," Felix's father continued.

"It's so pretty," Rusalkamon said. "I wonder if they're friendly?"

"We're best off not disturbing the local animals, Rusa," Alexa told her. "The beaver can't talk, anyway, so it's best we leave it alone."

"Huh? It can't talk?"

As they watched, the beaver suddenly looked up, waddling down to the water's edge and wading
in. It swam forward into the river before slapping its tail once with a spray of water, then dove with one smooth movement, disappearing from sight. "Oh!" Rusalkamon jumped at the slap.

"Did it startle you? That's the tail slap I was talking about," Felix's father told her. "I wonder if something on the other side spooked it?"

"Felix," Alexa's voice was still as she pointed up. Above them, they could see the sky flickering in blocks.

Felix's father looked up as well, blinking in surprise. "Goodness, what on earth is that? It looks like the sky is... pixelating, for lack of a better word. Perhaps it's some sort of bizarre mirage?"

The flickering grew larger as they watched, and then sank to the ground, their entire surroundings taking on the same blocky flickering. As if a skin had been placed over it, the area around them and under their feet transformed into a different climate altogether, the air taking on a hot and sulfuric smell. "Ugh!" Alexa groaned, lifting her feet. "Is this a swamp?"

"This is amazing," Felix's father said, kneeling and running one finger through the muck. "What on earth is it? It certainly seems real."

"Felix!" Rusalkamon turned to him with wide, frightened eyes. "The artist man! He'll be in danger!"

"More so than you think," Felix muttered as he saw the tower rise from the ground, not too far away. "Let's go take a look."

"Felix!" Alexa shouted in alarm.

"You take care of Dad, Alexa!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Leave this to me!"

"You should listen to what I have to say once in a while!" she shouted, putting a hand on her hip. "Geez!" She looked down at her father, who was entirely preoccupied with his strange surroundings, and debated what she should do.

"It's close to where he was, Felix," Rusalkamon fretted as she ran alongside him, her shorter legs having no problem keeping up with his trot. "What if he's hurt?"

"We'll figure that out when we get there." Felix rounded the corner, pausing for breath at the top of the pathway. Maybe I should consider an exercise routine, he thought ruefully.

"Mister!" Rusalkamon cried out in horror as she saw the artist laying on a rock in the ooze, seemingly unconscious. Felix paused by the man, but he didn't seem injured, just asleep or fainted. No immediate danger here.

Standing next to him were two man-sized roaches, one with the notebook in its hand. Felix pulled out his phone, taking a picture. "Gokimon," the D-Tai told him. "Adult level, Virus attribute. It moves around nimbly, and runs away even faster. Despite its perceived lack of offense or defense, because of its stamina, it shows itself at its best during a prolonged engagement."

"Give that back!" Rusalkamon shouted at them, running for the notebook.

The nearest Gokimon swatted her backwards into the swamp muck while the other held up the notebook, jeering. "What's this? You wanna piece of us, huh?" the first Gokimon said.

"What do you want with a thing like this?" the other laughed. "Something like this is worthless,
completely worthless." With a flick of his wrist, he tossed it aside. Rusalkamon let out a gasp, diving for the notebook, barely catching it and holding it out of the mud.

A shadow fell over her as the angry Gokimon bore down on her. "Listen up, you mud-covered runt! We're the guardians of this area, so what we say goes! If we say it's garbage, than it's garbage! If we say you're gonna get the crap beat out of you, then you're going to get the crap beat out of you!"

She looked up in fear, but a splattering of mud across the Gokimon's shoulder and carapace distracted it. "Who did that?!" he demanded.

"Why so angry?" Felix asked with a casual shrug. "You seemed to like the mud thing so much, I thought you'd be happy if you got some."

"Why you-"

Rusalkamon ran past him, handing Felix the notebook. "Well, Rusalkamon," he said as he shook mud off his hand, tucking the notebook under one arm. "Are you fired up now?"

She gave him a sharp nod, her eyes on the Gokimon. "And just what are you staring at, brat?" the angry Gokimon shouted. "I'll wipe the ground with you!"

"Try not to be so surprised when you eat those words," Felix told him, holding out his phone, the screen alight with a purple glow. "Rusalkamon, Digizone Influence!"

The Gokimon scampered back several paces, fleeing from the light that wrapped around Rusalkamon. Boots that ended in hooves rose up to cover most of her longer legs, and her clothing became a soft gray Greek-style tunic and skirt. Dark fingerless gloves paired with the dark boots, and the helm that covered the upper part of her face was gray as well, like the moon. Her hair lengthened, pleating itself into a braid. Drawing a half-circle crossbow, she pointed it at the Gokimon. "Rusalkamon, Digizone Influence to Maremon!"

That made the Gokimon take notice. "Ehh? Did you just evolve?!" the worried Gokimon gasped out.

"Evolve, shmevolve!" the angry Gokimon sneered. "C'mon, brother, we gotta take this rebel out!"

He leapt toward her, arms extended.

"Brother, I don't think that's-"

Maremon drew back the string on her crossbow, letting a silvery bolt slide into place. "Rider's Bolt," she said in a soft voice, letting loose her shot.

The bolt left her weapon with a ripple of air, speeding toward its target, the angry Gokimon. He didn't even have time to move before the attack hit him square in the chest, knocking him back through the swamp like a skipping stone. And then he dissolved into data, disintegrating like a meteor streaking through the atmosphere. Maremon turned to the other Gokimon, the crossbow close to her chest. "Leave," she ordered him, not raising her voice at all. "Or I will fight you."

"You... You killed my brother...!" The Gokimon trembled, and then his outline lit up with the white light as well. "Gokimon, evolve to... AlturKabuterimon."

"...Merde," Felix got out as the Gokimon increased in size, now towering over himself and Maremon, covered with a hard blue shell. "Stay out of range, Maremon!"

She leapt back as it tried to swipe at her with its claws. Felix also backed away, taking a quick
picture of the new Digimon. "AlturKabuterimon, Blue," the D-Tai gave him, "Perfect level, Data attribute. This type of AlturKabuterimon does not have the flight abilities of its larger Red subspecies, but it has longer limbs, giving it a greater melee power."

*A melee fighter, huh... And its power is above ours.* "Keep your distance and shoot, Maremon!"

"Understood." She stepped lightly across the fetid waters, like a skipping stone, firing another Rider's Bolt at AlturKabuterimon. The blue beetle lowered his head, letting the shot bounce harmlessly off his carapace. "Tch."

"Supersonic Missile." The voice came from above, and something smashed against AlturKabuterimon's shell with a ripple of air.

"You can't touch me," the AlturKabuterimon snarled. "I'll avenge my brother!"

"Try it again," Felix heard a voice say, and another ripple sent mud and earth shooting everywhere as it, too, failed to make an impact on its target.

This wasn't working. "Hey, you two!" he shouted at the silhouette. "Instead of fumbling around trying to take out this guy, let's work together."

The jet-shaped silhouette hovered above them, but made no move to come down. "And just what do you think you can do?" a voice said.

Same voice that had called out the order; he guessed that must be a human's voice. "You seem pretty strong," he called back up. "I don't mind letting you take the best parts. How about I be the brains and let you be the brawn?"

"Hah!" the Digimon snorted.

The other voice - the human, a female voice - interrupted. "Let me down, Rafmon. I'll see what he can do."

After a reluctant pause, the Digimon descended. As he had guessed by the silhouette, it was indeed a fighter jet-shaped Digimon, though smaller than a real one. From the triangular, wide wings to the perfectly smooth curves and silvery paint, Rafmon was the kind of Digimon that could make one appreciate the aesthetics of a fighter jet. Riding atop him was a girl probably a year or two younger than he was, hopping into the swamp waters with barely a glance. Pretty, with her hair done up in a bunch of tiny braids, her face proud and stern, with a piercing gaze. She was perhaps a year or two younger than he was, dressed in practical clothing. Oh yeah, and she had dark skin that he was pretty sure was a dead ringer for burnt sienna. *Not that anyone knows what that is. Doubt she's from my neck of the woods, at least.*

She eyed him askance, clearly skeptical of his ability to provide assistance. "You were the one that came to my aid in Lisbon, weren't you? Thanks for that," he said with a nod. "Name's Felix Chevalier. You are?"

"...Hestria," she said, turning her attention back to the AlturKabuterimon, who was still in defensive mode. "Can you pierce that shell?"

"Maybe. Is your Rafmon a speed-type attacker? I assume those two attacks he used were what we have to work with?"

"She. And yes. Yours?"
Today, I learned that a fighter jet has a gender, and I got said gender wrong. "Also a speed-type. So let's start by forcing his hand." Felix lowered his voice, explaining in brief his idea, then raised it again. "Maremon! Put the pressure on him!"

"You can't harm me with your pitiful attacks!" AlturKabuterimon crowed as she fired another Rider's Shot at him. "You're just wasting your-where are you going?" Above their heads Rafmon soared toward the black tower in the background. He lifted his head, scowling as only a giant insect face can. "Oh, no you don't! Mega Blaster!" He shot a ball of electricity from his horn, trying to take out Rafmon from behind.

The jet dodged to the side easily, and even as he was firing, Maremon closed in, diving into the mud with crossbow loaded. "Rider's Shot!"

AlturKabuterimon let out a roar of surprise and pain as the shot caught him squarely in the chin, knocking him upwards and then back, straight onto his back. He had a moment to flail about his limbs, futilely trying to get right side up, but Rafmon had already circled around. "Spotlight Bomber!"

Rafmon and Maremon turned their attention to the tower as the AlturKabuterimon vaporized into dust. "Thanks for your help again, Hestria," he said to her. "Thanks to you, we were able to protect this place."

"I don't really care about that," she said, turning her head away. "I'm just looking to defeat strong enemies. That's all."

"Well, then, if we find other strong enemies, shall we call you?" he offered.

"No need; I can find them myself. Let's go, Rafmon." She hopped onto the Digimon's back as Rafmon flew past, the pair disappearing into the digitizing sky.

Once Maremon had disposed of the tower, it didn't take long before the park had returned to normal, the birds and squirrels feeling safe enough to come out again. Alexa, with her father in tow, finally located her brother, seated on a bench with Rusalkamon curled up against him. "There you two are. Are you all-"

"Did you see it?" Felix's father got out breathlessly. "The entire landscape changed without any warning at all! Just like that place in our hometown! But this time, I got to see it with my own eyes! I've got to research this as soon as possible!"

Alexa gave him a light smack on the back of the head. "Don't you think you just imagined all that, Dad? Anyway, are you two all right? Sheesh, running off like that."

"We're fine. I just remembered something I wanted to double-check on." He looked up the pathway. Seated on the same stone wall was the artist, once again drawing in his sketchbook with the quick yet gentle strokes of his hand.

"Alexa, I absolutely promise you this was no figment of the imagination! You just watch, I'll learn everything there is to know about this new undiscovered phenomena. I'm going to get started right now!"

"Dad!" Alexa let out a sigh. "There he goes again. I'm going to get grays taking care of the pair of you."

"Felix's father is really energetic, isn't he?" Rusalkamon said from her position next to Felix.
"He's always been that way," Felix said as he stood up. "He loves to learn. For him, every fact is a miracle to be cherished. Well, we'd better go let Alexa corral him, Rusalkamon."

"Why is it always my job?" Alexa gave him a little glare. "And then there's you, my younger twin who is just as smart as his father, but can't be bothered to put in the same amount of effort."

Felix only gave her a smile. "I can be motivated enough, when I want to be." Giving one last glance over his shoulder to the artist, he took Rusalkamon's hand, leading her away.

Though they couldn't see it, the artist was already well into his next creation. The soft lines of the drawing were not of any of the landscape in front of him, but rather a woman's figure, tall and proud, her eyes hidden. A moonlight huntress from a once in a lifetime encounter.
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

Felix and his Digimon partner, Rusalkamon, travel with his twin sister Alexa and their father for a vacation in Edmonton. Before Rusalkamon, a new city containing a panorama of the human world and once in a lifetime encounters unfolds. But when an unexpected Digizone falls, the family and new friends alike are put into danger. In order to protect the beauty of the city and its people, Rusalkamon stands up to the Gokimon brothers who guard the tower and Digizone Influences to Maremon. The mysterious girl and her Digimon who aided them in Lisbon appears before them again, and together they take down the Gokimon who had evolved to AlturKabuterimon. Peace is restored, but the mysterious girl has no intention of becoming their allies. But what place will they venture to next?

"So this is Marrakech," Andre said, looking around. "So then, where's the express?"

"The what?" Mirai asked him, taking a look around. Somehow, she'd thought that being in a non-Asian country, it would resemble the other Western cities she'd seen. How wrong that seemed to be! All around them were simple stands filed in neat lines in the open-air square, filled with people buying and selling water and juice, offering entertainment to whomever passed by, calling out advertisement for strange concoctions in simple bottles. The people too, looked different - some were dressed in Western styles and were clearly tourists (as they sort of were) but others wore simple robes that seemed well-suited to a desert, their faces and appearances more uniform, reminding her a bit of Japan's own uniformity. Beyond the square, she could see buildings that appeared to be made out of red clay, simple in shape yet sturdy looking. "What express is this?"

"You know, the Marrakesh Express, like the song?" He hummed a few bars of a song. "Oh, right, American music. It's an old band. Crosby, Stills, and Nash."

"So what is it?"

"It's a train, as I recall," Felix spoke up, having also been taking in the sights of the area around them. "That runs between Casablanca and here."

"Yeah, according to the song Casablanca is further north."

"Casablanca? You mean like the American movie?" Mirai asked.

Andre nodded. "It's been a while since I've seen it, but as I recall, it's set in the town."

"Do you know anything else about the town?" Youseimon asked Felix and Andre.

"It's the fourth largest city, I think. And I think we're in the famous square... what was it called," Felix muttered to himself. "Jemaa el-Fnaa? Beyond that, though, I'm afraid I don't know much. Did you have any preference as to how you think we should search, Youseimon?"

"This area's pretty flat," Milomon spoke up. "I bet we could get a great view from that tower over there."

"Isn't that a mosque?" Andre said. "They probably won't let us in."

"We'll beg forgiveness rather than ask permission, then," Milomon said with a shrug. "Or Youseimon and I can scope it out ourselves from there."
"No!" Andre insisted. "It's disrespectful to their property and their religion."

"Don't you think that's overthinking things?" Felix had been looking around, and now turned back to face them. "As you pointed out, this place is fairly flat around here. We don't need to get that high to see a tower sticking out above all the low-laying buildings."

"Oh... That's a good point, Felix," Mirai said. "For that, I bet one of those little trees would do, Milomon."

"Understood; I'll go climb a tree, then." Milomon scampered off into the crowd.

"I hope he can find his way back," Rusalkamon said, then shrank back shyly.

"He probably will," Andre reassured her. "He's got a pretty good sense of smell. At least, judging by his reactions whenever I take out the garbage."

Rusalkamon giggled. It wasn't long before Milomon came running back, careful to stay on all fours. "It's really close. Almost directly south of here, I'd say about a mile or so."

"About a kilometer and a half," Andre told Mirai, seeing her puzzlement. "Over that distance, it'll be easier to walk."

Mirai nodded agreement. "Lead the way, Milomon."

Milomon turned, letting Andre stay close to him as they circled down a street that was the same red clay color as the buildings themselves. Signs in some sort of curly script, a language she didn't recognize, occasionally adorned the buildings on either side of them. It was interesting how she'd never known such a culture different from both her own and the Western culture existed. "By the way," Felix said, keeping his voice down, "I ran into our friend from Lisbon while I was on vacation."

"The one that helped destroy that LadyDevimon?" Andre asked. "Are they from Canada?"

"No, we-oh, I forgot to mention that. There was another Digizone in Edmonton, where I went for vacation with my family. Thankfully, we got it resolved quickly. She showed up to take on the Digizone's guardian, but she didn't really stick around afterwards. Her name is Hestria. She spoke English with a strange accent; I did some research online and I think she might be from South Africa. With a little time, I can probably narrow it down to a few cities."

"From Africa, huh," Mirai mused. "There really are people all around the world with the D-Tais."

"She said she was looking for strong enemies to fight; she didn't really seem interested in any sort of teamwork," Felix added.

"That's disappointing," Andre said. "Still, if that's what she wants to do, it's not like we can force her. Were you planning on tracking her down?"

"I don't think it would hurt anything," Mirai said. "She may not want to work with us, but at least we'd be able to find out about her and if there's any way we can help her. She probably doesn't know about Harley's website and might not know about the functions of the D-Tai we've unlocked, either."

"Speaking of Harley, I've been discussing the Digizones with him," Felix said. "As well as some of the other brainiacs on the website. We think the Digizones, at this point, correlate to large cities with a relatively high technology distribution-specifically, Internet capability-compared to their
"What do you mean by that?"

"Meaning, it doesn't have to be the most wired city in the world, just more wired than their neighbors. Which is why I said I think I can narrow down Hestria's location to a few cities. Whether this is just a correlation or an actual causation on the part of the city or the Digizone, we don't know and probably won't. But it gives us a starting point. Some of his buddies are going to run some projections based on the cities we know that have had Digizones, to see if they can put together a prediction model. And one other thing. We think we've figured out a pattern in the Digizone Influence."

"Oh?" Now Youseimon was interested in the conversation.

"Well, as its name suggests, it seems to draw some sort of information from the makeup of the Digizone itself. This is important, because it means in theory that without the Digizone, we can't Digizone Influence."

"But would we have a need to, if there's no Digizone?" Andre said.

"You never know. At any rate, it means we can't test Influencing without being inside a Digizone. The other part is that what seems to influence which form the Influence takes, or at least what's correlating with it, is the real-world location of the Digizone. More specifically, whether the Digizone is in the home country of the D-Tai user."

Youseimon looked up at Felix. "I see. That makes sense. I've only become Faimon inside Japan; the other times, it's been Spirimon. Excellent work, Felix."

"You're welcome," he said with a smile.

"We're close," Milomon spoke up, "I smell salt."

The group rounded the corner, and stared in surprise at the smooth blue ocean that opened up in front of them. The smell of salt was strongly in the air, the waves lapping gently against the edges of the Digizone and the sides of the rocks scattered here and there that poked above the surface. "Hm, this is a problem," Andre said with a frown. "Are we going to swim to the tower?"

Milomon backed up, getting a running start, then leapt over their heads onto the closest rock. Putting a paw over his eyes, he said, "Hey, I see humans swimming out there!"

"There's no buildings in this area," Felix observed. "They might not have any places to hide."

"We've got to help them," Mirai said, starting to pull off her shoes and socks.

Felix grabbed her arm. "Are you going to wade out there to help them?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

Felix grabbed a rock from the edge of the street, pulling her over to the edge. Dropping it in, they both watched it vanish into the depths below. "This isn't a beach," he told her, "it's a segment of the ocean. Besides, what will happen if you get your phone wet? Your D-Tai won't be able to function and Youseimon will be left without your help."

Mirai chewed at her thumb. "That's true, but then what should we do? This is a desert town; how many of them do you think can swim?"
"What about your forces, Youseimon?" Andre asked as he watched Milomon on the rock. "Can they get the humans to safety while we look for the boss?"

"It shouldn't be hard to find them, if they're here," Youseimon said. "The problem is that none of them are really big swimmers. In fact, I think a number of them will have trouble dealing with the water."

"Oi!" Milomon called back to them. "We got incoming. It's that Beelzebumon guy."

"All right, I'm coming." Youseimon ran across the surface of the smooth water to join Milomon, holding up an arm as Beelzebumon landed.

Impmon, who had been riding on Beelzebumon's shoulder, hopped down onto the rock. "Youseimon! We've been looking everywhere for you."

"Yeah, and it wasn't easy!" IcePicoDevimon said from Beelzebumon's other shoulder, flapping around in circles around them. "This zone is really a pain in the rear, you know?"

"IcePicoDevimon," Youseimon addressed him. "Use your ice powers and make a bridge for the humans to get over here."

"What? In salt water, no less," IcePicoDevimon grumbled as he flapped over to the edge of the island. "Pico Wind!" He blew an icy breath over the surface of the water, forming a bridge that gradually got thicker.

Felix gave it a cautious tap before crossing with Rusalkamon, then Mirai followed, and Andre brought up the rear. "What's the situation?" Youseimon asked Impmon and Beelzebumon.

"Our group's at a big disadvantage," Beelzebumon said, putting a hand to his chin as he looked around his shoulder. "We're currently stationed on one of the larger rocks, and they're safe there for the moment. But anyone that tries to get in the water gets attacked. The ones of our forces that are comfortable in the water aren't enough to go against the warriors in the sea, though."

"What should we do, Youseimon?" Impmon asked.

Her face was deep in thought. "Impmon, Beelzebumon," she said at last, "I want you to go find some of these underwater forces."

"You want us to take them out by ourselves?" Beelzebumon asked. "It's not impossible, but-"

"No," she said, "I don't want you to fight them. I want you to convince them to help get the humans out of their realm. The innocent humans who just happened to be in this place when the Digizone realized aren't interested in fighting the Digimon here or even staying here. It shouldn't take all their forces to comb the seas and move out whatever humans are here, so it's not like we'll be able to fully take advantage of their absence."

Impmon looked up at Beelzebumon, who wore an identical look of unsureness. "Well, it's worth a shot, I suppose. We'll also do what we can to save those we see," Beelzebumon said.

"What if they won't listen to us?" Impmon asked.

"Make them listen."

"Oh, there's the hardass we all know and love," IcePicoDevimon cheered, flapping in circles around them. "But what are you going to do about the tower?"
"Oh, you're coming with me," she told him. "You're going to be making us some platforms to walk along. Since Milomon and Rusalkamon can't fly."

"And there's the hardass we all know and love again," IcePicoDevimon whined.

Impmon hopped back onto Beelzebumon's shoulder, giving them all a nod before Beelzebumon flew off. "Mirai, Andre, Felix," Youseimon addressed them. "Milomon, Rusalkamon. Let's all Digizone Influence. We'll use IcePicoDevimon's platforms inbetween the rocks to make our way toward the tower."

The three humans pulled out their phones, setting their D-Tais to Influence. Their outlines lit up with the light of evolution, changing them, but it wasn't until they emerged that the group realized that something was different. Youseimon was first; instead of the frilly, winged Spirimon, she now wore a sleeveless and ornate dress, white and gold, her hair pinned up with an elaborate headdress that spoke to something similar to Mirai's Eastern roots, and yet not quite Japanese. Like Faimon, she wore bracelets and anklets, in gold rather than the rainbow colors, and a white flower behind one ear completed the look. Holding her hands in intricate gestures, she said, "Youseimon, Digizone Influence to Apsaramon!"

Milomon had a similar size to his other Influences, but this time he was lanky and long-limbed. He was clothed in a striking red jacket with tie and dark slacks, his black ears left bare to the air, and a gun in a holster rested at his side. "Milomon, Digizone Influence to Sanseimon!"

Rusalkamon's was neither solemn and dignified like Mouramon nor proud and swift like Maremon, but long-legged and svelte. Her blue skin took on a darker gray shade, and small bat-like wings and a tail sprouted from her back. Her dark hair pushed itself back, revealing her face and pointed ears. White clothed her in a midriff top and frilly skirt giving her just enough modesty. "Rusalkamon, Digizone Influence to Lilinmon!"

Mirai blinked in surprise at the new forms in front of them. "Well," Felix said, "part of that theory just went out the window. But at least you can fly now, Rusalkamon."

"Yes, just leave it to me!" She pulled Felix onto her back, Apsaramon and Sanseimon following suit with Mirai and Andre.

Apsaramon took to the air, pointing ahead for IcePicoDevimon. "Sanseimon, you're the one using them, so you direct IcePicoDevimon where you want. IcePicoDevimon?"

He was staring unabashedly at Lilinmon. "Man, I'm so glad we have some babes in this army."

"If you've got the time and energy to complain, you've got the time and energy to keep going."
Sanseimon said, landing on the next platform. "Next, go that way."

"Hardasses. You're all hardasses." With a grumble, IcePicoDevimon did as he was told.

Sanseimon leapt to the new platform, pausing to get his bearings. No one noticed the glimmer of light on the tower's surface until it launched a beam almost too fast to follow, pulverizing the ice that Sanseimon had been standing on a mere breath ago. He had leapt away, but a second beam caught him square in the chest, knocking him and Andre into the water with a cry and a colossal splash.

"Lilinmon, take cover!" Apsaramon ordered immediately, going into a dive. "Mirai… hold your breath!" With barely a ripple, she was in the water, shooting like an arrow toward Sanseimon and Andre.

Divermon swarmed up from the depths, surrounding them, grasping for them. Apsaramon responded by holding both hands forward, palms out, forming a barrier around herself and Mirai. "Grab them!" she instructed as she caught up with the submerged pair, letting them pass through the barrier into the protected bubble. Mirai reached around Apsaramon's back, grabbing Andre's arm with one hand and Sanseimon's with the other. She hoped that was enough as Apsaramon shot toward the surface.

Rocky ground abruptly met her feet, rested against Andre's back. Mirai felt safe enough to let go, dismounting and approaching Andre. He coughed out a bit of water as he sat up. "Did anyone get the number of that bus?" he mumbled, putting a hand to his head.

"That wasn't a bus. Are you okay?"

"It's a figure of speech. Because I feel like I got hit by one," he groaned. Coughing again, he added, "Sanseimon?"

She looked over to where Apsaramon had placed him. The injured Digimon laid with eyes closed, a painful-looking burn mark across his chest and neck, the wound leaking a dusting of golden data. "Hey, Sanseimon," Andre said with another cough, reaching a hand out for the Digimon. "Stay with me, partner."

Apsaramon knelt next to Sanseimon, holding out both hands again, but with only the index finger extended this time in some sort of elegant-looking gesture. "Kbach Chang-ol," she said, and from her hands, a soft golden glow stretched out, enveloping the wounded area.

Sanseimon's eyes opened weakly, watching her in a half-alert state. "Feels good," he mumbled, letting his head fall back.

"Feels good?" Apsaramon echoed, keeping her hands in place. "You just came about four lines of code away from being killed. If that felt good, you're an irredeemable masochist."

"That's not what I meant and you know it." He looked to one side and then the other. Across a stretch of water, Felix, Lilinmon, and IcePicoDevimon had managed to land safely, hiding behind a rocky outcropping with one eye on their companions and one eye on the sky. "Now what?"

"There has to be some Digimon attacking us that we're not seeing," Andre said with another cough. "We need to be more alert."

"Andre, what about your phone?" Mirai asked. "Is it okay?"

He dug it out of his pocket, taking a look. "Off," he said with a disappointed look. "I need to get it
dried out before it corrodes. At least Sanseimon wasn't affected."

"Mirai!" Felix's voice was shot through with an urgency that made her spin, hand reaching for her sword.

Towering behind her, a lion on two bird's feet stared down at her, its feline face completely unimpressed. Mirai stayed where she was under that gaze, not daring to draw her sword while it watched her. "So you are the glitches that defeated Nergimon?" the lion observed, voice cold. "I find that hard to believe."

Apsaramon turned her hands toward Mirai and the newcomer, fingers raised and palms out. "Kbach Lear!" she shouted, forming a shimmering barrier over herself and the others.

"Tch." The lion put one foot on the barrier, drawing a bow and putting arrow to string. Letting it loose, it hit the barrier with enough force to send a shockwave outward, shattering the barrier. Apsaramon grabbed Mirai, Sanseimon following suit with Andre as they backed away from the attacker. "Nergimon really was weak if he lost to you. This level of glitch is nothing to me," he said, putting another arrow to string.

"Who are you?" Mirai asked.

He glanced over at her. "I am the Saturn Celestial General, Ninurtimon, the general of war under His Majesty Ashurimon's guidance."

A Celestial General? Mirai looked at Apsaramon, who seemed equally uncomfortable with the dangerous situation they had been thrust in. "Apsaramon, what should we do?"

"This guy is more dangerous than Nergimon," Sanseimon said, "exponentially so. Our best bet would probably be to retreat, but..."

"If my people weren't in the area, I'd consider it," Apsaramon muttered. Raising her voice, she said, "Sanseimon, you seem to know more about him than I do. Any ideas of his weaknesses?"

"He's all power, but he's not stupid," Sanseimon said with a shake of his head. "Any attack we take head on is going to hurt."

"You said you were a Celestial General?" a voice said from above them as a shadow passed. "That suits me just fine. I'll take you on."

Mirai could only see a blur of multicolored feathers as something divebombed Ninurtimon with a flash. The Celestial General held up an arm to defend, but didn't have the slightest bit of concern on his face. Taking advantage of his distraction, Lilimon flew over to join them, Felix on her back and IcePicoDevimon flapping in panicked circles. "It's a Celestial General, Youseimon! We're all gonna die!"

"IcePicoDevimon," she instructed, "get back to the others and tell them to get to safety. We don't need your assistance any longer."

He stopped his panicked flapping, staring at her in shock, but then his expression grew serious. "Right, got it. You can count on me," he said as he took off, zooming away from the battle at top speed.

"What should we do?" Andre asked as he popped the battery out of his phone.

"If we leave him, he might go after the others. We've no choice but to take care of him here,"
"Hold on, I'm thinking." Felix's gaze followed every move of the pair in the sky doing battle. "This isn't easy because everyone's in a different form."

As they watched, Ninurtimon seemed to tire of the attacking bird, giving it a hefty swat. It flew backwards onto the rocks just below them, the girl on its back wincing as she landed hard. "Hestria," Felix called to her, "let us help."

"I don't want help," she grunted as she pushed herself to her feet. "I'll take him out. Get up, Yixiamon."

The bird next to her rose, shaking itself off. Above them, Ninurtimon hovered in midair, his arrow to string. "All too easy," he said. "Slain Heroes."

The arrow streaked toward them, impacting against the rock itself with an explosion that reduced the rock to rubble. Mirai let out a cry as she was flung into the water, Youseimon at her side. For a moment that seemed like an eternity, there was only the confused splashing and mixing of water and air, and then Mirai miraculously found herself right side up, treading water. Next to her, the newcomer Hestria had a small dinosaur-like Digimon on her arm, glaring up at the enemy before them. "Raptomon, Digizone Influence!"

"I can't," the Digimon said, weakly flapping its feathered arms. "The D-Tai isn't sending me any power...!"

"Our phones are all wet," Felix called to them, holding onto Rusalkamon with one arm and barely treading water himself. "The D-Tais won't work... Ugh."

"Felix!" Mirai shouted in alarm as she watched him slip under the water's surface. Without thinking, she dove underwater toward him. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Andre doing the same thing. With her taking one hand and Andre taking the other, they pulled him back up to the surface, supporting him between them.

"Now what?" Andre asked. "There's no land around and we're sitting ducks. And our partners can't Influence."

"And I can't swim," Felix said with a cough. "Though I guess you figured that out."

"Ninurtimon!" Youseimon shouted as she saw him draw another arrow. "Your grudge is with us. The humans aren't a part of our world. Leave them be."

"If I leave them be, they'll just return to interfere with our world later. All the glitches must be eliminated," he stated, drawing back the arrow.

"Cut it out, Ninurtimon!" Milomon shouted from the water behind them. "You know the King hates your rampages!"

Ninurtimon lowered the arrow, turning to look at Milomon. "Milomon... So you were here," he said slowly, lowering the bow. "Mardukkimon won't be pleased."

"Mardukkimon isn't my master."
"I think you'll find that Mardukkimon disagrees. Stand down, Milomon. I'll let your master deal with you."

"Have you got noise in your ears? I said he's not my master."

Mirai looked to the two boys, gesturing with her free hand. "The tower's island is over there. Let's at least try to get to shore."

Andre nodded agreement, but looked over at Milomon as the trio began a slow swim toward the shore, his expression concerned. "Surely you don't mean to go against the King's program," Ninurtimon stated. "Has that glitch infected you?"

"Is it really that wrong?" Milomon asked. "Letting the Illegals live. Just because they're not born in designated times and places, they're automatically evil?"

"Everything that defies the King's program is evil. Even you yourself, if you persist down this path, Milomon."

"If that's the case... then why did Mardukkimon even let me find Kudamon in the first place?"

"I don't know. You're welcome to ask him when you see him again." Ninurtimon descended, standing on the water's surface as he looked down at Milomon. "You're coming with me."

A splash at his side made Ninurtimon turn, and the lion Digimon found himself staring down Hestria, who had leapt out of the water using Raptomon as a platform. Raising her hands, she pointed a gun at his face, and fired.

Something akin to a paintball exploded across his face, and he let out a roar, clawing at his eyes. "...is that my gun?" Andre asked as Raptomon caught her arm, pulling her toward shore.

She tossed it back to him as she passed. "You don't even carry a real gun?"

"Of course not!"

"Move," Mirai ordered, "we need to get to shore before he recovers." She kicked all the harder, but her legs were starting to feel wooden, Felix's heavier weight dragging her down.

"Rusalkamon," Youseimon said to her, "let's switch off with the humans. We need to get them to shore as fast as possible."

She nodded agreement, and the two slipped in under Felix's arms, dragging him forward. "Are you okay?" Andre asked Mirai. "You can lean on me if you want. I'm used to water."

"Don't underestimate me. I was first in my class in the 100 meter swim." But this was a case of endurance, not a case of speed.

"You damned glitches!" Ninurtimon flew over their heads, landing inbetween Andre and Mirai and the rest of the group, who were close to shore. "How dare you...!" Eyes red from both the pepper and his anger, he drew back his arrow, pointing it at the water between them. "Slain-"

"Death the Cannon!" interrupted him, a blast enveloping him in heat.

Mirai dove under the water to avoid the explosion, following Andre ahead of her as they resurfaced away from Ninurtimon. "Mirai, grab on!" Impmon shouted to them from Beelzebumon's shoulder. "You too, uh, what'syourname."
Mirai grabbed onto one of Beelzebumon's ankles with a tight grip, Andre latching onto the other, and Beelzebumon flew toward the shore, firing off another shot at Ninurtimon. At the shoreline, she could see Tailmon and Wizarmon helping the others out of the water. Hestria had also landed on the shore, having opened her phone to try and dry it. "That does it, I'm buying a waterproof case."

"Is something the matter?" Prariemon asked her, ears perking up a bit.

Hestria shot her a look, and didn't answer. "Who's still here?" Youseimon asked, frowning as she shook her sleeves dry. "I told you to get out of here."

"That is why we came," Spadamon said to her. "Against a Celestial General, we knew you would need help."

"I didn't think I taught you to be suicidal."

"Oh, you did," Impmon quipped.

"Oh, we are not, let me reassure you," Spadamon said at the same time.

"Tch," Hestria said, looking over at Ninurtimon, who was sizing up the group. Beelzebumon noticed his gaze, and fired off another shot to divert his attention. "If I could Influence Raptomon, I'd take him down myself."

Mervamon eyed Hestria, then grinned. "You're optimistic, I'll give you that. None too bright, though. You do realize he's an Ultimate level, right?"

"She's got a point, though," Mirai said, pulling out her own waterlogged phone. "Our D-Tais are all dead in the water until we can clean out and dry our phones."

"Oh, is that all?" Wizarmon said. "Let me see them. You too, young lady."

Mirai, Andre, and Felix all set their phones down on a rock, and after some hesitation, Hestria set hers down as well. Holding out his staff, Wizarmon closed his eyes, and a faint burst of data could be seen over the phones. Opening his eyes again, he said, "The dates will be wrong, but they should work now."

Mirai picked hers up, beaming as the power button responded, booting the phone back up. "Wizarmon, you're amazing."

"Of course, as to be expected from my partner," Tailmon said with a grin.

Behind them, Ninurtimon let out a snarl, seizing Beelzebumon by the shoulders as he smashed the other Digimon back against the rocks. "Don't get ahead of yourself, demon."

"I could say the same for you, war general!" Mervamon shouted as she charged at him, sword drawn. "Spadamon!"

"Everyone, channel your power to Mervamon and Spadamon!" Youseimon shouted before glancing back to Mirai. "Let's go."

Mirai nodded, holding her phone up, the other three humans doing the same. In front of them, their four digimon took on their Influenced forms anew. "Sanseimon, you're with me!" Asparamon shouted. Holding out her hands in something similar to an "OK" gesture, fingers spread, she released a flurry of white petals with a shout of "Kbach Cheap!"
"Zantetsujuu!" Sanseimon's shot went straight through the petals, drawing it into a vortex that amplified upon itself, smashing against Ninurtimon's raised arm.

But the others refused to give him time to rest. Impmon already had his fire running along Beelzebumon's gun, and the older Digimon released a shot with a call of "Night the Cannon!"

Even as Ninurtimon cried out as the attack hit him, Mervamon charged her sword with Tailmon's holy power and Wizarmon's sorcery. With a cry of "Triple Strike Roll!", her charged impact hit her in the side.

Spadamon, surrounded by Elecmon, IcePicoDevimon, Prairiemon, Labramon, and even Kudamon, raised his sword, drawing in their powers of lightning, ice, metal, sound, and light. "Sword of Five Elements!" With a leap, Spadamon thrust his sword at Ninurtimon's face, into one of his eyes. "Aim for the sword!"

"Shall we?" Lilinmon said to Yixiamon as the others attacked.

"Just this once, I suppose," Yixiamon replied as she took flight, Lilinmon following.

"Malin Calin!" Lilinmon held out her arms, releasing black points of light toward Yixiamon.

"Mai Ogi!" The black light swirled around Yixiamon, and she added her wind to it, sending sickles of wind down at Ninurtimon, pouring yet more power into an already overloaded program.

"Damn you glitches...!" Ninurtimon got out as his data distintegrated. "If I'd had..." And then the last of his data was gone, drawn into the tower.

Spadamon and the ones around him let out a cheer, raising their paws in a victorious gesture. Mirai let out a whoop herself, and Felix put an arm around her and Andre's shoulders, his face beaming. "How's that for some teamwork, huh? You too, Hestria."

She looked over at the other three, then let out a 'hmph' as she turned her head. "You lot did all right, I suppose. But I still would have preferred to take him out myself."

"You should listen to them, little missy," Mervamon told her, tossing her hair with a hand. "You won't be getting that much stronger if you can't work with others. Though, if you'd like me to prove my point, you're welcome to come have a match with me any time you like."

"Let's go, Yixiamon."

"Yes, Lady." Hestria hopped onto her Digimon partner's back, and they took to the air without looking back.

"Kids these days," Mervamon grumbled, shouldering her blade again. "Well, I guess I'd better do something about this tower. You stay there and take a breather, Bel. You got hammered by that war general." He let out a low chuckle in response, sitting back against the rock.

"Milomon, Milomon!" Kudamon zipped through the air like a furry lightning bolt, coiling around Milomon's neck. "Did you see? I fought alongside everyone, too!"

Milomon smiled a soft, sad smile, and held onto Kudamon with both arms. "Yeah. I saw. You did well, Kudamon. But be careful, okay?"

"Don't you worry about me, Milomon. I can take care of myself now. So you be careful, okay? Don't get a cold from all this water."
Around them, the Digizone was starting to dematerialize, separating back from the human world. "You all did well," Youseimon told her comrades. "Stay safe, and we'll meet at the next Digizone." As the last of it faded, she looked at Milomon, who had let Kudamon go to return with Spadamon and the rest. "You were Mardukkimon's apprentice?" Her tone was curious, not accusatory.

He turned his gaze to the side. "It's not like I asked to be. It was just the position I was born into."

"That you left that position of your own free will is enough for me, Milomon. You don't have to avert your gaze."

He looked up at her in surprise. "Um," Rusalkamon began, "What's this Mardukkimon like?"

"I'm not sure anyone could tell you," Milomon said, folding his arms. "No one really seems to know what Mardukkimon thinks. No one even knows what Mardukkimon really looks like, even. Sometimes he seems wise, sometimes he seems cruel. He's a sage, like Nabimon, but not as powerful. I imagine, since Nergimon and Ninurtimon are now gone, that he'll be the next one we face." Milomon's ears flattened against his head. "Boy, I'm not looking forward to that."

"We'll just have to be well-prepared," Andre said. "Well, it's still early in the day here. Anyone want to try catching a ride on the Marrakesh Express with me?"

"Sorry, I can't," Mirai said, raising her hands. "It's late where I am. Maybe some other time?"

"Not a problem."

Mirai held out her hand, and Youseimon took it, the pair walking away from Andre and Felix. Now that the water was gone, the ruins of some ancient castle were under their feet. What place had this been, Mirai wondered, and what had happened to it? Maybe Felix might know, next time she saw him. "You know, Youseimon," she said as she began setting the Internet Transport. "I think I'm starting to get interested in history."

"Nothing wrong with that. The people that followed before us and where their footprints landed... It's important to know that, in order to place your own footprints. I only wish we could find out more about our own Digital World," Youseimon said.

That made Mirai curious, but Youseimon's expression was downcast, so she let it go. "I wonder what happened to that Hestria person and her Digimon. They sure were in a hurry to leave."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about them. Whatever they're up to, it's not our business."

Even as she said that, Hestria was some distance away already, with Yixiamon skimming above the building line, quick enough to be nothing more than a blur to those below. "I was right," she muttered to herself as their target in front of them stopped, landing on a rooftop. "Someone was watching us."

"Lady, be careful," Yixiamon warned as she landed. "It's possible that they're with the Celestial Generals."

"I don't care either way. I just want to battle strong people," she stated. Raising her voice, she added, "Identify yourself."

"You ran off to chase me alone?" the human in front of her asked. "Why not call your friends?"

"There's not a need."
"I see. You don't fit in with them, do you? Is there any place you do belong?"

Hestria frowned at the question. "What does that have to do with anything?"

She raised her chin, meeting Hestria's eyes with her own dark-eyed gaze. "I can tell," she stated, placing a hand on the dragon Digimon next to her. "I don't feel like fighting you today. Enjoy your solitary existence for a bit longer." Holding up a phone, she vanished before Hestria's eyes, the dragon vanishing with her.

"Lady?" Yixiamon took a step toward Hestria.

Hestria frowned to herself, a hand on her chin. "What," she said, half to herself, "was that all about...?"
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The ordinary children, Mirai, Andre, and Felix, and their partner Digimon, have come to the Moroccan city of Marrakech. For the children, the African city holds new sights and experiences unlike their own homes. The city's Digizone of water threatens the humans inside it, and the children seek to destroy the tower quickly. The Saturn Celestial General, Ninurtimon, appears in their way, and brings the full force of the Digimon King down upon them. It is only through the combined efforts of the children, their temporary ally Hestria and Raptomon, and the combined efforts of Youseimon's friends that Ninurtimon is defeated. An unknown human confronts Hestria, signalling the start of a new battle. But what place will they venture to next?

If she thought Marrakech was a completely new world, Cape Town was another world beyond that. Mountains next to the sea, mansions next to slums, men and women of the darkest ebony next to the palest white, and every shade inbetween. She'd heard of some Western cities, like in America, having such incredible diversity, but this seemed to be even beyond the pictures of those cities.

And yet, she had no idea what she was doing here.

"We've been walking for a while," Andre said from beside her, Milomon draped over his shoulder as only a cat could. "What is it you wanted to show us, Felix?"

"I thought we should take a look around and see this place for ourselves," Felix said from in front of them, giving them a grin. "We don't get to do enough touring, anyway."

"That's all well and good, but it's pretty late for Mirai. And it's pretty early for us. We shouldn't keep her out too late."

"Don't worry about me," Mirai said, waving her hands. "I'm perfectly fine. Though, I wonder why you wanted to visit this town in particular, Felix?"

He looked over his shoulder again, eyes twinkling. "Because it's the place where our sort-of ally, Hestria, lives."

Andre blinked in surprise. "You're sure? How did you come to that conclusion?" Youseimon asked, curious.

"Well, when it comes to facts, there isn't much the internet can't tell you," Felix said. "I found her through a few careful searches. But the internet still isn't the breadth of human knowledge. There's a lot of things that aren't mere facts that it can't tell you. Especially for a non-Western country. At least, when you're searching in English, anyway."

"You could have searched in French," Andre said.

"Ha! I did. But there's even less available there. South Africa has been more Dutch historically, I believe, so that's probably why. France was off conquering the western Sahara during that free-for-all."

"So this is Hestria's home," Mirai said to herself, taking another look at the buildings.
"What do you think?" Youseimon asked her. "Does it tell you anything about Hestria?"

"I don't know that I can deduce something about her just from this town, but... It has vitality, doesn't it? It feels like the kind of place that would rise up even if it was being attacked."

"That's the power of a place that was able to develop in adversity," Felix said. "Most of the powerful countries in this world were the ones that were challenged, then overcame it and issued challenges in turn. I suppose there's a human lesson in that."

"I agree," Youseimon said. "People and Digimon both can only transcend their limits when they have a reason to."

Felix looked over at her, then faced forward again. "Well, shall we go pay our friend Hestria a visit?"

"Yes, let's go," Mirai said, smiling. "Where are we going?"

"To a concert."

"You know, when you said concert," Andre said, "I thought we'd just be meeting her here. Not that she'd be the main act."

"Surprise! That's why I said it had to be today." Felix looked extraordinarily pleased with himself. "I found out quite a bit about her through the internet, actually, since she's something of a minor celebrity. Her parents are both big in the South African entertainment business, so I suppose her being the center of her own girl band is a pretty logical conclusion."

"I wonder if that's why she's so antisocial," Andre mused. "She probably doesn't hang out with regular Joes that often."

"Joes?" Mirai echoed.

"More asocial, really, but I get your point. Well, we have some time before this concert starts, so why not poke around a bit and see if we can get backstage passes?" Felix suggested.

"I don't think just walking around will get us tickets, let alone a backstage pass," Andre said with a frown. "It might get us thrown off the premises, actually."

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I agree. It sounds interesting to take a look around," Youseimon spoke up. "If worst came to worst, we could send Milomon to scout."

Milomon perked up from Andre's shoulder with a yawn. "Sure, sounds fun."

"It seems that I'm being outvoted," Andre conceded, patting Milomon's head. "Well, it's not like it's a life or death situation, anyway. I guess it won't hurt anything."

Felix lead the way, skirting the temporary barriers erected around the edges of the outdoor venue. "I didn't realize you were such a stickler for the rules, Andre."

"I just don't want to do something that would make me unable to look my mother in the eyes."

"You're really the kind of person that does want they want to do, aren't you, Felix?" Mirai observed.
"It's my bad habit." As they got away from the entrance, the crowds thinned out some, but the security guards did not, making it impossible to jump the barrier.

"I like Felix's confidence," Rusalkamon spoke up. "I find it encouraging."

"Hey, you kids," one of the guards noticed at last, "the entrance is around that way. There's nothing back here."

"We just wanted to see the stage from a different angle," Youseimon spoke up, giving the guard a winning smile. "I'm a bit interested in architecture. Could you tell me something about the construction?"

"...uh, well..."

"Digimon?" came a voice from behind the barrier.

Youseimon, Milomon, and Rusalkamon all had an instant reaction to the word, tensing up, with the humans easily catching their wariness. A teenage girl, skin darker than even Hestria, and with the fullest, most beautiful lips Mirai had ever seen, was watching them from inside. "Miss Eranna?" the guard said. "Please don't worry about the perimeter, we're just sending these kids on their way."

"Oh, no, it's quite all right," the girl said with a wave of a manicured hand. "These are Miss Hestria's friends. Could you let them in, please?"

"Felix?" Andre's single spoken word contained the question he couldn't ask.

The older boy gave him a nod of reassurance as the guard opened the temporary barrier, letting them all inside. "Here, you can come with me," she told them. "I'll let Miss Hestria know you're here."

The group followed, keeping a bit of distance between them and her from wariness. "Who is this?" Mirai asked Felix in a whisper.

"One of Hestria's bandmates," he whispered back. "It'll be fine. I think."

Eranna guided them to a mobile trailer, letting them inside. It reminded Mirai of the travel trailers she'd seen in American shows, well-equipped with a kitchen and seating area, with what was presumably a bedroom in the back behind a closed door. "You must be the ones Miss Hestria's told us about," Eranna said, scooping up Rusalkamon in her arms. "Oh, you're all so cute!"

"So Hestria's told you about Digimon?" Youseimon asked.

"Yes, and her darling Raptomon, too. We take care of her little girl when she's busy with other things. It's kind of like our band secret," Eranna said with a beaming smile, finally letting the blushing Rusalkamon go. "So, if you don't mind me asking, what are your names? I'm Eranna Jantjies."

They each introduced themselves in turn, Eranna nodding vigorously after every name, as if the motion helped her commit it to memory. "How nice to meet people from all around the world," Eranna said as she went to one of the cupboards, pulling down as many cups as she could find. "Miss Hestria doesn't know how lucky she is. Coca-cola's all right with everyone, right?"

"The soft drink?" Andre said to Mirai, noting her blank look. "Do you not have sodas in Japan? It's fine with me," he added to Eranna. "Their headquarters is not that far from my house, you know."

"In a can, sometimes," Mirai said to Andre, "but they're not really that common?"

"It's the same company that makes the Georgia brand of coffee in Japan," Felix added. "Why not try it?"

The Digimon were already comfortably curled up with their own glasses, so Mirai plucked up her bravery as Eranna poured hers. The liquid was fizzy, and dark, almost the color of Eranna's skin. Mirai took a sip, and then had to stop herself from flailing a hand. "It's so sweet!"

Felix laughed at her expression. "It is pretty sweet," Andre agreed. "Maybe you should try the diet brand sometime. It's more bitter, so you might like it."

She really didn't get Americans and their desire for sweet drinks, she thought as she sipped at the glass. "So do you have an interest in the Digital World yourself, Eranna?" Youseimon asked her.

"Is that where you're from?" Eranna asked. "Mm… I guess my interest is more in Lady Hestria and her adorable Raptomon? Though if all of them are as cute as you…." She picked up Rusalkamon again, the girl letting out a squeak as she was cuddled.

Mirai looked over the top of her glass at Eranna. "So what is Hestria like?"

Eranna put Rusalkamon down, picking up her own glass. "Hestria… is a lady. An incomparable lady."

"You dislike that?" Felix asked.

"No, not at all," she said with a shake of her head and a smile. "Rather, I feel very fortunate to be able to support Lady Hestria. This band exists for her sake. It's only natural that we support her in her trips with Raptomon, as well."

"Why is it 'only natural'?" Andre asked, brows furrowed. "What do you mean, it exists for her sake?"

"It's because she is a lady. Her ability, her limits, they are all so much beyond our own. It's because she is here that I can escape my own limitations. All of us feel that way." Eranna smiled. "Well, when you see her perform, you'll understand. You are staying for the concert, right?"

"Uh, about that," Felix said. "We don't exactly have tickets."

"Oh, that's not a problem. Let me just dig up some passes…." Eranna opened a drawer, shuffling through the papers within.

"Eranna!" Someone was banging on the door. "Eranna, what's taking you so long? We need to be backstage now."

"Just a minute, I have guests for Lady Hestria. Ah ha." Eranna handed a set of passes to the closest person, Felix.

"Guests? I'm sorry, but they'll have to wait. Hestria can't meet anyone right now, she's waiting on us."

"I know, I know. Just show those to security and they'll show you where to go," she directed to Felix. "You can let yourself out, just don't take too long or you'll miss it!" Eranna blew them all a
After the concert was over, Mirai thought she was starting to understand what Eranna had meant. To her surprise, once on stage the cool Hestria had an inescapable charisma, commanding attention as she sang, some of her songs in English and some in a language she didn't know, which were no less powerful. "I guess that's what they mean by 'born to perform'."

"You wouldn't think it by looking at her," Felix said. "Did you have fun, Rusalkamon?"

"Yes! Humans have a lot of fun things, don't they?"

"There you guys are!" Eranna came running over the emptying field, hopping a barrier in the process. "Well, what did you think?"

"You're all amazing," Andre said. "Thanks for letting us see it."

"Eehee. But you see what I meant, right? About Lady Hestria."

"Felix!" Rusalkamon was looking up in alarm, pointing at the sky. "Felix, it's trouble!"

"Trouble?" Eranna looked up, as did the rest of the group, watching blocky patterns flash across the sky. "Oh, how pretty. Are the lighting guys doing something new?"

"Miss Eranna," Andre's voice was urgent. "We need to get everyone out of this area and back in their homes. Something bad is about to happen."

"What do you mean by something bad?"

The Digizone came crashing down all at once, rewriting the ground under their feet as if someone had laid a massive tablecloth across the whole thing. The sky grew dim, and the buildings shifted appearance, no longer the modern architecture but rather some fancy, bygone era's design. "What is this?" Eranna asked, frowning at the new buildings. "It's kind of creepy. Is this the Digital World you guys were talking about?"

"A small portion of it. It's not all like this," Youseimon said.

"Eranna, we need to get everyone out here. It could be dangerous," Andre told her.

She nodded, touching a hand to her ear, tapping on her earpiece. "Pierre? Oh, good, it still works. Yes. We need to clear the venue while we figure out what's going on. Okay, good." Turning back to them, she said, "Security's already on it. Now what?"

"We need to get you to a safe place," Andre said. "Let's head for one of those buildings."

"I think it's too late for that," Youseimon said. "Take a look."

At the edges of the garden-like field they were now standing in, plated centaur-like creatures began moving forward in the dim light. Felix already had his phone in one hand, taking a picture. "They're called Knightchessmon," he said, "virus type. They're only Adult level."

"The tower's that way," Milomon said, pointing. "It doesn't look like it's that far."

"Then let's break through," Youseimon said. "Everyone, let's Digizone Influence."

Eranna watched in surprise as the small Digimon around her became Apsaramon, Lilinmon, and...
Sanseimon. "Oh my," she said, "do they all change like that?"

"Under the right circumstances. Mirai, you three protect Eranna. We'll form a circle around you," she said.

"Sanseimon, you take point," Felix said. "Mirai, you and Andre go ahead of Eranna; I'll bring up the rear."

The rest of the group nodded agreement, taking their positions. Sanseimon led the charge, firing his gun as he forced his way through the ranks by sheer firepower, backed up by Apsaramon and Lilimon's shots. Mirai held her sword at the ready, but the KnightChessmons were easily bowled over by the force and speed of the attack.

Ahead of them, Sanseimon stopped, and Mirai almost ran into him. "Sanseimon?" Apsaramon questioned.

"It's Noir," he said in surprise. "That Sistermon chick."

She turned toward them, and Mirai could see the tenseness in Sanseimon's back. Youseimon had offered her protection, but there was no way of knowing whether she had decided to take them up on that offer. "Sistermon Noir!" Lilimon said in surprise. "Is... How's Blanc?"

To Mirai's surprise, Noir gave them a cheeky grin, waving with the fingers that weren't gripping her gun. "I'm the welcoming party. I thought I'd give you the red carpet. You're welcome. Though it's more black and white, I suppose," she added, kicking at a nearby downed KnightChessmon. "You're Rusalkamon, I take it? Blanc's doing well."

The relief in Lilimon's face was immediate. "Thanks for your assistance," Apsaramon said. "What's the situation? The others are?"

"Off in separate directions, since we didn't know which way you'd be coming." Noir waved over one shoulder. "The tower's being guarded by a RookChessmon and BishopChessmon. I value my skin, so I haven't taken a crack at them yet. I take it you want to?"

"Leave them to us. If you see an opportunity, take it," Apsaramon said. "Sanseimon, Lilimon, let's go."

"Is she one of your friends?" Eranna asked as Mirai followed the three Digimon, keeping an eye out for other enemies.

"Sort of, I guess. We fought her once. I guess she's let bygones be bygones."

"I wouldn't say that's the case," Sistermon Noir spoke up. "It's not as if I had something against you from the start."

"So you're fighting with Spadamon and everyone else?" Mirai asked her.

Noir looked in the direction of the fight that had just begun. "It's... kind of weird, you know. I feel like I've been half asleep, ever since I took the King's oath. Now that I've been on the run... I'm constantly being worked to the bone, fighting for my life, and terrified for my sister. But at least I'm awake."

Apsaramon nodded. "I understand completely."

"You'd better understand. You're the one that dragged me into this mess in the first place."
Felix was already pulling up information through the D-Tai on their enemies. "Two Perfect types, eh? This'll be tricky with just the three of us."

Andre pointed upwards as something passed overhead. "Looks like it'll be the four of us. We'd better go."

"Take care of the tower, if you can," Apsaramon shouted to Sistermon Noir before leading the way to the opening around the tower, the other two following.

"We'd better stay close to them," Andre said, "it'll be safer for all of us. Stay with us, Eranna."

"The architecture is completely lacking in taste," Eranna observed, "but the residents aren't so bad, I suppose."

"I admire your optimism." Mirai followed Apsaramon and the other Digimon.

Hestria had already landed when they got there, with her partner already doing battle. She wasn't the Yixiamon they had met in Morocco, nor the Rafmon Felix had encountered in Canada, but something new altogether, a half-bird, half-reptile creature that reminded her of some fossils in the dinosaur books, covered in feathers that were green and blue on the body itself, red and orange on the wings. "First Hurricane!" she shouted as she launched a wind attack at the RookChessmon and BishopChessmon.

"We're coming!" Apsaramon joined her in the assault, as did Sanseimon and Lilinmon.

Hestria turned as Mirai approached, and her face darkened. "What do you think you're doing here?"

"I'd say it looks like a battle," Mirai countered.

She looked past Mirai to Eranna, who waved cheerily, as if they had just met in a hallway. "Don't worry about me. You just do your best, Lady Hestria."

Hestria turned away with a sharp motion. "I don't need you to tell me that."

Felix watched the fight with a calm gaze as the RookChessmon and BishopChessmon went on the defensive, protecting themselves easily from the scattered attacks. "Mirai, Hestria, this isn't working," he called to them. "We need to coordinate our efforts."

"I don't need your help!" she snapped. "Don't get in my way."

"Hestria, they're stronger than they look," Mirai said. "You can't do this alone."

"Watch me."

"Stop saying such selfish things!" Andre walked over to her, seizing her by the shoulder. "You can do this alone? Don't give me such nonsense when it's your Digimon that's doing the fighting. Stop making her suffer for your poor choices and act like a real partner!"

Hestria looked too surprised at Andre's heated words to swat his hand away. "Strength alone doesn't win," Felix said, turning his head toward the fight. "Neither does just being reliable, or just wanting to win. Or merely knowing what to do."

"We took down a Celestial General by combining our strengths," Mirai said to her, holding out a hand. "If we can do that, these two shouldn't be a problem."

She let out a derisive 'feh' sound, but didn't back away. "Well, then, if you're willing to listen,"
Felix said, "I've noticed a few things about these two. We can beat them, even with the disparity in our power levels."

Hestria looked back to the fight, where her Digimon had been knocked from the skies by the white BishopChessmon. "I'm listening."

Felix grinned before lowering his voice. "Here's what we do. Pull out your D-Tai; we'll use it to send instructions..."

By the tower, Apsaramon slid through the grass in an arc, trying to find a weakness in the bosses' defense. And then she got Mirai's message. "Heh, sounds interesting," she said with a grin. "Let's go!"

"The thing about their teamwork," Felix explained as Hestria's Digimon shot toward the pair, wings glinting in the dimness, "is that they're a paired defense and offense. The black one has no offensive capabilities, whereas the white one has no defense."

"First Hurricane!" This time, the attack wasn't aimed at the pair, but at the ground itself, whipping up a storm of dirt and dust at the pair.

"So we need to separate them," Felix continued. "Without the BishopChessmon, their attacking ability will be gone."

Through the storm, Apsaramon flew with her barrier in place, Sanseimon on her back. "Zantetsujuu!" he shouted, nailing several shots against the BishopChessmon.

"They appear to be plated with armor. So we'll have to break that with Sanseimon's steel-cutting shot. Then, Lilinmon can take advantage of those cracks further with her attack."

"Malin Calin!"

"Once the RookChessmon has no offensive partner, we'll break down its defenses by attacking at different times, from different angles. He won't be able to keep up with four different moving targets attacking in succession."

"Kbach Cheap!" A flurry of petals on RookChessmon's left.

"Urvogel Pinion!" A set of feather-shaped darts from above.

"Malin Calin!" Black beams of light from behind.

"Zantetsujuu!" Shots from the front and right.

As the four attacks continued, seemingly random in their succession and timing, it was clear that Rookchessmon was getting more confused and flustered over this attack, looking this way and that. Finally, the Urvogel Pinion hit a crack in his brick-like fortification, smashing a hole wide open. "It's there!" Felix shouted, pointing.

Three more attacks, and RookChessmon went the way of its partner. "Great job, everyone!" Mirai cheered. "That was a great plan, Felix!"

"You're not too bad," Hestria's partner said, then glanced back at her to see her reaction.

Felix looked at Hestria as well. "So how about it? We work together pretty well, don't we? Let's get along."
She fixed him with a hard gaze. "No."

"Why not?"

"I don't like you."

She's so blunt! Mirai thought, looking to Eranna for clues as to whether this was Hestria's normal mode or not. The other girl had her arms folded, her eyebrows knitted.

Felix showed no signs of being deterred. "Sorry to be unlikable. But we need you just like you need us. So let's work together."

"And just how do I need you?"

"Because these aren't the only enemies out there. There's the other Celestial Generals, for one. What are you going to do if you run into someone stronger?"

"Asterism Fall."

Mirai didn't even have time to look up before being surrounded by falling objects, akin to being inside a meteor shower. One brushed against her arm as it fell, and she let out a cry from both the impact and the heat. Nearby, Andre sheltered Eranna with his own body, one arm raised in defense. "Everyone!" Apsaramon said in alarm, flying back to the group of humans. Raising her hands in the palms-outward position, she shouted, "Kbach Lear!"

"Up there!" Felix pointed to one of the buildings. "That's what's attacking us!"

At first, she thought it might have been a lizard from the shape, with the outward-bent legs and the curve of the back, but the neck and tail were too long, too dignified, and it was covered in dark blue fur all over. Large bat-like wings extended from its back. "Asterism Fall," it repeated, and the burning stars aimed themselves down onto the group again.

"It's her!" Hestria said, her eyes dark as she glared upwards. "You want a piece of me? Come down and face me."

"Huh?" Mirai looked up where Hestria had been looking, and now she could see it too—the figure of a girl standing next to the furred dragon, her long hair whipping in the wind. "A... human?"

"Hey!" Andre shouted at her. "We're not your enemies, why are you attacking us?"

"You're not my enemies? Who decided that?" The girl stayed where she was on the roof above. "I happen to consider you my enemies quite well enough. So I'll be defeating you here in just a moment."

"Who decided that we were enemies?" Felix countered. "We're trying to save our world. By saying you're our enemy, are you saying your goal is different?"

"Yes. This world can rot for all I care."

"What's with that attitude?" Mirai scowled at her. "Don't you live here in this world, too?"

"Live here...? That's a generous way of putting it. I don't care anything about this wretched place," the girl said. "My only goal is to defeat all of you!"

Apsaramon braced against another Asterism Fall. "I don't know what she's playing at," she got out between gasped breaths, "but she's seriously trying to kill us."
"If you want a fight, I'll give you one," Hestria growled. "Archeomon! Go!"

"First Hurricane!" Archeomon launched her wind attack against the dragon.

It didn't seem fazed in the least. "Beautiful Claw," it countered, swatting Archeomon out of midair with a rainbow-colored extension of its claws, and Archeomon fell to the ground, reverting to Raptomon upon impact.

Felix held up his phone, taking a picture. "Betradramon," he read aloud. "Another Perfect level."

"Then we'll just handle it like those Chessmon guys," Mirai said. "If we combine our abilities-"

"This one's on a completely different level, Mirai," Andre told her. "Can't you tell? I think we should retreat for now."

"But- Can we even retreat? And what about the Digizone?"

Apsaramon let out a cry, and that was the only warning they got before her barrier was smashed, allowing the shooting stars into their area, smashing into the ground around them, the mere shockwave throwing them back. Mirai winced as she hit the ground, Eranna landing nearby. "Ow, ow," Felix groaned as he sat up. "That is not the way you make friends, just so you know."

"I don't need any damned humans to be friends with." The girl raised her arm, then pointed at the group. "Betradramon! Finish them!"

The humans were on the ground, the Digimon had been devolved. Mirai knew she only had seconds to get to her feet before the enemy fired the blast that would kill them all. She stood, and then she heard it before she saw it - the crack of an impact on the tower behind them.

The girl turned, as did Betradramon, watching as the tower fell. Next to the ruined base, Sistermon Noir stood, one gun resting against her shoulder. "Don't be that way, little miss. A moving target's more of a challenge, don't you think?"

"You're betraying the King?" Betradramon said. "You'll regret that."

"Come make me regret it, then."

Mirai leaned against the closest wall, but the Digizone was already fading, leaving the buildings of Cape Town in their previous state. "Is anyone hurt?" Andre asked as he got to his feet. He winced as he put a hand to his side.

"Bruises, I think. Youseimon? Felix, Hestria?" Mirai offered Eranna a hand up.

"I'll recover," Youseimon said. "But it seems like that enemy is going to be a problem."

Hestria approached, Raptomon tucked in one arm. "Go back to your trailer," she ordered Eranna. To Mirai, she said, "You. What were you thinking when you dragged her out here?"

She blinked, unsure why Hestria seemed so angry all of a sudden. "We were guarding her until she could get to safety."

"You call this 'guarding her'? You almost got her killed."

"I'm perfectly fine, Lady Hestria," Eranna interjected. "There's no need for concern. Everyone was quite nice to me."
"I told you to leave already." Hestria turned on her heel, marching back toward the streets and vanishing around the corner.

"That girl... She really isn't honest with herself, is she?" Eranna said with a smile. "Well, that's part of her charm too, I suppose."

"You're pretty laidback for someone whose life was just in danger," Felix said, picking up Rusalkamon in his arms.

"Oh, was I? I didn't feel that way. You said you'd protect me and I trusted you." Eranna smiled, then gave them a bow. "Thank you very much for your company, it was quite enjoyable. Oh!" Pulling something out of a pocket, she handed it to Mirai. "My contact info. We should hang out again if you're around! Anyway, I'd best go take care of Lady Hestria and little Raptomon, so I'll see you around."

"That is one astonishingly naive girl," Felix commented after she had left.

"I don't think that's the case," Andre said. "I think she's just mature enough to not react poorly to things. You two aren't hurt?"

"Not really, but... Who was that girl? Why was she fighting against us?"

"It can't be good for us," Youseimon said. "You saw it. She was more of a threat than any of the regular enemies we've encountered thus far. The power of humans is a double-edged sword."

"I think we should share this information with Harley and the others on the website," Andre said. "If there's one human fighting us, there might be others as well. It could be a serious problem."

"Felix?" Rusalkamon looked up at him. "You're quiet."

"It's just an impression," he said, "but I think Mirai has the best chance of finding out something about this new enemy. She may be from your town."

"My town? What makes you think that?"

"The way she speaks English... It's the same as you."

Mirai frowned. "You mean she speaks with a Japanese accent?"

"Not just a Japanese accent. A Fukuokan accent. She has the same irregularities in her speech as you do, from what I heard. And I've heard other Japanese people speak English; it wasn't the same." Felix let out a sigh. "Of course, that was based on a conversation of a minute or so, so it's not conclusive. But it's what I suspect."

"I understand. I'll see if I can find out anything in town. She looks to be around my age, so I'll start with the schools."

Felix nodded before pulling out his phone, queuing up his trip home. "Good luck. And make sure you're careful. We don't know how this will play out yet."

Chapter End Notes
Sorry about the long wait between updates. The chapters are ready, but NaNoWriMo is totally messing up my posting schedule. Will do my best to stay back on track!
Partnering is Impossible!? Beijing's Request for Help!

Previously on Digimon Travelers...

Mirai, Felix, and Andre visit Cape Town, the home of the mysterious Hestria. They see the diversity and vitality of her home. They then hear from her stagemate, Eranna, as to what sort of person Hestria is. Unexpectedly, a Digizone appears and threatens them with a new enemy, a human and her Digimon, Betedramon. They manage to escape with the help of their former enemy, Sistermon Noir, but many questions are still left unanswered. But what place will they venture to next?

Rina laid the sketchpad in front of her, studying its features. Long hair in a loose ponytail over one shoulder, glasses, dark eyes and classic Japanese features. "I bet she'd be popular with the boys. Why are you looking for her?"

"I need to talk to her." Mirai folded her arms over her knees, watching her friend.

"You blew off pestering the kendo guys for this? It must be important." Rina handed the sketch back. "But she doesn't look familiar to me, and I know most of the girls in this school. Do you have a name? Your drawing sucks, by the way."

"My drawing's good enough. I passed art, didn't I?" Mirai tucked it in her bag, glancing toward the window. Youseimon was seated on the sill, legs swinging as she watched the afterschool clubs below. "I don't know her name. I don't even know if she goes to this school. But I think she's probably in middle school."

"Well, if there's anyone that can find out, it would be Kiraharu Rina-sama, Fukuoka Middle School's most popular girl. I accept bribes in the form of cash, credit, or admiring worship."

"Rina-chan, knock it off. Geez."

"Heeere!" Youseimon called cheerily as she popped up next to the desk.

"That isn't what I meant!"

"You're so cute, Youseimon-chan," Rina laughed, picking up her bag. "Let's get out of their way and go grab the registers from the faculty room. If your mystery girl goes to our school, we'll find her there."

"The registers? But the teachers-"

"Have you forgotten? Kirahara Rina-sama, most popular girl in school with teachers and students alike. I've borrowed stuff before." She skipped into the staff room without so much as a knock, inviting herself in.

"...Take a good long look, Youseimon. That's courage and power right there."

"I'm not really sure I get it, but I'll watch," Youseimon said, peering in as Rina chatted with one of the teachers.

In her bag, Mirai's phone buzzed, and she pulled it out. The D-Tai icon flashed at her, revealing Harley's face once she touched it. "Yo, Mirai."
She blinked, stunned into momentary silence. "Mr. Harley? What's going on?"

"I've been going over the stuff you guys posted the other day. Do you have a moment?"

Mirai waved for Youseimon to keep an eye on the faculty room, curling up by the staircase. Keeping her voice low, she said, "I've been looking, just as Felix suggested, but we haven't found anything yet. Did you find something out?"

"I'm afraid not. I've been trying to figure out if we can run some sort of interference on this enemy's D-Tai, since I'm assuming she has one, but the program's really resistant. You'll probably hit paydirt before we do."

"Um, if you say so."

"Oh, but that's not the only thing I'm calling about," Harley added, turning to something off-screen. "We got a request for help through the website just now. It's from a girl in China who says a Digizone's turned up. She needs help rescuing her partner."

"Ah..." Mirai looked over at the hallway where Youseimon was still stationed by the faculty room. "A Digizone? Right now?"

"Yeah, I'm picking it up on my D-Tai. I sent Andre and Felix an email, but it's like two in the morning over there, so they're probably asleep. What about your South African friend?"

"I don't know how to reach her." She chewed on a finger. How strange to think that after all that time, she'd be going on a mission by herself again. "Okay, I got it. I'll tell Rina-chan to handle things here for me."

"All right. I'm calculating the exact location based on what this post has got. I'll send it over to you once I have it. Saffron and I will meet you there in a bit, okay?"

"Ah? Is it not late for you too, Mr. Harley?"

"Not so late as to be completely unreasonable. Though I'm used to odd hours. You should see some of the crap I pull when I'm on a deadline. I'll send you a message."

"Okay, I'll be there in a bit." Ending the video call, she rejoined Mirai, waving Rina over.

"Not a problem for the great Rina-sama," she said with a grin, flashing Mirai a V-sign. "I can't take them out of the room, but we can look all through them. Touma-sensei even has the records from last year if we need them."

"Ah... Rina-chan, I really appreciate it, but... something's come up, so I can't stay late. Could we look another day?"

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'll go ahead and get started. Just give me the sketch." Rina held out a hand. "That's what besties are for, right?"

"Rina-chan, you're really awesome." Mirai handed her the notebook. "I'll make it up to you tomorrow."

"Sure. Tomorrow, you can tell me what's going on," Rina said with a cheerful smile, giving them a wave. "With you and your little sister there."

"...Understood." Mirai took Youseimon by the hand, pulling her down the hall to the bathroom.
"I see what you mean about your friend," Youseimon said. "I underestimated her."

"Ah, I've got the message from Harley." Mirai pulled out a scrap of paper, sketching down the kanji Harley had sent over. "Youseimon, we're going to China."

"This is the address the email gave us," Harley said as Mirai approached. "But I don't see the Digizone anywhere around here. Maybe I couldn't read it right?"

"Mirai!" Saffron waved, clapping her hands against Mirai's. "How great to see you again! You're looking well."

"Hi, Mirai, Youseimon," Floramon added. "You two have been accomplishing so much lately, haven't you?"

"Harley!" Gazimon pointed upwards as something large flew over their heads.

Mirai looked up just in time to catch a glimpse of a woman with wings. "Digimon?"

"I didn't get a close look, but I think that's Darcmon," Gazimon said. "So there is a Digizone around here after all."

"Hey! Move out of the way!" They looked up just in time as a girl on a bicycle bore down on them, braking hard. Not hard enough, as she toppled into Mirai, sending both into an undignified heap on the pavement. Sitting up, the girl looked up, letting out a sigh. "Oh, bugger."

"Are you two all right?" Harley asked, offering Mirai a hand up.

"I'm fine," she said, looking over at the other girl - a Chinese girl about her age, with her dark hair styled like Youseimon's. Struck by a sudden urge to touch the hair, she grabbed Youseimon's hand instead.

"Oh, I'm really sorry about that," the girl apologized, getting to her feet and giving them a bow. "I was in a bit of a hurry and didn't see you in time. I'm sorry."

"If you're not hurt, it's fine," Saffron said. "Just be careful, okay?"

"Ah, just a moment," Harley spoke up, holding out his phone to her. "Do you know the place listed here?"

She peered at his phone, and then up at his face. "It's here. You're on the corner right now. Are you trying to find something?"

"We were supposed to meet someone here... I guess we got here first." Harley let out a sigh, tucking the phone away.

"Um..." The girl shifted her footing. "That was probably me. Are you 'Disassembler'?"

"That's me. You must be 'Phoenix', then."

Mirai looked at Saffron. "Their screennames on the website," she explained. "In the general section. You should check that part out more often."

"I've kind of had other things demanding my attention right now. So this is the DigiTraveler we
"were going to meet?" Mirai looked at the Chinese girl as she greeted Gazimon and Floramon.

"Please, pardon me for not introducing myself. I'm Li Meihuang," she said, extending a hand to Saffron, who shook it, and then to Mirai. "You two are also from the website?"

"I'm 'Flower Girl'," Saffron said. "But you can call me Saffron. And this is Mirai."

"And this is my partner, Youseimon," Mirai added.

"Oh my gosh, how adorable are you?" Meihuang clasped Youseimon's hands in her own. "You look like you came straight from a fairy tale."

"Speaking of which, where's your partner?" Harley asked. "Didn't you say she was in trouble?"

"Ah ha... about that. Actually, she sort of ran off on me." Meihuang pointed in the direction she had been going. "I was chasing after her when I ran into all of you."

"She ran away?" Mirai echoed.

"Was it that Darcmon we saw?" Gazimon wondered.

"It seems there's a bit of a story behind this," Saffron said. "Is there perhaps some place where we can sit down and talk?"

"Ah, there's a good place right around here, follow me."

"Gazimon," Harley instructed his partner, "you and Floramon take a look around and see if you can locate the Digizone or Darcmon. Report back to us through the D-Tai if you find anything. And try not to be seen, if you can."

"Got it, leave it to us," Gazimon said, nodding. "Let's go, Floramon."

Youseimon watched them go, her expression clearly showing that she wanted to gather information as well, but she said nothing as she followed Mirai. Ahead of them, Meihuang entered a store along the strip with an intricate dragon painted above its door. "What does that mean, I wonder," Saffron said, squinting at the Chinese characters along the sign.

"It's the characters for 'dragon' and 'king'," Mirai explained, "though I don't know how you say it in Chinese."

Harley grinned. "I like this place already." He held open the door for the girls, walking in behind them.

Smells assaulted them from all angles - the smell of fresh, cooked food, tinged with spices Mirai couldn't identify in their entirety. "Oh, it's a Chinese restaurant," Harley observed. "It would figure that we'd find someone in the restaurant business."

"Oh, I'm not in the restaurant business," Meihuang said. "I study dance. This place is owned by my fiance's family."

"Your fiance?" Mirai stared. "How old are you?"

"Fifteen!" She beamed at the other girl. "We'll be married once I'm eighteen."

Mirai tried to put some sort of rational thought to the idea that a girl her age was already slated to be married, and failed. "Is this some sort of arranged marriage?" Harley asked as she led them to a
"Oh, you're familiar with those in America? Yes, it is. He's a wonderful man," she told them. "He's going to be an engineer."

"You look surprised," Saffron said to Mirai. "I thought they had that sort of thing in Japan too?"

"Ah... Yeah, but not for anyone like me. My family's of no big importance."

"Well," Youseimon spoke up, fixing her gaze on Meihuang. "Why don't you tell us about what's happened and why you want our help?"

"Hm... Where to begin." Meihuang put a hand to her chin. "After those 'guaiwu quan' started appearing all over the world, my friends and I started following the news through the Internet... That's where we found the website that Mr. Harley runs. It was actually pretty fun to read about and talk about the possibility of monsters, but I guess I didn't really take it seriously... But then this morning, one of those guaiwu quan opened up here... I saw the tower and went to take a look."

"'Guaiwu quan'?” Saffron echoed. "Do you mean a Digizone?"

"Is that how you call them?" Meihuang pulled out a scrap of paper, scribbling down a few characters. "This is what we call them. 'Guaiwu' is a monster. 'Quan' is like a circle or a pen, I guess?"

"Ah, so that's what this means?" Harley took a look at the paper, holding it up. "I'd seen this over in the Chinese-language threads, but I wasn't sure what it was referring to. Every language seems to refer to them differently. Then again, I guess it would be hard to transliteralize into a character-based language like Chinese." He let out a sigh. "I'm glad that's not my second language."

"What is your second language?" Mirai asked, tilting her head.

"Esperanto," he declared. "It's incredibly easy to learn and use."

"...I've never heard of it."

"I'm guessing you ran into your partner there?" Youseimon said to Meihuang.

"Yes! I thought the guaiwu quan would be scary, but it's really so beautiful. Have you seen it? It's got a huge tree with a lovely breeze all around, and homes and shops are built into the trunk and the branches, stretching as far as the eye can see... It was so peaceful and calming, I wanted to stay for a bit. I guess the other people in that area were frightened and ran off, and maybe Darcmon expected me to run off as well, but I didn't."

"So that Darcmon is your partner?" Harley asked.

"Yes. At least, I want her to be, but..." Meihuang looked down at her folded hands. "We got to talking, and the little icon appeared, just as Mr. Harley described on the site, but when I told her about the website and everything I'd read, she got angry. Or scared. Or both. And that's how we were when you found me," she concluded.

Mirai looked over at Youseimon. The Digimon's face looked troubled, but she said nothing. "Well, I guess I can see why she might be scared," Saffron said. "The Digimon that are partnered with the humans are basically all rebels, after all."

"Rebels? I haven't seen that on the website."
"It's part of the members-only section," Harley said. "Discussing the nature and fate of the Digital World, I thought was best to not leave open to the public, but rather to the people that had experienced it, as well as those we trust. Since you've a D-Tai, I'll open up your access."

"Huh. To think that there was a hidden level to the website, even."

"I'll warn you; the rabbit hole goes pretty deep."

Meihuang and Mirai both looked at him blankly. "It's a reference to an English storybook," Saffron explained. "Meaning that the full scope of the issue is difficult to grasp until you're well into it."

"Well, I don't know anything about rebels or what the guaiwu quan are really like," Meihuang said. "But I thought at that time that we could really become friends. This D-Tai... It must have appeared for a reason, right? Is there some reason that humans and monsters can't understand each other?"

"No, you're right," Youseimon spoke up. "Trust in your instinct. If you thought you could become allies, then there must be a possibility. But it requires understanding from both sides."

Meihuang looked at Youseimon, giving her a soft smile. "Even though you're so small, your words are so heavy."

"Should we try using the D-Tai to communicate with Darcmon?" Mirai asked. "We could call to her, for a talk."

"Go ahead and give it a try, Meihuang. We'll see if we can locate her with our D-Tais, and hone in on her location."

Meihuang nodded, hopping off her chair as Harley rose, following him outside. "What a nice girl," Saffron said. "That Darcmon must be pretty lucky."

"I wonder about that," Youseimon said. "If this is the zone I think it is... Darcmon is the boss of this area."

Mirai pulled up the D-Tai, flipping to the tracker function. "Will we... have to defeat Darcmon, then?"

"Our real goal is the towers, not the guards. If Meihuang can convince her to walk away, or at least distract her, all the better."

Saffron nodded agreement. "It's better to try to get along, after all. Meihuang said it herself - surely humans and Digimon can come to understand each other."

"I agree." Mirai gave her a smile. "So let's go."

She didn't see any more humans around the perimeter of the Digizone, so perhaps now things would be peaceful, Darcmon thought as she settled down on a branch, watching the comings and goings underneath. It wasn't the most populated or exciting zone, but it was quiet, and she liked that.

Above her, a few Tinkermon flitted through the branches, having some heated argument with each other, their wings flashing as their voices rose and fell. Although they only looked superficially the same, it drew her mind back to the humans, to the one human in particular who had approached
with a smile, showing no fear of her unfamiliar surroundings. So that's a human's warmth, Darcmon thought, staring down at her hands. But it's not something I can grasp right now. My duty lies here. It was fine this way. Once the zone returned to the Digital World, it wasn't like they'd ever see each other again-

"Darcmon! Hey, Darcmon!"

She almost fell out of the tree at the voice, staring at the ground below. Meihuang waved up at her, beaming, and behind her stood a few other humans and Digimon. "What are you doing up there?" Meihuang called to her. "Is the breeze nice?"

"Wh- What are you doing here?" Darcmon stammered out. "I told you to go home."

"I won't go home. You're my partner, after all."

"Please get such ridiculous ideas out of your head. I am not a human's partner!"

"We just want to talk," one of the other humans, a male who appeared to be older, called up. "Could you come down?"

"I don't see what there is to discuss."

"Don't be so frigid," a Floramon perched on a human girl's shoulder said. "You'll never get married if you act like that."

"... What does that have to do with anything?"

"Oh? Don't tell me you wouldn't like to be a blushing bride~"

"Floramom," the human girl spoke up, "as nice as that may be, I think that's somewhat irrelevant to the point at hand."

Scanning the rest of the group, Darcmon felt her back tense up as she saw the Digimon accompanying the final human. A face that had been in just about every wanted publication passed around. "Youseimon," she hissed. "You came here to destroy the tower, didn't you?"

"Yes," the smaller Digimon answered bluntly. "But that isn't why we're here right now. Listen to what your human has to say, Darcmon."

"I have no intention of listening to you, you death goddess! Leave this zone at once!"

"Maybe we shouldn't have come, and let Mr. Harley handle it," the girl said to Youseimon.

"I'd rather be prepared in case of trouble, though."

"Darcmon, I'm sorry," Meihuang said, looking up. "I didn't know about the war that you're fighting, or that it might be a tough issue for you. I'm not going to make you fight, Darcmon. This D-Tai..." She held up her phone, the pink icon prominently displayed. "I'm sure it didn't come from a desire to do battle, but from the moments of beauty that you showed to me. I want to be able to share those with you, Darcmon."

"I absolutely will never ally with a human. My duty is only to guard the tower from rebels like her," she pointed to Youseimon. "I'll give you all one chance to leave before I'm forced to take action."

"We're not asking you to join the rebels," the human male said. "How you define your partnership
"Even doing nothing to stop you would be a betrayal of my home," she waved an arm around at the tree behind her, "and to the King. Leave."

"Are you really so sure about that?" Youseimon spoke up. "You're telling me you felt nothing when you met this human? I don't believe that for an instant. Something in you responded, and gave birth to that bond. The D-Tai is proof of that. It's not too late for you to come to understand your partner, Darcmon, not yet. You should talk and listen to her before you lose that chance."

"Asterism Fall."

She heard the words before she saw the attack, and Mirai dove on instinct, sheltering Saffron with her own body. "Youseimon!"

"Mirai!" she heard in the same instant, even as her fingers fumbled with the D-Tai, activating the Digizone Influence.

In front of her, Youseimon became Apsaramon, activating a barrier around them. "Kbach Lear!"

"What's going on?" Saffron shouted over the noise of the wind and the sound of destruction.

Gazimon pointed upwards. "Harley, look! There's a human with that dramon!"

Harley bit at his thumb. "That must be the one Felix warned me about... We might be in trouble." Pulling out his phone, he scowled at it. "We still... don't have the power to Influence?"

"Darcmon!" Meihuang shouted. "Are you all right?"

Mirai looked up at the other girl, who gazed down with cold, dark eyes. It was funny how absence really did make the heart grow fonder, because right now she wanted nothing more than to have Andre, Felix, and Hestria helping her. Drawing her sword, she said, "Mr. Harley, please take everyone to a safe spot. Leave this to us."

"Can you handle her alone?"

"We'll think of something. Floramon and Gazimon can't Influence, so they'll be in as much danger as you are."

"Damn it, but I wish you weren't right. Saffron! We're falling back."

"I won't let you," the girl said. "Betedomon!"

"Asterism Fall," the dragon said, sending another burst of shooting stars at them.

Apsaramon's barrier broke, and she jumped for Mirai, shielding the girl with her body. "She's too high up," she said. "Let's take this battle to her level, Mirai."

"Got it!"
"I don't understand," Darcmon said as Apsaramon carried Mirai over her head, landing on the branch above where the other human and Betedramon were. "The humans are fighting each other?"

"Darcmon!" Meihuang stood below, holding out her hands. "I don't understand why, either. But we need to get out of here. It's dangerous."

"Forget it! I'm not going to turn tail and run just because she's a little bit strong!" Darcmon turned to look upward again. She could see Youseimon's human, Mirai, charging toward the pair with a wooden sword, and Betedramon placing herself in between the two.

"Now isn't the time to be stubborn! Can't you tell I'm worried about you?" Meihuang shouted. "Come down here before something happens!"

"This isn't stubbornness! Can't you tell that this is my home?" Darcmon shouted back. "The Digimon here... I have a duty to protect them!"

Instead of looking surprised or chastised, Meihuang's gaze was direct and... sad? "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to sound like I was telling you to abandon your home. If it's yours, then I want to protect it, too. Just like I want to protect this city that I live in. How can I help you protect this place? I can't do anything if you don't tell me what I should do."

Darcmon looked down at her, then back up as a buildup of data made the back of her neck tingle. "Breath of Stars," Betedramon said, and the effect was immediate, crackling down the branches and the trees, even breaking the air itself with the white-light force that exploded outwards.

"Mirai!" Harley's cry was echoed by Darcmon's own cry of horror, seeing the aftermath of the attack. Branches had been split and broken off by the force, fires licking at them. All at once, the beautiful central tree had been dyed in crimson and orange. "Mirai, are you up there? Say something!"

Mirai and Apsaramon had both been knocked to the ground by the force, the latter reverting to Youseimon. "Mirai?" she asked in worry.

She was holding her shoulder, which looked more away from the torso than it should have. As Youseimon watched, Mirai clutched at it, and the touch moved it back into place. Mirai let out a scream as white pain flooded her senses, rendering her helpless against Betedramon's attack. "My shoulder... it really hurts... Need to grab my sword..."

Darcmon stood frozen to the spot as flames grew closer, unable to comprehend how, in mere moments, her home had gone from idyllic and peaceful to awash in destruction. "You damned human!" she shouted, charging toward Betedramon. "Don't damage our home any further!"

"Beautiful Claw," Betedramon said, and drew her claws along Darcmon's smaller body, shredding flesh and bits of data, letting her drop to the ground.

"Darcmon!" Meihuang ran toward her, grabbing her hand. "Darcmon, say something! Don't die!"

"Got to put the fire out," she groaned in response. "The fire..."

"We... don't have anyone that can do that," Harley said, clutching a fist in frustration. "None of our attributes are right. Damn it! If only I could Influence... What kind of a worthless partner am I?"

Betedramon descended with her human in her claws, the girl watching as her dragon advanced on Youseimon and Mirai. "This is the end for you."
"Take that ending and shove it up your ass!" Betedramon let out a snarl of surprise as bullets and black points smashed against her face. Sanseimon and Lilinmon charged as one, knocking the dragon from its branch.

Mirai was still trying to decide why Sanseimon and Lilinmon were in Beijing when Andre knelt next to her, placing a hand on her forehead. "Mirai, are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"Andre? Why are you... Isn't it the middle of the night there?"

"I couldn't sleep. Had a bad feeling," he muttered. "Looks like I was right. Do you have pain anywhere?"

"My shoulder... The blast, I got yanked and it really hurts..."

"She could have dislocated or separated it," she heard Felix's voice addressing Andre. "Does it look out of place?"

"No, it looks normal. I'll take care of her; you direct Sanseimon and Lilinmon."

"Oh, I plan to." She couldn't see his face, but Felix's voice was completely lacking in any of its usual humor, cold enough to send shivers down her spine.

"Do you have pain anywhere else?" Andre asked her, pulling off his jacket. He took her arm in light fingers, moving it carefully to her stomach so he could make a makeshift sling.

"Um... I hurt all over, but the shoulder is the worst... Where's Meihuang? And Darcmon? Harley and Saffron?"

More footsteps, and Saffron peered down into her face. "I'll move her somewhere safe. Can you stand, Youseimon?"

Youseimon! Mirai felt her focus snap back into place, and pushed herself up to a sitting position with her good arm. "I'm okay... I think I can stand. Youseimon?"

"I've had better days, but I'll be fine. I'm more worried about Darcmon."

"She's badly injured," Saffron said. "But the D-Tai can help heal her wounds, right?"

"If I can become Apsaramon... I could help."

Mirai picked up her phone, but her focus could only carry her so far. The D-Tai icon on her phone remained dark and inert. "C'mon," Mirai said to herself. "D-Tai..."

"Don't worry, Mirai," Saffron told her, helping her to her feet. "Harley's working on something. Leave it to all of us."

"But..."

"Andre!" Felix called over to him, and the other boy gave Saffron a quick nod before running in that direction. Sanseimon and Lilinmon were still on their feet and largely unhurt, but not doing much past annoying Betedramon. Still, their movements were pulling the dragon away from the burning tree, and allowing some of the native Digimon to try and put out the blaze. Watching the flames lick the land and sky and everything inbetween, while she stood there with her arm in a sling and bruises all over, she had never felt so weak and helpless.

While Betedramon was distanced from the tree, Felix and Andre made a run for the human girl, the
latter drawing his pepper-spray gun. "Call off your dragon!" Felix shouted at her.

She backed away hurriedly. "Betedramon!"

The dragon moved before any of them could react, swatting Sanseimon and Lilinmon out of the way, and then bringing her tail around to slam against Andre and Felix directly, knocking them aside. "Andre! Felix!" Mirai shouted in horror as neither moved to get up.

"You delayed the outcome for a little while, but now it's time to finish this," the girl said. "Betedramon! Destroy them."

"No!" Saffron cried. "Leave them alone, don't hurt them!"

As if to punctuate the call, a cracking, crumbling sound resounded in the background, over the roar of the flames, and the tower fell, dropping pieces. Betedramon turned back to the downed humans, but Sanseimon and Lilinmon were already standing between her and them, ready to attack again. "Let's go, Betedramon," the girl said, and the dragon turned and followed, vanishing along with the flames as the Digizone retreated.

Saffron supported Mirai as she led the way over to Meihuang and Darcmon. Harley was some distance away, Floramon and Gazimon with him. "Saffron, I'll check on these guys. How are the girls?"

Meihuang had Darcmon's head in her lap, trying not to cry as she stroked the Digimon's hair. The data leakage had stopped, but Darcmon's face was still pained and unhealthy. "My home," she murmured. "What's going to happen to it?"

"I'm sorry," Saffron said. "We couldn't stop her or stop the fire."

"Is this... what a war is like?" Meihuang asked softly. "Causing so much pain to everyone involved? Why... is everyone fighting?"

"There isn't a good answer for that," Youseimon said. "All I can say is that we're not fighting because we want to cause destruction. You have to decide for yourself what you and your partner want to do."

"I want to help you, however I can. But I don't want Darcmon to fight any more." Meihuang put her arms around Darcmon's shoulders, clinging to her partner. "She's been through enough."

"Mirai," Harley addressed her, helping Andre into a sitting position. "Can you make it home by yourself? I'll take these two home."

"Yes, I think so." She put a hand to the jacket that was her makeshift sling.

"Good. Get your shoulder looked at."

He knew what had happened-basically, he'd met one of the many business ends of a dragon—but Felix couldn't really recall the act. The sticky blood on the side of his head gave him an idea as to why. "Merde," he muttered to himself as he unlocked the back door. "I hope I don't need stitches." At least he wouldn't have to worry about Rusalkamon, currently draped against his shoulder and fast asleep. She'd been banged up, but wouldn't require a doctor or stitches or all the ugly bits of human recovery.
A light flicked on as he entered, and he pulled back a sigh, dragging himself inside. His leg hurt, too. Had he twisted it somehow, or just bruised it up? "Where have you been?" Alexa said, barely holding back the anger he knew she was feeling.

"Can't you ask me in the morning?" he groaned, flopping into a chair and draping himself across the table. "I'm tired and I have a headache."

She approached, and touched a hand to his head. "Well, of course you've got a headache, you've practically split your skull open. What did you do?" Her tone shifted from angry to worried. "You need to see a doctor."

"No. No doctor. Doc can't do anything other than stick a needle in it, anyway."

"Stop being stubborn!" Now she sounded ready to cry, and he looked up at her. "You're bleeding and you could have been killed or badly hurt, and for what? What is it you're fighting for? Why are you doing this?"

"Why...?" He looked over to Rusalkamon, still clinging to his shoulder. Laying his head on the table again, he murmured, "Why am I..."
The Meaning of Teammates

Previously on Digimon Travelers...

Mirai and Youseimon look into the identity of the unknown girl whose Digimon, Betedramon, attacked them, but come up dry. Harley and Saffron invite them to China, where they meet Meihuang, a kind girl who befriends the boss of the Digizone, Darcmon. Darcmon's choice between the human and her home in the Digizone is strained when the mysterious girl and her Digimon show up again to attack. Even with Andre and Felix's help, all three are injured and narrowly escape. But what place will they venture to next?

Nothing was moving.

A week and a half had passed, and there were no new Digizones, no sign of the mysterious girl, and even her shoulder still ached when she moved it, even though the doctor had said it would be fine. She hadn't heard from Felix or Andre, either, and she hadn't even been able to reach out through the D-Tai and ask. Nothing was moving, and because of that, she didn't feel like she could move, either.

Even Youseimon had become quiet, absorbed in her own thoughts, clearly edgy about the situation. But even her partner was just as paralyzed as she was, keeping to herself so thoroughly that Mirai barely saw her during the day. Maybe it wasn't a bad idea. She wasn't sure what she would say even if Youseimon was there.

"Mirai-chan, you've been out of it lately," Rina's voice reached her as she walked home from school. She'd barely been aware of her friend's presence at her side. "You haven't even been bugging the kendo guys lately."

"Well... it's not like I could fight with this shoulder." Words that held a second meaning.

"Yeah, but it's not just that... Oh?" Mirai looked over at the last word. "Do you know that girl, Mirai-chan?"

"What girl?" She looked ahead. At the top of the hill, a girl with twin-bun pigtails waved at them with a sweeping arm movement. "Is that... Are you Meihuang?"

"Meihuang? Is that Korean or something?" Rina asked, puzzled.

"Hello!" Meihuang greeted them in English as she approached down the hill. "Are you Mirai's friend? I am Li Meihuang of Beijing."

"Uh..." Rina flailed her arms at being addressed before attempting a reply in English. "Very good meet you! I Kiraharu Rina."

Mirai managed a slight smile at the grade-school level English. The so-called princess of Fukuoka Middle needed to study more. "Rina-chan, could you go ahead of me? I need to talk to Meihuang about stuff, and she doesn't speak Japanese."

"Are you saying my English is bad?"

"No, I'm saying it's awful."

"Hmph! Well, I know when I'm not wanted," she mock-sulked, then gave Mirai a pat on the
uninjured shoulder. "I'll see you at school tomorrow."

"Sorry about that," Mirai addressed Meihuang after Rina had left. "I didn't want to talk about things in front of her."

"Ah. She doesn't know about the Digital World, then?"

"I haven't told her yet. Actually, I haven't told anyone here in town. I didn't want to make them worry," Mirai pointed down the street. "Um, there's a little cafe down the street if you'd like to sit down."

"I would love very much to sample some Japanese food!" Meihuang said, eyes shining in delight.

"Then just follow me."

"It must be hard on you," Meihuang said from behind her as they walked. "Keeping that secret all by yourself."

"Well, it's something that has to be done. Aren't you keeping the secret, yourself?"

"I told my fiance. He's helping me take care of Darcmon, so it was necessary."

"Ah. How did he take it?"

Meihuang let out a little giggle. "He freaked out, of course. I imagine anyone would be incredibly shocked to learn what we know. Actually, his surprised face is really adorable... I'm glad I told him."

Mirai didn't think she'd ever understand the feelings of an engaged girl. "Here we are. We can just take a booth and the waitress will be around in a bit."

"So why did you come out here?"

Meihuang had been staring intently at the menu before the question was asked, but then put it down. "Yes. I thought I should thank you in person."

"... Thank me?"

"Well, I thought I should apologize first," Meihuang said, her eyes never leaving Mirai's face. "Because of me, you and your partners came to Beijing, and were injured. Because of my inexperience and unwillingness to handle the problem alone. But I feel that apologizing would belittle your decision to come and help, and to fight. Such a heavy decision that was made of your own free will should absolutely not be disrespected. So, I thank you wholeheartedly for what you have given me."

Mirai blinked, then shifted her gaze away. "It would have been more impressive if we'd actually won, though. We didn't manage to save ourselves or the Digizone."

"You survived, as did Darcmon. That in itself is a victory. Defeat only comes under two circumstances: death, and surrender. You have not done either, therefore you have achieved a victory, even if it isn't perfect as you might like. Surviving is the only prerequisite to a second encounter."

Mirai stared at her as the waitress came around. "I would absolutely love some of these mantou and some tea, please!" she addressed the waitress in English, beaming.
"She'd like the manju and some tea," Mirai repeated to the confused waitress, "and some tea for me, please. They're called manju, not mantou, Meihuang," she added in English.

"Oh, is that right?"

Mirai shook her head. "Still... I'm kind of surprised. That you can talk about defeat and victory so easily, even though you don't like war."

"Ah, well, we are the country of Sun Tzu, you know," Meihuang said with a wave of her hand. "My parents are fans, so I read it growing up. And victory and defeat are attitudes you can turn to anything you do, you know?"

"I guess... It's just easier to do when you're not talking about a real war."

"That's the wrong way of looking at it," Meihuang said. "Shouldn't you approach anything you do with full determination?"

Mirai stared, completely caught off guard by the words. It was a fact that seemed so clear to her once it had been spoken. If anything, she should have been the one to say that-approaching something halfheartedly had never been her style. It was the reason she wore her grandfather's goggles around her neck. A pilot, especially one who had flown in a major war, couldn't afford to do anything with less than his best. Those goggles had been with her when she'd attended to her chores, when she'd bid her father farewell on his flights, when she had decided to try to get on the kendo team. Since when had she ever made a habit of quitting?

"I'm sorry, Meihuang," she said at last. "I think I've been thinking about this the wrong way."

"How so?"

"The Digimon... When they fight, they get hurt, you know."

"I know."

"I've never been hurt in a battle, though."

Meihuang stayed silent, waiting for her to continue, not even touching the manju when the waitress brought them over. "We call each other partners, but she's always protected me from injury. Even though she herself is injured. Even though I've shared in her fights, this was the first time I've shared her pain. I wouldn't say that I ever treated this like a game, but... I didn't take it seriously enough. I must have been such a burden on the others..."

"I wouldn't say that," Meihuang said with a soft smile, picking up her teacup in both hands. "Do you know, what 'Disassembler' told me when I asked for help?"

"Huh? What did he say?"

"He told me he and 'Flower Girl' would come, and then he said he'd bring along the strongest pair there was. So there wasn't anything to worry about, because that strongest pair would definitely take care of things." Meihuang took a sip of her tea. "You shouldn't be so hard on yourself. You are very valued by your teammates."

"Thank you, Meihuang. I feel a little better than I did before." She stood up. "I'm sorry to cut this so short, but could you excuse me? I have some things I need to do."

"Of course. I'll come back and visit you sometime," Meihuang said. "You absolutely have to treat
me to some more Japanese food!"

Mirai smiled, and it felt like a movement forward. "You really like Japanese food, huh?"

"I like food of all cultures. Food is something that's universal to us all, that connects us, and yet each place has an identity all its own. It's a powerful thing."

"Then you'll have to treat me at your fiance's restaurant sometime as well."

"Absolutely!"

With a wave, Mirai went to the front of the cafe to pay for both meals before leaving out the front door. She pulled out her phone, pulling up the D-Tai as she walked. She needed to find Youseimon, and then make some trips.

"Was that what you were worried about?"

Mirai looked up. Youseimon stood by the corner of the building. "You were upset because I was getting hurt and you weren't? Don't be. We're creatures of data; we can repair our data perfectly, and much faster than humans can."

"That's true... But it still hurts, doesn't it?"

Youseimon looked away. "Compared to the feeling of having my soul rot away in a place away from the sun... it's not painful at all."

"Youseimon..." Mirai put a hand to her goggles. "I'm... going to do better. So that next time you won't be hurt. I'll see this through to the end."

Youseimon smiled, then looked at Mirai's phone as it began to buzz. "A Digizone?" she asked, voice becoming tense.

Mirai touched the D-Tai's icon. "Yes, it's a Digizone at last! Let me see where... It's in Cairo, Egypt. It's probably late for Felix and Andre... I wonder if they'll be there."

"I suppose we can only try and find out. Shall we go, partner?"

Mirai touched a hand to her goggles, and grinned. "I was planning on going even if you didn't tell me."

To her disappointment, when they arrived, they must have already been in the Digizone, for the area was dark and foggy, with a depressing, damp air. "They should come to this area," Mirai said, "but will we be able to see them in all this fog, I wonder."

"Is this what Cairo is like normally?"

"I don't think so. Egypt has a river, but it's mostly sandy and stuff. Can you see the tower from here, Youseimon?"

"I can't, but if I can fly, I might be able to. What should we do?"

"I wonder if I should contact Harley or Saffron. Oh, I wish I knew what time it was there for them. It's not horrendous, I hope." Or should they try and tackle it themselves?
"Mirai!"

That was Andre's voice, without a doubt. She ran in the direction of his voice, throwing her uninjured arm around his neck. "Andre! I'm so glad to see you! How are you feeling? Are your injuries okay?"

"Mirai... I'm okay. Just a couple of cracked ribs, so it hurts if I breathe too deeply, but really, I'm okay," he reassured her, patting her head. "What about your shoulder?"

"Still have to wear the sling, but it should be okay. I'm glad you're here. But isn't it late for you?"

"I'll be fine. I'm learning to nap now, with all the late-night stuff we've been doing. Milomon heard the alarm," he added, ruffling his partner's ears.

"I'm really glad you're here."

Andre rubbed at the back of his neck. "Well, being reliable's my special trait, right? The running joke among my classmates is that my special talent is showing up."

"But it's really great you did. Thank you, Andre. Not just for here, but in Beijing, too. You've come to every Digizone without fail."

He coughed. "So has Felix come by?"

"Ah... No, I haven't seen him yet. Do you think he'll come even though it's late?"

"Well, he's had perfect attendance too, right? Let's wait a bit. Have you looked around or found anything?"

"No," Youseimon spoke up, "and I'm concerned. There was a long delay in the Digizones. I'm worried something might have happened in the interim to my allies."

"Cheer up, Youseimon," Milomon said. "I'm sure they're all fine. They can take care of themselves."

"... I suppose you're right. It's not like it was when we were younger. They've all become capable," Youseimon said, more to herself than to Milomon. "Still, I won't be at ease until they see them."

"Say, Andre," Mirai spoke up, "You... Your mom took care of your injuries, right?"

"Hm? Yeah, she did. We kept it a secret from my siblings so they wouldn't worry."

"Your mom doesn't worry?"

"She's too high-strung and energetic to worry," Andre joked, then his expression fell. "I'm sure she is worried. But she wouldn't stop me. She's always been like that."

"I wonder if I should have told my mom," Mirai murmured. "But she's not a fiction writer. I guess it would be pretty hard to believe."

"It's pretty hard not to believe, when the evidence is right under your nose. But I get your point. Secrets are sometimes harder than the truth."

"Maybe I'm just jealous," she admitted. "I mean, you told your mom, and Felix told his sister, and Hestria told her stagemates... Even Meihuang told her fiance.”
"Meihuang? You saw her?"

"Yeah, she came to Fukuoka. She-" Mirai paused, looking up at the sound of something moving in the mists.

Milomon crouched next to Andre's foot, then stood up. "Oh, it's Felix! Felix came!"

"Milomon! Hello, everyone!" Rusalkamon appeared first, running over to Milomon and grasping his paws.

Felix was not far behind, but he wasn't the only one joining them. "Ah, you're... Alexa, right?" Andre said. "What are you doing here? It's dangerous."

"I'm well aware it's dangerous." Alexa's voice was the Sakurajima volcano, ready to rain fire down at any moment. "That's why I'm here. So a certain stupid little brother doesn't get himself bashed in the head again."

"Well, that's the story." Felix had a bandage wrapped around his head, but his carefree expression was still the same. "Please take care of my elder sister."

Seeing Felix stare down the volcano without so much as faltering in his smile... Mirai had a newfound respect for his bravery. "It's fine with me," Andre said, "but won't it be dangerous for her?"

"If anyone tries to mess with us, I'll break their skulls," she stated, cracking the knuckles on one hand. "Don't worry about me."

"What's the situation?" Felix asked Mirai.

"We just got here not too long ago ourselves. We haven't located the tower in this fog, or Youseimon's allies," she said.

"Let's split up," Youseimon said. "Now that all of you are here, I can leave the tower in your hands. Mirai and I will go look for my allies."

"I don't like the idea of splitting up," Mirai said. "If that dragon girl shows up again, we'll need everyone's help."

"We'll have an easier time of it if we can find my allies to help."

"Or it means we need to take out the Digizone quickly, before they can show up," Felix said. "I'm pretty sure we're her targets, not your people, Youseimon."

Mirai pulled out her phone, and activated the Digizone Influence. "Mirai?" Youseimon, now Apsaramon, questioned.

"You go with Felix and Andre," Mirai said. "I'll go look for your allies myself. I've met a number of them, so I should be able to identify them."

"No. It's too risky for you to go alone in your condition."

"She has a point," Felix said. "Alexa, you go with her."

"Excuse me? I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"Come on, Alexa. You'd leave this poor defenseless girl on her own?" Felix walked over to Mirai,
putting a hand on her uninjured shoulder.

"Family comes first."

"Felix," Mirai scowled at him, "I am not-

"Just go along with it," he said in her ear, barely even a whisper. "She needs to see that not all Digimon are enemies."

She looked at him, then back at Alexa. "It's more difficult handling a sword one-handed, so I'd feel reassured if you were with me, Alexa."

"I absolutely will not take any risks until you're back with us, Alexa," Felix said, raising one hand. "If we see the dragon or her girl, we'll run away. So will you do this for me?"

Alexa's expression held an intense darkness, but then she turned on her heel. "Let's get this over with, you."

Mirai wondered if she might have actually been safer alone. "Okay, I'm coming."

It felt strange to be in a Digizone without Youseimon. But she had to do what she could, Mirai thought to herself. Somehow, she thought that must have been why Alexa had come with Felix, the same line of thinking. "Keep an eye out for any movement, but don't attack them right away. Our Digimon friends might be looking for us, too."

"Hey, you," Alexa's expression was still dangerous, but focusing on the task at hand seemed to be taking off some of the edge. "This Digital World, Digimon thing... What's so great about it?"

"What's so great about it?" Mirai considered the question. "Well, the Digital World is the home of our friends. And those Digimon are our friends. So I guess that?"

"I don't understand it." Alexa's eyes narrowed in frustration. "What does he see in this place?"

"You mean your brother?"

"Ever since that Digital World showed up in our hometown, he's changed. He's never talked about having friends; he doesn't even go out that often. He's never shown much of an interest in anything, least of all other people. Why is this place different? Why are you different?"

Mirai's footsteps slowed, then stopped. "That Felix? That same Felix, you say is uninterested in other people, other things? I don't understand."

"He's always just done what he feels like doing. He can't be bothered with anything that doesn't interest him, so he doesn't have very many friends. He's just never been this interested in other people. Not for this long. He's changed, and I want to know why."

"I...don't think I can help you with that." Mirai paused to get her bearings in the fog and to listen for enemies. "The Felix I've always known is really enthusiastic and a bit pushy, but kind and reliable. He's always come through for us."

Alexa made a disgruntled noise in response, then put a hand on Mirai's shoulder. "Hold up. Something's that way."

She could hear it now - a rustling, like clothes rustling in the wind. Alexa took a step back, pushing Mirai against a wall, both their focus on the noise in front of them. Shapes drifted ahead of them,
seemingly not noticing them as they passed, rounded shapes that didn't seem to touch the ground. "Ghosts?" Alexa muttered. "What is this, Pac-Man?"

Mirai held up her phone, snapping a quick picture. "They're Bakemon," she told Alexa. "According to this, they're not that tough."

"Hm. So you think we can take them if we need to?"

Mirai looked up, then took another picture as larger shapes emerged from behind the Bakemon. "Uh-oh."

"'Uh-oh'?"

"Those big ones are Phantomon. They're much stronger. I don't think we want to mess with them."

No sooner had she said that than the Phantomon turned toward them, scythes raised as they flew. "Then we're making a run for it," Alexa said, grabbing Mirai's free hand, dragging her deeper into the fog.

What kind of Digizone was this anyway? The ground under her feet felt like dirt, but she couldn't make out anything more than vague building shapes. It was toward those shapes that Alexa ran, ducking inbetween two of them. "They're following," Mirai told her, feeling tenseness creep into her voice. Right now, Youseimon wasn't with her to protect her.

From nowhere, hands appeared from the shadows in the fog, grasping Mirai from behind and dragging her back, clapping a hand over her mouth. In front of her, she could see something grabbing Alexa in the same fashion, something that had paws with long claws...

*Those paws with long claws...* Mirai let herself relax, and the mists folded around them, dragging them both into complete darkness. And then lights came on over her head, rows of long fluorescent lights. "Alexa?"

The claws released her, jumping away as she took a swipe at them. "Where are we?"

"I think it's a human office building," the owner of the claws said from above Mirai's head.

"Tailmon!" The cat-like Digimon was perched along the top wall of a cubicle, tail swishing slowly.

"The Phantomon won't find us in here," another familiar voice said. "I apologize for the rough treatment."

"No, it's fine, Wizarmon. These are some of the friends I was looking for, Alexa, so don't worry. Isn't it great we found them so fast?" Mirai beamed at the other girl.

Alexa took a swipe at the cat's tail, more from curiosity than animosity. "How many shapes do you guys come in?"

"More than are easily counted," Wizarmon told her.

"Tailmon, Wizarmon, where's everyone else? Are they okay?"

"We're all still alive," Tailmon answered for him, "so that's something. But the King's putting out more of an effort to hunt us down. We've had a Celestial General on our tails. So we're all split up right now. Spadamon and Impmon are here, with some of our fighters, while Beelzebumon and Mervamon guard our hiding hole."

A Celestial General... She knew that meant he or she was dangerous, but at the same time she was relieved it wasn't the girl and her dragon. "Where is Youseimon?" Wizarmon asked. "Isn't she with you?"

"No, she's with Felix and Andre. They're going for the tower." Mirai chewed on a finger. "I wonder if it might be safer to bring you to our world. The human world."

"Even if it were possible, we would have to decline." Spadamon stood at the entrance, Impmon behind him. "There are many things we need to do here."

"Even so, if two of your strongest are pinned down having to protect those who can't fight... I'll talk to Harley and Saffron and see if they have any ideas."

"I see your point. Still, not all of those who are not involved in combat do not fight."

"More importantly," Impmon spoke up, "we need to get organized and get going. Hi, by the way. Hey, you rabble-rousers, let's get going!"

More familiar faces filtered in - Elecmon, IcePicoDevimon, Prairiemon. "...You have a dog," Alexa said, staying still as Labramon paused in her tracks.

"She's not a dog, she's Labramon," Prairiemon told Alexa firmly. "Don't pick on her, please."

"You brought another girl!" IcePicoDevimon circled above Mirai's head. "I like this trend."

"What are you going to do?" Mirai asked. "Is it just the Phantomon and Bakemon that we're up against?"

"No, they're not that much of a problem; they're pretty indifferent to our presence." Wizarmon used the base of his staff to draw glowing lines on the floor, sketching a quick map of the nearby zones. "After the last Digizone, Mardukkimon, the Jupiter Celestial General, has been after us. We haven't had much time to think, so we crashed this neutral zone long enough to set up a Digizone and get in touch with Youseimon. After this, we'll be able to go here, or here," he pointed with his staff, "to one of these zones where the King's presence isn't very strong. The control towers give him some degree of control in these zones, to be sure, but without an actual physical army in the area, we'll be able to take a breather."

"Hey, Wizarmon... Would it be possible to get a map of the Digital World? And something showing which zones have DigiZoned thus far? I'm sure Harley and the others could use it to help us."

"Sure. Let me borrow your phone for a bit."

Alexa stood next to Impmon and Labramon at the door, gazing outside. If the moving shapes some distance away noticed them, they didn't react. "Is that the tower?" she asked, pointing.

"Ah, you can see it from here?"

"Well, I could. It looks like it's falling."

"Oh! Felix and Andre must have taken care of the tower. Good, that means they probably didn't run into trouble. Let's head that way," Mirai said as Wizarmon handed back her phone. "By the way," she continued as they ran through the mists in the direction Alexa had seen the tower in, "I'm sorry about your brother's injury. Was he all right?"
"As all right as he could be. He wouldn't go to a doctor, but I've been keeping an eye on him like a hawk since then. He seems like he'll be okay, but..."

"He's pretty lucky to have a caring older sister like you. I'm jealous."

"Hmph. He's just spoiled because he's used to me cleaning up his messes."

"What did you think of those Digimon?" Mirai said. "I'm sorry we didn't have time for a proper introduction."

"I don't get what you see in them, but they aren't savage, at least. ... The dog was kind of cute."

Mirai smiled as the Digizone pixellated and disappeared around them. Well, it's a start, at least.

Like a floodgate being released, sunlight poured down upon them with intensity, enough to hurt her eyes. Shielding them with her good hand, she looked around for Andre and Felix, spotting them not that far off. To her surprise, someone else was with them. "Hestria!"

The girl turned at her name, and something about her expression immediately struck Mirai as strange, though she couldn't put a finger on what. She didn't seem quite as...sharp? "Alexa," Felix greeted with a wave. "See, told you we'd stay out of trouble."

"Don't think I'll let you go off on your own again. This was a one-time thing." She scowled. "Can we go home now? It's like three in the morning."

"You guys took down the tower?" Mirai said to Andre and Hestria as Youseimon came bounding over, happily latching onto Mirai.

"She did most of the work," Andre said, "taking out the boss while we worked on the tower itself. So she's the one you have to thank."

"Thanks for coming to help us, Hestria," Mirai said with a smile.

"I didn't do it for you," Hestria replied as Raptomon landed neatly on her shoulder. "My only goal is to become stronger."

There it was again, that feeling that something wasn't quite right. "Maybe so, but you were a big help nonetheless. We should work together more often."

"I'm not interested..." Her eyes lost focus, causing Andre to pause and watch her. "Nngh. I can do fine on my own..." Barely were the words out of her mouth before she tumbled forward, legs collapsing underneath her. Raptomon let out a cry of alarm, flapping back into the air.

"Hestria!" Andre and Mirai both reached for her, Andre with his hands on her arm and Mirai using her shoulder to hold the girl's weight. "Hestria, are you all right?"

"M fine..." Hestria slumped against Mirai, her breathing harsh.

Her breath felt warm on Mirai's ear, far too warm. "Help me set her down, Andre," Mirai said.

The boy was already doing so, touching a hand to her forehead. "As I thought... she's got a pretty heavy fever. Has she been sick, Raptomon?"

The bird jumped at being addressed. "No, she... She's been tired, but it's not like she's sick...!"

"No, she's definitely sick. It could be flu, but I'm not sure how dangerous that is in South Africa."
Andre frowned.

"I'll take her home," Mirai said. "And I'll call Eranna and let her know. Her stagemates will know better what to do. Just put her on my back, will you, Andre?"

"You can't handle her alone. I'll come with you."

"No, you need to go home and rest. If I need help, I'll call Meihuangle. Just put her on my back, please." Mirai knelt down awkwardly, and Youseimon and Andre helped her get Hestria onto her back.

"Are you sure you don't want help?" Andre asked. "My siblings have had the flu before, so-"

"Go home, Andre," she told him firmly as she stood. "We'll be fine. Go to sleep." Fumbling with the D-Tai, she asked Raptomon, "What's Hestria's address, do you know?"

The Digimon looked at Mirai blankly. "I'll take that as a no. Okay, we'll just have to transport there and make our way there."

If there was a time difference between Cairo and Cape Town, it must not have been much of one, for it was late morning there as well, the streets full of people out and about. Thankfully, no one seemed to care that Mirai was walking through town with a local idol on her back. Raptomon took to the skies to get her bearings, and then came back to land in Youseimon's arms, directing them in a soft voice.

The place Raptomon led them to was an apartment building, but much larger and fancier-looking than the place Mirai lived. Inside, the place was so roomy, it could induce agoraphobia, with large windows facing out over the city. Taking off her shoes would have been too difficult with her burden, so Mirai's feet thunked across the wood floors as she made a beeline for the couch.

"You must be tired," Youseimon said as Mirai slowly lowered Hestria to the couch. "Carrying her all this way."

"It's not too bad. More that my shoulders hurt; not being able to use both arms sucks." Mirai sat down on the floor next to the couch, looking at Hestria's flushed face. "Youseimon, Raptomon, can you bring me a bowl of water and a wet washcloth?"

"I'll show you where they are." Being back in Hestria's apartment seemed to have snapped Raptomon out of her worried daze, and she hopped across the floor lightly, leading the way through a door.

Mirai watched them leave, then pulled out her phone, selecting Eranna's number. *Maybe I should text her, that'd be cheaper... But I don't know if she'll see it right away.* Touching the dial button, she put it to her ear.

"Hallo?" Eranna's voice.

"Hello, Miss Eranna. This is Mirai Watanabe. We met at your concert," she began.

"Oh! The Digimon girl. Yes, how are you?"

At least her voice sounded cheerful. "I'm actually in town right now. In Hestria's apartment,
actually. She's got a fever and she fainted. I'm not sure how sick she is."

"Oh, that idiot," Eranna sighed. "Don't worry about her, it's just a stomach bug. We sent her home from practice because of it. I'll come over in a bit and take care of her."

"No, it's fine. I'll stay here and see if I can get her to wake up and drink something."

"Well, if you insist. I'll still be over in a bit anyway, okay?"

"Got it."

Mirai let Eranna hang up just as Youseimon re-emerged with the requisite bowl and washcloth. "Is this all right?"

Mirai dipped her fingers in the bowl, satisfied at the temperature. Wringing the cloth out so it was only damp, she placed it on Hestria's forehead. "If this doesn't help, we'll try a bag of ice. Can you two bring me something for her to drink? Preferably just water or... Do you have Aquarius here?"

"I don't know it." Raptomon hopped her way to the open kitchen, Youseimon following.

Such a big place, Mirai thought to herself. She could fit two or three of her apartments in the open living area alone. "Hey, Raptomon, does anyone else live here besides you and Hestria?"

"I've never seen anyone else."

"It's my parents' apartment," Hestria spoke up from the couch, putting a hand to the washcloth on her forehead. "They're not here very often. Why are you bothering my partner with such a trivial question?"

"I was just curious about you. Eranna's on her way," Mirai told Hestria, putting out a hand to help her sit up. "You should drink something. Think you can keep it down?"

"If not, I'll be sure to aim in your direction," Hestria grumbled. "The hell happened to you?"

"The hell happened to me?" she echoed, confused.

Hestria pointed to the sling. "I suppose you just took a tumble down a flight of stairs."

"Oh, that. No, we were attacked by that unknown girl and her dragon-like Digimon. She was horrifyingly strong; you'd like fighting her."

Hestria accepted the cup Youseimon handed her, taking a sip. "Why'd you tell the busybody? Now I'll never get rid of her."

"You mean Eranna? I don't know your other stagemates or anyone else that might be able to help you. She said you haven't been feeling well."

"I'm fine. She's overreacting."

"Pardon me for saying so, but collapsing in the middle of Egypt with a fever doesn't really fit the definition of 'fine' as I understand it." Mirai took the glass back from Hestria, handing it to Youseimon to fill again. "You should rely on other people a little more."

"I don't need a lecture."

"Maybe not, but I might end up giving you one anyway. I think I understand that you want to be
strong. But collapsing in a foreign country because you've made yourself sicker by pushing too hard gets you further away from that goal, not toward it."

"So you would've told me to stay home? I don't-"

"I didn't say that. You would have come anyway. I would have done the same thing. But you should have thought it through," she said, pointing at Hestria in a scolding gesture. "Why didn't you think to bring a bottle of water or an ice pack to help keep yourself cool? Why didn't you ask to lean on someone's shoulder if you were feeling ill? What if you'd fainted before Raptomon could Influence, and then she was attacked? Did you think about what you might be getting her into? It's all well and good to push yourself ahead through willpower, but there's a difference between pushing yourself and rushing recklessly, without even taking precautions."

Hestria blinked at the pointing finger hovering near her nose. "Are you scolding me?"

"Of course I am! And I hope Eranna chews you out, too. And I hope Raptomon does, too!"

"Me?" the Digimon squeaked.

"Yes, you. You're her partner, aren't you? You should speak what's on your mind. Don't hold back. You Digimon are the ones that take on most of the danger. The least we humans can do is listen to what you need."

Raptomon looked at Hestria, fluffing her feathers in what appeared to be a nervous gesture. "I... I like you the way you are, Lady, but... I worry about you."

Hestria looked at her, then flopped back on the couch, head draping over the edge. "All right, I get it. Is that all you wanted to say to me, Japanese girl?"

"It's not 'Japanese girl', it's Mirai Watanabe. And no, it's not all I wanted to say." She stood up, pointing at Hestria again. "Once you're better and my shoulder's healed... I challenge you to a fight. Human versus human."

Hestria sat up again, one hand on the washcloth. "Huh?"

"I want you to take me seriously, Hestria. You want to be strong. You only respect strength. You're not the only one that's trying to become stronger, Hestria, and I'll prove it to you with this sword."

Mirai pressed her lips together. "The dragon Digimon we've been fighting is insanely strong. I can't do it alone, and neither can you. I want us to work as a team. If I win... I'll have you join us."

Hestria looked at her, but past the fever, there was a spark that Mirai hadn't seen before. "I won't run from a challenge. Once that shoulder's healed, you'd better be ready to bring it, Watanabe."
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The ordinary children, injured by Betedramon's brutal attacks, begin to question their place in the Digimon war. Mirai is visited by Meihuang, and with the new girl's kind words, finds her fighting spirit again. In Cairo, the next Digizone sees the reassembly of the team, and Felix's sister Alexa as well. Mirai demonstrates that some of the Digimon are their allies. The tower is taken down by Hestria, who collapses in front of them. Mirai, thinking of the team, challenges Hestria to a fight. But what place will they venture to next?

The sea of chaos was so vast, Ishtarimon thought to herself as she looked out the window, watching the play of light across its surface, the sparkle of the bits of data lighting it from below. Our lord Ashurimon should be saving the zones from the sea of chaos. Instead, he's having to focus on these stupid bugs. She ground a paw against the stone floor in disgust. Fools who have no idea of the implications of their actions.

A rustle caught her ear, but she didn't turn, already recognizing the source. "Got bored with chasing the bugs already, Mardukkimon?"

"You could say that." Even to the other Celestial Generals, Mardukkimon was an unnerving presence, so hidden by his or her cloaks that the true face was most likely never going to be seen by anyone. She could only imagine what Mardukkimon appeared like to their enemies. "You're busy?"

"Just thinking about the bugs, myself. I underestimated them when they first appeared, but they've taken Nergimon and Ninurtimon from us." Her nails dug into the windowsill. "Those disgusting, primitive glitches. I envy you, getting to handle them for Lord Ashurimon."

"You'll get your chance. Probably sooner than you think. I've informed Lord Ashurimon, as well as Nabimon, that you are to take up the task of hunting down the bugs hiding out in the zones."

"Excuse me! You're shoving this off onto me without so much as a by your leave? Why?"

"I've learned what I needed to know from them."

She snorted. "One should be exterminating bugs, not learning from them."

"One has to understand the cause of a bug in order to fix it." Mardukkimon fixed red eyes on her. "Have you ever heard the phrase about 'what appears to be a bug is called a feature'?"

"No. What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I mean. What we think is a bug may actually turn out to be something that is necessary for our digital world."

"What do you mean by that?" As she thought, she couldn't make heads or tails out of Mardukkimon's thinking. "Are you suggesting that these bugs aren't causing all the instabilities of our world right now? That's a dangerous path to follow, Mardukkimon."

"Rest assured, I won't be sitting by idly." Mardukkimon turned to look out the window, but who knew what those red eyes were actually looking at. "Since Nergimon and Ninurtimon have both fallen, it now comes to me to deal with the primary source of the bugs: those that have partnered..."
"I suppose you're going to learn from them, too?"

"No, I'll be testing them. War is caused by the clashing of two separate determinations of justice, Ishtarimon. There won't be a runner up in this fight. So if I don't return, you'll know that our justice is not the justice that will be carried into the future."

She stared, not sure what to make of that. Was Mardukkimon being traitorous? Merely pessimistic? Or was there some secret in all the layers of cloth that knew something she didn't? Before she could get an answer, Mardukkimon had turned away, exiting from the room without a word.

Breathe in, breathe out. His ribs were still a little tender to the touch, but at least Andre could breathe without pain. Good enough, he decided.

Milomon ran around his feet, chased by Kat and Jane, of which the former was squealing with delight and the latter was quiet but looking no less pleased. With a leap, Milomon clambered to the top of a bookshelf, looking pleased with himself as he peered down at the girls. "Milomon! That's not faaaaaair," Kat complained.

Andre looked up from his exercises, alerted by a familiar buzzing on his phone. "Milomon. We've got a call."

"That was fast." Milomon leapt down, scampering off to Andre's room for his bag.

"You and Milomon are leaving, Andre?" Kat asked him, giving him her best puppy eyes.

"We'll be back soon. Just stay out of mom's way." He looked past her head to the computer in the corner of the room, covered in papers as Jezra rearranged them with frenzied motions.

"Your bag, partner!" Milomon tossed it to him.

Slinging the bag over one shoulder, Andre turned toward the zone of barely-contained chaos. "I'm heading out for a bit with Milomon, Mom."

There was no immediate response, but at length Jezra did turn around to look at him. "You're going out to fight again?"

"Yeah."

"Dangerous?"

"Hopefully not. But there's no guarantees."

Jezra put her hands on her knees, fixing him with her one good eye. "Are you sure you have to go?"

"Are you trying to stop me?"

"Probably," she said with a wave of one hand. "I'm not completely assing this motherhood thing. But I don't think I can actually stop you, either. It's your life that's being lived, here." She turned back around. "So make sure you tell me everything that happened when you get back."

Andre smiled, and gave her a little wave of goodbye. "Got it. Let's go, partner."
"Do you know where this is, Milomon?"

"It's in the human realm," he offered helpfully.

Andre pointed upwards, at massive billboards advertising things like "Lion King", "Wicked", and "Phantom of the Opera". "We're on Broadway. The Broadway."

"Why's it a 'the'?"

"It's one of the most famous spots in the world for plays and musicals," Andre explained. "You know, 'Broadway is dark tonight, little bit weaker than we used to be'?"

"You're too new school for him," Saffron's voice said from behind Andre. "It should be 'They say the neon lights are bright on Broadway...'

"Hello, Saffron, Harley," Andre greeted. "I didn't know you were a fan of the classics, Saffron."

"It was one of the first things I learned to play on guitar," she explained with a smile.

"You play guitar?"

"Well, doesn't everybody?"

"I want to learn!" Floramon spoke up, tugging on Saffron's hand. "Teach me, Saffron."

"Andre! Harley!" Felix had arrived, Rusalkamon on one side and Alexa on the other. "Oh, Alexa, I don't think you've met our San Francisco friends. This is Saffron and Harley, and their partners Floramon and Gazimon. Guys, my elder sister, Alexa."

"Lovely to meet you," Saffron said, offering her a hand.

Felix's sister seemed to be in a better mood this time, Andre noticed as they shook hands. Maybe Digimon were a little less foreign to her now. Or maybe Saffron's friendly presence was the reassuring factor here. "Oh, Mirai isn't here yet?"

"It's almost noon here," Andre said, "so it must be close to midnight there."

"She told me she was coming," Harley said. "So I figured we'd wait a minute."

Andre nodded agreement. "Thanks for coming out, you four. It'll be nice to have your support."

"I was actually born in New York," Harley said. "So I know my way around the city."

"And I wanted to see the place he grew up," Saffron added. "Just think, we're standing on Broadway!"

"And yet, we don't stick out at all," Andre noted with amusement as a few people snapped pictures of Floramon and Gazimon. "They must think you're part of a cast, for one of the shows."

"So they think we're stars?" Floramon said in delight, putting her hands to her face.

"Sorry I'm late!" Mirai and Youseimon came running over. Stifling a yawn, she said, "Hello, everyone. Do we know where the Digizone's at?"
"I'm picking up a tower's signal," Harley said, turning to orient himself. "A little function I whipped up. If it's working properly, it looks like it's not far. We just need to head a little north."

"By the way, Mirai, if you've ever wanted to be on Broadway," Saffron gestured around them, "ta-da!"

Mirai looked around, nonplussed. "Is this an American landmark or something?"

Andre laughed. "Something like that. We'll tell you later."

Mirai turned to follow Andre and Saffron, only to pause as something swooped above her head, circling around her shoulder. "Mirai, here you are," Raptomon said as she settled down on Youseimon's head. "I'm glad we found you!"

"Raptomon! Is Hestria around here too?" The girl was several feet away but walking toward them, phone in one hand. "Hestria!"

Hestria looked up at the gathered group of six humans and five Digimon. "...Sorry I'm late," she mumbled, cheeks taking on some color.

"You're not late at all," Mirai reassured her. "Are you feeling better?"

"Well enough."

"You must be the Hestria Mirai told us about," Saffron said. "I'm Saffron, and this is Harley. And Floramon and Gazimon."

"Shouldn't we be going?" Hestria said. "We have a Digizone to take care of."

Harley pointed down the street with a grin. "Let's take a little walk."

As they walked, Mirai thought that if one was going to see a major city in a foreign country, being with friends was the best way to do it. Thanks to Felix, she learned that New York City was the most populated city in the entire American nation, but wasn't actually its state capital like she thought it might be. Alexa groaned, but did recall that she'd been to the city before with a few American friends to see a concert. Saffron told her about a famous song called "New York, New York", performed by a legendary American singer named Frank Sinatra. Harley relayed a story about a huge video game party he'd attended at a park they passed. Andre told her that all of the major publishers in America had their corporate offices in this city. Even Hestria, who hadn't been to the city before, still knew something about the musicals being advertised on the gigantic billboards, singing bits of songs here and there. And their stories, their knowledge, was only scratching the surface of a city that held such a history, even though it wasn't that old. I think... I really do want to study history a bit more.

Ahead of them, the landscape went from populated urban buildings to densely-packed jungle with barely any space of transition between the two. "Found our Digizone," Felix observed.

"Milomon, can you take a look ahead and see if you can spot the tower?" Andre asked.

"Got it, partner."

"I'll come with you," Raptomon said, taking to the skies.

"Everything's so calm and quiet around here," Harley said, looking around. People were staring at the newly-created jungle, some frightened, some merely curious, but no one in a real panic. "Weird
for New York."

"The Digizone's probably been here a while," Andre said. "They've already had their time to panic and get over it. Though judging by the fact that no one around here is panicking, it seems like nothing's come out."

"Can they?" Mirai asked. "I mean, Sistermon Noir saved us that one time because they couldn't follow once the Digizone was neutralized, right?"

"I imagine they can," Youseimon spoke up. "Especially if they're strong. That human girl may merely have not wanted to pursue us into the human world."

"That would beg the question of why, though," Hestria said, folding her arms. "Why would a human have an aversion to fighting in the human world?"

"Maybe she doesn't want to cause damage here?"

"We found it," Milomon shouted as he came bounding back through the treetops, Raptomon flying above his head. "This way, over here. The trees clear out a bit further on."

"Here, let me," Andre offered Mirai a hand, since her other arm was still in the sling, and helped her onto a thick tree root.

"Don't stray too far from each other," Harley told them from another root. "It'd be too easy to get lost in here."

"Don't worry, Harley," Floramon said, "we're on my home territory. I could find them if I needed to."

"This is your home, Floramon? I feel lucky to have seen it the same day I saw Harley's hometown," Saffron said, pleased.

"What's your home like, Gazimon?" Harley asked.

"Ah, not like this. I was born in a rock quarry area, but I traveled around a lot soon after."

"Is the noise bothering you?" Felix asked Hestria as he offered her a hand up.

She didn't take it, hopping up on her own. "It's fine. I'm used to bigger crowds, actually."

As Milomon had said, the trees did indeed open up into a massive clearing, the trunks and vines becoming a backdrop to the carpet of grass and a sparkling little pond. And, of course, the gigantic black monolith at the center, silent and inscrutable. "There's no one here," Gazimon said. "Did they run away?"

"I'll try looking," Floramon said, hopping onto a low-hanging branch.

"They could be lying in wait. Stay alert," Youseimon said. "Mirai, let's go ahead and Influence. If they truly aren't around, we might be able to take down the tower before they get here."

Mirai pulled out her phone, nodding to Andre, who did the same. Felix and Hestria also held theirs aloft. Youseimon, Milomon, Rusalkamon and Raptomon, within their bursts of light, became Spirimon, Kaitomon, Mouramon and Rafmon. The latter took to the skies, soaring upward as she got closer to the tower. Then, she veered away. "Watch yourselves! There's someone on the tower!"
Mirai turned her face upward, shielding her eyes. She could just make out some shape at the very tip, a shape that pushed away from the tip and descending with a ripple of capes. The unknown Digimon—it had to be a Digimon, falling from that height-landed lightly, its cloaks falling around it. Near herself and Andre, Kaitomon sucked in a breath of surprise. "Kaitomon?" Andre questioned softly.

"Mardukkimon," Kaitomon mumbled, frozen in place.

The eyes nestled among the cloaks moved toward Kaitomon. "Milomon."

"Huh? I don't know what you're talking about, never met him," Kaitomon blurted out.

The eyes narrowed a bit, and if Mirai didn't know any better, she would've thought Mardukkimon was amused. "You don't have to justify yourself. There's no point at this stage."

"Uh... Me no speaky your language, I-wait, what?"

"I said there's no point. I've come to destroy all of you," Mardukkimon said, no emotion present. "So there's no point in defending your actions."

"Uh, Spirimon? We may be in trouble," Kaitomon muttered to her.

"We've defeated two. We'll defeat him as well."

"Mardukkimon isn't the same as them."

Before Mirai could ask what he meant, Mardukkimon raised a hand. The Digimon in front of them tensed up, but instead of attacking them, the general pushed a ripple of power against the tower, shattering it with barely any movement. "What?" Mouramon gasped in surprise. "But isn't that your own tower?"

The Digizone retracted with speed, the grass turning to pavement, the clearing becoming a large square. People started to poke their heads out windows and doors, surprised to see their town back to normal. But unlike the rest of the Digizone, Mardukkimon remained.

The four Digimon shone again, reverting to their usual forms. "Oh no! Lady!" Raptomon said in alarm. "Quick, Influence me back!"

Hestria bit her lip, holding her phone out, but nothing happened. Mirai did the same, but Youseimon remained as she was. Mardukkimon swept one arm out, and invisible power gripped all four Digimon, their expressions turning to pain as it pressed on them. "Youseimon! Why now, of all times?!" Mirai demanded of her phone, pounding her finger against the icon, which only returned a red "X" shape.

"Allergy Shower!"

"Paralyze Breath!"

Yellow-tinged black clouds surrounded Mardukkimon, and the four Digimon were released from his grasp. Mirai scooped Youseimon up in her arms. "Youseimon! Are you okay?"

"We need to get out of here, now," Harley told them, taking Andre by the arm. "We can't pick a fight here, this is Times Square. There's countless numbers of people in the buildings around."

"That's true, but where would you suggest?" Mirai asked.
"Central Park. It's not like it's deserted, but it'll be better than here. Let's make a run for it!"

Saffron and Floramon helped the other Digimon to their feet, and the group ran, Harley leading the way. "What do you think we should do when we get there?" Saffron called to him from behind.

"We'll work on getting everyone out of there, you and me," he said. "We'll have to leave this fight to those who can fight. Are you guys hurt? Will you be okay to Influence again?"

"I don't think we can," Felix spoke up, his expression solemn. "They didn't change back because they'd been hurt. I think it's because the Digizone's gone. Just like we thought, Harley."

Mirai almost stopped dead in her tracks. "Wait, you mean we can't Influence them in the human world? That we're sitting ducks?"

"That seems to be how it's working out, doesn't it?" Felix let out a little snort. "I guess this is the part where it stops being fun."

"What should we do?" Andre asked. "Can we hide from him?"

Harley looked over his shoulder, and then forward with a quick movement. "No, because he's following us!"

"Allergy Shower!" Floramon paused to launch another attack at Mardukkimon. He swished it aside with his cloak, bearing down on her. "Aaah!"

"Floramon, watch out!" Gazimon leapt to her rescue, slinging her onto his shoulder before returning to a full-on run. "You idiot, don't do that!"

"But it's not fair! I want to help, too!"

"We can't. We don't have the strength." The fur along Gazimon's back rose, the only sign of his frustration he could display while running.

Ahead of them, the park sprawled outwards, and Harley brushed past a policeman with barely a glance. "Hey, you, kid!" the policeman called to him.

"Mr. Policeman," Saffron shouted as she passed, the others right behind her, "please evacuate the park immediately. There's a monster."

"What monst-Ack!" With a blast of pressure, Mardukkimon landed in front of the policeman, but thankfully the general's attention was on its Digimon targets.

A second blast wave threw them into the air and off their feet, throwing Digimon and humans alike into the grass. Mirai moved her good arm in front of Youseimon as Mardukkimon approached on silent steps. "Don't you think," Mardukkimon said, "that you're poking your nose in somewhere where it doesn't belong?"

"What business of it is yours whether I'm doing that or not?"

"You'll get hurt for it. More so than that sling you're wearing."

"I'm not going to sit here and listen to you badmouth Mirai!" Raptomon hissed at Mardukkimon, feathers bristling. "Sickle Wind!"

Mardukkimon brushed it aside without so much as a blink, then slammed Raptomon against the ground with his invisible power. "You're being bothersome. I'll make this plain to all of you; you
cannot win. There are only two paths open before you. You can all die here. Or you can listen to my offer of leniency."

"I'm not sure I can trust your leniency, Mardukkimon," Milomon said.

"You humans," Mardukkimon ignored Milomon, "our King Ashurimon is well aware of your presence, as well as your potential. He does not want any further interference from you. But this is not your war nor your world, so he is reluctant to kill you all outright. Here are the terms of surrender. Delete the D-Tais from your electronic devices. If you do that, I will spare your lives as well as theirs. They will merely be arrested and detained."

"I refuse," Youseimon said, pushing aside Mirai's arm. "I will never return to that place. No matter what you do."

"Either you return alive, or return to that place dead. You have no other options."

"Wait, Mardukkimon!" Milomon got to his feet. "Andre... Go ahead and delete the D-Tai."

"Milomon! What are you-"

"What I'm doing is leaving you alive, dammit. I'd delete a thousand D-Tais for that. It's not like that could ever sever our bond. But death... can."

Hestria let out a snarl of rage, charging at Mardukkimon with a raised fist. The cloth moved on its own, catching her hand and twisting her arm around, bringing it dangerously close to snapping. Mardukkimon held her like that for a beat, then tossed her aside.

"Damn it!" Gazimon dug his claws into the ground. "If only we had more power...!"

"You will never have power," Mardukkimon said. "You have no convictions. Mere curiosity and amusement has led you this far; it's no surprise that you have no real strength when you need it. This is no game. Now, delete your D-Tais, or I will be forced to start with the killing." The general seized Floramon in loops of tattered cloth, holding her aloft.

Hestria charged at Mardukkimon again, but this time she had a knife in one hand, slashing at the strips of cloth. "You shut the fuck up," she snarled. "You think we think this is a game? I have never once considered it that. I'll take you one on one and prove it to you."

The general looked at her, and seized her wrist with one of the cloths. "And just what conviction is that, that you think can beat mine of wanting to save our world?"

"I'm fighting for my pride," Hestria said, slicing through Mardukkimon's cloth with a wide sweep. "Because it improves who I am. Rolling over and giving in isn't in my repertoire, you jackass!"

Mirai grabbed her sword in one hand, then stood up, drawing it. "I'll fight you, too," she said. "This is for the sake of the Digital World. I'm fighting so that Youseimon and Impmon and all their friends can have a peaceful place to live. Without having to worry about your damn king trying to kill them! How's that for conviction?"

"I will, too," Andre said, drawing his pepper-ball gun. "Milomon is my reason to fight. The fact that there are other Digimon suffering is my reason to fight. If you'd like to put that to the test, you'd better be prepared to be put to the test in return."

"You, save the world? Don't you think you've got that backwards?" Mardukkimon looked from one human to the next, posture unchanged. "I could say ten words that would make you completely
realize how wrong you are about the threat to our Digital World."

"Oi, are you done talking?" Felix's voice was absolute zero. "You shitty old fart."

Mardukkimon turned its head to face Felix. "I suppose you want to save something as well."

"Is that how you get your jollies, mangeux d'marde?" His voice was cold, but his words boiled over with anger. "Sitting in judgement of other people, deciding whether their lofty goals meet your standards? Who crowned you the conviction police? Why do I need some grandiose reason to be permitted to conduct myself as I please? Going to the Digizones, being with Rusalkamon and my friends here, kicking your ass-I do these things because I want to. What's wrong with being interested in the things I'm interested in and doing the things I want to do? I don't need a better reason than that, and I'm not obligated to give you one just because you think it's not good enough."

Mardukkimon couldn't answer right away, so caught off guard by Felix's words. "You fool, for that reason you'd threaten-"

"I asked you if you were done talking, shitty old fart." Felix held out his phone, whose screen glowed purple. "Enough babbling. I'll show you I'm perfectly capable of defending what I want to do."

Mardukkimon took a step back, and then turned its head. Mirai also had her phone held out, the screen red. Andre and Hestria also held theirs out, the colors of her blue and his green enhanced by each other. "You can't Digizone Influence here," Mardukkimon said. "Don't waste your time."

"Then we'll just have to do something else!" Youseimon leapt forward, into the light of Mirai's D-Tai, and Rusalkamon, Milomon, and Raptomon did the same with their partners. The light from four small smartphones became a rainbow of pillars, and four Digimon's voices came from inside as they changed.

"Youseimon..."

"Milomon..."

"Rusalkamon..."

"Raptomon..."

"Shin Evolution!"

From his position next to Gazimon and Alexa, Harley could only stare in shock at the light and the wind that whipped his hair around. Even without seeing the rest of his face, Harley thought that even the Celestial General looked surprised. "What the hell's going on?" Alexa said, shielding her face from the wind with a hand.

"A miracle, and no less. That's what's going on."

From the red, Faimon emerged with a burst, shattering the light as she landed firmly. Kaitomon, Maremon, and Archeomon exited as well, forming a loose circle around Mardukkimon. "It's your home nation forms?" Hestria questioned.

"No, this is different," Archeomon told her. "Power is coursing through me... I've never felt this much power in my whole life."
Maremon looked back at Felix, smiling. "It's because of you. I can feel your wisdom radiating through me. Your pure feelings allowed this to happen."

Felix smiled softly, then gave her a thumbs up. "Go let loose on him, then. Show him what happens when you act like a bully."

"To think," Mardukkimon said, and its voice didn't sound angry or frightened, but merely awed. "That you'd find the secret of the shin evolution in front of my eyes. It's only a matter of time, now."

Kaitomon charged first, and Mardukkimon responded by leaping into the air. Faimon took off after him, grasping Maremon by the hand. Kaitomon hopped onto Archeomon's back, and they followed. As one, the humans all looked up, watching to see what would become of their firm beliefs.

Maremon fired off several shots from her bow, cutting through Mardukkimon's ripples of power, and Kaitomon's shots from the other side ripped through his cloth, sending scraps drifting downward. For every move Mardukkimon tried to make, someone was there, firing a shot, a dart, a rainbow. As if they'd been together all their lives, their teamwork functioned with an unspoken knowledge of who would be where, who was doing what, who needed to do that in order to win. They shared that unity with their partners on the ground, who all stood together with their common, unshaken belief that this path was not mistaken.

It was only for a moment, but Mardukkimon's guard dropped, his tattered cloaks unable to defend himself for the briefest of gaps. And they all knew it. Pierced by their strongest attacks all at once, Mardukkimon did not have time to voice its regrets, or anything at all, leaving nothing behind but a few strips of cloth.

The four Digimon descended to the ground, then collapsed in a heap together as they changed back, all clearly spent. "You did it!" Mirai shouted, scooping up Youseimon with her good arm. "All of you, you're incredible!"

"We were only able to do it because we were together," Youseimon said. "All four of us."

Mirai, Felix, and Andre all turned to look at Hestria. She flushed at being suddenly put on the spot. "Well... you guys didn't do so bad." She mumbled something further.

"What was that?" Felix asked, grinning as he poked her in the arm.

"I said good job and that's all it means," she muttered, the red color deepening further on her dark skin.

Harley smiled, leaning against a tree as he watched from a short distance. "We really can't compare to them."

"There's still things we can do," Saffron told him, reaching out for his hand.

"Man, I'm beat!" Milomon complained, slumping against Rusalkamon. "Andre, can we go home now?"

"What? You mean to tell me that after we came all the way to New York, you want to leave without trying a New York hot dog? Or New York cheesecake?"

"Cheesecake?" Mirai echoed, eyes shining.
Milomon's ears perked up. "I am up for any game plan that involves food."

"I should be going now," Hestria said as she picked up Raptomon. "I'll... be on time to the next Digizone."

"Nuh-uh," Felix grabbed her arm. "You're coming too. You're part of the team now, and this is a team outing."

"But..." She looked down at Raptomon, who looked back up with pleading eyes. "Oh, all right. It's only proper to sample local cuisine when you visit a new place."

Alexa stood to follow as the group began walking toward the edge of the park, but Saffron put a hand on her arm. "Let's leave them alone for a while. We'll take you back to your home, no worries."

Alexa's shoulder's slumped. "...Is there really anything I can do for him? To keep him from harm? It seems like I didn't need to worry at all."

"You'll find something," Harley told her. "Just like us. But in the meantime, let's let out strongest team celebrate the forming of their team."
A Girlish Heart

Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The children and Digimon meet in New York City, a place full of stories for each person, and search for their next Digizone. They are confronted by the Jupiter Celestial General, Mardukkimon, who destroys the tower himself to isolate them in the human world. Mardukkimon tests their bonds and their beliefs, and a new power, the Shin Evolution, arises. With the defeat of Mardukkimon, the Travellou'ers' strongest team is cemented in. But what place will they venture to next?

Her paws made no noise on the stone floor; normally an advantage, but right now, Ishtarimon wanted to at least have some noise to echo her frustration. "Nabimon! Where are you, Nabimon?!"

"You don't have to shout." She turned to face him as he stepped away from a shadowed part of the wall. "What's gotten you in such a mood?"

"Why don't you guess?"

"You're worried about Mardukkimon? There's no need."

"Why, did Mardukkimon return? That irresponsible bastard, I'll-"

"No. Mardukkimon is most likely dead."

"Wait, what? How can you-How do you know?" Ishtarimon stumbled backwards, trying to come to terms with another potential loss. Surely not. That Mardukkimon always seemed nothing if not cautiously prepared.

"I had Mardukkimon watched, as I did with Nergimon and Ninurtimon," Nabimon said. "It seems those Digimon partnered with the humans did the job."

"Lord Ashurimon was right," Ishtarimon murmured. "The power of humans is nothing to take lightly. Did we... recover Mardukkimon's data?"

"No. The tower was destroyed before Mardukkimon perished. We're still working on it."

Ishtarimon clenched a fist, slamming into the nearest section of wall. It crumbled under the impact. "Those damned humans! Now it's just you and me, Nabimon. What are we supposed to do?"

He held up a hand in a placating gesture. "Let's have our own human ally distract them for now. She's proven capable enough. If nothing else, she can buy us time to make our own plan of action for dealing with the humans once and for all."

Ishtarimon folded her arms, her violent energy turning more calm. "Even if Lord Ashurimon vouches for her, I don't trust her. She is a human, after all."

"Neither do I. That is why I aim to put our own plan into action while she is drawing their attention. Humans have to be dealt with."

"You're right, Nabimon."

A harsh, hot wind pushed through the hallway with the voice. Ishtarimon didn't even need to look at the figure in the doorway, knowing him by presence alone. "Lord Ashurimon. Your humble
servants await your orders for your program," she said, dropping onto one front knee.

"How would you like us to act?" Nabimon also knelt.

"The human world... These Digizones are becoming more of a problem for us," Ashurimon said. "Nabimon. I want you to alter the program causing the Digizones so it is no longer a problem for us. I'll send you this one to help in that task."

Ishtarimon glanced up at the metal footsteps on stone floor, then back down. Whatever Nabimon was to do with a Kokuwamon, it wasn't any of her business. "I understand, my lord. We will without fail preserve your program."

"And that's everything that's happened up to this point," Mirai concluded as she walked next to Rina. Part of her felt better at finally explaining everything to her good friend, but another part was worried that she wouldn't be taken seriously. "I promise you that it's true."

Rina studied her face, and then turned back to face forward, tucking her hands behind her head. "Well, I'm glad you told me at last. I was starting to wonder when you were going to."

"I... wait, what do you mean, you were starting to wonder when I was going to?"

"Please, this Kiraharu Rina-sama wasn't born yesterday. Sayo told me a bit about it from that time you were in Kyoto. I figured you'd tell me when you were ready, but you sure took your time about it, didn't you?"

"I didn't think you'd believe me," Mirai hung her head. "Some of it's even hard for me to believe, even when I'm there. If you'd been the one to tell me, I don't know what I would have thought."

"Well, I don't think you're lying to me, and that's what matters. You might be completely wrong about it, but you're not lying. That's the important part. Even if the facts are hard to believe, I still believe in you. So that's the reason we're looking for your mystery girl, right?"

"Yes. She's the one that keeps attacking us in the Digizones." Mirai put a hand to her injured shoulder.

"Feh! When I meet her, I'm going to give her a piece of my mind for daring to hurt my adorable Mirai-chan!" Rina fumed. "And speaking of adorable, where's your little girl? Er, Digimon, I mean. Youseimon-chan isn't with you?"

"No." Mirai's face fell. "Actually... she's mostly just been sleeping, since we got back from New York. Milomon and Rusalkamon and Raptomon have been the same, so Harley and Felix think they might have just been overtaxed from that Shin Evolution thing."

"Shin Evolution? Sounds like a real monsoon of a trick."

"That's not funny."

"It's totally funny." Rina looked at her. "Don't worry, I'm sure she'll be fine. I mean, it's not like it's something they're not supposed to do, right?"

"No... I guess you're right on that. None of them treated it like it was something forbidden. I'll ask Youseimon about it if she's awake when I get home."
"Yeah. Hey, Mirai-chan..."

The tone in Rina's voice changed, completely. "Rina-chan?"

The other girl held out her phone to Mirai, using it to subtly gesture at something ahead of them. "Look up ahead, over there. The girl standing near that couple of boys. Could that be your girl?"

Mirai followed her gaze, and felt her back lock up. Even from a distance, she could see the draconic Digimon curled around her neck like a toy, much smaller than Betedramon, but most likely the same Digimon. "So she was from this town," Mirai muttered. "Felix was right."

"Let's follow her," Rina said. "Just act normal. Even if she recognizes you, she won't suspect anything if you let me keep an eye on her instead of you. This way, we might find out where she lives or hangs out."

Mirai chewed on her lip. If the girl decided to pick a fight, Youseimon wasn't here; she'd be helpless. On the other hand, the streets were plenty full of people. Most likely, this girl wouldn't try anything. "C'mon," Rina said in a louder voice, pulling on Mirai's arm. "It's your turn to treat me. So tell me about this guy, what's he like?"

Mirai looked at Rina, and drew a blank as to what the other girl was talking about. "You mean Felix?"

"I mean just go with it," Rina whispered back. "C'mon, is he cute?"

"Cute? Uh... I guess so? He's foreign."

"Oh, a foreigner! You lucky girl, you," Rina teased, even as she steered Mirai by the arm. The girl with the Digimon had separated from the loose crowd on the corner, making her way up a street. "Is he sweet, does he treat you?"

"Uh... I don't know that 'sweet' is the right word," Mirai said slowly. "That's really more like Andre. He's very reliable. But Felix also surprisingly pulls through when you need him. It might be because of him, that last time."

"Ah, the one you mentioned before? What's this Andre like?"

"Andre's so very kind. He's always taking care of other people. I always feel like he has my back."

"Ooo. Does he have a girlfriend?"

"I... don't know? I never asked. He's never mentioned one, though."

"Really, Mirai, shame on you," Rina teased, giving her a little push. "Keeping all the pretty boys to yourself. So when are you going to introduce me? You should totally introduce me."

"You..." In front of them, the girl stopped, her back still to them. "How long are you planning on following me?"

"Ehh? No one's following a little brat like you, shoo," Rina said, waving a hand. "Don't interrupt our conversation. Now, where were we..."

The girl turned, and her eyes met Mirai's. Both knew the farce was up. "Oh, I'm so sorry," the girl snarked. "So is she your girlfriend?"

"She's my friend," Mirai replied, annoyed. The dragon around the girl's neck hadn't moved, for all
the world like a toy, but the girl seemed content to battle with words for now. "Just who are you, anyway? Why do you keep coming after me and my friends?"

"Oh, my mistake. You looked so much like boyfriend and girlfriend, I couldn't tell."

_Oh, come on!_ Mirai glanced down at herself. Sure, she was in practical slacks and a T-shirt, but she didn't look that boyish, did she?

"Perhaps then you should get that prescription on your glasses checked," Rina called over. "Maybe we could arrange that for you?"

"Oh? Going to sic your banchou on me?"

"You're one to talk!" Mirai shouted. "You've had no problems attacking us!"

"I never raised a finger against you. Unlike you, you bokken-wielding weirdo."

"Stop acting like you aren't just as guilty for it! Acting like you're so superior because you won't get your hands dirty. At least I'll take responsibility for the strikes I take!"

"You'll 'take responsibility for the strikes you take'? Isn't that just a fancy way of saying you like hands-on violence? It must be hard for you," the girl said, "not knowing what it's like to be a real girl. Go put your gakuran back on, it suits you better." With that, she turned and walked around the corner, disappearing from sight.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Rina ran forward, pausing at the corner. "She vanished! Where the heck did she go?" She turned as she heard a hard 'thump' behind her.

Mirai had her fist against the wall, her head down. "So what if I'm a little tomboyish," she muttered.

"Mirai-chan?"

"I'm going home," she said, turning away. "I'll see you at school next week."

The D-Tai was ringing; she could tell by the sound. Sitting up, Mirai ran her hands through her hair, trying not to look like she'd just rolled out of bed (she had) or was a complete mess (she was). That done, she picked up the phone. "Hello?"

The faces of Andre, Felix and Hestria looked back at her. "Sorry, did I wake you?" Andre asked. "The time zones-"

So she did look like a mess. "It's fine. I'm awake." Trying not to grimace, she gave her hair another half-hearted comb-through. "Is something the matter?"

"How's Youseimon?" Felix asked. "Has she woken up yet?"

Mirai looked over at the futon on the floor. Youseimon lay curled up in the center, expression relaxed and childlike as she clutched at the blanket with one hand. "No, she hasn't. But at least she looks like she's sleeping well."

"It looks like it's the same for all of us, then," Hestria said. "And we don't have any idea when they'll wake, do we?"
"Like I said before, I don't necessarily think it's a problem. All the mentions of evolution by the Digimon indicated it's a natural process. My suspicion is that it's probably harder to do if you've never done it before." Felix shrugged.

"There's also the fact that this isn't their world," Hestria pointed out to him. "We have no idea how being in the human world really affects them. We can't be blasé about it."

"That's true. But we can't panic over what we don't know. Rusalkamon and the others have never expressed an indication that being in the human world is strenuous or troublesome for them. But if it's a concern, the best we can probably do is ask other Digimon."

"Speaking of," Andre spoke up, "what are we going to do if a Digizone shows up and our partners aren't awake?"

"We'll have to handle it ourselves," Mirai said. "Youseimon has allies in the Digital World. We'll just have to support them as best we can. We can also call on Saffron and Harley should we need to."

"Is that such a good idea?" Hestria folded her arms. "They haven't once Influenced that I've seen. If they run into that dragon girl, they're dead."

Andre frowned at her. "Don't underestimate them. They're valuable support. Harley and his friends have done a lot of the enhancements to the D-Tai."

"Just because they're good at supporting roles doesn't mean they won't still be dead if they try to fight her."

Felix raised a hand. "What about that girl in Beijing, Meihuang? Her Digimon might not be an even match, but it's an Adult level. That's something, anyway. Have you heard from her, Mirai?"

"Um, not since she came to Fukuoka. I can talk to her, but ultimately I don't know if she'll agree. I think it'll really be up to Darcmon. And I don't think Darcmon wants to betray her allegiance."

The conversation fell quiet. "Mirai," Hestria broke the silence. "Is something the matter?"

"The matter? Why-"

"You seem distracted," Andre said gently. "If something's wrong, you can talk to us about it."

"No, there isn't really anything." She waved her hands in denial. "I'm fine."

"Ah, I know what will cheer you up," Hestria said. "Your shoulder's all better now, isn't it?"

"Huh? It's pretty much okay now, yeah. I just have to be a little careful around strenuous activity."

"Let's have that match you promised me." Hestria pointed at the screen. "Since our Digimon are resting, we'll go at it hand to hand, or hand to sword if you prefer. Though I don't know how much it'll cheer you up when you lose."

She was barely listening by the end, already caught by Hestria's words, distantly feeling her shoulders starting to shake. "Talking about a fight at a time like this... Can't you act a little more like a girl?!" She hung up the phone, tossing it onto the futon next to Youseimon, and curled up in a ball. So what if I'm not very girly. So what if I'm rough and not cute and violent.

She didn't know how long she sat there, but at length her mother's footsteps stopped outside her
door. "Mirai? A friend of yours is here to see you."

It must be Rina. No, her mother wouldn't call her 'a friend'. Curiosity overcame her self-disgust, and she hopped off the bed, opening her door.

Hestria looked her up and down, then raised a hand. "Yo. God, you're a mess."

"Aah?!" Mirai took a step back in sheer surprise, and then her eyes went down to Hestria's feet. "Aaah!"

Hestria raised an eyebrow, then let out a yelp as Mirai grabbed for her legs. The movement knocked her back onto her rear. "What the hell?"

"Take off your shoes." Getting one off, Mirai stormed back to the front door, setting it down by the door, then came back for the other one. Thankfully for Hestria, she had the other one off, handing it over. "There, that's better. Now... What on earth are you doing here?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Hestria got to her feet, dusting herself off. Seizing Mirai by the arm, she pulled the girl back into her room, seating her on her chair. "Brush, brush... There we are."

"I'm really not in the-ow," she winced as Hestria began brushing her hair with utter disregard to the tangles, "mood to-ow-have a match with you right now-ow-Hestria."

"Oh, that's not it. I just can't stand seeing you so pathetic." Hestria peered at her face, studying it. "If only your hair was sturdy enough for cornrows... Well, can't be helped. Are your clothes in the dresser?"

"Yes, but-"

"Good enough." Hestria began ruffling through the drawers, holding up a few items of clothing before deciding on a spaghetti strap shirt and shorts. "This should do. A white purse, if you have it. Get changed, I'll wait for you outside. Make sure you've got your phone and wallet."

Without a doubt, Mirai understood nothing of this current situation. "I-what?"

"We're going out," Hestria explained with the tone of someone whose patience is being tried, "so get dressed. I'll wait for you in the hall."

All Mirai could do was blink as the door shut. "I really don't think I understand her," she said to the sleeping Youseimon as she got changed.

As promised, Hestria was waiting by the door, having reclaimed her shoes. "Where are we going?" Mirai asked as she sat down to pull on her own shoes.

"A mall."

"Mall...? Do you mean Canal City or something?"

"Sure, that'll work." Hestria exited first, folding her arms as she waited. "Can we walk there, or do we take the bus?"

"Um, the bus I guess? I'm heading out," she called inside before shutting the door. "Hestria, I really don't understand. Why did you come to Fukuoka?"

"Isn't it obvious?" She let out an irritated sigh. "You're taking me to the mall so we can do some shopping. Since someone seems to think I need to be a little more girly."
"That wasn't..." Mirai sighed herself, feeling the sudden weight of guilt. "I'm sorry, Hestria. I said something stupid."

"Too little, too late."

As usual for the Fukuoka bus system, one arrived within minutes, shuttling them off towards Tenjin. To her surprise, Hestria seemed interested in the bus and its passengers, as well as their surroundings. "I didn't think you'd be this interested in a bus ride." A couple of the passengers glanced up at the use of English.

"One should always make the most of any new situation. Especially an artist. Years later, those bits of memory could be your next hit."

"I didn't know you wrote your own music."

"Not much of it. I'm still new at it."

Some of the passengers were now watching curiously, heedless of any perceived rudeness as they stared at Hestria. "American?" an older woman asked her in Japanese as they stood to exit.

"No, she's South African," Mirai replied, then dropped a few coins into the payment bin. "We've still got to walk a bit."

"What did she ask you?"

"Oh. She thought you were American, so I corrected her."

Hestria wrinkled her forehead in confusion. "That's an utterly bizarre thing to say. Why would they think I'm American?"

"You know. Black-er, people with your skin color, whenever we see them on television they're American. So that's what people think."

Instead of looking offended, Hestria snorted in amusement. "Americans don't have a monopoly on everything, just so you know."

"No, of course not. Though, you know, your city and Andre's city weren't that dissimilar. They're both very diverse places. Fukuoka... well, really, most of Japan is pretty uniform."

"That bother you?"

"No? I guess it's just different. It's interesting to notice." Seeing the curvy building up ahead, she pointed. "That's Canal City."

"Interesting architecture," Hestria observed. "Well, let's go find a clothing store."

Once they had found a suitable store, it didn't take long for Mirai to realize that her impression of Hestria's purpose had been mistaken. Although the older girl tried on some outfits of her own, her primary interest was sending Mirai back and forth to the dressing room with varying outfits. "You've got pretty long legs," Hestria commented, "so you should try wearing skirts a bit more often. See? That one's good."

The girl in the mirror, wearing a frilly top and skirt, paired up with tall boots, didn't seem to be her at all. Her own unsure expression and timid body language seemed to enhance the girlish effect. "I... don't really own any skirts. I used to get them torn up a lot, and..."
"How so?"

"Just..." she hung her head. "Climbing trees and running around and stuff."

"Well, that's simple enough," Hestria said. "Change outfits when you want to climb trees. Now try on this one, and after that we'll get you some hairclips and a nice lipstick."

She obediently retreated into the dressing room with the new outfit. "Is this... because of what I said earlier?"

"You thought it might be something else?"

"I guess... I was just a little under the weather." She paused, then admitted, "I saw her. That dragon girl. She said some things to me. About how I wasn't a real girl and stuff. I let it get under my skin when I shouldn't have."

"If it didn't bother you to begin with, her saying it wouldn't make any difference. Why's it bother you?"

"Why's what bother me?"

"Not being girly all the time. You dislike swordfighting, after all?"

"No, not at all. I really enjoy it."

"Then you don't like being mistaken for being a tomboy?"

"No, I am a tomboy. You know," Mirai leaned against the dressing room door, "my last year of primary school, we did a class play... They all wanted me to play this really manly gang leader part. Getting to yell about justice and the manly path of living and honor and everything... I really liked it. I guess it made a bit of an impression."

"Do you want to be a boy?"

"Huh? Why would I want to be a boy? I'm a girl," she stepped out in the new outfit. "Well, I'm not a very good one, but I am a girl. Maybe it would have been better if I'd been born a boy, but... I can hardly change that."

Hestria looked at her, but her attention didn't seem to be on the outfit any longer. "Then it seems to me what you're upset about is that society makes you feel guilty for not acting to conform to a gender standard all the time."

Mirai struggled to fully comprehend the meaning to the English words. Seeing her confused expression, Hestria put a hand to her temple. "Look, Mirai. The one that gets to validate whether or not you're a "real" girl is you. Maybe things were different a hundred, two hundred years ago. But right now, a girl doesn't have to be limited to making sandwiches in the kitchen and giggling vacantly. If Japan hasn't figured that out, that's their fault, not yours."

She felt herself smile for the first time in a while. "Thanks, Hestria. You really are a kind person. I'll try to have more confidence in myself."

Hestria looked away, a bit of color rising to her cheeks. "Yeah, well, don't let anyone say I don't try to empathize with other people. Do you like that one?"

Mirai turned and looked at herself in the mirror. That girl that looked back in the mirror was
actually pretty cute. "Yeah. I really like it."

"Then go get changed and we'll get you that one."

"Eh?! But-"

Hestria waved off her complaint. "Consider it payback for the bus fare."

"But that's-"

"Then take me out for dinner or something," Hestria said, pointing back to the dressing rooms. "Go."

"...yes ma'am."

After the purchase, the pair walked the length and height of the mall. Hestria picked up some clothes and a few Japanese souvenirs, and Mirai bought the promised meal in the form of some sushi to go. Armed with food and bottled water, they stopped on one of the upper balconies, listening to the music coming from the nearby arcade. "Not as different as I thought it'd be," Hestria said, leaning her back against the rail.

"You think so? Every place I've been, I'm always overwhelmed by how different it is. I used to think that all of the Western world was alike, but it's really not."

"Hardly. Even in Africa, you have incredible diversity from end to end. Even in my country, even in my town. And yet, the more things are different, the more I can find common grounds anywhere I go."

"I guess that's true. Even if the places are different, people are the same in a lot of ways." Mirai looked at Hestria. "Why did you come all the way out here? Was it just to cheer me up?"

"I don't like having a pathetic rival. If I'm going to be challenged, I want to actually be challenged."

Hestria turned, looking down into the courtyard below. "Actually... it's kind of refreshing. Most people either dismiss me because of who my parents are, or are afraid to challenge me because of who my parents are."

"Are they really that big of a deal? Eranna said something about them being entertainers, too."

"It's a big deal to other people. I guess they're sort of like how your Japanese idols are? They're quite popular."

"You're pretty amazing, you know, Hestria," Mirai said with a smile. "Not because of who your parents are. You never seem to falter in anything. Well, I'm not going to lose to you. I'll have faith in myself, too."

"Good. You still owe me a match." Hestria turned back to the courtyard as the fountains below began their hourly routine. "Oh, it's spraying in patterns. Wow, it's going so high!" she added as the jets shot past their heads up to the top floor.

"There's another one on the ground that can do words and images," Mirai said. "It's pretty cool."

"I like this one." Hestria closed her eyes, drumming her fingers against the rail. "The sound is so rhythmic. It's soothing."

For a long time, they both leaned against the railing, watching and listening to the simple yet
moving bursts of water. "Thanks for coming out, Hestria. I do feel much better. I'll let the guys know, too. Right now, we'll have to do what we can."

Hestria nodded agreement after the pattern finished. "I'll walk you home."

"You don't have to do that. It must be late for you."

"Shut up and don't argue with me. I'll do what I want."

Instead of taking the bus back, they walked, and so the trip was longer, but more leisurely. Whatever bad things had come from the Digizones and the Digital World, Mirai thought it must have been a good thing, to let her meet people like this. As she walked, she pointed out things to Hestria, little bits of the neighborhoods that she knew and memories that went along with them. In doing that, it was easy for her to realize when they'd come to the same area where she and Rina had met the dragon girl before. "Something the matter?" Hestria asked her.

"Does it show? You always seem to notice."

"It's because you have a simpleton's face," Hestria reasoned. "So what happened?"

"Simpleton's face?" Mirai grimaced at that. "This is around the area where we ran into that girl before. I thought she might be in this area. But it's not like lightning would strike the same place twice, right?"

Hestria's response was to grab her in a full-body tackle, throwing her to the ground. Mirai winced as her recently-healed shoulder made contact with the ground. She didn't need to question why Hestria had just body-checked her - the star-shaped bolts of light made it clear. "Lightning doesn't strike the same place twice, she says," Hestria grumbled. "I ought to smack you for that one."

Mirai got to her feet as Betedramon landed at the end of the alley, shooting another blast at them, carving up the walls and faces of the buildings. "Knock it off!" she shouted at the girl and her dragon. "People around here could get hurt!"

"Where is your Digimon?" she asked. "Tell me where it is. If I destroy it, I won't have to destroy you."

"Like hell I will!" She flattened herself behind a vending machine, listening to the sounds of shattering glass just in front of her. Across the alleyway, she could see Hestria flattened in a similar fashion in a little nook of the wall. Pulling out her phone, she ran her thumbs over the screen in a frantic manner.

Mirai's own phone buzzed, and she pulled it out, looking at the message. 'I have a plan if you can distract her. I need a little time.' Mirai met Hestria's eyes, and gave her a thumbs up. Hestria offered a smile, and then she vanished.

**Distraction, distraction...** One of the balcony rails had been cut, dropping pieces of metal bar onto the street. Close enough. Mirai jumped out from behind the vending machine, making a dive for the closest piece at hand. Gripping it with enough force to turn her knuckles white, she charged at Betedramon, aiming for the head.

It growled, catching the blow in its claws, and she pulled the makeshift sword out to the side, the sharp edge slicing its paws. "You thug!" the dragon girl yelled. "Attacking her directly! Stop playing around with trash and bring out your Digimon!"

"You think I'm playing around?" She aimed a shot at Betedramon's wrist, and it connected, though
not with the full force she wanted as the dragon twisted away. "If you don't want me hurting your Digimon, then fight me yourself. I'd rather be a thug than a coward that can't protect their partner!"

Mirai had the pleasure of seeing that comment hit home. "You... stupid girl! Stop getting in my way and just stay here in the human world! The Digital World doesn't belong to you!"

Oh, so she was a girl now? Mirai snorted. "And just who decided you get to be the guard of who comes and goes?"

"The King of the Digital World, that's who!"

"Well, we don't agree with your king!" Mirai hit the ground as Betedramon took a swing at her with her tail. "So call us anarchists."

"And while you're calling, call off your dragon." From behind, Hestria grabbed the smaller girl in a headlock. "Or I'll break your neck."

"You wouldn't dare," Betedramon hissed.

"She's been trying to kill us. I think it's only fair. Want to see how far a human neck bends?"

The girl had her hands on Hestria's arm, trying to throw her off. Now, they tightened their grip. "Betedramon. Take her out."

Betedramon met her eyes, and then stiffened up her tail, aiming to stab Hestria in the face. "Hestria!" Mirai shouted, even as she ran for the tail with her pipe-sword raised.

Above her head, several needles shot into Betedramon's face, causing her to yelp and recoil. "What a nuisance you are, causing trouble on our home turf. I was having a nice nap, too." Youseimon sat on the railing of a third-floor balcony, a few more darts held in her hand.

"Youseimon!" If she could have flown, Mirai would have hugged her partner right then and there, and not just because she'd come to the rescue.

"Release your evolution, Betedramon," Youseimon ordered. "Or do you want to find out how good an aim I have on a human-sized target?"

"You can't-"

The sharp look Youseimon gave her would have caused lesser beings to drop dead. "Don't mess with me, dragon. You're the one that broke the rules. You went after my partner. If you don't want me to extract revenge in her blood right here and now, then back off."

Betedramon looked from Youseimon to her own partner, still held in Hestria's grip. "Let her go. Then we'll leave peacefully."

Youseimon continued to watch her with that merciless gaze. "I have your word?"

"You have my word. There will be no more violence today."

"What's your word worth?"

Betedramon drew herself up, her fur fluffing out. "My word is worth that of the dragon code that runs through me. If I break it, then let me no longer be a dramon."

Still with that gaze, and at last, "You can release her, Hestria."
The older girl looked as if she wanted to protest, but acquiesced at last, dropping her grip. Betedramon shed her evolution, flying into the girl's waiting grip as she ran away. Hestria grimaced. "We should have kept her prisoner."

"We wouldn't have been able to subdue Betedramon," Youseimon said as she landed on the ground. "Not without causing more damage to the city."

"I know. That's why I let her go. Doesn't mean I liked it."

Tossing the pipe into the rubble it had come from, Mirai ran to Youseimon, scooping her up in her arms. "Youseimon, you're awake," she mumbled, clutching onto her small body.

"Huh? Of course I am. I just needed a little nap after that fight."

"You idiot, you've been asleep for days."

"Oh. Is that so?"

Picking up Mirai's bags from the ground, Hestria handed them over. "In that case, I'm going to go back and check on Raptomon. Don't stick around here too long, unless you want to get into trouble."

Mirai nodded, then paused as she looked around. "This is twice we've met here. I wonder..." Gazing upwards, her eye fell on a large building. "I thought so. I know this place. That's an apartment building."

"An apartment building?" Hestria squinted up at it. "Looks like all the other ones around here. How can you tell?"

"I used to have a friend who lived in there. We used to come hang out around this area since it wasn't far. I wonder..."

Hestria looked back up at the black building, silent and imposing, its secrets locked behind its doors. It wouldn't be today, but Mirai felt sure that they were finally onto something with the girl's identity. What just remained to be seen.
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

With their Digimon exhausted from the shin evolution, the children are left vulnerable. Mirai's heart is assaulted by the cruel words of the unknown girl. It is Hestria who comes to Mirai's aid with wisdom of her own. A stronger bond between the two rivals is created, and then put to the test when Betedramon attacks them again. Thanks to the combined efforts of Mirai, Hestria, and Youseimon, the dragon and her human are repelled. But what place will they venture to next?

"Your little pet seems irate, Nabimon."

Upon being addressed, Nabimon moved from the shadows, coming to stand by Ishtarimon's side. Both looked down into the bowl-shaped depression, filled only with some sparse large boulders, and a dragon Digimon that was smashing said boulders into dust. "Which one? The human or the Digimon?"

"Both. Don't tell me your little human lost already, Nabimon. That's not much of a showing, now is it?"

"Even though our King had such high hopes for her." Nabimon shook his head. "I fear her abilities will pan out to exactly how I expected."

"Why does the King have high hopes for her?" Ishtarimon gave him a quizzical look. "Just because she's a human?"

"Whether it's merely that or there's more to it, I do not know. You would have to ask him." 

"I'm not that curious." Ishtarimon looked back down into the bowl. Betedramon, having spent all her frustrations, had changed back to Peledramon. The human girl picked her up, and they seemed to be having a conversation Ishtarimon couldn't hear at that distance. "So what are we going to do? It sounds like your plans involving that Kokuwamon aren't complete yet."

"That's correct. Care to take them on, Ishtarimon?"

"Hardly. I have my hands full trying to catch the rebels in our world, let alone someone else's." She made an irritated gesture with one hand.

"Then we'll have to try a different tactic. Perhaps one not so much relying on pure power. These are humans we are dealing with. They are not perfect beings." Nabimon raised a hand, signalling for Peledramon and the human to join them. "And I believe I know the weak point to attack them with."

"This is the building where Sayo-chan used to live, isn't it?" Rina tilted her head back, gazing up at the impressive face of the structure. "You think our mystery girl is here?"

"We were attacked twice by her, just around the corner. I don't think it's coincidence. We used to hang out in the same places, after all." Mirai pulled the door open, studying the lobby inside. Empty, save a couple checking their mailbox.

"Are you sure you want to do this now?" Youseimon asked. "Or would you rather call for backup?"

"Anyone we call would stick out way too much. Rina will be our backup."
"I can scream like I'm being murdered," she offered cheerfully.

Youseimon didn't seem quite sure what to make of that. "Excuse me," Mirai called to the couple by the mailboxes. "I'm looking for a girl about my age, with long hair and glasses. Do you know anyone like that?"

"Here's what she looks like," Rina added, holding out her phone.

The couple looked at them, then at the phone. "No, she doesn't look familiar," the woman said at last.

"Is she a classmate of yours?" the man wanted to know.

"Yes, but she hasn't been in class lately and we're worried about her," Rina said, the perfect image of a concerned star student.

"I'm sorry, we don't know her," the man said. "I hope you find her."

Mirai waited until the couple had left, then turned to Rina. "When on earth did you snap a picture of her?"

"When we were gossiping about boys." Rina flashed her a V-sign. "This is why you shouldn't underestimate Kiraharu Rina."

"I don't underestimate you. And yet, you keep surprising me."

"It's hard to be so talented."

"What should we do next?" Youseimon asked. "Can we go upstairs and ask?"

"Let's give it a bit and see if anyone else comes down," Mirai said. "It probably won't be looked on kindly if we go knocking door to door."

Rina nodded agreement, then walked to the mailboxes, taking a look. They were impressive in number, covering the wall, and many of them had names posted on the outside. "It makes sense that they wouldn't know her even if she's here. There's so many, it'll be impossible for them to all know each other. We'll have to find the right person."

"But how will we know if there even is a right person?"

"We won't. We'll just have to trust your call, Mirai-chan."

Thirty minutes passed, then an hour. The three girls spoke with everyone that came in or out of the building, but the answer was always the same. It seemed that even if the girl did live here, she didn't get out much. Or she wasn't here at all, Mirai thought to herself, doubt beginning to edge its way into her mind.

A sudden crowd came off the elevators, some of them chatting with each other, swarming around in an overwhelming tide. Rina jumped right in, offering her phone to the various families and people, undeterred as she asked this person and that person. But the expressions all remained the same, their answers all in the negative. Mirai sighed as Rina came back to join her, watching as some of the people trickled out. "Maybe we should try again on another day," Youseimon suggested.

"Mm. If we try on a weekday, it might work better," Rina said. "Most people would be coming in
at the same time."

"Oh," a voice said from behind them. "Isn't that Daiichi-san?"

All three of them looked up. An elderly woman stood behind them, staring at the picture on Rina's phone. "Do you know this girl?" Rina asked, handing the phone to her.

The woman squinted at the phone, holding it close to her face. "My, my, that does look like Daiichi-san, doesn't it? But it's not quite the same."

"Daiichi-san is someone you know, then?" Youseimon prodded gently.

"Oh, he used to live here. Nijino Daiichi-san. A quiet man, but always so polite. What was his wife's name...?"

Rina shot Mirai an apologetic look. The elderly woman failed to notice it, poking through the back halls of her own memory. "Megumi, wasn't it? Yes, that had to be it. Nijino Megumi-san. Such a pretty woman. But very quiet, just like her husband. They kept to themselves."

"Maybe this girl looks like Nijino Megumi-san?" Rina pressed, pointing to the phone in the woman's hand. "Maybe they're related?"

"Oh, no. She doesn't look like Megumi-san at all," the woman said. "Not a bit."

"Then I'm sorry to have bothered you, ma'am." Rina reached for her phone.

"Now, Daiichi-san... She's a dead ringer. She must be his daughter," the woman said as she handed the phone back.

Mirai's face lit up. "So you do know her!"

"Daiichi-san used to live here, you know," the woman continued. "A very quiet family. They had a son and a daughter. What was the son's name... Wasn't it Shiro-kun? An outgoing boy. And I think they had a little girl, too... What was her name? I never really saw the girl. She might have been a sickly sort."

"Do you know where they moved to?" Youseimon asked her.

"Oh, aren't you a cute one? You remind me of my shamisen playing days. Such an underappreciated instrument these days."

"Um, grandma," Rina said, "do you know where they moved to?"

The woman looked at her with a stern glare. "Goodness, you don't listen. Who said that they moved anywhere?"

"But you said they used to live here!" Clearly, Rina's weakness was old people.

"Yes, that's correct. The place where they live now is the golden plain, may Buddha have mercy on their souls."

Mirai and Rina looked at each other, completely thrown off their rails. "Where's the golden plain?" Youseimon asked, not understanding the reference.

"You mean they died?" Mirai asked, a sinking feeling in her stomach.
"A terrible accident, to be sure, claiming people so young. They had their whole lives in front of them. You young girls should be sure to value your families while you can."

"That's horrible," Mirai managed. "They all died? The whole family?"

"Yes, a tragic thing indeed. The whole family - father, mother, and son. Now that I think about it, didn't they have a daughter, too? I wonder what happened to her..." The woman continued her thoughts aloud, mumbling to herself.

"Thank you very much for your time, ma'am," Mirai said with a bow, tugging on Rina's hand.

Once outside, Rina blew a lock of hair out of her face, her expression disgruntled. "I don't like old people."

"I could tell. But she told us some useful things."

"Useful? We don't even know if this Nijino guy is the dad of the girl we're looking for."

"It's the best lead we've got, isn't it? If nothing else, it's a name. Let's look up this Nijino Daiichi person and see what we can find out about him." Mirai paused as her phone inside her bag began to buzz. "Uh oh."

"That sounds like a Digizone," Youseimon said.

"It is a Digizone. Sorry, Rina-chan, but I've got to go," she said, pulling her sword out of her bag. "I'll get with you later so we can look at it, okay?"

"You're so high maintenance," Rina complained. "Hurry up and go save Siberia or wherever you're going."

"Actually, it's in India. But thanks!"

The crystalline field they arrived in had to be a Digizone, which made Mirai hope that they might not be too long in taking care of it. Andre, Felix, and Alexa were already there, and Milomon and Rusalkamon were in discussion with Spadamon, Impmon, and Labramon. "We're not late, are we?" Mirai called. "We came as soon as we could."

"No, we just arrived ourselves," Andre told her. "We were just talking with these three about this Digizone."

"Youseimon!" Impmon hopped over to her, grabbing her cheeks in both his hands and stretching them out. "Yep, it's you all right."

"Wh- Impmon! The least you could do is not pick on her as soon as you see her!" Spadamon glared at Impmon.

Youseimon let out a little 'heh' as Impmon released her. She must miss her friends, Mirai realized. It was only what little time in the Digizones that she'd been able to spend with them lately. What would it be like for her not to have contact with Rina or Sayo for so long? "What's our status?" Youseimon asked Spadamon.

"You do not need to worry about a thing. We have had a few new folk come in to help. Mostly Child level like ourselves, but every bit helps. We have also acquired more Digimon that are in need of shelter and help. So I have put Beelzebumon and Mervamon on defensive duty and making that our priority for now. Since Mardukkimon and Ishtarimon have been after us, we've had to keep
"Well, Mardukkimon is dead, so that's one less thing to worry about. With Ishtarimon, it's only a matter of time. What about this zone?"

"I've got one of our new recruits sweeping the area," Labramon spoke up. "They can cover ground like this faster than me or Prairiemon, so I think she'll be back soon."

Nearby, Hestria and Raptomon appeared, the latter flapping down to join the other Digimon with a cheerful greeting. The former had a thermos in one hand, and barely looked awake. "Hestria?" Felix questioned. "Go back to bed. We can handle this."

"Shut up." She shot him a look before taking a sip from her thermos.

"Goodness. Someone's not a morning person."

"I said shut up."

Felix grinned with the expression of someone who is well aware they are poking a bear, and enjoying it nonetheless. "What time is it for you over there? Three AM, four AM?"

"I swear if you don't shut up, I will cram your teeth down your throat."

"Labramon-han!" The shout came from above, and a ladybug-like Digimon landed on the crystal surface next to them. "I've found the tower as you've requested."

"... Kansai accent?" Mirai stared at it.

The bug Digimon looked up at her as Andre snapped a picture. "So you're called Tentomon?"

She turned to face him. "Yes, I am Tentomon. May I make your acquaintance?"

"I'm Andre, and this is my partner Milomon. And..." Andre pointed out the others to Tentomon, naming them in turn.

Labramon cleared her throat. "So where is the tower?"

"It's in this direction." Tentomon pointed a claw in the direction she had come. "The guardian is a SkullBaluchimon and there's an army of Starmon and SuperStarmon inbetween here and there."

"SkullBaluchimon?" Felix began pulling up the relevant data on his D-Tai. "That's a Perfect-type. And the Starmons and SuperStarmons are Adult and Perfect. This won't be easy."

"We are here to back you up," Spadamon said. "We have dealt with those sorts of ranks before."

"Let's do the shin evolution again," Milomon suggested. "We'll be even with the Perfect-ranks, so it shouldn't be a problem then."

"No," Felix said. "I don't think that's a good idea. All of you were exhausted for days afterwards. We can't risk having you out of commission for that long."

"I agree," Mirai said. "Let's just Influence and cut a path through."

"It'll be fine," Rusalkamon said. "We're a little stronger now."

Andre shook his head. "If we're up against a wall, we can always upgrade to the shin evolutions."
Let's start with the Influence and work up."

Raptomon looked over at Hestria, who shook her head. "Then, let us go," Youseimon said. "There's no point in wasting time arguing about it."

The other three looked disappointed, but stopped their protests. The D-Tais lit up as the four became Apsaramon, Sanseimon, Lilinmon, and Yixiamon. "Navigating around this place is going to be a pain," Sanseimon grumbled, hopping onto a jutting crystal. "The humans aren't going to be able to keep up with us well."

"We'll have to carry them."

"But it'll be hard to fight with them on our backs."

"We'll just have to keep up as best we can." Mirai pulled herself onto one of the lower crystals, using its height to look around. At least she had use of both arms again, for which she was thankful. "Tentomon-han, where's the tower?" Belatedly, she grimaced. Now she's got me doing Kansai accent, too. How does that even work with English?

"Follow me, everyone." Tentomon flew past Mirai, and Apsaramon, Yixiamon, and Lilinmon all followed, with Sanseimon close behind. The rest of the group followed as best they could, climbing over shards of crystal and too-smooth crystalline faces.

"Why is everything made of crystal?" Felix wondered. "Normally you'd see this sort of crystallization underground."

"Felix, is this really the time to question everything?" Alexa gave him a look as she helped him over a log of crystal.

"We do not know," Spadamon answered him. "It simply is, the same way all of the zones are. Wizarmon has told me there are certain factors that influence the structure and content of the zones, but you would have to ask him for more detail."

Ahead of them, Tentomon let out a yelp as stars shot past her antennae, forcing her toward the ground. "Everyone, be on the alert! We're under attack!"

"Is it the dragon girl?" Andre shouted as he pulled himself over a large crystal.

"Oh ho ho ho ho!" came a painfully stereotyped voice from above. A star-shaped figure stood on one of the crystals, one hand in front of where its mouth would be. "It just so happens that you've run out of luck! To think you commoners would happen to run into us!"

Mirai opened her mouth, then closed it. "Um. I, um. Didn't expect to meet a noble lady here."

"It's a SuperStarmon!" Spadamon pointed as the star descended. "Be careful, they're quite strong."

"An' she ain't alone either, buddy! Yee-haw!" Another one jumped down and joined the ojousama Superstarmon. This Superstarmon was easy to distinguish - where the first one had settled on lace and a fancy dress, this one wore coveralls, and what appeared to be mud. "Y'all think yew kin tresspass on our land? Y'all gotta nuther thing comin' to ya!"

Andre almost dropped Felix's hand, barely managing to pull him onto the crystal. "What is this, a bad TLC documentary? 'When Stereotypes Attack'?"

"Oui, oui, mon ami~" This one had a beret and an ascot. "Soon zey will see zat zey are no match
for ze likes of us! Non, non~"

"...Just so you know, we don't talk like that. And neither do the French."

Next to Felix, Alexa cracked her knuckles. "No complaints if we kill that guy, right?"

Hestria looked around, then groaned as a fourth Superstarmon leapt down to join the others. "I'm dreading this."

"La Quill bestoj kruroj estas du bluaj trunkoj en la arbaro de rubo sub la konservujo," the fourth rumbled. "Skuante forĵetita hypos kaj vibris tumuloj de defluilo ŝlimo."

"...It isn't even speaking English," Mirai observed.

"Oh, so you think you're funny, do you?" Hestria shook a fist at the Superstarmon. "Think you can speak gibberish because I'm from Africa, is that it?"

"Is it just me or is that thing speaking Esperanto?" Alexa said to Felix.

"Huh? You can tell?"

"Look, you four," Apsaramon said. "Your act's real great and all, but we're kind of in a hurry... So, shoo."

"This is a little too weird for my tastes." Sanseimon shook his head. "Let's just leave them to their business."

"Oh ho ho ho ho! You think you can get rid of us that easily?" The ojousan snapped her fingers, and the crystals around them bristled with a sudden influx of Starmons. "To underestimate such distinguished figures as us... It will lead to your death!"

"Yahoo! Y'all are gonna have real purdy mouths when I'm done with ya."

"Resistance is futile, n'est pas?"

"Devus rimarkis ke la verso estis freneza iam mi trovis chems kovrita sub la konvencio en la narkotajo listo."

"Now," the ojousan continued, "prepare to meet your-"

All four Influenced Digimon charged at once, their attacks smashing against the Superstarmons, sending them several inches into the nearest crystal. "Let's go!" Hestria said, waving to the others.

Tentomon took off again, starting forward only to stop as a Starmon landed in front of her. She barely had time to back up before Alexa was behind her, smashing her fist against the Starmon's face. "Huh," she said as it toppled backwards. "Squishier than I thought!"

"Protect the humans!" Impmon shouted to Labramon as they ran next to the group of five, firing their own attacks at whomever came close.

"Don't forget that we can take care of ourselves!" Holding his gun in both hands, Andre fired at one from only a few feet away, nailing it in the eye. Next to him, Hestria seized another Starmon's arm in both hands, flipping him into the hard surface.

Felix took a step back as Mirai got between him and a Starmon, poking him in the face with the tip of her sword. "Uh, go team?"
"Felix, do you see a pathway for us?" Mirai called to him, swinging her sword in a sideways swipe to another Starmon.

He looked around, then pointed. "I'll lead the way. Hey, Impmon, come be my wingman for the moment!"

"Huh? If you insist." Impmon hopped onto Felix's shoulder, setting another nearby Starmon on fire. He ran, and the others followed, letting Apsaramon and company give the Superstarmons a final throw over the way they had come.

"You know," Sanseimon said as they brought up the rear, "I think we are getting stronger. Even in these forms."

"They might just be really weak," Yixiamon said. "Don't let down your guard."

Felix led the way through the breaks in the crystals, and then the area opened up, the tower well within sight. "Oof," he said, leaning against a jutting spire. "I'm not cut out for this much running."

"You should get out and exercise more," Alexa told him as she stood next to his shoulder. "We could fix that problem."

"Making me into a musclehead is beyond the abilities of reality, sis."

For all intents and purposes, the valley appeared to be empty. Was SkullBaluchimon lying in wait somewhere? "Where did you see the SkullBaluchimon, Tentomon?" Apsaramon asked, echoing her partner's thoughts.

"He was right there, prowling around... Maybe he's gone off somewhere?" Tentomon rose into the air again, moving past Mirai.

Sanseimon held out an arm, blocking Tentomon's path. "You don't want to do that."

"Is something the matter?" Labramon asked.

"There's definitely something down there," Yixiamon said. "We're just not sure where. For a Child rank, it's too dangerous."

The other three nodded agreement. As one, they took on a glow, then returned to their Child ranks. "But you just said-" Andre began.

"Mirai," Youseimon said, "everyone. It's time to activate the shin evolution."

"Youseimon? But-"

"This isn't the time or place to argue," she said. "We need to face SkullBaluchimon on an equal footing. If we say we'll be all right, then we'll be all right. Do you trust us, or not?"

"Please have faith in us, Lady," Raptomon said to Hestria. "You already know your strength, but don't you also know mine?"

Andre spoke first, pulling out his phone. "Well, if you're that determined, I can't argue with you. Let's give it a shot."

"You sure about that?" Felix asked him.

"Well, isn't it the same for us? Even though it isn't safe, even if it's against our family's wishes... all
Andre flipped through the functions on the D-Tai, resting his thumb on the shin evolution option. The screen took on a green glow.

Felix grinned at him. "Where'd you hear that impeccable logic? You should smack the guy that told you that." He pulled up his D-Tai as well, holding his phone out.

Mirai and Hestria exchanged brief glances before also pulling out their own phones. Holding them out, they engulfed their partners in the light.

Faimon, Kaitomon, Maremon, and Archeomon all emerged, leaping down into the valley. Around them, crystal shattered, shards flying toward them, but Archeomon flapped her wings, tossing them aside like dust. SkullBaluchimon leapt at them, claws extended as it tried to latch onto Faimon's neck. She dodged neatly out of the way, and Kaitomon and Maremon's quick shots punished him for the decision. "They really are something when they work together," Felix noted. "Even the dragon girl can't stand up to this."

"Yeah. If it isn't too hard on their bodies," Mirai said. "There's a lot on those shoulders."

"It's what they chose for themselves." Andre folded his arms. "We can only support them, now."

In front of them, SkullBaluchimon fell hard against the crystalline floor, gold data dissipating from its body. "You did it!" Mirai shouted to them. "Let's take out that tower and--"

"Watch out!" Labramon's shout was the only warning they had before something flew right over them. The force of the wind alone was enough to knock Mirai and Andre forward, both tumbling down the crystal's slope, which quickly became jagged. Mirai let out a yelp as the shards sliced into her leg. Then she was in the air with a bounce, and as she did so, thick claws closed around her was all she could do to simply lay in the grip of whatever had her and wait for the world to stop spinning.

"Mirai!" Youseimon's voice reached her ears from below. Her focus snapped back into place, and she realized she was in the air, dangling from Betedramon's hand. At the base of the slope, she could see Andre lying in a crumpled heap, Kaitomon running to him and Hestria descending from above.

"Youseimon!" she shouted back, trying to twist out of Betedramon's grip. About as successful as trying to unscrew a fire hydrant's bolt with bare hands. "I'm okay!"

"Don't try anything funny," she heard the dragon girl's voice from above. Betedramon came to land on the tower itself, the smooth black surface inches away from Mirai's face. Could she do anything from her position? Somehow, she'd kept her grip on her sword, but she doubted it would do much of anything against a stone monolith.

"Put her down," Youseimon ordered. "Or I'll make you put her down."

"You can try, but you probably don't want to press a fight when she's in the middle of it, do you? I'll offer you an exchange. I'll give you back your human if you bring me the one responsible for the Digizones."

"What are you talking about?" Maremon shouted up at her.

"Oh, Youseimon knows fully well what I'm talking about. Don't you?"

"And if I said I didn't?"
"I'd say you were lying. After all, you're the one that masterminded the appearance of the Digital World's zones in the human world. You're the one creating the Digizones. You're the one inflicting damage on the human realm for your own selfish purposes!"

"You're lying!" Mirai shouted without even thinking about it. "Youseimon is always with me, she couldn't-

"I'm not saying she dirts her own hands. But the Digimon who is, is doing so under her orders. Isn't that right, Youseimon? Or are you going to lie to your partner?"

Faimon looked to the side, not saying anything. At last, she spoke, "I can't deny... what you're saying. But I can't produce what you want."

"Youseimon...?" No, something wasn't right. That couldn't be right, Mirai thought, even as Faimon refused to look up at her. It was just too ludicrous to believe they'd been fighting against Youseimon's own plan all this time.

"Too bad for you, then. I'll give you a little time, if you think you can catch up with me."
Betedramon lifted away, pushing the tower with a hard shove of her back feet, sending it to the ground. She could hear the cries of the other humans, could see the panic in Faimon's eyes as Betedramon rose into the air. And then the sea and sky expanded outward, erasing all traces of the humans and their partners, including her own.

Mirai was alone in the Digital World.
Mirai in the Digital World!

Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The children, Mirai and Rina, look for clues to the mysterious dragon girl and unearth a possibility in Nijino Daiichi. In the next Digizone, the Digimon prove their growing strength against the SuperStarmons and SkullBaluchimon. Before they can bring down the tower, the dragon girl takes Mirai hostage and reveals a startling truth: that Youseimon is the one creating the Digizones. With that said, she escapes with Mirai still a hostage. But what place will they venture to next?

"Andre! Can you stand?"

He let out a sound that was half grunt and half groan, and pulled himself into a sitting position with Kaitomon's help. "I hurt all over," he said at last, "but I don't think anything's broken this time. Geez, at this rate I need to start carrying bandages on these trips."

"You look like a right mess," Hestria said as she slid to a stop next to him. "But I guess if you're making practical observations, your head's okay at least."

"Yeah. I think the only thing that's irreparable is this outfit." Andre used the sleeve of his ripped shirt to wipe blood from his face. "Is everyone else all right? What hit us?"

Her expression darkened. "No. That four-eyed bitch made off with Mirai."

"She what?" Andre shot to his feet, looking around. The other three Digimon were nearby, standing in the streets of New Dehli. Felix and Alexa were still above, perched on the roof of a house. No Mirai. "What happened? Why?"

Hestria folded her arms, and looked at Faimon. "Because Youseimon won't hand over whatever she's using to create the Digizones."

He couldn't process the meaning of that right away. Storming over to Faimon, he faced her front and center. "You let her take your partner away? You let your partner down? How could you?"

She refused to make eye contact with him. "It's not something you can easily understand."

"You're damn right it's not, so explain yourself! Is it true that you've been making the Digizones? You've had us running around, cleaning up after something you've deliberately made? At least... tell us that part isn't true."

"Did I force you to come?" she replied, still avoiding his eyes. "Did I make you do anything you didn't want to do?"

"Youseimon." His voice went quiet. "Clench your teeth."

She looked up at him just as he punched her full on in the jaw, knocking her to the ground. "Did that shake things loose in that head of yours?" Andre asked, rubbing his knuckles. "Have you figured out what's really important?"

Faimon stayed where she was, and didn't move. "Well, I can't blame him for being angry," Felix said as he stopped next to Andre. "And in retrospect, some of your actions make sense. I can see why you didn't say anything. But I'm curious as to why you would create Digizones only to have us neutralize them. What does that accomplish?"
"It's necessary," she said at last. "It's the only way we have to combat the King's power."

"It's irrelevant," Hestria spoke up.

"How is this irrelevant?!" Andre demanded of her.

She met his eyes, unfazed by his anger. "Isn't the important thing to go get Mirai back from the hands of that crazy bitch? We can worry about the details of what's going on with these Digizones and who lied to who later. Youseimon, how do we get to the Digital World?"

"There isn't an easy way." Finally, her expression showed something - a hint of guilt and frustration. "That's part of the reason why we have to use the Digizones. We'll have to trust in my allies. They'll set up another Digizone for us to join them as soon as they can."

"How are we supposed to trust in your allies?" Andre said. "We can't even trust in you."

She got to her feet, making eye contact at last, her own flashing with repressed anger. "Say what you like about me, but those Digimon have lived their lives by supporting others. They won't abandon her."

Hestria shook her head. "Whether we can trust them or not, it'll still take time. We need to get her back as fast as possible. We can't afford to wait on another Digizone."

"Pardon me," said a voice behind them, "but if you're looking for a way into the Digital World, there is a faster way."

It was a good thing she wasn't prone to airsickness, Mirai thought as she watched the ground pass underneath them. It seemed like a silly thing to focus on, but it beat getting bogged down in negative thoughts. *Okay, Mirai. You're currently on your own. You have to figure this one out by yourself.* Right now, they were too high up in the air for her to survive a fall; she'd need to wait until they were closer to land.

Or sea, she amended as she saw the sparkling of the horizon. "Is that the sea from Marrakech?" she wondered aloud, putting a hand over her eyes.

To her surprise, Betedramon answered. "That's the Sea of Chaos."

"What is that?"

"Death," Betedramon said after some thought. "It's chaotic data in which we Digimon can't survive. It's said that there used to be many more zones, but they were swallowed by that sea, dissolving every living thing on them."

"That's horrible. Where did it come from?"

"We don't know. All we know is that the Digital World's King is trying to raise those empty zones from the sea."

Mirai let that sink in. "Hey, you. Are you the daughter of a Nijino Daiichi?"

"Where did you hear that name?" The response from above was terse, shot through with sudden anger.
"Ah... There was a lady at the apartment building, she said you looked like him..."

"I'm not his daughter anymore," the girl snapped. "Please leave me alone."

Mirai felt foolish. Of course she wouldn't want to be pestered about him if he was dead like the old woman had said. As the sea approached, she asked, "Why are you fighting against us?"

There was no response, and Mirai figured the girl didn't want to answer. But at length, she said, "I don't care about the human world. I'm going to live in the Digital World."

"Huh. Humans can live in this world?"

"Why wouldn't they be able to?"

Near the sea, Mirai could see movement that wasn't the reflection of light on the waves. As they got closer, the blurs resolved into shapes, and then into the forms of Digimon - a bunch of gray rhino-ish ones fighting against a variety of Digimon. "Another battle?" Betedramon wondered. "Don't they know when to give up?"

Mirai scanned the crowd below, her face lighting up as she saw familiar faces, ones that were already moving toward them. Somehow, Tentomon had gotten there first, and Beelzebumon was close behind, firing his large gun. "Hey!" Betedramon flicked to the side, narrowly missing the shot. "I've got a hostage, you kn-"

Beelzebumon didn't even slow down. He slammed full force into Betedramon's underside, delivering a hard impact. The girl on his back let out a cry as she was knocked from her perch, tumbling off Betedramon's side. Caught between having to hold onto her hostage and rescue her partner, Betedramon let go of Mirai, diving for the other girl.

For a moment, she was floating, with nothing but the air whipping around her. Then Beelzebumon grabbed her out of the air, holding her to his chest with one arm as he turned sharply. "Beelzebumon!" she said, clinging to his neck. "Thank you."

"Think nothing of it." Swooping in low, he landed next to Mervamon, firing off a few shots. "What's our status?"

"We're working on a retreat, now that the zone's re-digitized." Mervamon swiped at her brow, wiping away some bits of data-whether they were hers or someone else's, Mirai didn't know. "Give us a hand?"

Letting Mirai down, he held out his gun arm, and fired and fired again. The enemy Digimon were smart enough to get out of the way, opening a path to some cave openings. "Let's go, missy," Mervamon said, picking up Mirai and tossing her over her shoulder. Mirai wanted to protest, but once Mervamon took off running, it was obvious that she wouldn't have been able to keep up.

Letting her down at the cave entrance, she said, "Go, we'll help the stragglers."

Mirai slid down from her shoulder, and ducked inside. The small entrance was actually a tunnel which stayed uncomfortably narrow. Something furry pressed against her arm, and she heard Tailmon's voice, "Keep going, we can't block the way." Mirai nodded, not sure if Tailmon could see the gesture in the dim light, and continued to half-crawl her way deeper underground.

It stayed narrow for some time before finally opening up. "Oh, it's Mirai!" she heard as she stepped out, and IcePicoDevimon came to land on her shoulder. "Always better to have a cute girl around. You came to see our digs?"
She took a look around. There were familiar faces here - she could see Elecmon pulling a sled of something, Sistermon Blanc tending to an injured limb. And there were faces she didn't recognize either - a green Digimon with a purple flower on its head that the D-Tai identified as an Alraumon; a small and yellow T-rex-like Digimon that was here and gone too fast to identify; a yellow Digimon wearing a pelt; a Digimon that looked like Tailmon, only in black, talking to a black dinosaur-like Digimon its size; a small white Digimon wearing a haramaki that seemed to be arguing with a yellow rabbit-ish Digimon. "So many new faces," she said to IcePicoDevimon.

"The King's rules are getting harsher," Tailmon said from beside her. "And the Illegal population is exploding. No, it's more accurate to say that with our current numbers, we're able to save more of them than we were in the past."

Mervamon and Beelzebumon finally emerged from the tunnel, dusting themselves off in oddly similar fashion. "We've sealed the entrance," Beelzebumon said, "since Tentomon said that Spadamon and Impmon had already gotten back. Where are they?"

"Oh, those two? Off and about," IcePicoDevimon said with a wave of one wing. "They're supervising the loading of the Trailmon."

"Trailmon?"

"How about I introduce you," Tailmon said. "I'll take care of her from here, Beelzebumon, Mervamon. IcePicoDevimon, get back to work."

"Got it. We'll help out here and come join you."

IcePicoDevimon made a face at Tailmon before hopping back into the air, following Beelzebumon. Tailmon tossed her head in the direction she wanted to go. "I'll show you how we get around."

"Why are you packing up? Are you moving somewhere?" Mirai asked as she followed. A few of the Digimon in passing regarded her curiously, but didn't address her.

"We're always on the move. We can't stay in one place for too long; even with the towers falling left and right, we ourselves are still being pursued. But it got a lot easier once we met the Trailmon. Before, we had to transport the wounded and the young ourselves."

"That must be hard." It was on the tip of her tongue to ask if Tailmon knew about the true nature of the Digizones, but she decided against it.

The cave they were in widened, and then opened up into a cove looking out over the sea. It was black, she realized, but reflecting light cast upon it, almost like oil. In its depths, she could see bits of multicolored data, like plankton. So this was the Sea of Chaos up close, she thought as she resisted the urge to touch it.

"Wizarmon!" Tailmon ran over to him, sitting next to him as he used some sort of magic to lift a number of eggs all at once into what appeared to be a boxcar. "What's our status?"

"We need more time." The eyes, almost hidden by the hat, scrunched up in concentration and frustration. "How much do we have?"

"We sealed the entrance; that will buy us a bit of time if they try to drill through, rather than look elsewhere for us. Do what you can. Beelzebumon and Mervamon are going to scrape together the others and bring them out here." Tailmon turned back to Mirai, guiding her toward the front of the train. "Mirai, this is Trailmon C-89. He's the leader of our little gang of Trailmon."
Mirai looked around the nose of the train, but didn't see anything. It, however, saw her. "Yo!" the
train said. "You're a human? Not as impressive looking as I thought. Aren't you guys supposed to
have three heads and breathe fire or something?"

She jumped before managing to identify the source of the voice. "What kind of human does that?
Um, hello, Trailmon C-89."

"Call me Cee. Those over there are my buddies, Trailmon Franken and Trailmon Buffalo. Frank
and Buff, if you please." The large eye rolled around, looking forward to where two more trains
were parked along the tracks. Where Cee was sleek with a pointed nose, Frank and Buff were large
and bulky. "Oi, you two! Take an eyeball at the human!"

"Hello, human!" one of them - Buff, she thought, the one with horns - called to her. "You need a
ride?"

"I guess I can't stay here if everyone else is leaving," she said. "Tailmon, I'll give you guys a hand.
What can I help load?"

"That will not be necessary," Spadamon's voice said from behind them. "Though we thank you for
your help."

She turned. Spadamon looked up at her, Impmon standing behind her. "I'll keep an eye on her in
Youseimon's place," Impmon said to Spadamon. "You help out with the evacuation."

He shook his head. "No, this is my responsibility, as well. Come with us, Mirai."

She looked at them. Youseimon's closest friends, right? "Did... did you know? About the
Digizones?"

Neither of them answered, but their silence alone seemed to indicate that they did know. Tailmon
regarded them quizzically, but shrugged it off. "If you're going to be guarding her, I'll give
Wizarmon a hand, then. Wizarmon!" She circled back around to her partner.

"Come with us, Mirai," Impmon told her, his expression serious. "We'll tell you what you want to
know." Spadamon turned, and Mirai followed, Impmon walking alongside her.

"Is his equipment evacuated?" Spadamon asked Impmon at last.

"One of the first things Wizarmon moved for us. But you know how he is about our base." Impmon
opened a door, and Spadamon stepped inside.

The room was dimly lit, and completely empty of any sort of items or furnishings. In fact, the only
thing in the room was a single Digimon, back to the door. "Oi, Kokuwamon," Impmon said. "I
know you're annoyed about us having to move base again, but I brought you a friend."

The digimon turned. He reminded her of a scarab or stag beetle, if a scarab was made of metal and
somewhat resembled a toy. His red eyes lit up as he saw her. "Good morning. You are the human
Watanabe Mirai?"

"How do you know who I am?" Even if he hadn't been a friend of Youseimon and all the others,
his presence felt safe. Maybe it was that robotic, yet adorable voice.

"A pleasure to meet you." He tilted his body forward, clacking his mandibles together.

"Mirai, this is Kokuwamon," Impmon told her. "He and Youseimon go way back, just like
Spadamon and me."

"It's a pleasure... But what does this have to do with the Digizones?" The last part was directed at Impmon and Spadamon.

"Ah." Kokuwamon clicked his mandibles together. "You would like to know about the Digizone program, then? Please ask."

"Kokuwamon is the one who made the Digizone program," Spadamon explained. "He is also the one that executes this program on command. Thus, making it so our world crosses with the human realm."

"But why make such a thing?"

Kokuwamon clacked his mandibles together again. It seemed to be some sort of habitual gesture, as if he were a human stroking his chin. "It was created it at Youseimon's request."

"You may as well sit down," Impmon said to her. "This is a bit of a story."

She looked at him, then Spadamon. Neither moved from their positions, even though they must have wanted to continue the evacuation. Letting out a sigh, she took a seat at last. "All right. Please explain it to me."

"Those of us from Youseimon's past-me, Spadamon, Kokuwamon, and some of the others-were originally set free from a prison by Youseimon." Impmon let out a sigh. "It's a prison that takes the data of Digimon who are killed in this world and holds them captive to be 'reeducated'."

Spadamon nodded. "I myself very nearly was lost in that reeducation. It took Youseimon and Impmon to make me remember the things I valued. Even now, I still have doubts sometimes. Flashbacks to that time. That's how insidious the reeducation is. People like myself and Milomon are fortunate."

"The towers that you see in each zone are the devices that transmit the data of killed Digimon back to his castle, and his prison," Impmon continued. "In other words, in any zone where a tower stands, the Digimon King has control over life and death. For those who have defied the King like us, for the Illegals that just happen to be born outside his set parameters, deliberate or not, for those who merely cross the King or one of his army in the wrong way, it's impossible to live in an area with a tower. Destroying the towers, and weakening his grip on the life of the Digital World has been our goal all along. It's what we have to do to survive."

"But then, why the Digizones? Why didn't you just take down the towers?"

"We did try," Spadamon said. "Then, we were not as numerous as we are now. As a matter of fact, we faced the possibility of annihilation. It was difficult to even get close to the towers on strength alone. We had heard rumors about the human realm, and the powers of humans - for some reason, the King has never tried to squelch those rumors. So Youseimon decided to take a chance on the human world. But we cannot travel there by ourselves. She decided that if we could not go there, we would bring our world to it." Spadamon looked over at Kokuwamon. "This one has an unparalleled ability to program, to the point that he can affect the Digital World like this. You might say he has Yggdrasil's programming running in him."

"So Youseimon decided to leave everything in our hands," Impmon continued. "Even though we needed her here. She placed trust in Spadamon and me, and in the untapped potential of a race of creatures she'd never even met. And then she'd stay there, in order to prevent damage to the human
realm from the Digizones. For the sake of both worlds, she's put everything on her shoulders. Well, that's the kind of idiot she is."

"There are few that would have the mental fortitude to make the decisions she's had to make. Decisions that sometimes determined who lived and who died. Even now, she continues to take all the difficult things on by herself, to keep us from them." Spadamon turned to her. "I was quite relieved when I found out she had discovered others to support her in the human realm - Digimon and humans alike. Just as I cannot protect everyone by myself-just as I have Impmon, Tailmon and Gatomon, Beelzebumon and Mervamon, and everyone-she needs those who can help her. Those such as yourself, Mirai."

"It's not like I didn't think she was a good person, you know," she said quietly. "What I don't understand is why she didn't tell me herself. I shouldn't have to hear this kind of thing from the enemy!"

"What would you have done if she had told you?" Impmon asked. "That she's deliberately creating the Digizones and putting your world in danger?"

"Isn't it obvious?! My friends being in danger is the same as me being in danger. And I always see through what I start to the end."

Impmon and Spadamon looked at her, then upwards as the ground shook. "Ah," Kokuwamon observed, "perhaps we are having a problem with geographic stability."

Footsteps raced down the hall, and the door was flung open by Sistermon Noir, who panted for breath. "What the hell are you guys doing?" she got out. "We've been compromised!"

Kat and Jane peered out the windows from their second-story apartment, watching the group that had gathered in the backyard. "Mom," Kat called to Jezra. "Andre brought home some more monster friends."

"That so?" Jezra said over the sound of furious typing. "What kind of friends?"

"I see a bird!" Jane said as Sveta joined them. "A pretty bird with big clawed feet!"

"There's also a big kitty," Kat said. "He's taller than Andre!"

"That's not a kitty. That's a lion."

Down in the back yard, Felix helped himself to a chair, Rusalkamon hopping into his lap and Alexa standing behind him. "All right, now that we're not in the streets of India... Talk."

"This is my benefactor, GrapLeomon," Youseimon introduced, standing in front of the tall Digimon with a lion's face. "He's the one that gave me the D-Tai. He's also assisted me with other things in the past."

"Are you the one helping her make the Digizones?" Andre asked. Even now, he was still clearly irate with Youseimon, but seemed content to leave her be in favor of finding a solution to their more pressing problem.

"I am not, though I know of them. Suffice it to say that if you're in a hurry, the explanation would be best saved for another time." He crossed his piston-like arms, his claws moving in and out in a
reflexive action.

"You said you had a way to get to the Digital World," Hestria said. "What is it?"

"Before that," Felix raised a hand. "You'll have to pardon us, but given that we just found out that Youseimon's been running a scam on us... How do we know we can trust you?"

Hestria and Andre looked over at him for an answer. "You don't," he said after a pause. "All I can give you is my word that I will not cause you harm. I am a Digimon of my word."

"How do we know that?"

"It's his reputation," Rusalkamon said, peering over her knees at the Grapleomon. "The Leomon are known to be very proud, and keepers of promises. It's because they are seekers of justice."

"But whose justice are they seeking?" Andre eyed the Grapleomon.

"That is what I myself am seeking to discover," Grapleomon said. "The Digimon King, Ashurimon. The rebel leader, Youseimon. Whose justice is the one that is pure? Who, ultimately, will become the good of the Digital World? I have assisted Youseimon in the past. Too, I have assisted the Digimon King. I will not do something that will dictate the directives of either's strategy. But something such as this is not a measure of your directive."

"But the D-Tai isn't, either?"

"Youseimon had already made the determination to seek out the power of a human partnership. I only gave that directive a path."

"I've heard enough to satisfy me," Hestria said. "If you have a way, I'll go to the Digital World and bring Mirai back. The rest of you stay here."

"No," Andre shook his head. "I'll come with you."

"Please," Felix said, "as if you're going to leave me behind. We may as well all be in this together."

"Youseimon," Andre addressed her, "you can stay here with my siblings. We'll return with Mirai."

"No. If anything, shouldn't I be the first one going? This is my responsibility. The rest of you don't need to be involved."

"You would only get in our way," Hestria said. "Without Mirai, you can't Influence or shin evolve."

"That does not mean I am helpless. Even without the power of evolution, I will continue to do whatever things I can do. That is how I have lived up until now." She looked up at the humans with an unwavering gaze. "Being small and weak is not an excuse to abandon my friends."

"Good," Andre said, "that's the kind of thing you should say."

"I will prepare the gate, then," Grapleomon said. "Please stand back."

Upstairs, Kat and Jane continued to watch the group below, unable to hear the conversation going on. "Mama, are you going to come see the lion?" Kat asked.

"I've still got fifteen minutes left on this writing session!" came the rather frazzled reply.
Jane tugged on Kat's sleeve. "The kitty vanished. So did big brother."

"Huh?" Kat looked back on the window. The back yard was now as bare as it had been only a few minutes prior.

It was the worst position they could be in right now, Mirai thought to herself as she clung to the back of Cee, her sword in one hand. Impmon and Spadamon crouched on either side of her, their eyes sharp. On their left, Tailmon and Wizarmon stood on Buff's back, and to the right, Beezlebumon and Mervamon rode on Frank. And surrounding all three Trailmon, Jewelbeemon hovered on all sides, green armor glinting in the sunlight, their spears at the ready. "We will have to keep them at bay until we reach the end of this road," Spadamon said. "We cannot let the Trailmon be damaged."

"If we can make it to the next zone, we'll be able to have better cover," Impmon added. "So just hang in there."

"I'm at a bit of a disadvantage," Mirai said. "All I've got is my sword."

"Myself as well," Spadamon said as Beelzebhumon took a few shots at the Jewelbeemon that flew over their heads. "We'll be relying on you, Impmon."

"Leaving the center stage to me? How kind." Impmon pulled fire and ice to his hands, sending out a pillar of each through the ranks of the Jewelbeemon. "You two just watch my back!"

Like rows of fighter planes, the Jewelbeemon began dropping on them, spears outstretched. Spadamon moved to the far end of the Trailmon, slashing at them as they passed. Impmon, Beelzebhumon, and Wizarmon all laid down furious long-distance fire at the enemy ranks, but for every one that fell away into the sea around them, two more got close enough to attack the train cars.

Mirai didn't have any further time to think about their overall situation as one landed on the Trailmon's back, spear aimed downward. With a yell, Mirai lunged forward, tip of her sword aimed straight at its head. The blow struck true; the Jewelbeemon let out a yell and tumbled backwards, dropping its spear. She planted a foot on top of the weapon, debating. She didn't know much at all about the spear arts, but she could think of one thing to do with it. "Heads up!"

One of the Jewelbeemon looked over at her shout, just in time to take the spear to the neck. Not a bad shot for no practice, Mirai thought as her next opponent landed. From then on, it was a blur of motion as she knocked one after the other off the Trailmon. Catching her breath for the shortest of moments, she thought she could see a dark mass in front of them. Were they almost at the next zone?

Another Jewelbeemon turned her attention back to the fight, and she bodily slammed against it, knocking it away. The motion, however, caused her to lose her own footing, tumbling down the Trailmon's back. "Mirai!" Spadamon said in alarm as she tumbled past him.

And then the sickening motion stopped, something wrapping around her. Mirai blinked and looked up into Maremon's helmeted face. "Hi, Mirai," Felix said from his position on Maremon's back. "Just so you know, it's dangerous to run around the tops of trains."

"Felix, Maremon! How did you two get here?"
"We came to rescue you, of course!" Maremon said.

"And it's not just the two of us," Felix added as Maremon landed on the end of the train next to Spadamon.

Mirai looked up as Archeomon passed overhead. On Buff, Kaitomon and Andre were filling the air with their shots, and Youseimon was with them, throwing her needles. Youseimon! She didn't think she could face her partner right now. What would she say, knowing the full story?

Underneath her feet, the train hit a bumpy portion, rocking Maremon around. "We're almost to shore, people!" Cee shouted with a whistle, slowing down. "Frank, Buff, form up on me! We're going to circle once we get to shore!"

"Yes ma'am!" The Trailmon on either side of Cee got closer until they were all but touching, leaving an easy hop between train cars.

Mirai gave herself a mental shake. They had the Trailmon to protect; she couldn't worry about other things right now. "Youseimon! We're going to evolve!"

The Digimon looked at her, then nodded as Mirai sent her red light toward Youseimon. Then she could only focus on herself as the Trailmon took a hard turn, curling around in a defensive circle. The Jewelbeemon descended again, and she was right among them, sword swinging. She was dimly aware of Alexa at her back, holding off a Jewelbeemon with its own spear, could vaguely hear Felix shouting orders to various Digimon, but most of her attention was on the enemy in front of her. *Man, if the boys in kendo club could see me now. I bet they couldn't pull this off in a million years.*

Andre's voice was in her ears. "Mirai, are you okay?"

"Huh?" The wild movement of the Trailmon and of the enemy had stopped. She didn't see a single Jewelbeemon capable of attack around them any longer. "Oh. Is it over?"

"Yes, it's over. You're not hurt?"

She rotated her shoulder just to be sure. "No, I'm fine. So we beat them?"

"That we did," Impmon said, flopping backwards onto the roof of Cee. "Man, we gotta stop doing this. It's exhausting."

Spadamon smiled briefly, then turned to Faimon. "Good to see you are safe, as well. We all managed to evacuate safely, somehow."

She sighed. "I'm sorry. I haven't been able to make a safe place for you yet. You should take a breather in one of the broken tower zones."

"If we have time to take a breather, we should focus on taking down more towers." Spadamon looked over to Mirai.

Faimon followed his gaze, then turned away. "It's all well and good that we found Mirai again," Alexa said, "but now how are the lot of us supposed to get home?"

"That's easy," Impmon said. "We'll just get another Digizone up and running. Spadamon, you go make sure our train cars aren't scrambled. I'll get Kokuwamon on the job."

"Sis, come give me a hand," Felix called to Alexa as he stood by one of the train cars with Tailmon
and Wizarmon. "Andre, Hestria, you guys, too."

That left Mirai with Faimon, who de-evolved into Youseimon. "Mirai," the Digimon began.

"You're such an idiot," Mirai sighed. "What are we going to do with you? Stop keeping everything on your shoulders, Youseimon. We're partners, aren't we? Didn't we seek each other out because each of us have something the other needed? You aren't the only one that's benefitted from this arrangement, Youseimon. So stop keeping secrets from me."

Youseimon turned her back to Mirai and the rest of the group, but Mirai could see the shake in her shoulders. Walking over to Youseimon, she sat down next to the Digimon, pulling her into her lap. "Mirai," Youseimon's voice was hoarse. "Don't let them see my face right now."

Mirai smiled, and circled her arms around Youseimon, holding her tightly enough so that only she would know. No one else was allowed to see the break in her defenses, see the tears born of a lifetime of hardships and difficult decisions. She was Youseimon's partner, and now the keeper of her secrets.
Loyalty Is...! Alexa and Labramon

Previously on Digimon Travelers...

Mirai, who has been taken to the Digital World, escapes Betedramon and her partner with the help of Youseimon's allies. She learns that Youseimon created the Digizones as a way of partnering with the power of humans. Meanwhile, the benefactor of Youseimon, GrapLeomon, arrives to lead them into the Digital World. Mirai stands up to fight against the forces of the Digimon King, and is reunited with her partner once more. But what place will they venture to next?

Andre made a face as he unbuttoned his shirt. "I'm glad this place isn't as cold as the real Moscow, but I could do without the bipolar temperatures."

"I'm not complaining, partner," Sanseimon said. "I prefer the warm. Though this humidity is as bad as Atlanta."

"Still, it's kind of a shame we have to leave so soon," Lilinmon said, wiggling her toes in the sand. "Maybe we don't have to destroy the tower right away?"

Mirai laughed. "If you want to see a beach, we have plenty in the human world. After all, if it's beaches, you can't beat Hawaii."

"Felix!" Lilinmon turned shining eyes to him. "Felix, can we go?"

He laughed at her enthusiasm. "Is Hawaii really that great?" Hestria asked. "I usually hear about the south Pacific islands."

"It's awesome!"

"It might be worth visiting the south Pacific," Felix said. "After all, some of those islands are so low to sea level, it's likely that they could vanish completely within our lifetimes."

"Felix," Alexa let out a sigh. "Rather than musing on all the facts in your head, shouldn't you be paying attention to all the fish people crawling around?"

"Why? Lilinmon's got it under control." Felix waved a hand at all the downed Hangyomon. The lucky ones were crawling away rather than dissipating.

"That wasn't too hard," Apsaramon observed. "We may not even need to shin evolve. Well, let's get moving and go find the tower."

Mirai carefully took off her shoes, tucking them in her bag, then went running through the shallow water with a whoop of glee. Andre laughed, and tied his laces together, slinging his shoes around his neck. "Not a bad idea."

"Honestly, how old are you?" Hestria snorted, even as she took off her own shoes.

"I can see the tower from here," Yixiamon said as she flew around them. "It's not far, follow me."

"You seem like you're in a good mood," Andre said to Mirai as he fell into step with her.

She blinked. "Well, it's kind of hard to be in a bad mood when you're on the beach, after all."

"By the way," Felix said from her other side. "Did Youseimon tell you anything about the
"Ah... I guess it's hard for you to trust her after that dragon girl said all that."

"Not particularly," he shrugged, "but I am curious."

"Oh... Well, she didn't, but she didn't need to. Spadamon and Impmon told me everything. Youseimon had one of her people create the program in order to reach the human world. So they could find allies among the humans. Youseimon went herself so she could prevent any damage to the human world."

"Huh. Lilinmon, did you know about that?"

"What? No, not really." The taller Digimon briefly paused by Felix. "I don't know anything about such things. I just want to help Felix. We do these things because we want to, isn't that right?"

He grinned at her. "That friend of Youseimon's is the one that gave the D-Tai to her, right? But I'd never met her or that Leomon-type before Atlanta," Milomon said.

"I suspect he spread it far beyond my small circle," Apsaramon said. "And the code is self-replicating, which I'm sure spread it further. That does fall in line with what I know of him. He has assisted me, but he isn't my ally. He has his own motivations."

"Motivation's one thing, but I still haven't forgiven you," Andre huffed. "Deception is deception."

"I understand. I won't ask for forgiveness, nor will I spend time reflecting on how it could have been done differently. It's already happened."

"C'mon, Andre," Mirai said, "don't be mad at her."

"He's allowed to be mad," Hestria said. "Actions are one thing, but we don't have a right to dictate how others feel."

"Oh?" Felix looked at her, and grinned again. "How very sociological of you."

Alexa looked from Felix to Hestria and back again, scowling. "Don't pester her, Felix."

"What? I'm just making an innocent observation~"

"Time to stop flirting," Sanseimon said. "We got company!"

Next to the tower, a mermaid burst from the water, holding them at bay with her anchor-shaped spear. "You will go no further, trespassers!"

"A mermaid?" Mirai took a picture, looking up the stats on the D-Tai. "Mermaimon... This one's kind of cool."

"I didn't know you were a fan of fish, Mirai," Apsaramon observed.

"Hm... well, I do like sushi."

"It shouldn't be necessary to kill her," Lilinmon said. "We could just knock her onto the beach."

"Bitches, are you looking down on me?" She kissed her anchor, lighting it up, then sent a wave of energy at the group. The Digimon all grabbed their partners, jumping away, with Alexa grabbed by Yixiamon.
"I take it back," Lilinmon growled. "We'll take her out."

"Geez," Sanseimon grumbled, dusting sand from his jacket. "Why do all the girls in the army have to be so cranky?"

"Because the boys are all jerks," Yixiamon said, giving him a look.

"Let's hit her all at once," Apsaramon said. "It'll give us a good idea of her power. All together now! Kbach Cheap!"

"Zantestujuu!"

"Malin Calin!"

"Mai Ogi!"

The four attacks swirled together, forming a vortex that slammed into Mermaimon, sending her skidding off toward the horizon, until even the blast hitting her couldn't be seen. "Uh... I guess we'll go with Lilinmon's plan after all," Sanseimon said at last.

"Let's take out the tower while she's gone," Apsaramon said. "We'll make this quick."

"And then we can go to Hawaii?"

"Not so fast, rebels!"

Felix groaned as he looked up, watching something descend. "What now?"

"Watch out," Sanseimon said as four paws landed on the sand without a sound. "That's Ishtarimon, the Venus Celestial General."

"What's her battle strength like?" Apsaramon asked him.

"I don't actually know. I've never seen her in battle. But she's an Ultimate type like Mardukkimon and Ninurtimon. It's safe to say she's not going to be a pushover."

"Then let's fall back and shin evolve," Apsaramon landed next to Mirai, dropping the zone's Influence and returning to Youseimon. The others followed suit, all evolving to their shin forms.

"So you do have a bit of power." Ishtarimon's expression was dark. "You damned rebels, who do you think you are? Claiming the power of shin evolution! Taking the lives of Nergimon, Ninurtimon and Mardukkimon!"

"They started it," Kaitomon said.

"Shut your food trap, Milomon. Those who don't even understand the consequences of their actions are unfit to speak."

"Screw you," Hestria said. "I don't recall the part where we're obliged to listen to you."

"Of course you don't, because you're fucking rebels! Foolish savages bent on destroying our world!"

"You seem to be a bit misinformed," Felix said calmly. "We're not out to destroy your world."

"Oh? Well, you're doing a good job of trying without meaning to, then! Don't you know what your
fighting and your destruction of the towers is causing? The rate you're going, you'll cause the zones to sink back into the Sea of Chaos. Can you live with that knowledge, knowing you've killed countless numbers of Digimon to live your selfish ways?"

"We won't sink the zones," Faimon said, her still voice a sharp contrast to Ishtarimon's anger. "We absolutely won't allow harm to come to the Digimon here, unless they insist on fighting us like you are."

"You say that, and yet you continue to destroy the very thing holding them up!"

"They haven't sunk yet," Maremon protested.

"Even if they sink," Faimon's voice grew quiet, "even if they sink, we'll just bring them back again. We'll bring back all the zones that were lost to the Sea of Chaos. Myself, and Mirai. With this red-hot passion that we hold in our hearts!"

Ishtarimon's expression was still filled with barely-contained rage, but she seemed to regard Faimon in a different light. "So this is Youseimon, the famous leader of the rebels. I can see why. It's as Mardukkimon said; you do have conviction. But conviction won't be enough to save you when you're on the side of evil." From nowhere, she produced twin star-shaped weapons, gripping them in the middle with their eight points facing outward. "Come, rebels!"

"Phantom Shot!" Kaitomon fired at her, grimacing as she blocked the shots with her large stars.

"First Hurricane!" Archeomon threw wind down from above, hoping to knock her off balance, but her four paws held her centaur-shaped body without budging.

"Fairyland Chorus!" Using the distraction from the others' attacks, Faimon drew close, letting off a close shot directed at Ishtarimon's face.

When the smoke cleared, Ishtarimon stood without having moved, her paws in the same indentations in the sand. "Is that all you have? My turn, then." Raising her twin blades, she said, "Bull of Heaven."

She was upon them before they could move, the blades falling in glittering arcs of light, knocking each Digimon to the sand in turn. Returning to her original position in the sand, she said, "Well, humans, I'll offer you the same leniency Mardukkimon did, though I'd rather kill you on the spot. Delete your glitch programs, and leave our world. The king does not want to see the blood of humans."

No one moved or responded. "You've got some nerve," Kaitomon said as he pushed himself to one knee, aiming his gun at her. "Phantom Shot!"

She flicked the attack aside with her lion tail, giving him a contemptuous look. "You're still alive? Know when you've hit your limits, brat."

Faimon also got to her feet, holding her hands out. "Remix Surge!" Pulling her energy together, she swept her hands around, and her allies' bodies took on a rainbow glow.

Maremon got to her feet, as did Archeomon. "Ah... that's better," the bird said in surprise.

"If we can't get you with normal attacks," Faimon said, "then we'll just have to combine our powers more effectively. Mirai!"

She nodded, holding her phone out. Without speaking, she knew what Faimon wanted: the red-hot
passion that bound them together. "Burning Fairyland Chorus!" Faimon shouted, throwing a primarily-red rainbow at the enemy.

"Unyielding Phantom Shot!" Kaitomon's black attack became green as he aimed for the same spot.

"Piercing Supersonic Calvalry!" Maremon raised her hands, then held them out at the enemy, propelling a shockwave that rippled with purple.

"Roaring Pinion Impaling!" With a flick of her wings, Archeomon sent feathers at Ishtarimon that left blue streaks in their wake.

This time, Ishtarimon was forced to one knee, holding both stars in a defensive position. "So that's the power of humans? I can't help but be a little impressed," she said, her smile taking on a feral light. "But it's still not enough to go toe to toe with me."

"Shall we test that theory?"

Mirai held out her violently shaking phone as she watched the fight, trying to draw on everything she could possibly send to Faimon. "Mirai!" Elecmon's ears popped over a sandbar, followed by the rest of his face. "Are you guys all right?"

"For the moment. Who all's with you?" she said.

"Just us," Labramon and Prairiemon's heads popped up above the sandbar. "The others are some distance away. We'll bring them to help!"

"Wait," Felix said. "What's their situation?"

"The Trailmon are under attack. But-"

"Then that's no good," he said. "We could only make use of Beelzebumon and Mervamon, anyway. Anyone else would just be a sitting duck. So go ahead back."

"But-"

"I'll stay in case they need to send a message," Labramon spoke up. "You two head back and help the others. Let them know that Youseimon and the others are here fighting Ishtarimon over the tower."

Elecmon's ears went back, but he turned at last, Prairiemon following. Labramon padded over the sandbar, taking a seat next to Felix. "You're not going to join in?" he asked.

"I'm not foolish. It's as you say; I'd just be getting in the way."

In front of them, Ishtarimon shook off her attackers with a blast of power, knocking them back. "That's quite enough of this nonsense," she said. "Temptation's Mistress!"

A jaundiced field spread outward from Ishtarimon, coating the four Digimon in yellow. Labramon let out a yelp of alarm as it stopped just shy of her paws. "Ugh," Archeomon groaned, falling onto the sand, Maremon falling next to her. "It feels like all the strength's being sucked out of me..."

"That's cheating," Kaitomon got out, falling to his hands and knees, Faimon sinking into the sand as well.

"Bitches, please. You're the rebels here; you don't get to complain about what's fair and what isn't since you're breaking the rules in the first place." Ishtarimon walked past them, approaching the
five humans. "Now, hand over your digital devices."

"Forget it," Felix told her. "Don't want to."

"You... Whether you want to or not is irrelevant, you're going to! You don't seem to understand your position here, human."

"Don't care, and don't want to." He stuck his tongue out at her.

"You...!" She reared up, bringing her paws down inches from his face. "There should be a limit to how far you can push things. Even though you're supposed to be our allies, on the side of justice, you insist on doing this!"

"If you don't mind me asking," Felix said, "what makes you so sure that we're supposed to be your allies, on the side of justice?"

"That is the King's decree." She kept her gaze on him, cold and ready to strike. "Whatever the King says must always be right."

"And on what basis does he make that claim? Does he work with a human himself, perhaps?"

"Our king is not so weak as to need the assistance of a weakling child," Ishtarimon said. "Is that all you have to ask? If so, hand over your digital devices. This is your last chance."

"Felix," Alexa said to him. "You can replace a phone."

"That's true. A phone can be replaced. You know what can't be replaced?" Felix looked up at Ishtarimon, his expression mirroring hers, neither giving any room for negotiation. "The opportunity to tell a bully to go fuck herself."

"I'll have your head!" Ishtarimon raised her star weapon into the air.

With a shout, Alexa was right next to Ishtarimon, kicking upwards against her arm. The star weapon thudded into the sand some distance away. "Don't you fucking lay a hand on my brother," she hissed.

"You think a human can fight me when your Digimon couldn't? You have another thing coming to you!" Undeterred, Ishtarimon sought to strike her with the other.

Alexa ducked under her arm, seizing it with both hands. "I don't have to stop your attacks. I just have to turn them away!"

"Sis..." Felix pressed his lips together, then ran for Maremon, throwing her arm around his shoulders.

"Let's go, while she's distracted!" Hestria followed, trying to get a grip on Archeomon's larger body and drag her out of the yellow circle.

"But Alexa-"

"Please go, Mirai," Labramon said to her. "I can't help Youseimon. So I'll help your human friend." Mirai paused, then ran across the sands herself, Andre joining her.

Ishtarimon grabbed Alexa by the shoulder, tearing her away from her other arm. "I am second only to Nabimon and the King himself in terms of strength. Know your place, human!"
Labramon leapt, claws slashing at Ishtarimon's shoulder, causing her to drop the human. Labramon then landed next to Alexa, crouched in a defensive position. "First them, now you. How do you think you can possibly be a match, when four Perfect-types are not?"

"I don't care about whether I'm a match," Labramon growled. "I absolutely will not abandon my friends!"

"Dog..." Alexa dropped down to one knee, lowering her voice. "I think I have an idea. Can you trust me?"

"You're a friend of Youseimon. Of course I can trust you."

"Whatever you do is futile," Ishtarimon said, swinging the star around. Alexa and Labramon dodged in opposite directions, running to either side of her. "Educate yourselves in the realities of battle!"

"You need to educate yourself in the martial arts!" Meeting Labramon again, she bounced off the Digimon, using her as a springboard to land on Ishtarimon's back.

"What the hell are you talking about, get off!" She swung her star around behind her as best she could, and Alexa ducked under it, getting closer to the back of her humanoid half.

"I take martial arts! And the first thing they teach you is how to deal with opponents bigger than you!" Grabbing onto Ishtarimon's long hair, she leapt from Ishtarimon's back, yanking her head back at a painful angle.

Ishtarimon let out a scream, more of rage than pain. "I'll kill you!"

"When dealing with larger, stronger opponents," Alexa shouted, "you aim for their weak points!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Ishtarimon saw Labramon, surrounded with a peach-colored aura that took the shape of something larger, with a golden mane and flowing tail. "Tiida Ija!" Labramon roared, throwing the full force of the peach-colored aura against a point on Ishtarimon's armor.

For a moment, nothing, and then a crack, and then more cracks. All at once, the armor Ishtarimon wore shattered and fell away, leaving her upper half exposed and vulnerable. "Y-you savages!" Ishtarimon gasped, covering her chest with folded arms. "You don't even have any decency!"

"Let's see how well you withstand all the others' attacks now!" Alexa said as she stood next to Labramon.

Ishtarimon turned. The others had pulled their Digimon out of the yellow zone, and they now were on their feet again, ready for another round. Ishtarimon's face turned red as she saw Kaitomon, Felix and Andre. "You lot, I absolutely won't forgive you for this!" she cried as she ran for the tower, disappearing as she touched it.

"Did you get her?" Felix asked as he sat down in the sand, panting for breath.

"We broke her armor. Apparently she didn't like that much."

Felix laughed at that. "I would imagine not, with three guys here. Thanks, sis. You saved my bacon."

Alexa smiled, and without thinking, she placed a hand on Labramon's head. "That's what I'm here for, my stupid little brother."
Labramon rubbed against her leg. "We make a pretty good team."

"Uh... I guess so?" Alexa turned away, looking at nothing in particular. "Uh, Felix! Let's get that tower thing so we can go home."

"What's your home like?" Labramon asked as she rubbed against Alexa's leg again. "I can't wait to see it."

"Wait a... uh, shouldn't you stay here?" Alexa was quickly becoming unable to be coherent.

"You're my partner now, so I'm coming with you."

"Partner? But-"

"Of course! After all, aren't we alike? We both don't want to let those we care about fight alone while we sit on the sidelines."

"I-I guess I can't argue with that, but..." Labramon looked up at her with large puppy eyes, and whatever will to resist Alexa had left vanished. She threw her arms around Labramon, petting the dog's back without a word.

Felix laughed. "Sis has a weakness for dogs. You don't mind if we borrow your ally, do you, Youseimon?"

Faimon smiled. "Labramon is her own person. She can choose whatever path she wants."

"Well, chalk up another one for the good guys," Kaitomon said. "Let's blow this tower and go home."

"Except that we didn't defeat her," Archeomon said. "For a while there, we were helpless. And we'll have to face her again."

"But we weren't completely out of our league, either. And if she's the third strongest, we have a chance," Faimon said. "Let's use this break between fights to get stronger. So that next time, we will defeat her."
Her Name is Nijino Kuroko

Previously on Digimon Travelers...

Through their battles, both the Digimon and children grow stronger. The opponents of the latest Digizone are no match until Ishtarimon, the Venus Celestial General, steps in to destroy the Digimon that resist the King. The four Digimon struggle valiantly, but are unable to push the battle in their favor. The children refuse to cave in to Ishtarimon's demands to turn over their D-Tais. When their friends are threatened, Alexa and Labramon join forces to shatter Ishtarimon's armor, forcing her to retreat. Another Digimon and child pair have joined the battle. But what place will they venture to next?

"Damn these humans!"

Peledramon tightened her grip on her partner's shoulder as Ishtarimon stormed into the room, making a beeline for Nabimon. "Nabimon! I've had enough of these damned disgusting creatures! We need to come up with something once and for all before we lose our ability to control them for real."

Nabimon looked up at her. Ishtarimon was no longer in the golden armor she typically wore, but rather a white and gold toga across her top half, creating a look of grace instead of the powerful statement her armor had created. "You felt like a mode change, I see."

"Change nothing! Those damned rebels!" Ishtarimon stamped one paw on the ground hard enough to spiderweb the stone underneath. Peledramon pushed against her partner's shoulder, urging her back against the wall. "Nabimon, we need to talk to the King about this."

"Very well. You two, stay here," Nabimon instructed as he followed Ishtarimon out.

Peledramon nodded, settling against his partner's neck. To her alarm, the girl pushed away from the wall, slipping out the door silently. "Wait, no," Peledramon said in a hushed tone, tightening her claws on the girl's shirt. "We need to stay here."

"Ishtarimon's got an axe to grind," the girl said quietly. "I want to make sure I'm not in its way. Just stay quiet."

Peledramon frowned, but knew that her partner had a point. She slipped down the hallway, keeping her distance from Nabimon and Ishtarimon, her footsteps making no noise. "Lord Ashurimon. The rebels continue to trouble us."

"Three of the Celestial Generals are no more, Ashurimon. Even the flaming sword has been lost to us. Now is the time to bring the justice of the heavens upon them, Lord Ashurimon," Ishtarimon pressed.

"The humans..." Ashurimon's voice sounded tired. "I don't understand why they've turned against me now."

"Humans are the best thing to deal with humans," Nabimon said. "Shall we let our pet deal with them?"

Peledramon could feel the muscles in the back of her partner's neck tense up. "She hasn't been very successful thus far," Ishtarimon pointed out. "I don't see why you're so sure she'll succeed now."
"She will. Humans are exponentially capable when they're properly motivated. If she doesn't win, she won't be able to stay in this world. I'll send her out after them again."

"And when she fails, Nabimon? Then what? Are you going to go after them yourself?"

"It's true that there are very few things in this world that can go against the combination of a Digimon and a human," Ashurimon cut them both off. "We will give her another chance. Ishtarimon, return to hunting the associates of the rebel Youseimon. We will send out the human girl against the humans one more time."

"As you wish, Lord Ashurimon." Ishtarimon turned, walking back down the hallway. Peledramon flattened herself as best she could against her partner's chest, the girl ducking behind a pillar. It was barely necessary; Ishtarimon didn't so much as look around as she walked away.

"Nabimon." Ashurimon's voice had fallen quiet, reflective. "Do you think I'm wrong?"

"You are our god, Ashurimon. What you do is for the sake of the Digital World."

"And yet, the humans threaten our world. Have I misjudged them?" A sigh. "I had such hopes for Daiichi's child. She shouldn't have had trouble with them at all. Look how easily she obtained the shin evolution."

"She is still just a child, my lord."

"It's because they're children that they have such power. I don't know what it is that she lacks that the others have."

"She will find it. As I said, they become more powerful when properly motivated."
She had apparently heard enough, for she slipped back down the hallway, as silently as she had entered. "It's okay," Peledramon said, touching her cheek with a paw. "I won't let you down. We'll win this time." No response. "Why don't we go home and rest? You must be hungry."

"Home? To where there's nothing?" She looked away from Peledramon, her glasses fogged up.

"There's me." Peledramon rubbed against her neck. "Wherever you go, there will be me. Let's go. I'll make you something nice."

"This is the address the Nijinos have," Rina said as she checked the number one more time. "I wasn't able to find out much about it yet. I figured it might be easier to go to the source."

"I guess so." Mirai looked up at the door as well, Youseimon holding onto her hand. "You want to knock?"

"What's this, turning shy all of a sudden? Well, not a problem for me," Rina said as she gave the door a sharp rap. No response came from within, and it remained that way when she knocked again.

"Maybe they're out," Youseimon said.

"Or maybe they really are dead," Mirai said with a shiver.

"At least one of 'em's alive, Mirai-chan. We've seen her ourselves. And I don't believe in ghosts,
anyway."

"I bet you didn't believe in monsters, either."

"Yeah, well, that is that and this is this." Rina reached for the doorknob, giving it a twist. "Hey, it's open."

"Rina-chan!" Mirai stared in horror as her friend swung the door open, peering inside. "You can't go in there!"

"I'm just going to take a quick look around."

Curiosity beat morality: Mirai peered around Rina's shoulder as the other girl reached in, flipping on the lights. The apartment looked perfectly normal, simply decorated but well-kept. Nothing out of the ordinary. Certainly nothing to indicate it was abandoned or used by ghosts.

Youseimon slipped inside, taking off her shoes at the entrance. "Youseimon!" Mirai hissed.

"Hold on a moment. There's something here I want to examine." Hopping onto the couch, Youseimon pulled something off the shelf, something that appeared to be some sort of shadow box.

"Ooh, something interesting?" Rina entered, taking off her shoes, and Mirai had no choice but to enter or to look suspicious outside in the hall. "Show me, show me!"

"Rina-chan!" Mirai groaned as she followed. Youseimon held the out so both girls could see. It was some sort of electronic device, with a simple screen in its plastic case and odd markings around the outside, but it wasn't anything Mirai was familiar with. "What is it?"

"It's from the Digital World," Youseimon said, "that much I know for certain. It feels the same as our world. And see these markings here?" she said, pointing to the glyphs along the outside. "These letters are our native writing system. This without a doubt came from the Digital World."

"But what is it?" Rina echoed.

"I don't know. According to the glyphs, it's a 'digital device', but that doesn't tell me much about what it does or did. It isn't like anything I've seen in the Digital World before."

"Hm. So the Nijino household definitely has a connection with the Digital World, then."

"We already knew that," Rina pointed out. "Since that girl said she was the daughter of that Daiichi guy. Or rather, said she wasn't any longer, implying that she was in the past."

"Yes, but it indicates some deeper involvement than just that. Whatever this digital device was, it wasn't here to look pretty. It had a specific purpose. That means that either she or someone in her family was involved in some separate incident in the Digital World," Youseimon explained. "And at the least, this household knew about the Digital World."

Mirai rubbed her arm, looking around the room. "Did the name Daiichi Nijino sound familiar to you, Youseimon?"

"No. But I've not known the name of any human prior to meeting you. If there were humans involved with the Digital World in the past, I don't know what happened." Youseimon let out a sigh. "I envy you humans, in a way. You keep such faithful records of the past, even with the things you would rather not remember. We in the Digital World have no history. Only the snippets
of legends and rumors that trickle down to us on occasion."

"We didn't keep good records, Youseimon. Much of our past is pieced together as guesswork, based on the tiniest things from past ages. It's just that we have so many people studying those tiny pieces that we can form something that seems complete." Mirai touched a hand to Youseimon's shoulder. "You'll be able to patch together your own history too, one day."

"Something's on in the back room," Rina spoke up. "I'm going to go check."

"Oh, come on, Rina-chan!" Mirai chewed at her lip, but once again followed as Rina walked down the short hallway, pausing at an open door. The interior of the room reminded Mirai somewhat of her own; it was pink and girly, with lovingly handmade bits of art hung on the walls. This had to be the dragon girl's room, Mirai thought. The room matched the girly exterior she put up.

"Check this out," Rina held up a notebook. "It appears her name is Kuroko."

"She's Nijino Kuroko, then?" Mirai put a hand to her chin. "That's sort of an odd name, isn't it?"

"Kind of ironic, yeah."

"Mirai, I've noticed something," Youseimon said. "This place has a difference from your room."

"It's girlier?"

"I wouldn't know about that. But there aren't any photographs in here."

Mirai blinked, then looked around. No pictures of the girl herself, no pictures of friends, no pictures of family. Struck by a sudden thought, she ventured back out into the living room. "There are no pictures out here, either."

"But there's gaps on the bookshelf. And there are empty nails on the walls." Rina pointed. "It's not so much that they weren't there, but more like someone removed them, don't you think?"

"But what would be the purpose of that?"

Youseimon turned as light came from the bedroom they had just left. The door creaked as it opened, and then the dragon girl stepped into the hallway, Peledramon around her neck. Her face darkened to a murderous level as she saw the two girls. "You...!"

"Are you Nijino Kuroko-san?" Rina asked her. "We came to talk to you and your family."

"Get out!" The words were practically a scream. "Peledramon, kill them! Get them out!"

"But your house-" the dragon protested.

"I don't care, kill them!"

"We're leaving!" Mirai said, raising her hands as Rina grabbed their shoes. "We're leaving, so don't be violent."

"Peledramon!"

Mirai grabbed Rina around the waist, and Youseimon hopped onto her shoulder as she activated the Internet Transport in a rush, queueing it to her apartment. Moments later, they lay in a tangled heap in the doorway of her own apartment, without the girl and her dragon. "Oh, Mirai-chan?" Her mother's voice came from the kitchen, and she stepped out a few moments later. "Oh, you brought
Rina-chan as well. Are you three all right?"

"We're fine, we just tripped," Mirai said with a wave of one hand as she tried to extract herself.

"Is that so? Well, we're having beef donburi tonight; Rina-chan, would you like to stay? It's been a while, after all."

"I'll call my mom and see if it's all right," Rina said as she ushered Mirai toward her room. Once inside, she said, "Mirai, can I borrow your computer?"

"Sure, I guess." Mirai sat down on her bed, letting Rina have the chair. Youseimon came to sit next to her. "So that was the dragon girl's house, after all. Nijino Kuroko. At least we have a name."

"I want to check my email," Rina said. "I asked my big brother to have some of his friends to check on the name Daiichi Nijino and see what he could find. I'm hoping he has-Ah, there it is!"

"So what did he say?" Youseimon asked after a length of time.

"Nijino Daiichi. The address matches what I found yesterday. The whole family was killed in a boating accident. Or rather, they found the bodies of the parents and the son, but couldn't find the daughter, so they believed her drowned. Except that she turned up a few weeks later without a scratch on her and no memory of what had happened. This was about a year ago. I guess she's been living on her own since then." Rina scrolled down the email. "Let's see... she's supposed to be registered with our school, but she's apparently been a truant." Rina sat back in the chair.

"That's horrible," Mirai said with a shake of her head. "She must be lonely."

"She doesn't act like someone that's lonely," Youseimon pointed out.

"That's the thing, isn't it?" Rina said. "Her family died in an accident, but she doesn't seem sad about it. Rather, she said I'm no longer his daughter and took all the pictures down... She seems angry."

"Why would she be angry? Something to do with the Digital World?"

"Well, my theory is that she doesn't actually know that her family is dead," Rina said. "If she thought, for example, that they had merely left and abandoned her instead, the anger makes sense."

Mirai opened her mouth, and found she could make no argument against that. "We still don't know what her full involvement in the Digital World is," Youseimon said, "but this at least sheds a little light on her mindset. Thank you for your help, Kiraharu-san."

"Rina-chan is fine. And you're welcome." Rina looked back over to Mirai. "So now that you know all this... what are you going to do?"

"So now that we know all this... what are we going to do?"

Mirai sat on the school's rooftop, Rina keeping a casual watch out as she chattered with some of the other girls. Youseimon sat just around the corner, out of sight, but still able to hear the discussion coming from the D-Tai in Mirai's lap, and chime in on it if needed. "Isn't it obvious?" Hestria said. "Having angst in your past doesn't make a valid excuse. We'll pound her ass into the ground." Having said that, she took a sip from a steaming mug that was probably a morning coffee,
judging by the light of dawn behind her.

"I sort of agree," Felix said as he towed his hair dry. Unlike Hestria's window, his was completely dark. "I'm not inclined to cut her some slack just because she's had her bad times. She's tried to kill us. But two wrongs don't make a right, so I don't want to go completely Rambo on her. If we can find a way to keep her in the real world, that'd be enough."

"What do you think, Andre?" Mirai asked.

"Mmm... You know, I just can't bring myself to hate her after hearing that," he sighed. "As my mom would say, it's not an excuse, but it might be a reason. I think her actions, in retrospect, are pretty consistent with someone who's lashing out in pain. Not someone who's a sociopath, who kills for the hell of it."

"I don't particularly care what her motivation is," Hestria said. "If she pushes me, I push back. If she thinks it's unfair, she shouldn't have tried to start a war to begin with. This isn't a game."

"Mirai?" Felix looked over to her. "What about you, what do you think?"

She rested her hands on her knees, and thought about it. "I... even though we've fought her and been injured by her, I just don't get the impression that she's mean or cruel. I think we might be able to stop fighting with her if we could get her to sit down and talk with us. I... want to try stretching out my hand to her."

"That hand's likely to be bit," Hestria told her. "Zebras don't change their stripes so easily. I'm not convinced that she isn't a psycho."

Felix looked from one to the other, then let out a slight chuckle. "Well, if Mirai says so, then I'm behind it. Let's see if we can talk it out first. It's not like we can't beat her ass later if that fails."

"Felix," Mirai said in surprise.

Hestria seemed equally surprised. "You're setting yourself up for pain, both of you."

"But Mirai is our leader," Felix said. "So I'll acquiesce to her. Surely you won't dispute that she is the leader, right?"

"Me?" Mirai got out in a squeak.

Hestria closed one eye, her expression annoyed. "Fine, whatever. Just for the record, I still think this is a bad idea."

"Hestria... Thank you."

The D-Tai began flashing, causing them all to look downward. "We've got a Digizone," Andre said. "I'll get there in just a bit. I just have to let Mom know I'm leaving."

"I'll have to go wake Alexa, or she'll kill me," Felix said. "I'll be there as soon as I can. It's not too early for you?"

"It's never too early for me to kick some ass. I'm kind of in the mood for it, anyway."

Mirai frowned. "I'm still at school. I'll try to sneak out, but it might take a bit. I'll call if I can't make it for some reason."

"All right. We'll see you there."
Mirai hung up the conference call, looking at the phone in her lap. "Something on your mind?" Youseimon asked.

"I guess I'm just surprised."

"That they consider you a leader? I'm not. It just means that for each of them, there's something in you that they've come to respect. I understand how you feel, though."

"Was that what it was like for you?"

"I didn't ask to be a leader. But since I'm so stubborn and determined to follow my own path, people started falling in step behind me. It certainly makes you feel valuable. But at the same time, you have a lot of standards to live up to."

Mirai offered her a little smile before turning to Rina, waving her over. "Rina-chan? I have to go to," she checked the D-Tai, "uh, Niue. Can you tell the teacher I went home sick?"

"You're a troublesome one, aren't you?" Rina gave her a thumbs up. "But I got you covered. Bring me back a souvenir."

"Is this Hawaii?" Rusalkamon wanted to know.

"I don't think it's Hawaii," Andre said as Mirai and Youseimon joined the rest of the group. "But I'm not sure exactly where this 'Niue' is, either."

Alexa gave her brother a poke in the arm. "How about it, walking encyclopedia?"

"It's an island in the southeast Pacific, around Tonga and Fiji, if I recall. No, Fiji may be too far north. Um. As I recall there's only about 1200 people on the island."

"That seems kind of small for a Digizone, doesn't it?" Mirai asked. "Good morning, everyone. Or evening."

"Actually, it makes sense in a weird way," Felix said. "Niue's got wi-fi all over the island, as I recall. It's probably not much of a stretch to say they're more wired-or wireless, really-than their neighbors."

Hestria gave him a look. "Mind if I ask why you know so much about a random tiny island in the Pacific?"

"Oh, I know a bit about most of them. There's some really fascinating stuff in there. For example, did you know that the Pitcairn Islands-"

"Does anyone see this tower?" Alexa interrupted. "Or we can sit here and talk history all day."

Felix stuck his tongue out at her. Milomon hopped onto Andre's shoulders, shading his eyes with a paw. "I think I see something that way. To the north."

"Hey," Mirai said, "someone's coming this way." Two people on bicycles were riding down the road in their direction.

"Just act normal. They'll ignore us."
Alexa put a hand to her head. "We're on an island of 1200, you think we can just blend in?"

The pair on the bikes slowed as they approached, stopping near the pair. "Good afternoon!" the girl of the pair greeted. "Are you visitors?"

"We are. We're just taking a quick look around," Andre answered for the group.

The boy frowned at them. "That's odd, I haven't seen you around. Were you on the plane the other day?"

The group looked at each other. Somehow it seemed wrong to lie to the natives, not to mention easy to disprove. Hestria decided to go for full-on truth. "We teleported through the Internet. We're looking for a black tower which turns the surrounding area into a different landscape. It's filled with creatures like this," she pointed to Raptomon, perched in her usual spot on her shoulder.

The boy and girl looked at each other, and then shrugged. "Okay," the boy said. "We haven't seen it."

"But we can tell you where it isn't!" the girl said.

"It's not in the south," the boy began, pointing.

"We know, because we were just there!"

"It's not in town, either."

"Alofi, that is. That's where we're from."

"We would have seen it."

Andre blinked at the rapid transitions between one talking and the other talking. "Are you two twins by any chance?"

"Two years apart!" they said in cheerful unison.

"I'm Puaiti," the girl said.

"And I'm Temaru. We're brother and sister."

"Who are you?"

"And where are you from?"

The group looked around at each other again. "Well, I'm Felix, and this is my twin sister, Alexa," Felix began, "and this is Rusalkamon and Labramon. We're from Quebec City, Canada, and they're from the Digital World."

"The Digital World..." Temaru ran a hand through his hair, his expression perplexed.

His sister latched onto something else altogether. "Canada," she repeated in awe, eyes shining.

"I'm Mirai, and I'm from Fukuoka, in Japan."

"And I'm Youseimon, of the Digital World."

"I'm Andre, and this is Milomon. I'm from Atlanta, in the United States, and Milomon's from the Digital World."

"You guys keep saying Digital World," Temaru knelt so he could take a closer look at Rusalkamon. "Where is that? I've not heard of it before."

"You haven't been to the right websites," Felix said in amusement.

"It's a world parallel to your own," Youseimon explained. "The area we are looking for is a place where the two worlds overlap. It should be somewhere on this island. It's important that we find it before the residents and the locals get into trouble with each other."

Temaru and Puaiti looked at each other again. "Okay," Temaru said. "We'll help you look."

"We don't want to trouble you," Mirai said.

"Please, let us help," both insisted immediately.

"Uh, o-okay!"

The two siblings beamed at them in unison. Felix grinned back. "Well, let's go on a scavenger hunt, then! We think it might be to the north."

"Let's circle around the beach, to the north," Temaru suggested.

"We'll be able to see most of the island from there," Puaiti added.

"It's only about two hours total by bike, but we'll be walking."

"Unless we find someone with a car."

"Well, I guess it's not too bad."

"It'll be like a tour!"

"It'll be kind of fun to be a tour guide."

"Well, come along this way, then." Puaiti waved for them to follow, walking her bike along.

The group followed the siblings until the end of the road, which wasn't far away. From there, the road it intersected seemed to circle around the edge of the island, skirting around the ocean's edge. "Ohh!" Rusalkamon ran forward toward the beach.

"Don't run into the road, Rusalkamon," Felix called after her.

She stopped by the edge of the rocks overlooking the sea, then waved back to him. "Oh my gosh, Felix! Felix, take a look! Look at the color!"

The rest of the group walked over, looking out at waters which were like blue crystal, revealing all the creatures living under its surface. "Look at all the fish," Milomon said, mouth watering. "They look amazing."

"I bet you don't have waters like this back in Canada and the United States, huh?" Puaiti said, hands on her hips as she grinned.

"I don't live near the water at all, so no," Andre said. "It's so peaceful. I can hear the waves."
"It doesn't even look like this in Japan," Mirai said, resting her hand on Youseimon's head. "It's amazing."

"We're very proud of our home," Temaru said as he turned his bike toward the north. "We may not have as many conveniences as your homes, but you'll never see a place like this where you're from."

"We've been traveling a lot of places," Mirai told him as they began to walk. The Digimon, without saying a word, all agreed to clamber down onto the rocks, skipping along the surface of the water and peering at the wildlife. "Each place is different. They're all amazing, but this place really is pretty."

"Where have you gone?" Puaiti asked, her footsteps practically bouncing in her eagerness. "Ahh, I'm so jealous! I want to travel too!"

"Well, I've been to the others' home towns. Let's see, where else? There was Lisbon, Portugal, though I didn't get that much of a look at it. Marrakech in Morocco was amazing! Cape Town was really pretty, too. So lively! And New York City! You've never seen such a huge town."

"Ahh! I want to go, I want to go! But I bet it's expensive!"

"Ah... well, because we use the Internet somehow, it doesn't cost us anything," Andre explained. "The travel doesn't, anyway. I don't really understand how it works myself."

She looked at him with shining eyes. "It's free? How do you get it?"

"You probably don't want it," Hestria said. "You do get to travel around, but that's a fringe benefit. You probably wouldn't like the real reason we have the Internet Transport."

"What reason is that?"

"Do you have any crime here?" Felix asked.

"Crime? No, none at all. We have a jail, but it's almost never used. Why do you ask?"

"So you've probably not seen a lot of violence in your lives."

The siblings looked at each other again. "No, we haven't. Why does that matter?"

Felix's hand went to his temple without him noticing. "You would, if you did what we did."

Another look between siblings. "You're saying that this world travel is involved in something violent?"

"It's a war," Hestria said.

They looked at her, and the at each other. "Andre, I caught a fish!" Milomon shouted from one of the rocks. "Can I eat it?"

"Put that back. It's not yours to take."

"Aww!"

"The fruit is better, anyway," Temaru called down to him. "We'll take you to the market after you find your weird spot. There's also some good restaurants to eat at. Have you ever had coconut crab?"
"Coconut crab?" Milomon's ears perked up. One could practically see the wheels turning in his head. "How does that work? Like a coconut with legs?" He paused. "Actually, that could be quite tasty."

"Haha, it's nothing like that."

Mirai looked at some of the houses and the buildings as they passed by. "It's kind of weird," she said, more to herself.

"What? Were you expecting thatched huts and hula skirts?" Puaiti said with a grin.

"No, but... Wherever you go, all the modern architecture is alike. It's only different when it's old. And when it's old, it's very different, but..."

"Well," Alexa said, "it could just be that there's really one best way to build things in this day and age. Every modern country has access to the same types of materials: steel, concrete, wood, plastic, and so on."

"I guess the more things are different, the more they're the same."

"Do you live in a house like this?" Puaiti said as she pointed one out. "We can show you our house when we get back to Alofi."

"No, I live in an apartment. It's a pretty big building, a few stories," she said. "Do you have any multi-story buildings out here?"

"Of course, in Alofi. It's our big city, though you might not think it's so big," Temaru said. "Although it's not like we have skyscrapers or anything. With the cyclones, it wouldn't be practical."

"Oh, I guess that makes sense. We have some problems with typhoons, but since we're a much bigger island, we can build big things just fine since it's harder for them to get inland."

"That's right, Japan's on an island too." Puaiti beamed. "It's like we're island sisters!"

"That's right. There isn't a place in Japan that's more than 80 kilometers away from land."

"Ha! Eighty? It's more like three around here," Temaru said with a smile.

Youseimon pointed ahead as the road began to curve toward the west and the houses began to thin out again. "Look, over there. I think we found our tower."

Labramon padded forward, sniffing the air. "I smell oil."

The siblings both sniffed the air. "I think you're right," Temaru said with a frown. "What's making that smell?"

"Probably the Digizone," Milomon said. "Labramon, let's take a look ahead."

"Right." The pair of Digimon were quickly gone into the greenery.

Alexa pointed upwards. "We must be getting close. There's the tower."

Both siblings tilted their heads up, following the shape. "It's so tall," Puaiti said. "Where did it come from?"
"From the Digital World." Youseimon nodded to the others. "Let's get going. Puaiti, Temaru, thank you for your help-
"
"We're coming too!" they insisted in unison.

Youseimon let out a sigh, but didn't protest further. "It's your choice."

"Let's take this road," Felix said, pointing to a road that cut through the interior of the island. "What's around this area, Temaru, Puaiti?"

"Just forest, really. And farms."

"Okay, then," Hestria said, "look for anything that's not that."

"Hey!" A small beetle Digimon wearing a scarf looked up as they approached, then ran into the trees. "Follow that one!"

Temaru and Puaiti left their bikes by the side of the road as they all ran into the woods, trying to keep an eye on the Digimon. And then the ground under their feet turned to concrete, and the trees disappeared. The Digizone was an industrial one, to be sure, but instead of having tall buildings and machinery out like a city from the future, the pipes and cogs seemed to be powered by steam. Airships overhead blocked out part of the sun. "So we've entered the steampunk Digizone?" Andre asked.

Youseimon shrugged, not getting the reference. "There's our tower. Let's Influence and take it down."

"No, wait." Raptomon's hackles rose. "Hestria, we need to shin evolve."

"Why? What's here?"

"She is."

Through the steam at eye level, the dragon girl walked toward them, Betedramon at her side. "Nijino Kuroko," Mirai said.

"Everyone, let's shin evolve!" Hestria held out her phone, as did Andre and Felix. The three digimon became Archeomon, Maremon, and Kaitomon, but next to them, Youseimon had influenced instead, becoming Apsaramon. "Mirai, what are you doing?" Hestria said, giving her a sharp look.

"We're doing this. Kbach Lear!" She threw up a barrier as Betedramon launched an Asterism Fall against them. The stars were deflected, tearing through the machinery around them, and shooting out into the human world beyond.

Temaru and Puaiti both gasped as the attacks impacted on trees, tearing into them, slicing off their tops. "Hey!" Temaru called in alarm. "Don't do that, you'll damage our land!"

"I don't care," Kuroko said. "I don't care about the human realm."

"How can you say that?" Puaiti shouted. "You haven't even seen our island! If you saw it you'd feel differently!"

"No I wouldn't!" Kuroko shouted back. "I won't ever care about this stupid world! I'm going to live in the Digital World, and all of you aren't going to get in my way!"
Hestria took a step forward, but Felix put a hand on her arm. "Mirai," he said, "what course should we take?"

Her eyes didn't leave Kuroko. "Can we... restrain Betedramon? Without hurting her?"

"Well... we'll find out." Felix cracked his knuckles, a smile spreading across his face. "You five, gather around. Time for a plan."

"Kuroko-san," Mirai called to her. "Let's stop fighting. Let's talk about this! We don't have any reason to fight each other."

"You're wrong. I have every reason to fight you," she hissed, and Betedramon geared up for another Asterism Fall. "You're in my way!"

"Go, Apsaramon!" Felix pointed, and she leapt at Betedramon, turning her shoulder as she got close.

"Kbach Lear!" As Betedramon shot her stars, the reversed Kbach Lear caught the attack from the inside, shattering as both attacks were neutralized.

"Nice trick," Betedramon said, "but I can do that again, and I bet you can't."

"I don't need to," Apsaramon said as Maremon leapt over her head, grasping one end of her braid.

"Starless Reins!" Maremon shouted as she looped her lengthened braid around Betedramon's snout, snapping it shut. Landing just behind her horns, she pulled the braid tight, keeping Betedramon from loosing its attack.

"Betedramon!" Kuroko called in alarm.

"Talk to us, Kuroko-san!" Mirai shouted. "Tell me why you don't want to stay in this world! We want to help you!"

"That's a lie! There isn't a single person in this world that cares whether I'm here or not, so why should I care about this world?"

"I care, Kuroko-san. Let's be friends."

"Friends? I don't know the meaning of that world. Even my own family abandoned me after they got tired of me. So I'm done."

"Kuroko-san, that's not..." Mirai bit her lip. "It isn't like that. Your parents-"

"I don't care about them. I envy you, Mirai-san. What a pretty name you have. Not like me. The blackness of the rainbow? What a disgusting idea. But I guess a lucky girl like you wouldn't know what it's like to be labeled as blackness, would you?"

"Oh?" The single word from Hestria held a dangerous note. "So you're saying you know what it's like to be black, then? Don't make me laugh."

Kuroko had time to look alarmed before Hestria was on her, hitting her hard enough to knock her to the ground. Betedramon reacted with a violent jerk, and Kaitomon and Archemon stepped in, restraining her further. "You think you've got it bad? Try living in my shoes sometime. You'll learn what it really means to be black."

Mirai walked over to them, putting a hand on Hestria's arm. "You going to hit me too?" Kuroko
asked, cringing away from the girls.

"Kuroko-san." Mirai felt ready to cry over pain that wasn't hers, but she felt nonetheless. "Don't you think they named you that because of your beautiful black hair?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Let's go, Kuroko-san," Mirai said, holding out her hand. "You don't have to be in this place any more."

"That isn't true," Kuroko turned her face away. "My whole family left me. Why would they have a nice reason behind an ugly name?"

"Kuroko-san... You really don't know? Your parents... They didn't abandon you."

"You're lying! They-"

"You really don't know?" She felt the tear even without knowing she'd cried. "You don't know that they're dead?"

Kuroko's face snapped into a wide-eyed stare of horror, and Mirai instantly regretted saying those words. "That's not true! They didn't die!" Kuroko screamed. "They didn't die!"

Betedralmon threw off her restraints again. "Betedralmon!" Kuroko reached for her. "Use that! The power that Nabimon gave us!"

"But-"

"Do it! I don't want them to be here any more!" she screamed, her hands over her ears, as if that would somehow make the world stop its cruelty.

Betedralmon looked at her, but then plucked her off the ground and rose into the air, taking on a sparkling aura. She took in a breath, and then released it with a few quiet words. "Dynas's Shade."

Hell descended upon the Digizone.

Mirai and Hestria both dove for cover, finding a crack in the pipes. Even so, the light and heat assaulted their senses, singeing their skin. As much as she wanted to shelter the others, or at least see that they were unharmed, she was helpless to do anything but wait until the light returned to a normal level.

The pipes in front of them had melted into a puddle of metal, steam rising as it cooled. Everything around them had been burnt and blasted, entire chunks missing from the buildings. In the sky, one of the airships was burning, sinking toward the ground. Even the island itself had been affected, showing a scorched crescent of earth where the attack had spilled out. Temaru and Puaiti lay in the street, knees bloody and eyes wide. "Guys!" Mirai called in alarm. "Say something!"

Felix was dimly aware of something blocking the sun over him, and opened his eyes to peer into his sister's face. "Anything broken?" she asked hoarsely.

"I don't think so."

"Oh, good," she said, slumping against his chest, "I managed to protect you this time."

He sat up in alarm. "Alexa? Alexa!" Normally, he'd be able to approach the situation rationally, plan the next step, but all he could focus on was the blood on her face, the burn on her shoulder. "Alexa!"
Next to him, Andre lay slumped against a small section of wall that had survived, unmoving. Youseimon was on the ground in front of him. He thought she might have come to their rescue as Apsaramon, but he couldn't recall for sure. Both Youseimon and Alexa had gotten hurt protecting him. "Merde!" he shouted, slamming his bloodied hand against the ground. "Get it together, Felix! I don't have time to be panicking!" Yanking back one of his sleeves, he looked around. Hestria and Mirai: mobile, mostly unharmed. Puaiti and Temaru: frightened, but unharmed. The other digimon: all down, and Betedramon was coming in to land. They didn't have long. "Hey!" Felix shouted at the pair of Niueans. "Come give me a hand, we need to move them!" They stayed where they were, but looked at him with wide eyes. "Didn't you say you wanted to help? Then help me!"

The magic word of 'help' got them moving, and they ran to his side, Temaru awkwardly pulling Andre onto his shoulders and the smaller Puaiti helping Felix with Alexa. "Mirai, Hestria! I'll take care of them!"

The girls were already running to the Digimon's sides as Betedramon again, releasing Kuroko. "I don't think I can do that again."

"You won't need to." Kuroko pointed at the downed Digimon. "Asterism Fall will be enough to eliminate them."

Betedramon turned her head, looking as Hestria and Mirai tried to rouse the Digimon, get them away. "Even the humans?"

"I don't care," Kuroko said in a whisper. "Get rid of them if they're in the way."

"I think you do care. That's why I want you to be sure."

Mirai carried Youseimon over to the rest of the group, letting her stand on her own as she rejoined Hestria. Raptomon had shakily gotten to her feet, but the other three were unconscious or too in pain to move. "What now? If even shin evolution isn't enough..."

"Lady!"

Betedramon walked toward them with slow steps, sitting back on her hind legs and spreading her wings. "Get out of my way."

In unison, Mirai and Hestria planted themselves in front of the other Digimon, each spreading an arm in a protective gesture. "Back off," Hestria said. "We won't let you touch them."

"If you don't move," Betedramon said, "you'll die."

"We won't die," Mirai said. "And we won't let you harm them further, either. Kuroko-san is wrong. You know that."

"Kuroko is not wrong! She's never wrong!" Betedramon drew in air, preparing for another Asterism Fall.

Mirai felt Hestria grab her hand in a strong grip, and as she looked, Hestria pulled out her phone. "Help me," Hestria said, her words unadorned. "I need your help."

She returned the grip, holding out her phone as well. The red and blue lights emerged from the screens, but this time, instead of engulfing the Digimon, they impacted on each other, surrounding the four of them with a blue-and-red mixed light. Mirai didn't flinch, didn't let up on her grip. It wasn't possible for a human to read someone else's mind, but in that moment, she didn't need to. Their heartbeats lay in sync, and their goal was the same. And it wasn't just them, but the two
Digimon on either side of them, that took in the light and changed, their child data stripped away.

"Youseimon!"

"And Raptomon!"

"Kikan shinka!"

The light bounced off them both, picking up speed until it was a blur that whirled around the pair of Digimon. Raptomon emerged first, drastically larger in size, now on par with Betedramon. She was now all bird, long-necked and short-beaked, a rainbow crest falling down her neck. Her wings also held an iridescent rainbow light, stretching long and shapely. The smooth avian flow of her profile went all the way down her tail, which seemed to stretch out forever, rippling like ribbons. "Raptomon, kikan shinka to... Hoatzimon!"

Youseimon's form was only slightly larger than her previous forms, clasped with a breastplate that sank down to her hips, accented with guards on both sides, all in white with dark green accents. Boots with dragonfly-wing adornments rose up to mid-thigh, and gauntlets with similarly-shaped arm guards clad her hands. Her long hair fell down in curls, partially pinned, and a headband with the same dragonfly accents circled around her brow. Those same dragonfly wings burst from her back in two pairs, spreading like a fan. "Youseimon, kikan shinka to... Titanimon!"

"Hoatzimon..." Hestria echoed the name, then smiled softly. "You've gotten stronger again."

"Titanimon! Let's end this!" Mirai shouted, waving her phone aloft.

Betedramon took off into the sky, preparing to launch her Dynas's Shade again. Titanimon hopped onto Hoatzimon's back, and the pair took off into the sky. "You won't beat me," Betedramon said. "I won't let you!"

"This match is already decided!" Titanimon said, calling forth a long spear into one hand, holding it behind her.

"Dynas-"

"Midsummer's Calm." Titanimon brought the spear around in a glittering horizontal arc, slashing the light buildup that Betedramon was calling. It shattered like glass, raining bits of light down onto the ground below, soothing the raw edges of destruction where it touched.

"Bird of Paradise!" Rainbow light shot from Hoatzimon's wings, taking the shape of a bird which impacted with tremendous force on Betedramon, causing her to devolve in midair. The snakelike dragon fell like a limp piece of rope toward the ground below.

Kuroko let out a wordless cry of horror, running toward Peledramon as she fell. But it was Titanimon who launched herself downwards, wings spreading as she got close. Catching the dragon in both hands, she landed neatly, Hoatzimon landing next to her. "Peledramon! Return her!" Kuroko demanded.

"You've lost this fight," Titanimon said, her gaze fixed on Kuroko. "Will you still insist on fighting?"

"Return her! Don't harm her any longer! She's my precious Peledramon!"

"Titanimon." Mirai had let go of Hestria's hand at last, walking over to her partner.
Without a word, Titanimon nodded, gently delivering Peledramon into Mirai's hands. "Here. She's your precious partner, isn't she?"

"Peledramon!" Kuroko took her into her arms, holding the dragon to her chest.

"Did that scare you?" Titanimon said. "If so, you should understand our feelings. We all have precious partners we want to protect."

"Kuroko-san." Mirai held out her hand. "You don't want to see your partner hurt any more, right? Let's not cause any more destruction. Rather, let's talk. Surely there has to be a way for each of us to avoid fighting. Please, give me your hand."

"Kuroko," Peledramon's soft voice came from her arms. "You should listen to her."

"Peledramon? But why?"

"I want to see it," she said, leaning her head against Kuroko's collarbone. "The partner of mine that finally makes some human friends. Because my partner is a human. It's painful not to have any friends of your own kind."

"Peledramon..." Kuroko's expression fell.

She was silent, and then a crackle of electricity circled through her fur, causing her to cry out with pain. "Peledramon!" Kuroko cried in alarm.

"I'm fine..." The words broke off in another squeal of pain as the electricity circled again.

"Peledramon! Hold on, I'm going to get you help!" Before anyone could stop her, Kuroko ran for the tower, disappearing into it as she touched it.

"She's gone," Hestria observed as she joined them. "That could have gone better."

Mirai didn't answer right away. "We need to take care of our Digimon and the Digizone first. Let's go ahead and destroy the tower."

Hestria nodded, and Hoatzimon took flight again. "What happened to Felix?"

From beyond the edge of the Digizone, Felix waved to them. Next to him, Alexa was sitting up partway, putting a bandage on one of her scrapes, and Andre was also back in an upright position next to Temaru and Puaiti. "Are you guys okay?" Mirai asked as she picked up Milomon.

"We will be," Felix said. "We're in surprisingly good shape for having just survived the digital equivalent of a bomb."

"Ugh, don't remind me," Milomon groaned from Mirai's arms.

"Hold him there for a moment." Titanimon drew her spear up, then slashed across at an angle. "Nectar Rain."

Mirai flinched as mist hit her face, glittering droplets falling on the injured Digimon. "Oh," Milomon said, "that's a bit better."

"Think you can walk?" Titanimon asked him.

He looked at her, then snuggled against Mirai's arms. "I think I'll stay here for a bit longer. You know, just to be safe."
Labramon got to her feet, shaking herself off, and then immediately went to Alexa's side, nosing her all over. Hestria picked up Rusalkamon, walking back over to Felix. "Here. Your partner."

"I'm sorry, Felix," she mumbled as he accepted her into his arms. "I didn't do so well this time."

"It's okay." He stroked her hair, cradling her gently. "You did well enough. You'll continue to get stronger. I'll do better for you next time, as well."

"Felix didn't do anything wrong."

"Then neither did you. So go ahead and take a rest."

The Digizone withdrew from under their feet, retreating into its own world. "I feel bad that their zone suffered so much damage," Mirai said with a sigh. "It wasn't their fault that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"The human world, too." Hestria nudged a foot against the scorched earth and blackened grass.

"We'll just have to stop the source of the destruction, then," Titanimon said.

"We're sorry about that," Felix said to Puaiti and Temaru. "We normally try to avoid causing harm."

"No, no," Temaru protested, waving his hands.

"It's our fault," Puaiti said.

"We really weren't much help at all."

"Even though we said we'd help you."

"We'll have to do better next time."

"Are you sure?" Hestria asked. "Is that what you really want? You saw what happened. It could be worse, next time."

They nodded in unison. "You helped us," Puaiti said, her expression set.

"So we'll help you."

"Although we may not be able to do much from here."

"We'll do whatever we can, though!"

Felix smiled. "Then give me your email addresses. I'll send you our website. Once you're registered, I'll let Harley know to move you to the members' section."

"But we have to warn you," Mirai said. "The rabbit hole goes pretty deep."

"Well, that's okay," Temaru told her. "We'll just be careful of what we eat down there."

"Eh...? There's something about that in the rabbit hole?"

Andre laughed, then winced as he put a hand to his head. "We'll just sit you down and have you watch the movie one of these days, Mirai."

"Ehh? I thought it was a book?" Felix, Andre, and the Niuean siblings laughed at her confusion.
Even Alexa spared a chuckle. "Wait, stop laughing and tell me, I'm trying to understand...!"

A little distance away from the group, Hestria's gaze rested on the area where the Digizone had been. Now, nothing but trees. "Something on your mind?" Titanimon asked her.

"That kikan shinka... Did you know about it?"

"No. It's the first time I've heard of such a thing, too."

Hestria tightened her grip on her phone. "Another unsolved mystery. And just when things are starting to pick up speed. We'd better be careful in the future."
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The children discover the tragic past of the girl named Nijino Kuroko, which divides their opinions on how to deal with her. Their next Digizone is in the tiny South Pacific island of Niue. There they meet siblings Temaru and Puaiti, who assist in their search. Betedramon and Kuroko wait for them at the Digizone's center. Mirai confronts her with the truth of her family's deaths, but Kuroko refuses to listen, bringing down Betedramon's full power on them. Even with the team injured and unable to fight, Mirai and Hestria stand together, refusing Betedramon. Their willpower comes together in a new evolution, the kikan shinka, and Titanimon and Hoatzimon defeat the dragon Digimon. Mirai reaches out her hand again, but Peledramon's injuries force Kuroko to retreat. But what place will they venture to next?

The sun hadn't come up yet, but Mirai was already awake, resting her chin in her hand as she looked out her window. The kikan shinka... I wonder what that means. What caused it? The word itself was as much a mystery as the method that had been produced. I can guess the shinka part, but kikan...? She began doodling kanji in her bedsheets with a finger, trying to come up with a combination that made sense.

On her futon, Youseimon stirred, sitting up. "You're awake? It's barely dawn."

"Ah, I was just thinking. You don't seem as tired as you did when you did the shin evolution. That's good."

"Yes. It could just be that we're adapting to larger amounts of data. But I don't think that's all of it. So what's on your mind?"

"I was thinking about the kikan shinka." Mirai hopped off her bed, grabbing a notebook off her desk. Writing down four kanji, she turned it around. "Do you think that this might be it?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything about the kikan shinka. What does this mean?"

"Well, 'shinka' means 'evolve'. Like the 'evolution' of 'shin evolution'," she explained. "This is the kanji for 'promote' or 'advance', and this is the one for 'change'. I see the same term in my game, so I thought it made sense."

"That does make sense. And 'kikan'?"

"Thinking that the digital world is sort of electric, this is the best I could come up with." She pointed to the first two kanji. "'Give' and 'send back'. It's the term for a feedback loop. I thought of it because of how the light of evolution bounced between you and Raptomon. The more it bounced, the faster it got."

Youseimon took the notebook in both hands, looking at it. "That makes sense. So it's possible the data of the two D-Tais is creating an amplifying event, feeding off each other in order to enhance the magnitude of data and achieve something that's unable to be unlocked alone. Like the saying 'greater than the sum of its parts'."

Mirai nodded. "The trick will be figuring out how to repeat it."

"I'm sure that it ultimately comes down to your emotions. More than anything, they are what powers the D-Tai," Youseimon said. "So think about how you felt in that moment."
Mirai nodded, letting her put the notebook back on the table. "That Kuroko-san..."

"You're worried about her?"

"I can't imagine how hard that must be to lose your family," Mirai said, resting her head on her knees. "I can't even think about it. I wonder... if I might have done something like what she's done, if it happened to me. Rejecting the human world."

Youseimon watched her, but didn't reply right away. She then turned as shuffled footsteps made noise outside the door. "Is your mother up?"

"That doesn't sound like her..." Mirai opened the door, and then went running at full speed toward the door. "Papa!"

"Ah, it's my Mirai-chan!" The man at the door lifted her up in his arms, then set her down again. "Have you been a good girl for your mother?"

"Yep! I've been making sure to keep my grades up, and I'm getting along well with all my friends."

He smiled, then noticed Youseimon peering at them from Mirai's bedroom door. "Oh, you have a friend staying over? Hello there. I hope I didn't wake you."

Mirai waved her over. "Papa, this is our zashiki-warashi. She's good luck."

"Well met, zashiki-san," he said with a smile, ruffling her hair in an affectionate gesture. "Please continue to take care of our Mirai-chan. Speaking of which, I heard you injured your shoulder from your mother."

"It's perfectly fine now, see?" She rotated her arm around. "It wasn't that bad and it healed up just fine. The doctor said I shouldn't have any further problems from it."

The man stood up, taking his shoes off. "Well, how about we surprise your mother with a nice breakfast? Since I'm finally home and all."

"That sounds great!" She followed him into the kitchen, Youseimon trailing behind. "Did they make you work a lot of flights?"

"Tons of them! But don't worry, I brought you and your mother back lots of souvenirs! I think we went all over the world, this time. But I'm back for a good long while, now."

"That's great! Where all did you go?"

"Well, I went to Lisbon, for one. Do you know where that is?"

"Oh, yes! It's in Portugal! It has a good underground subway system."

"Oh, you knew that? Smart girl. We also went to New York City. That's in America."

"That's where Times Square and Central Park are! And where Broadway is!" she told him. "The Americans have a lot of songs about it. One goes 'Broadway is dark tonight...""

"Haha, that's right, though I didn't know about the song. Papa also went to Rio de Janeiro."

"Not as much of a carnival as you'd think it would be," she muttered, hand on her chin.

"You've really been studying your geography, haven't you?" He set the rice cooker, than dug out
materials for omelettes. "I'm proud of you."

"Actually, Papa, I'm thinking about studying history," she said, helping him crack the eggs. "The world is a really vast and wonderful place, isn't it?"

"Oh, are you? I think that sounds great," he said with a smile. "It's a wonderful world we live in."

"Do you travel around the world, then, Mirai's father?" Youseimon asked him.

"Oh, I didn't tell you? Papa is a pilot."

"You can call me Tsutomu," he told her. "I fly for a Japanese commercial airline. Mostly passenger flights."

"Tsutomu-san, then. You like seeing other places and cultures?"

"Of course. The more you understand about other people, the more you can understand about yourself, zashiki-san. Seeing the good and the bad of other countries helps me to understand the good and bad of our own. And that helps me improve myself."

"I see. No wonder Mirai-chan is so mature."

"Ha ha. Well, she does a lot of that on her own. Are you still wearing your grandfather's goggles, Mirai-chan?"

"Of course! I wear them every day. Well, not at school, but when I can."

"I'm glad. I'm sure that would have made him happy, too." He began putting food out on plates. "Well, go see if your mother's awake yet. It won't stay hot forever."

Youseimon followed as Mirai started down the hallway. "You asked if you might have become like Kuroko," she said in a soft voice, "but I think that could never have happened. The goggles that you wear are the proof."

"Thanks, Youseimon."

"She'll be all right... won't she?"

Nabimon looked up from the bubble he had placed Peledramon in, turning to Kuroko. "She needs time to rest and recover. Do you mind explaining to me why she's in this state, even with the additional power I gave you?"

Kuroko winced at the words. "Things were going well, but then... they evolved again. Something they called 'kikan shinka'. They completely overwhelmed us."

She expected to be criticized further, but Nabimon regarded her with interest. "Tell me more about this 'kikan shinka'. What exactly transpired?"

"Those two girls stood in Betedramon's way," Kuroko began. "When they wouldn't move, Betedramon started to attack, and then... their phones lit up. The light got all swirled together and bounced between their Digimon. And then they became forms I hadn't seen before. They called themselves Titanimon and Hoatzimon."
"I see," Nabimon said after a long pause. "I'll look into this further. You'll be off duty until Peledramon recovers."

"Can I... stay here, with her?" she asked.

"I suppose that will be acceptable," Nabimon said after brief consideration. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other matters to attend to." He exited the room, leaving Kuroko and Peledramon alone.

Alone. She was all right with being alone; it was the way it had always been. Her parents, overprotective as they were, never wanted her going outside, and she had contented herself with her small room, the four walls of her world, and the computer that was permitted to be within. She had been all right with that. Even when her brother had been born, and allowed outside like any normal child, she had been all right with that. She hadn't been jealous. She hadn't been angry. She just wasn't.

So her world had consisted of a small physical space; so what? She had all the books she ever asked for, learning all about a world she'd never have to venture out into. She had friends, online friends, although they came and went with the tide. So she couldn't smell it, taste it, or touch it. It didn't mean that world wasn't still valid.

_Because my partner is a human. It's painful not to have any friends of your own kind._ Peledramon's words tried to weasel her way into her head.

What rubbish. Even after her parents had abandoned her, she could take care of herself. She ordered the weekly grocery deliveries, she made her own food, she kept the house clean. Who said that was painful? Even though they abandoned her, she could handle herself just fine.

You really don't know? You don't know that they're dead?

Her fingers dug into her scalp. How would she know that? Why would she know? How could they possibly be dead? She tried to remember what she had been doing the day they had disappeared. They had been together, and then... nothing. And then she was alone. What had happened in that interval, and why couldn't she remember it?

Her memory remained blank, like a freshly-washed chalkboard, and then a few pieces of chalk appeared in her mind. The lines formed Ashurimon's face, and then Nabimon, Ishtarimon, Mardukkimon, Ninurtimon, Nergimon, all looking down at her. They seemed to be saying something, but she couldn't make out the words. There was only the heat of the sun and gritty sand underneath her.

No, it was darkness. A wet, suffocating feeling all around her, pulling her down into a heavier, crushing depth. What was she reaching for? Was there a hand trying to grasp hers? Her breath caught in her throat, and she lashed out without thinking, smacking her arm against the wall behind her. Pain brought her back to her senses, back to the small room with the injured Peledramon. _Why did I think I'd met them before? The first time was when Ashurimon brought me from my room to the Digital World, and gave me Peledramon._

Peledramon. She reached her bruised hand out, touching the bubble that held the Digimon. At first, she'd been indifferent to the Digimon's presence, but Peledramon's constant presence, her affection, had wormed its way inside her heart, filling up a small space in what was otherwise cold and empty. Without realizing that she'd been lonely, she'd become a little less so. Even if the human world rejected her, even if the Digimon didn't want her, at least she had Peledramon.

Inside the bubble, Peledramon moved, then curled up on herself, looking around. "Peledramon!"
Kuroko said, putting her hands on the sphere. "Are you all right? Do you have any pain anywhere?"

"Kuroko..." Peledramon turned, showing her back.

"Peledramon? Is something wrong?"

She didn't turn around. "Why are you here? I thought I told you that you should be among the humans."

"Of course I'm here, I'm worried about you. What's the matter, Peledramon?"

"You're so annoying," the dragon said. "Go back to your own kind. Humans don't belong among Digimon. You're just dragging everyone here down."

Kuroko removed her hands from the bubble, stumbling backwards. "Peledramon, what are you saying?"

"Isn't it obvious? Everyone here was using you from the start! And now that you can't even do what we wanted you to, you're useless to us. I've gotten tired of looking at your face, so get out of here!"

"Peledramon!"

"Stop using my name!" she shouted, baring her fangs as she looked at Kuroko at last. "Don't you get it? I never cared about you. I was just ordered to be friendly so you'd do what we told you. Get out of here! Go back to the human world, or I'll hurt you!"

Kuroko stayed still, her head hanging. "Don't worry," she said in a whisper. "You already have." Turning on her heel, she fled for the door.

Peledramon waited, listening as the footsteps vanished into the distance. She waited, but the footsteps didn't return. When at last she was sure that she was alone, Peledramon finally allowed herself to cry, sobbing into her tail. I'm sorry, Kuroko. But I don't want you to be hurt by the Digimon any more. You can finally make friends with the other humans. You don't have to be used by us any longer.

Gradually, her sobs lessened, replaced by a feeling of dead weight. She wiped her eyes, and curled up in a tight ball, waiting for time to pass. At length, the sound of someone entering the room reached her, but she didn't bother to uncurl. She could tell by the sound that it wasn't Kuroko. "Where's the human?" Nabimon asked her.

"I don't think she wants to work for us any longer. She'd rather be making friends with the humans."

"I was afraid of that." Nabimon sighed. "I suppose I'll have to bring her back."

"Why bother? It's not like we would be able to win against the other humans now." Peledramon wriggled upwards, sinking her claws into the edge of the bubble and pulling herself out. "She's not useful to us any longer. So... can you remove this program from me?"

"I'm afraid not. Her on the other humans' side won't make any difference, but she can't be allowed to bring your power to the other side. You understand."

"Don't worry." The words were lead in her stomach. "We won't be on the same side any more."
Kuroko didn't even remember coming through the gate, but she was back on the floor of her room, heedless of her uncomfortable position as she wailed into the wooden planks of the flooring. It was a lie. It had to be a lie. It wasn't a lie. She didn't care even if it was a lie. "Peledramon! Peledramon, please don't leave me alone!"

Once again, she was well and truly alone.

Bile rose in her throat, and she stumbled across the hall to the toilet room, barely making it in time as her body purged everything inside her. That done, she curled up on the hallway floor, too exhausted to even cry any longer. Peledramon. Even if it was a lie, she had to see her again. Even if it was a lie, she still wanted to hear that cheerful voice, the only thing that echoed inside her heart. But now, she'd no longer be welcome in the castle. She'd never see Peledramon again.

Alone.

"No," she mumbled, staring at her hands. "Please, someone help me. Papa, Mama, Shiro, I'm sorry... Please, just don't leave me alone..." Silence greeted her. There wasn't even the hum of the kitchen appliances or the ticking of a clock to break the solitude of the apartment.

Kuroko-san... Please, give me your hand.

She sat up at the memory. That girl, Mirai, who'd extended her hand. It's just a lie, a corner of her mind whispered. Just like everyone else.

Even if it was a lie, she could bear with it. Just like she could endure Peledramon's lie, if she'd only stay with her. If that girl could get her into the castle, she didn't care what else happened. She had to live around here. Was she a part of the apartment's roster?

She all but ran back to her room, sliding into her chair and pulling up the apartment's internal website. No good... She didn't know Mirai's last name, or even how her first name was written, so she couldn't find her in the roster. Switching over to the internet, she began searching, hoping something would turn up. She tried searching local websites, or her name with various spellings in conjunction with the city and various terms, hoping she'd find something.

At last, a hit turned up - a picture of a younger Mirai, standing for a picture with a number of her classmates, all dressed up for some sort of school play. The girl in question was dressed in a rakish cap and a boy's jacket, pointing proudly at the camera. For the first time in what felt like forever, a slight smile touched Kuroko's lips. I was just saying that before, but... She really is a gakuran girl. The caption listed her as "Watanabe Mirai."

Now she had something to go on. She ran more searches, now with the correct writing of her full name, but even the internet couldn't deliver her more of an address than a section of the city. Well, at least it's around here. I'll just have to go out there and start looking.

She put her phone and her wallet in her pockets, then walked to the front door, staring at it for a long time. She was going to be going outside, alone, without anyone with her to protect her. She'd never gone out without her parents, and after that, without Peledramon. Now she was going to go outside alone.

Her throat closed up, her pulse quickened. I'm scared... I can't do it! She sat down with a thump next to her shoes, trying in vain to get her own fear under control. I'm scared... I'm scared!
What was out there to be scared of? She didn't know or couldn't remember, but she knew it was there. Calling up an image of Peledramon in her mind, she put on her shoes, then forced herself to her feet. Tucking her key in the pocket with her wallet, she opened the door.

The hallway was empty, but she could see the distant lights of the night cityscape through the windows. So vast! And it was dark, she wouldn't be able to see, and there could be dangers lurking where she couldn't see them. *You're just getting yourself wound up. You have to try. Or would you rather stay here alone?*

Keeping her head down, she avoided eye contact with anyone that might have entered the hallway, and rode the elevator down. A couple of people in the lobby looked up as she exited the elevator, and she avoided looking at them, hurrying out the door. The street still held plenty of noise, from passing cars, from late night carousers, from the wind stirring the store banners and rustling loose paper across the road. No Mirai. Of course, she shouldn't have expected to find her so soon. Which way should she go? She pulled out her phone, examining a map of the area, and then headed to her right.

"Hey!"

She didn't know if the shout was intended for her or not, but she wasted no time to look, taking off at a run. The streetlights blurred as she ran without direction, pausing only when she was forced to catch her breath. *I can't do this. Who am I kidding? But I can't get back into my room now, either. Can I use the D-Tai to get back to my room?* She flattened herself against the wall behind her, panting for breath and hoping the world would just ignore her.

"Kuroko-san?"

She looked up at the familiar voice. Mirai stood a few feet away, her Digimon partner next to her. "Watanabe... san," she got out.

"Is something wrong, Kuroko-san? You look scared. Did someone try to hurt you?" Mirai made an irritated noise in her throat. "I left my sword at home."

Youseimon looked up at her. "That's a good thing. You want to be known as a delinquent for the rest of your school days? A gang girl?"

"Well, no, but if a perverted guy was trying to attack Kuroko-san, I'd take him out!"

"You're not making the connection here, Mirai."

The conversation was so ridiculous in light of everything that had happened that she began to giggle, even as tears ran down her face. "Kuroko-san!" Mirai put her arms around the girl's shoulders, guiding her away from the wall. "Here, let's sit a moment." She pulled some cash from one pocket, handing it to Youseimon with a few murmured words. "There's a park bench right over here, we can have a seat."

Kuroko let Mirai guide her to the seat, feeling grateful once support was under her legs. "What happened, Kuroko-san? You can talk to me."

"Peledramon," she managed.

Mirai's eyes widened. "Oh no, did something happen to her?"

"She said she didn't want me any more. She told me to go away and return to the human world."
"Oh..." Mirai looked at Kuroko's face, and then touched her shoulder. "I'm sure she must have said that because she wanted to protect you. Anyone can see that Peledramon really cares for you."

"Really?" Kuroko turned watery eyes to Mirai. "You really think... she really does care, even though she said that?"

"I'm sure of it. So don't think badly of her, Kuroko-san. I'm sure it was to try and protect you."

"I'm not... How could I think badly of her?" Even if this, too, was a lie, just told to make her feel better, it worked like a charm. Already she could feel the heaviness in her chest lifting.

Something cold was pressed into her hands, and then Youseimon sat on Mirai's other side, handing her a small container. "It's just ice cream, but give it a try. You'll feel better."

She opened the container, using the little spoon to take a taste. "It's so cold," she mumbled. "But it's good. Really good." She could feel the tears run anew down her cheeks, but this time, it was nothing more than the fact that a convenience store ice cream could taste so good.

"I'm glad." Mirai ate from her own container, holding the spoon in her mouth. "Did anything else happen? You looked so frightened when I saw you."

"I don't... I don't go out much," Kuroko admitted. "My parents told me there were dangerous things outside, so I absolutely wasn't allowed out. So... I'm scared to go by myself..."

"Then whenever you're scared, just call me," Mirai said. "I'll protect you. That way, you can go to lots of fun places. We could go shopping, or ride the Sky Wheel, or..."

"Why are you so nice to me?" Kuroko asked, her voice as direct as the question.

Mirai met her eyes. "Do I need a reason to be nice to someone?"

"I tried to kill you."

"But I don't think you're a bad person. I think you've just been scared, and lonely, and that the Digimon King took advantage of that. If I want to blame someone, I'll blame the one whose unrelenting cruelties have forced this problem." Mirai looked up at the lights of the buildings around them. "If you won't attack us any more, that's good enough for me."

Kuroko looked down at the ice cream. "Can I ask another question?"

"Of course."

"Why 'Kuroko-san'?"

"Oh!" Mirai almost dropped her ice cream as she waved one hand frantically. "I know it seems kind of informal and all, and I wasn't trying to imply anything by it, but I thought since you were mad at your father that maybe you wouldn't want to be addressed as Nijino-san, so maybe that was a mistake, but..."

"Um... I don't really mind Kuroko-san, Watanabe-san."

Mirai paused in her flailing, and smiled. "You don't? That's great. Actually, I think 'Kuroko' is a pretty cool name. Oh, you can call me 'Mirai-chan'. That's what my friends call me."

"Your friends...?"
"Yep."

"M..." Kuroko took a shaky breath, forcing the word through. "M-Mirai-chan..."

"Yes?" she said with a soft smile.

_I made a friend. A human friend._ Kuroko scrubbed at her eyes, trying not to cry all over again, and returned to her ice cream. "Well," Mirai said at last, handing the empty container to Youseimon, "we'd better get going."

"Ah... You're going somewhere?"

"There'll be a Digizone soon. You want to come too, right?" Mirai hopped off the bench, holding out a hand. "You want to see Peledramon again, right?"

Kuroko pressed her lips together. "That'll be easier said than done. Peledramon's in the Digimon King's castle. I was looking for you to try to get your help, but it's danger-"

"Then it's fine," Mirai interrupted. "You wanted my help, right? So let's go."

Kuroko finally reached out, and took her hand.

Kuroko had read enough to know at a glance that they had to be in London, in England. But what she didn't see a sign of was any Digizone. Several other humans and Digimon were gathered by the river, waving to Mirai as she appeared. Mirai waved back, then ushered Kuroko forward as she joined them.

She recognized the faces of Andre, Felix, and Hestria, as well as their Digimon, and clung to the back of Mirai's shirt, wishing she could become invisible. _Maybe this wasn't a good idea after all._

"Mirai! You're late~" another girl greeted her, a girl she didn't recognize. She thought she recognized the tall female Digimon behind her. It certainly recognized her, eyes narrowing.

"Meihuang!" Mirai moved away from Kuroko, giving the girl a high five. "What brings you to London?"

"I saw the message Saffron posted," she gestured to an American-looking girl next to her, "and I really wanted to see London! And buy English tea! Lots and lots of tea. Oh, but that isn't the only thing," she added, looking at the Digimon.

"I'm going to fight, too," she said. "Whatever it takes to keep my home from burning." She gave Kuroko a significant glance.

Yep, she knew exactly who that Digimon was. "Oh, everyone, this is Kuroko Nijino," Mirai said, pushing her forward. "Her partner is in danger, so Youseimon and I are going to rescue her."

"Why should we help her?" the female Digimon asked.

"You're not seeing the big picture, Darcmon," Youseimon told her. "Peledramon's being held in the King's castle. With Kuroko's help, we can get inside. This is a good opportunity to storm their defenses when they aren't expecting it."

"How do you know they won't be expecting it?" Felix asked her.
"Well, I imagine they think we won't want anything to do with someone who previously attacked us and was an enemy."

Felix put a hand to his chin. "Hm, that's true. They don't seem like the type to assume the best of people."

Kuroko kept her eyes downcast, unsure of what to make of the conversation. She wasn't sure if they were ready to enact revenge on her or not. "Kuroko," Andre's voice made her look up. "We haven't been formally introduced, so... I'm Andre Harris. And this is my partner, Milomon." He held out a hand to her.

She reached a little for it, her hand shaking so badly she wasn't sure she could meet his grip. He reached over, taking her hand in a gentle shake. After he let go, Milomon held out a paw as well. "Welcome to the good guys' side."

"Um..."

"Hey, I'm in no position to throw stones," he said. "I used to work for the King, too. I can guess what kind of situation Peledramon is in. I wouldn't wish that on anyone."

She managed to take his paw, feeling the soft fur tickle against her hand. "Um... Thank you..."

Rusalkamon walked over to her as well, looking up at her. "Um... When we were fighting before... you said something about not understanding what it's like to be 'black'. I think... I can understand your feelings, so... let's be friends."

Kuroko looked down into the earnest eyes that stared back up at her, and then held out her hand. The more she did it, the more natural and less scary it felt. "She's actually pretty shy, isn't she?" the American girl said. "It's kind of cute."

Darcmon snorted. "I don't see why we're all so quick to forgive her. I certainly won't."

"That's all right," Meihuang told her. "Your feelings are your own. No one can tell you how to feel about the situation."

"I agree," Alexa said. "She hurt my brother. She's got a long way to make up for it."

"Aren't you mad?" Darcmon asked Meihuang. "She caused a lot of damage."

"I feel like it's not my place to hold a grudge," Meihuang said. "I wasn't the one whose body was battered or home was destroyed. I'll respect the feelings of those who were. Yourself, and Mirai."

"I agree," Hestria said. "I got off light compared to the others. It doesn't mean I'll be cuddling up to her, but I'll tolerate her and see what happens."

"I feel that way, too," Felix said. "I'll trust Mirai's judgement in this."

"Because she's the leader, yeah, I know. Don't we have a bus to catch?"

"A bus?" Kuroko asked, and then shrank back as a couple of the humans looked at her.

"A double-decker bus," an American-looking man said to her. "We're taking a tour of the city before the Digizone arrives. Oh, I'm Harley, by the way. This is my partner, Gazimon."

"Yo," the Digimon on his shoulder said with a wave of his paw. "I'd offer to shake, but you probably don't want that." He wiggled his claws for emphasis.
"And I'm Saffron, and this is Floramon," the American girl said, giving Kuroko a hug. Kuroko thought she did a rather admirable job at not panicking at the overly friendly contact.

"I'm fine with you as long as you don't hurt my Saffron. If you try, I'll make you regret it," Floramon told her.

The group moved as one to the bus stop not too far away, and it didn't take long before one of the large red buses pulled up. "Everyone to the top!" Harley ordered, picking up Gazimon in his arms. "Sit together and don't crowd the other people on the bus!"

"Yes, daddy," Felix said with a grin as they boarded the bus. Kuroko found herself in the very back row, seated between Mirai and Andre, with Felix and Alexa on his other side, their Digimon in their laps. Harley, Saffron, Meihuang, Darcmon, and Hestria filled up the row just in front of the last row. "Have you been to London before?" Andre asked Kuroko.

She jumped at being addressed. "Um... No. I haven't. Except for the Digital World, I've never left Fukuoka."

"Well, make sure you take a good look around, and listen to the tour guide," Andre told her. "England has a very long and interesting history."

She took his words to heart, fixing her eyes on the world moving around them. The buildings all seemed old, but in a completely different style from anything in Japan. People that were white, black, and everything in between moved around the streets, talking in a strange version of English. "By the way," Andre said, as if prompted by her thoughts, "your English is very good."

"Um... It's probably not that good... I read a lot in English, but I don't talk it hardly at all..."

"You're doing fine. Plus, they speak British English here, so I'm sure they think I talk funny, too."

"You're nice," she mumbled. "I don't understand why."

"Well... My mom always told me I shouldn't hold a grudge," he said. "There's a difference between disliking something because they might hurt you in the future, and disliking someone because of what they did in the past. I don't think you'll hurt us any more, so it's fine. And if I'm saying that, no one can complain," he added with a look toward Alexa. "I'm the one that has the most scars from it."

"I can complain all she likes. She hurt my brother."

"And yet that brother is none the worse for wear," Felix said. "What, do you want to hit her or something?"

"It'd be a start."

"You... can hit me if you want," Kuroko said. "Though the bus probably isn't a good place for it." She gripped the edges of her shirt, steeling herself for her next words. "Everyone... I'm sorry for the pain I caused you. I know that doesn't make up for it, but... I won't be violent any more."

"That'll be good enough for the moment," Harley said, pulling out his laptop. "I need to figure out where the epicenter of the Digizone is going to be."

Youseimon blinked. "You can figure that out?"

"While you guys were in Niue, another Digizone opened in Istanbul," Saffron explained. "So
Harley and I and Meihuang went to take care of it. We met up with your people, Youseimon, and Harley asked about the one who makes the Digizones. That adorable Kokuwamon. Anyway, the two of them are in communication now. Between the two of them, we should now be able to put an exact time and place on the Digizones when they realize."

"That's excellent," Felix said. "With the proper timing, we can turn this into a blitzkreig. They won't be able to fight back."

"Wait," Youseimon said. "Another Digizone opened? While the one in Niue was still open?"

"Yes. I don't think it was opened that much longer after you left for Niue. It might even have been a bit before. Why do you ask?"

"Kokuwamon shouldn't be able to open two at once," she said. "My understanding of his program is that he has to be physically present in a zone for it to realize into a Digizone. So why did the other one realize?"

Felix looked over at Kuroko. "Um, I don't know how it realizes," she said, waving her hands. "I was just told to go there and fight."

"It's safe to assume," Youseimon said, "that someone working for the King is realizing these Digizones. They brought theirs up before Kokuwamon could realize his, knowing that we would head straight there. They may have not anticipated us having other DigiTravelers. Harley, please work closely with Kokuwamon on the Digizones; our program may be compromised in the near future. Was your group seen by the enemy Digimon?"

"Probably. It wasn't a crowded zone, but I don't see how we could have avoided it."

"Is that really the only reason they made a Digizone of their own?" Hestria muttered.

"We are probably their biggest target right now."

"I don't know about that. It's not like we've had the Celestial Generals on our necks every time we enter a Digizone. If we're their biggest target, why did they send Kuroko first?"

"Maybe they're just afraid of you," Gazimon suggested.

Youseimon shot him a look. "I doubt that."

"More like they didn't want to consider us a threat," Milomon said. "It probably took until Mardukkimon before the other two really took us seriously. But I'm sure now that we're their number one priority."

"We can discuss that in the future," Felix said. "Right now, it's probably better that we pay attention to this particular Digizone. Harley, do we know where it's going to land in the city?"

"Well, since we have to drop it in a populated area no matter what," he tapped on his computer, "I decided we should drop it on Parliament."

Hestria gave him a look. "You're dropping a portion of a parallel world on their body of government. You realize they're never inviting you back here, right?"

"Hey, I'm only doing what Guy Fawkes couldn't. Besides, they're Brits; they'll just stay in and have another cuppa."

Hestria rolled her eyes and sat back. "Can we get in to this Parliament place?" Youseimon asked him.

"Close enough. I think I've got the epicenter right outside their doors, so we won't actually have to get in. We'll just wait outside, let the Digizone show up, and bam! Blitzkrieg."

"Um, Harley?" Mirai turned to him. "If we're going to get into the King's castle, we can't destroy it right away. Otherwise we'll be stuck in the Digital World."

"Oh. Uh, right. That makes this a bit trickier."

"So then we'll have two goals," Hestria said. "Hold off any attack, from humans or Digimon, inside the Digizone. And then a group to get inside the King's castle and rescue this dragon." She let out a sigh. "I guess the question is, which place do we think the Celestial Generals are going to go?"

"They'll defend their castle first," Milomon said. "They won't let their castle be in danger just to wipe out the rest of us."

"Then I'd better come with you," Hestria said to Mirai. "In case we need to use the kikan shinka again."

She nodded in agreement. "If you'll come, I'd be glad to have you."

"Felix, I think you and I should go, too," Andre said to him. "If we're fighting the Celestial Generals on their home turf, they'll need our support."

"I agree," Felix said. "And I'd like to take Harley with us, too."

"Me? Not that I'm objecting, but why?"

"The castle's probably going to be the source for whatever's causing the rival Digizones, right? If we can find it, you, with or without communication with Kokuwamon, might be able to dismantle it."

"I guess that's true." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "You guys are asking a lot from a guy that failed his C++ course once, you know."

"Then Meihuang and Alexa and myself should support Youseimon's allies," Saffron said. "They'll be there, right?"

"Yes. They're assembling as close to the tower as they can get."

"Saffron," Harley protested.

"We all have to do what we can, right? Don't worry about me. I have capable people around me."

Andre pointed ahead. "Look, there's Big Ben."

They all looked up as the iconic London clock tower drew close. "We'll be getting off around there," Harley said. "So take some deep breaths, because we're about to dive in."

The bus made a stop next to the Westminster Bridge, and they all disembarked, looking across the crowded street at the clock tower and the yard. "It's really crowded here," Andre said. "It could be bad, getting everyone to safety."

Harley made a face. "I know. About all I know of London is what Google Maps could tell me, so I
tried to pick a location we could find once we were here. Even the parks and gardens looked
crowded, if the images were anything to go on. If we have a little more time next time to figure out
what city is syncing up with what Digital World zone, I'll try to make it a less crowded area. But
we've only got so much flexibility in terms of size and location."

"Here it comes," Hestria said as the sky began to change color in large blocks. One person noticed,
and then a few, and some were either well-informed by the news or just cautious, for they made
their way inside the buildings quickly. It still wasn't enough as the Digizone descended.

Outside, the ground shifted and the scenery warped, with the buildings turning into large boulders
and chunks of stone. The ground turned to dry stone, crumbling under their feet, marked with
craters of every size. Above them, the sky had turned dark, with large, shining stars that didn't
waver in their light. "We've ended up on the moon," Felix said, raising his eyebrows.

"Everybody get inside or get away!" Andre shouted. "There's a bomb!"

The confused Londonites may not have understood the sudden change in landscape, but a bomb
was easy enough to understand. People began to run away, pouring into buildings where they could
find a door. And across from them, lined by a backdrop of stone which had to be the Parliament
building, the black monolith stood tall, unaffected by its landscape. "Youseimon!" Spadamon's
voice called to her. "We are here!"

She raised a hand in greeting as Impmon and Spadamon ran up to her, followed by several other
regulars. "Our fighting force is out here?" Mirai asked.

"Yes. We are ready to take down the tower as soon as you are."

"Actually, we need to get out of the Digizone," Mirai said. "We're aiming an attack on the castle."

"The castle?" Impmon said with a frown. "Why?"

"We're rescuing a friend."

Impmon and Spadamon looked at each other, but didn't question her further. "I'm coming with
you," Impmon said at last. "One of us needs to be there, and Spadamon has things to do here."

"We're going to be leaving three with you," Youseimon told Spadamon. "We need the closest
road."

"It'll be that way, past the tower," Impmon said. "We'll have Kokuwamon open up a little hole for
us. Tentomon! We need a message to Kokuwamon, stat."

"Yes, Impmon-han."

"That one speaks with a Kansai accent?" Kuroko asked Mirai quietly.

"Yeah. And Spadamon talks like a samurai. Well, let's go, everyone," she said. "The Digizone's not
getting any younger."

"Hold it right there!" In front of the tower, an armored Digimon that somewhat reminded Mirai of
Prairiemon stepped forward, backed by several smaller but similar looking Digimon. "You won't
be laying a hand on this tower."

"Stuff it!" Alexa's phone lit up with a peach color, and Labramon leapt forward, changing midair to
a larger, lion-like dog who landed neatly on the boss.
"We'll handle this Crescemon and these Lekismon!" Darcmon said as she leveled her staff. "The rest of you, get going!"

"This way," Impmon said, hopping onto Kuroko's shoulder and pointing. "It won't be far. Kokuwamon kept this Digizone small."

A hole opened up ahead. "We need to travel fast," Hestria said to Raptomon. "Think you can handle a shin evolution?"

"It isn't a problem for me any more."

The others shared a nod, and then the four Digimon shin evolved. "You're coming with me," Hestria said as she hopped onto Archeomon's back, pulling Kuroko with her. "You too, Harley."

"There's the road of light," Kaitomon said, Andre and Gazimon clinging to his back. "I think I know where we are. Follow me, I can lead us to the castle."

"Is it far?" Felix called from Maremon's back.

"Not excessively so, since we can avoid entering another Digizone. Though I don't like the idea that we can be attacked out here."

Mirai looked over Faimon's shoulder as she flew. The golden road that Kaitomon and Maremon ran along seemed so narrow, far more so than she would have liked. "See," Kaitomon said, pointing, "you can see it already."

Impmon hopped from Archeomon's back, landing on Mirai's back. "Hey, Youseimon," he said. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

"It's just that that place has a lot of memories."

"Did you grow up in that castle?" Mirai asked.

"Sort of. We grew up below in a prison, with the sea as our only view of the outside. It's no surprise that it was so easy to brainwash people in that place. It was enough to turn us all a little crazy."

"Youseimon..." Mirai gave her shoulder a squeeze.

"I'm fine," she repeated. "The past is the past."

"Kuroko," Hestria said, "how do we get into the castle? Where are we going to find your dragon?"

"There's a smaller entrance to the underground levels," she said, pointing, "around the back. We can use that."

"Follow us," Hestria shouted to the others as Archeomon veered to the side.

Groups of Piccolomon and Gargomon took notice as they got close, throwing their spears and attacks. "Oh, look," Andre commented, "it's the police."

"Ha! Don't they know an expert thief never gets caught?" Kaitomon took his cape off, letting it flutter in both hands. "Sand on the Beach!" They yelped as the cloak sprayed them with sand, temporarily blinding them. When they could see again, the group had already vanished.
"There's a door," Mirai said to Hestria as Archeomon came in for a landing.

Maremon took a step back, then gave it a kick too fast for the eye to follow, smashing it down. "No there's not."

"Good thing we weren't trying to be subtle." Archeomon returned to being Raptomon, hopping onto Hestria's shoulder, since the tunnel in front of them would be too cramped to fly in. "Now which way?"

"Follow me. I know this place." Kuroko led the way, listening every few steps for sounds of Nabimon or Ishtarimon.

"So what is this place?" Andre asked in a hushed voice as Kaitomon attached his cape to the doorway, making it appear as if the door was still there. "And will you be all right without your cape?"

Kaitomon already had another one pulled out. "Hm?"

"... Never mind."

"This is where Nabimon does a lot of his work," Kuroko said. "The equipment down here is all his."

"Could Nabimon be running the rogue Digizones?" Maremon asked Faimon.

"I don't know. Programming reality isn't as simple as it sounds. You have to have the right mindset to understand it."

"Who knows what Nabimon understands," Kaitomon said. "He's the sage of the five Celestial Generals."

"If he's that good, we might be in trouble," Harley said. "I'm not so sure I can run rings around him, even with Kokuwamon's help."

"Well, we'll do what we can."

Kuroko paused outside a door, clenching her fist as her hand shook. "This is... the room where I left her."

Hestria ignored her discomfort, pushing the door open. Peledramon hovered in the center of the bubble, the main item in the room. "Peledramon!" Kuroko shouted, placing her hands against the bubble. "Peledramon, are you all right?"

She sat up, then her eyes went wide. "What... Didn't I tell you to leave? What are you doing here, you stupid human?"

"Shut up!" she shouted back. "I can be where I like to be! I'm here because I want to be here!"

Peledramon sat up as Mirai and Hestria entered the room. Harley followed, setting his laptop on the table nearby. "The other humans...?"

"We came to rescue you," Mirai said.

"Who said I asked to be rescued? Get out of here, you stupid humans, all of you!"

Hestria walked over to the bubble, gauged the distance, and delivered a roundhouse kick to its
edge, shattering it. "Shut the fuck up," she told Peledramon. "You don't get a say in this mission."

Peledramon shrank back from the shattered edges, looking at them with wide eyes. "But I- you don't- why?"

"Didn't Kuroko-san say it? Because we want to," Mirai said. "Harley, how's it look?"

"This guy's a serious programmer," Harley replied, chewing on his lip. "I'm just downloading the whole thing. I can't possibly pick it all apart right here."

"Okay. How long do you need?"

"It doesn't matter," a voice said from within the room. "He isn't going to have it."

Harley started to turn, then let out a choked cry as a gnarled hand grabbed him around the neck, lifting him off the ground. "Harley!" Gazimon shouted in alarm, leaping for the attacker's face. The old man merely swiped him aside, hard against the wall.

"Nabimon," Kaitomon said, then shook himself. "Oi, old man, let him go!"

"Mirai!" Hestria shouted as she pulled out her phone.

"Right with you!" Standing shoulder to shoulder, they held out their phones, mixing their blue and red light.

Titanimon emerged first, her weapon aimed at the Digimon's throat. He held out one hand in response, stopping her attack, and kept his grip on Harley. "Hoatzimon, give us some space!"

Hestria commanded.

"Bird of Paradise!" Her attack smashed through walls and ceiling, opening up ample area for her to fly in.

"We just lost our element of surprise," Felix noted, his expression displeased.

"Not the time to worry about that. Titanimon, hold him still!" Andre called to her, drawing his gun.

Nabimon looked over at Andre as he fired, taking the pepper-ball right in the face. That was enough for him to finally release Harley, who dropped to the ground, gasping for breath. "Felix!" Andre said. "Let's try this kikan shinka."

"We barely know how it works!"

"You think we have a chance at him as we are?" Andre looked to Kaitomon, who nodded, and reverted to Milomon.

Felix looked at Maremon. "I guess we need to give it a shot. Maremon-"

"Not so fast, brats!" Ishtarimon leapt down from a higher floor, interposing herself between Titanimon and Nabimon. "You want a fight, glitches? Try the third strongest Digimon in the Digital World."

Allowed to step back, Nabimon held out a hand, manipulating some sort of data in the air. Milomon screamed as electricity crackled around his body, forcing him to the ground. "Milomon!" Andre said, kneeling next to his partner.

"Damn it, Nabimon," he gritted out. "That's cheating."
"Glitches don't get the right to complain about fair play," Ishtarimon said. "Let's go, brats."

Titanimon and Hoatzimon exchanged brief glances, then rushed her at once, forcing her out of the immediate area and into one of the adjacent rooms, enough that they wouldn't immediately risk hurting the humans. That left Nabimon with the rest of the group. Maremon positioned herself in front of Harley, pointing her crossbow at Nabimon. "Don't you lay a hand on any of the humans. I might not be able to defeat you by myself, but I can hurt you."

"Oh? How very arrogant of you," Nabimon said, his robes swishing as he took a step forward. Mirai couldn't help but think how frail he looked, and yet that was clearly a deception. "You wish to go against me by myself? Perhaps I'll indulge you."

"Milomon," Andre said. "We need to evolve again. Can you stand?"

"Something's... interfering with my body," he groaned. "This isn't an ordinary attack."

Peledramon crawled out of the bubble, onto Kuroko's shoulder. "It's a restraint program," she said, her eyes on Nabimon. "Nabimon puts them on those he wants to keep under his control."

He met her eyes, and manipulated the air again, touching brief keys of light, and Peledramon let out a cry as the electricity crackled around her form again. Unable to keep her grip, she dropped into Kuroko's arms. "Peledramon! Wait... It was you?!" she directed to Nabimon. "You're the one that hurt her after our fight!"

"I couldn't have you taking a Digimon capable of shin evolution over to the rebels' side," he stated. "I don't particularly care where you go, but Peledramon will remain loyal to the King."

Her shoulders shook, and she gently lowered Peledramon to the ground. That done, she lunged forward, one arm cocked back. "You basta-"

Mirai caught her arm, pulling her back. "Help Harley," she whispered in her ear, "he can help them." Letting her go, she pulled out her sword, holding it in her hands. "You're Nabimon?"

"I am."

Kuroko dropped to her knees, then looked over at Harley. Felix was already at his side, pulling him away from the fight, and Impmon had retrieved his unconscious partner. Half-crawling over to help, they pulled him over to Andre. "Can you help them with just your D-tai and your phone?" Andre whispered, looking at the laptop across the room.

"I don't know." Harley held out his phone, holding the camera in a shaking hand toward Peledramon. "But I know a few programming tricks. If this is just programming... maybe."

"So you must be the leader of the Celestial Generals," Mirai addressed Nabimon. "Why are you causing so much harm to the Digital World?"

"Am I really the one who is causing harm?" he countered. "You think you rebels are on the side of justice?"

"I don't think we've claimed that, no," Mirai said. "But they're fighting to survive. Because they have no other way to live under you and your King's control. Do you really think that genocide is made fine by your 'justice'?"

"That is the world the King demands," Nabimon said. "What he says must always be right."
"Listen to yourself! No one is right all the time. Not even a King. You don't even question him? What kind of subordinate are you? Are you brainwashed?"

Nabimon didn't seem fazed by her rapid-fire questions. "I do not question the King. Of us all, he is the only one here who survived the time of the Sea of Chaos's rising. All of us who were born after have many things of the world we cannot know. Our knowledge is limited by our own personal histories." Nabimon met her eyes with a steel, cool look. "What the King is doing will prevent the revival of the Sea of Chaos. If ten, a hundred, no, even if half the world has to die, is that not a preferable price to pay to letting the whole world perish?"

"No, it's not! You should save the world without anyone having to die! Otherwise, how can you really call it saving the world?"

"You say that," Nabimon observed, "and yet you yourselves have slain many in our armies."

Felix held his position next to Harley, hoping his size would block Nabimon's view of what Harley was doing. The American now lay on his stomach, tapping with a frenzied pace on his phone's touchscreen. "How's it coming?" Felix whispered. "Can you read this code?"

"Only a little. This is Milomon's code, I scanned it a while back. And this is Peledramon's." He pointed at two chunks of scrolling code with his free hand.

"So what are you doing, then?"

"Hoping that this rogue code of Nabimon's is consistent. And that none of their other code is. That's running, anyway."

Felix smacked his forehead. "Of course, I get it. You don't have to understand, just look for the code that's the same."

Andre looked up at Nabimon's words, then briefly touched Milomon's shoulder. "You're still wrong," he told Nabimon as he stood next to Mirai. "If he was trying to save the world, he'd still try and minimize the losses as best he could."

"What makes you think he isn't?"

"Isn't it obvious? How many Illegals would have been happy to have led normal, peaceful lives if they'd been given the chance? What about Milomon, would he have left if you'd let him express his compassion for another Digimon? What about the dark-types, who might be prone to mischief or even evil, but can't all be painted with the same brush? If anything, you brought this on yourselves."

Nabimon looked at them, then at the ongoing fight nearby. All three combatants showed injury, but Ishtarimon didn't seem to be tiring as she ran at blazing speeds, striking at Titanimon and Hoatzimon's weak spots. "This is taking longer than I'd like," he said, raising a hand. "I think we're done."

Andre and Mirai braced themselves, but Maremon dove for his arm, knocking his aim aside. "Don't you pick on them," Maremon hissed. "I told you I'm your opponent."

"You, my opponent? I don't think you're worthy." He held out his arms, letting scrolls fall from his sleeves. The scrolls picked themselves up and shot toward Maremon, wrapping around her as Nabimon said "Destiny Record."

"Maremon!" Felix shouted.
"I found it," Harley said, his tapping becoming even more frantic. "At least, I think I found it. Now I have to try and delete it... Hang in there, you two."

Kuroko touched a hand to his shoulder, looking up as the scrolls bound around Maremon, taking on a dark glow. Along the top of their surface, they changed to black with colored lines of code circling around. Maremon's face was pained as she tried to twist away, to no avail. "So this is the source code of Maremon? Not impressive," Nabimon said as he reached inside, grasping one of the lines of code.

She let out a scream as if it was her very heart that was being squeezed. "Maremon!" Felix shouted, holding out his D-Tai. "Maremon, revert now!"

She de-evolved back to Rusalkamon, her smaller figure dropping through the bindings and hitting the stone floor with a sickening thump. Felix ran for her, and Nabimon turned to face him, sending more scrolls in his direction. "Destiny Record."

Mirai jumped in the way, gritting her teeth as the scrolls locked around her. "Mirai-chan!" Kuroko shouted. "No, don't hurt her!"

The scrolls turned black, revealing the same kind of code that had swirled inside Maremon. "The source code of a human," Nabimon said as he approached. "How very fascinating. I wonder what it's like?"

"No!" Kuroko threw herself in front of Mirai's bound body, shoving a couple of scrolls aside. "I won't let you touch her!"

The bodies of Titanimon and Hoatzimon flew through the air, impacting against the far wall. "What fools," Ishtarimon said as she trotted over to Nabimon. "And you, human, don't think just because Lord Ashurimon likes you that we'll let you do as you please!"

"Shut up! I absolutely will not let you touch her!" Kuroko held her ground, glaring at them from behind her glasses.

"Why do you care?" Nabimon said. "She's a human. She's threatening the Digital World."

"She said we were friends," Kuroko said in a hoarse voice. "Just when... I finally made a friend on my own, someone that's like me, and you want to hurt her? I don't care what you do to me, but you will not touch her!"

To her surprise, Nabimon took a step back, releasing Mirai from the scrolls. "Nabimon?" Ishtarimon questioned. "What are you hesitating for? If you don't want to remove her, I will."

He let out a low chuckle, his eyes fixing on Kuroko with a dangerous intensity. "Now I see why Lord Ashurimon was interested in you. Now I must examine your source code for myself."

The scrolls went shooting for them, but a cry of "Gekirin Fury!" and a burst of flame stopped them in their tracks. Peledramon landed on Kuroko's shoulder, looking twice as big due to her fur bristling at every angle. "Keep your dirty hands off my partner!"

"Harley?" Mirai turned to look at him. From his position on the floor, he gave her a thumbs up.

Hestria landed next to him, his laptop under her arm. "Don't worry, I've got him."

"And we've got this guy!" Andre stood, Milomon on his shoulder, and Felix stood next to him with Rusalkamon on his arm.
Felix held out his phone, and Andre did the same, their colors of purple and green coming to the screens. "We won't let you have your way any longer, shitty old man."

The bouncing, swirling color surrounded them, and the Digimon jumped into the light. "Milomon!"

"Rusalkamon!"

"Kikan shinka!"
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The child caught between two worlds, Kuroko, wavers in her loyalties. Spurred on by Peledramon's harshness, she returns to the human world. Putting her fear aside, she pushes herself to the outside world to plead to Mirai for help. The next Digizone in London brings all the children together to protect both the city and to invade the King's castle, to rescue Peledramon. However, Nabimon springs his traps on Peledramon and Milomon, and Ishtarimon proves to be more than a match for Titanimon and Hoatzimon. The children's bravery, intelligence, and compassion halt Nabimon and Ishtarimon's one-sided fight, and Milomon and Rusalkamon become the next to obtain the miracle of kikan shinka. But what place will they venture to next?

"Milomon!"
"Rusalkamon!"
"Kikan shinka!"

Milomon fell to all fours, and his body thickened and lengthened, sharp-tipped metal wings springing from his back, encompassing his frame with their magnitude. A white mane grew around his face, and white bracers graced his front paws. Spreading his massive wings protectively in front of Hoatzimon, who rivaled him in size, he let out a roar. "Milomon, kikan shinka to... Asarluhimon!"

Rusalkamon grew tall and mature. A wide-sleeved dress, so dark a blue it was almost black, offset by silvery crescents, fell around her form, accent with a decorative and ornate belt that hugged her hips. A translucent mesh covering her collarbones tied together the part to the top of her dress to the wide choker around her neck. Several ribbons of dark blue and silver fell from her shoulders down her back, mingling with her long hair. Painted nails and a wide-brimmed witch hat, all in the same blue, finished the look. "Rusalkamon, kikan shinka to... Enchantemon!"

"Are you kidding me?!" Ishtarimon demanded. "Now who's cheating!"

"Don't be bitter, Ishi dear," Enchantemon scolded her with a waggle of her fingers. "It's bad for your skin."

"You... You shut up!"

Enchantemon responded by raising one hand, twirling her fingers as if moving back the hands of a clock. "Cinderella's Chime!" Behind her, Titanimon and Hoatzimon pulled away from the wall, able to stand again. "Sorry we're late," Enchantemon told them with a smile. "Care to give us a hand?"

Nabimon's interest was on Asarluhimon. "To think that I would lay eyes on the flaming sword, only to be at its tip. You should have been with us, Asarluhimon."

"I'm not your tool, Nabimon. I don't exist for your exclusive use."

"I disagree."

Asarluhimon pulled his front paws back, pointing his wingtips at Nabimon. "Then we'll correct you."
"Nabimon," Ishtarimon said to him without looking at him. "Let me handle them."

"Ishtarimon-"

"You'll just be in my way. Get going." She smiled a soft smile at him, like she would a friend. "What's two more weaklings?"

He sighed, but then vanished without further warning, without so much as a "poof" to indicate his exit. "Now," Ishtarimon drew her twin star blades again, "I can fight without my ally getting in the way."

"If you think that makes it easier, you're wrong." Titanimon said, picking up her long spear. Holding it behind her in a state of readiness, she added, "We are greater than the sum of our parts. It's a shame that you are not."

"Want to find out?" Ishtarimon ran for Titanimon, almost too fast for the eye to follow. "Bull of Heaven."

Titanimon was ready, and whipped the spear around with a blur, scratching Ishtarimon's face just above the eye. "Rapunzel Ladder!" Enchantemon said, and her ribbons and hair both snaked out, latching onto Ishtarimon and pulling her back.

"Nice one," Hoatzimon complimented. "Let's add this to it. Bird of Paradise!"

"Iron Tanaquill!" Titanimon brought the spear around, swirling it in Hoatzimon's power, then slashing across Ishtarimon's upper torso. The combined strike was enough to draw a sparkling of leaking data, and Ishtarimon fell back, sagging in her restraints.

She looked up as Asarluhimon approached, wingtips pointed toward her, and let out a low chuckle. "So this is how it ends? We finally meet for the first time, and it's going to be our last?"

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice soft. "I never had any expectation of meeting you."

"Go ahead and do it," she told him. "Or I'll come after you again."

Only his eyes showed any expression as he raised his wings. "Kelmh alesleth."

When the dust cleared, only the last traces of her data still remained. "We should go, quickly." Asarluhimon said, avoiding eye contact with anyone. "Ashurimon knows we're here, now."

"I agree," Harley said, getting to his feet with Hestria's help. "We're not in a position to know enough to make a further move right now. Let's take our victory and run."

Maybe it was the difference in the firmness of the mattress. Maybe it was the different smell of the air. But before she was even fully awake, Kuroko realized she wasn't at home.

Peledramon! The dragon was sleeping next to her, and she reached out, holding onto her as she tried to remember how she'd gotten there. She remembered Ishtarimon's defeat, and after that, things were a blur of returning and reverting the Digizone, and somehow she'd gone home with Mirai. So this is Mirai-chan's room... Somehow, it didn't feel that different from her own. The colors were similar, which was both strange and comforting. She really is girly in some ways.

Sudden realization made her sit up, Peledramon squeaking as she was awakened. I'm in someone else's house! What do I do? How do I act? What's appropriate? Did I even take my shoes off at the
"Kuroko?" Peledramon asked, squirming a bit in her arms before crawling to her usual place around Kuroko's neck.

"Um... I think I'm at Mirai-chan's house and I don't know what to do. I've never... been to a friend's house."

"But you are now. Isn't that something?" Peledramon rubbed her head against Kuroko's chin. "See, nothing bad is going to happen. It's okay to take little steps."

Getting to her feet, Kuroko straightened out her clothes, noting with some relief that her shoes were indeed off. The room was a similar size to hers, and was only a little disorganized. School work was spread in an uneven pile on the desk, one shirt was hanging halfway out of the hamper. Without really thinking about it, Kuroko tucked away the shirt and straightened the pile, then paused as the corkboard by the desk caught her eye. It was filled with things tacked to it: a high scoring test, a letter from someone, some notes about her schedule over the weekend. But overwhelmingly, it held pictures. Some were of Mirai by herself, with an older couple Kuroko assumed were her parents, with girls her age, with Youseimon and the other DigiTravelers. "Kuroko?" Peledramon asked as she touched one of the pictures. "Is something wrong?"

"No," she answered after a long pause. "This gives me a bit more insight as to why Mirai-chan is... so herself. What she considers important above all other things." Turning away from the corkboard, she opened the door.

She didn't see Mirai, but she could hear voices - a man and a woman. From the hallway, the man who had been speaking looked over at her. "Good morning. It's Nijino Kuroko-san, right?"

"Ah, y-yes," she managed with a minimum of hesitation, giving him a bow. "Please pardon my intrusion."

"Not at all. Thank you for taking care of my daughter all this time," he said with a smile. So this was Mirai's father. He was tall, which didn't surprise her given Mirai's height, but also broad in the shoulders, as if he had some Western blood. But his face also resembled Mirai, and held warmth. "You must be hungry," he continued. "Come into the kitchen, you can have some breakfast."

Kuroko followed obediently, pausing at the entrance to the kitchen. A woman who couldn't be anyone but Mirai's mother was washing dishes, having already set out some fried eggs and rice balls. Mirai definitely took after her father more, Kuroko thought. That explained the gakuran thing, in a way. "Good morning," she greeted. "You're Nijino Kuroko-san, correct? Mirai told us all about you."

Wondering what exactly Mirai had said, Kuroko gave her a nervous bow. "Thank you for letting me intrude on your home."

"Not at all! I wish she'd bring friends over more often. Would you like some breakfast? I was about to make some toast, too."

Food sounded good. Food that she didn't have to cook sounded even better. Kuroko slid into a seat by the kitchen bar, accepting the glass Mirai's father handed to her. "Um, Mirai-chan is...?"

"She's just outside, talking to one of our neighbors," Mirai's mother told her. "I expect she'll be in before too long. Well, eat up."
Even with the invitation, Kuroko still needed a subtle urge from Peledramon to start eating, nearly dropping her chopsticks in the process. "That mass hallucination topic is in the news again," Mirai's father noted as he sat nearby, reading the paper.

Mirai's mother looked up. "Mass hallucination? Is that what they're calling it?"

"Well, no one else seems to be able to figure out what to call it when a portion of a major city turns into a kaiju movie set. Look, someone got a picture," he held it out to her. "Isn't that bizarre looking? That's the House of Lords in London. Not that you can tell."

She took a look at it before returning to her kitchen work. "You will be careful, won't you?"

"Don't worry. I haven't been anywhere close to any of them since it started popping up in the news. Plus, I'll be home for a while, now. Where's safer than Japanese soil?"

"I hope that's the case."

"Well, don't let it worry you too much. Oh, it seems like the Hawks have been having a good season this year, haven't they?" he commented as he flipped the page. "What do you think about going to see a game, dear?"

Mirai's mother thought about it. "Well, it might be nice to get out of the house for a while. My schedule's free, but Mirai does have afterschool activities, you know."

"Ha, that's true. She's growing up quite nicely, isn't she?"

As Kuroko watched them talk, the food that tasted so good tried to stick in her throat. Listening to Mirai's mother and father talk, like a married couple that was mature but still in love, reminded her of her parents more than she wanted to admit. "Ah, Nijino-san?" Mirai's mother said as she hopped down from the stool. "How is it?"

"It's very good," she said as she took a rice ball with her. "I'm just going to go check on Mirai-chan."

"Kuroko?" Peledramon questioned in a hushed tone as she sat down to put on her shoes.

She looked to see if she was being watched, then handed Peledramon the rice ball. "Sorry. I think I need to get away for a minute."

Peledramon nibbled on the rice ball, waiting until they were outside on the open-air walkway. "What's the matter, Kuroko?"

"They just... They remind me a bit of my parents. They don't look the same and they don't sound the same, but still, there's something that's the same." And the enhanced sound of her own hammering heartbeat, her shaking legs, were all the same as they had been the last time she stepped outside. I'm not scared. I'm not scared. Peledramon's with me again. I can handle this.

Peledramon brushed her tail against Kuroko's cheek in a comforting gesture. "It'll be okay, Kuroko."

She could see Mirai over the railing of the walkway, talking with another girl her age, Youseimon standing nearby. Putting a hand to Peledramon, she walked to the stairs and onto the street.

The other girl looked over as Kuroko approached, then Mirai turned. "Kuroko-san! How are you feeling this morning?"
"I... don't really know? I feel all right, I guess. Did something happen last night?"

"After the Digizone was taken care of, you pretty much collapsed," Youseimon explained. "We brought you here."

"Oh." She looked over at the other girl again. She didn't see another Digimon partner, and she didn't recognize the girl as an enemy-former enemy, she corrected herself—but she must have known about the Digital World for Youseimon to be talking about it freely. "Um, um, Mirai...chan, the breakfast... It's ready."

"I know. I stole a couple of rice balls when Mom wasn't looking. Kuroko-san, this is Kiraharu Rina-chan, one of my good friends who's been helping me about a bit with the Digital World business. Rina-chan, this is Nijino Kuroko-san."

Now that she took a second look, the other girl did look familiar— the same girl that Mirai had been with when she'd confronted her in front of her apartment. "Oh," she realized at last. "The girlfriend."

"Uh... We're not really that way, Kuroko-san."

The other girl looked her over with an appraising gaze, then fixed Kuroko with a firm stare. "So you're Kuroko. The one that got my Mirai-chan injured, isn't that correct?"

"Rina-"

The other girl held up a hand to cut Mirai off. "I was the one helping Mirai-chan find you. So isn't that right, Nijino Kuroko-san?"

Kuroko winced at the harsh tone, but held her ground, even though it took all she had not to run away. It was easier to face people when they were enemies, she thought. Facing them angry because of something she'd done was much harder. "Yes. That's correct."

"And you've got the nerve to act buddy-buddy with Mirai-chan, after what you did? I hope you're prepared to take your punishment."

Kuroko turned her head away, but didn't move. She wasn't sure she could move if she had tried. "Rina-chan!" Mirai protested as the girl raised a hand.

Then she brought it down with a firm flick to Kuroko's nose, causing the girl to let out a yelp. "Punishment complete," she said with a wave of one hand as Kuroko put a hand to her nose. "Well, if Mirai-chan says you're all right, I don't have any room to disagree. She knows you better. So let's try to get along, all right?"

Kuroko looked at her in surprise, trying to make sense of what she was saying. Rina held out a hand. That, at least, she could understand, and she took it cautiously, giving it a mild squeeze. Rina responded with a vigorous shake and solid squeeze. "Rina-chan, don't scare me like that," Mirai said, folding her arms. "The last thing I need right now is something else that makes my blood pressure skyrocket."

"Mirai-chan, please. You're fourteen. I'll be having grandbabies before you have to worry about your blood pressure." Rina gave Mirai's cheek a pinch. "Well, shall we celebrate with a drink? It's a nice day out in the park."

"Yes, let's." Mirai turned to Kuroko, waving her forward.
As she passed Mirai, she noticed what she hadn't before; the girl had a bag with her, the tip of her sword poking out like a curious animal. "Mirai-chan, that bag..."

"There'll be a Digizone later," Mirai said, raising one hand in a quick apology. "I didn't want you to worry."

"So soon?"

"Yeah. We're going to be trying to hit them as fast as possible. We want to wrap this thing up before they have a chance to spring more surprises on us."

"I'll come with you," Kuroko said immediately. "I mean... I want to come."

"Kuroko-san... I don't want you to come." Mirai touched a hand to the other girl's shoulder. "Because you've already had to see so much fighting. I don't want Kuroko-san to fight against those people. I mean, you don't hate them, right? I want you to rest a little more and think about it. Don't worry, we'll handle it, and we won't hurt anyone we don't have to."

"I think that's a good idea, Kuroko," Peledramon said. "At least this one... let's leave it alone for now."

Kuroko frowned, but nodded at last as they paused by a vending machine. "Here, first round's on me," Rina said, putting a few coins into the machine.

Mirai pondered the machine, then paused as her phone buzzed. "Already?" Youseimon asked.

"Looks like it. I'm sorry, Rina-chan, Kuroko-san." Mirai raised a hand of apology. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Could you two wait for me?"

"Leave it to this Kiraharu Rina-sama," Rina said, thumping her own chest with a fist. "I got this."

"That... really just makes me worry more. I'll be back really soon," she promised.

Before Kuroko could protest, Mirai had activated the Internet Transport, her and Youseimon vanishing into thin air. "I will never get used to seeing them do that," Rina complained. "One day, they've got to take me with them."

Kuroko looked over at this new girl, not sure what to make of her. She seemed so... loud. And a bit terrifying. The feeling of being in danger, of being exposed, was coming in around her all over again, and even Peledramon's presence wasn't helping. "Well?" Rina said, startling her out of her thoughts.

"Huh?"

She pointed to the vending machine. "Going to pick a drink or what? I'll grab an orange soda for Mirai later."

"Oh... That sounds... fine. The soda, I mean."

Rina looked at her, then hit the button herself before queueing another soda and a coffee for herself. "So you're involved in this Digimon stuff too, huh?" Rina said, cracking open her drink and taking a swig. "Cute dragon, by the way."

"Thank you!" Peledramon said in pleasant surprise, preening.

"Um... yes." Kuroko let Rina lead her to a park bench, sitting down with the drink in both hands.
How was she supposed to handle this strange girl? Surely Rina still had some resentment against her for injuring Mirai.

"Thought so. That must be rough." Rina leaned back on the bench, looking up at the sky. "That dumb girl is always rushing off on her own. You two should rely on this Kiraharu Rina-sama a little more, you know. I'm pretty good in a pinch."

"You're quite protective of Mirai-chan, aren't you?"

"I'm always protective of my friends, Kuro-chan."

"K-kuro-chan?"

"I was thinking Kuro-tan, but that might come across as a little masculine, maybe," Rina mused. "Ooh, what about 'Kuroppi'? That's really cute."

"I..."

"Too much? Kuroppin, maybe?"

"No, it's... I didn't expect you to actually be nice to me," Kuroko said after failing to find a more diplomatic way to say it.

"What, did you think I was going to be a brat because Mirai-chan isn't here? That's not how I roll. Don't make light of the friend-making prowess of Kiraharu Rina," she stated, holding up a finger. "Actually, just so you know, it's a bad idea to underestimate me in general. I'm pretty amazing."

Kuroko finally smiled, putting a hand to her phone which felt warm to her touch. "I'll... keep that in mind."

"You decided to drop it where?"

On the phone's screen, Harley made a face. "I did the best I could. There's a limited amount of geography where the zone and the real world overlap, remember? At least I kept it small."

"But still," Andre waved a hand at the massive intersection in front of them, which swarmed with people as the light changed. "This doesn't seem ideal. Why didn't you ask Mirai about local landmarks?"

"Tokyo isn't Fukuoka."

"Still, I imagine she'd know things like, oh, that Scramble Crossing is full of people!"

"Dude, it's like five in the morning. At this point, all I can say is 'bite me'." Harley groaned. "Why is it always like five or six in the morning? What bullshit is this that breaks through yonder window?"

"You may as well let it go," Felix told Andre as he looked around. "As a loud foreigner, you're attracting attention."

Hanging up, Andre shoved the phone back in his pocket. "I don't think it's so bad," Milomon commented. "This is sort of like that Broadway place. People are taking my picture." He smiled and waved at a pair of teenage girls, who snapped a picture before moving on, giggling all the while.
Andre rubbed at a temple. "That's all well and good, but it doesn't help us when the Digizone drops and we have to get all these people out of our way."

"Sorry, are we late?" Mirai and Hestria came up, their Digimon in tow.

"Not really. The responsible one was just busy chewing out our computer programmer," Felix said, giving them a smile. "And we have the countdown, so it hasn't dropped yet."

Mirai nodded, then looked around, head tilting up at the large building with the massive screen on the corner. "I'm glad I didn't tell Rina-chan I was coming here. She'd be really jealous."

"Why's that?"

"You don't... oh, of course you wouldn't know. Shibuya is famous for being trendy and fashionable. As Rina-chan tells it, a lot of specific styles of Japanese fashion got their start here."

"Makes me wonder what the Digizone will be like. Someone's mother's basement, maybe?" Felix wondered.

Hestria looked up as the sky behind the massive building on the corner began to flicker. "We're about to find out. Prepare yourselves, everyone."

All around them, the ground rippled with the blocky data pattern they had come to associate with the Digizones, spreading through to the nearby intersection, culminating in a spiral tower situated in the center of the square. Digimon appeared here and there, looking just as confused as the humans standing next to them. And nothing else changed. "Uh," Andre said, "we have the tower and the Digimon, but where's the Digizone?"

"Even the screens are the same," Felix observed. "Except that now they're showing some message with that Digital World language on it."

Rusalkamon followed his gaze, squinting at the sign. "It's advertising Wristers."

"Hey, hey, hey, hey!" Footsteps clanked as the owner of the voice stood next to them, looking out at the crossing. "Why's there so many humans in Shibuya?"

Mirai took a step back from the speaker. Taller than any of them, it was what appeared to be a monkey dipped in metal, wearing sunglasses. "Hey, you humans!" he boomed down at them, striking a pose as he did so. "What brings you to our Digital World's Shibuya?"

No one spoke right away. "So the Digital World has a Shibuya?" Felix asked.

"Of course, little boy! Where else are you going to go to see the hip and the trendy of the Digital World? Behold!" He waved an arm at some of the Digimon around. Mirai recognized a couple of Lekismon, taking a picture of a slim, pink-armored figure holding a rose. "Or there!" A couple of Digimon on ice skates, which seemed to work perfectly well on sidewalks, railings, and car roofs. "Or there!" Some small, fairylike Digimon that reminded her of Spirimon, crowdwatching as they sat on a streetlamp. "There is no doubt that this is Shibuya!"

"Well, it is Shibuya," Mirai agreed. "But it's Shibuya in the human world. Well, sort of. It's both."

"What what what what?" The metal monkey sprang back like he'd stepped on a tack. "Do my ears deceive me, little sister? Are you telling me that we've come to the Shibuya of the human world?"

"Yes... that's correct."
"That's..." He looked again at the scramble crossing. "That's amazing! The human world's Shibuya! Hey, everybody! We're in the human's Shibuya!"

The Digimon in hearing range all noticed. "No wonder all these humans are so good-looking," one of the fairies commented.

"Hey, that's bodacious!" the ice skaters exclaimed, offering high fives to a pair of human skateboarders on the sidewalk. "Awesome shredding with you!"

"Now that I look at it," Felix said, "the people in the cars don't seem too pleased, but nobody seems really fazed."

"Then let's go ahead and take out that tower," Hestria said. "How far do you think we should go? There doesn't seem to be a boss around."

"Hey, wait wait wait wait!" The metal monkey waved his hands at them. "You mean that tower in the middle of our Shibuya? You can't just take out a part of the city!"

"No, no, we won't damage the city," Mirai reassured him. "We just have to take out that one tiny tower right there. We'll be very careful not to hurt the city or anyone in it."

"No, no, no, no!" The monkey held a finger in front of her face. "I cannot allow you to do that! For I am MetalEtemon, the boss of this zone, and I will protect that tower!"

Another long pause. "You know, let's talk about this," Felix told him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "We don't want to interrupt your way of life, wouldn't you agree?"

Hestria waved to Mirai as Felix subtly spun MetalEtemon around. "I wish we had Rafmon in this area," Hestria whispered. "It's Tokyo, so you'll have Faimon if you influence, right?"

"That's right. I'll have Youseimon shin evolve, in that case," Mirai whispered back.

"Agreed. I don't think we should go full-on kikan shinka," Andre said. "Milomon, let's shin evolve as well."

"Yixiamon is faster than Archeomon," Hestria said. "We'll stick with Influencing."

Mirai cast another glance to Felix and MetalEtemon, then gave Youseimon a nod. Two shin evolved Digimon and an Influenced Digimon made a beeline for the tower, charging up their attack. MetelEtemon noticed, but Mareomon pushed against him, slowing him down. For a moment, they had a clear shot at the tower.

Then the pink-armored Digimon sprang in front of them, lashing out with his ribbon against them. The skating Digimon also leapt into the fray, bringing Yixiamon down with body weight alone. "Hey!" Faimon growled as she swatted at the fairies hovering around her head, trying to gouge at her face with their spears. "Knock it off!"

"Don't you touch our Shibuya!" both fairies demanded in unison.

"We're not going to harm your Shibuya," Kaitomon said as he landed roughly in the street, causing a car to brake and swerve around him. "We're just sending it back to the Digital World. It's safest for everyone."

"Well, maybe we do not agree with your assessment," the pink Digimon said, landing neatly on top of a parked car, not even denting the roof. "Shibuya is Shibuya."
"Fashion and trends do not play safe!" MetalEtemon declared, hopping onto an awning and striking another pose. "And even if they did, what is the danger here? The Digimon of Shibuya. The humans of Shibuya. We all come to this place for the same reason! Is there not a way to get along?"

Mirai looked around at the humans on the streets. Some seem frightened, others were nodding in agreement. "I appreciate your desire for cooperation, MetalEtemon," Faimon addressed him. "I don't think you're wrong in that. But right now, the world we live in is not ready to hold hands with the humans. It's we, who are at war with each other, who are not ready to hold out our hands."

"You wish to wait for perfection?" the pink Digimon addressed her. "That will never come. We don't expect the human world to be perfect, either. We all hold ugly sides to ourselves that we do not wish to show to others. Even in spite of that, we have to hold out our hands or risk losing ourselves in isolation."

"I agree with you as well, LordKnightmon," she said. "I don't think we can wait for perfection. But we need to wait for peace."

Andre frowned as he looked around. Some of the humans were beginning to shout opinions, both in favor and against. "This isn't a good position to be in. If we attack the tower now, we might hurt some humans. They're getting too close."

"Should we... retreat for now?" Mirai wondered. "Maybe if we wait until their guard goes down."

"That will either let the humans scramble for an attack, or the Digimon of the King. Either way, if it stays too long, the situation will build out of control. Humans aren't ready for Digimon, either." Hestria chewed on a nail. "If only we could use Apsaramon right here. We need a barrier ability."

Kaitomon flicked his ears, then jumped back, landing near the humans. "What do you need a barrier ability for?"

"If we attack the tower, we need to keep the debris from falling and hurting people."

"I thought that might be the case. I can't make a barrier, but I can stop the debris," Kaitomon said. "So proceed with whatever plan you have."

"Easier said than done."

The skating Digimon were still on Yixiamon, and LordKnightmon and MetalEtemon were more than capable of holding off the three lower-power Digimon. Was kikan shinka their only choice? Mirai chewed at her lip. She didn't like the idea of putting that much power in such a crowded and occupied space, and judging by her teammate's expressions, neither did they.

She barely saw the shadow as it passed over them, loosed like an arrow toward the tower in the scramble crossing. Dark blue wings spread in the sky as Betedramon's bulk came down on the tower, attacking it with her teeth and a shout of "Beautiful Claw!"

"Go, Kaitomon!" Andre shouted.

The perfect-level Digimon was already next to the tower, spreading his cape, swirling it around until it seemed larger than it actually was-no it actually was larger. "Now you see it!" he shouted, catching the pieces of rock and debris in his cape as they fell from the tower. Betedramon caught the upper half in her claws and tail, setting it down gently. Reattaching it, he gave a bow to the crowd, who applauded. "Thank you, thank you. You've been a lovely audience."
"Kuroko-chan!" Mirai called to her as Betedramon landed. "Kuroko-chan, why are you here?"

The girl took refuge behind Betedramon's wing, trying to gauge her mood. "I saw it on the news? I thought... you could use... some help."

Felix let out a chuckle. "Good job, Kuroko, Betedramon. Well-timed."

MetalEtemon stared at the tower, his expression unreadable behind his sunglasses. "So soon that we already have to part from the human Shibuya. But we will come back one day. And be the trendiest in both worlds!" He posed again, to the applause of those standing nearby.

"Tsk," LordKnightmon turned his helmeted head away. "You talk of peace, Faimon, but you tear apart those who would reside peacefully with your own hands."

"When this is over," she told him, "when we truly have peace and freedom in our Digital World, Shibuya will be the first place I turn to face."

"The humans' Shibuya? Or the Digimon Shibuya?"

"Both. Is there that much of a difference?"

He chuckled. "You contradict yourself, Faimon. But I can't do anything for the moment. I'll retreat quietly."

Hestria let out a sigh, then glanced over to Maremon, who was gazing up at the sky. "Is something the matter?"

"Maybe it's just me, but... shouldn't the Digizone be fading by now?"

The other humans all looked at the sky as well. "Nothing's happening," Andre said at last. "That's not good."

"Is there a problem with the Digizone program?" Mirai asked. "What's going on?"

"I'm going to dial Harley," Felix said. "Although he won't like me very much for this."

As he pulled out his phone, however, it lit up. "Guys!" Harley's voice came through, sounding exhausted but shot through with adrenaline.

"Harley? We have a problem," Felix said. "We just took down the tower, but the Digizone in Shibuya and all its Digimon are still here."

"Uh, we have a worse problem," Harley replied. "The Digizone in San Francisco is back."

"Wait, it's what?" Andre leaned over Felix's shoulder. "What about the others? What about Atlanta?"

"I don't know yet. Saffron!" he shouted over his shoulder.

Mirai's phone buzzed with its D-Tai signal, and she pulled it out. "Mirai!" Meihuang's eyes were wide. "The guaiwu quan! It's back!"

"Felix!" Alexa's voice came from his D-Tai, her face appearing in its own box next to Harley's. "Felix, that desert thing in our home, it's shown up again!"

"I'm getting reports in from all over via the website!" Saffron's voice shouted from offscreen. "It's
everywhere! Every Digizone and then some is back!"

Faimon landed near the group, reverting to Youseimon. "Mirai?" she asked. "Is something the matter?"

"Yeah. Something's the matter. A worldwide something is the matter."
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

Using the power of the kikan shinka, the four ultimate-level Digimon are at last able to defeat Ishtarimon, and revert London's Digizone. In Fukuoka, Kuroko takes small steps into the outside world, slowly bringing the light of hope to her D-Tai. The next Digizone is a Digimon version of Shibuya in Shibuya, and humans and Digimon alike find common ground in their culture. Unwilling to harm the humans or the peace-loving Digimon in their way, the team's hands are tied until Betedramon takes down the tower. However, the Digizone does not fade, and instead the Digizones of the world return in full force. The DigiTravelers face an unprecedented worldwide crisis. But what place will they venture to next?

"So it was ice, after all. Robert Frost, buddy, you don't know how wrong you had it." Jezra pulled the pencil she'd been chewing on from her mouth, tucking it behind an ear as she beheld a sight most Atlantans couldn't even imagine: foot upon foot of snow.

The humans that she could see were all fleeing as best they could through the snow, abandoning cars, getting inside buildings or through the Marta stations to the underground where they could. Those that weren't fleeing were those that weren't human. Jezra snapped a few pictures with her phone, examining them as they raced by, ignoring her for the moment. If she'd had to describe them, in a shot, she would have pulled such phrases as "Santa's little ogres" and "Japanese oni in deep-freeze." Hm. Those were pretty good. Maybe I'm on to something here, she thought as she wrote herself a note.

"Hey! You lot!" A volleyball with wings-ha, another good one, I slay me-was flapping around some of the Santa's-little-ogres, dodging the snowballs that they threw. "Shouldn't your attention be on keeping your shit together and not-garbleflagh!" A direct hit to the big mouth. "You guys, shut up and listen to me! Take this seriously!"

Now that she thought about it, one of her son's stories had a part about a volleyball with wings, though not in so many good words. Well, it couldn't be helped; he wasn't a writer. "Hey, you, Batty Koda," she called to him, gesturing for him to come. "Get down here, I need to talk to you."

He glanced at her, then took another, harder look. "Holy crap, there are melons in the winter," he noted, hovering level with her chest.

Seizing him by the wing, she held him up to scrutinize with her good eye, appraising him as if he were a piece of meat. Three pounds, probably chuck-level. Ten bucks or so. Ha, I really should be writing this down. "Oi, Batty Koda," she said. "You're a friend of my son, right? About yea high, good looking, has a black cat monster?"

"Boy with a cat..." The volleyball crossed its little legs in thought. "You mean that Andre brat?"

"That's him, and he ain't no brat. Good, that means I can trust you, at least this much." She held her phone in front of his face. "You 'n' me are gonna be working together. This is how we get started, right?"

"Hey, whoa, you mean being partners, you and me? I'm really not up for partnership, I'm not the kind that likes busting my ass on the front lines." He stole another look at her chest. "On the other hand, I've never gotten to work with a bonafide mil-"
Jezra looked up as several of the Santa's-little-ogres closed in, leering at her menacingly. *And me without my shotgun.* Grabbing the volleyball with one hand, she spiked him off the nearest enemy face.

"Ow! What the hell was that for?" the volleyball demanded as it began flying again.

"Well? You gonna be my partner or what?" She glanced behind him at the angry Santa's-little-ogres. "Or you can deal with them on your own."

"Nice to be working with you, partner!" he yelped as one of them took a swipe with its club.

On her phone's screen, the same icon she'd seen on her son's phone showed up, and she grinned.

"Actually, I kind of think we should get out of here," the volleyball said, sounding more nervous than a first-time author facing the slush pile. "I told you I'm not for the front lines."

"You are now, Batty Koda." Finding the option she wanted, she thrust the phone out, touching the icon with her thumb. "Digizone Influence!"

The volleyball's body lit up, and stretched out. Within moments, the volleyball had become a stick figure with wings, towering over the Santa's-little-ogres by far. "I..." Holding up his hands to his face, his expression became like that of a child who's been gifted a pony with rockets attached. "I'm big."

"Yeah, you are," she agreed, "so put your Slender Man alter-ego to use and kick the shit out of those guys."

"Oh, right!" He looked around, but the Santa's-little-ogres were already fleeing. "Aww. That's no fun."

"If they aren't running around causing problems, then fuck 'em," Jezra said. "Listen up, Batty Koda. This mixed dimension thing is only funny in books. Right now, we have to keep the humans and the monsters from killing each other. You up to the task?"

"In all honesty, probably not," he admitted, setting his jaw. "But Youseimon sent me here to do what I could while she and your son and everyone else are trying to get this fuckup undone. So we'll have to make do somehow."

"Batty Koda, I like the way you talk. I think we'll work well together." Jezra flipped open her phone, looking for another feature her son had described.

"So what are we doing now?" he asked.

"You're kicking the ass of any monsters that try and pick a fight with the humans. I'll kick the ass of any humans that try to pick a fight with the monsters. And I'm going to call my son and find out why he's not home yet."
friends to examine the code he picked up during the raid on the castle. Thanks to Hestria, we were able to pull Nabimon's complete program. But Kokuwamon can't help us with it since he's opening holes in the Digizones for Youseimon's group to get out to the other zones and report in. They'll keep in touch through Kokuwamon, who will keep in contact with Harley and myself."

Mirai looked around the room. Even though everyone had to be thinking about their home towns, they were all here all at once: nine people, nine Digimon. Saffron, Harley, and Floramon and Gazimon. Herself and Youseimon, Kuroko and Peledramon. Andre and Milomon. Alexa and Labramon, Felix and Rusalkamon. Meihuang and Darcmon. And Hestria and Raptomon. "Does anyone have a plan?" Meihuang asked.

"Saffron, can I borrow your laptop? I want to check the website," Felix said to her.

She handed it over. "From the data we're getting from the website and from the news, it looks like it's probably all 108 zones of the Digital World that have crossed over, even ones we haven't touched before. That's 108 cities in the real world that are suddenly beseiged by monsters."

"There's not 108 of us," Peledramon spoke up from her position around Kuroko's neck. "How are we going to prioritize?"

"I've started by instructing Spadamon to split our team among the Digizones," Youseimon said, "but they're spread very thinly. We're talking only one or two per zone, and a number of them aren't battlers. If it comes down to a fight, they'll be overrun."

"Guys," Alexa called from her position, draped over the back of a chair in front of the television. "I suggest we prioritize by which cities are reacting to this with military force. Because it looks like that's quite a few."

Saffron chewed her lip. "I believe it. We've already heard the sirens approaching the bridge area, but if things go poorly there, police and military are undoubtedly next."

"You're all correct," Felix said from behind the computer. "It's impossible for all of us to cover all 108 zones with just ourselves and Youseimon's allies. We're going to need help."

"Yes, but where are we getting that help?" Hestria asked. "It doesn't just materialize out of thin air."

He turned the laptop around to face the rest of the group. "Is that so?"

She leaned in, as did the others, reading the screen. The message board was being overwhelmed with threads from all corners of the globe, some in languages Mirai couldn't even identify, let alone understand.

The monster hole returned! What should we do?

A monster zone showed up in our town! We want to help.

I'm in the middle of an Ungetumgebite and the police are evacuating the area. Should I tell the ungetum to leave?

We had a monster zone open up nearby. My mom is a reporter. Can we help?

One of the rakshasa ksetra has appeared in my district. I'm in the military. Can we ask the rakshasa to not attack?

Felix flipped the screen around, and began typing. "I think we can make this work. Give me a few
minutes to start organizing things here. It'll take some juggling of resources, but we might be able to handle this without bloodshed, depending on how clever we are."

"But do we really have enough resources?" Hestria crossed her arms. "Even with the website, most of the people involved in this are young, without any political or military power. Can we really turn back two worlds with just us?"

"We'll have to. History has had worse odds," Felix said, even as he typed with an intensity rivaling Harley's. "It only took three hundred for Sparta, after all."

Hestria gave him a look. "Didn't all those Spartans end up dead? I've seen the movie."

"You know what? Let's make like the movies and never tell me the odds," Andre said. He then paused as his phone buzzed. "That's the D-Tai."

"But who's calling you on that? We're all here," Mirai said.

"About to find out. Hello?" Andre answered the call, and then nearly dropped the phone. "Mom?!"

Mirai and Kuroko peered over his shoulder as Jezra's face looked back at them. "Yo, son. I found one of these monsters to work with and he's keeping the streets clean. Now what?"

"Uh... Mom? What do you mean, you found one of those monsters? You mean you formed a partnership?"

"Wheeee!" came a voice in the background, deeper than normal, but still identifiable as IcePicoDevimon's. "This is awesome."

"...Is that IcePicoDevimon?" Youseimon put a hand to her face. "Good grief."

"Don't give me that look," she told him. "Just because I'm older and your mother doesn't mean I can't do cool things sometimes. Anyway, I've unlocked the first stage, the Influence thing, but the second stage doesn't seem to be working yet. Any thoughts?"

"If you've Influenced, I'd leave it at that for the moment," Youseimon spoke up, putting herself in view. "Hopefully, you shouldn't need any more firepower than that. The important thing is not defeating anyone, but keeping them from fighting each other."

"That's about what I figured. Well, if all else fails, I'll run home and get my gun. Andre!"

"Yes?"

Her single eye fixed on him. "I take it you're off to solve this problem?"

"Yes, Mom. We're working on it right now. We'll do whatever we can," he said, expression set.

"That's my boy. Keep in touch, and let me know if you won't be back by dinnertime." The call disconnected.

"Your mom is kind of scary," Kuroko said to Andre.

"Kind of?" Mirai shook her head.

"I'm worried about her being with IcePicoDevimon," Youseimon said. "He's kind of a pervert."

"Again: 'kind of'?"
"Mom can take care of herself," Andre said with a shrug, "especially when it comes to her girl-parts. Felix, we've got some support in Atlanta. What now?"

"Good. We've got a few other people in that town; I'll let them know so they can inform her of the movements of people around the city." He resumed his frantic typing. "Give me a moment. Okay, Saffron, I'm working on some preliminary instructions for everyone. I think we might have enough people to cover this. Youseimon, I'm compiling a list and I'm corresponding it with the known Digizones. Can I have Harley tell your people to give our people a hand?"

"Of course." She eyed Harley. "If he has a moment."

"I'll make him take a break in a bit," Saffron reassured him. "Don't worry about him. This isn't the first time he's burned the keyboards working hard on a project."

"Okay, Saffron, I think we're under control for the moment, but I'm going to connect to your D-Tai and explain the strategy I've got going on for some of these places. Everyone, we're going to be splitting up. Meihuang, didn't you mention that your boyfriend knows about the Digizones?"

"Yes, I did. Why do you ask?"

"Get his help, if you trust him. I'm sending you back to Beijing. We don't have anyone in the city there."

She nodded. "Right, I understand. Darcmon and I will absolutely protect that Digizone without fail."

"Good. And by the way, everyone, keep your D-Tais at the ready and relay anything you see or hear. Alexa: likewise for Quebec City." Even as he spoke, he was still typing. "I'm going to go to Lisbon, because I can speak the language and I'm not seeing anyone there so far. Andre, you're in Rio. Hestria, you're in Johannesburg. Mirai, Shibuya. Kuroko... You confident in your English?"

"Um... Confident enough, I suppose."

"Good, I'll send you to Edmonton, then. Saffron, I'm going to leave you and Harley in charge of your home town. Can you handle it and everything else you've got going on?"

She looked over at Harley, still hard at work, with Floramon pouring him some fresh coffee, Gazimon behind him watching the screen. "We'll manage somehow."

"Floramon and I will do something," Gazimon spoke up. "We'll protect the city. We have to pull our own weight."

Mirai chewed on her lip. "Will it be okay, me going to Tokyo? My hometown-"

"Relax. I've got it covered. I need you to make sure that LordKnightmon and MetalEtemon aren't pissed enough at us from last time to take it out on human Shibuya."

"Point taken. I trust you, Felix." Mirai gave him a smile before she stood, looking to her partner. "Let's get going. We have work to do."

"Well, that's what he said to do," Rina muttered to herself as she stood at the edge of the Digizone, looking down into the ruinous structures. "But this is easier said than done."
Crossing her arms, she thought about it as she stepped inside the Digizone, looking here and there for some of the monsters that were supposed to live in this area. The guy on the website had asked her to protect this area in Mirai's place, since she was needed elsewhere, and that was what Kiraharu Rina intended to do. That didn't give her any more of a clue on exactly how to protect it. What exactly would she be protecting it from? If there was some sort of dimensional natural disaster resulting from this mergy monster-hole type thing, she was going to be in trouble.

"Ignitemon-han!" A voice above her head made her look up as something round flew by. "Ignitemon-han, where are you? I've got instructions from Youseimon-han!"

"Kansai accent?" Rina muttered to herself as she watched the creature land. But it had mentioned Mirai's partner, Youseimon, and that meant that he was on their side. She hoped. Picking up a small rock, she did the only logical thing in the situation, and chucked it at the monster's head.

"Ow!" The insect put both front claws on its injured head, giving her an aggrieved look. "That wasn't nice!"

"I think this works better when I have a Poke Ball," she muttered. "Um, ladybug monster thing, I choose you?"

The large eyes looked at her, and even she had to admit that reading the facial expressions of insects was a skill that was not in her arsenal. "I'm afraid I don't understand?"

"You're Youseimon's friend, right?" Rina put her hands on her hips. "I'm Mirai-chan's friend, Rina. We should work together."

"Ah... Youseimon-han and Mirai-han's friend? It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Tentomon."

"Nice to meet you, Tento-chan." Surely the pinkish ladybug had to be a girl. "I think we both came here for the same reason- to protect this place. How do we do that?"

"Ah!" Tentomon turned fully to face her, lifting off the ground briefly to get closer. "Yes, we came here to protect this place as well. I believe fully that Youseimon-han will do something about the merging of worlds, so please do not concern yourself over that. We need only to protect the citizenry of both worlds from each other until the two worlds separate."

"... You're really wordy. But I get it." Rina held out her phone. "So, we just need to do the contract thing and we'll work together, right?"

Tentomon's eyes lit up at the phone. "Oh... You're offering someone like me a contract? I'd always thought for sure I would be the last one anyone would pick, because I'm sort of boring and shy... You don't mind?"

"You're also kind of weird," Rina said, then put a hand on her head. "But I think I like you. You seem like a good match to my sensibilities."

Tentomon looked up at her with those large eyes, and it wasn't as if they looked any different. But Rina imagined that face was smiling as Tentomon touched a claw to her phone.

"Hey, freeze!"

Rina looked up as she heard the sound of cars. Two police cars had pulled around to the edge of the zone, officers out on either side. "Step away from the girl, monster!"

The aura that radiated from the Digimon was impressively depressed. "Oh... So you're calling me a
"Isn't that what the Digimon term means?" Rina asked.

"Yes, but it isn't nice when they put it that way, Rina-han."

"Kiraharu-san!" one of the officers called. "We've got you covered, so get away from the monster!"

She squinted up at his face. "Is that Taiga-kun?"

"Yes, it is, but worry about that later. For right now you need to get to safety, Kiraharu-san!"

She let out a sigh. "This is what my life consists of, Tento-chan. Once again, I am having to educate the men in my life. Hey, Taiga-kun! I'm not in danger. Tento-chan isn't going to harm anyone. In fact, shouldn't you be worried about other people causing a problem and instigating violence? This is a strange place to be in right now, and it's worrisome for them."

"What are you talking about, Kiraharu-san?"

"What I'm talking about is that the 'monsters' aren't going to harm us, Taiga-kun. Tento-chan wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone me." She lowered her voice. "If that's a lie, don't tell me until later."

"I am thoroughly opposed to violence when it can be avoided, Rina-han."

She pointed at the officers decisively. "You need to stop acting with so much prejudice! Rather than treating the monsters as enemies right off the bat, we should try and understand them. It's the job of the police to protect, not make things worse! Would you be acting like this if it was Americans that had suddenly been dropped on our town?"

"Americans are still human, Kiraharu-san!"

"So now you're just judging on appearance? These Digital monsters look different to us, but they still talk and have feelings and are at their heart peace-loving creatures! I already know this. I've been meeting with one for several weeks now!" Turning to Tentomon, she said, "Say something to them."

"Eh?! But I wouldn't know what to say, Rina-han."

"Anything will do. Well, anything that convinces them you're not a bloodthirsty beast," Rina amended. "Start with 'hi'."

Tentomon took to the air, hovering next to Rina, then turned to face the policemen. "Um... Good afternoon to you both. Um. Well, I guess it's really nighttime now, isn't it?"

Both officers looked at each other. "Kansai accent?" the other said to Taiga.

"See? My great-uncle Yuuya always said you could trust a Kansai accent," Rina said. Well, actually, I think he said you couldn't. He was kind of a jerk. Well, that's not important now. "Hey! I have an idea! Since it's late, why can't we call a curfew? The Digimon are all outside, so keeping the humans inside would keep them apart at least."

"Can we do that?" the other policeman said.

Rina gave her best winning smile to Taiga. "Don't you think you should listen to me, Taiga-kun? It'd be terrible if we had to be unfriendly to each other."
"Uh... I think we should give it a try," Taiga said. "I mean, what's she's saying is making sense, right? Even if the monsters are dangerous, keeping everyone inside is safer. Ah! But that doesn't mean you can hang around them, Kiraharu-san! Get over here right now!"

"Please," she tapped her phone against her temple and smiled winningly. "I'm a professional Digimon speaker."

"Now you're just making stuff up."

"Oh? Then why don't you watch this." She opened up the phone, finding the option just like Mirai had shown her. "Tentomon, time to shin evolve!"

"Ah? Oh!" Tentomon's body lit up with a black light, elongating and becoming humanoid. Moments later, a silver-armored figure stepped out, the rose colors of Tentomon becoming the accents on her armor. "Tentomon, shin evolve to... MetallifeKuwagamon!"

Rina had the pleasure of seeing two adult men have their minds blown. "It... it changed," Taiga got out in awe.

"See? That's what happens when you disbelieve the great Kiraharu Rina-sama," she said with the perfect flip of her hair.

The newly evolved Tentomon, now MetallifeKuwagamon, looked down at herself in equal awe. "I... I'm evolved... I can't believe it, this is so amazing! Even though Gomamon and Biyomon said I'd never amount to much, I still evolved..."

"Tentomon-san!" A young boy-no, Digimon, she presumed-with a skull hat not unlike that of a Cubone came running over. "Tentomon-san, I've been looking for-wait, you're not Tentomon-san," he said, looking up and down her form.

"I'm MetallifeKuwagamon now!" she declared in exhilaration. "Look, see? Don't I look cool?"

"Uh, I guess so... But now isn't the time to worry about that," he told her. "We have a big problem! There's a bunch of human children confronting some Giromon and Tekkamon. I think they're about to get in a fight."

"Well, that's our cue," Rina slapped MetallifeKuwagamon on the arm. "I'll leave that curfew thing to you, boys." Blowing them a kiss, she turned back to her partner. "Shall we away?"

"Oh, yes!" MetallifeKuwagamon turned her back to her. "Here, you can ride on my back."

Rina looked at her, and she sagged. "Oh... Perhaps our partnership isn't to that level yet... I misread the situation..."

"Oh, what the heck," Rina said. "I'll add riding on the back of a Kamen Rider to my bucket list." Pulling herself onto the taller Digimon's back, she pointed ahead. "Let's go!"

"Um, it's this way, MetallifeKuwagamon-san..."

The other police officer shook his head as he watched the trio leave. "She might be insane. What are we going to do now?"

"I'm going to call in that curfew to the boss and see if we can get it approved."

"Eh? You're still going on about that?"
"Well, why not? It makes sense, and besides, you don't want Kiraharu-san to be angry," Taiga told him. "That much is certain. Besides... Don't you know someone else with that same sort of charge-ahead temperament? Someone we might work for?"

"What about him?"

"Well... let's just mention that 'Kiraharu' is her mother's surname," Taiga said as he flipped on his police radio.

"... She's what?"

"So, just to make sure I have this straight: That monster hole thing has opened up again."

"Yes."

"Over a national landmark."

"Yes."

"With a tree full of monsters."

"Digimon, but yes."

"And we have to keep the Chinese military from blowing the whole damn thing sky-high."

"Yes."

"By ourselves."

"No! We have Darcmon with us," Meihuang insisted.

Baijiao let out a sigh that was still audible over the rumblings of the old Vespa engine. "You know, you're supposed to be a dancer. Your life isn't supposed to be this exciting."

"Isn't it great?" She beamed at him.

"Yeah, yeah. Just so you know, if I die in this, I'll haunt you and your descendants to the ends of time."

"I wouldn't have descendants," she said as she leaned in to his back.

You know, arranged marriages really aren't a bad thing, Baijiao thought to himself, glad that no one else could see his face.

Driving against the outgoing traffic, Baijiao checked the streets, confident that they were going the right way. Eventually the outgoing crowds thinned out, and the tops of a gigantic tree came into view. "That's my home!" Darcmon said, flying ahead.

"Hey, don't get ahead of yourself," Baijiao called to her. Pulling the Vespa up to the field surrounding the tree, he parked it and took off his helmet. "Gotta say, I didn't get to see it last time, but this is pretty damn impressive."

"All of the monster holes are different," Meihuang told him. "I've been to a few myself. But this
"Of course it's the prettiest; it's in China." He looked at her askance. "Do your parents know you've been running off out of the country chasing monsters?"

"Not at all!" She gave him a winning smile.

...*When she does that, it's hard to defy her unique brand of logic.* "Well, at any rate, we've beaten the military here, but for how long, we don't know. Are we expecting any backup?"

"Let me ask Felix. Felix," she pulled out her phone, switching to English. "Felix, did you send anyone our way?"

"I tried, but most of them aren't in Beijing. I did send whoever could get here, but I don't know if or when they'll be able to show up. Weirdly enough, we have a lot of people in Hong Kong," he said. "Which is good, but it's like, is supernatural phenomena big there? Because-whoa!" He ducked something she couldn't see. "Uh, call me back in a few, gotta go. Não, não! Isso não é bom!"

Baijiao made a face. "Just so you know, today's going to suck."

"What do you think we should do?" Meihuang asked. "Can we reason with them?"

"This is the government's military. Can you reason with a runaway locomotive?" He rubbed at his forehead. "No, at the least we need to be able to defend against their attacks, and maybe then stare them down. Oi, Darcmon! Who else do we have here that's got good defensive abilities?"

She was examining a part of the tree, running her hands along the scarred wood. "At least it's healing correctly... I'm sorry, did you say something?"

"I asked if there's anyone else here that has defense."

"No," she let out a sigh. "It's pretty much me. Most of the Digimon here are children and babies."

"You think you can defend against tanks and missiles by yourself?"

"Well, I'll have to, won't I?"

"Speaking of the Digimon babies," Meihuang said, peering up at the tree, "where is everyone? Last time there were so many."

Darcmon turned away from her partner. "They're in hiding. Because there are humans here."

"That'd be the last time this place came to Beijing, right?" Baijiao said. "The time you told me about, Meihuang?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's probably better that they stay in hiding," Baijiao said. "They're about to see even more human ugliness. But you have no one that can fight here at all? Not even someone that could shoot long-range weaponry down?"

She paused, but then turned back to the tree. "There isn't anyone."

"Darcmon?" Meihuang questioned.

"Hm?"
"That isn't the face of someone who's being honest about there being no one else," Meihuang told her. "What's wrong?"

"Now isn't the time to be fussy about help," Baijiao added.

"There's... a criminal locked up inside this tree," Darcmon admitted at last. "A vicious, evil Digimon that nearly destroyed this tree once. He's strong, but... he would destroy us faster than the humans would."

Meihuang frowned, putting a hand to her chin. "But Darcmon, that doesn't make any sense. If he was a threat, wouldn't the King have just killed him?"

"I don't know why he didn't. I just know he's still here." She shivered.

Baijiao folded his arms, considering. "Let's go talk to this guy."

"Oh, I knew you were going to say that!" Darcmon flared her four wings as she glared at him. "I don't think you quite understand what we're dealing with! I was there. Keramon is a force of pure destruction! If we let him out, it'll be the end of our home for sure."

"We can sit here arguing and doing nothing," he told her, "or we can take a chance that this might actually work out. I'll take responsibility for this Keramon. If we form a contract, I might be able to keep him in check."

"'Might' isn't good enough."

"Which 'might' do you prefer? That I 'might' not be able to control him, or that you 'might' not be able to defend your home?"

Darcmon pressed her lips together, then turned back to the tree, touching a branch. In front of them, a door swung inward. "Don't say I didn't warn you," she said darkly as she stepped inside.

The pair followed, the door swinging shut behind them. Compared to the still-sunlit open air outside, the inside of the tree was only dimly lit, and unsurprisingly, smelled overwhelmingly of wood. "This way," Darcmon said, leading them down a staircase. As they descended, the smell of earth became just as powerful as the smell of wood.

"Are we underground?" Meihuang asked.

"We're in the tree's taproot," Darcmon said without turning around. Stopping at the base of the stairs, she pointed ahead. "There's your new friend, human."

"Baijiao. But thanks for asking." He walked forward, Meihuang following behind him. In the dim light, he could just make out a grate stretched across the floor. Kneeling down at its edge, he asked, "I guess this is it?"

Something with long claws reached for him, and he jumped back, Meihuang letting out a little scream. "I told you," Darcmon said. "He's violent."

Baijiao knelt by the pit again, and large eyes watched him from inside the pit, not making a jump for him. "Do you understand me?" he addressed the eyes slowly.

The eyes blinked at him, and a hand reached out, slowly this time, trying to touch his phone. "Are you satisfied now?" Darcmon asked him. "We don't have much time left."
"You want this?" Baijiao asked, ignoring Darcmon as he pointed to his phone. "What do we say when we want something?"

It tilted its head. "Is he trying to teach that thing manners?" Darcmon asked.

"He is the eldest of four siblings," Meihuang told her. "He's very good with children."

The large eyes blinked at him again. "We say 'please'," Baijiao instructed, holding the phone just out of reach. "Please."

The hand drew back, the large eyes stayed on his face. And then, "Pl...ease?"

"I can get another phone," he said with a shrug. "You can't get another tree."

Darcmon gave her partner a look. "Your fiancee is stupidly stubborn."

"He's wonderful," Meihuang said with a happy sigh.

"You can get another phone," he said, raising an eyebrow. "Hey, do you understand me now?"

The eyes rolled around, then flicked back to him. "Understaaaaand."

Baijiao took a seat by the pit. "Then tell me something, Keramon. Why are you here?"

"Whyyyyy." The eyes closed, and Keramon seemed to shrink back. "Don't understaaaaand."

"You don't understand my question? Or you don't understand why?"


"He eats data," Darcmon explained. "That's how he nearly destroyed this place."

"So he's got special dietary needs. Did you assess the scale of his appetite?"

"Did I what?"

Baijiao looked over at her. "You're a terrible parent, you know."

"I am-I am not!"

"Keramon," he turned his attention back to the Digimon again. "Do you want out?"

"Want out!" The clawed hands reached for him eagerly.

Baijiao took one of the hands in his own. "Then understand. There are things you can eat, and things you cannot eat. Always ask 'please', and if they say no, don't eat it. Otherwise you'll get into trouble. Do you understand now?"
"Keramon understand."

Meihuang's phone buzzed. "Meihuang!" Saffron's voice. "Are you guys okay? I'm watching the news, and the military's going to be there any minute now."

"We have to go, 'Jiao," Meihuang told him.

"No go," Keramon protested, clinging tightly to Baijiao's hand. "No go."

"You can come with us," Baijiao said. "If."

"Iiiiiif?"

"You have to be my partner," Baijiao instructed. "You have to listen when I say no. Understand?"

"Understand. Please?"

"Darcmon, blow the lid off this thing," he instructed, turning back to her. "We've got to get up to the surface as fast as possible."

She bit her lip, but seemed to have lost her will to argue, and touched some controls on the wall. The grate slid back from the hole. Baijiao caught Keramon's hand as it slithered out, pulling him up. "Aww," Meihuang said, observing the large head and spindly arms. "He's kind of cute."

"He wasn't cute when he was Infermon," Darcmon said. "His appetite for data was uncontrollable. It was only by reverting him back to Keramon, to this state, that we were able to contain him. Well, what's done is done." Darcmon led the way up the stairs.

"Frog-humping son of a bitch," Keramon muttered, crawling into Baijiao's arms.

"Excuse me, what?"

Baijiao coughed. "I may or may not have been looking at American shows. You know, for accuracy."

Meihuang giggled as they made their way back up. Outside, the tanks were now in sight, pointing their turrets at the tree. "Shit," Darcmon said as she spotted them. "They're here."

"Holy testicle Tuesday," Keramon offered helpfully.

"Please wait!" Meihuang called toward the tanks. "None of the monsters here mean you any harm!"

"If we destroy this tree, we'll destroy our national landmark, too!" Baijiao added in.

Silence greeted them from the tanks. "Our presence alone may be a deterrent," Baijiao said. "They'll be reluctant to fire on-"

One of the tanks swiveled around to point at the tree, and fired. Darcmon was in the air within a mere breath, striking the missile with her spear and sending it sky-high. Keramon watched it go, then turned to Baijiao. "Please?"

"You can eat that?"

Keramon nodded, then opened his mouth wide, displaying tiny tapered teeth, as if to assure Baijiao that a missile would fit. Another shot, this one aimed at Darcmon, but Keramon was in front of her,
catching the missile in its teeth. Under his long claws, the physical object turned to strings of numbers, which Keramon ate with a contented look.

A pause. No one on either side really seemed to know how to respond to a missile eating Digimon. "Is it because we're in the Digizone...?" Darcmon said.

"Then we'll use that," Meihuang spoke up. "We don't want to be aggressive, anyway. Let them bring the fight to us. Darcmon, give Keramon support - take out anything he doesn't get."

The shots resumed, and Keramon leapt about with surprising agility, catching the missiles and eating them one at a time, with Darcmon deflecting the rest. Baijiao looked at his phone as it began to shake in his hand. "Wow, he's really going all out, isn't he?"

"That's good, isn't it?"

"I wonder what this does," Baijiao said, touching something on the phone.

Keramon paused, looking at Baijiao as his outline became filled with light. "No!" Darcmon said in alarm. "He's evolving into Infermon!"

The figure that emerged from the light was now more humanesque, dressed in purple and green armor with feathery shoulders. "That's Infermon?" Meihuang said. "He's kind of pretty."

"No, that's not," Darcmon said, sounding puzzled. "I'm not sure who that is."

"Argomon, so the D-Tai says," Baijiao said.

The tanks had stopped firing for a bit, unsure of what to make of the sudden change (or of the fact that none of their ammunition was landing). "Hm... I think I understand a little more now," Argomon said, his low, deep voice a sharp contrast from Keramon's.

"Argomon?"

He looked to Darcmon. "It seems I've caused you some trouble in the past." Then to Baijiao. "I'll be relying on you."

Baijiao cracked a grin in response. "Likewise."

"We're not going to be outdone, Darcmon!" Meihuang said, holding out her phone. "Let's protect your home!"

Darcmon flew up into the pink-colored light. "Darcmon, shin evolve to...!"

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"I don't think they're going to hold off much longer, sis."

"I agree." Saffron folded her arms as she looked south toward the Golden Gate Bridge and the city itself. At the end of the bridge, a number of police cars had already gathered, and beyond them on the bridge itself, a similar number of Togemogumon, bristling at them. Looking back at her car, she asked, "Harley?"

He shook his head. His team must have been making progress, for his shoulders were less tense, his expression indicating he was less likely to tear someone's head off. "We need more time. This isn't going to be solved any time soon."
"I figured as much." Saffron took a breath. "Harley, can you step away from that for a minute?"

He looked up at her, and blinked. "Probably. At least, for a minute or two. You're not going to try to make me get some sleep, are you?"

"I'm not that foolish," she said with a slight smile. Turning back to the standoff, she continued in a voice almost too soft to hear. "We need to fight."

Surprise flashed across his face. "I didn't think I'd hear you suggest that."

"What choice do we have? It sounds silly, I know, but we can't keep them from fighting except to fight ourselves."

He hopped out of the car, walking over to her and putting a hand on her trembling shoulders. "It's okay. You don't have to force yourself. There's nothing wrong with being against violence, you know. If more people were like you, maybe our world wouldn't be so screwed up to begin with."

"But I do. If it comes down to feeling guilty that I've broken my morals, or feeling guilty that someone got injured or died when I could've prevented it... I know which of the two will let me sleep at night. Harley, we have to fight." She met his eyes. Behind those firm hands was a person who was just as reluctant to violence as she was, if not more so. New York, for all its glamour, was not a peaceful place to grow up.

He turned away from her. "I'll call Felix and let him know we need help."

"No, Harley. They have their own jobs to do. We can't hide behind them any longer. We need to pull our own weight and defend our town with our own hands. We have to stop dragging Floramon and Gazimon down."

"That's the wrong way of looking at it," Floramon protested. "When we met, I wasn't looking to protect or be protected. I just wanted to escape. If you'd been the kind of person who jumped headlong into battle and forced me to evolve... I wouldn't have been able to stand it. You haven't dragged me down, Saffron. If anything, you've pulled me up. Now, I want to evolve and help your homeland."

Harley looked over to Gazimon, his gaze asking a silent question. "You know, I grew up around fighting," he said, scratching at one ear. "The strong rule, the weak get eaten kind of deal. As far as I'm concerned, humanity's the best thing that could have happened to me. We didn't fight much at all, that's true. But you fought just as hard as anyone, Harley, and you still are. You were the one that taught me you don't have to fight all the time. But any time you need me, I'll be ready to fight."

He looked back to Saffron, and let out a sigh through his nose. "What do you suggest we do, then? We can't Influence outside the Digizone, and we'll have to get through the cops to get to the Digizone. Which will be frowned upon, I'm sure."

"I know. I wasn't planning on Influencing." She locked eyes with him. "I want to try the kikan shinka."

"We can't even dog paddle, and you want to go off the high dive?"

"Didn't Mirai and Felix and everyone say that it was more about connecting with another person than it was pulling some kind of secret out of the D-Tai? If it's connecting with another person, is there anyone in our group that's more qualified than we are? They've known each other for months. We've known each other for years. I want to know you for many more years to come. We... absolutely can do this."
He held her gaze, then let out another sigh of resignation, stepping in close to her. Touching a hand to her cheek, he said, "You know, you are the most aggressive pacifist I've ever met."

"Don't tell me that. Tell me I'm pretty and that you like my guitar playing."

"When this is over, I'll tell you anything you want." He took her hand in his, then pulled out his phone with his free hand, holding it at arm's length. "Here goes nothing."

She interlaced her fingers with his, his calluses from endless days of typing built on already-roughened hands brushing against her knuckles. Closing her eyes, she could hear his breathing slow down, becoming more calm, and she matched herself to it, waiting for their heartbeats to align. With her eyes closed, she became further attuned to the presence of her Digimon partner, and her human partner's partner as well. Surely, this sensation was what it was like to become one with the universe.

Her phone felt warm in her hand. At first, the glow from her phone was nothing unusual, but then it took on an orange color, and increased in intensity. "Oh," she couldn't help but murmur, squeezing Harley's hand as his phone emitted an equal gray light.

Floramon took Gazimon's paw as they entered the light. "Floramon, kikan shinka to... Rosemon!"

"Gazimon, kikan shinka to... Duftmon!"

Rosemon turned to her partner with her new form, and though Saffron could no longer see her eyes, she knew the expression they must have held. "How's my aesthetic now?" she asked with a grin.

"A little risque, but I think it'll work." Saffron gave her an OK sign.

"I look pretty cool now, right, partner?" Duftmon's eyes twinkled through the metal helmet he now wore.

"Yeah, but can you back it up?" Harley smiled. "I'll be relying on you."

"You see?" Saffron leaned in to him, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. "When we really need to, we can do it, too."

His eyes crinkled at the corners, his expression soft in the pre-dawn light. "Can you handle it from here? I need to go back to work. If Felix calls for you, tell him to go jump off a bridge."

"Be nice to him; he's Canadian." Saffron turned to the other Digimon. "Let's go play mediator."

Rosemon offered her a hand, and she took it, letting the taller Digimon place her on her shoulder. "This is a strange reversal of roles," Saffron noted as Rosemon leapt into the sky, her cape and long hair trailing out behind her.

"I know, right? Though I won't say I mind it."

Duftmon took to the sky next to them, wings gliding so effortlessly that Saffron was sure there was some clear violation of physics involved. Then again, here she was riding on the shoulder of a sort-of bondage queen, who seemed to be in the air by sheer willpower alone. "You know, you Digimon make no sense."

"How so?"

"I'll explain gravity to you some time." Saffron pointed ahead. "Down there on the bridge, that's a
good place to start."

"Got it. You down there, make way!" Duftmon flew ahead, aiming for the neutral area on the bridge between the Digimon and the police. They backed up hurriedly to let him land, and Rosemon came to land right next to him, Saffron still perched perfectly on his shoulder.

"It's the legendary Duftmon!" one of the Togemogumon said. "Did you come to save us?"

"Legendary? I kind of like that." Duftmon gave the group a nod. "Don't worry. Things will be fine now."

"Good morning!" Saffron called to the officers. "Sorry to have you out here so early. Would anyone like coffee? I could call my boss."

"Let the girl go, monster!" one of the cops called through a megaphone. "Then keep your hands where we can see them!"

"Saffron, they're picking on me," Rosemon whimpered. "How rude, they should be telling me that I'm pretty."

"Let your boyfriend do that." Nearby, Duftmon sneezed, causing some of the cops to tighten their grips on their firearms. "Look, everyone, I need you to listen. You're both scared of each other and I don't blame you. This isn't a normal occurrence and things are in motion to return everything back to the way it's supposed to be. But until then, we need to stay calm and not invoke violence against each other. This will be over soon and everyone will go home peacefully. That's what we want; for everyone to be able to go home."

"What are you planning on doing?" one of the officers asked.

"I'm not violent," she said, folding her arms. "What I'm going to do is nothing more than stay right here. I'll make sure that no one on either side gets hurt." Saffron turned to Duftmon. "I know you probably don't want to go too far, but can you look around the rest of the zone and make sure there's no problems?"

"I'll be back soon," he said, taking off.

Saffron stood next to Rosemon, the pair of them a barrier between the two sides. Neither the police nor the Digimon moved, no one backing down or coming closer. Then, at last, one of the Togemogumon called out hopefully: "Hey, do you guys know how to play Rocks, Rocks?"

Behind her, MetalEtemon was having a karaoke session with a mixed group of humans and Digimon, which was making it hard for Mirai to hear the conversation she was having in her D-Tai. To make matters worse, the other side seemed just as noisy. "So that's the situation," Eranna said, a blue humanesque Digimon with wings flapping next to her. "Hey, is that a concert? I see we were on the same page."

"It's sort of a concert. Well, if singing and dancing is keeping people calm, keep it up, Miss Eranna."

"Hey, I'm a performer. We perform. Right, Seirenmon?" she added to the Digimon next to her.

Mirai's phone buzzed in her hand. "Hold on, let me let you go. I've got another call." Switching
over to the insistently buzzing icon, she nearly dropped the phone at the face she saw. "S-Sayo-chan?!

"Oh my god, Mirai-chan," Sayo moaned, so distressed that she used an English phrase. "So many babies!"

"Babies?"

"Babies! Baby Digimon! Look," she said, turning the phone so Mirai could see Prariemon, surrounded by bouncing blobs of Digimon. "And they're all hungry!"

"Uh..." Mirai looked up at LordKnightmon, who was peering over her shoulder. "What do baby Digimon eat?"

He shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I haven't been a baby in quite some time."

"Well, it's not so much the food that's the problem," Sayo said. "They seem to be taking to baby food and formula quite well. The problem is that we don't have enough hands. My mom brought all her friends to help, but..."

"That's the Machine Zone, isn't it?" LordKnightmon said. "Human girl-Sayochan-there should be a group of ToyAgumon that live there. They're the ones that are normally responsible for those children, so they should be able to help."

"ToyAgumon, got it."

"You can use the D-Tai to look them up, Sayo-chan," Mirai added. "So you know what they-" Sayo had already hung up. "-look like."

"I suppose I should've told her that they're pretty shy and don't like outsiders," LordKnightmon commented.

"Well, she'll be all right; she's got Prariemon with her." Mirai set down her phone in her lap with a sigh. "At least nowhere seems to have blown up yet."

"Yes, but how long is that going to last?"

Faimon came swooping down from the sky, making a neat landing next to Mirai. "Your people are doing well keeping the peace, LordKnightmon. Thanks for watching Mirai for me."

"Of course. Both Shibuyas have a lot in common, after all." LordKnightmon put a hand to his chin. "Is this going to be a permanent state of affairs? I can't imagine the King will be pleased with this."

"I really don't know what's going on in his head right now, but I hope this isn't permanent. It's not fair to either world."

"Oi, kiddo," MetalEtemon called over. "Someone here to see you."

"See me? In Shibuya?" Mirai stood up, tucking her phone into her pocket.

"Hello, Youseimon," a voice greeted as a lionlike Digimon rounded the corner. "It's been a while, hasn't it? Although I suppose it's 'Faimon' right now."

"GrapLeomon. I... didn't expect to see you here. It's dangerous to be in one of these realized zones right now."
"It's dangerous to be anywhere," he countered calmly. "So what are you going to do about it?"

Their eyes met, and neither spoke for a long time. "Can you get us a path to the castle, GrapLeomon?" Youseimon asked at last.

"Yes. But what are you going to do there?"

"Cut this problem off at the source, if we can. Mirai... Call the others. We'll confront Ashurimon ourselves."
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The world's Digizones realize all at once, causing a global crisis of an unprecedented level. The DigiTravelers, a handful of children and their Digimon allies, spearhead the effort with their supporters all over the world to keep the two worlds from breaking out into war. New partnerships are formed and new allies join the fight. Thanks to their combined efforts, a tenuous peace is held. GrapLeomon shows up then to guide them to the Digital World and their final battle. But what place will they venture to next?

Their feet all landed lightly on the pathway of light which stretched before and behind. "Ashurimon's castle," GrapLeomon stated, pointing forward.

"We've been there before," Raptomon said. "Though this time, there won't be any turning back."

They all nodded in agreement, an unspoken promise. "Hey, look," Rusalkamon said, pointing. "I can see the other zones."

"They look like they're covered in an aurora or something," Andre said. "Is that the effect of them being in the human world?"

Milomon chewed on a finger. "Something like this can't be good for either world."

"I agree," GrapLeomon said, turning toward the castle. "Therefore, let us make haste."

Five humans and five Digimon followed, each quiet and solemn. Mirai, watching her partner, noticed her brooding expression. "GrapLeomon," she said at last, "if you thought the Digizones were harmful in the first place, why did you allow me to use them?"

"Have I ever stopped you from doing anything?" He continued walking without turning around. "You put your faith in the power of humans. Perhaps I, too, wished to see this mysterious power."

"Why didn't you try pairing up with the humans, yourself?" Milomon asked. "If you were curious about them."

GrapLeomon glanced back with a slight smile. "In another time and place, perhaps, that might have been appropriate."

The castle loomed closer as they approached, silent and dark. "I don't see any movement," Hestria said. "You'd think at the least they'd have some form of security."

"What's the point? You defeated Ishtarimon. There isn't any security that can stand up to you any longer, save possibly Nabimon and Ashurimon." With that, GrapLeomon walked up to the front gate, placing a paw on the thick wood.

"Even so, are you sure we should just be waltzing in like we own the place?" Felix asked.

It was Peledramon that responded. "More that there isn't a point to sneaking in. Nabimon will be aware. He'll confront us on his terms, no matter what we do."

Milomon let out a sigh as he walked through the gate. "How many times have I passed through these gates, I wonder. Before I got into trouble, anyway. I wonder what Mardukkimon saw in me
that he brought me here. Not that I can ask him any longer."

"You couldn't tell?" GrapLeomon looked over at him. "It's because Asarluhimon is one of the Celestial Generals. Or has the potential to be, anyway."

"Surely you're joking. Why would I have the potential to be a Celestial General?"

"Because of who Asarluhimon was prior to the Sea of Chaos swallowing the world. Surely you sensed it yourself, when you were in that form. The five Celestial Generals, yourself, Ashurimon, and one other. You are all the same kind."

Milomon paused, regarding GrapLeomon askance. "What exactly do you know of me, before the Sea of Chaos?"

GrapLeomon looked at him, then continued into the castle's interior. "Only Ashurimon truly knows the details." Walking forward again, he then paused, his back to the group. "Youseimon. There is something I should tell you in regards to the detail of your birth."

"What do you mean?"

"I think you should start at the beginning," Felix said. "What's this Sea of Chaos swallowing the world thing? No one's really done a good job of explaining this."

"Some time in the past, the Digital World fell into crisis," GrapLeomon began. "Because of an overwhelming dark power, which brought the Sea of Chaos to this world to swallow everything. Ashurimon, who was the sole survivor of that catastrophe, had to start recreating the world by himself."

"But what does that have to do with me, GrapLeomon?" Youseimon asked.

He didn't answer right away. "When he began pulling the corroded data from the sea and forming it into the zones, so Ashurimon told me, he found something. A DigiEgg, untouched by the sea's toxic effects, for a reason he didn't know. That DigiEgg... turned out to be you."

"You mean she came from the sea?" Felix frowned. "She's not a mermaid."

"Who knows? That is what Ashurimon told me, and I believe him to be honest in this instance. It would explain why he hates and fears you, but also why he wanted to keep you alive. He wanted your secrets."

Youseimon pressed her lips together. "I have no secrets. I remember nothing from the time before I was born or any lives I might have lived prior. I know that my body isn't affected by the Sea of Chaos for some reason, but I don't know why myself."

"I figured that might be the case, even with you having progressed so much in such a short time. Still, I wish you could have told us what happened in those days."

"So you're saying that you don't trust what Ashurimon told you that happened?" Andre asked. "That maybe something else caused the Sea of Chaos?"

"No, that isn't it. On the contrary, I think he is truthful in that he was the opposing force to the Sea of Chaos's encroachment, and the only one who lived to tell the tale," GrapLeomon said. "The bigger problem is that we don't know what our world was like before the Sea of Chaos came. Even our 'ancient texts' were recreated from his knowledge and power. There's most assuredly bias in there. And there's also things that he may not know. I believe that Youseimon was a part of that
prior world."

"It may very well be," Nabimon's voice spoke, seeming to come from all around. "She may be of that prior world. But that world no longer exists. In our world, she is nothing more than a glitch. She is a misplaced creation who does not obey our rules. She has only caused chaos and destruction."

"Shut your trap, asshole," Hestria snapped. "Get out here so we can properly pound your face into the dirt. We're busy people, so don't waste our time."

"Oh? How very confident you are, human girl. But you can't bluster your way around facts."

"You can't turn your opinions into fact just because you want it to be that way," Mirai said. "Youseimon is not a glitch."

"Then pray tell, how do you explain her existence? Her immunity to the plague upon our world, which no other resident in the entire Digital World has?"

"I can't disagree with him," Youseimon said, causing Mirai to look at her. "It's true that there's something fundamentally different about my code that allows me to survive the sea of chaos. It's true that I've caused problems for this world. But if you think I'm going to roll over and be deleted just because you tell me to-"

"Of course I wouldn't expect that. Glitches are notoriously hard to get rid of," Nabimon said. "To the point where they'd prioritize their own existence over anyone else. Even over the entire Digital World."

"Oh, shut up!" Andre shouted. "Who's prioritizing their existence over others? We have a very small group of humans and Digimon who are trying to keep these worlds from falling apart! What are you doing to help keep these two worlds from being permanently messed up, Mr. High and Mighty? Didn't you cause this problem by realizing all the zones at once?"

Milomon nodded agreement, looking to Youseimon. "There's a lot of Digimon out there putting their trust in you right now, to save their worlds. They believe in you, so don't get cold feet now, oh mighty leader."

"I had no intention to."

Nabimon sighed, and at last appeared before them, seemingly nothing more than a small, fragile old man. "As I thought, it's impossible to reason with someone who is incapable of such comprehension. It's time to clear the Digital World of you glitches."

Youseimon took a step forward, but GrapLeomon put out a paw. "Will you... let me handle this?" he said, his eyes on Nabimon. "I'll create an opening for you. You make your way to Ashurimon."

"You offend me, GrapLeomon. Lord Ashurimon thought highly of you," Nabimon said, raising a hand. "You were more trustworthy than any others. We even placed you in charge of the reeducation. To think that even you would glitch to this degree."

"My loyalty has always been to justice," he replied. "My only interest is seeing whose justice is true. Ashurimon's. Youseimon's. I have been watching them both. One of them will win this conflict, and the other will fade into history. I want to see which is which."

"You imagine Lord Ashurimon can lose?" Nabimon gave him a look down his long nose. "Where would you get such a stupid idea?"
"Why," GrapLeomon shifted into an offensive pose, "don't you ask Mardukkimon?"

Nabimon's eyes narrowed, and he didn't answer right away. "Go," he said to Youseimon. "I'll follow when I am able."

"GrapLeomon," Mirai began, but Youseimon took her hand, leading her away.

With only a slight pause, the others followed, slipping into a narrow hallway and closing the door behind them. "I know the layout of the castle," Peledramon said. "Ashurimon spends most of his time on the upper levels. I'll lead the way from here on."

They walked in quiet, partly from fear of being detected, either by Nabimon or some other party, and partly from being unsure of what could possibly be said. "Are you sure he'll be all right?" Milomon asked at last. "That's Nabimon he's dealing with."

Youseimon followed right behind Peledramon, keeping her back to the rest of the group. "No. I expect that he'll sacrifice himself to slow Nabimon down."

"Then shouldn't we go back?" Rusalkamon asked. "We can kikan shinka and work together to take him down, GrapLeomon doesn't have to die-"

Felix put a hand on her head. "We need to save our energy for the real fight," he told her. "This isn't going to be easy. Or pretty."

"Are you saying we should just leave him to die?" Milomon argued.

"We will not turn back," Youseimon said. "We can no longer turn back. We have a task in front of us. Going back would only waste his efforts in trying. It would be the highest disrespect we could pay to his spirit. And he is one that I must not disrespect."

Silence fell on the group again. Mirai, after the weeks turning into months that she had spent with her partner, could tell everything that she wasn't saying by the angle of her shoulders, the eyes which focused straight ahead. "He must be important to you," she murmured so that no one but Youseimon could hear as she put a hand on her partner's head.

"What are these rooms?" Felix asked as they moved up a corridor.

Peledramon turned back to look at him. "I'm not sure. Kuroko and myself didn't venture out more than we needed to."

Mirai cast a look over at the other Japanese girl. Kuroko's face didn't clue her in to anything - not the false arrogance, pain, indecision, conflict or extreme shyness she had shown before. Her eyes, too, were looking forward.

"Do you think we should take a look around?" Andre asked. "I mean, know your enemies, right?"

"Most of these rooms would be under Nabimon's domain," Peledramon said. "Ashurimon doesn't use most of the castle, but Nabimon runs all his projects."

"Why didn't you say that before?" Felix said. "We can use that, if we can figure it out in time. The secrets to his forced Digizone realization might be around here. Or possibly even his own weakness."

"I doubt he'll have a weakness that easy," Youseimon said, "but the point about the forced Digizones is very good. If we can find the power source that's running this program, it would make
it easier for Harley and his team to disassemble it."

"Then let's take a look," Andre opened the nearest door, peering inside. "What sort of thing would we be looking for?"

"I don't know what Nabimon uses," Youseimon said. "We have a bunch of equipment, but Kokuwamon is the power source for our operations. It won't be that easy for-"

Mirai had opened another door, and turned to face Youseimon. "You said Kokuwamon, right?"

"Yes... But Kokuwamon is back at our central camp with Impmon, he's not here to help."

Mirai looked at her, then silently pushed the door open. Inside, computer equipment of some unknown origin, but that Mirai had seen before, lined the far wall. And working that equipment was Kokuwamon, electricity crackling between his pincers as he fed the program power. "Isn't that your ally?" Milomon asked. "What's he doing here?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Hestria entered the room, Raptomon on her shoulder.

Kokuwamon looked up as she entered, then let out a squeak, attempting to hide under the control panels. "Oh! Strangers! Why are there strangers here?"

"What do you mean, strangers? We've met before!" Milomon stormed over to Kokuwamon. "You turncoat, why are you helping Ashurimon now?"

"Hold up, Milomon," Youseimon said. "That's a Kokuwamon, all right. But it isn't our Kokuwamon."

Milomon looked at her, then backed away from Kokuwamon, who was attempting to become as small as possible. "Hey, don't be afraid," Rusalkamon said, crouching next to the machine Digimon. "We won't hurt you."

It looked up at her, red eyes glowing. "Are you... Nabimon-san's friends?"

"Sure, we'll go with that," Felix said, taking a look at the monitors before pulling out his phone.

"When is Nabimon-san coming back?"

"He isn't coming back," Youseimon said. "What's the purpose of this program?"

"Oh." The red eyes dimmed briefly. "When is GrapLeomon-san coming back?"

Youseimon paused, then looked away. "He isn't coming back, either. What's the purpose of this program?"

"I think," Felix said, "though I'm no expert like Harley, that this is the same kind of code we took from Nabimon when we rescued Peledramon. It might be our culprit. I'm trying to connect with Harley now."

"Hello?" It was Saffron who answered. "Felix, is something the matter? We're a little busy." Behind her, Duftmon could be seen flying overhead.

"Nice to see you, too. Is Harley still working on the program?"

"Yes. But it's painfully slow. We're actually having more luck with the San Francisco police, which is saying something."
"We found something that might speed it up," Felix told her. "We found code that I think might be the active part of this on their end. I'm going to see if I can use my D-Tai to scan it somehow."

"Hold on, I'm passing you over to Harley."

The image on the screen spun around, and then was replaced with Harley's sleep-deprived face. "Okay, we should be able to do this. There's a data transfer function built in to the D-Tai. Do you know where it is?"

"I've familiarized myself with all of them, although I might not have used them all yet. Your girlfriend looks much better than you do, by the way."

"She always does."

Kokuwamon uncurled from the floor, looking on with interest as Felix pulled his phone out, setting it on the flattest part of the panel. "Hey, Kokuwamon," he said, "does this panel have a phone jack?"

It looked at him, then typed on the closest panel. A portion of the wall slid open, offering a cord to plug in. "Okay, Harley, you have incoming," Felix said.

"Oh!" Kokuwamon looked at the phone as it began transmitting. "Is that the D-Tai?"

"You know of it?" Milomon asked.

Kokuwamon reached for Felix's phone. "If it's just the D-Tai you're interested in, take a look at mine instead," Andre offered, holding it out.

A bit of electricity arced between the pincers as it took the phone lovingly, touching one hand to the screen. "This code has gotten so magnificent," it sighed happily. "Even beyond my expectations."

"What do you know of the D-Tai?" Hestria asked it.

"Oh. I'm the one that programmed it."

"Wait," Felix rounded on the Kokuwamon, "you made this? For what purpose? What all did you program into this?"

"I don't really remember," Kokuwamon said, its eyes dimming. "It's become so much more than it was. Like Digimon themselves, the D-Tai is a program that evolves. It's made in part from Digimon code."

Felix put a hand to his chin, digesting that. "You should leave here," Mirai told the Kokuwamon. "It's dangerous here. If you leave, you can be free."

"Free?" It tilted its head. "I am not allowed to leave this room."


"But what about GrapLeomon-san? He is the one who told me I must remain here."

Milomon paused, glancing over at Youseimon. "You should leave this place," Youseimon told the Kokuwamon. "Not because anyone ordered you to. Not because anyone ordered you not to. Think for yourself in the future."
"She's right," Milomon said. "You must have family or someone to return to, right?"

"I don't know family," Kokuwamon said. "I don't know what's out there. Isn't it scary?"

"It is scary," Youseimon agreed. "And it's painful. But it's also joyous and wonderful. The freedom to choose your own path, and the things you will experience on that path, are both things that you can only experience for yourself. No amount of description from us will tell you enough."

Kokuwamon looked at her, and the rest of the group. "What do you want to do?" Rusalkamon said. "Is there something you want?"

The eyes went so dim, Mirai thought they'd gone out altogether. "The D-Tai... Its code is out there. I wouldn't mind seeing all the ways it's evolved."

"Then go." Youseimon stepped back, and the rest of the group did as well, clearing a path to the door.

Kokuwamon looked around, and then stood up on its stubby legs, walking out the door. "You should have invited him to join your group," Andre said.

"I don't have that right," Youseimon replied. "It was because of me that GrapLeomon had the D-Tai program made, after all."

"I'm not saying that I like his methodology," Milomon said, "but you saw that Kokuwamon's face, right? He was proud of what he'd made. So I don't think it was all bad."

The corners of Youseimon's mouth twitched. "He wasn't proud of anything, since that Kokuwamon was female."

"... How can you tell?"

"I've finished scanning the code," Felix announced, disconnecting his phone from the jack. "So we should probably get a move on and let Harley's team handle the rest of that."

"This way, then." Peledramon slithered onto Kuroko's shoulders, pointing toward the hallway.

Mirai paused as the others filtered out of the room, looking to her partner. "Youseimon?" She couldn't see her expression as Youseimon's back was turned, but she knew the slump of those shoulders.

"Well," she said, more to herself than to Mirai, "I never expected that he was perfect."

"You've all had to do difficult things." Mirai briefly touched her shoulder. "Let's go. We'll make it so those difficult things aren't as numerous in the future."

Youseimon turned to look at her, and smiled. "Yes, you're right."

Peledramon's direction led them upstairs, and then out into a massive open room, lined with columns and set in marble. "Fancy," Felix observed. "This the throne room or something?"

"It's an audience hall, yes," Kuroko spoke up. "The King sometimes sees visitors here." Then realizing she'd addressed his question, she ducked away behind Mirai.

Felix raised his eyebrows. "We're not going to eat you, you know." Then looking over at Hestria, he added, "Well, she might."
"Laugh it up, Canada boy."

Andre put his fingers to a temple. "Just ignore them, Kuroko. You're here with us. That's enough of a show of trust in you that you should feel free to speak."

"He's right, Kuroko-san," Mirai said. "You're part of the team."

She gripped Mirai's sleeve, not looking up, but her expression seemed pleased. On her shoulders, Peledramon snapped to attention, leaning forward. "I smell data."

"Data?" Felix held up his phone. "Something else related to their programs?"

"Not that kind of data," Youseimon told him. All of the Digimon were now tense, on alert, focusing on the doorway at the front of the hall. "The human equivalent, I suppose, would be the smell of blood."

Mirai felt herself growing just as tense as the Digimon looked. From the hallway, they heard footsteps that approached, and then the door opened. She held her breath, a breath that caught in her throat as Nabimon stepped inside, looking just as he had before. "That's enough," he said to the group, his voice a deadly calm. "This is as far as you go."

"Where's GrapLeomon?" Milomon demanded of Nabimon.

"He is in the same place I am about to send all of you." He unfurled the scrolls from his sleeves. "Oblivion."

"So be it, Nabimon." Youseimon's shoulders trembled, her hands clenching into fists, but her voice was just as calm, and just as filled with murderous intent. "If you want a fight, I will make you regret that for the rest of your short life."

"Let's kikan, everyone," Mirai said. She pulled out her phone, and the others followed.

After a pause, Kuroko held hers out as well, her arm trembling a bit. Andre took her free hand, holding onto it. "Don't be afraid. It'll work out."

"That's not what I'm afraid of."

"Then don't be afraid," he told her, "because you belong here."

With a wave of his arm, Nabimon sent the scrolls flying at the Digimon, but the light from the D-Tais poured fourth all at once. Red, blue, green, purple, and yellow all came together, bouncing off each other and growing more intense, deflecting the scrolls as if they were merely the paper they appeared to be. Titanimon, Asarluhimon, Enchantemon, and Hoatzimon emerged from the light, and then the one that had been Peledramon came forth as well, seeming to shatter the air around herself.

Larger than Hoatzimon or Asarluhimon, she made the massive audience hall look small. Her appearance reminded Mirai of a Chinese dragon, similar to her other forms, but this time a deep, darker blue than Peledramon or Betedramon, with fur that sparkled in the light. Clouds hung from her claws like tufts of fur. "Peledramon, kikan shinka to... Asteridramon."

"Do as you like," Nabimon said. "It won't help you. Destiny Record!"

"Midsummer's Calm!" Titanimon brought her spear up, and the scrolls fell to the ground, as if they were snakes that had been tamed.
"Going to need more than that, old man!" Enchantemon told him. "Riding Hood's Wolf!" Her shadow elongated, taking on the form of a wolf, teeth and claws outstretched as it dove for Nabimon.

"Unwritten Calling," he said, circling one of the scrolls around the attack, squeezing it into nothingness. "Two can play at that game."

"Let's see how you handle more, then. Bird of Paradise!" Hoatzimon shot at him from the right.

"Thuban's Sorrow!" Asteridramon drew her clouds together, sending a funnel of black toward Nabimon from the left.

"Kelmh Aleseth!" Asarluhimon took to the sky, hovering overhead and directing the many metal swords of his wings at Nabimon from above.

"Unwritten Calling." Nabimon's scrolls took all three at once, and though the force of the wind from Asteridramon's attack pushed him back, he remained unharmed.

The five humans watched as the Digimon clashed, the level of their power throwing the air around in violent winds. Andre lifted his gun, sighting it, then lowered it. "No good. I can't get a clear shot."

"It probably wouldn't do much good," Hestria told him. "This is beyond the level of humans. There isn't anything we can do right now but watch."

"And it's turning into an endurance match," Mirai said as she watched Titanimon nullify another attack of Nabimon's. "Who's going to wear out first?"

"No, that's not true," Felix said, his eyes taking in every detail of the rapidly-moving fight. "There's still something we can do in this battle."

"What did you have in mind?"

He gave her a smile, tapping a finger against his temple. "We use the thing between our ears. I think I'm getting an idea, but I need some help. Who thinks they can get over to the two sides of the hall, where the windows are, without getting killed?"

"I can handle that," Hestria said.

"I'll go too," Kuroko spoke up. When Felix looked over at her, she didn't shy away, but pressed her lips together. "I want to help, too."

Felix glanced to Mirai, who nodded agreement. "All right. Everyone hold onto your phones; we're going to use the D-Tai to communicate."

They all watched the screen as Felix typed his instructions, then gave them a nod and a grin. Kuroko and Hestria looked at each other before moving off without a word, Kuroko to the left and Hestria to the right. Felix sat down cross-legged, his phone resting on his knee as he kept one eye on it and one eye on the battle. "I don't know what you're planning," Mirai said, "but I know well enough to trust your plans."

"Why, thank you, oh mighty leader. Let's just hope your partner feels the same."

"She will."
His phone beeped, and from her position halfway down the hall, Kuroko gave him a V-sign. "Okay, let's see if we can pull this off."

Felix sent his instructions, and then each of the team typed in their messages to their partners, instructing them of the battle plan. Although they didn't respond in words, they all looked to Titanimon briefly, who looked over at Mirai, giving her a brief nod. Mirai gave her a thumbs up in return.

Titanimon landed opposite Nabimon, positioning him between herself and Kuroko's side of the wall. He sent his scrolls at her again, but instead of breaking his attack, she charged in full-on, using her spear to slice through some but not all of the wrapping, clinging scrolls. Even as she did so, Asarluhimon launched his attack, barely missing them both as it impacted against the far wall.

"Quetzalcoatl Heart!" Hoatzimon drew her wings back, filling the room with a powerful wind force.

"Thuban's Sorrow!" Peledramon added her attack, pushing it to even higher forces.

"Swan's Wild!" Enchantemon pulled a white feather from inside her hat, flinging it out and letting it multiply into a vortex that connected with the other one.

The three attacks converged on Titanimon and Nabimon, pushing even harder, flinging them both through the hole in the wall. Once outside, Titanimon used the tornado to push them down, into the Sea of Chaos below. The pair disappeared with a splash, the waves settling almost as soon as they vanished under its surface.

"I hope this works," Asteridramon said, landing near the hole and looking out.

"There's probably only two Digimon in the entire world that can survive the Sea of Chaos," Asarluhimon said. "Nabimon isn't one of them."

The rest of the group came to stand by the hole, watching and waiting. "What do we do if she doesn't come up?" Hoatzimon asked.

"What can we do?" Enchantemon shook her head. "We can't survive the sea ourselves, even at our level."

"Don't worry." Mirai had her phone in her hand, pointing it out at the sea. "I'll know if something happens."

At last, the water's surface broke, and Titanimon shot into the sky, coming to land on the edge of the floor, collapsing into a sitting position. Injuries were apparent on her back and wings. "Titanimon!" Enchantemon said in alarm, kneeling next to her. "Did the sea hurt you after all?"

She shot them a look. "What do you mean, did the sea hurt me? This was all of you," she said, flicking her wings for emphasis.

Enchantemon let out a little laugh as she pulled the other humanoid Digimon to her feet, supporting her weight. "I'm fine," Titanimon complained, "I just need a moment to rest."

A splash from the sea caused them all to turn, and Nabimon latched onto the edge of the hole, pulling himself up hand by hand. Unlike Titanimon, his exposure to the sea was evident; data leaked off his form like steam rising from a pot. "You truly are a glitch," he ground out. "I cannot die... not without protecting Lord Ashurimon...!"
"Get away!" Asarluhim swatted his partner back with a paw, shielding him with his wings. The others reacted similarly, Asteridramon taking the time to swat Nabimon away. It was just in time; even as he fell away from the wall, Nabimon's body turned white, then exploded outward with a massive quantity of energy. Shockwaves rippled through the hall and the castle, breaking the walls and columns apart.

Hoatzimon spread her wings, trying to shield her partner and Titanimon and Mirai at the same time. Through the dust and the debris, she heard Asteridramon squeal, her head and shoulders pelted with heavy rocks. Moments later, Kuroko let out a cry as well. "Kuroko!" Mirai called, then coughed as dust went in her nose and mouth.

"Over here!" Felix's voice sounded muffled, and as the dust cleared, she could see him and Enchantemon, trying to deal with the rocks that had fallen on the pair. "Hestria, come give me a hand," Felix grunted as he attempted to pull on the rock trapping Kuroko. "You're the muscle here, right?"

She shot him a look, but took in the shape of the rock before putting her shoulder to it. "Someone come give me a hand with this. Felix, you make yourself useful and pull her out once we get this up."

Andre joined Hestria, Mirai on her other side. Together, the three of them pushed against the rock, levering it up. "It's a good thing I'm not some out of shape fat kid," Felix huffed as he held Kuroko under her arms, pulling her back. "Otherwise this might be kind of awkward."

Slowly, the three set the rock back down. Mirai looked over at Asteridramon, but the other Digimon had already cleared the larger rocks off of her. "Where's it hurt?" Andre asked as he looked her over.

"Just my leg..." she winced as Andre put a hand to it, looking it over.

"It's not obviously broken," he said after a moment, "but it's clearly going to be badly bruised at the best. Could be cracked or chipped. It'd be best if we could keep you from putting weight on it. Anything around here we could use as a crutch?"

"Broken building materials," Felix said, "but I wouldn't be shoving any of that in my armpit."

"I'll carry her," Hestria said after looking Kuroko over. "She's pretty tiny."

Felix laughed, patting her arm. "Hestria to the rescue."

"Don't make me hurt you, Canada boy. There isn't anyone to carry your ass around."

The Digimon joined their partners, all reverting to their Child forms. All looked exhausted, but pleased. Felix, however, didn't. "I knew we shouldn't have fought that guy, though. You guys are already tired, and we haven't even seen Ashurimon yet."

"Just think positive," Rusalkamon told him, taking his hand in hers. "If you stay strong, we will too."

Youseimon nodded agreement. "Our data reacts to your emotions. If you keep your spirits up, we'll recover faster."

"Yeah. But will it be fast enough?"

Andre spoke, his voice chilled. "No. I don't think it will be."
Mirai turned to follow his gaze, and then she saw what had made him gone still. Two hooves that clacked softly against the bottom of the stone stairs, a man's figure taller than Titanimon or Enchantemon, with a lionlike face and paws. A disc of light hovered behind him like a halo, and two bull-like horns rose from his head. But more than that was the aura that entered the room with him, the sense of presence that threatened to flatten all before it without even trying. The presence of a king.

"Ashurimon."
Previously on Digimon Travelers...

The five children: Mirai Watanabe of Fukuoka, Andre Harris of Atlanta, Felix Chevalier of Quebec City, Hestria Lastname of Cape Town, and Kuroko Nijino of Fukuoka. Together, they have met their destined partners and overcome many obstacles for the sake of preserving the peace of the Digital World. Arriving at Ashurimon's castle, they bid farewell to their ally, GrapLeomon, who dies fighting Nabimon. The Mercury Celestial General, the last obstacle between the children, their Digimon partners, and the King, finally falls. Now they are confronted by Ashurimon himself. They have reached their final destination...

The room of pristine tiles and spotless pillars had been turned to ruin, covered in dust, the marble shattered. The Digimon who had been protecting its unspoiled nature and its primary occupant had left nothing behind, not even traces of fading data, leaving only five children and five exhausted Digimon. So this is how the end begins, Youseimon thought to herself. This isn't how I wanted to start.

"That's Ashurimon?" Mirai asked of no one in particular. The question was rhetorical; there could be no doubt that the Digimon in front of them was none other than the King of the Digital World.

"So that's the King of the Digital World," Andre said.

"No doubt about it." Milomon took a step back, placing himself in front of Andre. Not that it would do much good in his current form.

Golden eyes drifted across the room, taking in the five humans and their Digimon, and then Ashurimon let out a sigh. The sound was weary, like someone who had been up against enemies for decades instead of a few scant months. "So you've come here at last, you who defy my order. I'm very disappointed that this generation of humans have turned out to have fallen so far from the ideal."

"What's he talking about?" Felix asked Rusalkamon in a whisper.

"I don't know."

Ashurimon turned to look at Kuroko and Peledramon, and both shrank back from his gaze. "You I'm most disappointed in, Nijino Kuroko. I would have thought that at least you, of all the people in the world, would be the one who would stand by the Digital World no matter what."

She swallowed, the color drained from her face, but at length she said, "I stand by my friends."

"Are the Digimon not your friends, then? Come here, Kuroko. Leave those who would drag you down. That is not the place where you belong. You, at least, I would like to spare from their fate."

She turned her face away, eyes screwed shut. "You don't understand anything about Kuroko-san," Mirai said, placing herself between Kuroko and Ashurimon. "Leave her alone."

"You shut up!" The snap in his voice made the air itself feel sharp, and Mirai backed a step away without thinking about it. "You are the one who knows nothing about that child! You damned disgusting piece of trash! How far are you going to go to tear apart a world that's done you no harm? Humans - the humans who come to our realm - they're meant to protect the Digital World, not destroy it!" He threw an arm around at the ruined audience hall. "This speaks for itself. This
destruction is just like the filth that's in your hearts. Get out of our realm and stop ruining it."

None of the humans spoke, unsure of what to make of Ashurimon's fierce anger. "Who is it," Youseimon said from beside Mirai, "Who is it that's ruining the Digital World? Just who is it that has a filthy heart? Wouldn't that be you, you selfish son of a bitch? The Digital World does not exist for you to use as you please! It's not meant to be some totalitarian regime! Digimon are meant to be free!"

"Just what would you know?!" He narrowed his eyes as he focused on her with enough intensity to kill from stares alone. "Or is it perhaps that you do know something? Have you... recovered those memories?"

Youseimon pressed her lips together. "Just what memories would those be?"

"As I thought... you knew nothing, after all." Even though his face was more feline than human, his frustration was clear. "I should have never let you hatch. I should have reduced you to a DigiEgg and left you in that place. All of this could have been avoided if I'd just kept you there."

"And that is why you are unfit to be a King!" Youseimon's anger was so thick it sharpened the air just as Ashurimon's aura had. "You claim you're on the side of righteousness here? Are you even aware of what goes on in the world you claim to have control over? Every Digimon in this world is forced to suffer because of you. You shove them into the roles that you want them to fill regardless of what their feelings are. You hand Digimon over to your subordinates like expensive toys, as if they have no will of their own. And if someone can't or won't fit into your mold, in your eyes, that's justification to destroy them. Your kingdom is one of decay. You ignored the problems of the Digimon that needed your help, that were bullied and mistreated. Indeed, it's fair to say that you were the reason for their mistreatment in the first place, at the hands of the subordinates following your orders. Where's the freedom a king should guarantee? Where's the peace? There is is no one in this world that lives in peace and freedom. Not in the entire Digital World."

"Shut your mouth." His cat-like pupils narrowed until they were all but invisible, and his power radiated outward, whipping the wind back. Humans and Digimon alike had to put arms in front of their faces to protect them from the wind, struggling to keep their footing. "If you understand nothing, then stop talking as if you understand. Or is it possible that you were infected with Tiamatimon's power after all?"

She didn't respond. It was difficult to tell if Ashurimon was drunk on power, driven mad, or both. Either way, the name Tiamatimon meant nothing to her. "Hold on here," Felix spoke up. "Who's this Tiamatimon?"

Youseimon looked back at him, and he met her eyes, trying to silently convey his thoughts as he put a hand on Rusalkamon's shoulder. They were tired, she realized, all of them. None of them, including herself, had fully recovered from their fight with Nabimon. Taking a step back, she held her tongue, waiting to see what Ashurimon would do.

"What do you care?" Ashurimon directed, his voice no less rageful.

"You said it yourself, didn't you? Humans are supposed to be on the side of justice. So convince us that's your side. It might change our minds."

"He's got a point," Hestria said. "We don't have the whole story. GrapLeomon mentioned that you were the only survivor of a disaster that destroyed the Digital World. Why is that?"

He turned away, his expression shifting from anger to pain, as if she'd hit an old wound. When he
spoke again, his words were sad. "Myself... and seven others. I don't know how long ago it was in the human world, but it has been many years for us. It was us... who met the first humans to enter the Digital World."

"There's been others to the Digital World?" Andre asked. "For what reason?"

"How they came here... even we were not fully sure of that. At first, we did not know why, either. We were all young, and so we spent our time idyllically." His eyes were unfocused. "We spent many days with no more agenda than to pass time in each other's presence."

This was a different Ashurimon, Youseimon thought. The creature before her with the sad expression, she might have believed might have not done the Digital World harm. But the King wasn't that person.

Ashurimon's eyes came to rest on Milomon. "You... don't remember those days, do you?"

Milomon pressed his lips together. "You're saying I was involved? I don't remember anything like that."

Ashurimon smiled, but it was more pain than happiness. "I didn't expect that you would." He looked at Milomon with more clarity. "I did not just 'hand you to my subordinate' for no reason. I had you brought here because you were one of us. You belonged here."

Milomon didn't respond. Youseimon doubted that there was a response that could be given to that. "But something must have happened," Felix prompted. "Something that changed those days. Was it the Sea of Chaos?"

"Thanks to the humans' partnership with us," Ashurimon said, "we were able to grow and gain immeasurable power. We all dedicated that power to the Digital World, to protecting the weak and bringing peace and harmony to the world. But among us, there was one that didn't share that same aspiration. That... was Tiamatimon." The way he spoke her name, Youseimon couldn't tell if it was merely hatred, or something more complex. "She betrayed us all and brought the Sea of Chaos forth. Nearly all of the Digital World, and every one of its inhabitants, fell to that sea, dissolved into fragments of code that were nearly irretrievable. She gave in to the Dark Power so thoroughly, it took all of us everything we had to revert her to a DigiEgg. And I... was the only one who did not die to see that goal fulfilled."

No one spoke. Ashurimon looked down at his paw-like hands, briefly clenching them into fists. "At that time, myself and the humans were the only living things still left in this world. I put myself in the Sea of Chaos to return what I could of its damaged code, its lands and people. And that is where I found you. You, whose egg lay as untouched as if it were in the Village of Beginnings. What are you? Why do you exist in this world?" He drew himself up, staring down Youseimon. "I have spent every waking moment since that day repairing the destruction Tiamatimon wreaked upon our world. I will absolutely not let you take it away."

She met his eyes, but the initial anger she'd felt was gone. All she could muster up was pity for someone who had fallen so far from his intended path. "What do you think I am? Do you think I'm infected with Tiamatimon's data or something?"

"I don't see how you couldn't be. She is--was--the master of the Sea of Chaos. None save her and myself could survive that corrosion. You want me to believe that it's just a coincidence that you happened to have been born with the same ability?"

"I doubt it's coincidence," she replied. "But I am not Tiamatimon. I am Youseimon, Faimon,
Titanimon. I did not come to this place to destroy the Digital World, Ashurimon. Like you, I understand what it's like to have precious friends that I don't want to see lost. There isn't anyone here that wants to destroy the Digital World. We want to save it." She took a step toward him. "Is it necessary to be at odds with each other? Let's make use of each other. Whatever original purpose there is to my immunity to the Sea of Chaos, let's use it for the betterment of the Digital World. I only want you to stop persecuting and harming the Digimon of this world. So what if they're not born according to a plan? So what if they're aligned with the shadows? We can still live together."

"You..." He closed his eyes. "Are naive. A dark-type absolutely cannot be trusted. No matter how much they seem trustworthy, just like Tiamatimon, they'll turn on us, because they're full of avarice and greed. Even now, they're the ones that break my rules and produce Illegal eggs. They corrupt normal Digimon to the darkness. You're also a holy-type; you should understand this."

Youseimon opened her mouth to protest, but from behind her, Rusalkamon spoke. "It's you who doesn't understand anything, Ashurimon. Stop talking like you could possibly understand."

He turned to look at her. "You, at least, I'm not surprised at."

"Will you shut up, you mangeux d'marde." Rusalkamon stood next to Youseimon, staring down the King of the Digital World. "We're all well aware of what you think of those who just happen to be born into the dark alignment. Every day, I got to hear about how I was dirty, and evil, and how I might very well have turned out how you say I will. And that would have been your own damn fault." She raised her chin, eyes daring him to argue with her. "Just because I live in the shadows does not mean I am bound to them. I can be as 'good' or as 'evil' as I want. At least I haven't killed countless numbers of Digimon just for being born in the wrong places. I am going to stand with Youseimon. Because I agree that she's right and you're dead wrong. But also, because I absolutely will never betray my friends."

Milomon stepped forward to Youseimon's other side. "Ashurimon, I don't have any memories of the time we spent together, that you say we had. But I do know that you must have been different in the past. I would have never become friends with the current person that stands before me, that warps and destroys lives under the pretext of saving them. You said that Tiamatimon betrayed you. Isn't it you that's betraying the memories of your friends?"

"If you remembered the horror that cost you your life... you'd be on my side, here with me," Ashurimon said. "Why can't you understand?"

"Because what you say and what you and your armies do is two different things," Raptomon spoke up. "I'm not an Illegal, nor am I a dark-type. Yet it was your army that nearly drove me to death. It was a human that saved my life. After what I went through, I'd be a fool to stand with you, Ashurimon. It'd only get me killed."

"Ashurimon," Peledramon's eyes held a sorrowful expression. "Having been by myself until I met Kuroko... Having understood her heart... I think I can understand yours. You're... lonely, aren't you? Even though you were able to bring your friends back to life, they had no memories of the time spent with you. They looked at you like you were a god, not a friend. And it's because you're lonely, because you're scared to trust again, that you've done these cruel things. I don't think you're a bad person, if you could just stop your harsh judgments and have hope for the future...!"

Ashurimon shut his eyes. When he opened them, there was no trace of hope or understanding. "Are you finished talking? It's time I remove you from this world."
"We won't let you!" Mirai held out her phone, letting it release its red light. "I'll stand by my partner."

"Not that we had any intention of not doing that," Felix said, standing shoulder to shoulder with her as he held out his phone.

"Well, we did try to resolve this peacefully." Andre held his out as well, adding green to the mix of color.

"Less talk, more ass kicking," Hestria said as she joined in.

Kuroko looked down at her phone, then to Peledramon. "I'm sorry," she addressed Ashurimon, standing next to the others, releasing her yellow light. "But you're wrong."

Ashurimon took a step back, holding up a paw against the blinding light of evolution as the colors fed on each other, pushing each other to their pinnacle. When they shattered apart, five Ultimate-level Digimon were staring him down, ready for battle.

"We need to get back," Hestria said, taking Kuroko by the arm. "Let's give them more room to fight."

"Over this way," Felix said, pointing to the pile of rubble from the previous battle. "We can hunker down behind this. I don't want to go too far."

"I agree," Andre said. "I want him to be able to hear my voice."

It was less like a fight, Mirai thought, and more like a dance, each blow perfectly placed and each dodge glittering in the stirring dust. Without speaking, the five Digimon moved as one, always aware of where the other was, where the attacks were launched from. Ashurimon may have been the strongest Digimon in the entire Digital World, but he had neither the benefit of numbers nor of any tricks, such as Nabimon's nullifying magic. Whenever Ashurimon moved to strike, his target was elsewhere, and another had swooped in to take advantage of his opening. And none of them showed any of the fatigue from the previous battle, spurred on by the shaking D-Tai's power. This battle had been won from the moment they had been able to kikan shinka.

And they all knew it, too. Titanimon landed next to Ashurimon as he dropped to one knee, showing no fear of him as she held her spear out. "You still have a chance to surrender, Ashurimon. Let's work for the greater good of all Digimon. Not just those who happen to be in favor."

With a snarl, he shoved her spear aside, making a break for the stairs at the far end of the hall. Enchantemon and Asarluhimon moved to intercept, but he still had enough power to blow them aside, reaching the stairs. "After him!" Youseimon said, taking flight and following him through the narrower hallway.

"I'll join you outside," Asteridramon said, snaking out through the hole in the wall.

"Me as well," Hoatzimon agreed.

"Let's follow," Hestria said as Enchantemon followed up the narrower stairs and Asarluhimon flew out the hole. "He's up to something."

Mirai nodded agreement, and they took off at a run, followed closely by the others. The sound of their footsteps echoed all around the stone stairway, creating a cacophony that made it impossible to pinpoint Titanimon or Ashurimon. "Where are you, Ashurimon?!" Titanimon's voice added to the mix.
They caught up just as Titanimon and Enchantemon reached the top of the stairs, which opened into an observatory-like tower. Nothing was in the room, save Ashurimon himself. "I have to destroy that egg," he said to himself, "before it's too late. But where is it?"

"You mean Tiamatimon's DigiEgg?" Enchantemon asked.

"It was here," he muttered, and then added in a more uncertain tone, "wasn't it here?"

"You have nowhere left to run to, Ashurimon," Titanimon told him. "Surrender now. Or we'll be forced to destroy you."

He ignored her, hands to the sides of his head. "Something's wrong," Kuroko murmured, her eyes on Ashurimon.

"What's wrong? Is he trying to pull out some new trick?" Mirai asked her.

"No, this is..." Kuroko chewed on her finger. "'Kitanai'. I don't know how to describe it."

Titanimon looked back at the pair of girls, silently asking for more information. "What does that mean?" Andre asked Mirai.

"He's... unclean. But I don't get what she means."

"Watch out!" Kuroko shouted, just as Ashurimon's gaze fixed on the pair of Digimon in the room.

The humans barely had time to land in a messy heap just below the top of the staircase; Titanimon and Enchantemon were slammed against the wall by an unseen force that had swatted them through the air like flies. "Surrender? To you?" Ashurimon's voice had a different timbre to it, and his eyes now lacked any sort of warmth. "You overestimate yourselves."

Felix looked up at Ashurimon, and then to Kuroko. "By unclean, do you perhaps mean that his data's mixed with something else?"

"Ah... Yes! There's something different."

"I'll ask you about how you know that later," Felix said. "Our problems just got worse. Enchantemon, can you open up the roof?"

She got to her feet, raising her hand. "Riding Hood's Wolf!" A portion of the roof fragmented away, debris and dust trickling down. Claws appeared on either side of the hole as Hoatzimon and Asteridramon pried the rock and wood back, trying to get inside.

Ashurimon looked upward, not impressed. "Five? Is that all you brought? Well, it doesn't matter; no force on this planet is strong enough to handle me." He waved a hand, the air darkening into shadows, aiming for the visible Digimon with snakelike teeth.

Felix bit at his finger in agitation. "Hey, Ashurimon? Or is it someone else I'm talking to? Are you... Tiamatimon?"

He looked down at his paws, then threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, how wonderful! I didn't think I'd ever hear that name again. It must just burn you up to have me, doesn't it, darling little Ashurimon?"

Then he grimaced, putting one hand to his head. When he spoke again, his voice sounded as it had before. "You... How could you..."
Ashurimon's eyes narrowed in fury as his voice changed again. "How could you. You were the one I thought most would understand. You were the one I wanted most to bring to the new world."

"Stop talking as if the old world is gone forever!"

"But it is, Ashurimon!" He threw out an arm in a frustrated gesture. Red and black scales flowed down from his shoulder, engulfing his arm in a reptilian appearance. "You think this world that you remade from fragments is anything like the world we shared? This is nothing but a shadow, your poor attempt to return to the past! That world deserved to perish."

He let out a roar as scales trickled across his face, massive wings springing from his back. The single eye on the unmarred portion of his face locked on to Titanimon. "Please... If you value this world at all... Please, stop her!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Mirai saw Kuroko's face, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Kurokosan?"

"They were in love," she said, rubbing at her face with her sleeve. "No wonder... it's so painful."

Hearing the emotion in Kuroko's voice, in Ashurimon's, Mirai felt her throat burn, and she turned away from Kuroko. "Titanimon!"

"You don't have to tell me," she said, holding her spear behind her. "Ashurimon... No, Tiamatimon. Whether you consider this world a fragmented shadow or not is irrelevant. This is the world that we live in. No one, even you, has the right to take it away."

"You were one of the chosen ones," Tiamatimon said to her. "You should have understood the reason."

"Whether I understand or not is also irrelevant. I don't care, Tiamatimon. An illegal, or a dark-aligned, or a simply flawed and incomplete Digimon is still a Digimon. A flawed world is still a world. You don't have the right to destroy either."

"Oh?" Tiamatimon/Ashurimon took flight, massive wings beating against the air, whipping it around. "Knowing that I, too, am a Digimon... you still intend to kill me?"

"I was prepared for that outcome from the beginning. I'll do what I have to. Even if my sins become too massive to bear, I'll still bear them. You called me a chosen one, Tiamatimon. Perhaps this is what I was 'chosen' to do."

Tiamatimon only laughed in response, shooting upwards toward the roof. Data of stone, wood, and even air itself disintegrated into dust as they entered the sky, above the other three Digimon on the roof. Pulling that data to themselves, more of Tiamatimon began to form, filling the sky as if she was an eclipse, an omen of doom. Titanimon grimaced, crouching to launch herself into the air after her, but Enchantemon put a hand on her arm. "Stop talking like you're in this by yourself," Enchantemon said. "We all came here with the same goal, so don't act like you're in this alone."

Titanimon looked at her, and then closed her eyes with a smile. When she opened them again, they glistened. "All right. I won't." Shaking her head, she turned back to the humans. "Mirai!"

She nodded, holding out her phone. "You want my help. Right, partner?"

"As much of it as you can bear to give." Titanimon looked over at Enchantemon. "Let's go."

The pair launched themselves into the air, joining the three on the roof. Above them, Tiamatimon's
ever growing wings flapped in heavy beats, the wind pushing waves of the Sea of Chaos outward. "We need to hurry," Felix said. "If those waves get going, it could be disastrous for the nearby zones."

"Asarluhimon!" Andre shouted up to his partner.

"We're on it." The three larger Digimon joined in Titanimon and Enchantemon's upward flight, flying as true as a volley of arrows aimed at Ashurimon/Tiamatimon.

Tiamatimon smirked with Ashurimon's mouth, and flapped her massive wings, sending a wall of wind at the group. They split apart in a single movement, each aiming an attack at her head, her chest, her wings and tail. As their blows landed, her form splashed apart into data like they were scattering water, but Tiamatimon didn't seem to be bothered in the least, swatting them back. "There's always got to be some fool that stands in the way of progress," she said, her wings blocking out the sun. "The process is already started! Can't you hear the dying groans of this world? Let it go to its natural conclusion! The new world will be a utopia for the chosen ones." She held out a clawed hand to Titanimon. "Stop your fighting for a world that tried to reject you. You have a place in the new world. Don't tell me that you have some attachment to these decaying islands of data."

"Are you joking?" Titanimon gripped her spear until her knuckles were white. "So maybe I've never settled down in one place long enough to come to appreciate it. So maybe I don't appreciate the good and the bad of this half-broken land. But the people who I spend my lives with--the people who I've fought beside, who I've learned from, who I've grown up with--there is meaning in these cracks and pockets. There's memories. Those people do love this land. That's enough reason for me to defend it from you until my dying breath!"

"Don't bother, Titanimon," Tiamatimon said. "You're different. You're stronger than these vermin that struggle with their petty lives, their petty flaws. You're strong, so you don't need them."

"It's because I'm strong that I need them. For a long time, I lived alone," she said, lowering her spear. "You're right in that I was strong when I was alone, too. But there wasn't any meaning to it. It was a stupid, annoying imp with no sense of humor that first put something in my life beside strength. And when we were locked in that room under the sea, wanting to save him was the first time I had a reason to use my strength. And then I met so many others. Least of all, a reckless, nosy human with a sense of justice that's likely to get her killed. A world with only strength has no meaning. A world without my friends has no meaning." Raising her spear again, she pointed it at Ashurimon's face. "Answer me something, Tiamatimon. Ashurimon couldn't come with you to your new world. Would you have left him behind?"

Her eyes widened as the words clearly struck home. Then she clutched at her head, back arching as she fought a battle inside the body that two opposing wills had been trapped in. "Mirai!" Titanimon cried out. "Everyone! For the sake of our world... For the sake of both worlds... lend me your strength!"

Mirai didn't speak, but only held her phone up to the sky, letting the red light burst forth anew in a wide burst that dwarfed the mere electronic device it came from. That red was joined by its companions, blue, green, purple, yellow. And then, it was joined by more.

"I just got your piece. Give me a minute to stitch it in to the counter-program." Harley barely took a moment to wipe the sweat off his forehead as he worked from the back seat of Saffron's car.
"Okay, Travis, are you ready? I can-"

On the seat next to him, the phone shook, and then released a gray light strong enough to make him see spots, the light exploding through the sunroof and into the sky, cutting through the fog. "The D-Tai?" he questioned, taking the phone in both hands.

"Harley?" Travis's voice.

"Uh, give me just a minute." Harley held the phone in his cupped palms, closing his eyes. "They need my help."

Down on the bridge some distance away, an orange beam joined his. Saffron sat on Rosemon's shoulder, lettering her partner hold onto her as she held the phone, focusing her thoughts on a request that hadn't come in words so much as a feeling.

In the snowbound zone, IceDevimon looked up from his swatting of SnowGoburimon as a deep crimson flooded into the sky. Jezra had her head tilted back, her single eye etching the color into her memories. "Ain't that a sight."

Further north, a peach-colored light rose from a sand-tossed land set among the snow. "Brother?" Alexa questioned as she watched the light pour forth.

On a small island in the South Pacific, Temaru and Pauiti, their partners BlackGuilmon and BlackTailmon next to them, watched as turquoise and magenta came forth from their laptops, side by side as they reached out to a destination beyond what they could see. And then that light was joined by black from Fukuoka, amber from Kyoto, indigo from Cape Town, a mahogany and pink from Beijing. And those colors were joined by even more all over the world, as more humans who had stood side by side with Digimon raised the sign of their contract, adding in the hue which defined them. By the time the light reached its destination, it could only be described as a complete rainbow, every color mixed together in sparkling iridescence. Those colors were the ones that joined with the five colors of the D-Tais below Tiamatimon, engulfing her and the Digimon underneath her. Tiamatimon let out a shriek, claws going to her head. "What is all this noise?" she cried. "Who are all these people I see?"

"It's the color of humanity, Tiamatimon!" Surrounded by the colored data, the fragments of human and Digimon memory, Titanimon herself was a rainbow, spear held out as she charged, the others right next to her. "It's the thing that we were missing!"

She let out a cry as the spear pierced Ashurimon's chest, her voice echoed with his own. She tried to beat her wings, but Asarluhimon and Asteridramon seized upon them, shredding them into data. She tried to thrash her tail, but Hoatzimon held it fast, crushing the data apart with her claws. She tried to raise her clawed hand, but Enchantemon held her fast, forcing her back, the scales falling away like tiny feathers stripped away. They all fell toward the sea, surrounded with the rainbow light. "Fools!" she cried out, pushing at Enchantemon ineffectively. "You'll all die with us!"

"It's time for you to leave his body, Tiamatimon!" Titanimon only drove the spear down harder, pushing Ashurimon's body down faster. "This time, be purified of your urge for destruction and return to being an egg!" As the sea rushed toward them, she tore the spear from his body in a glittering arc, forcefully tearing the data apart. "Humanity's Iron Tanaquill!"

Light and sea met, and expanded outward, becoming brighter than the sun itself. When at last the light died down, Mirai dropped to her knees, the deactivated phone at her side. "Where are they?"
Andre asked, rubbing at his eyes. "Did they fall into the sea?"

Hestria leaned against the wall, Kuroko still on her back and both their phones silent on the ground. With a grimace, she pushed herself away, shoving one of the windows out of its frame. "Raptomon!" she cried out into the air.

Felix leaned on the other side of the opened window, rubbing at his eyes. "Holy... Would you look at that."

Where the sea had been, dried land now lay untouched, stretching all around the castle from the point of the Digimons' impact. Shoving away from the wall, Mirai paused only to scoop up her phone before tearing down the stairs, trying to reach the plains below. "Youseimon... Youseimon!"

Andre was behind her, then Felix, then Hestria and Kuroko, all going as fast as they could despite the lack of strength in their legs. Each one focused on the same thing: the state of their partners. Even the D-Tais lay unnaturally quiet. Below the castle, the land leveled out into rocky plains which already were starting to show signs of new growth. There, at last behind a rock, she saw Youseimon, sitting up weakly, two eggs resting near her. "Youseimon," Mirai mumbled, falling to her knees next to her partner. Youseimon didn't say anything in return, only held out her arms as Mirai held onto her, squeezing her tightly. "Youseimon, you did it."

"We did it," Youseimon corrected, snuggling against her shoulder.

Hestria had barely set Kuroko down before she had Raptomon in her arms, stroking her feathers soothingly. Kuroko cried openly as she pressed Peledramon's fur against her face, gripping her as if she'd never let go. Even Felix and Andre had their partners in their arms, murmuring tired words of congratulations. Finally, Mirai let Youseimon go, turning back to the eggs. "Is that Ashurimon and Tiamatimon?"

"I'll take responsibility for them," Youseimon said. "In their next lives... I want them to have a better chance."

"Even the Sea of Chaos is gone," Kuroko said, looking around as she clutched her partner. "Isn't that great?"

"It isn't gone." Peledramon pointed out into the distance. "But it's an improvement. And it shows we can turn back the Sea of Chaos."

Rusalkamon pointed upwards from Felix's lap. "The data above all the zones is going out. Like little stars."

"Harley must have pulled it off," Felix said, absently stroking her hair with one hand.

"Yes. That means your world is safe. There won't be a reason to run the Digizone program ever again." Youseimon pushed herself away from Mirai's arms, looking to the rest of the humans. "You all should leave here while you can. Once the boundary between worlds is stable again, it might be much harder to return you home."

"You won't... You won't be coming with us, will you," Mirai said, looking down.

Youseimon touched her hand. "You've done everything you need to do and more. But we Digimon still have a lot to do. If there's to be a day where we exist together, side by side... we have to first gain true peace and prosperity here."

"Will I... see you again?"
"You can see me any time you want," Youseimon told her. "With the D-Tai. It's there as long as our contract is kept."

"That's not the same."

"I know. But I have promises to many other people to keep."

"No!" Kuroko held Peledramon to her chest, tears welling up again. "No, Peledramon, I can't stand to leave you! I need you."

"Kuroko," the dragon touched a clawed hand to her cheek. "You can't stay here. You have things you need to do in the human world, just like I have things I have to do here. Ashurimon's death isn't going to be taken lightly. I know you'll be fine, Kuroko. You're not alone any longer."

Raptomon looked up at Hestria, who found something on the horizon to look at. "It's just as well. You're a bird; you're meant to fly in bigger skies."

"We'll fly again together someday," Raptomon said, rubbing her head against Hestria's shoulder. "I promise."

Hestria turned away from the rest of the group with a sharp motion. "Hestria?" Felix looked over at her.

"Something in my eye" was the muttered response.

Rather than give her his usual carefree grin, his smile was soft. "Is that so."

"Felix?" Rusalkamon looked up at him from his lap. "Will you... be okay without me?"

"Are you worried about me? You're a hundred years too young for that." He rested a hand on her head. "Don't worry about me. I've improved myself, too. I feel kind of like a big brother," he added, grinning like normal. "Getting to see my little sister grow up."

She stood up, giving him a little kiss on the cheek. "Don't you worry about me, either. I can take care of myself, now."

"You'd better. Or I'll come knock some sense into you myself."

"Andre..." Milomon's watery eyes and flopped-back ears were a picture of kitty sadness that could have moved Lucemon himself to tears. "I don't want you to go. I want you to stay here with me."

"I know. But I have to help Mom take care of my little sisters. Sorry to have been so selfish, keeping you in the human world all this time."

Milomon shook his head. "You're not selfish. I don't think you even know how to be selfish. So I'm going to worry about you a bit." Milomon grabbed his hands. "You call me the moment you need any help, you understand? I'll get there. I don't care how."

"I will. You take care of Kudamon."

Mirai rubbed at her face, determined to keep her eyes dry. "This isn't forever, Youseimon. We'll definitely... be together again."

Youseimon turned to her, and held up a hand to shake. "Thank you for everything, Mirai. I couldn't have done it without you."
Mirai shook her head, declining the handshake, and then held open her arms. Youseimon threw her arms around Mirai's neck, burying her face in her shoulder, and the two held on to each other as if they'd never let go.

The end of summer passed, and the crispness of winter began to seep into the air, until it was time to change over to the winter school uniform for class. And that was turning out to be a problem, Mirai thought, grimacing as she looked in the mirror. Somehow, she'd gotten taller again, just enough to make her uncomfortable with the length of the skirt, but there was no helping it now. *Kuroko-chan's going to make fun of me if I say it, but I kind of wish I was wearing the boy uniform right now.* Picking up her sports bag, she tossed her school books inside. Reaching for her phone next, she paused, her fingers hovering over the icon of the D-Tai's program. A program that had laid silent ever since her return to the human world. A program that was part of a world that, even with the continued studies of Harley and his friends, they still didn't fully understand. *It's just not time yet,* she thought, placing her phone inside her bag.

"Mirai-chan?" Her mother called to her as she entered the hallway. "Do you want breakfast today?"

"I'll just take toast; I've got practice to get to."

"This early?" Her father looked up from his newspaper. "Would you like a ride? Papa will still be around for another day."

"Sorry, I already promised my friends. Don't forget to be back in time for Christmas!" she told him as she accepted first her boxed lunch, and then a slice of toast from her mother. "You promised this year."

"Haha, I understand. Don't grow up too fast, now."

She slipped on her outdoor shoes, then stepped outside, bag over her shoulder and toast dangling from her mouth. Across the rooftops of Fukuoka, the mix of old and new and undeniably Japanese, across the tops of the buildings she'd fought to protect, a fine morning fog hung in the air. Even through that, it took no effort to see the silhouette of the black obelisk, the control tower that was a standing symbol of what had happened the previous spring and summer. But for that symbol, one might have thought it was nothing but a dream, a hallucination, as most of the world seemed to treat it. Indeed, the panic of a few months ago seemed all but forgotten, relegated to the corners of the Internet and the whisperings of the fringe of society. But those who could see the towers would never forget. Or perhaps it was because they'd been irrevocably changed that they were visible in the first place. Who knew how the Digital World really worked?

"Oi, Mirai-chan!" Below, Rina waved at her. "Hurry your butt up! It's freezing!"

"Yes, yes," she said with a wave as she moved for the stairs. "But it's only in the sixties."

"Only in the sixties my cold and adorable butt!"

"You know, Rina-chan," she heard Kuroko's voice as she came down the steps, "I hear they have a revolutionary new solution for keeping out the cold. It's called 'wearing clothes'."

"Don't be so jealous that I look this amazing in a school uniform."

"You two are always so energetic in the morning," Mirai said with a smile as she exited the stairs, joining Rina and Kuroko. "Well, shall we go?"
"What were you spacing out upstairs for?" Rina asked as she shouldered her bookbag.

"Eat your breakfast," Kuroko instructed.

Mirai took another bite of the toast, pointing in the direction of the tower. "Oh, yeah, that," Rina said. "Weird, huh? I wonder if Tentomon is doing okay."

"We'll see them again," Kuroko said. "Absolutely we will."

"Yeah. But in the meantime, you two have entrance exams to study for. And I," she hefted her bag, her practice swords sticking out of the top, "have practice to get to."

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