Crystal Moon
by AmongTheStars (Mellythedork)

Summary

A girl named Melody, 16 years old, wakes up in another universe to join the consciousness of another version of herself. With characters she once voiced in a roleplay in trouble, she now works with the "her" in this new world, trying to both keep this new life stable as well as help her old characters. Many hardships are in her way, but as - and with - Xiaolian Melodia Thompson, she finds herself more prepared to face them than she believed she ever could be.

First in the Mooniverse series.

DISCONTINUED

Notes

I'm not sure what I'm doing here? Heh. (Actually I'm really freaking nervous)

So this was a huge mess of a story written by a friend of mine a couple years (2013/14) ago, when I was going through some hard times. At the current point we write it together, though it's mostly me.

The thing is, my friend left a lot of inconsistencies and plot holes and such, so I've recently started editing/basically rewriting this. (Yes, I have permission from my friend to do this, she's cool like that.) So what's going to be posted here is that edited stuff. Umm... I hope you enjoy!! (And now it's the second-time rewritten version. NO PLANS FOR A THIRD, I PROMISE.)
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

The first chapter of the rewrite! Technically re-rewrite, since what was here before was the first rewrite, but that makes it sound too complicated. This turned out a lot different than I originally thought/intended, but I really like where it went. I hope you do too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Is everyone ready?” the team’s leader asked. “Everyone's aware of the risks if we get this wrong?”

Her faithful student nodded, as did the other five around them. “Too much magic, and we're back in the freeze,” her adoptive sister summed up bluntly. “Too little, we send a spirit into the void and don't fix what we're trying to fix.”

“You've sent your void expert over to find this 'Melody'?” her sister's biological brother asked. “Did she call back yet?”

The woman raised her hand, where a pulsing dark crystal sat. “Yup.”

One of the two spirits kicked in the air where they all levitated, trying to control her impatience. “You think Viphi found that 'third universe' you keep sayin' is out there? 'Cause I swear, Casey, if you kicked her off into the void for somethin' that's not even there-”

She was silenced as Casey raised a second crystal, this one lighter than the first. It pulsed with power as well. “She found it.”

“So the sooner we get this Seer's spirit to that third universe, get her integrated, get her happy, and find out whatever connection she has to the freeze-” the third of the teenage girls ticked each step with an extended finger, “-then the sooner we fix the freeze, and I can take the spirits and go home?”

“That's right. I promise.”

Her sister frowned suspiciously, but said nothing. The second spirit took a moment to stretch his arms forward, then stated, “Then let's get started.”

Along with the others, Casey let her energy flow out. Their magic auras gathered together into a storm of power, colors mixing and glowing until the cloud of energy was a snowy white.

Casey let an extra trickle enter the storm from the shy, hidden spirit who had informed her of this third universe, of the dimension most like theirs. A small dash of dark gold entered the mix, fading quickly into the mass.

With that tiny spark, the direction was given. The storm condensed on itself, collapsing with a thundering noise into a shimmering portal.

Casey turned to her student and her sister, nodding quickly. “Go,” she forced out, trying not to let her emotions stop them from what they'd all planned. “Peggie will join you soon.”
Her sister grabbed for her guardian spirit, making sure the little one was safely encased within her egg. She slipped said egg into her pocket, exchanged a look with Casey's student, then flung herself into the portal before the insanity of all this could catch up with her.

"We won't let you down," Casey's student promised her firmly, before shooting through the portal as well.

Casey sighed, trying to control her worried tears. “I know you won't, Meggie,” she whispered. “Just take care of Kalia for me.”

“You used to control demons, you can totally navigate the void,” a girl grumbled to herself, shifting through the in-between of the dimensions as she tried to find her way home. “You were blessed by the void itself, you totally won't get lost. Well guess who's lost, Casey!”

She threw her hands up in aggravation, trying to figure out why she'd followed this plan in the first place. 'Use the void to go to another universe. Find the girl in this magic photo. Use the void to call on epic powers to copy her spirit and send her to this third universe that's totally there. Come home and wait with us while everyone we know and love is frozen in time!'

Oh yeah. Such a great plan. If she hadn't actually been legitimately blessed by the void, she would've thought that Casey had just cracked again from the pressure.

*I don't even know how I'm doing any of this*, she thought with annoyance. *I swear, if I get home and something went wrong, I'm blasting that stupid mage in the face with my 'void powers'.*

A section of the void nearby pulsed and brightened, a path appearing from the nothing. As if to clarify its purpose, a sign was at its front, labeled neatly, *Your Dimension*

“You're freakin' crazy, too,” the girl griped to the nothing, taking the path nonetheless. The same thing had happened on her way to the other universe, so she knew it worked.

Didn't make it any less *weird*.

She tried to ignore the figure waving goodbye to her as she shot down the path. She did *not* need another chat with that...whatever it was.

It was probably a god. She'd had enough of those in her life.

Meggie hadn't planned on losing Kalia as they'd left the portal. Ki sensing told her that her teacher's sister was now on the opposite side of the planet.

She'd be fine. It was better this way, actually – they could cover more ground to find the Seer. Then, whichever didn't find her could just Instant Transmit to the one that did. Or better yet, wait for Peggie to show up, IT to *her*, and keep an eye on her until they could all get back together.

Meggie put a worried hand over her belt buckle, feeling the muted power of her little rose pearl. Kalia was different now. If she was the one to find Peggie...it would be fine.

She set about searching for the energy of their 'Writing Seer', an invisibility spell keeping any late night walkers from seeing her fly around.
Melody jolted awake at the sound of music, her hand smacking into the shape of a phone. Blearily, she grabbed at it, opening her eyes just enough to find the answer button. After that, they snapped shut again, and she tried for a semi-polite, “Hello?”

She was pretty sure it came out as a mumble. Oh well. She really didn't care.

“What, are you still in bed?” an unfamiliar voice asked. “Get up already. It's ten-thirty and you've got to track down your cousin still.”

She relaxed. None of this made sense, which meant it was just a dream. Nothing to worry about. “Sure, okay, wh'ever...” A huge yawn escaped, and she blindly searched for the edge of her blanket in order to get back underneath. She was in no mood to be getting up just yet. “Who's'is?”

The person – a guy, she thought – sighed. “It's Touma.”

“...Who?”

“I—jeez, listen. Somewhere near you should be an egg. There's this little person sleeping in it. Wake her up and she'll remind you of whatever you forgot. Okay?”

“Mmmhhm.” Melody was now rolling around to cocoon herself in her blanket. For some reason she'd been on top of it. And where was her pillow?

Touma...that named sounded familiar...oh, right, he was a character in the thing, the show...

“Promise me, Melodia. Get up and talk to the egg person.”

She groaned in response, waiting for this dream to fade into the next one. As she went to pull her hair from the cocoon – it was no fun sleeping with trapped hair, even in a dream – she noted that it was...hm, three times as long? That was nice. She liked long hair. Maybe she could do the thing where it got longer and shorter with her thoughts?

She tugged a bit too hard, pain registering on her scalp. She grunted, surrendering with her hair only half out of the blanket. “I dun' wanna. Wanna sleep.”

There was a long sigh. “You brought this on yourself.” Silence hit the call for a brief moment, then a loud shout nearly made her drop her phone, a different voice demanding, “Wake up Melodia-chan!!”

“Noooo!” she complained, already feeling herself losing her tiredness.

“Talk to the egg!! Get up! Find a chocolate muffin and get moving!”

“Freakin' loud!” she snapped, reluctantly realizing she could no longer fall back asleep.

“I'll stop yelling if you get up and send a picture to prove it!”

“Fine, you little devil, I'm getting up!” She started kicking at her cocoon, pushing it down and freeing herself. When another yawn hit, she aimed it at the phone, hoping these two knew how against this she was.

When she was finally free of her hastily-made blanket cocoon, she shoved at her hair to get it out of her face. Her fingers caught, resulting in another twinge of pain and a responding grunt. Freakin’ hair...

As she fumbled through the phone icons to find the stupid camera, something vaguely occurred to
her. That had...hurt.

Her eyes narrowed. She stared at the phone a bit, then reached over to pinch her arm—frik—OW!

She was now glaring. Okay, so this wasn't a dream. So who the hell was calling her?

Touma read the call information. No matter how much she looked, it didn't change. What...

...Wait, this isn't even my phone, she realized. It was similar, but not exact.

Then she looked up. She registered that she was not her bedroom.

She coupled this information with the pain and the knowledge that this wasn't a dream.

What.

She tossed the phone onto the bed, not bothering to end the call. Sliding off the bed, she wobbled a bit on her tired feet, and located the door. A full length mirror was attached, which she only noticed as it showed her reflection when she tried to open it.

She'd already realized her hair was longer. Much longer, in fact – the curls reached her butt, a reddish-brown that somehow seemed more vibrant than it should be. Her bangs, brushed sideways, were tipped with red, as was the end of the right section that hung down beside her face. The section to the left of her face was a dark, slightly dull purple, possibly right to her roots. She wore a light blue dress – similar to, but not exactly, the one she'd gotten for Christmas a few days before.

Melody hesitantly reached out to touch the reflection of not-her-but-it's-moving-like-me. A cold, frightened feeling started sinking in. Is this...really me? she wondered in disbelief, her other hand petting her hair to make sure it was real.

Slowly turning, she looked around the room. She'd been on a queen sized bed, which held an unfamiliar pillow and blanket, both of different purple shades. The room was small, with a single window looking out to the city; underneath it was a patterned purple suitcase and black messenger bag. On the other side of the room was a closet door.

Her gaze dropped to the phone. Scared, but with nothing else to go on, she hesitantly returned to the bed and scooped it up, asking nervously, “Um...d-did you say you were Touma?” He said nothing yet, and she managed to add, “Like, from Jupiter?”

He needed a moment to breathe, but he replied, “Yes, that's me. Listen, for the past week you've been having memory problems. Your name is Melodia Thompson – McClain to the public – and you are currently in Seiyo, Japan. You are here to meet a cousin for the first time.”

Like little heavy thuds, his words seemed to unlock memories that said the same. Someone had given her information on a cousin she didn't know she had. A good friend had confirmed this; a mage had teleported her from America to Japan and was letting her stay in her apartment for the time being.

What. What.

“Y-You mentioned something about an egg person?”

“She's like a guardian spirit. Look around, do you see a large blue egg with some kind of pink flower on it?”
Though she thought she might be going crazy, Melody looked around the room again. She spotted such an egg on top of the suitcase – a calm, pale blue, holding a ring of pink flower outlines that circled it in a pattern. “Y-Yeah.”

“She'll take care of you and tell you everything you need to know. You're in no rush to meet this cousin, and they don't know you're coming, so if you need today to put yourself together, that's fine.”

“Okay...”

“At around eight tonight, I'll be at a concert for the new year. I'll send you the address. You don't need a ticket, and I'll meet you backstage afterwards. Alright?”

Melody took a shaky breath. “A-Alright.”

“Can you repeat some of the things I've told you? So that I know they're sticking?”

“Uh...I have memory problems. My guardian spirit will take care of me. I'm not in a rush to meet my cousin. I'll meet you at a concert.”

“When is the concert?”

“At eight.”

She could hear Touma breathing, trying to calm himself. This didn't seem to be easy for him, either. “Alright. So talk to your spirit, and get something to eat. You probably have text messages, but you don't have to answer them if you don't remember the person who sent them.”

Melody took a deep breath of her own. “O-Okay. Um...thank you...”

“I know it's scary. But trust me, you'll be fine. We've been friends for a long time and I know you can get through this.” She couldn't find the words to answer with, so he added, “I'll check on you later. Take all the time you need.”

“...Mhm.”

Touma hung up, and Melody began staring over at the egg, wondering what the hell was going on. She had to stay calm. She had to think about this and figure out...everything.

It was clear that this wasn't her home. She'd just spoken to an anime character – in Japanese? She honestly didn't know. Something else to figure out.

She sat on the bed, trying to focus. Okay, so she wasn't home, and she talked to an anime character. That meant...a different dimension? Okay. Okay, think, did anything happen last night that could explain...no. She'd gone to bed in her home, then woken up here.

Okay, so something or someone had kidnapped her. Why? Furthermore, how? Was it the same as her friend, Megan – a girl who, with her entire family (minus her father) had suddenly appeared in her dimension about a year ago? They'd said a rainbow portal...someone impersonating a family friend...Melody had been their 'bridge'.

Melody looked more carefully at the phone. Photo gallery, texts, contacts, calls...very basic. Very plain. Besides a settings icon that showed up while she flipped through the three home screens, nothing else.
She flipped it over. Took careful note of the Voltron symbol on the back. She took a breath, closed her eyes for a few seconds, then checked the 'all programs' section.

Hmm...nothing useful. Certainly no spiral rainbow icon. So she was here without the reality-warping whatever that had helped her help Megan's family. That didn't mean it couldn't find her – she had a feeling that, with time, that icon would appear. Just like it did before.

The questions now: Why was she 'Melodia Thompson'? Why had she seemingly replaced someone who already existed here?

Freaking hell, this was terrifying. She was starting to realize just how scared Megan's family must have been when they'd wound up in her dimension.

Stay calm. She had to stay calm. She was someone else and had to figure out if there was anyone she could tell that would believe her, and maybe be able to help her.

Melody looked over at the egg again. She stared at it for a bit, then set her phone down, got up, and walked over to it.

A guardian spirit, born from an egg. She added 'Shugo Chara' to the list of anime/cartoons that existed here, alongside 'Idolmaster' and 'Voltron Force'.

She leaned over and gently tapped the egg with the tip of her finger. “Um...hello?”

No response. She tried a few more times, figuring the Character just needed a wake-up call. When the egg formed a crack in the middle and began to open, she pulled back. From within the egg came a Guardian Character that looked very similar to a rag doll she owned in her dimension – short red hair, a green dress with pink flowers, striped stockings. The only difference was the life in her shimmering black eyes, and the little pink flower pinned in her hair.

The Character yawned, rubbing at her eyes. “G'morning, Dia,” she mumbled. “Did you sleep well?”

Melody bit her lip, not sure how to explain. She ended up sitting on the floor, waiting for the Character to wake up. Some vague part of her mind – maybe the memories of 'Melodia', who she was replacing – informed her that the Character's name was Annie.

As Annie finished a long stretch, Melody swallowed. She should know. I've taken over her Bearer. “Um...Annie, I need to talk to you.”

“Yes?” Annie seemed to sense that something was wrong.

“...I...I'm not Melodia.” Melody wasn't good with comforting words, so she was forced to be blunt. “I think I've taken her place? This isn't my dimension, I don't think.”

There was silence from Annie, who simply blinked at her in confusion. She frowned, looked around a bit, then floated down to the black messenger bag beside the suitcase. After fumbling with the zipper, she disappeared inside, and returned holding a purple shell pendant with black wings.

“It's not that I don't believe you,” she said. “I just...”

Melody shook her head, “N-No, I understand. I...I talked to Touma? He called. He said I have memory—sorry, that Melodia has memory problems. I...I guess now I do, because I don't know anything about where I am.”
Annie presented the pendant to her. “Here. This is connected to a pure energy. It’s...not really a mental magic, but...I’d like to see if it responds to you. See...there’s this spell, where two minds can be in the same body, so...if it answers you, then that means...”

Straightening a bit, Melody saw where she was going with this. “It means that Melodia's still here.” She nodded, taking the pendant, and closed her eyes.

She felt her fear being pulled away. Warmth she couldn't describe more than 'home' overtook her, a wordless promise that she was safe. She heard Annie ask her to sing – that made sense. Clearly, Melodia was the Purple mermaid princess. If Melody could find a connection to that and access it somehow, that meant she hadn't just completely overthrown Melodia's life.

A song she knew from the show floated into her mind. She could hear, and feel, the music surrounding her. She urged it to slow from the upbeat tempo it presented, then let herself open up to it.

Before she could back out, Melody opened her mouth and began to sing.

“Nagareboshi ni negai o kaketa
Nanatsu no hikari mitsukedashite
Hanarebanare ni natta JUERII SUTAA
Unmei to iu kizuna o shinjiteru”

“Tsumetai nami ni toketa
Namida no yukue wa
Darenimo kidzukarenai mama
Sotta awa to kiete itta”

“Nakashita mono o sagashiteru
Kokoro ga setsunai
Murasaki no ame ni tsutsumarete
Utai tsuzukeru Song for You”

“Umarekawaru asa ga kuru nara
Onaji inochi o mata ikitai
Meguriaeru subete no mono ga
Houseki ni naru kiseki o shinjiteru”

As the warmth softened, and the music faded, Melody opened her eyes, waiting for Annie's judgment. The Character had a thoughtful expression – maybe she was comparing Melody's song to those that Melodia knew or sung. Could Characters compare energy?

Melody looked down worriedly at the pendant. She didn't want to just...replace someone. If Melodia was still here, buried somewhere, she would much prefer that. It meant there was a far greater chance of separating herself from this body and getting home.

...Home, huh?

Melody put a hand to her face, trying not to cry. For a few minutes, she'd forgotten. She'd forgotten what had happened.

The sharp words in her memory still stung. Her own words. *If you want to take away one of the few things that keeps me how I am...then I hope you're proud of who I turn into after this.*

The chill, suffocating and controlling, rushed back. The fight.
We keep fighting over it, maybe we should stop. *No! This is all I have!* It always comes back to this. *No it doesn't, you're lying!*

*This is your fault! It's all your fault! I need this!*

Melody's grip on the pendant tightened desperately. Did she *want* to go home? Did she want to go back to that heartbreak, that...that void that swept away happiness and hope?

She'd lost the things that had mattered to her more than almost anything. She'd lost a story, a friend, an escape from the world. She'd lost a million characters that felt like family.

Part of her, unfamiliar and quiet, spoke up. *Isn't that a little selfish? Weren't you the one at fault?*

Was she? Everything was starting to blur. Maybe she had done wrong. She couldn't remember. There was so much fear about where she was now, and so many questions about what would happen to her. They overshadowed her memories.

*Yes, it hurts. I know it does. There's no way to get rid of that. For now, though, you are somewhere new. Focus on that. Focus on finding answers, and then you think about what you may or may not have done wrong.*

The voice in her head was soft, new. It reassured her in a way she wasn't capable of herself.

*Melodia?* she wondered. There was no reply.

Something touched her hand, and she jumped a bit. When her eyes focused, she saw Annie smiling at her.

“It's her voice,” she said. “Your song is her voice. You don't feel any different from Melodia, and...I think the fact that I'm still here helps prove that she is, too.”

Melody let out a long sigh of relief. She hadn't replaced Melodia. She hadn't taken away Annie's Bearer. Thank goodness...

“So, what's your name? Do you know how you got here?” Annie seemed to be taking this very well, and Melody was grateful for that, if a little confused.

“Um...Melody. And...I-I don't.”

Annie nodded, looking thoughtful once more. “Well, let's see...you can use the Pearl Tear, you're connected to me, and you were straightforward and honest instead of leading me on. Those are all good signs. Now, unless you have any ideas on how to get home, we should think of how we're going to handle this.”

Melody tried to think. She didn't really want to lie to people, but...if she started going around claiming she wasn't Melodia, people either would think she was crazy, or would get angry. “Um...Touma said you could tell me anything I needed to know. I know that...uh, I'm friends with him, and I'm here to meet a cousin... Actually, some things here remind me of TV shows that I know...”

“Hmmm...how about we start by going through phone contacts? There are a few people you should be aware of.” Annie flew over to the bed and picked up the phone, carefully lugging it back over. “We can decide what we'll tell people after you have an idea of who's around.”

“...Do you really believe me?”
Annie took a moment to hand the phone over before answering. “I do. Dia isn't the type to play tricks like this. I can feel a small difference between you and her, so I know you're a different person, but since I still sense her and I'm still here in general, there doesn't seem to be any other explanation.”

Melody looked away, uncertain. This whole thing was overwhelming. “And...you're not mad?”

“Melody, do you wish that you had the words to comfort those you love when they need it most?”

“...How did...”

“You have the very same wish that Dia does. That is the wish that gave birth to me.” Annie reached out to put a tiny hand on her hair. “I feel that wish inside you. Not just Dia's, but yours. They're not exactly the same, so I know that there are two hearts in there. Dia's, and yours. You are both scared and I will help both of you for as long as I need to, no matter who is control.”

When Melody couldn't speak, the Character continued. “Dia is still here. At some point, you'll probably be able to see her memories, so for now let's just give you a little time and-”

Her words were cut off by a faint knocking. They both turned to look at the door. The sound didn't stop, so Annie glanced at Melody and asked, “Are you up for seeing who's at the door?”

Melody made herself breathe. As long as she was here, it wouldn't be right for her to hide away and derail the plans and relationships Melodia had. “Yeah.”

She stood, walking to the bedroom door and opening it. She glanced out – to the left, an open door leading to a small bathroom. Across from her was another door, closed. To her right was an open space, holding a couch, television, and small kitchen area. Right – according to Melodia's memories, she was staying at a mage's apartment while in Japan.

She stepped out into the open space, looking around until she spotted a door. Gathering her courage, she walked over and peered through the spyhole to see who was (still) knocking.

Long, pale red hair. A monkey tail in need of grooming, a worn out blue wristband, and exhausted indigo eyes. Melody pulled back, blinked a few times, and looked again, only to see the same girl. That couldn't be right. That...looked like a character from her roleplay. But...there was already a Melodia in that dimension, and she didn't have hair this long. She didn't have a Character named Annie. Was this some other version of who she thought it was...?

She carefully hooked the chain to keep the door from opening all the way. She then unlocked said door, the knocking stopped, and she opened it a crack to ask, “Y-Yes?”

“I'm really sorry to bother you but is your name Melody and do the names Meggie, Casey, and Kalia mean anything to you?” the girl outside asked in a rush.

Melody stared at her, trying to process. Not sure how to answer, she asked a question of her own. “Are you Margret Saotome, twin of Peggie, student of Casey Hogan?”

She could not begin to describe the pure joy that slammed across the girl's face. “Yes! Oh thank god, it is you!”

“...Do you know why I'm not in my dimension?” Melody asked hesitantly. It was worth a shot, at least.
“Y-Yes, I do! I'm so sorry, I wanted to find you before you woke up. I can explain everything.”

Melody unlatched the chain and opened the door, letting Meggie in. (Meggie and Megan, oh jeez, she'd never keep them straight) “Uh...sorry, can I call you Margret? I already know a Megan, so...”

“Yeah, of course.” Meggie – or rather, Margret – stepped inside. When the door was closed, she took a quick look around, then focused again on Melody. “Are you okay? I mean...mentally...?”

Frowning, Melody admitted, “I'm kind of freaking out, if that's what you mean. It's not really normal to wake up in another dimension.”

Margret nodded. “Right, right. I'm so sorry. Listen, um...I don't know how to say things. I'm sorry if I'm blunt or if I go on a tangent.”

“Just...did you do this?”

“Yes? I mean, it wasn't just me. Casey, and Kalia, Nova, some of the humanized bey spirits...oh, and Maddie, and Kalia's dimension's Gohan.” Margret tried to smooth her tail out as she spoke. “So, um, basically...you're a Seer? Specifically, your writing, which connected you to us. That's a Seer thing.”

Melody...could understand that, she supposed. “Okay...”

“So, umm...well, things kinda...went bad a couple days ago.” Margret shifted on her feet. “You know how...time is really weird for us? It doesn't really match up across the world? Well, it suddenly kinda...stopped. Completely. Everywhere...”

“...What?”

“Yeah...” Margret's frown only grew. “The bey spirits weren't affected. Um, we're not sure how Gohan's still moving, but it might apply to Kalia too, whatever it is? For Casey and I, it might be our magic...and Maddie's got that whole demon queen magic whatsis stuff going on—anyway, apart from us, nothing and no one is moving. We're not sure what caused it, and it's kinda hard to check on Dialga when their champion whatsis is frozen...um, so...Casey thought of you.”

Not sure if she was following, Melody asked, “Casey knows about me?”

Margret shrugged, seeming uncertain about it herself. “She...didn't say how. Just that there was a chance that maybe something happened to you, and maybe if we meddled a bit...a lot...that we might learn something. So...we tracked down this universe, untouched by the time freeze, and...not yours...and we cast a spell to copy your spirit and send you here. It looks like you latched on to the 'you' of this dimension.”

Not unkindly, Melody admitted, “Kinda figured that part out. We...at least know that Melodia's not just plain gone.”

“We?” Margret finally saw Annie, and her eyes widened. “Oh gosh! She has a Character?!?”

Annie smiled reassuringly. “I'm okay, I promise. From what you say, you were only trying to help your world. I hope that you succeed. I'll do my very best to watch over Melody while she's here.”

“I will never understand how your kind is so freakishly understanding,” Margret whispered, appearing touched. “Thank you...”

“Annie. Melody and I were just about to go over some of Dia's phone contacts.”
“That sounds good! Uh, I'm guessing there's no memories yet...?”

Melody shook her head. Part of her was still...kind of terrified, but suddenly she wasn't alone. She had an answer to why and how she was here. That helped more than she realized it would.

She glanced down. She should probably tell her... “Um...I don't know how...me stopping a connection to your world might be the cause...or maybe it's coincidence...but I feel like I should mention I wasn't the only one. My...i-it wasn't just me writing about you. It was a roleplay with someone else. And I...I had a fight with them a few days ago.”

Something stopped the chill and the painful memories from welling up this time. It still hurt, but something was giving her strength. “I-I don't know if...I'll ever be able to connect to you like I did before. It was pretty...final.”

Margret pulled her into a hug, surprisingly gentle for one who boasted one of the strongest power levels in her dimension. “Whatever it was that froze my world, even if it had nothing to do with you, we'll figure it out. Personally, I just think that meeting someone who knows what we've been through as well as you do is really cool.”

“...You think I'm cool?”

“Pff, that's an understatement. Anyone who can spend a long time dealing with us is some kind of spectacular. We know our lives are a mess.”

Melody returned the hug, a wave of calm seeming to wash over her. *My favorite roleplay character thinks I'm cool.*

*Awesome.*

Looking at Melodia's phone contacts shed a lot of light. She was a member of the Dungeon Gym in New York – they'd spent the last week there, in fact. She was once an idol for 'Horizon Productions agency', but retired about a year before. She was the younger sister of Lance McClain, a Voltron pilot, and Aniko McClain, a doctor with two young sons and a deceased wife. Her mother was named Mingzhu, and she knew Kyoya Tategami.

There were some names that Annie couldn't help with, because she'd never met them. Even so, Melody had a better idea of things now. Chowing down on a chocolate muffin that had been sitting on the kitchen counter, she found the strength to check those texts Touma had mentioned she probably had – and absolutely did have.

*From Aniko: you made it safe yeah? boys say hi. answer when u wake up. and text Pidge, he's going nuts over here*

*To Aniko: awake. Bad memory day. With friends and in good hands.*

*From Zeo: Have a good day, Dia! Good luck meeting your cousin! Stay safe, okay?*

*To Zeo: thanks. I will.*

*From Madoka: Hey! You still planning to stop by while you're nearby? MBC isn't too far from you!*
To Madoka: we'll see

From Kai: Welcome back to Japan! Horizon Pro. is having our New Year's party tomorrow. If you can, you should come! I'll bet that everyone would love the surprise!

To Kai: we'll see! Thanks for the invite.

From Abigail: please anwer. Please. Where youar e. you cant just disaprr like that.

Melody looked up at Annie, showing her the message. The Character shrunk a little, frowning with embarrassment. “Um...so...I don't know exactly what happened, but a week ago, Dia ran away from Arus after a crystal monster attacked. It's the reason her memory's been bad, but anything else is...fuzzy. She went to New York to hide and dropped contact with a lot of people. I wasn't feeling well, so I was sleeping in my egg and I don't know more than that.”

Sighing, Melody scrolled upwards, seeing several more texts of similar topic (and typos) from Abigail. What to do...

To Abigail: I'm okay. I just...I'm not up to talking to people. Sorry to worry you.

From Ikuto: Can we talk?

Needing context, Melody scrolled up. Previous messages surprised her.

From Ikuto: I overheard your father and sister speaking, and learned of a family member of yours that lives in Seiyo here in Japan. His name is Tadase. If you'd like to meet him, I'll give you the location of his home. Ikuto

There was a few hours between this message and her reply.

To Ikuto: I'll look into it.

His response had been only minutes later, the message she'd seen first. Melodia had not answered.

Something was up between them, that much was obvious. There wasn't really anything she could do – she wasn't going to start meddling in Melodia's life like that.

New Year's...There was a chance he'd be at the festival. Was this the same one as in the show? She didn't really have a way to tell.

If it was, though...

“We need to find the New Year's festival going on in this town,” Melody decided. “I...need to be there to help someone.”

She had no time frame for the scene she was thinking of. Even so, she wanted to try and be there.

It felt like Melodia was objecting. She couldn't explain how she knew that, but part of her wasn't happy with the choice she was making. Please trust me, she tried to tell her. If we can help Ikuto, there's so much pain that we can stop.

No answer. Melody stood up and started looking for some shoes. Once Melodia's boots and a pair of socks were on her feet, and Annie had very helpfully provided her with Melodia's anxiety medication – whew, that could've been bad – she was out the door, Margret and Annie at her side.
Chapter End Notes

Song: "Star Jewel"* from Mermaid Melody - Japanese
*The original word "midori" was replaced by "murasaki" due to Melodia's pearl color.

Art:
Margret and Kalia going through the portal: http://fav.me/dbyhbn3
Star Jewel: http://fav.me/dbzsqhk

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
As they walked through the city, Melody searched through texts on her phone from those she'd answered earlier, trying to piece things together. One thing she noticed was that Melodia was apparently multi-lingual (mermaid magic?) and that had crossed over to her. She'd unknowingly sent her replies in whatever language applied. Kinda cool.

_Ikuto claimed Tadase was related to Melodia. She had Madoka check it out, it turned out to be true, and so she came here to meet him. Madoka gave her pictures...huh._

Within the messages between Melodia and Madoka were three images. One, she quickly identified as something-or-other Tsukasa, Tadase's maternal uncle. The second was Tadase's mother.

The third, a woman that she knew from the sudden haze of happiness she gained, was her own mother. Her curly black hair fell to her shoulders, and her deep purple eyes increased the sense of joy she held in her smile.

“She's so pretty,” she couldn't help but comment. Annie giggled.

“Aren't you cold?” Margret suddenly asked, having needed to activate a warmth spell around herself shortly after they'd left. Melody thought for a moment, then shook her head. Melodia didn't seem to have a coat, so she'd gone outside without one. Even so, she felt fine.

Annie explained, “Purple mermaids are from the Antarctic, and that's one of the coldest places on the planet. They have a natural immunity to lower temperatures.”

Melody brightened. “Really? Awesome!” She absently tapped at the pendant she'd put around her neck. _You're so lucky, Melodia._

Even if she didn't get an answer, it felt calming to 'talk' to Melodia. A reminder for herself that the real owner of this body was still around.

“Second question, Annie mentioned you being missing,” Margret pointed out. “You're not worried about being spotted and causing a scene?”

Shaking her head, Annie once again answered. “It's not common public knowledge. Knowing Lance, they're keeping it under wraps. She's not all that well known, either, unlike him, so it wouldn't really cause a panic.”

That made Melody feel even better. No panic was wonderful.

They stopped for a traffic light, and Melody took the chance to look at new texts that had come in.

_From Zeo: You do your thing and have a good new year then! Say hi to your friends!!! We're not the only people you know!_
_From Zeo: I'm freaking tired so I'm going to bed. But we're all rooting for you!_
_From Zeo: Happy New Year!_
_From Zeo: Be safe!_

The swarm of responses from Zeo was definitely a surprise. She wasn't sure how to answer at first,
feeling something off about his last one, but she managed a reply.

To Zeo: Sleep well! And don't worry, I'll be very careful!

From Abigail: You had me worried sick!! Yo can't jus disappear like that u know!!!

To Abigail: I'm sorry. Things came up.

She remembered to text Pidge, too, like Aniko had requested. Pushing aside the thought of how strange it felt to her for the Voltron Force to have cell phones – how did messages even send to them? They were on a different planet! - she sent him a short message.

To Pidge: I'm not ready to say where I am, but I promise I'm okay. You can tell the rest of the Force that.

They crossed the street and continued on their way. By the time she started hearing the festival, she'd gotten a few more replies, so she checked them before they continued.

From Madoka: Just take care of yourself! And happy New Year!

To Madoka: Happy New Year

From Kai: Okay! I hope you're having a good New Year!

To Kai: You too!

From Aniko: Be safe. Don't be afraid to call us if something happens. We're your family and we love you.

To Aniko: I know. I won't. Thanks.

Finally, the address for the concert that Touma had promised to send. A quick check revealed it was in fact at this festival – she’d have no problem getting there on time.

As they reached the festival itself, a shock of warm joy seemed to hit Melody smack in the gut. The loud voices faded to comfortable levels, the crowd seemed easy to navigate, and she suddenly wasn't worried about getting lost.

Margret leaned over to inform her quietly, “You seem to be glowing a faint pink.”

Annie assured them it was normal. Melodia had a large amount of 'Haert Siqu', which reacted to crowds of happy people and the like. There wasn't a need to worry – only mages would actually see the glow. Margret perked right up at this, asking, “You have Spirit Quartz here?”

“As far as I know, there's twelve types!”

“Twelve?! That's double what I've found! This world is awesome!”

Melody shied away from the conversation the two began, letting Margret have this moment. She found herself lost in the cheer around her, practically sucked in – before she knew it, she was playing games and sampling foods like everyone else, and there was a feeling of ‘home’ dancing inside her that she hadn't felt in a long time.

It's okay, part of her said. It's okay to feel like that.
For now, she was okay with believing that.

After a long while, they stepped away for a break from the crowd. According to Margret, Melody was still glowing. Melody couldn't see it herself, but Annie had already explained it would apparently die down sooner or later. She wasn't concerned about it.

“I've never been to anything like this,” she confessed to Annie and Margret as they wandered into a calm, empty clearing. “It's really fun, though!”

“Isn't it?” Margret agreed, still stuffing her face with treats. Melody had to laugh – Margret might only be a quarter-Saiyan, but she had certainly inherited the appetite.

They sat by some bushes, Margret teasingly complaining about the ease of some of the games. When Melody countered with ‘then why haven't you played any?’ she explained that ‘I'd run them all out of business and then no one would have fun!’.

As an afterthought, she'd corrected herself. “The only game left would be that goldfish gathering one. I can't control my strength enough to not break the net, so it's impossible for me to win.”

“If I wouldn't transform when my hand hit the water, I'd totally play for you,” Melody chuckled. If Melodia was a mermaid of the 'Mermaid Melody' variety, enough water would transform her, and in a crowd like this, she'd be bubbles in an instant. Frankly, the thought was terrifying – the 'Haert' she was letting off kept her from panicking about it, though. So that was nice.

Margret rolled her eyes. “I am not going to let you risk your life for a-”

Melody watched in confusion as Margret's gaze snapped over to the woods. Not moments later, Annie pitched in, “I sense another Character!”

Margret stood, clearly thinking. “And I sense some rotten energy. Something's wrong.”

Quickly getting to her feet, Melody worried, “What kind of 'rotten energy'? Like a corrupted egg?”

“...I'm not sure.” Margret stepped closer to the trees, peering around to see if she could find the source. “I don't think it's an egg...”

“Well, why are we just standing here? Let's go make sure no one's hurt!” Melody took off with a determination she wasn't used to. This courage was clearly Melodia's, but for now, she was going to borrow it.

Margret caught up in an instant, and Annie wasn't much farther behind. As they got closer to whatever they were sensing, Melody realized that she could feel it, too – a dark, creeping pain, engulfing--

That person there!

Melody stumbled out of the trees, catching the attention of the wobbling teen and his Character. Margret stifled a gasp behind her hand, recognizing them both from versions in her own world.

Catching her breath, Melody couldn't think of what to say. When Ikuto turned to leave without a word, though, she stepped forward. “Wait!”

This was why she was here.

He stopped. Melody kept moving forward, ignoring the annoyance she was feeling from Melodia.
“Ikuto-san. Please. I know we're not friends, but please, let me help you.”

Ikuto turned slightly, watching her with suspicion. She waved for Margret to stay back, and stopped a few feet away from him. “Please,” she repeated.

“What's the difference between then and now-nya?” Yoru snapped. “Ikuto, let's go! There's no way she means it-nya!”

Then and now? Something had definitely happened between them. Melody didn't know what that was, but she didn't want it to stop Ikuto from getting the help he needed.

She started moving again. She walked right up to the unsteady teen and wrapped her arms around him, hugging him from behind. “I'm not letting you leave like this,” she whispered.

“...Why now?” he asked quietly. “What could have possibly changed your mind so quickly?”

She gave him the only answer she could think of. “Because I can't remember what happened to us. I have amnesia. So right now, I don't see any problem with helping you.”

She didn't want to lie, but there was no way he'd believe the truth. For now, she had to live with this.

She let him go, carefully, making sure he wasn't going to fall. “Listen. Something's up with that violin. My mage friend can sense a big darkness in it – I can, too. You don't need to tell me what's going on, just let us help you.”

He turned towards her, nearly tripping. Melodia's reflexes were just fast enough to catch him. “You expect me to believe that...you don't remember?” he asked accusingly.

“I don't expect anything. All I know is there's dark energy hurting you, and my friend can do something about it. It doesn't matter to me who you are or what's happened between us.”

Ikuto regarded her for a moment. “You don't, do you? What if I told you it was your father that did this?”

“...Huh?” Melody blinked, her mind freezing up for a second. Her...what?

A shot of pain suddenly drove through her head, making her growl as she tried to stay steady. Words – memories – flooded in.

“Your father... He and your sister were taken away when you were very little,” a voice said. “Something...terrible happened, and darkness surrounded them.”

“Our father is a corrupted man,” another voice told her. “He and Shelly have been controlled so long, their real selves might not be reachable anymore. If they try to approach you, get away, understand?”

“How could you work with Easter, with such dangerous people?” This voice was her own, full of anger. “I saw you with them! With Shelly and Max! How could you, Ikuto-san?! How could you do something like that when I've told you how horrible they are?”

A shaky breath escaped her. Her gaze fixed on the ground, pieces fell into place.

Something had happened to her father and sister. Max...Shelly. They'd become involved with Easter somehow, maybe not of their own free will. Melodia had seen Ikuto with them once...
“Oh god,” she whispered, feeling tears hit her eyes. “I never even gave you a chance to explain.”

She'd taken one look and decided he was part of the problem.

*He's not. He's not! They're using him. Easter is using him! It's not his fault, Melodia, it never was!*

She let every memory she had of the Shugo Chara show come through. Every moment of Ikuto's pain. The reason Yoru had hatched. The way he'd gotten strung into it all because of his father's disappearance. The things they'd make him do in the future, the very near future, if they didn't do something.

Something shifted.

Melodia slowly lifted her head, tears streaming down her face as she whispered in shock, “I didn't know.”

The widening of Ikuto's eyes told her he saw the truth in her pain. This was no joke.

“I'm so sorry I wouldn't believe you,” Melodia cried. “I-I was...I didn't know...I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry...”

She hugged him. She didn't know what else to do. She hugged the friend that she'd hurt and promised herself she'd never be so rash again.

At some point in the blur of tears and apologies, Ikuto agreed to the healing.

As Margret's magic began pulling apart the flood of corruption soaked into Ikuto's violin, Melody saw her.

Standing beside her, transparent and vague, a duplicate of her current form. A sad smile, and a whisper: “I knew helping you was the right choice.”

Her eyes widened. Before she could say anything, the misty duplicate vanished, and Melodia promised, *We'll talk later.*

Hesitantly, Melody looked around. The only other person who seemed to have noticed was Annie, who looked just as shocked as she was.

That look, and everything else, abruptly faded to white.

“Do I risk it?” a green haired girl asked herself, sitting in the shadow of an observatory. “What if it's not her? What if...no. No, it has to be her.” She stared at her phone, a contact page for Melodia brought up on the screen. The picture was five years out of date.

The girl reached up to take hold of her pendant – a green shell. The pendant of the Green mermaid princess. “I-I don't know...how this works, Aqua Regina...but if this is Mel, then please give me a sign!”

She blinked, and Annie was in her face. Melody jumped back, almost falling over. “Gah!”

Annie shot back a short distance. “Sorry! You—You froze up. Your eyes were glowing – I wanted to be here to tell you what it was.”
“My eyes were what?”

Glancing over at Ikuto, who was resting against a nearby tree as Margret pulled the corruption from his violin, Annie flew closer. In a whisper, she explained, “Melodia has visions. She can see points where someone is making a decision, as long as she knows that person. Who was it that you saw?”

Melody blinked a few times. “I...th-the Green mermaid princess?” The shadows had prevented her from seeing the girl’s face well. The voice...she knew it, but her head still felt like it was spinning, so she couldn’t place it.

Annie thought on this a moment. “Hmm...I think you once said that she disappeared when you were eleven. What was the choice she was trying to make?”

“Um, calling me?” Melody frowned. “She was asking for a sign that it was...” She trailed off. Something about that seemed...

Melody pulled out Dia’s phone and went through the contacts, searching for a girl with green hair —there. Watarigani Megumi.

...Wait.

“If this is Mel, then please give me a sign!”

Megumi would have no reason to doubt that her contact info was in fact her. Not like that – it didn’t seem like she was concerned about it being out of date.

Megumi...Megan. Megan's beyblade persona.

Melody swallowed. *Aqua Regina? I think I'm gonna be the sign she's asking for.*

Melody hit the call button.

The dial tone sounded. Once...twice...

`click`

“H...Hello?”

“...Megan?”

She heard a sharp gasp. “Melody?”

Relief washed over her. “Thank god...Regina, rather. Where are you?”

“I-I think I'm at Yuki's observatory. I mean, there's a lot of pictures of him and me, but he's not actually here. Uh...why exactly are we here?”

“Uh...you know that roleplay I hav—had? That universe is...not doing well. Casey and some others sent me here. I...you're either here because of them, or-”

“Or the freakin' rainbow kidnapped me again.”

“Yeah. L-Listen, try to get in contact with Yuki or see how long it's been since he left. Find a way to the B-Pit if you can. I'll...try to see if they brought you here.”
“How did they bring you here?”

“Questionable knowledge from Casey, apparently.”

“Ugh. I need a candy bar. Anyway, I woke up in a freakin' lake, so I know how mermaid swimming works. I think I can track your magic pearl and use that to...you know, find you. After I find candy bars.”

The casual tone Megan had was more than Melody could've hoped for in this situation. “Maybe you should yell at a toaster?”

A brief silence, followed by, “I can't tell if you're joking.”

Melody cleared her throat, reminding her: “They just explode with bread! What's the deal with that?!?”

“Shush. Right now. I...ugh. I don't suppose that chat friend of yours followed us here?”

“I've been checking this phone all day. Nothing.” She imagined the following silence was probably Megan counting to ten instead of screaming in annoyance. “If anything, we'll get you home. Well...to your family.”

Megan sighed. “Just...don't go crazy without me. I'll get swimming, I guess, and see you...tomorrow, hopefully.”

Tomorrow. That was good enough. “Okay. Be safe. Remember the bubble curse!”

“I will. G'bye.”

“Bye, Meg.”

From Pidge: It's really good to hear from you, but we're all worried. What's going on, Melodia?

To Pidge: That crystal thing messed with my head. I think I had to get away to put myself together. I'll be okay, I just don't know when I'll be ready to come back.

From Abigail: litenyou. Listen. 'things cme up" YOU DISAPEARED FRM THE FAE OF ARUS.I THOUGHT YOU EERE DIED.

To Abigail: I'm not died!
To Abigail: I mean, dead. I just needed to get away. That crystal creature really messed with my head.

“That's all I can do for now,” Margret said, letting the red glow of her magic fade from the violin. “It's not finished, but I need time to recharge my magic. You should be able to sleep alright, if nothing else.”

Ikuto sighed heavily, watching her put it back in the case. “How long will it take?”

Margret thought for a moment. “Corruption this bad...not to mention the effects it's had on you...at least a week. That's if we're lucky.”
Melody reached down to help Ikuto stand. “I’m staying at an apartment not too far from here. You can stay there for now, keep away from Easter.”

He accepted the hand, only wobbling a little once he was on his feet. He still looked exhausted.

“How about we go back for some lunch?” Margret suggested. “I...Tsukiyomi-san, I can put an illusion on you that will prevent anyone from recognizing you on the way.”

He seemed too tired to object, only giving a slight nod. Margret cast the short spell, and Melody watched as his appearance turned vague and generic – if she hadn't seen it happen, she'd have no idea who he was.

As Margret led the way back, Melody let Ikuto lean on her while they walked. Yoru was more than happy to rest on Margret's shoulder, a good place to hide from any other Bearers.

They made it back to the apartment without incident. Margret magically unlocked the door (after knocking; Melodia's mage friend still wasn't there) and let them in. Sandwiches were put together, and Ikuto soon passed out on the couch. Melody took Margret into the bedroom Melodia had claimed, and brought up the subject of Megan.

As she'd feared and expected, Margret's reply was, “Who?”

Melody took a slow breath. “She's my next door neighbor, in my dimension. This is now the second time something's dragged her to a different one.”

“That...is she nearby? I'd like to talk to her.”

“Her goal is to meet us by tomorrow. I don't feel comfortable explaining her full situation when she's not here.”

Margret nodded. “That's understandable.” She glanced at Annie for a moment, then asked, “I don't suppose you've...heard anything from Melodia?”

Melody slowly nodded. “Uh...she was actually the one crying and hugging Ikuto-san...And then she appeared as a misty kinda thing and said that she knew helping me was the right choice? And we'd talk later?”

Margret chuckled. “Well, I dunno what that first part's supposed to mean, but at least she doesn't seem hostile. Why don't you try reaching her now? We've got some time before that concert you mentioned.”

“Yeah. I was thinkin' about that. Make sure I'm...y'know, conscious in time to go.”

Margret nodded, then left the room. Annie flew around a bit, then offered, “Do you wanna see how my egg appeared?”

Blinking, Melody decided on a nod. Annie smiled, summoning up her egg from wherever it went when she wasn't using it. She jumped inside and pulled the top on, explaining, “Just touch the egg! You'll get visions about the moment of the wish and when I hatched.”

Annie disappeared into the egg, and it sealed up. Melody stared at it for a moment, thought, Why not? and gently set her hand on the egg.

Once again, her vision went white. This was quickly replaced by an image of Melodia – not much younger, but her hair far shorter – crying in the hospital. She couldn't do anything for the person...
she was visiting. She couldn't help the others who were worried about that person. Once home, alone in her room, she'd made that wish. *I want the strength to help my friends when they're hurting.*

She'd gone to sleep crying. The next morning, Annie's egg was there. She'd picked it up and found it was warm.

The scene shifted to a room in the Castle of Lions, on Arus. Melodia – identical to the one before, but with the hair length she had now – was curled up at her desk, staring at a photo of her and her Dungeon Gym friends.

Everything was going wrong. Toby was in the hospital, Zeo was being subjected to horrible experiments, Masamune was...who even knew where!

She just wanted to help them. She just wanted it to be over.

A cracking sound caught her attention, and she turned towards the egg. She watched in amazement as the top burst off, revealing a small human-like spirit that looked practically identical to the rag doll her mother had given her.

With a warm smile, the small spirit introduced herself. “Hello! My name is Annie. I hope we'll have fun and grow together!”

As Melody blinked away the white spots, Annie came back out of her egg and dismissed it once more. She waited patiently for Melody to speak.

“Wow,” was all she could manage, soft and surprised. “I...so you were born while Toby...” She jolted suddenly. “Wait, how long ago was that? Is Toby still in the hospital?!”

“That was over a year ago!” Annie assured her. “Toby is perfectly fine.”

A sigh of relief made its way out. “Oh, good...so all that stuff with Ziggurat is over...”

“How do you know about Ziggurat?”

Melody frowned a bit. “Well...I mentioned that some things here reminded me of TV shows? The world championship and all the stuff about Spiral Force...that was kinda season two of a beyblade show...”

Annie blinked, then frowned. “Sometimes I don't get why Writer Seers connect to stuff like that.”

Melody just sighed, falling backwards onto the bed. “Well...at least it's over. Related, though, does 'the god Nemesis' mean anything to you?” When Annie shook her head, she frowned again. “Well damn. Oh well. That's season three. I'll...it's probably better I don't spoil the future.”

Nodding in agreement, Annie sat next to her on the bed. “So, you want to start meditating now? That's my best guess on how you can talk to Dia.”

“...Gimme like, two minutes to just lie here.”

Annie gave her those two minutes, then directed her into a type of meditation that she said Aniko had taught her. Opening herself to see her spirit within...or, something.

*Hello?* she offered.
Hello, Dia's voice echoed, oddly quiet. Sorry, it's hard to reach you. I'm trying to put mental walls back up. Kinda broke them last night.

Oh. Um, can I help?

Maybe? I'll see if I can unlock the memories that tell you how to do it. Dia fell silent for a bit. A few visions of mental security lessons with a very pretty brunette woman fell into view, and Melody used them as a guide.

As they went, she could hear Dia's voice growing stronger. That's good! The basics are already done. Should turn off the glowing, or at least make it less noticeable. We won't get any nosy telepaths, either. I can do the rest from here while you go around.

Melody felt herself frown. Is that...really okay? You're not...mad?

Mad? Oh, jeez, no. You wouldn't even be here if I hadn't let you in. I'd show you the memory but I'm having trouble finding it...being in the backseat of a head is weird. I'll keep looking, though.

You're...awfully calm about this...

She could almost imagine Dia shrugging. I mean, it's not like you were shoved in without my permission. I don't really have a reason to be mad. If anything, I'm really happy you're here. I...never would've known the truth about Ikuto-san without you. Could you...would you be willing to share more of that 'show' version?

Uh...sure. How do I do that?

Dia definitely laughed. Permission's all I need. I should be able to find it now. Hmm...do you want memories about Touma? Make it a little easier when you see him tonight?

Really? That would be awesome...

Okay! It's probably not safe for me to unlock a whole lot at once, so let me find the really important ones. How we met...uhh, last time we saw each other...oh, I should throw in some about his agency and the other idols there. That's probably all I can manage, is it okay?

That's a lot more than I would've hoped I could get. Thank you.

“Are you sure you're okay going back on your own?” Margret asked a few hours later, as Melody was ready to go. “I mean...not alone alone, because you have Annie, and kinda Melodia, but...you know what I mean.”

“I'll be fine,” Melody promised. “If anything does happen, I have Ikuto-san's number.”

Margret still seemed uncertain, but nodded. “Okay. I'm not your babysitter. I'm just...worried.”

“I know. We'll be back after the concert, okay?”

“Okay.”

Melody wasted no time getting back to the festival. It was only about 7, but she didn't want to miss the concert, and crowds were a thing. She located the performing area, then wandered around a bit more to get some more food samples that were particularly yummy.
While chowing down on one such sample, Melody felt a chill go through her. She quickly looked around, feeling something was very wrong. After a moment, it seemed Annie felt it too – she started floating off, stopping after a foot or so and turning back to Melody with a frightened look.

“I sense...I sense something I can't explain,” Annie told her. “A dark feeling...and nearing it, many other Characters...”

After a few seconds to process, Melody's eyes widened. *That's the Guardians. Lulu...the Mystery eggs!*

*The what?*

...*You'll see. “Annie, follow that creepy feeling! That's where Dia's cousin is!”*

*It's what?!*

Melody knew they could handle it. She knew they'd be fine, but she still took off after Annie, following the corrupted feeling of...siblings? She was fairly certain she remembered this one was siblings who were having trouble getting their performance right.

Whoever it was, no matter if the Guardians could handle it, she felt like she had to be there. To just ignore this feeling would be wrong.

As she turned a corner, she nearly ran into the Guardians, and at the sight of the streams of blue energy (or water?) she acted without even thinking. “Annie!”

She felt a tiny weight in her hair – the symbol of her Character Change, a red flower pin – and shoved her way in front of the Guardians, throwing her hands into the air. Above her and the other appeared a large, glowing dream catcher, and though the attack was strong, her defense held.

Something shifted.

A warmth in her chest, a wordless promise she couldn't describe.

“My heart, unlock!”

There was suddenly light all around her. She saw Annie disappear into her egg, which she let vanish into her chest, and the warmth she felt spread throughout her. *I can help them,* she found herself thinking as she closed her eyes, allowing the transformation to occur.

A light blue dress with black trim at the bottom formed on her, little red flowers decorating it. A white apron accompanied it, tied in the back with a large bow; striped stockings and black shoes followed. A large blue bow with a red flower placed itself in her hair, which flooded with the brilliant red that her bangs held.

Twirling as the transformation completed, she and Annie both exclaimed, “Chara-Transformation: Ocean's Lullaby!”

The Guardians called their own Transformation titles, but there was no time to dwell on what had just happened. Even as she set down, the two children affected by Lulu's power were throwing more attacks. She could barely jump away in time to avoid the first; the straw of the second scratched at her face, but she slid under it and managed to keep from being caught. A quick glance above, however, showed her the others were not as lucky, but any thoughts to help were cut short by the Mystery Egg balls the corrupted children threw next; with another dream catcher, Melody shielded herself.
As the attacks finally ceased, and the Guardians found their footing, Melody heard the corrupted girl tell her brother, “We won't screw up anymore, brother!”

“What’s up, you two?” Amu shouted. “Listen to me!”

The children ignored her. “Watch our perfect performance!” the brother insisted, as he and his sister threw out more water-like energy, along with the strips of straw and Mystery Egg balls.

“Everyone!” Nagihiko shouted, a safe distance away, that single word urging them to fight back. Of his friends, all but Amu responded with confirmation, “Right!”

“Go Go Little Duckies!” Yaya cried, the summoned toys quickly taking the watery energy into their mouths. Rima followed up with, “Tightrope Dancer!” breaking apart the straw.

With the exclamation of, “Holy Crown!” Tadase formed a shield to block the balls, and Melody stepped up to aid him.

“Dream Net!” she cried, letting another dream catcher appear, providing a new shield to hold steady as Tadase's grew to push the balls away. Whether or not this aid was unnecessary, she found she didn't care – as long as she could provide some form of help, whether in her shield or with her simple presence, she felt powerful.

Nagihiko called Amu's name, alerting her to the opportunity that he saw. She responded by summoning her own item, “Heart Rod!” and twirling it above her, calling out, “Spiral Heart Special!” The attack spread like a wave, crashing into the corrupted siblings and causing them to drop the straw umbrellas they both held.

“Brother, did we just screw up again?” the sister asked in a panic.

“Screw up?! There's no way we'd let that happen again!” he cried, his tone the same as hers.

“Don't be afraid of making mistakes!” Rima shouted forcefully, gaining their attention. “Even if you screw up, just change that into a joke and make the audience laugh!”

“That's right!” Amu added with just as much strength. “There's nothing wrong with messing up! As long as you put your heart into it, the audience will enjoy it!”

Melodia added in her own words of encouragement. “No audience comes for perfection! They're here to see your show, the smiles you wear and to see the best you're capable of! As long as you believe in your strength, you'll reach your goal!”

As she saw the question marks on their foreheads change to X's, and the translucent form of X Eggs form around them, Melody felt the corrupted feeling begin to fade. Even more, as Amu called out, “Negative Heart: Lock On!” and she felt the surge of pure energy; as Amu shouted, “Open Heart!” and sent that energy to the corrupted children, Melody felt that dark presence she'd sensed disappear entirely with the negative influence that Lulu had pushed upon them.

The siblings began to fall, and Melody pushed out one more dream catcher, a soft bed of white energy flowing up to catch them safely. As she and the Guardians rushed forward to take the siblings and set them against the small shrine nearby, she felt that warmth again, radiating all throughout her body, setting a smile on her face.

Yaya gathered up the umbrella and balls that belonged to the unconscious siblings, and everyone let their transformations end, Melody included. She expected all that warmth to disappear, but found that it still surrounded her – she felt it all over, not just in herself, but in the whole
surrounding area.

She followed the Guardians as they hid behind the shrine, smiling with them as the siblings woke up and rushed to make it to the talent competition before it started. When they were gone, she felt a hand on her, and turned to see Tadase, his mouth open and ready with questions.

_Do you wanna take this?_ she asked Dia.

_Really? Thanks..._

Melody blinked, and suddenly everything seemed like she was watching through binoculars. Dia had taken control with no effort – that kind of made her feel better, knowing she could do that.

“Sorry we had to meet like this,” Dia said sheepishly. “I'm at least glad I could help. I'm Melodia.”

Yaya's jaw dropped. “Melodia?!?”

“Surprise! I was actually looking for you...well, one of you specifically.” Dia took her phone out of her boot – no pockets, nowhere else to put it – and pulled up the images Madoka had sent her. “I have something kind of important to tell you,” she said, facing Tadase. “Would you please look at these three photos?”

She handed the phone over to him, and gave him a chance to scroll through. He looked up questioningly. “Excuse me, but why do you have pictures of my mother and uncle?”

Dia let herself take a calming breath. “For starters...that third one, the woman with black hair? That's their sister. Your aunt, her name is Mingzhu. And...she's sort of my mom.”

She could see the gears turning. “My aunt...is your mother?”

“Apparently.” Dia rubbed the back of her head, smiling awkwardly. “I'm not sure what happened, or why I never knew before, but...long story short, what I do know is the family's kind of messed up and spread out. When...a friend mentioned you to me, I thought it was best I come talk to you.”

Tadase returned her phone before he spoke. “I'm...sorry, I'm not sure how to...”

“We don't have to be best friends or anything,” she assured him. “In fact, it's probably better we keep some distance. You're all fighting against Easter, right? There are two staff members there, possessed by chaotic spirits. If they learn we know each other, things could get bad. I came to warn you about that.”

Amu seemed worried now, which wasn't surprising. “Possessed? Spirits?”

Dia nodded. She hesitated, then confessed, “My father, and sister. The spirits possessing them definitely know you're related to them, but if they haven't acted on it yet, you're probably safe. It just didn't seem right to not tell you.”

“So it's better we act as if we never met you?” Rima concluded.

“Yeah. When it's all over...I'd really like to get the family back together.” Dia gave a sheepish grin. “You guys take care of Easter, I know you can. I'll see about dealing with those spirits.”

Tadase's Character floated forward. “This is invaluable information. You have my deepest thanks for taking this risk.”

Dia blinked, then smiled again and gave a little bow. “If they do pull anything, let me know. Let's
share numbers on the way to the performance area.”

Yaya jumped. “We'll be late!” She took off, becoming the lead for the swarm of Bearers eager to see their friends perform.

Once they were all seated, numbers were exchanged, and Dia had gotten a photo with Tadase, control was returned to Melody. She wobbled a bit, even sitting down, and had to blink several times at the sudden adjustment in vision.

Would you send that photo to Mom, Lance and Aniko? Dia requested. Make sure to tell them not to contact him yet. Explain the situation with Easter. They'll understand.

Y-Yeah. Melody fumbled through the process, glancing up periodically to watch the performances going on.

To Aniko; Lance; Mom: [picture sent]
To Aniko; Lance; Mom: This is Tadase! He's twelve years old and lives in Seiyo, Japan. He's our cousin! (I had Madoka check it all out) His mother and uncle are Mom's siblings and he lives with...I guess his paternal grandmother. He and his friends are sort of the rivals to Easter – until that gets dealt with, it's probably best not to contact him. I'm not sure what would happen if those spirits knew we knew about Tadase. I still felt like I should let you know, so...surprise!

From Mom: That's Mizue's son?

From Aniko: I remember Uncle Tsukasa and Aunt Mizue. It's nice to know they're doing well.

From Lance: Wait, they're alive?

From Mom: Thank you. Thank you so much. Please, if you can, ask him to tell Mizue and Tsukasa that...that I'm not angry with them. They'll understand the context.

To Aniko; Lance; Mom: I will!

You know, I'm jealous. You were a magical girl with Annie before I was. I mean...I didn't know that was even a thing, but...still jealous.

I'm sure you'll have your turn, Dia. Though...honestly, I kinda feel like it was both of us.

Hmm...maybe. There wasn't enough time to tell, I guess.

I feel...I feel like I really made a difference here, Melody confessed. I helped them...I was able to step up and help them.

Is the idea of sticking around for a while still so scary?

Heh...no. Not anymore.

Glad to hear.
Chapter End Notes

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 3

The New Year's Amateur Talent Competition eventually came to a close. While the duo the Guardians had saved weren't the winners, they did place third. Every competitor did amazingly, in Melody's opinion, and she enjoyed watching all of them.

It was after the competition that Jupiter's concert began.

When Jupiter came onto the stage, Melody felt a wave of cheer rush against her along with the audience's vocal cries. It was a bit overwhelming, and by the time she settled down, she'd missed their intro. The music for their song had started – she didn't know this one, and she was eager to hear it. Dia was polite enough not to spoil it for her.

“Erande yuku michi no saki ga wakaranakute
Dakara fui ni kinou sae mo mabushiku maru

“Furimuite toikaketa
Ima, nani ga dekiru no darou (Where are you now?)
Shinjitai (Wish)
Kasuka na hikari dakara egakeru mirai”

“There is my hope
Hateshinai kono sora o massugu watatte
Kimi o teraseru you na hoshi ni naru to
Itsuka negatteru futashika na kyou mo
Kibou egaku tame no kagi ni naru koto
Inori nagara aruiteku”

The song faded as white slowly overtook her vision. It wasn't the same as before, abrupt and without warning. This time, it was gentle, soft, and made her feel as if she was being held in a warm, loving hug.

The white faded into shades she could only describe as 'ocean'. A woman's voice greeted her, Welcome home, my child.

Melody looked around – noted that Misty Dia was back – but couldn't find the source of the voice. Nevertheless, it continued. When your color fell quiet, I grew concerned for your safety. I am greatly relieved that it was nothing of worry.

This voice. She knew this voice. The last time she'd been here, this voice had greeted her, within the gentle sea...

A light flared in front of her, and she covered her eyes quickly with her arm to block it. She heard Dia gasp, and felt a soft hand on her arm. She slowly lowered it, staring in awe at Aqua Regina herself, who had given a hand to both of them, letting her fingers intertwine with theirs.

You both have wonderful hearts, Aqua Regina told them with a smile that made Melody's voice catch in her throat. It wasn't the beauty of the woman – though she was kind of beautiful – but the
way she felt so real. Melody felt enveloped in the safety of her power, and suddenly understood that this was the origin of the peace and strength from her pendant – or specifically, the Pearl Tear within. *My power is always with you. You are both welcome to it, whenever you are in need of aid.*

A strong current rushed between them, and Melody cried out as Aqua Regina disappeared. There was a flood of white, forcing her to cover her face once more, and all too quickly she found herself back in the crowd, fans cheering as Jupiter left the stage.

In a daze, Melody put a hand to the pendant. Dia commented wisely, *Whoa.*

Closing her eyes, Melody whispered, “Thank you, Aqua Regina.”

*My strength is always yours,* the goddess’s voice assured her.

Melody dazedly excused herself from the Guardians, skirting around the area to find a way to get backstage. Once she found it, she was surprised they let her in – then again, Touma had mentioned he’d take care of that, hadn’t he?

She found Jupiter resting on a bench, wiping their faces with towels and drinking some water. Following Dia’s advice, she took a deep breath before she approached them. “H-Hey…”

Shouta exclaimed instantly, “You made it!” She stepped back a bit, startled, and he grinned apologetically. “Whoops, sorry. I got excited.”

“Have things been coming back?” Touma asked, skipping the greeting for the more concerning topic.

She nodded. “I’m doing okay! Annie’s helping a lot.”

Hokuto smiled at the Character. “That’s quite a relief.”

Annie giggled. “Just doing my job! And as for you doing yours, you were great!”

“Awww, you’re too sweet, Annie!” Shouta beamed. “You two should visit the office again! Kero misses you~”

“That’s the Character of one of their co-workers,” Annie explained. “He’s really nice. So is his Bearer!”

Sighing, Touma leaned back. “Have you eaten?”

Melody blinked. “Uh, lunch, yes. Dinner? No…”

“Allright. Consider it our treat, then.” He moved to stand, and she stepped back so he could. “Let’s get changed and find the Producer. Melodia, we’ll take you home.”

He walked away before she could object, and as she stood there in shock, Shouta giggled. “Translation, I’m worried about you, so let me make you dinner!”

Melody sighed. There wasn't a reason to say no, she supposed...

*Don’t you dare. Touma is almost as good a chef as Mom, and that’s her job.*

...Well. Dinner would be something to look forward to, then. But on the other hand... “Isn’t it New
Year's Eve? Shouldn't you guys be with your families?"

“We can spend a little time with you before we head home!” Shouta insisted. “Besides, I don't think Touma's in any rush. His dad's probably buried in his office. Let him celebrate with you~”

He and Hokuto stood up, following Touma to change into their regular clothes. Melody frowned, then pulled out Dia's phone.

To Ikuto: We're apparently having guests. The idol trio Jupiter is coming over to make me dinner, and Touma is probably staying later than that. Margret, you better control your stomach.

“You never had a Character, but you can see Annie?” Melody repeated in surprise.

Hokuto and Shouta nodded. “Ever since we joined 315 Pro.,” the former clarified. “Touma had one, but...”

“We just kinda woke up one day and poof, there was Kero!” Shouta finished.

Melody paused to make sure they were headed down the right street. “That's...huh. So, we've visited the office before, then? Met Kero and his Bearer?” Pierre, Dia supplied. “Pierre, right?”

Touma nodded. “If I remember, you had a theory on it...”

Melody frowned. Dia? Is one more nudge too much for today?

Hm...I probably shouldn't unlock it, but...how about, repeat after me?

Melody took a moment to listen. “Something like...At 961, you were ordered around. When you quit, and started working freelance, that was like having your eyes opened. You saw a new path, a new...uh, light. You had a great dream of rebuilding yourselves. And that's kind of what it's like when you give birth to a Chara-Egg. But instead of individual wishes, you all had the same one, so the...magic, I guess, was spread between you. You two started seeing those wishes that were around in Character form, and Touma, who already could, wasn't really affected.”

Hokuto nodded thoughtfully. “That sounds right. I still agree with it, honestly.”

Annie smiled. “I think it's a great theory, too. Out of curiosity, is anyone else at 315 Pro. seeing Kero now?”

“Hmm, glimpses every once in a while, I think,” Touma mused. “The whole place just has that feeling of...what you said, a 'new path' or whatever. Starting to think there's some magic user there or somethin'.”

Melody chuckled. “Or maybe you three just spread your light with them and it's contagious?”

Shouta contemplated this, his face skyward. “Hmm...you think so? Even the old guys?”

“Shouta,” both his unit mates said with a warning tone. He grinned, “I'm just kidding!”

A few streets later, they reached the apartments. Margret let them in, smiling awkwardly – Melody recalled the Jupiter of her dimension was still...not so great.
Ikuto, appearing half asleep and still collapsed on the couch, watched them enter. He apparently deemed the group not worth his energy, because he curled back up for more sleep. Melody shot a quick glance at Margret, who smiled and nodded – he was fine, just needed rest.

After brief introductions, Touma raided the kitchen to see what was available. He made a list of what he used so that he could replace it later, and started cooking.

Dinner was...really nice. Melody felt completely at ease – they weren't pushing her to talk, or bringing up topics that bothered her. Learning about the idols they worked with now, plus the best chicken she'd ever had? Yeah. This was a good dinner.

Hokuto and Shouta headed out after helping with the dishes. Touma stuck around, pulling Melody into the process of baking a cake to celebrate with, because why not? They picked a marble recipe and a chocolate icing, and...it was a lot of fun.

Sitting in Dia's room, holding her hands out so Margret could magically wash them (as far as Touma knew, she was in the bathroom using the sink, but as a mermaid that was impossible), Melody confessed, “I don't think I'd be upset if I had to stay here for a long time.”

Margret raised her eyebrow, though didn't look up from her spell. “Oh?”

“...I don't know how to explain it. It just...” She breathed deeply, taking in the scent of cake. “It feels like home.”

*Home.* That was a hard word for her. She didn't feel at 'home' very often, even in her own house. 'Home' was usually the arms of her parents, or curled up with a cat and a book, not a new place she knew nothing about.

And yet, that's just what it was. This world, no matter where she went or who she was with...was home.

She felt her smile falter. At home – the dimension she belonged in – she'd...made some terrible mistakes. Just four days ago, she'd wrecked her biggest friendship.

It had been her fault. Being pulled away from the situation, being given time to think about it, she knew that now. She had made a lot of mistakes and someday, she'd probably have to face up to them.

But...even so...the chill was gone.

The chill. The creeping feeling that had taken her for the four days before this, keeping her body tense and heart shattered, was completely gone.

The memories that had caused it to happen were still there, but the chill itself was *gone.*

She was happy. For the first time in days, she was once again happy. She was excited for what the next day would bring. A world where nothing was the same as she'd grown up with, where magic existed and spirits were real. True, there were also dangers – but they just didn't seem so scary.

It was all she'd ever wanted. A world full of endless possibilities, amazing people, and best of all – *magic.* From her first writing class in elementary school, she'd been drawn into worlds full of fantasy, treasuring them wherever she could find a gateway – books, TV shows, games. Now, she lived in one.

*I'm happy.*
Melody laughed.

It started as a little giggle, then quickly grew into full on laughter, tears appearing in her eyes. She curled into herself and laughed, enjoyed the freedom, enjoyed the fact that the weight of pain and cold was gone.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed like this. It was wonderful.

“You said you copied my spirit, right?” she asked. “There's another me in my home dimension...so...do you think...I could stay here?”

Margret blinked, her spell canceling out with her surprise. “Uh...like, permanently? I-I'm not the one to ask. I think that'd be Melodia...”

*Can I? Would you be mad if I asked for that?*

She didn't get a verbal answer. Instead, her pendant flashed, and she was engulfed in a plum light that blinded her. When her sight returned, she squinted, not sure what the hell had just...

Floating before her in the light, Dia smiled. “I've been waiting for that question ever since Aqua Regina-sama claimed you. Yes, Melody. You can stay.”

Melody rushed forward, grabbing Dia in the biggest hug she could manage. She buried herself in Dia's arms, whispering over and over, “Thank you. Thank you.”

“If I'm being honest,” Dia confessed, “if this is anything like the spell I think it's like, we're probably going to fuse. Is that okay? We won't be two different minds. Eventually...it'll be just one new, awesome Melodia.”

Melody nodded. She didn't have to put any thought into it. “I'd love that. I'd really love that.”

“Me too.” Dia pulled out of the hug and ruffled her hair. “Well, Margret's waiting. And so is that cake. Just let me have a few bites, okay?” After that, she faded; the light went with her. Melody was back in the bedroom.

“I can stay,” she whispered happily. “She said I can stay.”

She had a whole new world to call home. She only hoped she could do it justice.

A light appeared at the top of her vision, drawing her out of her thoughts just enough for her to lift her head. Margret pulled back, but Melody found herself reaching for it. As soon as she held the light in her hands, the glow shattered, leaving behind an egg.

Her eyes widened. Quickly, she pulled her hands in closer, feeling a lump of shock and joy in her throat as she stared at the new Chara-Egg. It was a light blue, holding a ring of white heart outlines not unlike the ring of flowers that Annie's egg had.

Melody broke into a grin and held the egg to her chest, promising that she'd make Annie's little sister proud.

A throat cleared. Melody looked up, and immediately caught the eye of Touma, who was standing in the doorway.

“So, I seem to be out of the loop here,” he said sharply. “Mind telling me why you're 'asking Melodia if you can stay'?”
Melody shrunk back. The door – they’d left the door open! What was she supposed to do now?

*The truth. Just tell him the truth.*

*Dia, are you crazy?!*

*Trust me. I know Touma. Just state all the facts – he might be grumpy, but he won't be able to deny I'm here and I'm okay with it.*

Melody blinked a few times, then hesitantly stood. She opened her mouth, caught sight of Ikuto lingering behind Touma, and faltered. *What about him?*

*I'm not sure. But he's here, and...he probably heard Touma. It's probably for the best.*

Melody's chest felt heavy. Clutching her new Chara-Egg, she took a slow, deep breath, then straightened herself as much as she could. “I...I mean exactly what it sounds like. Melodia is one mind in this body. I woke up as the second one today.”

Not giving Touma a chance to object, she started explaining everything from the moment she'd woken up. Her belief that it was a dream, her realization that it wasn't. Her confession to Annie and the way the Character still being there had proven Dia's continued existence. Margret's arrival, and the reason for her being there. How she'd come to love this world, after a single day, and didn't want to leave.

When she was done, she bowed her head. “I understand if you don't believe me, or if you're mad. I don't know how I can fix that. Just...know that Dia is the one who let me in. She said so herself.”

There was a deafening, uncomfortable silence. Touma didn't seem to know who to be angry at – Melody, Margret, or both of them. It was Annie, quiet but firm, who spoke first.

“Sing what you sang to me this morning. Let them hear you.”

Melody didn't argue. The song burst out from her pendant, and she joined in full force.

With every word, she tried to convey the feelings she had. For this world, for Melodia's life, for the people she'd met today. She put everything she had into this song, and hoped that they could understand.

She couldn't look at them when the song was done. She stared at the floor, waiting for their decisions. Waiting to hear what they thought of her.

There were sighs. There were uncertain grumbles, and shifting feet.

Something shifted.

Binocular vision returned as Dia abruptly took over. “Okay, come on, the hell do we have to do to convince you? What embarrassing as hell story do I need to share to make you realize she isn't lying? Because I'm sure there's plenty to choose from-”

Melody dove, yanking control back before Dia could do any damage. “No! Dia that is *not* the way to do this!”

*Oh yes it is.* She couldn't see Dia, but she knew the girl was grinning. *Look at their faces.*

Melody looked up, and for a moment, her breath stopped.
Touma was absolutely floored thanks to Dia's few seconds in the spotlight. Behind him, there was a light of amusement in Ikuto's eyes, a small smile on his face.

“What the hell was that?” Touma demanded. “Did—was that Melodia?”

“I'm so sorry!” Melody burst out. “Sh-She shoved me away!”

“Shoved you—wait, you're telling me you two can take turns with this crap?”

“Uhh...y-yeah? I guess...”

Touma groaned, leaning his head against one hand. “What the hell...time freezing worlds, copied spirits, sharing bodies?”

A minuscule amount of fear chipped away. “Y...You believe me?”

“It's hard to argue with music magic that only Melodia has,” he snapped. “I don't know how the hell she does it, but if it's still there then...” Touma gave an aggravated sigh. “I don't know how to feel about this.” He stepped aside as Ikuto tapped his shoulder, letting the other man through.

Ikuto walked right up to her and asked quite plainly, “Is that why you didn't care about my involvement with Easter? Did you take precedence over Melodia-san?”

“Uh—I'm not in charge, if that's what you're asking. I just...asked her to trust me. A-And she did.” Melody wanted to crawl under the bed and hide from his stare. “It's hard to explain how, but I knew you weren't a bad guy. Easter was just using you...a-and we could step up then and stop it. I...just wanted to help you.”

She relaxed just a little when he turned away and looked at Margret. “And you. What's your plan in all this? You think kidnapping a 'Seer' is going to help you?”

“We didn't...” Margret sighed. “Okay, maybe we did. But that's not the whole story. Melody is a Seer that was connected to my dimension for a very, very long time. We don't know anyone else with that kind of knowledge. The problem is, she's...not doing well emotionally. My magic teacher thought that if we could clear her mind, calm her down, she might find some kind of helpful memory that could unfreeze everything.”

“That's a big 'if'.”

“When it comes down to it, Tsukiyomi-san, we have nothing else to lose. Even if this doesn't work, at least we will have tried. And we'll keep trying things until we fix it.”

The boys watched her, neither sure how to answer that. Touma eventually came up with, “You don't scare easily, do you?”

Turning quite snarky, Margret set a hand on her hip and smirked at him. “You happen to be talking to one of the most physically strong people in my dimension, who's already been world hopping twice and has kicked the snot out of more villains than I can count. No, Amagase-san, I really don't.”

“There is no possible way.”

“No, she's telling the truth,” Melody assured him. “It's....a long, complicated story. And honestly I don't remember a lot of it anymore.” That was the problem with such a long roleplay – once you stop copying it down, there's pieces you'll forget ever happened. She hadn't backed it up for a long,
long time. “Basically, that tail means she's part alien, and that alien race is mostly extinct but they all live on Earth. That race is also ridiculously strong.”

The boys seemed to finally notice the monkey tail flicking about, and Touma stammered back. “Wait. Hold up a—are you telling me that she's a Saiyan?!”

Melody blinked a bit. “Wait, you have DBZ here?”

“It’s a popular anime,” Annie shrugged. “Apparently.”

So you’re saying she’s Goku, Dia said suspiciously.

I...no, she's Vegeta. It...ugh. “Listen, if she wants to talk about it, she can go for it. Right now, though, I think there's something more important that someone isn't telling me.”

Channeling the best serious face she could, Melody faced Touma. “Is the cake going to burn? Because Dia already called dibs on a slice.”

The cake did not burn. It was iced, and it was delicious.

Melody felt really good about how everything had gone. Touma and Ikuto were clearly still processing, but they weren't rejecting her. It was nice.

It was nice until Touma casually mentioned, “So are you sharing her boyfriend, too?”

Melody almost choked on her cake. “What-the-who-now?!”

He raised an eyebrow. “Well then...does the name 'Toby' ring a bell.”

For a moment, she was silent.

Then she wasn’t. “Dia! What the hell?! This is important information!”

I-I was gonna tell you! That's—it's a private thing! I was gonna tell you when we were alone!

“This isn't the kinda thing you can just push off ‘til later-” Melody grabbed her head, a practical bullet of pain rushing through. She held back a groan.

Did you just force an unlock-

Dia's voice cut out. So did every other sound. The only thing that processed now was Toby.

Toby. The strongest Blader of Team Dungeon, taken advantage of and experimented on by Dr. Ziggurat, probably the only person Melody had ever really hated. And the hatred was only echoed by Melodia's own memories, anger slipping out from cracks in her mind at how much he hurt Zeo, hurt Toby, hurt her friends and then had the mind to try and manipulate her while saying it would help Toby and--

Melody shut her eyes, breathing slowly. Memories were blurring in, hazy and dull. Dr. Ziggurat had tried to get her to join Hades Academy, using Toby's illness as motivation. She'd been wary, then tried to refuse, but he had been persistent.

“You posses a power the likes of which I've never seen,” Ziggurat had said. “But you cannot control it, cannot contain the raw energy you release. You don't want to hurt anyone with that
uncontrollable power, do you? Allow me to help you, my dear. After all, how can such a dangerous power be trusted to behave itself in battle? What good is a blader who can't control her bey? All that I can bring you is control, and success. I can give you the ability to channel that power. Together, you and your friend Toby will rise to the top of the world! Isn't that what you want?"

Control? Success? He hadn't given her any of that.

What he had done was stuff her in a pod and force an Arrangement on her. She didn't know what she'd done after that, where she'd gone or even who found her – all she could remember was waking up in the Castle of Lions, Lance and Hunk guarding the door.

She'd had to have hurt someone, the way they'd acted. But they'd never said a word about it. They'd gently asked her to remain on Arus for her safety, setting up video chats with Toby, and that was it. The next time she set foot on Earth...

“Toby!” she shouted, bursting into the Gym and almost falling flat on her face. “Toby, I'm here!”

Zeo and Masamune turned. “Dia!” They ran towards her, asking her questions, but she ignored them, scanning the room for-

A boy with silver hair – probably as long as her own corrupted brown locks – was watching her with a nervous smile. Confused at first, she then noticed his eyes – Toby's eyes – and she stared in disbelief.

“Toby?” she whispered.

“You've been supporting me...all of Dungeon Gym, for years. You've been there and...you've always been on my side, you know? You're like my...best friend...”

“Will you continue staying at my side...not just as a friend, but as my girlfriend?”

The onslaught of memories caught her off guard. Toby, over the years-- being close to him, growing up with him in the gym and training. It wasn't long before others joined in – Zeo, Masamune, Coach Steel, every Blader she knew by name in Dungeon Gym. Years of practice, friendship, and just living flooded her mind, taking over her vision for what seemed like hours.

And then the call. The call, about a year ago, long after she had moved to Japan and begun work as an idol.

Someone walked over while she was on break. They handed her a phone. Coach Steel was on the other end, and four words were all she understood.

“Toby's in the hospital.”

Toby, the first to accept her into the gym when she'd first arrived in America. The one to train her personally when she didn't quite grasp something, or was falling behind the others.

Toby. The strongest Blader she'd ever known. The most amazing person in the world.

She'd quit her job to be able to visit him. To be able to support him. He had been giving her strength for as long as she'd known him – and then it had been her turn, sitting in the hospital with
him, to do the same.

When the pain subsided and the world returned, Melody found herself in the bedroom, phone in hand, Toby's contact info pulled up and waiting.

Her whole body felt heavy. If there was one thing that every part of her agreed on, at this moment...

She hit the call button. Dial tone one...twice...three-

click

“D...Dia? 'S'at you? Wha's goin' on...?”

“There's something I have to tell you.”

It was that Toby, who had been lied to with his very life on the line, now deserved the truth.

Once Annie helped her change it to a video call, Melody told Toby everything. She explained things as best as she could, slowly, repeating when he needed her to. Throughout the entire thing, he was quiet, polite, and patient. As he was thinking it all over, he almost fell asleep – it was very, very early in the morning for him, and Melody had forgotten to take that into consideration.

As he struggled not to pass out, Dia apparently spotted something that made her ask for control. Melody obliged – she had no reason not to – and disappeared into binocular mode.

“Toby, this is Dia,” she said calmly. “You've been talking to Melody, a very sweet girl that – like she said – I'm eventually going to fuse minds with.”

“...I...I think I get it.”

“I want you to know that this is nothing like what happened with Faust, or the Arrangements.”

Through binocular sight, Melody watched as Toby stiffened. Dia continued on. “I had full choice of consent in this situation. I chose to let her in, and accepted that she and I would be sharing this life. My question is, Faust, did you give Toby that same choice? Or do I have to come over there and perform some kind of exorcism on you?”

There was silence for a few seconds. Melody, shocked, tried to determine what Dia was going on about. Faust? Masamune and Zeo had defeated him. He was gone, he...

He had dull gray eyes, and those were the eyes staring at Dia from Toby's face.

Inwardly, Dia was screaming. Dia was furious. Dia wanted to walk right up to Dr. Ziggurat and punch him in the face a thousand times.

For whatever reason, Melody saw the logic in Faust's return, and she shared those thoughts.

What Zeo and Masamune must have done was return dominance to Toby's consciousness. Faust wasn't destroyed, he must have been too firmly planted in Toby's mind. He'd gone dormant. And then he'd woken up.

“Toby is not sleeping well tonight,” Faust said quietly, a natural sharpness in his voice that was
unlike Toby's usual tone—it differentiated him from his host. “I am...trying to help him stay awake for you. This is a very serious subject and he would be upset if he did not respect that.”

Dia tried very, very hard to stay calm, keeping Melody's theory in mind. “How long?” she managed. “How long have you been...back?”

“We are estimating around thirteen months now. Toby has been attempting to find a way to tell you.” He closed his eyes, breathing deeply. “He is aware of everything you say while I am in control. I am sorry that I tried to deceive you.”

Shakily, Dia ordered, “I need you to go away right now.”

He slowly nodded. When his eyes opened, they were flooded with indigo once more, and drooped heavily with the need for sleep. “Dia, I-”

“Are you okay? Has he done anything to hurt you?”

“I'm fine, really. I promise. I'm still healthy, I'm still me. But Faust is...part of me, now. I don't think he's going to leave.”

“...Toby, I'm sorry, but I don't think I can handle this right now. I'm going to let Melody back out and...think about this.”

As Melody's vision went from binocular to normal, she saw the resigned sadness on Toby's face. He said nothing, but it was clear he understood, and that it hurt.

Awkwardly, Melody cleared her throat. “Um...I guess we're sort of in similar boats, huh? Two minds in one body...” He didn't speak, but he nodded in reply. Melody fumbled for words. “Um, is he behaving? Has he done anything we should be worried about?”

“...We've had some arguments. It's been settling down recently...he doesn't force himself in front, and he's oddly considerate.” Toby pushed his hands against his face, sighing and trying to keep awake. “It's hard...to really explain.”

“But he hasn't done anything to make you think he's a threat?”

“No.”

Melody closed her eyes and drew in a long breath through her nose; she opened her mouth to release it. “So for now, in your books, he's okay?”

“...Yeah.”

“...I've learned today that I'm a bit more forgiving than Dia is. I know that neither of you are at fault here, but she's going to need more time.”

“Trust me, I know. I've known Dia for a long time.” Toby sighed. “Uh...Melody, I really appreciate that you took the time to explain all this. I think that you're going to do just fine here, and I'm looking forward to meeting you. Just...maybe don't make a habit of telling people this.”

She nodded. “I won't.”

A short silence, broken by Toby awkwardly asking, “So...could I share the stupid thought that came into my head when you were explaining all this?”

Raising her eyebrow, Melody shrugged, “Sure?”
He glanced around for a moment, then cleared his throat. “My girlfriend's mainframe had an outside AI installed and it's currently merging with every program she has installed.”

Melody snorted in surprise.

“The AIs are melding together. In the end they will become the supreme Melodia!”

She started giggling.

“What will this supreme Melodia uncover? What secrets will be discovered, what mysteries does she hold? Find out next time on AI Battles: Ultimate Creation!”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she laughed.

“It's the middle of the night and I'm tired as hell!”

“Then go back to sleep!”

“I had to share the stupidity!”

“Keep this up and I'll have to start calling you Masamune!” she teased.

The over the top, dramatic-as-fuck, drawn out cry of “Noooooooooo!” ended with them both collapsed on the floor, laughing.

When he recovered, Toby surrendered and hung up to get back to bed.

_Toby's amazing__, Melody assured Dia through giggles. Still processing the Faust information, Dia didn't answer.

Melody pulled herself off the floor and went to address the eavesdroppers at the doorway.

From Toby: did dia open the box masamune put in her bag
From Toby: im going beck to sleep now iswear

To Toby: Hang on a sec.

Once the others were shoved out of the room and the door was locked, Melody picked up the black messenger bag she'd seen that morning. Walking over to the bed, she began pulling out everything inside and looking it over.

A box that took up half the bag, and a small worn out pair of long purple arm warmers. Figuring Dia wasn't in the mood to explain the latter, Melody focused on the former. It was plain brown cardboard, a note written straight on it: _Happy New Year from Dungeon Gym_ - in English, she noticed after a moment of scrutiny.

Opening it up, the first thing she saw was a piece of paper, which she took out to read. She noted it was in Japanese, meaning it was probably written by Masamune.

_Hey Di! Sorry it's not wrapped all nice and stuff, but we didn't have time. You know how hard it was to hide this in your bag? If I'd been too early, you'd have seen it before you got to Japan!_

_Anyway, everyone wanted to pitch in and get you something, since we kinda failed with Christmas and all. Not like you gave us any warning before you showed up, of course!_
I really hope you like it, or at least that you don't think we're trying to push it onto you. We just thought that you might feel better with a new partner at your side. Not that anything could ever be a replacement to your old one of course! It's just we don't want you to feel all alone. Maybe while you're in Japan you can give it a spin? If you want!

I know how important Lynx is to you, and how hard it must have been to leave it with your village. I know you haven't picked up a launcher since. And I know that you plan on getting Lynx back, but...in the meantime, maybe you could give this one a go? We all pitched in to pick the parts, and Coach fixed up your old launcher.

We just wanna see that big fire in your eyes again, Di. You were the greatest you when you had a Bey at your side. And even if it's not with Lynx yet, I hope you can get that fire back.

Your pal, Masamune

Packed neatly within the box was a purple beyblade-sized pouch and a purple and black launcher sticking out of a black case.

Melody set the letter aside, gently taking out the small pouch and opening it, letting the beyblade it held drop into her hand. She recognized some parts – a Leone facebolt and energy ring, and a Spiral fusion wheel, but couldn't place the spin track or performance tip.

Hesitantly, she ventured, Dia?


Melody let her be. She'd ask about Lynx later.

To Masamune: Thank you. And everyone else.

From Madoka: I accidentally let slip to Kyoya that you're nearby...he's demanding to see you.

Carp. Go see him. I-I'll be...just go. It was weird, hearing someone sniffle telepathically. Kyoya's like family. I-I haven't...seen him in a while. Y-You can have Madoka check those bey parts, too.

...You want some more cake before we go?

A mental whimper of confirmation. Melody dropped the bey and launcher into the bag, then went to the main room to cut another slice of cake and ask for directions to the B-Pit.

After Dia had her cake and Margret turned her scarf into a bag-bed for Melody's Chara-Egg, Touma became her guide and they headed out.

To Madoka: On my way

Chapter End Notes

Song: "planet scape"* by Jupiter, from Idolmaster SideM - Japanese
*This song is not magic. Only magic songs will be italicized. Therefore, this one is not.
Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
The cab dropped them off half an hour later, in front of the shop. While Touma paid the driver, Melody stared up at the B-Pit sign, preparing herself.

She was about to meet two of her favorite characters – people – in anything.

“Are you ready for this?” Touma asked, startling her after his silence through most of the trip.

Melody nodded. “Yeah... Yeah, I am.” She'd been successful in staying calm the whole way so far, and thought she'd make it through this without too much trouble.

“...What's your plan, exactly? For the people that Melodia knows?”

She sighed. “Honestly...we've decided on amnesia. Dia can't unlock a lot of memories at once, or I'm overloaded and I get a huge headache. If she were to try it all at once...I don't wanna know what would happen.”

Touma nodded slowly. “I see...” He led the way to the back door and hit his fist against it a few times. As they waited, he took off the glasses and hat he wore as a disguise – he'd worn them both this trip and when Jupiter had walked her home. Melody could understand why – rumors of hanging out with a girl would explode and might damage their reputation. But considering no one was around, he was most likely safe. Everyone was probably at home by now, or at festivals, waiting for midnight.

As a thought, she took Dia's phone out to check the time. 10 P.M. Two hours until the new year.

The door opened. Madoka greeted them, but Melody and Annie didn't hear it. The feeling of a corrupted egg, dark and cold, took all their attention.

Melody gave a vague apology as she brushed past Madoka and walked inside. She set her bag on the table, her step slowing in the process, then broke into long, fast strides as she rushed to the doorway of the spare bedroom.

Kyoya was on the bed, sitting hunched over with impatience. As she came into his sight, he straightened.

Melody practically flew across the room, coming to an abrupt stop beside the bed. “You're hurt,” she said bluntly, the bandage wrappings hard to miss.

“It's over here!” Annie called, having stopped by the round ottoman nearby. Melody took a moment to glance over, and for a few seconds, froze at what she saw. A Chara-Egg, dark green, with a dim golden design on opposite sides that she couldn't quite make out – due to the white X marks blocking them.

“Since when do you have one?” Kyoya asked suddenly.

Melody blinked, tearing her gaze away from the corrupted egg. “A-Annie's about a year and a half old.” Kyoya didn't know Annie...Dia hadn't seen him in over eighteen months?
Look he’s hard to track down okay?

Melody sighed. “Um...what happened to yours? If you're okay with talking about it.”

His gaze flicked away momentarily, then returned to looking at her. “I'm not. But I have a feeling you'll pull some psychic nonsense out of the air and figure it out yourself.”

“...No.” She shook her head. “I'm not going to pry like that. I just...do you know what those X's mean?”

“I fucked up.”

...He wasn't wrong? Melody winced regardless. “Kyoya, I...” Focus. She had to focus, stay calm, and tell him. “I'm...going to be honest. I...am having a lot of memory problems right now. I know that you and I are like family...other than that...”

“The crystal monster?”

“...Yeah.”

With an aggravated sigh, Kyoya leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. “You weren't kidnapped. Let's call that a plus.”

Melody slowly sat on the bed. “Madoka said you wanted to see me...”

“You were in the area. I took advantage of that.”

Tell him about Megumi.

“...Megumi's going to be here tomorrow,” Melody said awkwardly.

She saw Kyoya tense. His gaze widened just enough to be noticed, and he said quietly, “Is that so?”

“Uh...yeah. I don't know what's going on, okay? Five years missing? She answered the phone and she's on her way.”

Kyoya drew in a deep breath. It was weird, seeing him try to control his temper. It was unlike him. Dia noted that there was a hidden relief in the moment – Melody wondered what was going on.

Dia was too tired, had unlocked too many memories that day, to be able to explain. Melody accepted that she'd just have to wait.

For now, she respected Kyoya's silence and just sat there with him. She'd let him be the first to speak.

The next five minutes were very quiet.

Then Kyoya moved to get up. Melody jumped to her feet and got out of his way, then followed him out to the main workshop.

Touma and Madoka, having been looking at something on the computer, turned. Kyoya held out his hand, demanding, “Leone.”

Madoka's face fell. “Kyoya, I already told you, I can't give Leone back to you until I've finished looking at the data.”
“Give me my bey,” he insisted sharply.

“I can't. You can have it back tomorrow when we meet with Gingka's dad.”

“Listen, you-” he started, cutting off when Melody gently touched his arm.

“Did something happen to Leone?” she asked.

Shooting a glare at Madoka, Kyoya gave no answer, instead storming back to the bedroom. Madoka sighed, then waved Melody over.

Melody joined them. The data on Madoka's computer screen made her eyes widen for a moment, but she hid her surprise. “What's that?” she asked, trying not to sound like she already knew.

“This is Leone,” Madoka said simply. She reached over to remove the bey from her scanner, and held it up for Melody to see. “Rock Leone transformed into this bey earlier today in a battle with Gingka Hagane. Gingka's Galaxy Pegasus did the same.” She paused, then asked hesitantly, “I don't suppose you've...seen anything?”

Shaking her head, Melody answered, “No visions about beyblade, if that's what you mean.”

You're not gonna tell her what you know? Dia asked.

I'm not gonna abuse what I know, Melody corrected. “Whatever it is, Madoka, you'll figure it out.”

Madoka sighed. “I hope so. Anyways, Touma said you had a bey you wanted me to look at. I'll gladly take a break from this mess to help you out.”

“Yeah.” Melody walked over to the table, carefully extracting the little pouch with the new bey. “Masamune and the others gave this to me...” She took the bey from the pouch, and held it out to Madoka. “Also a Leone, but I guess I like cats.”

Madoka chuckled, taking the bey. She set it in her scanner and set it to analyze, then pressed a few buttons on her keyboard to bring up the data.

Melody watched the digital version of her bey get dissected into its individual parts. “Spiral Leone...a C145 spin track and HF/S performance tip,” Madoka reported. “It looks like it would deliver some hard attacks, but also keep its balance really well. Seems like they gave you a Bey that would be similar to your old one in terms of attack strength.”

“And my old one was a...Lynx?”

“That's right! Hades Lynx RF145 F. An attack type bey.” Madoka pressed some more keys, bringing up a new data file. “You left it at your home village when you visited it two and a half years ago. A promise to see them again, I think you said.”

Nodding absently, Melody found herself staring at the gold and blue parts of Dia's old bey. Madoka let her for a bit, then quietly asked, “How bad is your memory?”

Melody turned her head, seeing the worry and pain on Madoka's face. She dropped her gaze. “Pretty bad. Annie's helping fill in a lot of blanks, though. Touma, too.”

Madoka nodded, slowly. Then she took a breath, and looked up. “Well, I'm Amano Madoka. I'm a princess of the planet Mithoria, third in line if anything happens to my sister, the queen. Her name is Kotone. The two that would inherit before me would technically have been first and second
before Kotone, but as neither is yet even five, our kingdom's council decided to make an exception.”

Taking all of this in, Melody nodded. “Aniko's sons, right? His wife...your oldest sister, passed away?”

“That's right. Two and a half years ago, a few months after the younger one was born. Her name was Chiasa.” Madoka smiled sadly. “I hope you remember her soon. She was the best.”

Leaning a little on the counter/desk, Melody asked, “Their names are...Jinhai and Sho Hai? Was that it?”

Madoka nodded. “They're really sweet. You should see if your phone has any pictures of them.” She turned a bit, looking around. “Hey, Crystal? Why don't you come re-introduce yourself?”

Melody watched as a brunette Character in a simple pink dress flew into view. “Oh! Hi.”

“Hello!” Crystal smiled. “I'm sorry I didn't come out sooner. I felt that it would be better if I gave you time to settle in first. My name is Crystal, I've been Madoka's Character since around the time that Chiasa passed away.” She nodded at Annie, “Hello again!”

As Annie waved, Melody couldn't help but ask, “Why do I get the feeling you're from a wish for Madoka not to blow her top?”

Crystal and Madoka exchanged glances, then both burst into giggles. Annie caught Melody's eye and nodded slightly, grinning – she'd hit the mark.

Touma shook his head, smiling. “I never know what to do with you girls...Honestly...”

“Love us unconditionally and let us stuff your face with Mithorian pastries?” Madoka suggested.

“I pick column B, 'pat you on the head and tolerate you because you're my friend.'” Touma reached over, but Madoka leaped out of her chair with a laugh. Soon the two were running around the workshop, each sending teases and half-hearted threats to the other.

Melody watched for a while, questioning all of it. Clearly they knew each other. She made a mental note to ask Touma about it later, then took Spiral Leone out of the scanner and returned it to her bag.

Leaving the children to their game, she slipped back into the bedroom, closing the door once Annie had joined her. “Sorry for the noise. They're going crazy.”

Kyoya rolled his eyes, but made no verbal comment. He was sitting on the couch now, his X’d Chara-Egg in his hands.

He's tired, Dia said, pointing out what Melody thought was obvious.

Why do you think I'm not pushing him for conversation? Melody sat beside him, gently putting her bag on the side away from him. While she knew Chara-Egg corruption wasn't contagious, she still didn't really want to put hers right next to it. Worry and paranoia were such fun things to have.

Once again, silence filled the room, only broken by whatever the hell Touma and Madoka were doing – Melody's guesses were tag, sibling-like bonding, or stress relief. Dia suggested a mix of all three; Touma had once been a blader, but retired when he became an idol. She'd brought him to Madoka when he needed repairs.
When Dia tried to explain her relationship with Kyoya, Melody refused the information. *You've given me more than enough today. Focus on the mental walls for now.*

She didn't want Dia to accidentally push a little too much. There was no telling what the final limit was, and she would much prefer a slow process of a few each day rather than risk shoving several open at once.

Melody would work with what she knew, but at the same time, had to be careful not to abuse her extra knowledge. Messing around like that had the possibility of turning things bad, and wanting to make things go faster was not worth that risk.

For now, she glanced at Kyoya. She knew he angered easily, didn't see a need to connect with people intimately, and had a strange way of showing he cared. He was prideful, a little arrogant, and often rude.

Personally, she didn't know how to connect with someone like that. Maybe just being here was enough. Trying to push anything certainly wasn't the answer, that much was clear.

Trying to push when he had a corrupted Chara-Egg was even worse of an idea. She had no idea what wish it represented, how long the X’s had been there, how old the egg was or if the Character had ever hatched. That was a lot of missing info. Until she had more – or any – answers, it wouldn't do any good to try and help.

If Kyoya chose to share that information freely, then she would accept it. If not, then it was none of her business.

She sat with him for a while. He spoke up once, asking Annie if she knew why Dia had left Arus. The Character could only give him the same answer she'd given Melody that morning. *A crystal monster attacked while I was sleeping. When I woke up, we were in New York. Dia couldn't remember what happened, or how or why she’d left. Through the week she started losing memories. Today was the worst of it.*

“Does your birth family know where you are?” he asked her.

Melody nodded. “I...came to Japan because I discovered a cousin. I sent them all a picture of us, told them where we were.”

“Did you actually talk to them?”

She frowned, and he scoffed. “You're kidding.” She shrunk back a bit, and he groaned. “You're not leaving this damn shop until you have a proper conversation with at least one biological family member. Understand?”

Melody slowly nodded. She added 'possibly possessive about our familial relationship' to the list of *What I Know About Kyoya*. What other reason would there be to explain why he specified 'birth family' and 'biological'?

Going by that, then... “Maybe we could ask Madoka to pull up the news so we can count down to the new year together? It's been a while since you and I did something like that, right?”

She couldn't read his face. Annoyance? Disbelief? She wondered if that was a step too far. “I-I mean...if you want. I don't have to stay that long. I just figured I'd-”

“Whatever.”
She didn't need Dia to tell her that was Kyoya-nese for 'yes'. She smiled. “I'll go ask, then!”

“I've never...been to a planet that wasn't Earth!” Margret exclaimed.

Madoka and Melody groaned, each taking a sip of punch. In the corner, though he wasn't technically playing, Kyoya did as well – though it could've been coincidence.

Grinning cheekily, Margret turned to Touma. “Alright, your turn!”

He tilted his head in thought. “Hmm...I've never...pulled a disappearing act.”

As Margret shrugged and took a drink, along with an amused Ikuto, Melody scoffed. “You guys are calling me out and I do not appreciate it.” (She still took a drink. She saw Kyoya do so, too. Not playing, right.)

“I have never broken a bey,” Madoka monotoned, eyeing Touma. He put a hand to his chest, pretending to seem insulted, then chuckled and took the drink. (So did Kyoya, once again. He really wasn't being subtle.)

After a short debate, they let Melody off the hook for that one, as there were no memories to prove she had or hadn't. It was then her turn.

She thought for a moment. Something she hadn't done, but people here had... With the limited memories she had of Dia's life...

Oho, wait a minute. This could be fun. “I've never met a vampire.”

The room fell silent as Margret glared at her, chugging the rest of her drink. Melody grinned.

“My planet's weird, okay?” Margret burst out in explanation, standing to refill her cup. “Just take your turn, Tsukiyomi-san.”

Though it wasn't clear whether he was really enjoying the game or not, Ikuto gave it a go. “I've never used magic.”

With narrowed eyes, Margret drank from her refilled cup. Madoka took a sip, and after some thought, Melody did as well. The music magic probably counted.

They waited for Margret to sit back down so she could start the next round. As she mulled over what to say, Melody glanced over at the three Characters. Annie waved, seeming perfectly content with the card game she, Crystal, and Yoru were playing.

Melody smiled. Calling Ikuto and asking if he and Margret wanted to join them, she hadn't expected a yes. But they'd come, and they'd brought the cake and dinner leftovers. Margret had decided they should play party games as they waited for the countdown, so here they were.

As Margret opened her mouth to start the new round, Kyoya interrupted, “Never shape-shifted.”

After a lot of silent blinking, all three girls took a drink. Mermaid form definitely counted for that.

Well, Kyoya wasn't really ignoring them. That certainly cheered her up.

“Never been part of a royal family or similar,” Margret offered. Madoka drank. Melody, while she technically should have – mermaid princess and all – refrained, as she'd have to explain and couldn't. Margret nodded in her direction, though – she understood.
“Never been in a plane,” Touma called. Everyone drank, and Madoka asked, “Seriously?”

He shrugged. Madoka frowned, but decided to move on. “Never stolen a robot lion.”

“No one asked you,” Kyoya snapped, causing Melody to jerk around and stare at him in surprise. He stared at her for a moment. “That's you.”

Narrowing her eyes, she looked questioningly at Madoka, who nodded smugly. Back at Kyoya. “I'm expecting an explanation,” she informed him.

“While that Lotor guy was still around. You took the Red Lion for a joyride and texted me 'we're ditching these idiots and getting Chinese'. The damn thing was above me before I knew what you meant.” Kyoya looked away. “From the sounds of it, your biological brothers probably got in a fight and you were sick of it.”

Melody sighed. “Note to self, can pilot a Lion,” she murmured before taking a drink. “New rule? Nothing I can't remember doing at least indirectly.”

_Holy crap I can pilot a Lion, Dia how dare you not tell me this._

_I can, thank you very much. I don't know if it'll go for a 'two heads in one' deal._

_Do not ruin this for me._ “Never have I ever been in a school for card games.”

“New rule, no calling me out!” Margret called, taking the drink regardless. “We get it, my planet's weird, let's move on!”

Madoka giggled. “Your planet sounds like a lot of fun. What's it called?”

Margret frowned, glanced at Melody, then mumbled, “Another dimension's Earth...?”

“You're from another dimension?”

Margret's tail flicked. “I'm just kinda visiting for magic research. Ran into Mel here and figured I'd stick around, see if I could help her somehow.”

“She's been decent so far,” Touma said, seeing the suspicion on Kyoya's face. “We probably don't have to worry.”

Melody smiled into her cup. She'd expected Margret to come up with an excuse, but hearing Touma vouch for her... He believed her. He really, really did. He might not trust them fully, but he did so enough that he was willing to speak up.

Ikuto raised his cup. “Never been to another dimension.”

Margret stuck her tongue out, but took a drink. Melody waited for her to start the next round, then suddenly realized that she was too busy staring at her to do so – as was everyone else.

At the same time, she realized she'd taken a drink of her own. “Uh...no, I just got thirsty-”

_“Xiaolian, listen to me. I don't know how, I don't know why...there's no easy way to say this. Something seems to have pulled us into another...world, dimension. I'm not sure. But if we just stay together, I'll make sure that you get home to your mom. Okay? Xiaolian?”_

_“O-Okay...”_
Melody snapped out of it as her plastic cup hit the floor, punch splashing out. She felt herself shaking, and tried to breathe, tried to calm herself. *Dia...?*

Very, very quietly, Dia told her, *That wasn’t me...*

A hand touched her shoulder, and her head snapped up. Kyoya stared back at her, questioningly, the smallest hint of concern hiding in his eyes.

She swallowed. Took another slow breath. “Wh-Who...who is ‘Xiaolian’?” she asked – anyone, so long as they might know.

“...You are. Your full name is Xiaolian Melodia Thompson.”

Melody put a hand to her face, counted to ten. “U-Um...I just heard...I-I heard a woman...telling me that...she and I were in another d-dimension. That she'd make sure I got home.”

“Subconscious recollection, maybe,” Madoka mused. “Melodia...when you were twelve, you disappeared for three months. Then you suddenly showed up again and...tried to say what happened, but you couldn't remember anything about it. Even with the memory issues you have now, part of you remembered ‘I was somewhere else’.”

Touma leaned forward, frowning. “It wasn't like a normal vision?”

Melody shook her head. Her shaking was getting lighter, maybe from her careful breathing, maybe from the steady feeling of Kyoya’s hand on her shoulder. “J-Just her voice, telling me that. Me saying ‘okay’.”

*I don’t know that voice,* Dia said softly.

Ikuto was suddenly standing near her, offering a glass of water. She took it, gulped it down. More careful breathing. The shaking stopped. “I...I think I’m done playing for now,” she told them all quietly.

They all nodded in understanding. She stood, stepping around the spilled punch, and wobbled into the bedroom for a bit of quiet.

For a while, she just sat on the bed and breathed. Rather, Dia did – Dia was far more shaken by this than she was. Dia breathed, and counted, and let Annie pet her hair. Melody waited patiently.

She couldn't begin to imagine how startling this was for Dia. She didn't know how to comfort her, but she pulled a bit at their mermaid magic so that it might help Dia calm down.

Eventually, Dia fell backwards. She lay down on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

“Melody,” she said quietly, “I need to figure out what happened in those three months. Will you be okay on your own while I dig for it?”

*I will.*

“...I'm sorry.”

*You don’t have to be. You have every right to look for this. I'll do what I can to keep things steady.*

Dia closed her eyes. “Thank you,” she whispered.
A few seconds later, Melody stared up at the ceiling. She lay on the bed for a few more minutes, then got up to tell everyone she was okay now.

The 'party' settled down after that. They played some card games, and took some photos – Kyoya allowed one group and a few with Melody, and everyone politely said nothing about that. Touma and Madoka had a bake-off, resulting in more amazing cake. Margret spent twenty minutes just brushing and braiding Melody's hair into pigtails, then coached her into switching between that and the unbraided. As Touma claimed this was 'something from her mother's heritage', she was even able to use this as her 'shape-shifting' answer that she hadn't thought through earlier.

At the end of another round of Go Fish – won by Madoka – Melody stepped back into the bedroom. It was about 11:30 now – she had half an hour before the new year hit.

She pulled out Dia's phone.

To Lance: [picture sent]
To Lance: Since I was in the area, I stopped by the B-Pit to see Madoka. Kyoya was there too, recovering from a battle. We called a couple others together and we're having a little party, kinda.
To Lance: I'm sorry I left like I did. I honestly can't remember what happened. The crystal monster...my memories have been really bad since then. I went to stay with Toby and the others for the week, then heard about Tadase and came here.
To Lance: I'm not sure what I'll do now. I know I'm not ready to come back to Arus...I want to get a better grip on my memories first. Figure out who I am. The red haired girl in the picture, Margret, is a mage that's promised to keep an eye on me. Touma made sure I had dinner, and he and Madoka both made cakes. Kyoya...is Kyoya. And Ikuto...I don't know if I ever mentioned him, but he's a friend I had a falling out with. We made up today and he's probably going to hang around with Margret and I for a bit because of family issues.
To Lance: I love you. I'm sorry I missed Christmas and that now I'm missing New Year's. I'm not trying to disappear, I just need some space to figure things out.
To Lance: Margret says my Haert levels are high, which means I'm emotionally taking this well. She suggested I mention that, when I told her I was gonna talk to you. Also, she wanted me to ask if the crystal monster was made of Spirit Quartz? Because if it's made of Menta that would explain my memory problems.

From Lance: Thanks for telling me all this. It helps me worry a lot less, knowing what's going on and that you're with people we can trust. Yes, the creature was made of Menta, and that would absolutely explain why you're having so much trouble. I can send you a small, pure version to meditate with, but you don't have to use it if you feel like you can't. If you want, I can send your Christmas presents too, I think they'd help you find a sense of grounding.
From Lance: Is there anything you want to ask?

To Lance: Yeah...Madoka said that I went missing when I was 12. I apparently lost all memory of that missing time when I suddenly appeared home? We were playing party games, and the topic of going to different dimensions came up. I...got this memory of a woman telling me we were in another dimension and that she'd get me home to my mom.

From Lance: Yes. We couldn't figure out what happened, but Toby's mom, a mage, gave you a look over and mentioned you had 'dimensional void traces' on you. Mom has a theory, but
it's a little wordy, so let me get her to write it up and I can send it with your presents.
From Lance: You mentioned Toby, so I'm assuming you remember him?
To Lance: Yeah, I do. I talked to him a bit earlier. I remember...a lot, actually. Childhood, the hospital, Spiral Force...
From Lance: Good to know. If you don't mind me filling in a few more blanks...
To Lance: Go ahead.
From Lance: Your name is Xiaolian Melodia Thompson. You're the youngest of four siblings. One is possessed, along with our father, by corrupt spirits of some kind. Our mother is half mermaid; we all inherited that. You specifically are the heir to the kingdom, but that doesn't really entail 'work' so much as 'have a pendant with a magic pearl that gives you magic music powers'. If you reveal yourself to a human, you transform into sea foam and die, so BE CAREFUL.
From Lance: I'm not sure on the exact volume, but getting hit with enough water or submerging yourself will put you in your mermaid form. And while you've probably noticed, you have some sort of guardian spirit that helps you out, they've been around for about a year.
To Lance: Her name's Annie. She's been a lot of help. I'll keep being careful, about everything; she and Margret will definitely keep an eye on me.
From Lance: It takes a lot of worry off me knowing you're taking this so calmly. I'll make sure this stuff gets to Madoka by tomorrow. If you come up with a plan on what you want to do after that, you don't have to tell me directly, but some member of the family would be nice.
From Lance: And no matter how much he might claim it, Kyoya does not count in this situation. Don't let him push you around.
From Lance: I love you, Xiaolian. Go count down with your friends. Happy New Year.
To Lance: Happy New Year.

Melody rejoined the group, informing Kyoya she'd talked to Lance. They then proceeded to gather around the TV, five minutes left.

From Toby: Zeo, Masamune and I promised to call for the countdown. Is that okay?
To Toby: Yeah
Call From: Toby

“10!”
“9!”
“8!”
“7!”
“6!”
“5!”
“4!”
“3!”
“2!”
“1!”
“HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

Call End
Call Time: 6m 13s

From Kai: Happy New Year! Hope to see you tomorrow!

From Aniko: Happy New Year

From Tadase: Happy New Year, Melodia-san!

From Mom: Happy New Year, Xiaolian. Take care!

“I don’t care what you get up to, I want you to keep me updated,” Touma said firmly.

Waiting for Margret to unlock the apartment door, Melody held back a sigh and nodded. “I will. I'll try, at least.”

“I'll keep an eye on them!” Annie promised.

Touma sighed, then turned to head home. Melody waved as he walked off, then entered the apartment with Margret and Ikuto. Or rather, just Ikuto – Margret froze outside the door, staring off into space.

“What’s up?” Melody asked.

Margret blinked, then smiled sheepishly. She tapped her belt buckle, which Melody now realized contained a tiny pink orb. “Long story short, I just sensed Peggie enter the dimension. I need to go find her, she was caught in the freeze. Casey promised to send her here to get her out of it.”

“Oh, of course! Go ahead!” Melody knew very well how important Margret's twin was to her.

“I'll see you in the morning!” Margret promised, before rushing out to take flight over the city, disappearing within an invisibility spell.

Melody closed the door, being sure to lock it. The mage that owned the place still didn't seem to be home...maybe they were visiting family or friends for the New Year?
She set the few remaining cake slices on the counter, making sure to cover them up to prevent attracting any bugs. After that, she went to Dia's room and found a spare blanket in the closet, and draped it over the already passed-the-fuck-out Ikuto on the couch.

_We'll fix what Easter did to you_, she thought. _I promise._

Melody turned the lights out, said goodnight to Yoru and Annie, then kicked off her boots and curled up in bed.

*Happy New Year, Dia,* was her final conscious thought before she settled her mind down for sleep.

**Chapter End Notes**

Did they play the game right? I've never played it before myself. XD

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: [http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/](http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/)
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go: [http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/](http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/)
Chapter 5

Melody jolted awake at the sound of music, her hand smacking into the shape of a phone. Blearily, she grabbed at it, opening her eyes just enough to squint at the screen. 3 A.M. Someone's dying.

Call From: Toby

....Damn it. She forced herself to sit up, answering the call. “Som'in wrong?” she managed.

“Look, I know it's shit time for you, but – which one is this?”

“Mel'dy.”

“Can you use the mermaid music magic thing?”

“...Why?” He knew about that? Why was he asking that at a time like this?

“Do you know about Spiral Force? Ziggurat?”

Melody groaned, rubbing at her eyes. “I know all about that crap, yes.”

“Zeo gets nightmares about it. He took a nap, now he's having a panic attack. The songs help him.”

She didn't have to be Dia for that to jolt her awake. “Put the phone on speaker.” Dia, Aqua Regina, whoever I need to ask – I need a song for Zeo!

When Toby said, “Go for it,” one of the two – or maybe both - had provided her with a song.

“It's gonna be alright
It's gonna be alright”

“I can tell by your eyes that you're not getting any sleep
And you try to rise above it, but feel you're sinking in too deep
Oh, oh I believe, I believe that”

“It's gonna be alright
It's gonna be alright”

“I believe you'll outlive this pain in you heart
And you'll gain such a strength from what is tearing you apart
Oh, oh I believe I believe that”

“It's gonna be alright
It's gonna be alright”

“When some time has passed us, and the story can be told
It will mirror the strength and the courage in your soul
Oh, oh, I believe I believe,”

“I believe
I believe”
“And I did not come here to offer you cliches
And I will not pretend to know of all your pain
Just when you cannot, then I will hold out faith, for you”

“It's gonna be alright
It's gonna be alright...”

For a minute or so, all she heard from Zeo's end were the fading sounds of crying. Having plenty of experience with anxiety herself, Melody had Toby hand the phone over to Zeo, and she asked him, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I-I...” There was a sniff. “I-Took a nap...it was...I was back with Ziggurat, a-and...and Faust...”

“It's over,” she promised him. “Zeo, all of that is over. Ziggurat can't hurt anyone anymore.”

Another sniff. “Zeo, there's no more Hades Inc., okay? There's no more Spiral Force. No more Twisted Tempo. No more Faust.” That part wasn't technically true, but he didn't need to know that. “Everything's okay now. And it's not your fault.”

“But I-”

“I would've done the same things you did to help Toby if I'd been in your position. Toby would've done the same things if you were in his position. We're allowed to make mistakes, Zeo. You couldn't have known, none of us could've.”

There was a short silence before Zeo relented softly, “Okay.”

“Drink some water. Sit with Toby for a bit. Just relax for the rest of the day, alright? Maybe you guys can watch a movie or something.”

“Mhm.”

“...I know it still hurts, Zeo. It still hurts me too.”

“We could've lost him,” Zeo whispered. “I could've lost my best friend.”

“I know.”

“After losing Mom, I don't want to lose anyone else.”

“I know.”

“He's family.”

“I know, Zeo.”

Zeo fell silent for a moment, then said shakily, “Thank you, Dia. I...I'm gonna...do the things. That you said.”

“Just take care of yourself, Zeo.”

“Yeah. I-I'll try. Can you...a-are you still gonna call for our countdown?”

“Absolutely, I wouldn't miss it.”

“...Okay.” She heard him inhale sharply, just trying to get some air in his lungs. “I-I'll...I'll talk to you later, Dia.”
“Talk to you later, Zeo.”

Before the call ended, Toby told her, “Thank you.”

Melody lay on the bed and stared at the phone for a long time. The memories she'd gained yesterday of Dia's time in New York – with Toby, with Zeo, with everyone – drifted through her mind.

The people that Dia had met in New York were family in her mind, just as much as Kyoya or her biological relatives. Knowing that even one of them was in pain made a lump in her throat, a weight in her gut – more than anything, she wanted to be at Zeo's side right now.

She was startled out of her thoughts when the bedroom door opened. Using the phone screen as a dim flashlight, Melody turned it towards the door, finding Margret standing there in surprise.

“Sorry,” she whispered. “Did I wake you up?” Margret slipped into the room, closing the door behind her.

Melody assured her, “No. Phone call did.”

“At this hour?” Now that she wasn't worried about waking Ikuto, Margret let her volume rise a bit. “Who the heck would be calling you now?”

“Toby.” Melody sighed. “One of our friends was having a panic attack...apparently the 'music magic' can calm him down pretty well.” Dia wasn't awake to unlock memories, but Melody had the vague feeling it had something to do with remnants of Zeo's Arrangement. Purifying the corruption it shoved in him, or something? She wouldn't think a normal panic attack would be something to sing to, magic song or not.

Silently, Margret walked over to her. Melody pulled the blanket away and stood, staring at the two Chara-Eggs on the suitcase, lit up by the moon shining through the window.

“I want to be there with them,” she said quietly. “But at the same time, the memories I'm getting are...I feel like I'm invading so much. I'm learning how Dia sees them, what she thinks of them, even the fights she's had with them. I asked to stay, but I didn't think about what that meant.”

She slowly turned, uncertainty across her face, barely visible in the moonlight. “They're my friends, but the thought of having to face them right now... there's a part of me that would rather face the problems in my home dimension.”

She saw Margret's face soften in understanding. “You're starting to wonder if you made the right choice,” she summarized, gaining a nod of confirmation. With a sigh, Margret tilted her head back and closed her eyes in thought. “Melody...how much did you see of my time world-hopping to fix the whole...'evil Carrie breaking dimensional barriers' thing?'”

Melody blinked. “...Uh...I think all the important parts...no, I didn't see the first time you went to the...um...the one you went to alone?”

“How about when I stumbled my way out of there? My talk with...Young Mom?” Margret opened her eyes again, then walked over to join Melody near the window. With the moonlight, the pain in her gaze was clear. “I had so much fun in that month... After the first three weeks, I figured I was stuck forever, so I should make the best of it, right? Then it comes crashing down when I'm yanked back out, and...it suddenly hits me. I spent two months helpless and useless, messing around, when
I should've been...”

Melody could see her fist clenching at her side. “It was a damn miracle that only fifteen minutes passed for the other messed up dimensions. If it had been two months all around...then I could've killed them all with my idiocy. It's about the only period of time that I have regrets from.” She smiled wryly. “I almost picked one world over my home. I almost gave up. I almost hurt the people I care about.”

Melody remembered, after a bit of thought. It hurt to think about it from her perspective, the fights with her friend and roleplay partner had begun growing in frequency during this 'arc'. From her perspective, this was about four months ago – not too far that she'd forgot completely, but not quite close enough that she remembered all the details.

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked, once it became clear Margret had paused.

“...That day, I started to question everything I'd done in the past year. Every choice I'd made regarding Shiro.” Margret drew her arms up around herself, slowly. “Should I have followed him the day he arrived at school? Should I have let myself befriend him...should I have become what I did? If I'd just left him alone...we wouldn't have gone on that journey. We wouldn't have gone to those worlds and...I wouldn't have screwed everything up.

“But after everything was settled...when we were home again, and I was with Peggie again, and I was able to clear my mind and really think about everything that had happened...” One of Margret's hands reached up to grab at the fabric of her dress, close to her heart. “I wouldn't change it. If given the chance, I wouldn't change any of those choices, even the bad ones. Even my mistakes helped me grow.”

She met Melody's eyes, and asked firmly, “Would you change this? Would you want to go home and just forget about this world, about the situation in my world?”

Melody stared at her in silence. Shock overtook her, the very idea of leaving people in danger putting a heavy weight on her chest. She couldn't name the feeling that washed over her right then, but it drowned out every bit of Dia's voice – her thoughts, her arguments, her opinions. For the moment, she was just Melody again.

And Melody would not, in any lifetime, ever abandon a situation if she had the ability to help people.

Maybe she didn't hold the answer for unfreezing Margret's world. Maybe she would, one day, find herself looking back in regret on one thing or another. But right now...

Right now, words of encouragement ingrained in her mind since early childhood came to the surface. No magic, no memories from Dia, just her own life. Her own favorite words.

"I close my eyes and feel myself fly a thousand miles away I could take flight but would it be right? My conscience tells me-"

Her voice cracked before the final word, a spark of decision pulling a hint of Tear magic into it.

“Stay.”

Melody had probably heard those words a hundred times growing up, watching the movie they originated from over and over. She hadn't seen it in a while, but the message of that song was reaching out to her.
That song meant everything to her. It always had. Every line, every note, it all held a special place in her heart. It inspired her own hopes, her own dreams, and right now, her choice.

Melody took a slow breath, touching the pendant around her neck. She gently denied its offer of song, not needing the push – not this time, at least.

She would never forget 'Melody'. She could never forget the pain or the hardships, or the love and kindness she'd experienced. That life had shaped her into who she was, and it would be an insult to everyone she'd met to simply cast it aside and take a new life.

This wasn't about becoming Melodia. This wasn't about running away, or ignoring her problems as Melody. This was about making a choice, taking a stand, and taking the chance to be as strong and brave as she'd always wanted to be.

This was about finding who she wanted to be.

There were people here that needed her. And being needed, something that no longer felt like an alien concept to her, filled her with more strength and determination than any song she could ever sing.

“Margret, after today, I want to go to New York.”

The proper alarm that Melody had set for 9 startled her awake. Her vision hazy with sleep, she searched for the phone to turn it off – except it stopped before she found it.

“Thanks, Margret,” she mumbled. She'd offered half the bed to the girl, considering it could fit two and it was more comfortable than the floor.

But when she rolled over to say good morning, Margret was still passed out, hugging her pillow to her chest. Annie then, Melody figured. Either way, it wasn't important. She reluctantly pushed the blanket off and pulled herself to a sitting position-

Only to come face-to-face with the bright smile of an unfamiliar Character. “Good morning!”

Melody let out a rather squeaky sound of shock, jolting backwards and almost hitting the wall. Was this Margret's-? No, it didn't look like either of the two she'd once had. Anyways, 18...19, was too old to give birth to a new...

Her gaze snapped over to the suitcase. Annie's egg was still there, but the second – her new one – had disappeared.

“Oh,” she whispered.

The Character giggled. “Did I surprise you? Yay! I hatched last night while you were busy talking to the other girl, so I didn't wanna interrupt. Then you both went to sleep, so...I did too! And now we're awake again!”

Blinking a few times, Melody nodded, taking in the appearance of Annie's new sister. She looked...actually, she looked almost exactly like Melody herself. When she didn't look like Dia, anyway. The same blue dress both she and Dia had, the same black boots...the only difference was her chocolate brown hair was Dia length, and parted on the side instead of in the middle.

No, scratch that – her eyes were different, too. Well...one was. Her right eye was hazel, the ocean-y color Melody's had been. The left, hidden behind her bangs, seemed to be the same blue as
The Character did a happy twirl. “My name's Hope! You're Mel, right?”

“Uh...yeah.”

“And I have a sister! What's she like?”

“Uh...Annie's really sweet...she just likes to sleep in.” Melody carefully set her feet on the floor and pushed herself off the bed. “She'll be up in a bit, probably...Did you turn off the alarm?”

Hope tilted her head to the side, looking curious. “You mean that noise? Yeah!”

Melody found Dia's phone half buried in the blanket. “The noise is to help me wake up. That's what an alarm does.”

After a moment of considering this, Hope nodded in understanding. “Oh, okay! Then I'm not supposed to turn it off?”

Smiling, Melody admitted, “I'm less likely to get up if I don't do it myself.” Hope seemed good-natured – she'd probably just wanted to help. Melody couldn't see a reason to be mad at her for that. “Try to keep your voice down, though? People can be grumpy if you wake them up.”

When Hope slapped her hands across her mouth, Melody giggled. She's either going to be a lot of fun, a lot of hassle, or some mix of both, she decided. “Come on, silly. Let's see what we've got for breakfast.”

The two quietly slipped out to the main room, a glance telling Melody that Ikuto and Yoru were still fast asleep on the couch. A look through the kitchen provided cereal, and she poured it into a bowl as quietly as she could. Ikuto didn't stir, so she'd apparently done well.

By the time the cereal was eaten, a groggy Margret had joined them. “Hey...”

“Morning.” Melody giggled as Hope began rushing to introduce herself. “Hey, I forgot to ask last night, did you find Peggie and Kalia?”

“Oh, yeah.” Margret yawned, eyeing Hope with confusion. “They're heading for the WBBA headquarters in...uhh, New York. 'Cause they wound up in America. So it works out for us.”

Melody nodded, standing to take her bowl to the sink. “And...how is Peggie?”

“...She's...technically still frozen, but her vitals are all moving again. I don't think she'd want me to see her like that, so I left her to Kalia.” Margret worriedly tapped at her belt buckle, a habit Melody was starting to notice. “Hey, uh...I've been meaning to ask...since the party last night. Was it you or your...co-roleplayer person?” She had to stop to yawn, “-that, uh, 'brought in' the vampires?”

Melody paused at the sink, unsure how to respond. It wasn't that she didn't know the answer, but... She hadn't really considered how personal the whole thing was to Margret when she'd said that last night. “In general, it was her, but...uh, Peggie and your aunt...that was me.”

She heard a long, resigned sigh come from her new friend. “Well...do you think...do you think there's a way to undo it? I-I mean, even if it's here...or maybe the Dragon Balls would work?”

“From what I know, Shenron's power is limited to what his creator can do. So unless your guardian of Earth can cure vampirism...” Melody shook her head. “But here's a thought. It's been...uh, three
months? Maybe you could use the Dragon Balls to revert her age by about that much. Like a time reversal.”

She was a bit confused when Margret shook her head. “Can't. For the same reason we can't undo the aging we did in the Hyperbolic Time Chamber. Trust me...we asked.” Margret sighed. “Because of all the different time streams in our dimension, since the whole 'champion attack' whatever thing twenty years ago, Dialga forbids any wishes that change time. It's too risky, we could screw things up further. So until Dialga fixes things...”

It took a few seconds, but Melody remembered what Margret was talking about. “Oh, right...I hadn't thought about that. Wow...that was twenty years ago, huh...” She smiled sheepishly. “That all happened around when Carrie first showed up. I think it was...her false Mithorian twin, being the 'champion' of Darkrai? Go...uhh, Aria, was Palkia's, and Noelle was Dialga's?”

Margret shrugged. “I just know that whatever happened back then is what started fracturing our time streams. Casey says it might be partially the cause of the freeze, but she'd have to find and unfreeze one of them to ask.”

“Right...” Melody remembered the concept, but not how it had actually played out. Much like it was for many things in Margret's world now...

“Enough about me and my problems,” Margret decided, waving her hand in dismissal of the topic. “How are you? How's Melodia?”

“Tired. Very, on her part.” During dreams of beyblade and running through disconnected scenes, Melody had been vaguely aware of Dia murmuring throughout it all. She found it highly unlikely Dia had gotten any kind of rest. “She's looking into the whole 'other dimension' thing.”

Finding bananas hiding in a cupboard, Margret pulled one off the bunch and started peeling it. “Well, good luck to her, then. Jeez, that surprised me though...” She sighed. “I thought you just didn't think. Kinda wish it had been that, really...”

Slowly nodding in reply, Melody took a moment to see if she could 'nudge' Dia at all. You doing okay? Nothing but a vague feeling of aggravation. Melody did her best to push that aside. Take a break, Dia.

Leaving Margret to eat, Melody returned to the bedroom to take her pill and check on Annie. The Character wasn't awake yet – and Hope demonstrated a scary mastery of pouting – so she grabbed Dia's phone to sit and wait.

From Madoka: Good morning! I'm heading out to the stadium today while we try to figure out what happened to Pegasus and Leone. Lance sent me a package to give to you, so come out and see me to pick that up!

To Madoka: ok, I'll head out soon.

It took about ten minutes for Melody to find a map on the phone, track a route to the stadium Madoka meant, and wake Annie up. Another five minutes or so for Hope to introduce herself to her half-asleep sister, which was kind of hilarious. She just kept spinning around and hitting things – the wall, Melody, Annie herself – and laughed through it all. Melody had never seen anyone so energetic, Character or human.

She had no wallet, no money or pass for a cab ride or bus ticket. It would take far too long to walk. So, five minutes after leaving the apartment, Melody made a choice - she called Touma and asked
for a ride.

It took about fifteen minutes before Hokuto's car arrived. Melody awkwardly thanked him – it was strange to see him without the other two – and made her best attempt at small talk for the thirty-five minute ride. If nothing else, he promised to tell Touma of her plan to head 'back' to New York.

He dropped her off a few blocks from the stadium and lent her some money for a few bus rides. She was reluctant to take it, but his damn flirty personality got her flustered enough that she wasn't able to flat out refuse. Dia was giggling at her by the time he drove off.

“He's funny,” was Hope's only comment. Melody said absolutely nothing, just taking out Dia's phone to reroute them.

From Megumi: the ocean is cold at night
From Megumi: id do bagel tricks for a cirsuc right now
From Megumi: you know what I mean
From Megumi: takin a nap then getting a cab to the right city, just gonna meet yuki when his boat arrives (hopfuly) and we'll go toghet. Bet you I can get ridda the cat pope.

From Megumi: Get some sleep, honey.

From Abigail: good mornig jerk who disapeard
From Abigail: ur mistake was informing me indrtely of you time zon. Welcome to japan. Im gona find y.

To Abigail: Maybe you should wake up first?
From Abigail: sh.ut up.

After gaining a shrug from Annie on who Abigail even was, and finding nothing about her but her contact picture (some blond girl, maybe the same age as her), Melody set her sights on the bey stadium.

Getting in was a small challenge. The stadium was officially closed to the public, and the WBBA staff members guarding the door wouldn't let her in until she'd called Madoka, had Madoka give the phone to Ryo, and had her identity and 'clearance' confirmed. One of the 'guards' then escorted her to the main stadium area, and though she gave a vague greeting to Madoka, her attention was instantly drawn to the battles going on below.

In one bowl was Pegasus against Sagitarrio, their Bladers shouting commands eagerly. In another was Bull and Leone, their battle full of more ferocity. Melody's eyes flicked back and forth between them, unable to choose which one to watch. Something inside her was filling her with a fire she'd only found in Dia's memories, and an excited smile grew on her face.

Having memories of Bey battles was one thing. Seeing them happen in real time was another thing altogether.

She didn't know how long she watched, lights and winds and shouts filling her senses. She was simply lost in the feeling of battle, a bystander seeing something incredible.

It sent an itch through her brain, a nudge to the mysterious memory of yesterday. After a brief blink, the stadium was suddenly a different shape, full of people, everyone holding fear and panic.

And a heart – several hearts – burning, crying, screaming for help from the field below. The girl
and her collection of spirits, forced through pain.

The dragon. Black and red, rose-like attributes that symbolized its very name. The dark petals spun around viciously by the wind, the very real wind produced by the dragon's summoning.

There was no sound. No sense of grounding. All Melody had was the sight of this one short moment, and the realization, *I know this place.*

And with another blink, it was all gone. She stumbled forward, grabbing the railing to steady herself. The echoing pain of those abused spirits and their master put a piercing thorn in her chest, and it was all she could do to stand and breathe.

Something shifted.

A small, gentle jolt ran through her, forcing her to shut her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, a shield of warmth expunged the pain, leaving her gasping, but stable. Little Hope floated in front of her, her hands set gently on her tense knuckles, and smiling peacefully up at her. A small part of Melody's mind registered that the Character's eyes almost seemed to be glowing.

A silent nudge urged her to breathe. She did so, a foggy voice next to her slowly starting to clear. Melody pulled at the new, calm energy, shoved away the pain – it wasn't hers, it wasn't hers – and felt the ground beneath her feet.

She grounded herself. She breathed. Hope nodded, and pulled away. The energy went with her, but the pain didn't return. Melody took another moment to collect herself, then slowly turned to the person beside her.

There was fear and concern all over Madoka's face, and it seeped into her voice. "Are you okay?"

Melody made herself nod in reply, though she couldn't find her own voice just yet. Her 'verbal' focus was directed inwards, pulling at Dia, calling for her attention.

*It was the same. It was the same as last night. I know where you were.*

She felt Dia's presence grow. *What was that?! You know what that place was?*

Her head was starting to ache. Not the sharp pain of the screaming spirits, but the dull thud of an overwhelmed memory. Melody put a hand over her face, closing her eyes, breathing through it.

She knew the show she'd just seen, but for some reason, she couldn't pull the thought to Dia. The details of the memory were fading – the dragon was a dark blur, the girl who controlled it a faceless blob. Who was she again? Were those petals or cloth? Was the stadium rectangular or octagonal?

*I can't remember.* Panic slid in, causing her to start shaking. *I-It's gone. It's all gone. I can't...*

What was she trying to remember again?

The throbbing in her head came to a sudden halt. Her fearful grip on her head, and the railing, loosened and fell. Why was she scared? She was just watching beyblade battles. She was with friends. What was there to be scared about?

Confusion took hold. *Were we...talking about something?* she asked Dia slowly.

*I...* Dia's voice was sluggish, unsure. *I don't think so? I was just resting, and...why am I awake?*
Trying to clear the fog in her mind, Melody looked around. The battles were still going. Hikaru and Ryo were still watching. Madoka was...standing next to her, worry in every bit of her appearance. “Dia, say something! What happened?”

Melody could only stare at her blankly. Why was she so concerned? “I...I’m fine. Why...?”

“Wh-Why? You were watching Kyoya's battle and suddenly it looked like you were going to collapse! I-I thought you were going to be sick!” Madoka was almost near tears. “You don't remember any of that?”

“No, I...” Remember? ...Oh! That's what was going on. “I-I think I just had another...uh, memory fritz...thing...” Melody shook her head, taking another glance around. She could still name everyone. She knew why they were there, how she’d gotten in.

Madoka ran her through a series of questions, reviewing things they'd talked about during the party. Melody answered everything, and got every question right.

So...what had it been that she'd forgotten?

Neither she nor Dia had an answer. For a little while, Melody just sat with Madoka and their Characters, meditating and trying to draw out any kind of hint as to what it might be. To their dismay, they couldn't come up with anything.

Reluctantly, they had to drop it and move on.

Madoka handed over a cardboard box covered in various crayon doodles, about the size of...a medium storage box, maybe? Not too big that it was difficult to carry, but not small enough that you could carry it with one arm. It had a lid and hole-handles on opposite sides. Maybe it was a storage box.

The doodles were new, scribbled with signatures that she couldn't identify. If she had to guess...Dia's nephews? There were lots of smiles and hearts, seashells and music notes, peace signs... People, too, that she guessed must be the family. Maybe. The one with a brown blob around the head and a 'dress' might have been her?

She took off the lid and assessed the contents. One of those business type yellow envelopes was on top of everything else. The 'everything else' were five smaller boxes of varying sizes wrapped in decorated paper – her Christmas presents – and two non-wrapped boxes, one looking like a clothing box and the other maybe for large jewelry.

It felt a little awkward to go opening Christmas presents in a bey stadium, so she ignored them for now. She went for the envelope first, bending open the little metal clasp and pulling out three sheets of paper. There was also a strange compact-sized lavender disc of some kind, wing-like symbols on the top around a small blue circle, and 'M~M' carved on the bottom.

A quick glance at the papers identified one as a brief life summary, one as her mom's theory on her apparent dimensional kidnapping, and one as a collection of encouraging notes from her brothers, mom, and the Voltron Force. She set the summary and theory aside, then let Dia read through the notes with her. Each one cheered them up a bit from their memory disappearance, everyone promising support in their own way.

A sticky note was applied to the 'get well' paper, providing an explanation for the strange purple disc. My music disc will chase away any nightmares or dark thoughts that might plague you. Just hold your finger against the blue circle, and it will play songs according to what you need. Love,
Dia was so touched she started mental-crying. Melody could only guess that the device was something very personal to Mingzhu... M~M, was one of those 'Mingzhu'? Maybe the other was 'Max'. Was this a gift from him to her, before...?

If so, she could understand Dia's reaction. She set the disc in her bag, promising to try it later. The envelope and papers went with it, and Melody then picked out the smaller of the two non-wrapped boxes, as it had a note of its own.

*Before you open this box: This is the Menta crystal I said I would send you. The box is made to dampen its powers as long as it's inside, so the crystal will only 'work' when you take it out. I tried to find a shape you'd like...I hope it helps. Lance*

Melody found herself hesitating for two reasons. One, Dia was expressing fear of opening the box, as it had been the Menta creature that had caused her memory problems. Two...Melody wasn't sure if she was ready to see it herself.

She remembered coming up with the idea, or at least how quickly she'd taken to it. She'd tried to 'implement' it into Margret's world immediately, with less than successful results. She knew almost nothing about it, except the basic idea for six types – Menta and Haert being two of them, as mental strength and emotional strength. There was also Jusia, Stratea, Fysika, and Courae – justice, strategy, physical strength, and courage.

Past that, she knew they could affect a person according to their 'power'. They weren't a well known crystal, most often being mistaken for regular colored quartz by those who didn't know better. By what she could see in Dia's unlocked memories, they could be ground into powders and used in potions or mage medicines. The clearest example of this was Toby's mother, a mage named Tracy, who had developed different affects for these powders as her main line of research. Also, there were twelve types. Double what she knew of. Double the lack of knowledge.

Melody had accepted that there were things in this world she didn't know about – more of that than she *did* know – but this was something that just sort of...unsettled her. Even if Dia's family used it and trusted it, even if Toby's mother could probably tell her anything she wanted to know...

Even if, it was still the same thing that had altered Dia's mind and begun stealing her memories. Melody couldn't ignore that. She was scared, Dia was scared, and Lance had already said it was okay if she didn't use it.

At the same time...part of her still wanted to see a piece of Spirit Quartz in person....*Dia, I'm going to open it. Just for a second. I won't touch it, I just...want to see what it looks like.*

*Dia's worried breath echoed through her mind. D...Don't take it out.*

*I won't.* Melody set the box in her lap and lifted the lid.

It was a light blue, slightly transparent; big enough to fill her hand and shaped like a crescent moon. Melody was no expert on the matter, but the rough edges made it seem like it had naturally shaped itself like this. It sat on a simple jewelry cushion, sunken into it slightly because of its weight.

It was very pretty. Melody admired that for a short time, then gently replaced the lid. She picked up the box, put it back with the others, placed the lid on the storage box, and stood up.

She walked back to the railing, and for a little while, she and Dia just watched the battles and let their minds calm down.
Chapter End Notes

Songs: "It's Gonna Be Alright" by Sara Groves - English
"Free" (bridge) from Barbie: Princess and the Pauper - English

Art:
It's Gonna Be Alright: http://fav.me/dc6d6g3
Free: http://fav.me/dc6dt6n

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Family:**
- *Mingzhu* - mother
- *Max* - father (possessed)
- *Xiaotong Lance* - oldest brother, pilot of red lion in Voltron
- *Xing Aniko* - second oldest sibling, father to Jinhai (4) and Sho Hai (2)
- *Jinjing Shelly* - third oldest sibling (possessed)
- *Madoka and Kotone Amano* – sister-in-laws (at least that's what we call them)
- *Chiasa Amano-McClain* - Aniko's wife (deceased)
- *Jiao Cheng* – aunt (deceased) former Indigo princess and Mom's twin, Aguma's mother
- *Aguma Cheng* – cousin
- *Jian Cheng* – uncle, Aguma's father

**Age 2:** Max and Shelly possessed, family separated; you say you wound up in Japan with the Tategami family
**Age 6:** Started beyblade; moved to New York
**Age 8:** Started looking for family; Voltron was found
**Age 10:** The Incident (Voltron locked away); we found you; you got your pendant; you started martial arts
**Age 11:** Returned to Japan
**Age 12:** You went missing for a while, we still don't know what happened because you lost memory of it very quickly
**Age 13:** Had your coming of age ceremony in the Purple Kingdom; became an idol for Horizon Production; had an unfortunate short meeting with Max and Shelly
**Age 14:** Spent some time with the Beylin Fist (our Chinese hometown) while recovering from Chiasa's death; you left your bey (Hades Lynx) with them
**Age 15:** Voltron returns and we defeat King Lotor; Beyblade World Championship; you and Toby started dating
**Age 16:** Voltron started fighting Spirit Quartz beasts, we still don't know where they're coming from. You went traveling around Earth to try and find their source (no success) and became an official Pokemon trainer (we have your Pokemon up here, they're happy and healthy)

Now on a bus heading for the nearest stop to the Horizon Productions agency – her old idol workplace – Melody took the time to read through the other papers. Madoka had been wary about letting her go, but surrendered in the end since it was to see more old friends and maybe regain some memories.

She'd decided not to tell any of the idols she was coming, even Kai, who had invited her. It wasn't only something she and Dia agreed on, but their Characters as well. A large, excited source of Haert – that is, the idols being surprised and happy to see her – was a fair shot at a safer unlocking of memories regarding them.

That, and Dia just plain wanted to spook them.

The bus jostled a bit, and Melody reached beside her to steady her box of gifts. When the ride settled, she turned her attention back to the summary. She could understand a lot of it, and nothing
seemed wrong with it, but there were some really surprising things on there. She wasn't sure what to think.

First, Chiasa. Madoka had mentioned her. She could now gather flashes - a room of people dressed in pale pinks and oranges, her running to hide in a closet, someone in red hunting her out. Anything else was a mystery, but she felt it was one she should solve quickly. She owed Chiasa that much.

On the subject of Chiasa's death... Dia had visited the Beylin Fist afterwards. Their hometown. This was a big shock, but with Aguma's name being on the list of family, she felt inclined to believe that maybe it was possible. With Dia's mother being Chinese, that would make the Beylin Fist the place she'd grown up. It would make sense that she'd want to raise her children there. With 'Jiao' being her mother's sister, then Aguma, her son, would be Melodia's cousin.

Picturing that was a little weird. She put the thought aside for now.

She knew about Dia going missing when she was younger, of course. Her aunt being the former Indigo princess made sense, in some way, if she reminded herself that Karen and Noel had been twins in the show – she was pretty sure she remembered that right? Living with the Tategami family, that certainly explained her sibling-like relationship with Kyoya.

Now, accepting that she was from the Beylin Fist, and accepting that she'd visited them after Chiasa's death, that meant that she had to accept that she'd left her bey with them. She knew that she'd given Hades Lynx to friends, a promise to return... Dia had found great comfort in the bladers of the Fist. They accepted when she was ready to leave. Dia left Hades Lynx in their care as thanks, and as a promise that she wouldn't forget their kindness.

Melody hoped, more than anything else she might try to do, that she could help the Beylin Fist.

She carefully slid the paper back into the envelope, in turn removing the one with Mingzhu's theory. She'd not read through it yet, but at a simple glance it was far different from the get well notes or life summary. The paper was lined, for starters, and almost entirely filled on both sides. Another sticky note was attached to it.

I am sorry that I didn't tell you this before. I...I just didn't want to scare you. But now you have asked about that time, so I'm telling you all that I know. I hope that something on this paper is able to help you somehow.

What was more, and in all honestly most concerning, there were small spots with water stains. Had her mother been crying when she wrote this?

As she started to read through it, she became less surprised by the presence of the tear stains. The contents were more tales of unsolved tragedy than a mere theory.

For centuries, mermaid princesses and guardians would disappear with their Tear, with no trace. Sometimes, Aqua Regina had the energy to create a new Tear and continue the line. Others, she did not, and it stayed cold. This “Tears' Curse” had even affected Mingzhu's twin, Jiao – in 1998, with no warning, she was simply gone. No one suitable was found to replace her, so Aqua Regina elected to preserve her energy and hold off on creating a new Indigo Tear.

In 2007, Mingzhu had all but been forced by the Purple Tear to pass it on to Dia, even with her fear of the curse.

In 2008, two princesses and two guardians all disappeared on the same day. Pink, Aqua, Yellow, and Orange were cold. Aqua Regina only had the energy to replace the first three, and they were
given to human guardians. Orange was left in silence.

In the summer of 2009, Dia had her three-month trip of missing memories. With her return came the re-emerging of the Indigo Tear – not a new one, but the one lost with Jiao eleven years prior. It had been given to a new princess and returned to the connection. Additionally, an echo to the Pink appeared, as if there were suddenly two Pink Tears.

At this point, Mingzhu explained how she came to the conclusion she had, the theory itself.

*Toby's mother, Tracy, a very skilled mage, attempted to find your missing memories of those three months. She found a locked section of your mind that she could not open – we assume it is where those memories are. More than that, she found something she called “dimensional void traces”, meaning that you had been taken out of our dimension and sent to or put in another. With that knowledge, we can assume that this may be the same fate of all other princesses and guardians to vanish.*

The curse had not struck again since that time. Mingzhu expressed hope that perhaps Melodia had broken it with her return.

*The woman you mentioned to Lance, promising to get you home – perhaps she was a former princess or guardian.*

That made sense, in context with the theory. A victim of the curse finding a young princess drawn into it, anyone with the pure-heartedness needed to hold a Pearl Tear would extend a hand in aid. Really, all of this made sense, and both Melody and Dia could agree with it.

All of it except for one bit.

*The Indigo connection returned. Jiao's Pearl Tear, with a new princess. We still don't know who she is.*

Melody returned the theory page to the envelope, and that to her bag. Under Dia's direction, she took out the phone and pulled up a contact named Alyssin.

**To Alyssin: It's been three and a half years. We have to tell my mom about you.**

Alyssin, a girl who had arrived in New York a few weeks after Dia's return. A girl who had asked her identity to be kept a secret from Dia's family. A girl who refused to share how she had become the Indigo princess.

After learning of this curse and how it had taken her aunt, Melodia no longer felt it was right to hide Alyssin's status from Mingzhu.

A while later, when Melody got off at the bus stop, she received a reply.

**From Alyssin: I can't. I'm sorry.**

To Alyssin: Her twin was the one before you. She disappeared about 14 years ago with the Tear. The Tear came back, but she didn't. Was it my aunt that chose you?

From Alyssin: I made a vow. A binding oath. I can't tell you anything.

From Alyssin: ...If you feel you need to tell her about me, then so be it. But I'm incapable of helping.

From Alyssin: Please tell her I'm sorry.
The now-familiar feeling of *something shifting* took hold. It was Melodia, one mind in sync, that stared at the phone incredulously. Melodia who could not believe the level of secrecy this supposed sister princess was presenting.

It was Melodia who was angry.

**To Alyssin: You're not looking like the pure-hearted princess you claim to be right now. There's more going on here than you seem to understand and I won't accept this silence. I'll be back in America by the end of today. We're going to talk.**

Melodia put her phone into her bag, hefted up her storage box, and started walking the remaining few blocks to Horizon Pro.

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Melody's plan to get into the building had been to take a picture of the entrance, send it to Kai, and wait for the chaos. It would make the idols very happy, which while a nice bonus itself, would also (theoretically) kick out some extra Haert connections to maybe remind her of Dia's time with them.

Really, it was all a big "maybe", but even if it didn't work it was fun to mess with them. Neither of them knew enough about Haert to know if it would work that way, but...shrug?

She didn't even have time to take the phone back out, though. Upon reaching the entrance to the agency – a rather nice three story office building with a proper sign and everything – she was almost immediately nudged by two different minds. While Melody didn't know how telepathy worked, the nudges did seem to be close, so she glanced around a bit. There was a silver haired woman standing nearby, bundled up in a large, warm looking coat, a bakery box in her hands, and an Espeon standing beside her.

Frankly, all Melody actually processed was the Espeon. And it wasn't really processing, it was more like trying to mentally shake Dia awake to demand *Why in heck did you not tell me there's a Pokemon here*?!?

During this brief moment of shock, the woman cleared her throat. A growing look of concern was appearing on her face, and for some reason, Melody had the feeling it wasn't a common expression for her. “Melodia-san? Is...that you?”

Melody blinked, trying and failing to stop staring at the Espeon. “Uh...yeah?”

“...Then who is staring at my partner like she's never seen a Pokemon before?”

There was a pause as Melody's brain heard those words, processed their meaning, and realized what she was insinuating. She felt herself stiffen up. Instinctively, she took a step back – should she make a break for it? Who was this? Dia was absolutely, truly asleep right now, and couldn't unlock anything for her even if she asked.

Possibly in response to her panic, the woman held a hand up. “Forgive me. I don't mean to be rude in my words. I am simply concerned as to why I sense two minds within you. Spells providing such can be damaging...”

Another nudge poked at her mental walls, and the Espeon pawed at the ground. Melody finally felt herself blink. “Uh - Uh, I don't...know how telepathy...”

*I'm talking to an Espeon oh my gosh what is happening.*

The woman stepped forward, slowly. At this point, she seemed to be making a careful attempt not
to startle her, like someone approaching a lost, scared child. “Allow me to start again. I am Takamine Noa, a friend and former colleague to Melodia-san.”

Noa...Noa...That name was in Dia's phone. “H-Hi...Uh...”

“Please, let us go inside. There are plenty of rooms we can use to speak in private.”

“But, um, the party...”

For some reason, that unfinished statement chased away the fear on Noa's face. “We have some time before it truly starts. I would prefer to settle this before we join in, however. If that's alright.”

Melody glanced at her Characters. Annie gave Noa a quick once-over, then nodded. “That's the woman in the photo albums. She's formal and secretive, and the world has a million theories on who or what she might be, but she was also like the mother of the idols, Dia included.”

“I like her purple pet,” Hope contributed.

Turning her gaze back to Noa, Melody slowly nodded. “O...Okay.”

Her compliance brought a tiny smile to Noa's face, and the woman motioned for her to follow. Her Espeon used some telekinesis to open the doors, Noa waved a greeting to the secretary at the lobby desk, and they headed in.

It was a simple building, from what Melody could see. An elevator at the back, a nice staircase on the right. The lobby was done up like a sun peaking out over a horizon – fitting, and definitely on purpose.

Noa's Espeon picked a door after a brief pause. She opened it, and her trainer walked inside. Slowly coming to terms with the presence of the psychic cat, Melody nodded in thanks and joined them.

It was a simple office, currently seeming to be more accurately described as 'a room with a desk, a chair, and lots of boxes'. Noa turned the lights on and set her bakery box on the desk. Melody chose to do the same with her gifts, and after a short silence, closed the door. Noa nodded, then seemed to consider her for a moment.

“I cannot say that I don't wish for as detailed an explanation as you can manage,” she confessed after a few seconds. “But first, may I ask your name? And to know if Melodia-san is well?”

Being confronted so bluntly, so immediately, was more than a little jarring. Annie and Hope both motioned for her to breathe slowly; she did, calmed herself, and began putting together words. “M...Melody. And Dia's fine, just tired...oh, uh, and having memory problems, but...”

The concern that just didn't fit Noa's face had returned. “Would you be kind enough to start from the beginning, perhaps?”

After collecting herself, Melody began doing so. She started with Dia's side – the Menta creature, the escape to Earth, and the memory glitches, leading up to the previous morning when she'd woken up in Dia's body. With Annie's help, she gave a quick summary of what they knew, though put less detail into Margret's world as it...well, wasn't exactly Noa's business, and leaving out the mermaid stuff.

Throughout everything, Noa was quiet and attentive. She didn't interrupt, but Melody could almost see the gears turning in her head, the questions lining up. When Melody reached the end of it, the final note being Dia's current state of sleep and why, Noa nodded with surprising calm.
“Your actions so far seem...I must say, rather commendable.” The strange fear Noa had shown before was completely gone now, replaced with a small smile. “You and Melodia-san are working together in this situation. That is reassuring to me. I was very much concerned that the two of you were forced together by someone's hostile intentions.”

Melody shook her head fervently. “No, no! Nothing like that at all. We're okay, I promise.”

“...I must admit, I'm not exactly pleased with this development.” Noa sighed. “The history of this sort of spell is a dangerous one... But if the two of you are doing well, then...I suppose it is not in my business to argue.” She glanced in the general direction of the two Characters, though didn't seem to be seeing them. “I must ask, though... I sense two spirits connected to the both of you. Would they be Guardian Characters?”

“Oh, yeah. One is Annie, she's Dia's. The other is Hope, and she's mine.”

“Ahh...” Whatever tension Noa still held was now melting away. “A Character cannot exist without the stability of their Bearer. I assure you, it is not that I had doubts to your honesty, but...Melodia-san is someone of great importance to me. A tether such as a Character is a great relief.”

With a slow nod, Melody was starting to see how Noa could be called a 'mom' to Dia and the idols. Her protective instincts were just... there, front and center. She had a natural sense of intimidation to anything she might perceive as a threat, but worry could override it in an instant if something was terribly wrong.

Sighing, Noa leaned on the desk. “Do forgive me, I am not usually so emotional. Seeing Melodia-san out of the blue, sensing two minds within her, and this tale you've told me...It pulls rather hard.” With a frown, she reached up to massage the bridge of her nose. “I may ask more of you in the future. For now, I believe I have only one more question...perhaps more of a concern, and then I will be happy to bring you to the celebration.”

Melody tried to brace herself. “And that is...?”

“You have mentioned your hope that overflowing Haert may unlock meaningful memories. Unfortunately, while the Haert would be a sound addition in memory retrieval, none can actually resurface without Menta present. You would need that crystal out of its dampening box and in relative proximity. While I understand the uneasiness you both feel, may I suggest that, without forcing you to come into contact with it, we set it in a room across the hall so that it may passively react and unlock? Would something like that ease your worries?”

Nudging Dia, Melody fed Noa's suggestion to her, and waited for her reply. Dia was groggy, and the time it took for her to understand it all resulted in a several minute silence throughout the room.

At last, Melody was able to relay to Noa, “If someone is with it or periodically checks on it, we're okay with...trying it.” A pause, as Dia added something. “Um...and Dia says she'll find the telepathy link for your Espeon before she goes back to sleep.”

Noa opened her mouth, but Melody had one more message. “She also says she's sorry she freaked you out.”

The woman didn't seem to know how to answer that. She simply looked touched.

'Even under the circumstances, it's wonderful to see you again, as it were.'
“Ah, thanks...Fi...”

‘Ficia.’

“Right. Ficia.”

Noa had headed upstairs to drop off her pastries and set up the Menta crystal, leaving Melody to have a few minutes to herself. Sort of. Her Espeon had elected to stay behind and wait for Dia to re-activate their telepathic link, and was currently content to sit in Melody's lap, while Melody sat on the floor.

Cats were awesome.

Actually, she was really glad Ficia had stayed behind. Lance's little life summary had been the first mention of Pokemon in this world, besides memories of New York she'd been...uncertain of in regards to accuracy.

“Hey, Ficia? Did Dia have any Pokemon while she worked here?”

‘Yes, a bouncy little Budew that Hibiki gave her. I believe her name was Lindia...and...yes, she evolved into a Roselia two years ago.’ Ficia nodded, then paused as Melody went to scratch her chin. The poke-cat started purring. ‘Oooo, that's nice. You're a cat owner, aren't you?’

Melody just smiled.

‘With no offense to Dia, this is far superior to her affections in the past. I hope this skill takes precedence when you two merge.’ Ficia accepted the scratchies a bit longer, then stretched her neck out to boop Melody's face. Simply because she could. ‘She has a few others as well, but due to her growing distance since the Spiral Force incident, none of us have met them. I believe there's a baby Totodile, an...Empoleon...and two of my own line, though I can't remember which. Then more, perhaps.’

“Guess I'll have to check in.”

‘Certainly—ah, Noa returns. I only sense three of the others here so far, are you ready to meet them?’

As Ficia jumped off her lap, Melody chuckled. “Ready as I can be.”

Noa came back into the room a few seconds later. Ficia picked up Melody's box with her telekinesis, and they headed for the stairs.

Melody ran through the options. Three idols...which ones, she wondered? Were any of them new, or would Dia know all of them?

At a doorway on the second floor, Noa turned around to give her a short warning. “You are probably going to be the instant victim of a crushing hug.”

Oh, dear.

Noa opened the door, and led the little group in. “Sena-san, Morikubo-san, Shinomiya-san, here she is. My surprise.”

A woman holding a Marill – Sena Shiori – turned to face the doorway, her eyes lighting up in delight. An unfamiliar teenager paused in adjusting the bow on her Ninetales. A Blissey let out a
gasp of joy.

And as predicted, Melody was tackled by the tearful hug of Morikubo Nono, an anxious girl who had been almost a sister to Dia. “Melodia-san!”

Melody needed no help from Annie to start petting Nono's hair and hug her tight. “Nono-chan, happy New Year! It's so good to see you!”

Muffled by the fact that her face was near buried in Melody's chest, Nono let out a small whimper. “Morikubo thought you would never come back...”

“No! I'd never abandon you, Nono-chan. I'm so sorry I made you feel that way. I'm here for the party, so we can spend some time together, okay?”

She only got a nod, but wasn't surprised by it. Nono was a girl that was scared by the simplest things, but who found comfort in the support of the few she trusted – Melodia, for instance. And Dia had all but adopted Nono as family. She'd often spent an hour or so brushing her hair and putting it up, knowing the actions had a calming effect on the severely anxious girl. She didn't have a brush now, but her hand seemed to work just as well for now.

Oh, that's weird, she thought, realizing how sneakily those memories had opened up. Not like the abrupt knowing that came from Dia's unlocking, or the painful jolt of forcing a memory out. A simple, calm feeling of recollection, filling in the details in a way that seemed perfectly natural.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the Blissey – Aura, that was her name – waving at her cheerfully. She smiled back, then let her gaze wander to the others in the room.

Shiori was beaming. “The tides have brought you home, and I have never been happier for that, Melodia-chan. It's the most wonderful surprise! Are you well?”

“I am. It's good to see you too, Sena-san!”

The young woman chuckled. “Shiori, please. We are far from strangers, even with our time apart.”

“This is a great treat!” her Marill chirped. Melody smiled.

And then realized that Shiori's Marill had just spoken.

She must have been making an incredulous face, because Shiori burst into giggles. Noa smiled slightly, then cleared her throat. “Everyone, there is something that should be brought to light. If you would quiet, for a moment.”

Melody definitely felt the strong pulse of Noa's Haert as she explained Dia's memory situation, from the glitches caused by the creature to the pure crystal aiding in mental stability. Shiori and the Pokemon all looked thoughtful and concerned. The unfamiliar teen expressed worry as well, while Nono begged, “You haven't forgotten me, have you?”

Oh, god, that hurt. Melodia almost felt the stinging of tears in her eyes. “Of course not! Nono-chan, I'd always sit with you when I had the chance. I'd do your hair over and over, and we'd have sleepovers at least once a week! You're sweet and quiet and my mom once made this acorn-shaped cake for you because I told her you were like a cute little squirrel.”

Tears of relief filled Nono's eyes, and Melodia found her hug became even tighter. She held the girl in return, swaying slightly, knowing it helped. “Nono-chan, I could not forget you, not ever.”
As the hug went on – it wouldn't surprise her if it lasted half an hour – Noa explained to her that she had the ability to understand water-type Pokemon, and to pick up other dialects as well. 'Her mother's heritage', apparently, which made sense after she put some thought to it. Merfolk were about music, and their songs had to reach through any language barrier. The Tear opened those channels in accelerated ways, and it took maybe a few days of constant exposure to learn a new language. That included non-human ones. As for water-types in general? Well, merfolk were water creatures themselves. It wasn't hard to figure out.

Jeez, she was remembering things with the slightest of triggers. It was nice, but slightly unsettling. She might have to ask Noa to put the Menta back in the box for a while, or these memories might start overwhelming her.

She greeted the Marill politely – Shell, a simple name that she wore proudly. It made Melody a bit sad. So close to Shelly...

Gently pushing that aside, she looked to the girl she'd neglected to introduce herself to. “I'm sorry, I totally ignored you. Melodia...with, uh, several surnames, apparently.”

The girl giggled a bit at that, clearly holding no grudge. “Shinomiya Karen. I joined the agency last summer.” Her voice was, in a single word, cute. Even though she looked about the same age as Dia and herself, Melody thought Karen sounded kind of young, but in a fitting way. “And this is my friend, a gift from Ganaha-san in 765 Pro.”

The Ninetales dipped its head in greeting. Melody nodded back, “Hello. I...may or may not know your, uh, dialect?”

The fox just smiled at that, seemed to shrug, and didn't look inclined to find out in any rush. A quiet one, Melody guessed.

She did know 'fairy' dialect, it turned out, as Aura quickly started recounting how Hibiki had raised her just for Nono. Hibiki apparently had a habit of walking the Horizon Pro. idols to a Pokemon Center, signing them up for a trainer license, and then presenting them with a Pokemon. Aura had become Nono's Pokemon at her last birthday, in August.

Shiori's Marill, though, was an egg from Haruka. She had a hobby of breeding 'baby' type Pokemon (such as the Igglybuff, Cleffa, and Azurill lines), and teamed up with Hibiki to give all the Horizon Pro. idols one Pokemon each. They'd just reached that goal at the end of October.

There were worse things to give, Melody supposed. Really, the fact that Hibiki had a few dozen Pokemon just wasn't surprising to her. Haruka raising some made sense, too.

While Melody was happily chatting with Aura and Shelly, a Buizel made its way into the room and began staring at her in shock. Before she could say hello, Melody watched Nishijima Kai run in, who took one look at her before her face lit up in glee. “Melodia-san! You made it!”

“Ah, so that is how you knew of the party,” Noa muttered, as Kai dashed over to get into the Mel-Nono hug.

Kai was given the same rundown on the memory glitches, and she took it rather well. A re-introduction to her Buizel, Speedwing (who seemed to be amused by the name), was nearly interrupted when two more idols – and their Pokemon – joined the group.

Saionji Kotoka and her Dragonair, a formal but caring pair, greeted her warmly. With them was a new girl, Kousaka Umi, who had joined with Karen and one other last summer. Though Melody
couldn't understand her Medicham, she thought the introduction went well.

Nono and Melody helped set out the new food brought in by Kotoka – almost a feast in itself. She was reminded that Kotoka was very, very wealthy, but that it was so in the background that even without amnesia one could forget.

It was about five minutes later that Ohara Michiru and her Munchlax arrived, both already snacking on bread – as was normal for them. Both were excited to see the surprise guest, but not as thrilled as the woman with them.

“So you're Melodia!” was the awed exclamation from the woman with purple hair, who to Melody looked strangely like a character she'd once used. “Oh, I've heard so much about you! My name is Kelly Brooks, but you can call me Kaori!”

Ah, that was why. She was this dimension's version of that character. She really needed to stop being surprised by that. “Nice to meet you. Your Japanese is really good!”

Kaori looked pleased. “Oh, thanks! I'm a friend of your former producer, Angela. I took over when she had to step aside for family reasons. Everyone's had nothing but good things to say about you, so it's great to finally meet you in person!”

Noa gently stepped in to tell the newcomers of the memory glitches, and Melody busied herself helping set out all the bread-foods Michiru had brought for the party. Nono still wouldn't leave her side. When the baked goods set out, and while they waited for the others to arrive, Melody sat with her and started braiding her hair, like old times. The quiet smile on Nono's face was probably the cutest thing she'd seen all day.

Nono told her about all the different jobs they'd had recently, and how with Aura's support, her anxiety was slowly starting to get better. Melody was so excited for her that she felt Dia wake up – though after the initial grumpiness had worn off, Dia was happy as well. She even took control to give Nono her own hug.

With Dia awake, Ficia stepped out to make the first promised check on the Menta. Reporting nothing was amiss, she returned, but not alone. Okazaki Yasuha had met the Espeon in the hall, and the way her eyes shined at seeing Melody was priceless. “Melodia-chan!”

Dia's When did her hair get so long? was pretty great, too.

Melody spent some time fawning over Yasuha's adorable little Cleffa, then was introduced to Kaori's Leavanny as well. The producer also had a Noivern, but that wasn't exactly an indoor Pokemon.

Something interesting she was noticing about Kaori was how she kept hiding her left hand in the sleeve of her oversized sweater (which Melody kind of wanted to steal and snuggle up in, because oversized sweaters were great, but that wasn't the point). When she pointed it out, Kaori just hid it again and started giggling, then whispered for her to keep quiet until everyone was there.

For some reason, that reminded her of Aniko, but she couldn't place why. Not enough of a trigger, she guessed. But Dia was giggling now too, so she certainly knew...and wasn't sharing. Rude. It was definitely something good, though. As time went on, Kaori almost seemed to be glowing with Haert. Even Noa was noticing, so that said something. But Kaori just giggled some more and left them guessing.

According to Kai, there were four people that hadn't arrived yet. While they waited, she and Nono
took Melody on a tour of the building. Memories stopped popping in as they walked further from the room with the Menta, but the brief pause was a nice break, really. It let the new memories have some time to settle in properly, and eased the slow headache that was starting to form. She'd probably have Noa put the Menta back in the box once everyone had arrived.

It was thanks to Kai that she learned a bit more about Kaori. The woman had apparently met the 765 Pro. producer during his time in Hollywood, during her own producer studies. She'd learned he was a mutual friend of Angela's, and had traveled to Japan with him when he returned to see how Japanese idols differed from American ones. In this time, Angela had revealed her need to step down, so Kaori had grabbed that announcement, spun it around, and decided without warning that she'd take Angela's place.

Though it had been a bit of a rough transition, things were now going smoothly. Like Angela, Kaori was fierce when it came to nailing jobs that matched each girl. Both held a strong compassion for their dreams – which was, in essence, to help the idols' dreams come true. Nono described them as something like fairy godmothers crossed with warriors.

On their way back to the party room, they met with two arriving idols. Sakakibara Satomi, the charming ditz that she was, didn't quite seem to realize that Melody being there was something special. She greeted her like she'd just seen the younger girl yesterday. Her Gardevoir was just as pleasant.

With them was the third of the idols that had joined the previous summer, Nikaido Chizuru. Though she introduced herself with a sort of projected, greater-than-thou ego, Dia could sense good intentions and heart within her.

Melody had to ask something, though. “Are you maybe related to a teacher in Seiyo?”

For a moment, Chizuru looked startled. “How did you-” She cut herself off, cleared her throat, and started again. “Ah, yes, that would be my brother. How did you come to know about him?”

“I'm just friends with someone who knows him...I know what he looks like, and you look kinda similar, so that plus your name had me wondering.”

Waving the explanation off, Chizuru just nodded. “He's a sweet man, though...strange, I'll say. That ex-girlfriend of his used to keep him in line, but...” She shrugged, not looking as sophisticated as she was trying to portray. The worry for her brother was probably more on her mind. “They're still talking, at least, so maybe there's hope.”

Smiling, Melody nodded. “Yeah, I'm sure it'll work out.”

You know something. Dia's tone was slightly accusatory.

They just maybe unclearly get back together. I think the original manga of the show has them get married? It's sweeter. They weren't in a position to meddle in that, so Melody felt it was safe to let Dia in on it.

...Alright, that's acceptable. Carry on.

They rejoined the party, Chizuru letting her Illumise out of its poke ball in the process. While Noa gave the memory glitch speech again, Melody found herself catching Shiori's eye. The woman met her gaze, glanced slightly down, then looked away altogether, almost seeming nervous. It was so slight, Melody almost missed it.

How odd. What was that about?
She unfortunately had no time to dwell on it. Tsukimiya Miyabi and her Mienfoo had arrived, so hugs pulled her away from Shiori's unusual little moment.

The combination of so many people, plus the feeling of Haert growing within the room, soon had Melody finding she needed to sit down. Memories were swimming around in her head, making it hard for her to think. It didn't seem she'd hold out much longer if she kept getting them. A whisper to Noa had the woman stepping out to put the Menta back in its dampening box, and less than a minute later, Melody felt her mind settling.

Everyone left her alone for a bit, letting her rest. They kept things quiet as they finished setting up, and Yasuha even let her hold her Cleffa in the meantime. When someone touched her hair, she was startled for a moment – then relaxed, the familiar feeling of braiding sending a calm over her. It didn't only work on Nono, that was for sure.

“I'm really glad you came.” Kai's soft voice came from behind her, the swimmer's hands working through Melodia's thick hair at a slow, unrushed pace. “I mean, when your brother called to ask if you'd shown up here, I was worried, but..."

“It was hard to think straight when I...left,” was Melody's awkward attempt at answering.

Kai chuckled. “So long as you're working through it at a good pace. That magic crystal helping your memories?”

“Mmm...I think I got too many in a short time. Takamine-san boxed it back up because I was getting a headache.” Melody sighed, absently petting the Cleffa in her arms. “Just...going through everything now. Sorting it out.”

“Well, I'll shut up and let you sort, then.” Kai's statement held a lighthearted tone, and made Melody giggle a bit. Then they both quieted down, and Melody glanced through the room, going over some of the basic things she now knew about these people.

She'd gone to the pool to time Kai on laps; she'd bought pastries with Michiru and clothes with Miyabi and her mother. She'd given Yasuha some of her old toys after hearing about her child actress work-filled childhood. Satomi, who was as ditzy now as she had been back then, had learned how to bake with her, when Mingzhu had flown in for a visit. Shiori had lent her books about the ocean. Nono, of course, was practically family, and Kotoka would often ask her for help with her vocal exercises and other practices. (Not that she needed the extra practice, she was just exceptionally diligent, which was something Dia had always admired.)

And then there was Noa. Noa had never provided any insight on her background, or her family. She found reading science books to be calming, had some strange phrases (“Let's cross our hairs”, for example, instead of “fingers”), and there were a number of rumors about her. Alien, time traveler, mage, Seer, mind-reader...

Huh. That last one actually seemed to be right. Who would've figured?

Even with so much secrecy about her, and her odd habit of not showing a lot of emotion outside songs or acting, Noa was the Mom Idol. She'd pick the younger idols up from school sometimes, and walk to the agency with them, just because. She'd bring treats for everyone without a solid reason. She'd take them on outings, everywhere from the library to the aquarium. She was Mom, and that was that.

And...strangely, she hadn't come back since going to box up the Menta...hm. It had been at least ten minutes. Looking around (being careful not to move her head, Kai was still braiding after all), she
noticed Ficia wasn't in the room, either. Curious, she tried to reach out to her mind. She wasn't exactly sure how to, but tried picturing her and imagining her words going into the Espeon's head. 'Um...Uh, Ficia? Can you hear me?'

There was an almost instant response. 'Yes?'

'Ah...Is everything okay? You and Takamine-san have been gone for a bit...'

'Noa is on the phone, that's all. I'm just waiting in the lobby for Cathy – she's the last idol we're missing. I thought it would be polite.'

'Oh, okay! See you in a bit, then!' Melody made a few mental fumbles as she tried to drop the connection, before figuring out how it worked. Once she wasn't sending every thought to Ficia anymore, she looked around again, passing back a ribbon from Satomi for Kai to tie the braid up with. While experimenting with her hair-shifting – between the one braid, the two braids from last night's party, and not braided at all – she once again found Shiori watching her. When the woman realized Melody was looking at her in return, she quite quickly turned and started fiddling with the pile of napkins.

After setting her hair back to one-braid mode (an interesting note was that Satomi's ribbon would be in different places depending on her hairstyle), Melody thanked Kai and walked over to Shiori, letting Yasuha's Cleffa go on the way. Upon noticing her, Shiori had an almost resigned expression – but it soon shifted to one of uncertainty and concern. “Shiori-san? Is everything okay?”

The woman glanced down, back at her, then bit her lip. Melody waited as she apparently thought something over. “Ah...well...may I perhaps speak with you in private for a minute, Melodia-chan?”

“Uh, sure.” Still confused, Melody followed Shiori out of the room, and down the hall to a different one. Shiori closed the door behind them and started fiddling with the lower hem of her sweater, seemingly unsure how to start whatever topic she had in mind.

Eventually, she turned to Melody. “Um...Melodia-chan, there's something I'd like to ask you.”

Melody nodded. “It's fine, go for it.”

Shiori's gaze dropped slightly, looking less at Melody's face and more at her neck. “Do you, uh...remember what that pendant means?”

For a moment, Melody opened her mouth, ready to answer. Then she paused, thought about it, and closed it again, now regarding Shiori a bit differently.

She knows...?

Clearing her throat, Shiori fumbled for words. “I'm certain you've gotten some kind of help from your family, of course, and perhaps that Menta thing helps too, but I was worried—I mean, it's not exactly my business...or maybe it is...I just wanted to make sure...”

She sighed, giving up her verbal attempt. In new silence, she reached into the collar of her sweater and pulled out a pendant of her own – the Aqua pendant.

Thoughts of Mingzhu's theory ran through Melody's head for a second. “You're...wait, what? The last Aqua guardian was picked five years ago...I would've...we knew each other...I never saw...”

Shiori looked a mixture of embarrassed and relieved. “I, um, wasn't sure how to tell you...ahh, but this does make me feel better in a way. I thought I might have to try and convince you that you were a mermaid, and I wasn't looking forward to it.”
Considering that, Melody now understood Shiori's strange behavior. “Uh, so...huh. This is a little...I'm still coming to terms with a non-Princess being able to hold a Tear, to be honest.”

“A guardian is a...placeholder, you could say. We have the ability to carry the Tear and the heart to protect it, but not the proper energy to channel its power correctly. Especially us human ones...” Shiori smiled awkwardly. “Ah...I'm not sure if your predecessor would have mentioned this...there is, um...”

“A curse?” Melody guessed. Shiori nodded stiffly. “My mom sent me her whole take on it. I know what it's about.”

With a sigh, Shiori admitted, “It's reassuring to know a current princess is aware... The idea is rather terrifying. I was told of it when offered the Tear...myself and Amami-san agreed that helping protect such a power was worth the risk, though.”

Melody nodded. Paused. “Ama...Haruka?”

“The Pink guardian. I don't know any others.”

After a few seconds to process that, Melody decided that Haruka was a pretty good choice for a Tear guardian. “Huh. Uh, I know the Green and Indigo princesses...and Orange is missing? That leaves...Yellow.” Curious on that front, Melody tried to find the Tear connection. A slow pulsing, sort of like a heartbeat, and something wordlessly told her to close her eyes. Six lights appeared – pink, yellow, green, aqua, indigo...and pink. Huh.

Right, Mingzhu's paper had mentioned a Pink echo. And she probably couldn't sense her own... But yellow was there. She tried focusing on that. Was there some way to tell who held that Tear...?

After several minutes of directionless delving, Melody had to pull back. She could only get one thing – a feeling of I know I've met this guardian but can't find her face. Kind of annoying, really. And Dia was apparently in the mindset that Melody should figure it out on her own – learn the processes and all that.

With a sigh, she opened her eyes. “I know her, but can't remember her. Apparently.”

“Not fully reassuring, but still takes a little weight of my chest.” Shiori smiled, tucking her pendant back under her sweater. “Well, that's filled my worry quota for the day. Shall we get back the others?”

Melody shrugged. “Sounds good to me. I wanna try some of that chocolate cake Takamine-san brought.”

Cathy Graham had arrived in their absence. Melody was promptly buried in several hugs, and had an...interesting double-topic conversation with Cathy's Doduo. She was left very confused by the end of it.

As Ficia took the duty of informing the newcomers to the memory dilemma (Noa was still on her phone call, it seemed), Melody found herself smiling at the room full of Dia's old friends. Her old friends. There was so much Haert, so much happiness, it just made her feel wrapped in warmth, and like for this moment, nothing could go wrong. She felt safe.

While happily munching on some chocolate bread, Melody realized her phone was vibrating.
From ????: Forgive me for taking so long to contact you. Getting myself in order was a bit of a task. Is Megan adjusting well? Have you two met up yet? Feel free to ask me all your questions. I will answer whatever I can.

From ????: By the way, now that we're using a phone for contact instead of that chat program, would you mind setting my little contact image as some kind of rainbow? I do love them so.

From ????: Oh! And I suppose I should give you some sort of name to call me. Hm.

From ????: Is 'Al' okay?

Melody stared at the phone. She stared at it so long that one of the girls asked if everything was okay. Shrugging them off and smiling reassuringly, she typed out a response. Only vaguely did she notice Noa return.

To ????: You're the reality bender? The one who kidnapped Meg and her family? And you did it to her again?!

From ????: I am...one of them. My brother is the second. We panicked a little, you see, when their home was attacked. They had to be saved. You already had a history of Seer writing, and a good one at that, so we sent them to you.

To ????: But why separate her? What's going on?

From ????: It is hard to explain.

From ????: Her kingdom needs her. The rest of her family needs her. Once she connected to Megumi, she opened a way for us to bring her back.

From ????: When those mages had you connect to the “you” here, we saw our chance. We piggybacked her, so to speak, on their spell. You joined Melodia. She joined Megumi.

From ????: We are diligently working on a proper separation for the two even as you and I speak. Both will be able to return to their proper families.

Only sort-of-hearing Kaori as she made her big announcement, Melody asked one more question.

To ????: Are you saying this is Megan's home dimension?

From ????: Yes.

“Girls, I'm sorry, but I have to go. Something just came up.”

She distantly congratulated Kaori on her engagement, gathered her things and some snacks for Meg, and left.

To Megumi: You better be at the B-Pit. I have answers for you.

Contact Updated: “Megumi” renamed to “Meg”
Contact Added: Al

Chapter End Notes

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-
stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Would you please tell me what's going on? This Al person, your friend Megan? What's all that about?

Waiting impatiently for the light to change so she could cross the street, Melody shook her head. Even if Dia couldn't see it, the motion was something to do. When we get to her. Megumi's gonna want to hear it too.

Megumi has been missing for five years and I still can't figure out why she'd be able to call you but not me.

Well we'll probably find out, won't we? Melody didn't mean to snap, but she was just so on edge now. And it wasn't Megumi, it was Megan.

In the exact same body and situation as Megumi!

Look, maybe a ghost did it, okay?! I don't know! I'm sure they'll tell us!

Both girls were too cross with each other to speak the rest of the way.

From Meg: yuki spotted, preparing to engage. Meet u soon.
From Meg: will kick cat pope's ass if possible
From Meg: because it turns out I have a bey

To Meg: good lu

Message Error. Tap to resend.

Melody dropped her phone as she slammed into someone. She stumbled backwards, only keeping her footing thanks to Dia's muscle memory. “Oh gosh, sorry! I wasn't looking-”

Her apology cut off as she realized who she'd run into. “K-Kyoya!”

Raising his eyebrow slightly, he questioned – with very little actual curiosity in his tone - “What's got you in such a hurry?”

“Uh-” Melody took her phone as her Characters flew it back up to her. “Something, uh...I-I'm going to meet Megumi! She's, um, coming in with a friend, and they're gonna head to the B-Pit.”

It was odd to see such conflicting emotions in Kyoya of all people. A hint of relief, a touch of disgust, a lot of anger. “A friend, huh?”

“I don't know the whole story, but I'm sure we'll get it.” Melody briefly ran through what she could remember of the first...no, second episode. In the meantime, Kyoya resumed walking.

Ah! It's Kyoya that finds Yuki! Melody hurried after him, realizing this was a lucky break. Even if he wasn't in the mood to talk, he'd likely come across Yuki and Johannes just like he had in the show. Meg would be with them.

They soon went up a hill of stairs, and she politely said nothing as Kyoya monologued to himself
about Leone being reborn. Actually, she wasn't sure he'd even noticed her. Best to pretend she never saw or heard any of this.

It was...harder to pretend she didn't see his X'd Chara-Egg float out of his hood. Damn it, she'd have to speak up. "Kyoya?"

He whirled around, probably about to snap at her, but stopped as he noticed the same thing. Hope shivered, new to the feeling of a corrupted Egg. Annie, however, was eyeing it with suspicion.

The Egg began to speak. Melody couldn't hear the words themselves, but she could see...vibrations, for lack of a better explanation, in its corrupted energy. The expression Kyoya wore was another sign – he was clearly hearing something she wasn't. She stepped back a bit, nodding for her Characters to do the same, to give him a moment of privacy.

"You're wrong." Kyoya's voice was harsh, directed at the Egg. "This power will enable me to fulfill any dream!"

A pause. Melody figured the corrupted Egg was providing a counter argument. "I will defeat Gingka!" Kyoya insisted when the new set of vibrations ceased. "I will defeat him, and nothing is going to stop me! Once I've achieved that, nothing will stand in the way of finding them!"

Finding them? Finding whom? Only hearing one side, Melody was at a loss.

She watched the vibrations go off once more, and this time, Kyoya just seemed to stop. All of his anger, all of his pride, gone. Shock and fear were now all that was present, and seeing that on Kyoya Tategami scared her.

Repeat after me. Fast. Dia's voice, quiet but firm, reappeared in her mind. Along with them, a wordless request. Melody glanced at her Characters, met Hope's eyes, and nodded.

The Character straightened, and nodded back without question. Her eyes lit up, and a feeling of passion and strength washed over her Bearer.

Melody listened to Dia's words and relayed each one to the boy before her. "Whatever it's telling you, Kyoya, I can promise that it's nothing Kimiko or Kakeru would agree with."

Kyoya froze. She had never seen the boy so still. It was...unnerving.

"Whatever that corrupted egg is saying, it's lying. It wants to break you down and control you, it wants to twist your mind until you can't remember what you really want. Stop being such a wet blanket and tell it! Tell it what you want, not what it says you want! Face up to it and tell it that it's wrong!"

She could feel the gross, cold sense of the egg's corruption, still trying to feed off him. She didn't follow what Dia was telling her to say, but it was definitely doing something, because Kyoya straightened. Kyoya straightened, found his glare and directed it at the egg, and clenched his fists. His Haert was practically ablaze with anger, but also raw determination, and Melody took a step back as he addressed the issue at hand as only Kyoya Tategami could: With a lot of yelling, a lot of flying fists, and a lot of bottled up rage. Honestly, she couldn't keep up, and more honestly, she didn't want to. This was Kyoya's moment. She'd given him the hammer, and now he was bashing away with it. When he was done, she'd be there for him.

And when he was done, his egg lit up. The X's lifted, the darkness cleared, and it floated to a rest in his palm, which he'd held out without much forethought.
Melody made a mental note to swear her Characters to secrecy. No, they were definitely not seeing a tear roll down Kyoya Tategami's face, that was ridiculous.

She set her box down, and took her bag off as well. Partly to comfort him and partly to provide him with a way to hide the warring emotions on his face, she walked over and hugged him tightly.

Dia gave her another suggestion. Still holding Kyoya close, Melody opened herself to the song offered. Soft, slow, holding a calm even though this was a song Melody knew was much faster and upbeat. It didn't matter. What it was 'supposed' to be didn't matter. Melody took the song she was given, allowed the words to come to her, and sang – for Kyoya, for his Character, and for all the pain and suffering he'd screamed out.

"Ikiterukagiri ishikoro darakedemo
Ookinakoede ganbare! Ganbare!
Tomarukotononai uchirano jinsei
Dakara owaranai utawo utaou"

"Wagamichiwo tsukisusume
Detaramena KYARAdemoi
Rokudenashidemo aishtierunda my daarin"

"Bakayaro! Honto no jibun
Itaikoto itteyare
Hamidashitekundayo chikazuitekundayo yumeni
Konyaro! Honto no jibun
Detekoiyo kakuretenaide oh yeah imasugu"

Melodia held her adoptive brother and promised him in a comforting whisper, “This never happened.”

“You and that damn song,” he grumbled, barely audible after all his shouting.

When the memory of the first and last time she'd sung that song was unlocked, Melody understood. When he'd needed advice on what to do – shortly after the disappearance of his younger brother, Kakeru. Before that, his baby sister, Kimiko. Between them, the accident that had caused his scars. And one of her own, apparently, on the back of her leg.

Kyoya's childhood had many unpleasant memories. She couldn't undo them, and she couldn't heal all of them, but she would help where she could. That was what a sister did.

It was also her duty, as his sister, to look away while he totally didn't wipe away the tears that were most certainly not on his face. To make sure her Characters understood – they'd seen nothing. Nothing had happened. Annie caught on without a problem, but it took a few tries for Hope to catch on.

Kyoya hid his newly purified Chara-Egg back in his hood, Melody helping him adjust it to hide the item from view. When Melody's box and all its 'insides' were back in her grip, they tracked down a nearby water fountain.

As they resumed their walk, she heard his quiet mumble: “Thank you.”

She smiled and said nothing. They walked for a bit, just silently enjoying each other's company. She knew that's how he preferred it, and it was fine by her.

She'd been able to help him. That was what mattered to her right now.
It was somewhere between five and ten minutes later that the approaching sounds of a bey battle reached their ears. Both bladers, and Characters, turned to see the source – Melody gave a sharp inhale of excitement. “There she is!”

“What?” Kyoya saw the young boy in glasses, and the taller guy that seemed to be chasing him – the battle was certainly one sided. “You're going blind, there’s no ‘she’—hey!”

Before he could stop her, Melody had shoved her storage box of gifts into his arms, and was wrestling out her new bey and launcher. At the same time, the boy with glasses was shoved back by the force of his opponent's attack, and a girl with green hair suddenly ran into view, barely catching him. “Yuki!”

“Hang on!” Melody called, letting Dia's battle instincts take over as she locked Spiral Leone in. The bey went flying with incredible force, rushing its way into the battle. Kyoya now saw that there had been three beys – the two belonging to the guys, and one belonging to the girl with green hair.

“Stop being such a bully, you dumb cat pope!” she was shouting. “The battle's over, cut it out!”

The subject of her ire, the taller boy with an awful slouch, gave a sort of meowing sound. “I have no personal grudge against you, you know, it's my job. Don't think badly of me. Lynx!”

His golden bey shot towards the boy's blue one, but the girls' intercepted. The fact that he still pushed them back was proof of his power, Melody wouldn't deny that.

“It's three against one.” She glared at the taller boy. “You better back off before you get hurt, you hear me?”

“You've already lost anyway!” the other girl shouted with a sneer. “Yuki's message will get delivered, one way or another! All three of us know it! There's no way you can stop it, so just pack up and go home! Pisces!”

The girl's bey managed an attack that pushed his Lynx back, then was surrounded by watery energy. Still holding Yuki, she called to it, “Special move! Royal Wave!”

The energy around Pisces picked up, producing a tidal wave that slammed into the golden Lynx. Dia was cheering inside – Megumi's special move, one she hadn't seen in five years, was now stronger than ever. Lynx was shoved back, only just holding steady; its blader let out a growl of frustration.

A voice cut through the air, “What's going on here?!?” Melody whirled around, and was never happier to see Gingka and his friends. (On the other hand, she realized Kyoya was now nowhere to be seen. It wasn't too surprising; at least he'd been kind enough to leave her box.)

Yuki matched her sentiments. “Is – Is it really you?!”

“Cat pope here doesn't know when it's an unfair fight!” Megumi – or, as Melody knew, Megan – informed the new arrivals. “He's been chasing us since the harbor!”

‘Cat Pope’ (or Johannes, as his name actually was) let out a short gasp of realization. “It's you? You're Gingka?”

At the confirmation of his belief, Yuki beamed. “I knew you were Gingka-san!” With the battle at a pause, Melody looked over in time to see his shock at the sight of Pegasus, held in Gingka's hand.
in case of a need for him to intervene. “What a great bey that is!”

Johannes reached out to catch his bey in a hissing recall. “This has become too annoying!” he declared, stepping back. With a final, “Adios!” (he didn't even say it right) he jumped, and was suddenly gone. Seeing it in person, Melody could only call it 'teleportation'.

“He disappeared!” Kenta exclaimed.

“And good riddance!” Megan scoffed, calling her own bey back. Melody did the same, turning back only to watch the exhausted Yuki pass out in her friend's arms. “Ah, Yuki!” Megan shifted her grip on him, and with Benkei's help, managed to stand while still supporting the fallen blader.

Melody hurried to scoop up his bey for him; in the process of putting her own away, she noticed that her bey's pouch had at some point been stitched onto the side of her bag. In the rush to help, she hadn't realized. Think about it later. “Madoka, let's take him to the B-Pit! He's come a long way to see Gingka.”

Blinking, Gingka pointed at himself in confusion. “Huh? Me?”

“Put your ego on pause and get walking!” Megan complained, making sure that Benkei was holding Yuki in a way that wouldn't hurt him. “Yuki and I came with an important message. But he knows the details more than I do, and not only is he passed out thanks to the crummy cat pope, but he's injured too!”

Melody grabbed up her box, already leading the way. “C'mon, let's get going! Madoka, call Gingka's dad too, he should hear what Yuki has to say!”

With confusion and concern, the group of bladers made their way to the B-Pit as fast as they could. All conversation waited – while Yuki's injuries weren't serious, they still had to be treated. Megan's, too, no matter how much she insisted she was fine.

When they reached the B-Pit, Madoka unlocked the back door and let everyone in. Yuki was herded into the spare bedroom; Megan stayed with Melody in the workshop, and promptly had her bruises and scrapes washed off by her friend.

“That guy was so annoying,” Megan complained. “No matter how hard I tried to lead him off, he'd always go after Yuki! I don't know if it's because Yuki was the 'target' or just because he was the weaker opponent, but – ghouls, I'm boiling!”

Flicking her forehead, Melody reminded her, “What matters is that Yuki made it, even with our...un-canon help.” Glancing back towards the bedroom door to make sure it was closed, she then turned matters to Megan's situation. Not entirely sure how to start, she just decided on a blunt, “Meg, it's here. The rainbow.”

There was a spark of annoyance her friend's eyes. “What.”

“It's...It's on Dia's phone now, calls themselves 'Al' and says they're one of two. And they were the ones that brought you here. Piggybacked you on my arrival.”

Anger and confusion burned. “Are you serious? Why?! Why would they – didn't they ruin my life enough already?!”

Melody grabbed her hand, trying to calm her down. “It's not what you think! Listen, both of you! You two need to stay as separate as possible until they can do it right.”
“Why? What the hell is going on?!"

Having already been grabbing Dia's phone at Melody's earlier instructions, Annie and Hope held it out, the messages with 'Al' once again opened. Though neither side of Meg would be able to see the Characters, the floating phone was obvious enough, and her eyes scanned over the messages onscreen – the end of the conversation.

The words she saw had an immediate effect. She froze, wide eyed, her anger replaced by disbelief. “My...my home? This is-?”

Melody cautiously released her, then handed her the phone and let her read the entire conversation. She stayed quiet through it, waiting until Megan looked up at her, tears in her eyes.

“I don't know what all this means,” she admitted, “but they say we can ask questions. So go ahead and ask whatever you want.”

Megan's gaze slipped between the phone and Melody a few times, before she shut her eyes. “I...I need to be alone,” she requested quietly. As Melody nodded, Megan stood, and headed up the stairs.

Sitting on the couch, Melody let out a long sigh and flopped over. Annie, ever the worrier, spoke up after a short silence. "What exactly is...going on with her? Can you tell us?"

I'm still wondering that myself, Dia reminded her.

Melody groaned. It still didn't feel right to explain without Megan there with her, but she knew that Megan was going to need time. Her Characters, and Dia, and Margret too – they all had questions.

One way or another, this was something that would be brought up more than once. Not saying anything would only result in confusion and chaos.

Quietly, reluctantly, while everyone else was still distracted by taking care of Yuki, Melody began the story.

“It started last February. An unfamiliar chat program appeared on my computer screen, with one message. 'At the cost of changing your world, would you help someone?'. I was so freaked out, I couldn't move. And...more and more messages kept coming in, explaining. A family's home was attacked, and they were in danger. They had nowhere to go, at least not in...not in their world. This person was asking if I would help this family adjust to a temporary life in...a new dimension. Mine.

"...I thought I was going crazy, or...dreaming. But they kept asking. 'Will you be their bridge?', and 'Will you be their hope?'. I-I didn't know what to do. I mean, to me, other dimensions were just theories, myths! When I finally broke down and answered, I just asked, 'How am I supposed to believe this?'.”

Melody closed her eyes, still remembering how everything she'd known had changed that day.

“‘This other person responded, 'If you turn around, you will see a small, harmless example of my abilities'. And when I turned around, the messy bookshelves we'd never been able to get cleaned and sorted were organized like we'd always put off doing. The cobwebs in the corners were gone. The broken old armchair covered in old school stuff was fixed up and didn't have a single stain.

“I looked back at the screen. 'I can reorder whatever is necessary. I can give them a place to stay. But it will do no good if they do not have someone to guide them.' I realized some higher being was asking me for help. And I said yes.” Melody buried her face in her hands, still unable to
completely wrap her head around what had happened. “I said yes, as long as no one in my world got hurt. They promised to follow that wish.

“Over the next few days, I noticed changes. My neighbor's messy yard was cleaner every time I looked. We heard she was moving. We said goodbye, and...a couple days after that, her house was replaced with one I'd never seen before. Bigger, clean, new, a treehouse in the backyard. Two cars. And no one in my family seemed to notice the difference. I went to check my computer, and an explanation was waiting for me.

“They had changed the...reality of that house. Once the neighbor that lived there was on her way to a new home with as little trouble as possible, they rewrote the structure of that house and all records of it. All memories of it, except mine. I was the 'bridge'. I had to know. I had to remember. And apparently, I had to go in my backyard and meet the family I had promised to help.”

Shaking her head, Melody paused to take a few breaths. She'd never told anyone about this – everyone would have thought she was crazy, after all. Hell, if someone had told her they were going through this, she would've thought the same about them. And even now that she was in another dimension - universe - herself, she still felt it sounded crazy. All of this did.

But even if it was crazy, it didn't make it any less real. That was probably the scariest part.

“I met Megan and her family that day. Her, her twin, their two sisters, their brother, sister-in-law, niece and nephew, and mother. A royal family of a kingdom that didn't exist in my world. They knew even less than I did, and they never got replies when they tried to use the chat program. They knew their kingdom was attacked, and their adviser had started leading them to safety, and suddenly a rainbow portal swallowed them up and put them in a world full of crystals. They were given new clothes, told to wait. Then they were sent to my world.

“We were never given an explanation for the attack, or why they needed to escape, or when they could go back home. Over the next few months, their brother and his wife and kids were given their own house in another neighborhood, but still close by. Their mother got a job. When fall came, the oldest sister somehow made it to a college, and the other three started homeschooling with me.

“And that became our lives, until Margret and her friends brought me here. And the... reality benders piggybacked Megan on the spell to follow me.”

For a few minutes, none of them spoke. Melody didn't know what Dia was thinking, but personally...she just felt overwhelmed right now.

There was Easter, the pain they'd caused Ikuto and countless children in their search for the Embryo. Her father and sister, possessed and corrupted. A curse on the holders of Pearl Tears. The duties of the legendary bladers, the upcoming fight against Nemesis...

And now, her promise to get Megan and her family home. When she thought about all of it together, it just seemed like so much. Too much.

Dia reached out to her, gently. *Each fight goes a step at a time,* she advised. *Easter? We've already gotten Ikuto away. Dad and Shelly? We're waiting for information. The curse? It's worrying, but there's nothing we can actively do. This blader stuff? Well, it works out, doesn't it? I know it seems like a lot, but our progress is steady. And as for...all of this, regarding Megan...I know that will work out, too. But maybe don't think of that one as your fight alone. Megan has to find her way too, right? This is her battle, most of all. And if she's anything like Megumi, she'll make it through.*
I promised. I promised to help her.

Think about it. They were able to bring her back here because of your connection to Margret's world, and the magic they used to bring you here. That's a pretty huge step in the right direction, even indirectly.

But...I just-

You're making this all out to be a lot more complicated than it really is. You need to step back and stop thinking about it all for a minute.

How can you say that?!

Take out the music disc, Melody.

But-

Melody was unceremoniously shoved out of control, and Dia fumbled Mingzhu's music disc out of their bag. She held a finger against the blue spot for a few seconds, which momentarily lit up.

Dia released control back to her. Though there were no speakers on the disc, a gentle song was released from it, quiet and peaceful and putting her frazzled mind to a rest it sorely needed. The thoughts of “What do I do?” had been so overwhelming, but they were now buried in the calm produced by whatever magic this disc used.

The music's power washed over her so completely that she barely noticed people passing through the room. Identifying them was impossible. This happened a few times, she knew that much, but the music drew her in and just...settled her. All her worries and fears, for now they were put aside, and she was content.

Melody found herself jolting awake when the disc's music was interrupted by something pop-genre-sounding. Blearily, she tried to find the source, and wake up at the same time. She hadn't meant to fall asleep at all...

The source turned out to be her phone, ringing. (Huh, Megan must have finished up and returned it.)

Call From: ???

Ugh. She reluctantly turned the disc off and, yawning, answered the phone. “Hello?”

“Hey! Countdown's gonna start in a minute!” It was...Masamune, confusingly. What? She had his number. She'd seen it earlier.

Rubbing her forehead, she tried to use her brain and think. “Mkay. Why aren't you using your phone? Who's number is this?”

An awkward laugh. “I, uh, dropped it down the stairs earlier...I'm borrowing Kayla's. Uh, that's Zeo's little sister!”

A note to consider for later. “You're an idiot.” She stifled a yawn, then pulled the phone away to find the video button. Once that was pressed, Masamune's grinning face appeared on screen.

Actually, there were two faces. There was Masamune, and there was a Character. She blinked,
confused. “Uh...remind me who this is?”

Luckily understanding, the Character waved. “Hi Melodia! I'm Uno, Masamune's Character! Is Annie awake?”

Annie floated over, trailed by a curious Hope. “Hi, Uno.”

“Hi!!” Hope's waving was almost twice as fast as his.

“Whoa!” Masamune's face got closer to the screen, trying to get a better look. “Who's that?”

“I'm Hope, Mel's new Guardian Character!” she exclaimed, beaming. “Who're you?”

Before Masamune could answer, Toby's voice came from the background. “It's about to start, get over here!”

The video was jostled as Masamune leaped over and onto a couch, joining Zeo, Toby, and a girl who had to be Kayla. Everyone said a quick hello – Zeo looked okay, that was great to see – before rushing into the countdown. Melody didn't count with them (it felt a little awkward to do that when she wasn't in the same room, and people were right over there down the hall), but Hope, who didn't know what was going on, absolutely did. Annie punched the air with each number, but didn't vocalize until the phone erupted with a cry of, “Happy New Year!!”

“Yay! New year!” Hope was still clueless, but it didn't stop her from enjoying herself.

When things had quieted down a bit, Melody figured she'd use this chance to break the news. “Hey, um...guys? I have a surprise for you.”

All four tried to get their faces onscreen, with Uno 'blocking' Zeo. “What is it?” asked probably-Kayla, who seemed to be maybe a couple years younger than them.

“Well, I'm...coming back!” Melody tried to smile. “After I finish some things up over here, I'll be doing a teleport thing with a mage friend and we'll be at the American WBBA!”

Zeo's head almost hit the screen as he tried to shove everyone else out of the way. “Are you serious?! That's awesome!”

“How was meeting your cousin?” Kayla pressed, elbowing her brother to the side. “Did you get to see a lot of your friends?”

Melody chuckled. “I met him, and it was great. I got to go to a party with my old idol co-workers, too. Right now I'm at the B-Pit, waiting for...hey!”

Without warning, the phone was taken from her. She scrambled around in her seat to find the culprit, who was suddenly screaming, “I'm not dead you guys there was a ghost and things went bad and I'm so sorry!!”

Melody blinked, while chaos exploded on the other end of the call. Meg...well, she didn't know who was in control, so Meg would work, was profusely apologizing to the phone. Presumably this was trying to make up for the whole 'missing for five years' thing.

As Meg stole her phone once again, Melody took a moment to stand up and stretch. She wandered over to the spare bedroom, and found everyone sitting in there, trying to pass the time with books or bey cleaning.
Madoka perked up when she noticed her. “Oh, you're awake!”

“Uh...sorry, I didn't mean to pass out like that.” Melody gave an apologetic smile, then glanced over at Yuki. “How's he doing?”

“Still out cold,” Benkei sighed.

Kenta set down the pieces of Sagitarrio. “Hey, um...aren't you Melodia? The sister of Lance from the Voltron Force? What're you doing here in Japan?”

Running through a few possible answers, Melody went with, “I've got a cousin here, and also a lot of friends.”

Standing up, Madoka walked over, trying and somewhat failing to not look concerned. “How's your...head?”

Melody smiled and assured her, “Better. Not perfect, but better. Um...after this kid wakes up, I'll be getting ready to head back to New York, okay?”

“New York?” Gingka repeated, before his eyes lit up in recognition. “Hey, wait a minute! I remember you from pictures in the Dungeon Gym!”

Madoka giggled, turning back around. “That's right! Melodia is a member there, she grew up with Masamune, Zeo, and Toby!”

“No way!”

“Are you two friends?” Kenta asked, noting the closeness of the two girls.

“Sister-in-laws, actually.” Madoka smiled sadly. “Her brother and my sister were married. I've known Melodia for a long time.” She glanced back at the taller girl. “You be safe, okay? I don't wanna hear that you got into trouble just after going back there!”

“Yes, Mom,” Melody monotoned, earning a short growl and a glare that didn't quite hide Madoka's smile. She grinned, then darted away when Madoka tried to kick at her. “Eep!”

Annie giggled. “We'll be looking out for her, Madoka, don't worry!”

Just subtly enough for the others not to notice, Madoka nodded in thanks. She gave a confused look in Hope's direction, but couldn't ask without trying to explain Characters to everyone else. Crystal took this as her cue to step in, and introductions between the Characters were swiftly made, letting Madoka know who the new girl was.

Meg popped her head into the doorway. “Melodia? I broke the friends. I'm sorry.”

With a sigh, Melody turned back to the situation at hand. “Let me know when he wakes up,” she told Madoka, before rejoining Meg in the workshop.

Meg offered the phone to her, explaining sheepishly, “I scared them so bad I think someone threw the phone, and the call dropped.”

Another sigh. Melody took the phone back. “First off, who am I speaking to?”

“Oh, Megumi. The other Meg's been calling me 'Gummy', if you wanna...I mean, I don't care.” She shrugged. “She's uhh...processing. I didn't really see a lot of that text talk, but I do think her plan is to stay with this group. Something about getting to Europe.”
“Melody nodded, understanding. “That's where she's from. She'll probably use their visit to try and find her kingdom.”

“Right, right...” 'Gummy' shuffled her feet a bit. “Um...I saw Kyoya earlier? How...How is he?”

“Grumpy. Angry.” Melody frowned. “He'll come around. I...think suddenly seeing you, even if he was expecting it, is making him...think a bit.”

“...And Dia?” Gummy's voice was incredibly quiet. “Is she...is she mad at me?”

Without a word, Melody offered control to Dia, who took it in an instant. Melody settled into the binocular-sight while Dia leaned forward and pulled Gummy into a tight hug. The other girl tensed for a moment, before shaking, and starting to cry. “I'm so sorry, Dia...I didn't mean to...”

All Dia asked was, “What happened?”

“I-I don't know really know. One day I met this Spiritomb, and we were talking, and...and suddenly every time I tried to call someone, or text them, I froze up.” Gummy sniffled. “I guess I was cursed? I tried everything to lift it, but nothing worked. A-And then...yesterday, it...Megan was able to open my mom's contact page. And suddenly I could call her...”

She tightened her hold on Dia, promising tearfully, “I didn't want to disappear like that. I really didn't...”

Melody could feel all of Dia's frustration towards her missing friend evaporated. The tears pricking at Dia's eyes affected her, too, and she felt the warmth from their hug. “I believe you,” Dia whispered. “I'm just so happy you're okay.”

Though they hugged for a while, it was Annie who broke it up, albeit reluctantly. “Dia? Since she's here, maybe we should tell her about your mom's theory...”

Dia slowly pulled away, and both girls took the tissues that Hope offered them. Gummy smiled a bit as she wiped her face. “You've got little spirits looking out for you, huh? Megan could see them...” She giggled. “It really excited her. She thought she'd lost the ability a long time ago...to see spirits...”

*It's news to me,* Melody assured her confused mind-partner.

Wiping her own eyes, Dia just shrugged. “They're really sweet.” Then, with a sigh, she led Gummy over to the table, and the bag. “Speaking of curses...my mom thinks the mermaid princesses might be under one.”

She took out the envelope, sliding the paper out and handing it to Gummy. As the girl read it, Dia rested a hand against her head, trying to settle all her emotions much like Melody had been struggling with before.

They stood in silence as Gummy read. Both Mels could remember most of the contents, and kept running through it in their mind/s. When Gummy finally lifted her head, shock all over her face, the only thing she said was, “Kimiko.”

Dia blinked, then looked at her. “Um...what?”

“Kimiko,” Gummy repeated more forcefully. “She disappeared in an orange light, didn't she? Five years ago? As in the same year the Orange guardian went missing?”
Both Mels processed this.

Both Mels agreed, “Damn it.”

Dia started thinking. “We know the general time frame of when Kimiko went missing...if we ask one of the new guardians when they received their Pearl Tear...and if the dates are close together...”

“Don't just stand there, do it!”

**To Shiori: This is really important. What time of year were you chosen to be a guardian?**

A few minutes ticked by, both princesses waiting worriedly.

**From Shiori: Just before the start of summer. Why?**

Dia closed her eyes, showing the messages to Gummy. “It matches up.”

**To Shiori: I just met with the Green princess, and I think we have a theory on who the last Orange guardian was/is. If anything comes of this I'll let you know.**

**From Shiori: Good luck, Melodia-san.**

Swallowing, Dia set her phone on the table. “Kimiko might be...damn it, if Kakeru was here we could ask if she had a pendant before she disappeared!”

Gummy looked almost distraught. “Right...he disappeared a few weeks later...I couldn't read the messages Kyoya sent until yesterday, but he did try to tell me.” She put her head in her hands. “And I stopped contacting him...ghouls, he must've thought I vanished, too...”

**Dia? I don't mean to interrupt, but...I still don't know who those people are.**

Dia grimaced. *Ugh, sorry...they're Kyoya's younger siblings. And mine, from an adoptive standpoint.*

...**Well, damn.** Melody didn't really know what else to say to that. Both his siblings missing, followed by Megumi...jeez.

**Yeah.** Dia let out a sigh. *This is...making me all the more eager to find those missing memories. They might be wherever I went.*

**Then go look. I'll...I'll try not to let things get to me.**

...**Are you sure?**

**I already decided to stay. I oughta be able to earn my keep.**

Dia glanced at Gummy for a brief moment. ...**Just give me a few more minutes with Megumi.**

Melody could understand that. She 'closed' the binocular sight, and let Dia have some time with her newly returned friend. She knew that they talked for a while, and then she felt the Pearl Tear light up. Power flowed through them, and though she respected Dia's privacy and didn't re-open her sight, she could hear the song.

Melodia and Megumi sounded beautiful together.
"Yume no tobira zutto sagashite tsuzuketa
Kimi to boku to no tsunagari o sagashite"

"Yes! Jibun o shinjite minna o shinjite
Ashita ga matterun dayo ikanakucha"

"Yes! Yokan no hoshitachi mune ni fuite kita
Kagayake... mayoinagara tachiagaru yo"

"Tsukareta toki ni boku o hagemasu kimi no egao wa saikou
Soshite suksu no zu susumun da ne
Tokimeki e no kagi wa koko ni aru sa"

"Yume no tobira daremo ga sagashiteru yo
Deai no imi o mitsuketa to negatteru
Yume no tobira zutto sagashi tsuzukete
Kimi to boku to de tabidatta ano kisetsu
Seishun no Puroroogu"

Chapter End Notes

Songs: "Honto No Jibun" from Shugo Chara - Japanese
"Yume no Tobira" from Love Live - Japanese

Art:
Honto No Jibun: http://fav.me/dc6gekm
Yume no Tobira: http://fav.me/dcga1xd

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It started with an innocent question. Madoka had just wanted to know if she'd looked at her presents yet. Melody, back in control, had admitted she hadn't. Since they were still waiting for Yuki to wake up, she decided to open at least one. Madoka had suggested Kotone's, wrapped in magenta paper with Mithorian symbols.

The box was small, maybe less than half the size of a clothing box. Tearing off the paper – which was a wonderful feeling to add to her de-stressing – revealed it was plain and white, two pieces. Melody removed the lid, pushed aside the tissue paper, and pulled out a black belt with a gold buckle. Knowing that Madoka and Kotone were alien royalty and would absolutely have access to real gold, Melody had no idea if it was or not and made a mental note to ask that in her return text. (Or not, maybe – she might freak out if it was.)

Regardless of the material the buckle – well, more of a plaque? What did you call a slab of metal that hooked the ends of a belt together? - was made out of, what concerned her more was the symbol on it. Two curved lines, like an open-topped heart, with three short straight lines in the middle that kind of made it look like a peace sign. Memories indicated it was, in fact, the symbol of peace on Mithoria.

While Melody was looking at the belt, Annie spotted a letter that had also been in the box. Being careful not to read it, she handed it to Melody.

Melody wished the letter's curled, shaky handwriting and the words it formed didn't hurt so much.

*Dear Melodia,*

*If you're reading this, I guess that means they weren't able to pull out the illness and I've passed away. I'm so sorry. You're the greatest little sister I could ask for barring my own, and I hate to make you sad in such a way.*

*This belt has a special meaning to me. My very favorite aunt gave this to me when I turned sixteen. I wore it so much that we had to ask a mage to cast mending and keeping enchantments on it so that it would stay in one piece.*

*We may not be related by blood as my aunt and I were, but I still treasure you as part of my closest family. I want to give this belt to you, so that you can carry our bond with you even after I've joined my mother in the spiritual plane.*

*I love you, little compassionate one. And I shall continue so forever.*

*With love stronger than a single planet could contain,*

*Chiasa McClain*

Madoka's oldest sister. Her sister-in-law. Aniko's wife. Taken by a corrupted Fysika-induced illness two years ago, breaking Melodia down into a shivering, sobbing mess. A woman in a red dress had done something – a spell, maybe – that made her emotions numb for a time. They hadn't been able to undo it, but it had worn off on its own a few days later. Something exploded...she'd been taken to the Beylin Fist to recover (mentally...she hadn't been injured, right?) in a safe environment.

Chiasa had meant a lot to all of them. She was one of the few people that could make Aniko smile,
could pick up a recipe or song as quick as their mother, and was the one to teach Melodia her
language. She'd taught Melodia, along with Madoka, how to perform a basic check on a beyblade,
and how to sneak food out of a ballroom when you didn't have a purse.

Melodia missed her.

Melodia cried and didn't argue when Gummy sat next to her on the couch, or when Madoka let out
a Sylveon and set it on her lap. The letter clutched to her chest along with Chiasa's belt, she felt the
soothing energies of everyone with her, and let the painful flood of memories settle where they
belonged. Eventually, she managed to pull herself together, though it still hurt.

After gently removing the Sylveon from her lap, Melodia stood and put on the belt that Chiasa had
left for her. She took a long, shaky breath, and when Madoka asked if she was alright, she nodded
and pulled her into a hug.

“Tell Kotone thank you,” she whispered.

“I will,” Madoka promised.

There was one more thing Melody wanted to take care of today.

With Dia's encouragement, she stepped outside and called their mother.

When the line clicked, and Mingzhu said excitedly, “Hello?” she felt a shiver of warmth and love
run through her.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Xiaolian, hello! Are you doing well? How's your memory?”

“It's going alright. Uh, Megumi's back! There was something involving a Spiritomb and it might've
cursed her, but she was able to break it yesterday.”

“Oh that's wonderful! I'm so thrilled to hear that, tell her we missed her!”

Melody relayed the message, which made Gummy practically glow with joy. “She missed you
too.” Now the hard part. “Mom, there's...something I remembered...that I need to tell you. I made a
promise not to, but at this point...you need to know.”

Hearing her daughter's serious tone, Mingzhu quieted. “What is it, Xiaolian?”

A pause, to gather her courage and find the right words. “Um...under circumstances she is
apparently under vow to keep secret...a girl I know...became the Indigo princess. For those same
unknown reasons, she asked me not to tell anyone. But after hearing what happened to Aunt Jiao, it
felt wrong to keep lying to you.”

There was silence at first. Melody worriedly guessed that Mingzhu was processing or trying to
figure out how to respond. While she didn't know what Alyssin's deal was, or why she'd wanted to
keep her title a secret from a past princess, she still felt this was the right choice.

After clearing her throat, Mingzhu spoke. “You are missing memories and it would be unfair for
me to be angry with you for something you can't remember. I...I'm still having trouble
understanding, though. The Indigo princess is someone you know?”
“I don’t know much about her right now past that, but...yes.”

“...Xiaolian. Melodia. I love you very, very much, but I am incredibly upset that you would keep this from me.”

Melody felt herself shrink a little. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“I want you to tell this girl that I am also very upset with her, and that she should pull her act together if she’s going to continue carrying this title.”

“I will.” She heard Mingzhu take a slow breath, and tried to cheer her up a bit. “On a brighter note, I met the Aqua guardian and also know who the Pink guardian is. They’re idol friends. Definitely in good hands.”

A tired chuckle came from Mingzhu. “So we are only missing the pink echo, and the Orange. I...just hope it stays that way.”

“Me too...um, speaking of, did I ever mention who the Yellow guardian was? I know I know her, but I can’t get further than that.”

There was a short silence as Mingzhu thought, and Melody absently kicked at the ground while she waited.

“Ah, yes! Now I remember. It was a girl you met after you came back from the Beylin Fist. I don’t remember her name, but you sent me a photo. Her hair was blond in the front, black behind. You should have her in your phone contacts, I think.”

That sounded suspiciously like a girl from Margret's world...one who she'd already found had an alternate version here. “Abigail...?”

“Maybe? That does sound familiar.”

If it was Abigail, Melody suddenly understood the girl's panic and anger at Dia dropping contact. “Oh...um...Mom, I should...she's been trying to reach me and I wasn't...”

“Say no more. Contact your fellow Tear holder, I can wait. And...thank you, Xiaolian, for telling me about Jiao's Tear. It means a lot to me.”

Melody smiled. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, Xiaolian.”

To Abigail: Do the words “Pearl Tear” mean anything to you? Please be aware that for the past week I’ve had memory problems and I’m genuinely trying to put things together.

From Abigail: [image sent]
From Abigail: u mean this
From Abigail: im so angry. Im so pissed at u. u just DROP CONTACT for a week without warning and suddenly anwer me like snothing's wrong. What “memory problems” are we talking about here because unless it's full blown amnesia I will not be satisfied.

To Abigail: You're not far off. I have some memories from America, some memories from Japan, but only a few concrete things. I actually have no idea who you are, but I was talking
to my mom and she mentioned your hair. I remembered it from your contact picture.

From Abigail: I
From Abigail: where are you where the fuck are you right now im coming over there right now
From Abigail: this is not ok are you ok what the hell
From Abigail: are you safe are you with friends do you have a plan????

To Abigail: I'm safe. I'm with my sister-in-law. Telling you where I am would be pointless because I'm going to New York tonight. At this point, there's a lot going on and I might forget to talk to people, so I can't promise I'll stay in touch.

From Abigail: I
From Abigail: I dont know how to respond to this
From Abigail: im angry and upset and freaked out and I just want to make sure youre ok
From Abigail: are you ok. Do you need help. Do you need me to stay with you for a while.

To Abigail: I'm okay. I have friends helping me out. I don't want to pull you away from your life, I'll be fine.
To Abigail: ...i can send you the numbers for the Aqua and Pink guardians, if you want. They turned out to be friends of mine. Maybe you three can meet up.

From Abigail: id like that
From Abigail: please stay safe

To Abigail: I will.
To Abigail: [Shiori contact information sent]
To Abigail: [Haruka contact information sent]

To Shiori; Haruka: sent the Yellow guardian your numbers. I think you should all get together, maybe compare notes. Knowing who everyone is and where they are might be something to keep in mind.

From Shiori: I agree. Amami-san, we should compare schedules to find a mutual day off and meet her.

From Haruka: Uh, okay! This is kind of surprising...But I'll do my best!

To Shiori; Haruka: Thank you. Her name's Abigail...that's all I really know. I'll try to keep in touch as best I can.

It was a bit before sunset that Gingka's father and Hikaru were able to make it to the B-Pit. While they were being filled in on what had happened, Yuki awoke, and everyone gathered in the spare bedroom to hear what he had to say.

“What's your name, son?” Ryo began.

“Mizusawa Yuki.”

“Yuki. Strong name.”
Benkei cut in. “Well I haven't seen you around here before! Where did you come from, huh?”

Sitting next to Yuki on the bed, Gummy spoke up. “Yuki came to ask you something, Gingka. We want you to lend us your strength, to help us, with your star fragment, as a legendary blader.”

This made confusion pass around the room. “Legendary blader?” Gingka repeated.

“Let's start at the beginning,” Ryo suggested. “Yuki, Megumi, how do you know about the star fragment in the first place?”

Yuki straightened a bit. “Well...long, long ago, a star fell from the sky.” This caught everyone's attention, as they'd heard the Koma Village story before. “Through the ages, the tops born from that star fragment changed shape, and evolved into the beyblades of today.”

Ryo was stunned. “That's a legend passed down in Koma Village.”

“How do you know about it?” Gingka pressed.

Yuki explained, “I was brought up hearing this story from my grandfather ever since I was a little boy.”

“From your grandfather?” Madoka echoed.

Crossing his arms, Ryo came to the conclusion, “So then, your grandfather's hometown must have been Koma Village.”

“Grandfather often brought me to a hill where we could see the vast, star-filled sky,” Yuki went on, “and he would say this to me. 'When a dazzling glow lights up the earth from the heavens, a new star fragment will arrive and awaken a great power.'” He seemed lost in his memories for a moment, reliving that time, before continuing. “When would the new star fragment fall down to Earth? I became deeply interested in that very question. Based on various astronomical observations and research of ancient ruins, I put together my own timeline of the universe that calculates the time of its arrival to Earth.”

In shock, both Madoka and Kenta exclaimed, “A timeline of the universe?!” With awe and joy, Madoka added, “That's amazing!”

Shy embarrassment clear on his face, Yuki went on. “The most important reference for making that timeline came from the ancient Mayan civilization.”

Not knowing what that was, Gingka questioned his father, “Did he say Mayan?”

“It was an ancient civilization that created a system of calendars through study,” Ryo explained. “Long ago, people calculated the flow of time using the movements of the stars that shone in the night sky.”

Yuki nodded. “And as it turned out, one of their calendars predicted the arrival of my particular star. Strangely, in ancient civilizations all over the world, there are many examples of legends that are very similar to the one passed down in Koma Village. The calendar left behind by the Mayans can be thought of as one of those.”

Still finding this all hard to believe, Hikaru could only comment, “No way!”

“Even from that long ago?” As scientific as she was, this was a stretch even for Madoka.
“The history of beys goes way back, yes,” Ryo agreed.

“I'm sure that the meteor I found is the new star fragment,” Yuki stated firmly, “and the light from the legend Grandfather told me has sparkled in the sky at last, there is just no doubt in my mind that this is what he was talking about.” He closed his eyes, reciting once more, “‘When a dazzling glow lights up the earth from the heavens’. It was the explosion of Spiral Force that Gingka-san released in space. That was surely the light in the heavens, of course!”

Gingka blurted out, “I did what?”

“Must've been in another solar system or something, that was over a year ago,” Melody found herself muttering.

“And after that, the star fragment has really come to Earth.”

Not having expected this turn, Ryo was surprised once more. “The new star fragment has arrived?”

“You mean it's really here? Awesome!” Gingka cheered.

Gummy sighed, taking the next part. “The problem is, depending on who gets their hands on the power in that fragment, it could be used for either good or evil.”

There was a brief pause as everyone took this in, broken by Ryo. “Light and dark are two sides of the same coin. Where there is light present, darkness can creep in. So a new light may very well become a tunnel of darkness.”

When Gingka expressed his confusion, Ryo lowered his gaze towards him. “That's the continuation of the legend passed down in Koma Village. Our ancestors who left those words behind also foretold the possibility that along with the arrival of the new star fragment, an evil presence planning to make use of it would appear.”

“It's true,” Yuki agreed. “Grandfather feared that the most of all. Will it be the beginning of a new era of beyblade, or will it be the sign of a new age of chaos and disorder?” His eyes grew sad. “If that time ever arrives, the star fragment must not fall into the hands of evil. When the time comes, you must take the lead to ensure that their evil ambitions are crushed completely...”

If she squinted her eyes just right, Melody could see Yuki's Haert, the love he had for his grandfather. (She discovered this on accident, she'd just had something in her eye and, well...) But she could also see a small crack in it – fear, if she had to guess. She couldn't blame him. Being told to lead a fight for the world? That would put a weight on any child.

“Grandfather had probably sensed an evil presence that would go after the power of the star fragment.” Abruptly, Yuki lifted his head. “No, not just him...the star fragment itself must have sensed it!”

“The fragment sensed it?” Ryo didn't appear to understand. Then again, no one did, except probably Melody herself – only because she'd seen the show. She'd heard all this before.

“Yes! That is why, on the day that the star fragment arrived on Earth, it split into multiple points of light and scattered across the globe.”

While Madoka expressed her amazement, Hikaru shared her disbelief. “The star fragment has a will of its own?”

Yuki nodded. “One of those lights came straight to me at the observatory. And inside that light, I
heard the star fragment's voice."

Once again, people expressed their uncertainty. Melody, however, felt a strange twitch coming on, and quickly put a hand on Madoka's arm. Just as her vision started going white, she closed her eyes – instincts from Dia taking over, preventing people from freaking out over the whole 'her eyes are glowing!' thing, and something to keep her footing stable when she came out of it.

A robed figure stood in front of her, face masked by a high collar and large goggles. She knew this man – Pluto, descendant of King Hades, ringleader of the Dark Nebula, Hades Inc., and the future attempt at reviving Nemesis. He extended a hand to her, while in the background, Gingka and the others cried for her to reject his offer.

The brief vision ended, and she tightened her grip on Madoka, catching her breath while trying not to draw attention to herself. She nodded to Madoka's unasked question, then opened her eyes, smiling shakily at her sister-in-law.

What the hell was that? she wondered.

"There is a great evil," Yuki was saying. "It will harness the unknown power of the star fragment. It has one goal – to revive the black sun, the god of destruction, Nemesis!" More confused exclamations before he continued. "The black sun will turn the world into darkness. Nemesis must not be allowed to revive. Gingka-san, please, lend me your strength!"

Waving desperately, Gingka objected. "Hang on a second!"

"Nemesis? And the star fragment's voice you say? You must have been dreaming or something, don'tcha think?"

"Don't be stupid," Melody grunted, gathering everyone's attention. She took a moment to let go of Madoka's arm, then continued to speak. "Obviously, the star fragment used its unknown power to give Yuki a series of visions. We don't know its full capabilities, so it's not out of the question for clairvoyance to be a gift it can give."

Kenta frowned. "Are you sure about that? It sounds..."

Pointing at herself with her thumb, Melody explained, "You're talking to a girl who has visions based on things I hear or see. This is nothing new to me, and 'the star fragment's voice' definitely sounds like a vision trigger to me. I believe Yuki-san's story."

The boy smiled gratefully at her, then turned a serious expression to the others. "I know that it's hard to believe, but the Mayan calendar even predicts the day that humanity will be destroyed."

The gathering of bladers let out a collective gasp. Melody found herself wondering, Wasn't that supposed to be 2012? Guess it's two years later here. Huh.

"Oh yeah!" Madoka snapped out of her shock. "I've heard of that day before myself! Isn't that day supposed to come soon?"

"Uh-huh. The time of humanity's destruction, predicted by the Mayan calendar, is almost upon us! I think the timing is tied Nemesis's revival."

For some reason, Madoka gave Melody a nervous look, while Ryo mused, "A great evil, indeed."

"That is why the star fragment split its powers into multiple pieces. To entrust the earth into the hands of the chosen ones. The legendary bladers themselves! They are the bladers who received a
piece of the unknown power, from the divided star fragment. There are a total of ten. The enemy is also surely trying to find those legendary bladers. They intend to gain their power for themselves! We have to prevent that from happening, at any cost necessary! The fact is, just as I expected, Gingka-san is a legendary blader! You are one of the warriors chosen by the star fragment. I beg you, in order to prevent the revival of Nemesis, please, lend me your strength!"

Gingka held a tone of disbelief. “I'm supposed to believe that I was chosen because you say so?”

While Gummy glared at his rude and blunt comment, Madoka exclaimed, “That's it! The light! I thought it was just my imagination! At that time the power of the new star fragment must have been put into Pegasus!”

“And going by what I saw earlier, it happened to Kyoya's Leone, too,” Melody added.

“Leone?” Yuki repeated.

Excitedly, Benkei cut in. “That's right! Kyoya's Leone also received a light that fell from the sky! And Leone was reborn then, too. So Kyoya is also one of the legendary bladers!”

Melody couldn't help but smirk. “Kyoya's always been a strong one. It's no surprise at all, to me. It could also explain why the beys transformed in their battle. They were so into it, and their spirits were burning so brightly, that it called to the power of the star fragment and caused the transformation.”

Gingka began excitedly talking to Pegasus. Meanwhile, Madoka gently tapped Melody's arm for her attention, and asked in a whisper, “What did you see?”

A heavy feeling dropped in Melody's gut. “Some...guy in a cloak,” she mumbled. “Didn't say anything, just sorta looked at me.” The vision made her uncomfortable, and she definitely wasn't going to share the full details – not now, and not with Madoka.

The conversation briefly turned to Kenta and Benkei asking if they could become legendary bladers, and Yuki trying to placate them. Gummy interrupted it, informing them all, “There's already been someone who tried to stop Yuki from telling you. It can only mean one thing. The great evil has already begun to work towards Nemesis's revival. We can't waste any time.”

“You mean the meowing guy from earlier?” Gingka questioned.

“Yes, cat pope guy. If I hadn't followed Yuki...” Gummy looked at the boy worriedly. “He could've seriously hurt him. We have to find the rest of the legendary bladers as soon as possible.”

Melody lifted her hand a bit. “Since I'm heading to New York, I'll ask everyone at Dungeon Gym if they've seen a light enter anyone's beys. That sound good?”

“That would be a big help!” Yuki agreed. He took a moment to get out of bed and stand, Gummy doing the same. “Thank you very much! Megumi-chan was definitely right about you, Melodia-san!”

Raising her eyebrow, Melody glanced at the girl. “Right about me in what way, exactly?”

As Gummy giggled sheepishly, Yuki smiled. “You are a person with a very big heart, and you go out of your way to help people even if it doesn't directly involve you. I'm glad that I finally got to meet you after all this time.”

Taking the chance, Melody decided to ask, “How long have you known Megumi, anyway?”
“How long? Uh, let me think...” Yuki pondered for a moment. “I think it was late fall of 2008, so...a little over four years, I guess.”

“Just a couple months after I went on my...trip.” Gummy nodded. “I'm probably the only reason he remembered to eat and sleep while working on all this.”

Melody extended a hand to Yuki. “Thanks for keeping an eye on her. Megumi's really important to me, so I appreciate it.”

Smiling sheepishly, he took the offered handshake. “Of course! She has been a very big help, and I'm glad that she could find you again.”

“Keep looking out for her, okay?”

“Oh, yes, absolutely!”

Melody pulled Madoka into a quick hug, then waved at the others as she headed out. “I'll text you what I find out, okay Madoka? Good luck, all of you!”

After a quick round of goodbyes, Melody grabbed her box of presents, and her bag, and hurried outside to find a cab to get her back to the apartment.

*Megan's in good hands with them, she thought, especially Madoka and Yuki. I know they'll keep those two out of trouble.*

Dia agreed.

“They don't want outside help,” Margret repeated, dumbfounded.

Melody sighed. “No, they don't. Megan and...Gummy want to handle this on their own. If something goes wrong, they'll contact me.” She showed Margret the texts saying exactly such, which Gummy had sent her while she was in the cab. “Megan has a plan in motion to find her home, and Gummy is willing to go along for the ride. They aren't actively trying to fuse like Dia and I are, so – this is according to a friend – they won't do so, at least for a very long time.”

Though the Megs had been stubborn about not asking for help, they'd let Melody tell Noa about their situation, and share Gummy's number with her. Just in case. It took a lot of weight off Melody's shoulders.

“I...ugh, fine. I guess I can relate. It's hard to ask for help when the problem's in your head.”

Margret sighed. “So this 'friend', are they a mage? How do they know this?”

“To be honest? I have no idea.” Melody shrugged. “She's at least a mind reader of some kind, but there's also rumors about being an alien, or a mage, so on and so forth...But she's a good person.”

“Are you sure?”

“She's a mom friend.”

Margret made a face. “Uck, every time I doubt something here, I get bit in the butt. Come on, then, let's get you packed.”

They headed for Dia's bedroom, Melody waving to a tired Ikuto as they passed the couch. Before they could actually enter the room, however, they heard jingling keys from in the hallway. Everyone paused, understandably curious, as a key was turned in the lock and the door was
opened, and there was a long group staring contest between the apartment's occupants and the white haired woman carrying grocery bags.

Eventually, the woman turned to Melody and stated with slight confusion, “I don't remember saying you could invite people over.”

“I'm sorry, we'll all be out of your hair in a bit,” Margret promised, as Melody started trying to identify the woman. There was no doubt that this was the actual owner of the apartment, but other than that she was drawing a blank. The best she could do was offer, “Do you need any help with your bags?”

The woman regarded her for a moment, then let out a sigh. “Sure. I don't need to feed all of you, do I?”

As Margret assured her she and Ikuto had already eaten (for the best, as Margret's appetite would probably have gone through everything that had just been bought), Melody took some of the woman's bags and went to sort them out into the kitchen. Annie, having caught on to the fact that no one but her knew exactly who this woman was, properly greeted her. “Hello, Milinka!”

Margret's voice stalled into silence, while Melody nearly dropped the can of olives she was holding. When she peeked over the counter, she saw 'Milinka' nod at Annie, then give Margret a strange look. Margret coughed, then explained, “I'm, uh, friends with someone with that name. Kinda caught me off guard there, heh.”

Milinka shrugged, kicking the door closed and walking over to join Melody in the grocery unpacking. The two worked in silence for a bit, not because of Melody's shock – it had been brief, but if there was a Kelly Brooks here then there could be a Milinka, too – but because Milinka simply didn't offer any conversation. She 'hmm'ed and 'ah'ed a bit when Hope and Yoru introduced themselves, but didn't seem very interested.

“Um, I'll be leaving in a little while to head back to New York,” Melody told her as Milinka hunted the fridge shelves for an empty space. “Thanks for letting me stay here.”

At last, Milinka took an interest. “It's fine. Least I could do.” She gave Melody's new Character a glance. “So this one's yours?”

“Yeah.”

Milinka shrugged again, apparently accepting the answer. “Well, it's strange for someone your age to birth a new Character, but I guess it's not impossible.” After shelving a box of pasta, she properly turned to look at Hope. “I met your Bearer last year, she helped me out of a tight spot. I trust she hasn't somehow gotten into trouble since you hatched.”

Hope giggled. “Nope, all good!”

Milinka smirked. “Well you help Annie take care of her, hear me?” When Hope nodded in agreement, she turned back to Melody. “So how'd the meeting with your cousin go? I assume it happened since you're leaving now.”

“It went well. I think he was a bit floored, but he seemed excited, too.”

Floating over to join them, Annie asked Milinka, “While you were out, did you find any information on what we mentioned?”

It took Milinka a minute to process the question, but she nodded. “Oh, yeah. It's actually more than
I thought I'd find.” As she put away the last of the cans, she waved Melody out of the kitchen. “Don't know if it'll help, but you did say anything would be nice.”

As Melody followed, she was grateful that Annie whispered to her, “You asked Milinka to see if she could find any information on the spirits that are possessing Max and Shelly.” She was suddenly very interested in learning what Milinka had discovered.

The woman posed her fingers as if imagining a frame around something, and after a flash of light in the rectangle between her hands, she summoned what appeared to be a floating screen made of a translucent white energy. “It's not exactly good news that I have for you,” she admitted, sorting through icons that made it appear to be some kind of tablet or smart phone. “That thing I said about it being very unlikely you'd get them back? That 'unlikely' is more of a 'nearly impossible'. These spirits aren't exactly easy to kick out.”

What looked like a web page appeared on the screen, and Milinka tapped at a few of the words, highlighting them. The screen grew an extra column, putting larger versions of those words in the new space. “Based on how you said they were 'chaotic energy that made my Siqu hurt', it's most likely that they're a species of energy beings called Mytans. While they technically have the same origin as Siqu, they were corrupted somehow, and without going into the gory details, they effectively tried to take over this universe somewhere around a few hundred million years ago.

“I know you probably wouldn't understand a lot of the details, since you said you're still a Siqu novice, so I'll skip to what you're here for. While appearances of Mytans since their attempted takeover have been scarce at best, there's reports of a trio seeking out the descendants of the mage army that stopped them. Effectively that could be translated to every living mage in every dimension in our universe. Your father, Max, is one of those. They attacked your family because they sought you all out for revenge.”

Melody felt stiff and scared, but stayed focused. She noticed Margret taking notes in some kind of mini-laptop, and was grateful for that. “A-And?”

Milinka tapped near the enlarged words. As Melody looked closer, they appeared to be names. “These are the ten Mytans known by name. I don't know which three attacked your family and took Max and Shelly, but I'm almost positive their names are on this list.”

As Melody scanned the list, not really expecting anything to jump out at her, a name did catch her attention. Confused and nervous, she glanced at Margret. “Um, Margret? Remind me of the guy that Casey had to fight as a kid in Kalia's home?”

Meggie looked up, “Huh? You mean Gorati?”

“He's on this list.”

There was a moment where there was nothing but pure shock on Margret's face. Milinka glanced at the list she'd made, considering Gorati's name. “Someone you know fought a Mytan as a child?”

“My magic teacher,” Meggie answered, breathing carefully. “But...No, he was powerful, but there's no way he was an energy...They can't traverse universes, can they?”

There was a dark pause as Milinka scanned through her information, then slowly turned towards Margret with sincere apology in her eyes. “The Mytan king and queen were reported to have been defeated by mages throwing them into the void,” she told her. “It's...unlikely they survived, but I suppose if they latched onto another universe...”
Melody hurried over to Margret. “They beat him,” she reminded her. “Even if Gorati was some energy spirit king, he was probably weakened by going between universes. A void would drain energy, right? Casey and the others beat him, there’s no reason to worry.”

Margret closed her eyes, taking a few breaths before she answered. “I...I need to tell Casey.”

Melody nodded. “Do what you need to do.”

Stiffly nodding, Margret turned and went to hide in the bedroom Melody had been using. She closed the door softly, being careful not to let her strength break it.

His gaze back to the list of names already, Ikuto commented, “What about the other nine? Even if we know one of them was cast off, three were involved in the attack. Do we know which ones they are?”

“Well, we can rule out Lilura, Taika, and Ula,” Milinka admitted. “Though we don’t know the queen’s name, they were her daughters. Lilura and Taika turned up a few centuries ago and made a peace pact with the mages of the time, and Lilura specifically contained half her energy so she could safely interact with mortal life. She’s supposedly observing us while passing as one of us and makes a new life on another planet every few decades.”

Nodding, Melody pressed, “And Taika?”

“Well, no one’s really sure, but the assumption is that she’s searching the universe for Ula.” Milinka frowned. “Records say – and I’m not saying records transcribed from a few hundred million years ago are completely accurate – that Ula, the youngest kin of the queen, vanished shortly before the takeover.”

“So one is a researcher, one is on a rescue mission, and one is the reason for the rescue mission,” Annie summarized. “It’s nice we’re narrowing this down, but we’ve still got six left. Any ideas?”

They all considered the remaining six names in silence – Isis, Ogechi, Phrixos, Erykah, Louhi, and Isingoma – but none of them were able to think of a way to cast off another name. While it was possible that Mingzhu might have caught a name in the attack, or Melodia’s brothers depending on their age at the time, Melody wasn’t willing to open that wound right now. She saved the names onto a note in her phone, and that was all she could do for now. Even having the information she did now was far more than she could’ve hoped for.

After dismissing her screen, Milinka took a glance at the clock in the kitchen. “So how are you getting across this time? Another teleporter?”

“Yeah, Margret’s doing it.”

“Well, I’ll let you pull your things together, then. It was nice having you. Hope you figure this all out.” Milinka turned her attention to the kitchen, and making herself something to eat. Melody left her be, heading to join Margret in the bedroom to pack up. While doing so, the sound of Chinese music suddenly joined them. Dia quickly informed her that this was Mingzhu’s ringtone, so she dug her phone from her bag and answered as fast as she could. “Hi, Mom.”

“Nǐ hǎo, Xiaolian,” Mingzhu said tiredly. If she wasn’t so focused and concerned, Melody would have been reminded of a Chinese-teaching kid’s show that her little sister had watched once upon a time. “How are you?”

“I’m doing fine. Actually, I’m about to get a teleport to New York, I’ll be back with Toby and the others.”
“I'll send your cookies to the gym, then, you missed out on Christmas.” Mingzhu took a moment to breathe. “I...Xiaolian, could we just talk for a bit, perhaps?”

Mingzhu sounded exhausted. Melody quickly glanced at Annie for help, and she replied with the activation of her Chara-Change. Melody directed the conversation to a bright tone, letting Mingzhu talk about favorite recipes and ‘There was this one time...’ and even things about when she and Max had been dating (Melody found the idea of them playing Tag by pushing each other into lakes to be the best possible way to ever play the game).

Also, according to Mingzhu, she'd skirted around the sea foam death curse by slipping Max a book on mermaids and quizzing him until one day she'd demanded, “What am I?” and he'd bellowed, “A mermaid!” without any doubt in his mind, yet not even thinking about what he'd said until a few seconds later. Mingzhu recounted that his face had been priceless – though not as good as it had been when he'd learned she was a mermaid princess.

It was around that point that she realized something about her mother's voice. “Mom? What's wrong?”

“What? N-Nothing, I-”

“Mom, you're crying.”

After a brief silence, Mingzhu sniffled. “I...I'm sorry, Xiaolian. I just...I miss him. I miss him so much...”

Melody stood there for a moment, then said quietly, “I know. We'll get him back, Mom, I promise. Him and Shelly.” Mingzhu didn't answer, too busy trying to keep herself together. Inspiration suddenly struck, and Melody pulled out the music disk, activated it, and held it near the phone.

For a while, she held the two items like that, sitting on the floor. Margret, having finished her message to Casey, was nice enough to pull Dia's belongings together for her in the meantime.

Eventually, Melody moved the disk away and said, a careful emphasis on the Chinese words, “Wǒ ài nǐ.” I love you.

After a long pause, Mingzhu choked out, “Wǒ yě ài nǐ.” I love you, too.

Turning off the music disc, Melody proceeded to sing what she'd sung to Zeo early that morning. When it was done, Mingzhu quietly thanked her, said she'd call back once she'd settled back into New York, and let her get going.

Chapter End Notes

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go: http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 9

Edit: Hey so I rewrote a good portion of the ending scenes to this chapter because I was looking back and went "ugh this sucks" and now I love it and excuse me while I roll around and giggle

To Toby: Going to teleport any time now. Meet you at NY WBBA?

From Toby: sure yeah as long as I get to go back to sleep after do you KNOW what time it is iver here? Suns not up thats what time is ti

To Toby: Sorry

“Okay. So everyone's clear on what's happening, we're about to Instant Transmit – teleport – to New York. We'll arrive just outside the WBBA building there, and Toby will meet us and take us to his house so we can rest up before planning our next moves. Any questions?”

Margret turned to Ikuto as he raised his hand a bit. “How long do I have to stay there?”

She frowned. “Still almost a week. Even with Milinka giving your violin an extra cleansing session, it's still drenched in negative energy. Even without that, Easter's still active, and they'll be looking for you. Going out of country might just be the best thing for you right now.”

“And how d'you know about Easter anyway-nya?” Yoru demanded.

Margret sighed. “Because they're a problem in my dimension, too. Okay? Can we go now?”

When Ikuto nodded, Margret grabbed the handle of Dia's suitcase, which the Christmas presents had been stuffed into – Dia hadn't really packed more than socks, underwear, and a comfy sweater, so there was plenty of room. The storage box had been broken down and folded in as well, so she could keep the doodles her nephews had drawn on it. Melody held the pillow and blanket, which were apparently from her room in Toby's house. She put her free hand on Margret's shoulder, her Characters diving into her bag. Yoru followed them as Ikuto mimicked Melody, holding tightly to his violin case.

Once everyone was physically connected to her in some way, Margret lifted two fingers to her forehead, and focused on the feeling of Kalia's Ki. As it was naturally much higher than any human in this world, it was easy to find. “Might wanna close your eyes,” she suggested. “It'll be easier on you that way.”

Ikuto and Melody obliged. There was a tingling sensation, followed by a momentary displacement of their footing from carpet to asphalt. Margret stumbled, and a new voice commented, “Don't you care throw up on me.”
Melody's eyes flew open. A young woman dressed in black stood before them, eyeing the wobbly Margret warily. Beside her was a friendly looking Character with a yellow blouse, white skirt, and a pink bow in her hair. This, plus the tail wiggling behind the girl, helped Melody identify her.

“Kalia?”

The girl's dark eyes flicked over to her. “Yeah. You're Melody, huh?” She considered the girl, and her two Characters as they left the bag. “Huh.”

Her Character floated forward, beaming. “It's great to meet you! My name is Emily.”

Annie and Hope introduced themselves, while Kalia narrowed her eyes at Ikuto. After a brief silence, she spoke. “I don't understand how you manage to deal with all these 'dimensional alternates', Meggie. Why is he here, anyway?”

“Easter,” Margret said simply, waving her off. “Where's Peg?”

Kalia nodded behind them, and everyone turned to look. A girl with short hair sat in a stiff heap on the ground, her movements jarring as she lifted her head. Margret bit her lip. “Peggie? How do you feel?”

It seemed to take several seconds for the question to process, before the girl answered, “S...low...”

Melody winced. Peggie was still fighting off the effects of the time freeze, it seemed. “It's nice to meet you.”

Another pause for processing, followed by a smile that practically twitched onto Peggie's face. “Y...es...” she managed.

This was unsettling. She hoped Peggie would recover soon – this couldn't be fun for her, either. It would probably be best to not make her try and talk for now, if nothing else.

“So, where's Toby?” Hope asked, looking around. There wasn't anyone besides them in sight, most likely due to the early hour.

“On his way,” Melody promised. “I think he's bringing a car?” She wasn't sure he could drive...Zeo could though, right?

Kalia scoffed. “Cars. I hate cars. Besides that, there's five of us, so unless he's got a big one we won't all fit. I'll just fly behind.”

An approaching vehicle catching his eye, Ikuto frowned. “I don't think that's necessary.”

It took Melody a few seconds to realize that the vehicle was a dark blue minivan.

It took another few seconds for her to sort through Dia's memories and remember that Toby's family was rather wealthy, and this was one of four cars that Toby's mom owned.

The passenger door opened, and there he was. Melody felt like shrinking as Toby looked at her, but Margret went right up to introduce herself and thank him for the help. The driver, who was the honest-to-goodness hired help for Toby's family, stepped out to help load Dia's things into the trunk, while Kalia picked up Peggie to set her in the car.

Margret climbed into the car, and Toby turned to stare rather suspiciously towards Ikuto. The taller boy ignored him, simply getting in the car without a word.
Dia nudged for control, and Melody handed it over. When Toby approached them, Dia's first action was to lunge forward and hug him, and murmur a short string of apologies.

“We'll talk after we all get some sleep,” Toby assured her.

Dia climbed into the car and shut the door. Kalia, true to her word, jumped into the air in preparation to follow. Just looking at her for a moment, Toby shook his head and closed the other side door, then got back in and closed his own.

And they were off. The car was quiet, everyone tired from their long days or interrupted sleep. Melody noticed Toby was dozing off in the front, and felt pretty bad. She herself was too tired to enjoy the sights outside the car. She remembered lots of buildings, Margret warning Toby that he'd need more food in the house and yes we're Saiyans like that TV show, and something about cleaning out a pool. Beyond that, the ride was a fog.

They pulled into the driveway, parked in one of the two garages, and trudged inside. Toby directed the Saiyans and Ikuto to rooms nearby, apologizing to the girls for having to put them in sleeping bags instead of beds. He then helped Melody carry Dia's things through the house, up the stairs, down a short hall, and into the room Dia always used.

Melody didn't notice much after that. She could look at the room after some sleep.

“You know, you really should mind your own business,” a man's voice complained.

As Melody opened her eyes, she found herself lying on an icy floor. She couldn't seem to move, and those two odd things put together had her realizing that this was a very bad situation.

“I've put far too much work into this project to let you stop me,” the voice continued, an angry growl entering his tone. “So why don't you be a good little girl and give back the boy.”

She couldn't place the voice. Melody made herself move, forcing her arms off the ice to push herself up. It felt like every part of her body weighed a ton, but she managed, and found herself staring up at a man with white and red hair, his eyes glowing a sharp, icy gold.

Max. Dia's father.

“Oh, you're dreaming right now,” he said airily, casually waving his hand a bit. “I just thought you and I needed to have a little...chat.”

Dreaming. She was dreaming?

“I do not appreciate your actions these past two days, Xiaolian,” he snapped. “The boy is my puppet, and I want him back.”

The boy...? Puppet? Who...

A chill ran down her spine, making her shudder. He wanted Ikuto.

The Mytan glared at her, through Max's eyes. “I know you have him. Send him back, before I have to resort to...forceful measures.”

For a brief moment, she balked, terrified. If this thing could invade her dreams...what was it capable of?

Just as she wondered this, something snapped. It wanted to hurt Ikuto. Her friend.
Melody forced her body to move, rising slowly until she stood firmly on both feet. “No.”

“...No?" 

Something burned within her. “I won't let you hurt him. Not you, not Easter, not anyone. Not anymore.”

His eyes narrowed. “What makes you think you can stop me?”

Melody had no idea. All she knew was that she couldn't let Ikuto be pulled back into this.

A flash of pink lit up to her right, and slammed against the Mytan in a vicious wave. Max's form flickered, momentarily showing a violent shuddering mass of golden energy.

“Get the fuck outta my head!” The roar of rage echoed through the dreamscape, cracks forming across the dark, gloomy scene. Leaping towards the two of them with a large curved blade of pink crystal — was that a scythe? - was Dia, fury blazing around her in a crackling gold and pink aura. The blade went down towards the off-guard invader, sliced through the figure, and shattered it.

As the dark cave and icy floor broke away to reveal a foggy plain, Dia rushed to Melody's side, the scythe vanishing with a spark. The angry aura fell silent before she reached the shivering girl. “Did it hurt you?!”

Melody somehow managed to shake her head. “I...I-I wanna w-wake up now...”

Dia gathered her into a tight, warm hug. “It's okay. It's gone now, and I'll add—I'll add more force to the walls, it won't get in again. Okay?”

“I wanna...”

“Go to the bathroom and fill the tub, curl up in there. Have the girls bring out Mom's music disc and just listen to that for a while, and you'll feel a lot better.” Dia placed a gentle, comforting kiss on Melody's forehead. “Never again. I promise.”

Melody nodded, trying not to cry.

Melody's eyes flew open. In less than an instant, discomfort overtook her, and she curled over and threw up on the bed. A wave of sobs burst out as the full terror of her dreams being invaded hit her, and she knelt there on the bed crying for what seemed like ages. Someone came in, she didn't see who, and tried to calm her down, but ended up only able to lead her into the attached bathroom. They filled the tub for her, quietly assured her she'd be okay, and left her to the care of Annie and Hope.

Annie brought her a damp towel to wipe her face off with, while Hope filled a paper cup with water so she could rinse the nasty taste out. Her dress had an awful stain on it, and with a few miserable sniffles, she lowered herself into the calm, warm water. There was a pins-and-needle feeling as she transformed – her tail hung over the edge of the old-style tub, and she let her head drop under the water, not thinking about how she was now breathing it. Her Characters delivered her mother's music disc, and she activated it immediately, keeping it clenched tightly in her hands.

She vaguely watched them put her dress in the hamper and hang her belt over the towel rack, then Hope left. Annie flew over to sit on the edge of the tub, having performed some sort of Guardian Character magic so she was now wearing a little green one-piece swimsuit.
Melody remained in the tub for as long as the water felt warm – and since she had that purple mermaid temperature weirdness, that would be for quite a while. She didn't bother with washing, but at some point Annie found a comb and started lightly pulling it through the ends of her hair. The Character couldn't put enough pressure on it to make it do much in the sense of detangling, but the feeling itself was enough to add to the calm setting that her Characters had set up for her.

She cried, but only a little, compared to the shaking sobs that had grabbed hold of her in the bedroom. While she didn't trust herself to speak, she mentally made a promise to repay her Characters for the care they were giving her, even when they didn't have a clue what had happened.

The entire experience went on as long as she needed – no one came in to bother her, and Annie said the bed was being taken care of. The Character didn't pry into the origin of Melody's sudden breakdown, but instead quietly showed her care and support until she was ready to talk about it.

Melody didn't – couldn't – tell her. The thought of giving a voice to that living nightmare was enough to bring the tears back. She quietly let the music from her mother's disc lead her through a quiet song with peaceful lyrics. She sang along as best she could, and whatever music magic the disc and her mermaid side contained, it settled her enough that she felt it was safe to fall asleep in her water-filled bed.

Her dreams were peaceful this time. She swam with Pokemon, and Megan, and introduced the Tear guardians to the beauty of the underwater world. She braided Nono's hair. She sang as Ikuto played his violin.

They were the greatest dreams that either of her lives had had in a very long time.

When Melody awoke some time later, part of her wanted to maybe just stay in the tub for another hour or two. She groggily stared at her tail for a while, slowly decided she was hungry, and attempted to lift herself out to the floor. She wasn't used to the form, though, so she only ended up slipping back down to the bottom and splashing water on the floor – adding to the puddles that had already been there.

“Annie?” she mumbled. When the Character appeared in her vision, she whimpered, “I can't get out. Help.”

Annie had the gall to giggle, but promised to get Margret and flew out of the room. Melody watched her fumble with the doorknob, then started stretching as best as she could while trapped in the large water bowl.

Even though her tail felt strange, it wasn't entirely unfamiliar. Comforting, in a way. Maybe that was just part of the mermaid magic.

Margret arrived to rescue her, the girl's Saiyan strength letting her easily lift her mermaid form. While Melody threw a towel over her tail and started drying herself off, Meggie took a heating spell to the puddles on the floor, evaporating them. She drained the tub as well, then left Melody to transform back and get dressed.

With her previous dress now needing washed, Melody grabbed the purple sweater from Dia's suitcase and put it on. A hunt through the dresser drawers provided her with some soft pajama pants.

Dia gently nudged her with a suggestion to check the boxes in the suitcase, specifically the one that
wasn't wrapped – she had a hunch on what it might be. Removing the lid from it revealed Dia's Raggedy Ann doll, the item that Annie's appearance symbolized. The doll was immediately clutched to her chest, and she slowly trudged her way to the hall, following Annie down the stairs and to the breakfast nook, where Team Dungeon, Kalia, and Ikuto were already eating.

She didn't argue when instincts led her to Toby, and dropped her head onto his shoulder with a soft grunt. He sighed, turning on his stool and pulling her into his arms. “Bad dream?”

“...Mhm.”

“Well, let's get you some food. It'll get your mind off of it.”

While Toby put a plate together for her, Melody perched herself on the last empty stool and gave a small nod of greeting to everyone else.

Zeo smiled comfortingly. “Your blanket and sheets are in the wash. You wanna play some video games after we're done eating?”

She contemplated the offer while staring at the plate of eggs and bacon Toby had given her. Video games weren't really her thing...but it would probably be a good distraction either way.

“I'll probably suck, but sure.” She gave a weak smile.

Unlike the past two days, there was no urgency in actions she had to take. Melody could unwind, have fun. It took about an hour, but she was able to put aside her worries and just hang out with her friends. Even Ikuto joined in – he couldn't understand English entirely, but knew enough to push through. The positive emotions and the new, peaceful environment seemed to be doing wonders for his condition.

While getting her ass handed to her in a one-on-one combat game, Zeo hit her up with a question. “Did Megumi really get cursed by a ghost? And that's why she couldn't contact us?”

Frowning as she concentrated on the controls, Melody nodded. “She can't figure out why it did it, but she broke it just in time to find me yesterday.” She swore under her breath as Masamune once again defeated her. She then scanned the character selection and picked a different one than she'd been using, hoping she'd have better luck. “She's staying with the friend she made in that time, who's heading a search for legendary bladers to save the world. Shoot, related, has anyone's bey been hit by light or randomly transformed? Promised I'd ask.”

The boys exchanged looks, and Toby shook his head. “No, nothing like that at all. What's a 'legendary blader'?”

Melody explained during the next match, quoting Yuki directly as much as possible. (She accidentally mimicked his voice, too, thanks to her Tear, but they didn't comment, so that was normal?) The boys shared equal parts excitement and concern for the situation, and Toby complained about the unfairness that Kyoya would be picked before one of them.

She gave him an odd look at that. “Uh, why's that unfair? ...Have you even met him?”

“Met him? He was a member of the gym, same as you!” Zeo laughed. “You two came to America at the same time. His dad has a friend here that suggested Dungeon Gym for your training, so you came over and stayed with that family 'til you went back to Japan...hmm, five years later.”

“...What.” There had been no indication of this in Dia's memories. What? What? “Kyoya used to live here? In America?”
Masamune nodded. “Yeah, you both lived with Samuel and Stanley Summers, and their parents! You remember them?”

“Yes...but I don't have any recollection of...” Melody frowned. “Huh...”

You want I should unlock it? Dia offered.

I...yes...yeah, that'd be cool. “I think I need a minute to process this.” She set down her controller, and sorted through the memories as Dia picked them out. Huh...

Younger Kyoya was not all that different from the one she knew from the show. Still rash, impulsive, insistent on becoming stronger. The only differences she could really see were that he was less swayed by corrupted intentions (such as the mess with Doji), and that he was shorter.

“This is weird,” she complained. “I wanna go back to video games now.”

While the boys laughed, Annie flew over. “I have a better idea! Why don't you open the rest of your Christmas presents?”

Hope started bouncing in her excitement. “Yeah! Yeah, do that!”

Thinking of Chiasa's belt, still hanging in the bathroom, Melody nodded. “Yeah. Sure.”

Kalia flew up to retrieve the box, while Zeo asked suspiciously, “Did one of those 'Characters' you guys have suggest something?”

“Di's just gonna open her Christmas presents.” Masamune grabbed the remote to mute the game. “Didn't Kayla get her something? You should have her bring it over.”

“I'd love to see her,” Melody added eagerly. At this, Zeo shrugged and pulled out his phone, shooting off a text to his sister.

“Warn her about the Saiyans,” Masamune realized. “Oh man, she's gonna flip.”

I'm still flipping. Definitely didn't expect DBZ to be a show here...

Dia scoffed. We may have aliens, but something like that? I doubt Earth would still exist.

...You wanna see the great ape form, don't you?

No.

It's hard to lie to someone that shares your brain, Dia.

SHUT UP.

Kalia returned, saving Dia from Melody's mental giggles. The box was set down and opened, and Melody told Zeo to hand them to her at random.

Zeo picked the heaviest, for no other reason than 'why not'. It was passed over to her, and she tried to judge what it might be, while noting the 'Lance' tag. For some reason, the shape and size was familiar to her... An instrument case? Going by the size, she'd say...woodwind.

Open it open it open it began chanting through her mind as Dia grew excited. Shaking her head a bit, Melody tore off the paper, and found her guess to be correct. Unlocking the case revealed a flute, which Melody had tried learning how to play twice when she was a bit younger. Apparently,
Dia was interested as well.

Also, Dia was now screaming with glee in her...mindscape, or whatever. At least it was happiness?

With the instrument was a disc that Zeo said would produce a hologram, being tech like what was used in the Castle of Lions. They tested it out and found it was an entire lesson plan and digital tutoring system to help her learn the instrument. Well, now they definitely had something to do while getting their bearings straight.

Zeo next fished out something that Melody wasn't sure had been in there before – a poke ball. She read the note attached: In Japanese, Her name is Esaria. Take good care of her!

Curiously, Melody tossed it up, letting out the Pokemon inside. From the flash of light came a small blue duck, who stamped its webbed feet on the ground, fluffed its wings, and proclaimed loudly, “Duckle-ett!”

“Hey, cool!” Zeo crouched down to get a better look at the blue duck. “Someone gave you a Ducklett!”

Puzzled, Melody's mind went to her idol friends. Maybe one of them had slipped the ball into the case at the party. She couldn't figure out which one it might've been, though...

To Noa: Did someone put a Ducklett in my gift box?

She had to re-type the text because she almost sent it in English, but when it was sent in the proper language, she sat on the floor and regarded the little duck. It was...a Unova Pokemon? She wasn't sure how the regions worked in this world, actually. “Uh, hi, Esaria.”

Esaria dipped her head in a nod, marched over, and firmly settled herself in Melody's lap. “Ducklett!”

There was a brief pause. “Why do I feel like the duck just adopted me?”

This set everyone laughing. When Masamune repeated it in Japanese for him, even Ikuto cracked a grin.

Once he'd settled down, Zeo passed over the next present. This one was wrapped in white paper covered in doodles – it was pretty obvious this was from her nephews, though there was no tag. She unwrapped it carefully so she could save the drawings, then opened the lid to the thin cardboard box to see what was inside.

Stitched blue eyes stared back at her from a face with a calm smile. A doll, with brown yarn hair, dressed in purple, filled the box. Looking closer, there was purple yarn in the same spot that Melodia's hair had.

It was a doll version of her. Younger her, judging by the lack of red, the shorter hair, and Dia's memories.

“Oh my gosh,” she breathed, lifting the doll gently. It seemed the same size as Raggedy Ann, but fresh and clean and...

Tiny tears prickling her eyes, she spotted a note that had been below the doll.

Wanted to give this to you during summer celebrations but I had trouble with the hair. And the face. I know you have the doll from Mom but I wanted to give you one too. Didn’t have a lot of
inspiration, so...it's just a mini you. Hope you like it anyway.

The boys are insistent that you know they helped. By 'helped' I mean they picked out the dress fabric and played with the stuffing and yarn.

I know Christmas is a family thing and we were all going to be together, but the boys and I are going to be visiting Mithoria for it. Kotone can't get away and I don't want to make Madoka pick between staying with her and coming to see us. So Merry Christmas, Xiaolian.

“Whadya think?” she asked Raggedy Ann, taking the older doll and holding the two in a way that made it seem they were looking at each other. “Raggedy Ann, this is...Melly. Melly, Raggedy Ann.”

The dolls 'decided' they were friends as Melody made them hug, then she giggled and hugged them herself. Dia couldn't say anything about it – she'd have done the same thing.

Esaria allowed the dolls to be set against her, and the next present was handed over. This one was smaller than the others, wrapped in paper that reminded her of circuit boards. Tearing that, and opening the box, revealed a gadget that looked like something between a pool ball and an MP3 player. It was mostly round, but had a flat bottom, and a small screen on top. Noticing a pair of buttons as well, Melody was reminded of a 20 Questions toy she and her older sister had growing up, except this one was black instead of translucent blue.

Everyone leaned over, trying to get a better look. “What do you think it is?” Masamune tilted his head, frowning.

“Poke a button.” Zeo stared intently at the device, his curiosity clearly at a peak.

Melody poked the button on the left. The small screen lit up, the Voltron symbol appearing on it. Besides that, nothing else seemed to happen. “Huh...That's weird-”

“Melodia?” came the sudden assault of three voices from the device. She shrieked, tossing it away from herself in a panic. Being across from her, Zeo caught it with a shout of surprise.

“Whoa, calm down!” one of the voices exclaimed, dimly familiar. “It's just us!”

“How you feelin’?” was the second voice's question. He also sounded...wait...

The third voice took no consideration. “I see you opened your present.”

“Lance?” Melody awkwardly took the gadget back from Zeo, staring at it. “Uh...Lance, what is this? What's going on?”

The first voice, a girl – Larmina, that's who it was – chuckled. “You like it? It was Vince's idea. It hooks up to the Voltcom channel and lets you talk to us whenever you want!”

The second voice, now identifiable as Hunk, had a proud tone. “Pidge, Vince and I put it together. It was a lotta fun to work on! How d'you like it?”

That...is pretty dang cool. My Voltcom always made my arm itch, so I could never wear it... Dia sounded touched.

Melody smiled. “It's great. Thank you.”

“The left button is for power, which you probably figured out. The one on the right turns on a video capture, so you can send dumb faces to us or share the stupid antics of your friends.” She could practically hear the grin in Lance's voice.
“Hey!” all three Dungeon Gym boys objected, gaining laughter from all three pilots.

“Well, tell Pidge and Vince I love it. Oh, and tell Aniko’s boys that I love their present, too! I love all of them.” Melody’s gaze fell to the flute case, and she finished softly, “Thank you, Lance.”

“Just relax and get your head figured out. There’s no rush at all.”

She tried not to let her tears fall. “Thanks.”

“We’ll take good care of her!” Masamune promised.

Lance laughed. “Oh, I don’t doubt it. Just keep her out of trouble, too!”

In sync, Masamune and Zeo declared un-apologetically, “No promises!”

There was a quick round of greetings from the other pilots as they tuned in, then they left her to her relaxation.

Zeo passed over the last of the gifts, a small-ish rectangular box wrapped in seashell-patterned paper. The tag indicated it was from Mingzhu. Melody tore it open, took off the lid, and blinked in surprise at the contents.

_Dia? What...is this?_ She took the...er, thing, out.

_It looks like a microphone? A magic microphone—oh! Oh! That's Haert!_

_What?_ Melody looked more carefully at the object. It looked... _sort of_ like a microphone, but less a technical one and more magical-girl-y. The grip was white, with gold bands at the top and bottom. A plum colored crystal orb was affixed to the bottom; a larger one was at the top, with a pink crystal heart somehow inside.

Wait, pink crystal...wait. She could sense it now, if she tried hard enough. That heart was...like Dia had said, Haert. “What...is this?”

None of the boys had an answer, either. Melody wondered if it was something Mingzhu had planned to explain once it was opened. But then, with Dia running off, she hadn’t had that chance.

She could ask, but...she kind of wanted to try figuring it out herself. A Haert powered magic microphone was her current guess, but she wasn't sure how to test it...besides, obviously, trying to use it. There also seemed a slight tug between it and her Tear?

“Zeo, Masamune, could you go take a look in my mom’s study for anything like this?” Toby’s voice broke her out of her thoughts. “It’s definitely got Spirit Quartz...”

“On it!” The two saluted and ran out of the room. Toby then turned to Ikuto, taking a few seconds of careful thought before speaking in slow, uncertain Japanese.

“My mother...has a violin. Do you want to borrow it?”

Ikuto perked up at that, nodding. Toby asked Annie to show Ikuto to the music room, and the two (plus Yoru, of course) left as well.

Toby then glanced at Kalia, who spoke before he could. “I don’t care what you’re trying to pull, I’m just going to sit here and play a video game.” She glanced briefly at Melody. “I almost forgot this, but I’m supposed to tell you not to bother the twins today. They’re dealing with Peggie’s situation and all.”
Melody nodded in understanding, then followed Toby as he motioned for her to do so. They walked past the stairs and went into his own little study, attached to his room, and he closed the door behind them.

Glancing around at the books, Melody was a bit confused. “Uh...are we looking in here, then?”

“Not exactly.” Toby smiled sheepishly. “It doesn't seem like you plan on telling them about what's going on, so...I thought it'd be better if we had a chance to talk in private. Melody, right?”

Melody felt herself shrink back slightly. “Y...Yeah...”

Noticing this, Toby sighed, then extended his hand, smiling awkwardly. “Toby Wallace. Nice to meet you, Melody.”

Hesitantly, Melody shifted the microphone to her left hand, and used her right to shake his. “N-Nice to meet you...”

“How're things going for you so far? Everything okay?”

“...Aside from the silent anger that Dia's boiling in right now, I-I guess so...” Melody fiddled with the microphone, just to have something to do with her hands. “She just...you know...wants to punch Ziggurat through the sun.”

There was a slow sigh from her companion. “She's not in any mood to talk to me, is she?”

“...Yeah, I take it back, she's also mad at you. For not telling her...” She frowned. “I don't really get it either. A year is a long time not to mention it...”

“I...didn't want to scare her.” Toby scratched the back of his head. “The whole Spiral Force incident really freaked her out, and...I was worried if I brought it up too soon...”

Before Melody could even process the shift, Dia had taken over, and her palm made a swift smack against Toby's face. She shouted something in Chinese that Melody couldn't catch, then grabbed the collar of Toby's shirt and pulled him forward. The microphone dropped to the floor with a thud, then rolled until it hit the wall. “Then what's not 'too soon', Toby? Two years? Three? When were you going to tell me about this?!”

Something cold brushed past Melody within the shared mindspace, and she curled in on herself in fear. D-Dia?

She went unheard. “You're not the only one Ziggurat messed with! You're not the only one he hurt, you...” Dia's grip started shaking, but didn't loosen. “You're not the only one who had something shoved into their head, wh-who almost got completely rewritten without any warning...any consent...A-And now you...you're saying that yours is back and it's okay?! That there's nothing wrong with that?!”

_Dia, stop. Please._ Melody couldn't see 'outside' anymore, only the cold shadow that was growing with every angry word. A shapeless blob of darkness, pink coursing through it like lightning.

“Dia, calm down.” There wasn't fear in Toby's voice, only concern. “You're going to let it out-”

“That's right! 'It'! They're _things_, Toby, not brain buddies that are just gonna let us live our lives however we want! Faust is _dangerous!_ And it _shouldn't exist anymore!_”

A sharp crack echoed through the mindspace, and the darkness abruptly began to shrink, the pink
lightning fading away within it. Her vision returned, and she saw Toby, one of his eyes now gray, and a hand lifted. He'd slapped Dia? Whatever had happened, she was suddenly letting him go, and the darkness was fleeing.

Melody could feel horror seeping through as Dia stepped back. “I-I...”

“This.” Toby lowered his hand, his voice carrying the faintest of echoes as Faust spoke with him. “This is why we kept quiet. We wanted to wait until we could get it out of your head.”

What the heck is going on? Melody pleaded. She felt weak, small, terrified. That darkness, whatever it was, could have swallowed her up entirely.

Dia was shaking her head rapidly, having backed up until she hit the wall behind her. “I didn't...I-I wasn't...Toby, I-”

He smiled gently, cutting her off with a soft, “I know.”

Still scared, still clueless, Melody tried to open a small connection with the Pearl Tear to help Dia calm down. To her surprise, a small pink light appeared from below them, but Dia didn't even seem to notice. Melody strained to find the source through the sight she had, but settled against her own judgment as Dia began to sing.

"It used to be so simple
It was a world I understood
I didn't know what I didn't know
And life seemed pretty good"

"But now the darkness rises
From somewhere deep inside of me
This power overtakes me
Can I keep this midnight from getting free?"

"If I can stay with the light
I know I'll be free
And I can start to be whole
I can start to be me"

Dia's gaze lifted to stare at a framed photo of herself and the boys, hanging on the wall.

"But instead I am struggling
With all that I see
And these friends
Mustn't see the midnight in me"

The song hit an instrumental as memories spun through, finally telling Melody what was going on. Dia's Arrangement, the prototype for Toby's, still had a grip on her. Her anger brought it forth, and gave her fits of rage that she couldn't control. Nothing short of force was so far able to snap her out of it, and guilt washed over her every time. The darkness that Melody had witnessed was the mental construct of the Arrangement, visible due to the way their minds were being linked, and attempting to hijack and corrupt Dia's inner Haert to gain full control.

Knowing what could have happened, Melody was even more terrified, but her fears were cut off by the distraction of the song shifting. Dia's hands slid down her face just enough for her to watch, and just enough that Melody could see as well. Toby wasn't really the singing type, so mer magic didn't
usually affect him.

It occurred to Melody that it might be a good idea to shut the connection and leave them alone. Just a few seconds after she did, Toby found his bearings with the new song and started to sing.

"I wish I had a way
To make this all okay
I can't believe my dumb mistake
Could've caused so much heartache"

"Oh why, oh why?"

Toby gently touched Dia's hands, drawing them away from her face. There was sadness in his eyes, and guilt. Worry, pain, fear, Dia could see all of it. Dia knew that Toby blamed himself for her Arrangement.

"Something is wrong, it's plain to see
This isn't how it's meant to be
We've had our share of problems, true
That's not the life I want for you"

"Oh why, oh why?"

He pulled her into his arms, their foreheads touching for a brief second before before he tucked her head into his chest. She only saw his face for a moment, but the flurry of emotions was still there, and she burrowed into the hug, trying to comfort him – even if he was the one singing.

"Lost and wounded
I don't know what to do
Cursed and helpless
I fear I won't get through to you"

"I'll try
And I'll try
I'll try
And I'll try"

The pink light at the bottom of their vision faded, along with the glow of the Pearl Tear. There was silence once the last notes faded, no one willing to speak. The couple stood there holding each other, both in pain, both seeking answers no one seemed to have.

“It's not your fault,” Dia whispered into the hug. “It's not your fault this happened to me.”

His arms tightened around her, and she felt him shake his head. “It is...all of it. I shouldn't have fought him...I should have called for help...then none of us would be like this. It's because of me.”

His broken tone rattled her. Toby was scared, shaken, and that was...that was wrong. All the years she'd known him, Toby had been an anchor, a source of strength. Even in the hospital, his light hadn't faded. But ever since they'd been subjected to their Arrangements, ever since they'd started dating and had become closer, she was starting to learn the pain and guilt he'd been hiding all that time.

_Sitting in that hospital, I always felt like I let everyone down. I was hurting all of them._

_I could see something was wrong with Zeo. He'd never tell me what it was, but I knew that_
something wasn't right about his new training. Maybe he was pushing himself too far because I wasn't there to reel him in...

I didn't know what Ziggurat was doing to him. I didn't know what Ziggurat did to you. I don't think I can ever forgive myself for that.

When I woke up in Zeo and Masamune's arms, I almost didn't even know who I was supposed to be anymore.

The day you came back from Arus, and I saw you...I knew. No one had to tell me. And I knew I could never let myself come that close to losing you again.

Promise me that if I turn into that again, you'll do whatever it takes to stop me.

For the past year, Dia had fought past her Arrangement episodes and found a system that worked to break them. She'd made playlists for Zeo out of regular music as well as magicked songs. During her travels, she'd made regular calls to the gym and would visit at least once a month if she could. She'd sung for not only Zeo, but for countless others that had been hurt by Ziggurat.

And yet, she'd never sung even once for Toby. He'd always said he didn't need it, his Haert masked. Now she knew he was lying. She knew she'd been wrong.

Dia carefully extracted herself from the hug, worriedly meeting Toby's eyes. Before the Arrangement, they'd been the same height, but he was several inches taller now. His eyes seemed duller, more distant. She knew what it was like to be in the backseat of your own mind, thanks to Melody, but that was with consent, and she could always take control back. What must it have been like for Toby, trapped behind Faust, seeing everything and being unable to stop it?

She didn't need magic for this song. She didn't need music, or a starting note. All Dia needed was to hold his face, open her mouth, and sing their favorite song.

"We were strangers
Starting out on a journey
Never dreaming
What we'd have to go through
Now here we are
And I'm suddenly standing
At the beginning with you"

Toby's minute shaking began to settle. Encouraged by this, Dia went on.

"No one told me
I was going to find you
Unexpected
What you did to my heart
When I lost hope
You were there to remind me
This is the start"

"Life is a road
And I want to keep going
Love is a river
I wanna keep flowing
Life is a road
Now and forever
Wonderful journey"

"I'll be there
When the world stops turning
I'll be there
When the storm is through"

With a soft smile and eyes that held far less pain than moments before, Toby whispered the final words with her.

"In the end I wanna be standing
At the beginning with you"

Dia pulled his head down just enough for their foreheads to touch. She breathed deeply, and at her pointed look he did the same. For a short while this was all they did, their eyes finding comfort in each other as they breathed out the anxiety and pain.

After nuzzling her nose against his, Dia slowly pulled away, letting her hands fall to take his. She squeezed them gently. “It's no one's fault except for Ziggurat's, Toby. We're still here, and we will be for a long time. Okay?”

She could see there was still some disbelief, but that was alright. No one said they had to be over it right away. “...Okay.”

“Do you wanna look through some photo albums together?”

He nodded.

They collected a few random albums from the shelves, then went to sit on his bed and reminisce. Neither realized they had kicked the strange microphone up against the wall, or that it was still glowing with the faintest hint of pink.

To hope that nothing else would happen during that time was wishful thinking.

Dia enjoyed looking through the albums, really she did. The memories they showed were carefree and fun, from the day she'd had first joined the gym to the pictures from her and Toby's first date. Using the photos, she was now positive that Melody had access to every moment of her time in New York, even – unfortunately – the memories of the Arrangement. It was hard to share that, but she knew that Melody would've had to see it eventually.

Now watching from the 'rear-view', Melody was noticing something between two photos in particular. Dia kept flipping between them for her, not saying anything. The first was of the Christmas party the gym had held before Toby's hospitalization, which she had flown over for. The second was their reunion after Spiral Force.

In the Christmas picture, Brad and her foster brother Samuel were photobombing the shot. Masamune was wearing a hand-knitted hat decorated like a unicorn, and Zeo had chestnuts stuffed in his mouth as he imitated a squirrel. Toby had his brown hair braided into pigtails and looked like he couldn't be happier about it. Melodia was sitting on the table in front of them, with what looked like pudding spilled on her. She looked half pissed off, half amused, and her attention was mostly directed toward the silver tinsel strand someone had dropped on her head. Uno was trapped under the empty pudding bowl, perhaps the perpetrator of the spill. The scene was goofy, heartwarming, and filled with love.
On the other hand, the second photo was taken at the entrance of the gym, in a drizzle of rain. Melodia was huddled under Faust/Toby's coat and being clung to by Zeo, in turn clinging to Toby herself. Masamune was trying to hug all of them at once. Uno and Annie floated close to their Bearers. Every smile looked forced, and no one had dry eyes. Toby hadn't even had his hair cut from the Arrangement yet – it was pulled back in a loose braid, hanging far down his back. Melodia's hair, from what could be seen under the coat, seemed to mimic the style. This image was very personal, and very...sad.

_I hate it._ Melody muttered this quietly, just needing to get it out. Dia paused at the comment, feeling nothing but anger and loathing towards Ziggurat, and what he'd done to them. This would have been completely normal, except it wasn't coming from her - it was coming from Melody.

Brought forth by the photos and Melody's anger, Dia started remembering things. She remembered fighting back against the Voltron Force when they came to get her. She'd...She'd hurt them. She'd hurt them and she'd laughed and... She wished so much right now that these memories would've just stayed hidden.

And, like Toby and Zeo, she'd been left with a physical mark – a reminder of what had been done to her. The length of her hair had more than doubled due to the Arrangement, just like Toby's, and had also been left with red tips immune to her hair-shifting magic. When she had cut the hair to hip-length, she'd left the red in her bangs, to remind her of the darkness still within her. A sign of caution, to remember the battle wasn't over.

A feeling of disgust washed over her as the red bangs slipped down into her view. Unlike Dia, Melody just felt like she was going to be sick looking at the color. She tried to put her focus on the purple – purple was good, purple was safe and had lots of good meanings for her, this purple was a reminder of her mermaid heritage and all the things that came with it. But she just kept glancing back at the red.

_I want it off._ Melody gently pushed for control, causing Dia to start shaking her head in disgust. _Dia, please..._

Dia relented. _Go ahead._

Toby looked startled as Melody sprang to her feet and stormed over to the desk in his study. She found a pair of scissors in his pencil cup, and grabbed at the hair that hung by her face. Toby wasn't fast enough to catch her before she'd snipped off half its length, letting the hair with the infernal red fall to the floor.

Toby grabbed her hand before she could attack her bangs. Hope begged, "Breathe, please, it's going to be okay."

"Dia said...I could.” She let Toby take the scissors, seeing the panic on his face. “I...I-I can't look at it. I just can't..."

Toby just looked at her for a moment before sighing. “Okay.”

They went to his bathroom, where Toby took a comb and straightened her bangs until they effectively blocked her eyesight. As carefully as he could, he slowly trimmed her hair until every hint of red was gone, leading to her losing half the length of her bangs. His hands were mostly steady, but it was still a somewhat uneven cut, as he'd never had a reason to cut hair before. After doing his best to even out her earlier assault and shortening the purple hair to...somewhat match, Toby stepped back and let Melody assess the new look in the mirror.
With Dia's guidance, she used her mermaid magic to grow her bangs out to their former length, and brushed them to the side where they looked best. After that, she stared at her reflection for a long time. With no red in sight, she felt calm again, rid of the visual reminder of Ziggurat and his Arrangement. The length itself wasn't a problem, she could handle that, long hair felt fine. The false color was what made her sick – not Dia, just her, learning about where it had come from.

Now it was gone.

She slumped a little in relief. “Thank you.”

Toby set the scissors and comb down, pulling her into a hug. “It's okay,” he promised. “I understand.”

*I know,* she thought, hugging back tightly, unable to speak.

When Toby let her go, her gaze flicked towards the mirror for a moment, but then returned to him. Slowly, she asked a question, not sure if she wanted to hear the answer. “Why are you being so nice to me? Why are you...being so stupidly understanding?”

The smile he gave was soft, and sad. He tapped a finger against the side of his head, and his left eye blinked gray. “Because we understand how hard this must be for both of you,” he answered, a hint of Faust's voice behind his once more. “The difference is that you two chose this. So if you're going to...fuse...we'd rather help than be an obstacle.”

His right eye filled with gray as well, as Faust took momentary full control. “Whatever your reason for being here, and for choosing to stay here, we will stand by you. I...do not fully understand the spectrum of human emotions, but I know pain. I know that...the two of you can...help each other.” His last words were slow, uncertain, but filled with a weak attempt at compassion.

Melody overrode Dia's wariness by starting another hug, this one for Faust alone. He stood there in confusion for the first few seconds, then slowly raised his arms in a stiff attempt to reply.

“We'll all learn how this works.” She felt tears in her eyes, and for now, let them happen. “None of us understand this, but none of us are alone, either.”

“...You are...making my chest hurt...”

“It's your emotions, Faust. You're gonna have to get used to that.”

“Stupid...”

“It's okay to cry.”

Faust and Melody spent a long while standing in the quiet, the former releasing the tears he didn't understand while the latter did her best to comfort him.

When Melody, Toby, and Hope rejoined Kalia, none of them mentioned what had happened. Emily commented on Melody's minor hair cut, prompting Kalia to try for a half-hearted, “Looks nice,” but everyone moved on fairly quickly. Masamune and Zeo were still searching Tracy's study, and only came over once to grab the microphone for a visual reference.

Though nothing about the events were said, Kalia could apparently sense the tenseness in the two/four minds, as she brought her smack-talk up to max levels and challenged both Toby and Melody to several game matches. All four consciousnesses were glad for this, and all but Faust
took turns at trying to beat her.

After a while, her controller died. She started to head to the media room next door to get new batteries, but paused as she heard someone following. When she turned, she saw Toby, and he joined her in the search. Both were quiet at first, still processing what they'd gone through. After a bit, though, Toby did speak. “I never knew your music magic was so...overpowering.”

She glanced up at him. “What do you mean?”

“You know, when we were...when it made me sing. I didn't even know what I was doing, but it...felt right, somehow. I could get words out that I couldn't before.” He frowned. “Is it always like that?”

Melody nodded. “In my experience, yeah. And from what I've seen for Dia, too.” She paused. “I...wasn't listening at the time, so I'm not sure what it was you sang, but...Dia's confused about something. I think another glitch got her. Something about a curse...?”

When Toby didn't answer, she stopped digging through drawers and turned to him. “Toby? What are you...cursed with?”

He absently shuffled through a couple more drawers before he answered. “Magic...if I use too much magic, I get sick. Both my parents are mages, and they were really excited to teach me, but my first spell had me in the hospital. At this point, I have such an energy build-up from having my magic unlocked, but not using it, that sometimes I have to cast a spell, and risk...” Toby sighed.

“...Is that what happened? When...” Melody didn't know how to finish her question, but it seemed Toby understood. By the look on his face, it hurt to remember, though.

“My father showed up. He...started attacking me, with his magic. I had to defend myself...I thought I was doing okay, but when Masamune and Zeo showed up for training, I...” There was guilt all over his face. “I used way too much. Rest wasn't enough to heal me that time.”

Melody felt herself swallow, nervously realizing something. “Did the Arrangement...fix it?”

He was silent for a while. Melody couldn't tell what his answer would be, but either way, the memory clearly wasn't a good one. She let him have a moment to himself, and eventually he answered quietly, “I have no idea.”

A lot of things made sense now. Why doctors couldn't diagnose his illness – Earth doctors wouldn't know magic illnesses. Why they couldn't treat it – can't treat what you can't diagnose. Why even Aniko's expertise couldn't help – he didn't have enough experience in that magic, he wouldn't know what to do. He'd kept Toby stable with some Fysika quartz, but that was as far as he could go.

And Tracy...Toby's mom had been called away shortly before that, something about an emergency with her old mage friends. Toby's father must have taken that opening to make his move. Contact with Tracy was minimal, and the emergency had developed into something she just couldn't leave. She knew everything that had happened, but could only send minimal support and advice with letters and small packages.

Out of all of this...something did bother her. She could figure that Toby's father would have ways to tell that Tracy had left, but...why? Just what reason did he have to attack his son? She'd never met the man, and Tracy hardly spoke of him, but she knew he was a workaholic. He and Tracy had parted on bad terms, and Toby had only a few fond memories of him. But he'd never been violent
towards them before.

She shared all of these thoughts with Dia, but her other half didn't know, either.

When she found the batteries, she grabbed two and headed back with Toby. They went back to playing for a bit, and then Mingzhu called. Mingzhu was relieved to hear she'd settled in, and said that her winter holiday cookies should be arriving at the gym sometime that afternoon. They had some idle chatter, then Mingzhu said she had to get back to bed and bid her good rest. Melody hung up feeling better than she had in days.

To Madoka: No magic lights in beyblades over here. Good luck on your end.

The armbands? I got them during that three months of being missing, I guess. Woke up wearing them, at least. I think they were supposed to cover...something? I had some kind of weird marks on my arms...or maybe bruises...I don't know. They went away pretty quick.

Sitting in her/Dia's bedroom, Melody stared at the armbands she'd almost forgotten about. They'd been in Dia's bag this whole time, sure, but they hadn't really been important, so she'd mostly ignored them. Now, though...well, she'd been curious.

They were from those three months, huh? Covered marks or bruises of some kind. It wasn't apparently enough to trigger any flashbacks, but it was still interesting.

She dug through the room a bit and found an old notebook and a pencil. Opening to an unused page, she jotted down what she knew about the 'missing' time period.

What we know about when Dia went missing:

Went to another dimension. Found by a woman who promised to get me home, specifically to my mom.
something that was triggered by seeing bey battles in the stadium
purple armbands that covered marks or bruises that disappeared

It wasn't much, but it was a start. She stuck the notebook in Dia's bag, and contemplated the sewn-on bey pouch.

To Noa: Still wondering about the Ducklett, but I know you're asleep and all. When you wake up though, I was also wondering if you saw who sewed my bey pouch onto my bag?

She dropped the armbands back into the bag, then went to go sit in the music room with Ikuto for a while and see how he was feeling.

It turned out he was feeling pretty good. His mind felt clear, he had a violin to play, and Easter wasn't breathing down his neck. He didn't say it directly, but he was clearly grateful for the opportunity to get out of Seiyo. His only concern was Utau, but Melody assured him that she wouldn't fall to Easter's tricks anymore. She sent Tadase a text to have him check on her, though, for his sake of mind.

She took out the flute from Lance – a beautiful gift that she'd probably never get over – and started practicing with the first part of the lesson plan, Ikuto giving some pointers on posture and such. It was a distraction that served well for both of them. She surprisingly managed to get him to promise a duet once she had a better handle on her new instrument.

A while later, Kayla arrived, and her attention was immediately diverted to the wandering Esaria.
When Melody rushed over to rescue her duck, she was assaulted by a hat being slammed onto her head, and in the confusion Kayla took Esaria and disappeared into the house.

Melody took the hat off to get a proper look at it, and was surprised and excited to find it had cat ears. Other than that, it was plum colored, that was cool. But cat ears! It also had a present bow slapped on it, so this was probably Kayla's present to her?

She pulled it back onto her head and hurried to find her duck. Kayla had taken her to the lounge on the second floor, and Esaria eagerly hopped away from the visitor to hide behind Melody's feet. She might not understand Esaria yet, but Melody could see the expression she had. “Kayla, you're scaring her!”

Kayla grinned sheepishly. “I'm sorry, she's just...so cute! What's her name? Where'd you get her?”

Melody bent down to pick Esaria up, and the duck settled into her arms. “Her name's Esaria. I just got her yesterday, from...one of my idol friends.”

“Aww, man, you saw your old co-workers? If I'd known I would've asked you to get autographs for me!”

“No way, I'm not your delivery girl!” Melody shook her head, smirking. “If you want those, you'll have to go to Japan and get them yourself.”

Kayla dramatically threw herself against the wall, wailing about the unfairness of life. Melody just rolled her eyes, sensing no genuine dismay in the scene – Kayla was just messing around.

When she was done with her 'fit', Kayla started badgering her about everything that had happened while she was in Japan. Melody gave a brief summary, leaving out the personal details; Kayla then just had to see what Melody had gotten for Christmas. When Melody asked Zeo why his sister was so hyperactive, he just shrugged. “She may or may not have a crush of some kind on you? Or she's just a huge ball of energy. No one can tell anymore.”

“Yeah, you have that effect on the whole Abyss family.” Masamune grinned, then bolted as Zeo shouted and dashed towards him. Melody and Dia both laughed.

Lunch went decently, with Kalia reporting that Margret and Peggie were doing alright, considering the circumstances. Zeo and Masamune hadn't found anything in Tracy's books regarding the strange microphone, so they still didn't know what it was. Melody would guess it was related to her mer heritage, considering what had happened earlier with Toby, but with Kalia and Kayla present she couldn't voice it.

The afternoon went by faster than Melody expected. Video games, flute practice, lots of chatter – evening hit before she knew it. They were preparing for dinner when Noa finally texted her back.

From Noa: The Ducklett is from Ganaha-san. Cathy was late because someone told her you were here, so she went to pick it up. As for the pouch, that was me. It simply felt more practical. I hope you had a peaceful day.

To Noa: Oh, thanks! It definitely is!

To Hibiki: Thanks so much for the Ducklett! She's super sweet.

Dinner passed uneventfully, and afterwards they gathered in the media room to marathon – of all things – Power Rangers. Her 'welcome back to America and its crazy dubs' party, according to Zeo.
She went to sleep feeling quite happy, Esaria curled up beside her on the pillow.

Chapter End Notes

Songs: "Midnight in Me" from Equestria Girls: Legend of Everfree - English  
"I've Got to Find a Way" (edited lyrics; extended version) from MLP: FiM - English  
"At The Beginning" by Richard Marx and Donna Lewis - English

Art:  
Midnight in Me: http://fav.me/dcgd0ri  
I've Got to Find a Way: http://fav.me/dcgds7d

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/  
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:  
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Your body should remember how this works, even if your mind doesn't, but let's go over the basics, okay?”

“O-Okay. Uh, how's this?”

Melody stood with an empty launcher, waiting as Zeo and Masamune checked her stance. They gave her some tips, which she easily slid into, and had her do some shadow launches for practice before letting her attach Spiral Leone.

The bey itself spun well, though with Melodia being two years out of practice, didn't end up lasting very long. They had her work on creating a bond with her bey, which mostly entailed launching it a lot and imagining her wishes being seen by it. 'This is how I want you to move' and 'You should go over there'. It was a lot harder than she'd anticipated, possibly in part because Melodia was uncertain about using a beyblade that wasn't Hades Lynx. Melody kept promising that she/they'd get it back at ToRyumon, but she could sense that Melodia still wasn't sure about all this – even after their brief battle to help Yuki.

It once occurred to her that she was talking to herself. She quickly dismissed the thought and hoped (again) that she wasn't going crazy.

“Yeah, that's it, you're getting the hang of it!” Zeo cheered as Melody was able to direct Leone through the short obstacle course of cans he'd set up. “You'll be back to top form in no time, Dia!”

“Let's do that a few more times and then give her a break,” Masamune suggested. “This isn't the only stuff she's gotta relearn, after all!”

Zeo nodded in agreement, “Good point. We could take her to the Gym's favorite cafe, I bet that'll help! How's that sound, Dia?”

Smiling, Melody nodded eagerly. “I'm looking forward to it!”

A few obstacle courses later, the trio headed for a place called 'Dragon Cafe', the boys sharing countless memories of crying over dropped cake (Masamune), spilling drinks on themselves (Zeo and about five others), and how they'd met Alyssin's father, Gurius Drake, at that table over there when they were eight years old. The name did click a little, but she'd left the Menta moon at the house, so she didn't get much more than remembering he was involved with 'Wandering Melody', some show thing that had been an attempt (a not very successful one, apparently) to broadcast her existence so her family could find her.

Melody found it very interesting that they'd met Gurius long before any of them had known his daughter. According to the boys, Alyssin and Gurius had had an estranged relationship for years, until something happened in the family that helped them settle their differences and allowed Alyssin to join her father in New York. They didn't know where she'd lived before, and whatever accent she might've had was lost due to her connection to the Pearl Tear – apparently, it just sort of canceled accents if you asked it to.

Melody spent the next hour doing accent requests for them, ranging from stereotypical Chinese to a southern drawl. Not only was it fun, but it was probably good practice with the Tear's magic, too.
They attracted a few people who said they enjoyed her 'impressions' and some of them recognized her, but no one made a big fuss.

Caught up in the joy of everything, Melody decided to sing for them. She didn't have to, and nothing was really pushing her to, but she wanted to.

She didn't magically get a song in her head or have an accompanying Tear-soundtrack, but she went up to the cafe's karaoke area and picked a song from the listings that she recognized. The owner didn't seem to need much convincing, as Melodia had sung for the cafe before and was always welcome to do so. If he wasn't so genuinely kindhearted, she might've suspected he only let her do it for the extra business he got by the customers she attracted.

Then again, it turned out the owner was the father of a Dungeon Gym blader...that might've had a little something to do with it. Once the music was started, she waited for the point where the lyrics kicked in, then began to sing.

"Oooh yeah, mmmm
Breakthrough"

"Up, down, spinnin' all around
Fly high, fallin' to the ground
Sometimes dreams can feel so far away"

"Time keeps skippin' out o' beat
Left, right, trippin' on your feet
Life is like a string of cloudy days"

"Sometimes it's raisin' your voice
Sometimes it's makin' some noise
Sometimes it's provin' to the world it was wrong
Whenever you can't see the light
Whenever there's no end in sight
Keep on, keep on movin' on
Keep on movin' on"

"Here comes a breakthrough
Here comes a day
Here comes a moment that you gotta go for it
So don't let it get away
It's all about a breakthrough
Just turn the page
Cause every day I'm getting closer
Life is just a roller coaster"

"Shake it, till you make it
Till you breaking on through
Don't stop till you breaking on through
Shake it, till you make it
Till you breaking on through
Don't stop till you breaking on through"

A younger girl had come near the stage and was watching in awe. Before she knew it, she'd helped the girl onstage and handed her the second microphone to sing along with her.
"Stop, still, take another breath
Road block, move it to the left
Get around whatever's in your way"

"Heartbreak, pick up all the pieces
Don't stop dancin' in the bleachers
It's gonna be your turn to play
Gonna be your turn to play"

"Sometimes it's raisin' your voice
Sometimes it's makin' some noise
Sometimes it's provin' to the world it was wrong
Whenever you can't see the light
Whenever there's no end in sight
Keep on, keep on movin' on
Keep on movin' on"

"Here comes a breakthrough
Here comes a day
Here comes a moment that you gotta go for it
So don't let it get away
It's all about a breakthrough
Just turn the page
Cause every day I'm getting closer
Life is just a roller coaster"

Melody had not been prepared in any fashion for Zeo to spring up on the stage and belt out the rap part – especially when she realized he wasn't even looking at the lyrics. *Holy crap.*

"I can see it in the blind sight
Movin' through the limelight
Groovin’ to the music Imma use it when the time's right
Hoping I can do it through the shadows, I can shine bright
Usually in life there's one shot, this is on
listen To the rhythm we givin' and it'll make you
Start pushin' the barriers it'll take you
Wherever that you wanna go, never too late to
Keep pushing till you breakthrough"

She and her co-singer took the song back as Zeo was given whooping cheers from the customers for his abrupt but amazing performance.

"Sometimes it's raisin' your voice
Sometimes it's makin' some noise
Sometimes it's provin' to the world it was wrong
Whenever you can't see the light
Whenever there's no end in sight
Keep on, keep on movin' on
Keep on movin' on"

"Here comes a breakthrough
Here comes a day
Here comes a moment that you gotta go for it
So don't let it get away
It's all about a breakthrough
Just turn the page
Cause every day I'm getting closer
Life is just a roller coaster

For the final part of the song, Melody dropped off, joining the crowd in clapping the beat as her young co-singer finished them off – she only added her voice back for the final line.

"Shake it, till you make it
Till you breakin’ on through
Don't stop till you breakin’ on through
Shake it, till you make it
Till you breakin’ on through
Don't stop till you breakin’ on through
Shake it, till you make it
Till you breakin’ on through
Don't stop"

“Here comes a breakthrough!”

The cafe erupted in cheers, and Melody found herself being hugged by her excited co-singer. “That was so cool! Thank you!! Thank you so much!”

Melody could've sworn she felt the girl's Haert just shining out right there. “You,” she told the girl, “have an amazing voice.”

“Really?!"

After assuring the girl yes, really, and letting her friends take pictures of the two of them, Melody waved to Masamune, Toby, and Zeo, and they helped her escape the crowd – not that the people were stopping her, but it was just more people than she felt comfortable with. She calmed down quickly once they were out of the cafe, and made sure to tell Zeo, “You, sir, freaked the crap outta me when you jumped onstage.”

“But it was fun, wasn't it?” he grinned.

She decided not to dignify that with an answer. “I think I'm ready to get back to training,” she instead stated.

“Okay, but after that, you and I are heading to the beach.” Zeo's tone gave no room for argument. She didn't even have a chance to ask why, before Uno made a suggestion.

“You should battle her now, Masamune! Even if she can control the bey, it won't matter if she can't focus in a battle!”

Masamune nodded firmly. “Right! A battle it is! And after that we'll head back to Toby's, and you can get ready for the beach!”

They refused to tell her why she was going to the beach the entire way to their training lot. Masamune quickly set up for battle. “Alright Dia, are you ready?”
“Uh-huh!” Melody locked Leone into her launcher and shifted into the stance that had given her the best results so far. For some reason she felt like she was supposed to do some sort of martial arts demonstration first, but maybe that was just the time with the Beylin Fist kicking in.

Masamune lifted his own launcher. “Okay then, here we go!”

“3!” Zeo started the countdown.

“2!” Melody knew it didn't matter if she won or lost – this was just practice, and it was just for fun.

“1!” Masamune had that fire in his eyes. He wasn't going to go easy on her.

“Let it rip!” She didn't want him to.

The two beys went flying and hit the ground hard; Masamune didn't waste any time in getting Striker to attack. “Hit 'er hard, Striker!”

Melody let the beys clash a few times, trying to judge Striker's power. She knew Masamune was strong, that was just a given – but was she strong enough to stand up to him?

_Guess I'll find out_, she thought. “Okay Leone, don't let him run the show! Hit 'im back!”

Leone packed a powerful punch, and Striker was sent hopping back. “It won't be that easy!”

Masamune promised. The next clash sent up sparks, the beys' fusion wheels grinding together before the friction forced them to separate. “Again!”

“Just what I was going to say!” Melody retorted, sending Leone in fast. The bey hit hard, and after another wave of sparks, pushed Striker back. _Striker might have a really high attack power, but it's not so great on stamina_, she remembered, _and his defense is even worse! I might be able to wear him down a little if I keep attacking head on like this!_

Responding to her will, Leone began a barrage of attacks against its opponent, slowly driving the other bey back. Masamune seemed to catch on, though, and had Striker retreat.

“You gonna let her get away with that?!” Zeo demanded, in full hype from the battle. “Come on Masamune! Get her!”

“You got it!” Masamune grinned, his spirit starting to gather into an aura around him. “Even if this is training, I won't lose, you hear me Dia?!” In time with its blader's growing determination, Striker rushed at Leone. As Melody opened her mouth to retort and counter, a flash of blue light caught her eye. Distracted, she wasn't able to challenge the attack, and Leone was sent flying behind her. “Gah!”

When she was sure Leone was still spinning, she turned to see what the light had been. It was hidden in the trees behind that part of the fence, but she did spot it – or rather, her.

“Shelly,” she whispered, her eyes widening. Her sister, recognizable by her sad blue eyes and uncut brown hair, only stared at her before the flash reoccurred – a teleport aura – and she vanished. “Shelly, wait!”

She rushed to the fence, but her sister was gone. Stunned, she dropped her head, muttering, “What were you doing here?”

“Dia, what's wrong?” Zeo and Toby ran over; Masamune summoned Striker back to his hand and did the same.
“Shelly? That's your sister, right?” Putting a hand on her shoulder, Masamune urged, “What happened?”

Shutting her eyes as she tried to let her mind settle, she answered, “Shelly. She was...she was right there. Just for a moment.”

Looking concerned, Zeo left the lot and ran around to the wooded area, examining the spot Melody was in front of carefully. “Right here? You sure?”

She nodded, “It...She teleported. I-I don't know.”

“Could she have been spying on you?” Masamune wondered. “The...Mytan, that's controlling her?”

Zeo knelt down, retrieving a slip of paper he'd spotted on the ground. “Guys, I found something.”

Waiting for Zeo to look it over, Melody asked after a moment, “What is it? Is it Shelly's?”

Frowning, he slipped it through the fence. “I can't read it,” he said. Once she had the paper in her hands, she flipped it until it was upright and read what was written on it. The Chinese words were choppy, some written in pen and some scratched on by pencil, like it had taken several sessions to write the note.

_I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I wanted to stop it but I couldn't. I hope your head gets better. Stay strong. I'll keep fighting. I love you Xiaolian. I love everyone. Please tell them that. Keep that Tsukiyomi boy safe, I know you can. I'll do whatever damage control I can here. Never forget that I love you and I will never stop fighting until we're together again._

She read it twice, then held it close. “She broke through just to get this to me,” she realized. _Shelly_...

Melody hung her head, feeling that strange half-itch feeling of tears that didn't quite reach her eyes. Clutching her phone, she whispered, “Fight it, Shelly. We'll save you soon.”

If Shelly fought hard enough that she could use the Mytan's power to teleport, not even just once but twice, they might be able to save her far sooner than Melodia could've ever hoped.

Melody just had to get strong enough to help her.

______________________________________________________________

“Put the launcher down,” Zeo said gently. “Let's go inside and join the others, okay Dia?”

Her hands shaking slightly, Melody only tightened her grip. Ever since they'd returned to Toby's house, she'd been training with Leone nonstop, trying to distract herself from...everything. In the end, it only made her focus narrow, but she still couldn't stop. There was too much to fight for, too much to train for. She couldn't just act like nothing was happening. She couldn't just pretend that...Shelly hadn't been there.

She felt sick, though, if she was being honest. She thought that if she even looked at a piece of food right now, she would throw up. “I'll come in later.”

He shook his head. “Dia, come on. It's been almost two hours since we got back, this isn't good for you.”

She knew he was right. Her wrists were aching, she felt a little lightheaded...but she couldn't stop herself. She had to push herself further, _harder_, get to the same level as everyone else, and-
Zeo reached out to take the launcher from her, and her vision blurred, “No!”

There was a loud crack, a flash of pink, and Zeo was sent flying across the yard with a painful shout. Melody tried to blink her eyes clear, but everything was hazy. “Zeo!”

She couldn't see him properly, but she could tell he stood back up. “Dia,” he said firmly, “drop the launcher. Come inside.”

He stepped forward, and the blur worsened. “Stay back!” She stumbled backwards as her head started pounding. She couldn't think.

“I can't do that, Dia.” Zeo kept approaching, and she kept tripping back until she hit a tree. “Please. Just focus Dia, it's okay.”

“I need-” The nauseous feeling was starting to worsen. “I need to be stronger,” she choked out. “I can't be...I can't be so weak, I have to get stronger!”

“You can't get that strength at the cost of your mind, Dia! We'll help you, we've already promised that, but this isn't the way to get there!”


Her vision too hazy, she hadn't seen him reach her. He grabbed the launcher and yanked it away, shaking her with his free hand. “Melodia, you need to stop!”

She swung at him. She didn't know why. Everything was too bright and foggy and spinning all at the same time. Don't stop. Don't stop battling. Win! “Give it back!”

For several seconds they wrestled for the launcher, Melody feeling completely disconnected from her body. She could hear herself screaming, but it just felt...wrong.

“Don't make me fight you!” she could distantly hear Zeo pleading. “Don't listen to it, Dia, you have to listen to me!”

I'm not trying to listen to it! I don't want to! Melody thought in fear.

The blur that was Zeo was pushed back, and there was another shock of pink. She heard him scream.

NO! she wanted to holler.

She could've cried when he stood back up. “This is for you, Dia!” he shouted. “Destiny Needle!”

A blue light took over what little vision she had, and she was suddenly anchored back in her body – but she couldn't move. As her eyes finally cleared, though only slightly, she saw herself surrounded by a glowing circle, Zeo beyond the edge of it. His eyes were burning with a terrifying light, but his expression was one of concern, even with the bleeding gash in his left arm, cutting through his jacket sleeve.

“Fight it, Melodia!” he ordered. “Don't let it control you like it controlled me and Toby. You don't have to suffer like we did!”

Her body gave a nervous laugh, jerking for a moment. She heard Zeo growl as he waved his uninjured arm, and she was suddenly pushed down by what seemed like gravity alone, trapped on
her knees. “You're not alone! You don't have to fight any of this on your own, remember that! Fight the Arrangement!”

She could feel herself take back control of her breathing, and started gasping for air as things lined up. Faust was still in Toby's head. Zeo...Zeo was using one of the special moves from Flame Byxis, but channeling it through his body instead of the bey. It wasn't just a circle, it was the compass image that appeared when Byxis had used that move. He was using it to control her, keep her from moving. Keep her from fighting.

If this had happened to him, what had the Arrangement system left in her?

With no other ideas, Melody reached for help from the only source she could think of. Melodia!

Unlike before, she wasn't moved aside for the original consciousness to take over. Melodia seemed to pull away from her, trying to access something else entirely. Trying to see what it was, Melody's gaze followed the pull towards...their Characters.

What? ... Oh!

With all the strength she could muster, Melody cried out, “My heart, unlock!”

Light exploded around her. She welcomed it, reaching out as Annie disappeared into her egg, and drew the Character into her heart. “Chara-Transformation: Ocean's Lullaby!” announced Annie's echoing voice within her, before she was brought back to the ground abruptly by Zeo's power. Warmth flooded through her, chasing away the crippling control of her past Arrangement. She gasped in relief, a tear slipping out. “F-Free,” she puffed. “I'm free!”

The compass image faded, and Zeo was quickly at her side. “Dia, are you okay?!”

“I'm so—I didn't mean to-” Full control finally restored to her, Melody latched onto Zeo, shaking. “I'm so sorry!”

“It's not your fault,” he assured her. “I didn't think about you being haunted like me and Toby. I should've realized. I should've warned you.”

“I-I hurt you!”

“What, this? This is nothing. I'll heal right up, don't you worry about it. I've gotten way worse cuts going camping with my dad.” When she finally pulled away, he smiled gently. “Maybe we should lay off the beyblade until you and I meditate, huh?”

Melody's voice was gone; she was too shaken to speak. She just nodded, sniffling, and let Zeo help her back to her feet. Reluctantly, she broke the Character Transformation, the warmth fading and making her shudder involuntarily.

Zeo swung his arm around her. “Let's go get us some cocoa,” he suggested. “After that we can head to the beach, get you distracted from all this.”

Wearily, she nodded again, letting him lead her back into the house. “Thank you,” she murmured softly to Annie, who smiled with great relief in return.

“You're insane,” Kalia said for the fifth time as she wrapped up Zeo's arm. “Okay, I've seen a lot of crazy stuff back home, I've seen people do crazy things, but you. You use a power you're absolutely terrified of to face against a friend that's being controlled by something of the same
origin. You literally talked someone down from inner-mind brainwashing, and came out of it with nothing but a couple bruises and a mild injury.”

Slapping his arm with about a minuscule amount of her strength, she watched him wince and smirked at him. “You'd make a terrific Saiyan.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Thank you...?”

Listening to the two as she sat at the breakfast bar, Melody bit back a smile and tried to hide it behind her cocoa mug. Dia, confused, asked her, *Is that even a compliment?*

*From Kalia it is.* Melody chuckled, then reached over to her phone as it buzzed.

*From Noa: I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm working on a research paper and I wondered if you two could answer a couple of questions to help me? I'd cite you as separate people, of course. If you aren't comfortable with the questions, you don't have to answer.*

*To Noa: Sure. What are the questions?*

*From Noa: The first question is, “If you were to discover you had one more sibling than you were told of by your parents, what would your reaction be?”*  
Dia might not have been in control, but Melody could feel her raising a mental eyebrow. *I see why she asked. We've got experience with that. I'd be suspicious of why I wasn't told, but would remain calm in my search for answers.*

Melody nodded. She thought over her own answer, then started typing again.

*To Noa: Dia's answer is “I'd be suspicious about why no one told me before, but I'd keep calm while I looked for answers.”*  
*To Noa: My answer is “I’d be a little hurt and upset, but I’d try to keep myself together and get an explanation.”*

*From Noa: I see. Thank you.*
*From Noa: My second question is, “If this sibling was taken without the parents' knowledge, how would you feel towards those who had taken them?”*  
Both minds raised an eyebrow at that. What kind of research paper was Noa writing, anyway?

*To Noa: Dia says “I'd be really pissed and might want to punch them. And if the sibling had a say in it, I'd be a bit hurt that they never tried to contact me.”*  
*To Noa: I guess my answer would be “I'd want a full explanation on why, and make decisions based on that.”*

*From Noa: I’m a little surprised at how different your answers are, to be honest. Not that there's anything wrong with it. Thank you very much, both of you. I have one more question, and then I’ll let you go.*
*From Noa: “How would you feel if this sibling, after many years, was able to come meet you?”*  
Both minds thought carefully on that.

*To Noa: Dia says “It would depend completely on the circumstances and what they're like.” I*
kind of agree with this one.

From Noa: Alright. You've both been very helpful. Melody, how should I cite you? Just as a friend of Melodia-san?

To Noa: Um...yeah, sure. That's fine. Good luck on your paper!

From Noa: I have a good feeling about it, especially with the insightful input of you both.

Melody went back to her cocoa, and waited for Zeo to decide when it was time to head to the beach. For whatever reason they were going... Maybe she'd take Esaria. Or were Duckletts more freshwater fowl...?

She looked down under her stool, where Esaria was currently settled. “Hey Esaria, do you like the beach? Or lakes? Uh, quack once for the beach, quack twice for lakes.”

The duck considered the question, then quacked three times. “Both?” A simple nod. “You wanna come to the beach with me, then? I don't know what's going on, but...”

Esaria gave another nod, and that was apparently that. Melody finished her cocoa, set the mug in the sink, and went upstairs to change out of her Pjs – and grab Chiasa's belt, of course.

Before she turned out the light in her room, she paused to glance at the microphone. A beach...maybe she'd spot some merfolk there? Or they'd spot her, more likely, because of her pendant... And if it was connected to her music magic, maybe another mer's input could help.

She tucked the microphone into her bag, turned out the light, and went downstairs to put Esaria in her poke ball, and see if Zeo was ready. This distraction would be good for her – and for Dia, who'd been quiet ever since the incident outside.

With Esaria in her ball, and that tucked into her bag, she followed Zeo to one of the two garages. He tossed her a helmet, and after a few seconds of blinking as he put on his own, she remembered that he didn't drive a car – he drove a motorcycle.

Oh. Well...right. Okay then.

She stuffed her new hat into her bag and put on the helmet. Once her Characters were also safely inside, she joined Zeo on the bike, Dia unlocking some associated memories to calm her down. Muscle memory also kicked in, which helped as well.

Zeo started up the bike, and they were off. Melody was more than a little jittery, but she had a secure hold on his waist and more than that, she trusted him. He didn't speed or make any fancy maneuvers, and after the first ten minutes or so, she was more comfortable with it. Actually, the way her hair was flying behind her felt kind of funny.

When they stopped at a light, Zeo called back to her. “You doin' okay, Dia?”

“Oh, yeah!” Being given the chance to breathe, Melody realized she really was fine. The ride itself was a distraction, and it was working well. Zeo was really good at this. “Are you gonna tell me why we're going to the beach yet?”

“Nope!” He laughed.

The light soon changed to green, and they were off again. Zeo drove with surprising care, and though she couldn't really feel her legs, it was a lot less...for lack of a better word, scary, than she'd
thought it would be. Dia was perfectly at ease with the wind and the speed, and it was crossing over to her.

She found herself losing track of time as she grew more and more confident about the ride. There was a buzz in her mind, the feeling of near-merging with Dia due to the experience, and when it did happen for a brief second, Melodia just gave a thrilled burst of laughter. “Wooooo-hooooo!”

Zeo started laughing at her outburst, and she didn't even care.

The sights of New York were, to a suburban girl like Melody, something spectacular. When they hit a red light, Zeo would point to places he knew, or she'd recognize something from Dia's memories.

Eventually, they turned into a parking lot and came to a stop. Zeo activated a shield enchantment to keep the bike from being stolen – courtesy of Tracy – and when their helmets were off, he proceeded to lead the way. Melody had a bit of time to let her Characters back out, and both seemed excited.

When they hit the sand and arrived at the beach proper, a mental force of ocean slammed into her. Melody stumbled a bit in surprise, while Zeo herded her towards the many, many people gathered there. “Hey!”

Some of them turned, and cheerful greetings were called back. As she and Zeo got closer, one of them let out a gasp, a grin breaking onto her face. “Princess!”

Almost everyone who heard the cry began to rally around her, and Melody almost backed into Zeo trying to gain some distance. A few kids were suddenly hugging her; elderly folks were beaming with joy. A middle aged couple greeted her with bows. “It's such an honor, princess! Welcome!”

She heard Dia swear. I totally forgot. It's the second.

Uh, yeah? Obviously??

It's a mer gathering. The Day of Light Tide. We celebrate Aqua Regina and all she's done for us. Songs, stories, lots of food.

As Zeo tried to convince everyone to give her some space, Dia's words processed. Melody looked around at the beach, grills and blankets and people everywhere. She realized that everyone here was someone of mer descent. She was surrounded by merfolk.

Her people.

“H-Hi, everyone! I'm glad I could make it!”

This was either going to be catastrophic or amazing.

Chapter End Notes

Song: "Breakthrough" from the movie Lemonade Mouth - English

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 11

“How long are you staying?”

“I've always wanted to meet you!”

“It's so wonderful to see you again, princess.”

“Did you miss us when you went traveling?”

Melody had been at the beach for almost ten minutes, and everyone was still asking her questions. Saying how happy they were to see her. Wondering how she was doing...

It was overwhelming at first. She brought Esaria out and held her for comfort. The duck quacked enough that some people got the hint that they were too close, and they backed off.

Zeo had been abducted by an elderly pair that seemed to be set on adopting him as their 'precious human grandson'. From what she could see, it was adorable. No one seemed to mind his presence, though some younger kids did seem confused.

Eventually, things did calm down. Melody was given space and got to try some of the scattered food, and Esaria hopped off to try the water. Annie and Hope befriended a baby boy, and explaining that to his mom was kind of fun.

As she wandered and snacked, Melody watched the merfolk around her. They were all shapes and sizes, and colors too – a woman with yellow eyes here, a child with aqua hair there. With the ways of anime, she might not have guessed these brightly colored folks were merfolk at all if she hadn't sensed the 'ocean' around them.

Some of them were from the Antarctic Kingdom – hers. They were, without a doubt, the happiest to see her of everyone there.

There was such diversity, it almost didn't make sense. When she asked someone why so many different merfolk were living on the surface, the answer was both surprising and logical. All current princesses and guardians lived on the surface, so many of the people would sometimes visit to see why they liked it so much. Aside from that, they felt safer because of it, since it meant a closer proximity and access to technology if they needed to get in touch with one for emergencies.

That explained why there were so many Antarctic and Arctic merfolk – she and Alyssin lived in the area. They wanted to be close to their princesses.

Alyssin... At the thought of her, Melody asked if anyone had seen her. They all gave a general shrugging answer, guessing she might be at a different beach. While going to grab a drink from one of the coolers, Melody took her phone out to text her.

To Alyssin: having a good Day of Light Tide?

It took a while for her to get a response. She'd already sat down on a blanket with Esaria when her phone buzzed.
From Alyssin: yeah. I'm out of town with my dad or I'd be at the usual beach.
From Alyssin: with you, im guesing.

To Alyssin: when you get back, come see me. We need to talk.
To Alyssin: until then...tell any of my people there that I say hi.

From Alyssin: I should be back in a few days. Srry. And I will! Do the same for me?

To Alyssin: Sure.

After her breather, Melody rejoined the wandering crowds, telling Indigo merfolk of their princess's greeting and ensuring the Aqua, Pink, and Yellow ones that their Tears were in good hands. She promised Greens that Megumi was safe. She tried to cheer up Oranges who had no mermaid to call princess or guardian.

New people kept arriving, and she did her best to greet them all, trying to be polite. She certainly wasn't a host of the gathering, but she was realizing just how important she was to them all. Even if they weren't from her kingdom, they were ecstatic to see a princess celebrating with them.

One girl that she greeted seemed quite surprised to see her. “M-Miss Melodia?” She was the first to greet her by name, so Melody gave the girl her full attention.

“Oh, hi! I'm sorry, this is gonna sound bad, but have we met...?”

The girl blinked. “Uh...n-no, I...no, sorry. I just wasn't expecting...” She pushed a bit of hair from her eyes. “I-I'm Leyla. The, um, Orange guardian before the last princess was m-my mother.”

Melody paused for a moment. “Oh, I...I see.” Orange ponytail, brown eyes, a white and blue dress with a black sash – Leyla didn't look familiar, but Melody could sense strange, familiar power from her. She wasn't entirely sure if she was comfortable with it, actually. She was...getting an uneasy feeling of deja vu...

“I-I'll leave you to yourself. It was nice to m-meet you.” Leyla nodded shyly before darting off, heading for a group of Orange merfolk. Melody's tense feeling didn't quite go away, though. \textit{Dia? Who was the guardian before the last princess?}

Uh...Mom might know? I think she was friends with most of the guardians and princesses of that time.

Melody retreated to a blanket with a couple of kids and took out her phone, trying to shake her nerves off.

To Mom: happy Day of Light Tide. Um, what was the name of the Orange guardian that you knew?

\textit{Just don't expect a quick answer, she's kinda either on Arus or in China. Time zones.}

Melody sighed, accepting a hug that one of the kids offered. \textit{Yeah...I dunno, Leyla just made me feel off.}

\textit{Someone from Margret's world, maybe?}

...\textit{Maybe? I think there was a Leyla...I don't know if it was Margret's world, though...I had a lot of side stories that never happened...}
Melody sat with the kids for a while, regaining energy from all her social interactions. There were several others who seemed to have the same idea on their own blankets. She didn't expect to recover much thought, but being by the ocean was definitely helping.

At some point, Zeo joined them, having escaped the adoring elderly couple. He let her lean on him, and brought out his Zorua and Poochyena to play with the kids. Melody found some joy in hearing their cheerful voices – her 'canine' and 'vulpine' for Pokemon was apparently passable. She wondered when she'd learn to hear Esaria...

Speaking of Esaria, she'd curled right up in Melody's lap, having satisfied her curiosity of the water for now. Melody giggled and pet the cute little duck, and enjoyed some quiet time with her and Zeo.

She put thoughts of Leyla aside for now. This was a day to set aside worries and enjoy the ocean's beauty. There would be time to think later, when her mother answered.

You're really starting to feel at home, huh? Dia sounded proud of her. Melody felt her face heating up in embarrassment, and tried to hide it from Zeo. You keep referring to things as yours. It's...It makes me really happy.

Melody was silent for a bit, before picking her answer. It makes me really happy, too.

After maybe a half hour of relaxing, Zeo nudged her and nodded to the group that had approached them. Taking a moment to clear her throat, she looked up at them. “Uh, yes?”

“Would you pick the Evening Song, princess?” one of them asked eagerly.

Dia filled her in before she could make a fool of herself. A song sung by the entire gathering, picked by one among them – usually a princess or guardian if they were available. All Melody had to do was open herself to the Pearl Tear and let it choose the song that matched her experiences and thoughts.

That sounded easy enough. “Uh, sure!” Melody stood, brushing herself off a bit. People called out for everyone to join them, while Zeo backed off, letting the merfolk have their space. Melody found herself a few feet away from the water's edge, the rest of the gathering behind her.

She pushed all thought aside, and focused on the energy of her Pearl Tear. Like she had before, she opened herself to the Pearl Tear and let it pick the song that matched her experiences and thoughts.

A piano, gentle and familiar, began to play. This was a song that Melody had heard many times throughout her life, and she agreed with the Tear – this was the perfect fit.

"The wind is moving
But I am standing still
A life of pages
Waiting to be filled"

"A heart that's hopeful
A head that's full of dreams
But this becoming
Is harder than it seems"
"Feels like I'm
Looking for a reason
Roamin' through the night to find
My place in this world
My place in this world
Not a lot to lean on
I need your light to help me find
My place in this world
My place in this world"

She was dimly aware, to some degree, that she wasn't alone right now. Swirling energy of pink, orange, every color of the rainbow, was surrounding her. Spots of red and sky blue around Annie and Hope; an electric blue sparkling around Zeo. Everything mixed together in a kaleidoscope of spirits.

"If there are millions
Down on their knees
Among the many
Can you still hear me"

"Hear me asking
Where do I belong?
Is there a vision
That I can call my own?"

"Show me, I'm
Looking for a reason
Roamin' through the night to find
My place in this world
My place in this world
Not a lot to lean on
I need your light to help me find
My place in this world
My place in this world"

In the strong instrumental that followed, she felt everyone's spirits merge. Hands gripped her own on either side, and the power of the song rose into a chorus that escaped any experience she'd ever had. Strength, courage, comfort, acceptance – all together, all at once.

"Lookin' for a reason
Roamin' through the night to find
My place in this world
My place in this world
Not a lot to lean on
I need your light to help me find
My place in this world
My place in this world"

There was no way to describe the beauty of the mer choir. With the magic of Aqua Regina and the Tear that led them, each voice blended perfectly with the next, harmonies flowing around the leading notes. If someone were to ask what she thought of it, Melodia would have only two words for them: Perfect peace.
"Lookin' for a reason
Roamin' through the night to find
My place in this world
My place in this world
Not a lot to lean on
I need your light to help me find
My place in this world
My place in this world"

"Lookin' for a reason
Roamin' through the night to find
My place in this world
My place in this world"

The music soared around them, catching the wind as it slowly faded into silence. As the hands holding hers fell back, Melodia raised her head and echoed one last time, a capella.

"Lookin' for a reason
Roamin' through the night to find
My place in this world...
"

A pink array of light blazed around her, the Haerts of everyone around her calling out. Melodia cherished the feeling, the comfort of her people and the strength they shared.

It was overwhelming, but in a good way. It wasn't that she felt she could do anything, but more...with the support of these people here, her goals felt a lot closer. Everything she wanted seemed reachable now. Saving Max and Shelly, getting Megan and her family home, stopping Easter and Nemesis-

The light was torn away, a painful chunk of energy leaving her without warning. In a panic, Melodia whirled around, her eyes scanning the area until they fell onto a single girl in the crowd. The pink rushed into her in the span of seconds, disappearing before anyone else could follow the trail.

Leyla.

Before Melodia could make a single move, the strange girl had vanished. No light, no wind – simply gone. Melodia was left staring at the person who'd been behind her, who had a glazed over look; they blinked, and their eyes cleared. There was no indication that they, or anyone in that vicinity, even realized someone had disappeared. The only proof that anything had happened at all was the dull pain of emptiness from Melodia's stolen inner Haert.

Those closest to her seemed to take her sudden turn around as eagerness. She was clapped on the shoulder and herded along with all the others, and the only reason she kept any semblance of calm was the fact that she could not, would not worry these people.

The next half hour or so was kind of a blur, though, as she tried to patch up the hole in her Haert energy.

When things finally stopped being fuzzy in her vision, Melody became aware that her head was resting in someone's lap. “-ina is one of my favorites,” an older woman’s voice was saying. “Let me just – dear, did you bring one of those projection spells from that nice woman Tracy?”
The person below her shifted slightly, and something was passed over her head. “Here you go,” was the reply of Zeo's voice. That calmed her a bit – Zeo must've noticed her daze, and kept an eye on her. What did he tell the others, she wondered?

_We're patched up, but that hurt like hell, Dia mumbled. Thank Regina for Zeo. He's getting hugs later._

_Agreed._ Melody wriggled a bit before managing to sit up. She leaned on Zeo's side, not feeling up to supporting herself yet. She still felt a little queasy from the stolen Haert. Zeo said nothing, but his arm went around her in a protective hug. Esaria was almost instantly settled into her lap, while Annie sat on her shoulder. Hope stretched out atop Zeo's head.

“Can everyone hear me?” Glancing to her left, Melody could see the elderly woman that had been cooing over Zeo earlier. A palm-sized silver ball was in her hands, a plus sign glowing a gentle white across it.

Once a general sign of agreement passed through the crowd, the woman smiled. “Well, as our Princess is a little overwhelmed by the amount of magic we all let out, I hope it's alright that I'm the one to share Aqua Regina's story with all of you folks this year.” She let her eyes wander over to Melody, who nodded in agreement. One, because that sounded like an amazing story, and two, she'd much rather hear it than have Dia unlock it to tell herself.

_“Alright, everyone settle down! Let's begin, shall we?”_  

When the beach was quiet, the old woman began the tale. Many times, Melody wanted to speak, ask questions, but the story gave an aura of silence to all its listeners.

“The ancient Manaphy is said to have created merfolk, and their sister people, the Panthalassa. All the gods who watched over waters took the young tribes into their care, sharing the responsibility. In time, however, their duties grew too numerous, and it was decided that they needed another to guide the two peoples. Manaphy called upon the aid of Lugia and Kyogre, and the three asked of the Creators to bless them with an apprentice.

“It's unknown which of the Creators gave their power and blessing, but a human-like child was brought into the world. Manaphy raised and tutored her in water magics, while Lugia taught her the songs of the ocean, and Kyogre guided her to care for all marine life. The three gods named the child Regina.

“Regina was still young by the standards of gods when she took the mantle of leader to merfolk and Panthalassa. It is said that both people were wary at first, but grew to accept her duties. She led a prosperous era, coached by her parents and teachers, and was overjoyed at the support her new people gave her.

“Alas, the peace was not meant to be. A darkness overtook the Panthalassa people, urging them to attack. Balance was lost as they warred with the unprepared merfolk, seeking conquest of the sea. As her parents struggled with the damage to their oceans, Regina escaped their watch to face the corrupt people on her own. She tried to reason with them, to heal them, but all her magic was nothing against their combined might. She was too young, and the darkness within them had taken complete hold of their souls. Though she wanted desperately to save them, she knew that too much damage had been caused, too many merfolk lost. Without the voices of her parents, Regina was forced to make the decision on her own.

“Calling upon the mighty powers she had been taught all her life, Regina systematically depleted their powers, gathered the corrupted, and brought divine destruction upon all Panthalassa. Tired,
mournful, and weakened, Regina could not be comforted by the merfolk she had saved, and begged her parents to let her rest. The war had taken a great toll on her heart, and the three gods took pity on her. Each sacrificed a small portion of their power to grant her the gift of the divine, the ability to pass on their memories to a new life. Regina wept with relief, and gave all she had left to heal those who had been hurt before she entered her second life. Her memories were sealed away within the underwater castle she called home, waiting for the day she was ready to receive them. In honor of her loving sacrifice, the three gods raised her anew, granting her the full title of an ocean ruler. It is during her second life that she became the goddess we know today...Aqua Regina.

“This story was blessedly given to us by Manaphy many centuries ago, and all keep it well. We are granted the knowledge of our goddess's protection, her sacrifices, and her love.”

Melody blinked out tears as the tale ended, while others did the same or applauded the power of their goddess. While the show had touched on the past of Aqua Regina and the Panthalassa, it hadn't...it hadn't been like this. She couldn't imagine the heartbreak of that kind of betrayal, or the sorrow when Regina was forced to act.

If Melody had to choose what to call Aqua Regina, between goddess and anything else, the word she would probably choose would be 'mother'.

Her hand lightly touched her pendant, and she hoped that Aqua Regina could feel how touched and honored she was for the goddess's guidance. She then buried her face in Zeo's side and tried to control her tears. Thank you, Aqua Regina.

“Hey Miss? How'd the first princesses get their magic?”

Enjoying a cup of warm tea as the evening grew colder, the old woman turned to the curious boy that had approached her. After the tale of Aqua Regina's beginning, many folks had returned to the city, or disappeared to their ocean homes. Of the half that remained, they had mostly scattered to food and conversation, though Melody and Zeo remained by the old couple, enjoying the quiet and the peaceful company.

In answer to the boy's question, the woman smiled. “Another story of Aqua Regina's protecting gifts. My voice is a little tired, though...”

To Melody's surprise, Zeo perked up. “I know that one. Is it okay if I-?”

“Of course it's alright, Zeodore!”

Melody couldn't withold the snort drawn out by the name. Zeo elbowed her, but she was already lost in giggles. “I'm not as great a storyteller, but if anyone else wants to hear it, I'm willing.”

With an excited grin, the boy turned and ran off to gather a group, and Zeo prepared a bottle of water. Melody reluctantly pulled away from his side and sat herself up next to him. “How do you know mer stories?”

He shrugged, nodding to the woman drinking her tea. “I've been hearing them here for as long as you have. My dad or Tracy usually drive us down here.” He paused as his Poochyena nuzzled his face. “But Dad's busy today, and Tracy's still doing mage stuff, so I figured I'd just drive you down and we could chill with your people.”

Melody smiled, her tone full of gratefulness. “Thank you, Zeo. This has been...it's been great.” Even with the...Leyla incident, her time at the beach had been her favorite over anything else since arriving in New York.
Zeo reached over to ruffle her hair, then settled in as people showed up to hear the story of the mermaid princesses. He took the silver ball he'd gotten back from the old woman, and traced a plus sign on it; when it reappeared in a gentle glow, he cleared his throat and waited for everyone to sit.

“Okay, so disclaimer, I'm sort of a special non-mer friend to the princess here. I've been hearing the stories of your people for about six years now, and I like to think I've gotten them pretty solid in my head, but if I say something that doesn't sound right feel free to call me out on it. Okay? Everyone ready? I'm gonna tell the legend of how the first mermaid princesses came to be.”

Melody pushed herself back a bit, stopping next to the eager boy who'd posed the question. Esaria and her Characters resettled themselves, and once Zeo got his Poochyena to stop sniffing the enchanted sphere, he started the story.

“It was Aqua Regina's second life. Decades after her rebirth, after receiving the memories of her first incarnation. She wanted the merfolk to have a way to defend themselves, so that a catastrophe like the Panthalassa attack would never happen again. With guidance from her three parents, she took her case to the Lord of Space, the dragon Palkia, and asked for pearls to grant to the people. Due to her duties done in both lives up to that point, Palkia deemed her worthy of the gift, and granted her eight pearls that could be blessed with her power.

“Aqua Regina took the pearls to her castle and filled them with her ocean magic. Music, love, and care – each aspect equal to the other. She held a festival to gather all merfolk, and during the celebrations she chose eight girls who held strong hearts and unwavering loyalty to their fellow mer. She soon held another gathering, giving these chosen mermaids the eight pearls, and decreed them to be the guardians of the people. She began training them in combat, spells, and music. They bonded with their pearls and learned magics that are now lost to the people.

“Her power spent over the creation of the pearl blessings, and the teachings of the guardians, Aqua Regina's second life ended peacefully. The guardians scattered across the waters to better protect the people, and around where they settled grew the kingdoms of today.”

While applause rang out for Zeo, Melody found herself exchanging a confused glance with the boy beside her. Neither had said anything during the story, since interrupting would be rude, but the boy now raised his hand. “Hey! If Aqua Regina made eight pearls, why don't we have eight princesses now?”

Water bottle already at his mouth, Zeo gulped down a drink before he could answer. “Uh, well, remember the earlier story about the Panthalassa?”

“Oh-huh.”

“As it turns out, Aqua Regina didn't get them all. A few escaped, and their long life spans let them hide and plan their revenge. When these survivors made their move, the new princesses rose up to protect their people and their goddess.

“However, one kingdom was lost in the surprise attack – the kingdom of the Red merfolk. When the battle was over, there was no way to salvage it. The Red princess, with no people to lead, chose to use all of her power to heal the oceans and strengthen the other seven pearls. She sacrificed herself to give the others the power they needed to keep their own kingdoms from falling like hers.

“When Aqua Regina learned of the actions of her eighth princess, she vowed not to replace her, so that her legacy would properly live on. She took the power the Red princess had given to the others and guided it, letting those seven pearls evolve into what would later be called Pearl Tears, which is what the princesses carry today.”
Many merfolk took a moment of silence to honor the fallen princess, though one stood and walked over to join Zeo. He took the silver orb, then cleared his throat. “There's something I'd like to add to that. One year ago, a prophecy was given in Europe that I think might involve the Red princess. A human princess gave it, then disappeared with her family shortly after.”

In the middle of petting Esaria, Melody's hand stiffened against the blue feathers. Not noticing, the man went on. “It mentioned the goddess of the sea reviving the royal ruby—”

With the startled quacks of her Ducklett, Melody jolted to her feet. The gathering fell quiet, and she shakily held her hand out. After a moment of confusion, the man gave her the orb. When it was in her hands, Melody stared at it, and recited the prophecy that Megan's oldest sister had given days before they'd been taken from their home. The one they had all spent the past year trying to decipher, to no avail, but had thus been ingrained in Melody's mind.

“As the star of light foretells war, the goddess of the sea will revive the royal ruby. The curse of pearls shall be broken and when the darkness is cleansed anew, a new age of peace will rise.”

Melody forced herself to breathe past the lump in her throat. “My...My friend. It was her sister that gave that prophecy...the family was one of Seers, each predicting something similar on the same day. Through the past year, they haven't been able to decipher any of it.”

Karcie's prophecy. Erika, their other sister, seeing a girl transform with red light. Megan's twin, Cassandra, looking to ashes and foretelling a rebirth in a time of darkness. Their mother, Molly, casting her eyes to the stars and seeing danger and lost lives, but new powers rising. Megan herself, a dream of a girl reluctantly taking a crown, gray clouds warning of hardships, water signifying a gift of power.

Nothing but silence came from the merfolk around her. Zeo, knowing of her visions, asked quietly, “Do you see her?”

Her grip on the enchanted sphere tightened. “N-No. Not me. That family, they—they saw it. They all saw it in their own way, and confided in me to help them make sense of it all. Until now it was just speculation that they were connected, but...it...” She swallowed, turning to face the people with certainty. “It's her. The Red princess will be reborn, and the princesses we have now will grow stronger from it.”

Maybe it was her faith in Megan's family, or the way her pendant felt lighter around her neck. Her brain buzzed with confidence, knowing without doubt that with all these pieces put together, she was right. Melody was completely certain that the Red princess would return to help them in a time of need – five Seers had predicted such. Five family members. It was impossible for their intertwined predictions not to be a future reality.

Without warning, the people around her erupted into cheers. Their princess had spoken, promising the return of a legend. Even if it would be in dark times, their faith was not weakened.

Standing there, her words reaching their hearts, Melodia vowed to herself that she would not fail their faith in her.

To Meg: the prophecy, the ashes, the dream, everything, all your things, it's the same thing.
Ask Gummy about the legend of the red princess. Everything she knows.
To Meg: star of light could be the star fragment? Fortelling nemiss?
To Meg: lives lost, danger, fruking nemiss. Soon oh my god its soon it could be soon

Damn these stupid time zones she's not gonna get this 'til she wakes up! Melody stared at the phone screen impatiently, then jumped slightly when someone's hand touched her shoulder. When she turned her head, one of her purple-eyed people was looking at her with concern.

“Princess, are you okay?”

Among all of the questions that had been asked of her today, this was the first time this question had been posed. Melody just kind of stared at the young woman blankly for a moment, not sure how to answer. Eventually she managed to stammer out, “I'm fine.”

The woman crouched beside her, then maneuvered herself to sit. “You know you don't have to stand on your own, right? We're here for you. Just because you're our Princess, that doesn't mean we expect you to do everything.”

All Melody could blurt out was, “You don't?”

“Of course we don't!” There was laughter and sincerity in the woman's tone that took a burden from Melody she hadn't noticed she held. “Princess, you've only had the Tear for six years. You didn't grow up with it, with any of this, like we did. It wouldn't be fair for us to ask for your complete leadership when you're still learning.”

Melody couldn't wrap her brain around a response. Everything Dia had been unlocking for her while here indicated that the Antarctic people looked to her for leadership and hope. Never before had one of them spoken with her like this – to the freaked out teenager she actually was, instead of the powerful leader she wasn't.

When she didn't get an answer, the young woman sighed, and reached over to put a gentle hand on Melody's cheek. “Are you sure you're okay? Is there something you want to talk about? I'll listen, and not just because you're my princess.”

“...I...I'm worried about the prophecy.” Melody shied away from the hand, staring down at her lap. “It's not that I don't trust it, because the track record for...that human princess, and her family, it's really good. It's just worrying because it says darkness will come. And...and her family's visions all say...”

“Melodia.” The woman's hand went to her shoulder again. “I don't know the connection you have to that human family, but you have your own Seer magic, don't you? Do you see danger for anyone close to you?”

A little startled that this mermaid knew of Melodia's power – and that she'd called her by name – Melody bit her lip, trying to think. No visions of danger had come...there was the Nemesis stuff, of course, but the only people really close to her in the legendary bladers group were...Kyoya. Madoka...Meg. And eventually...

Aguma. He was really the only one, out of those people, who faced danger. Being tricked into working for the revival of Nemesis...

“My cousin.” Melody took a shuddering breath. “My cousin might be tricked into...something really bad.”
The woman nodded. Her expression of support didn't waver. “Anyone else?”

“...The...human princess. She's having a lot of trouble...her family's...” Melody shook her head, unable to find a way to explain. Not without sounding crazy, at least. “And I have a friend...terrible people are after him...a-and more friends, going through something I couldn't begin to explain...” Ikuto, and the people from Margret's world. She was doing all she could for the former, but was having no epiphanies or even theories about how to help the latter. After they'd brought her here to speak to, to help them, she felt like she was just letting them down.

She blinked back tears. “And my sister, and dad...they've been in trouble for so long...a-and I don't know how to...”

“Start from the easiest, and work your way up.” The woman pulled her arm back and held up her index finger. “Number one. Which is the easiest for you to deal with, going by the resources you have now?”

Sniffling a bit, Melody had to go with, “Th...The friend that's...got people looking for him...”

“Okay. So how can you help them? Keeping them away from the terrible people, right? Making sure they're healthy and active, but still hidden. You've got a lot of friends in this area alone, so I'm sure that's all covered, right?”

Melody slowly nodded. Ikuto's situation was, strangely, the simplest they had to deal with. Easter didn't reach America at all, and Dia had guided her through activating mental guards around Toby's house to prevent another dream invasion.

A second finger went up. “So we can consider that checked off. What's next?”

It wasn't hard to figure out. “My...cousin. I can visit him before...before he's tricked.” She could just join Gingka's group when they went to China. Meg would keep her updated, and Margret could teleport her back to Japan.

“Great! Third?”

This one was harder. Her family...Meg's family... “The family of Seers. One of them is...is friends with the Green princess. They can watch over each other...and I can support them while they work to fixing those problems.” She could also pester the rainbow...er, Al. Get progress updates from them. Do damage control for their American friends... “I can, um, try to contact her family for her.”

Her fellow Purple nodded, and another finger rose. Given the two choices left, Melody felt herself swallow. “My dad and sister. I...um...” This one, she was clueless on. How did you fight something like a Mytan – let alone two?

Left to think, the two Mels tried to brainstorm. They were low on information...going against a powerhouse like a Mytan, they'd be better off going for a battle of wits rather than force. Maybe...they could try to contact one of the Mytan princesses? Milinka should know something, right? And Tracy had a lot of different books in her library, and even more in her study. There was bound to be at least one on Mytans. Maybe she could write to her, even.

Why in the world was it so much easier to come up with ideas all of a sudden? They'd been a jumbled mess trying to sort through this before. Dia thought it might be the ocean, the mer genes reacting to the peaceful energy it let off. It wasn't a solid theory, but...in the end, did that matter? They could think clearly right now, so whatever the reason was, they should take advantage of it.

“I can gather information and try to find allies to help.”
“Information is always good. What about the last problem? The friends who are in a situation you can't explain?”

Melody pushed back the flashbacks of roleplay and tried to think of something useful. Time freeze...Pokemon. Dialga would be impossible... If she could find a forest, maybe she could find a Celebi shrine? Ask for advice? There was Al, but they might not be a 'time' god...Asking wouldn't hurt, though. Anything else...time...time...Dialga? Time Gears? The rescue team games, did Margret's world have Time Gears? That just led to a new branch of questions – how powerful was Dialga, did it reach multiple dimensions, was there one for different branching timelines... Nothing Margret or anyone they had available would know. The only solid lead might be a Celebi, and...that was something Kalia could follow up on? While Melody worked through the situations of this world?

Weakly, Melody realized it all boiled down to, “I can...offer advice as I think of it...”

Lowering her hand, the woman gave her a gentle smile. “Sometimes that's all we can do, yes. But I know your friends will appreciate your support. Don't try to tackle it all at once, and slowly, you'll find your problems are dwindling. You'll be able to face the big ones eventually.”

She leaned closer, pulling Melodia into a hug so sister-like that a few more tears escaped. “The Purple people will always be behind you, Melodia. You and your whole family. You're our princess, yes, but you're also something even better than that. You're just one of us. We won't stop supporting you while you try to get the rest of your family back, because they're part of our family, too.” The woman started petting Melody's hair comfortingly. “And the Purple family looks out for their own.”

Melodia was too busy sniffling to answer, tears dropping down her face. The woman held her close, singing what Melodia recognized as the lullaby her mother sang to her whenever she got the chance.

"In a dream I see
A world meant for me
Wrapped in mystery
The waves sing to me"

"And so I will follow a falling star
To find out who I am and who you are
Come along, it can't be very far
The waves are singing"

Melodia stood at the shoreline, plastic bags around her boots to keep her dry. More people had left by now, the remaining mostly from her kingdom, wanting to share their support. It seemed the fate of Shelly and Max was no secret to them, and they too wished for a safe return and reunion for the family.

The words of the comforting woman had done...something. Not just her advice, or her song, or her hug. All of it together, the care and love and hope...it was fumbling around in her, making her a little dizzy and a little confused. Memories of her two lives were mixing together a bit. Hope kind of looked like Melody's mom every few seconds, while the beach kept shifting to the different ones both Melody and Dia had each visited growing up. She couldn't pull herself together enough to put up a mental wall or even check the ones she had. All she could really do right now was stare at the ocean and try to pretend nothing was wrong.
And that wasn't hard, there really was nothing wrong. Besides the dizziness, and the mixing memories... Okay, maybe something was wrong. She just couldn't focus on it long enough to do anything. And for being right next to the ocean, that was odd. The ocean was supposed to bring her focus, not take it away.

Whenever she'd glance back at the people still walking around, faces from Melody's life would fade in and out. The woman who'd comforted her kept looking like Melody's older sister, while an Orange girl looked like one of her close friends. Melodia had to shut her eyes and face the water again to stop the confused headache she had from growing.

What was going on with her?

She just watched the ocean for now. The way the waves moved, the sea birds – both 'normal' and Pokemon – flying above, the clouds just slightly blocking the rising moon. In the growing cold, she watched her breath fog up in front of her. Part of her saw it and wanted to bundle into a blanket; another part saw it and didn't care.

Melody and Dia. Her two halves. The two people that made her...her. She couldn't really sense them now, at least not as clearly. Was that what was wrong? They were still there, she felt that much, but it felt less like two people than it did before... Jeez, even the thoughts she could manage didn't make any sense. She'd rather not think right now. She just wanted to watch the sea and the sky and feel the freedom and peace they gave her. She wanted to wonder how many more secrets were hidden in the waters, besides the kingdoms, the people...

She wanted to sing.

"La la la la la la la
La la la la la la la"

Melodia didn't think. She just sang.

"I was living in a fantasy
Waiting for somebody to rescue me
But I've found a way to light the dark
It was always here inside my heart
No more fairy tale pretending
I'll make my own happy ending"

"If I wasn't meant to fly
I wouldn't have these wings
I wouldn't reach up to the sky
Every night in my dreams
There's a voice inside of me
Saying I can do anything
'Cause if I wasn't meant to fly
I wouldn't have these wings"

With every phrase, her mind was clearing. She could find a new bridge between her two halves, born of the feelings inspired by the words she'd been told. It disoriented her – but singing, something both halves loved, was stabilizing it. Stabilizing her.

"There's a star that's shining down on me
Reflecting everything that I can be
Every journey starts inside my heart
And there's no mountain that's too far
'Cause if I set my mind to it
Whatever it is, I can do it"

"If I wasn't meant to fly
I wouldn't have these wings
I wouldn't reach up to the sky
Every night in my dreams
There's a voice inside of me
Saying I can do anything
'Cause if I wasn't meant to fly
I wouldn't have these wings
To take me farther
Than I ever thought I'd go
Higher than the heavens
'Cause deep inside I know"

Melodia whirled around to the remaining merfolk, to her people and friends. This was thanks to them. This chance for her to experience what a full joining would be like, to know who she would be when the time came, it wouldn't have happened without their support, and she wanted them to know the joy and gratitude she felt for them all.

"I stand here for all your dreams
And all the hope you have
I take my song and reach up high
Never weak with your faith
There's a voice inside of me
Saying I can protect this peace
I believe I'm meant to fly
'Cause you've given me these wings"

"La la la la la la la
La la la la la la la" 

Melodia beamed at her people and said simply, “Thank you.”

Melody stared at the ceiling, her head still spinning. The temporary merge with Dia had left them both wobbly and sluggish, so Zeo had brought her home almost as soon as she'd finished singing. She didn't remember much of the ride back, or even getting to the house. She was just...in her bed now. Somehow. Probably Zeo.

Whatever time it was, she was more than ready for bed. After kicking off her boots and dropping her hat on the floor (she'd been aiming for the nightstand), she remained stretched out on the bed as she was, movement seeming stupid and impossible.

Before she could pass out, Annie brought her phone over. Melody accepted the fate of answering texts, hoping there was at least something helpful.

**From Meg: WE ARE HEADED FOR INDONESIA**

Right. Okay, it was sleep time.
Chapter End Notes

Songs: "Place in This World" by Michael W. Smith - English
Theme from Barbie as Rapunzel - English
"Wings"* from Barbie: Swan Lake - English
*Final verse rewritten by me

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

A Dia chapter! Now, if you'll excuse me, this is the last chapter for now and it's almost 2 in the morning and I'm tired as heck.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fear. Pain. Ancient guilt, and the desire to make things right. Somewhere in these swirling emotions, as Melody's dreams were torn apart, a familiar sense of Haert surrounded the area. Her gaze shot towards the sky, where a gathering of orange and pink magic swirled with immense power.

A pulse of energy shot through her, and Melody found herself frozen in place; she couldn't move a single part of her body. Something inside her was starting to stir, cold and foreboding. Magic was rising into the air above her, a cloud of many colors.

“Merfolk of the great seas!” A voice with no visible source rang out, power radiating from it. “Barely more than a year ago, we lost a great many of our people to the energy experiments of a surface man. The curse placed upon you by the Panthalassa has brought loss and grief for millennia, but never to this extent. I will stand by no more! You are the children of my dear friend, and people who have accepted me without question. I will spread my power to all your kind and free them of this pain! This suffering will end!”

The voice began a chant that Melody could not understand, and the magic above spread into a glorious aurora. She dropped into an ocean that had appeared below her, transforming to her mermaid self, and regaining her movement as the dark energy within her was ripped out and sucked into the light. When she surfaced, she watched in confusion and awe as it let out a beastly scream, before it was smothered by the aurora and destroyed.

Sensing a presence behind her, Melody whirled around, only to find a small island. Atop it stood a girl in blue, her orange hair flickering with the same energy that flowed above them.

Leyla stepped to the edge of the island, dropping to her knees and giving a low bow, her face almost in the sand. “I am sorry I did not ask your permission for your Haert. Please understand that I did it for your people.”

Melody felt herself imitate a gulping fish, trying to think of an answer. When she didn't speak, Leyla lifted her head, revealing glowing eyes that matched the aurora in the sky. “When your family was attacked, your driving Siqu ripped Haert from your family in an attempt to survive. With the rejuvenational nature of Siqu, it merged together with yours and gave you more Haert than one person should ever have. I used that to my advantage today, taking a piece of that extra Haert to power my spell. The merfolk are free, and you are a little closer to using up the dangerous excess within.”

“...What are you?”

Face to face with a girl who'd ripped energy from her, disappeared with no trace, had entered her dream and now lifted an ancient curse, Melody could ask nothing else. Fear surrounded her, just as
familiar and unexplainable as it had been when she and Leyla had met in the waking world.

Leyla's glowing eyes blinked, and she slowly rose from her bow. Now kneeling, she spoke quietly, sadly. “I am the spirit that Aqua Regina calls upon when the Orange Tear needs a guardian. I am the one who failed her and allowed a child to be chosen and lost. I am the princess who has lost her people to darkness. I believe you have learned my name. I am Lilura.”

“Lilura specifically contained half her energy so she could safely interact with mortal life. She's supposedly observing us while passing as one of us and makes a new life on another planet every few decades.”

A Mytan.

The dream's stability faltered, Melody's fear rising. Leyla – Lilura – pulled back immediately. “I'll go. I just wanted to apologize, t-to explain. I'm sorry.”

The magic faded. The dream faded. Melody awoke with a gasping scream, her tail tangled in the blankets and her face covered in drying tears. She barely registered the quick arrival of comforting arms, only able to bury her face in Toby's shirt and shiver with receding terror.

Even if the curse was gone, she had faced another Mytan in her dreams. Even if Lilura was on their side, she had taken her magic and forced herself past the enchantments of the house to enter her mind. Melody could no longer believe that her dreams were safe.

She didn't sleep anymore that night. Dia took over, turned human again, and did so; Melody sat in their mindscape in a ball and reviewed reassuring, happy memories until morning came.

From Meg: Question, how does my phone still have service in Indonesia?
From Meg: Oh ghouls we have different time zones. You're asleep right now aren't you.
From Meg: Bwah, fine. I'll just say it now, there's a cool little mer town around this island and I'm totally chilling there while we're here.
From Meg: Oooo I should warn them about the volcano erupting tomorrow. Ghouls. I better get down there so we can move everything to the farther edge. I'd be a terrible princess if I let these mers lose everything they own.
From Meg: Don't worry, I'm staying away from the volcano! I WILL BE CAREFUL LIKE YOU WANT ME TO
From Meg: MY PHONE IS WATERPROOF I JUST REALIZED IT'S STILL WIIH ME DOWN HERE AND IT STIL WORKS HOLY GHOULS I CAN TKE PICTURES OF THE TOWN FOR YOU
From Meg: ILL SEND THE REST OF PICTURS WHEN WE HEAD BACK T JAPAN OR SOMETHIG BT LOOKIT TIS TOWN
From Meg: [image sent]
From Meg: LOOKIT
From Meg: I love and appreciate you and I'm sorry for my message spam, I've been really excited today. Did I mention I love you?
From Meg: This is Gummy. Megan is the freaking most hilarious person I've ever had the pleasure of knowing.

To Meg: you (gummy) and I got balton tech phones from Pidge. That's why they work legit anywaher.
To Meg: *anywhere. Haven't been up long, sorry. That mer town looks nice.  
To Meg: yeah. yeah Melody says she's pretty crazy.

From Mom: Her name was Lilura. She was so shy about the whole thing, it was really adorable.

To Mom: thanks. Just wondering.

Curled up in the bathtub, Dia contemplated the note that had been on her nightstand when morning had come. It didn't say much – an apology, a request, and two seemingly random words – 'Aquarius Crystal'. As for the request, Lilura wanted her to give a protection charm to Zeo – something about a promise to his mother, who she'd known before her death. The charm itself was made of enchantments Dia couldn't begin to recognize, so she'd given it to Toby and asked him to look into it – and this 'Aquarius Crystal' thing - before they even told Zeo.

Dia felt horrible. She'd done so much to try and protect Melody, so that she could sleep peacefully, but it seemed like her efforts were in vain. Maybe that Margret girl could help? She was a mage. Or, since it was dreams, she could try reaching out to Cresselia...

She drained the tub and dried off, and once her legs were back she grabbed a random outfit to put on before heading downstairs. When she was about halfway down, she began hearing music. She turned to look down at the living room, and realized Ikuto was in the music room playing Tracy's violin. Since the music room was...less a room, more a half-circle add-on to the living room, she could see him from where she was. To her relief, he looked more peaceful than he had since...well, since Melody and Margret had found him.

Walking through the house, she passed Masamune in the breakfast nook. She gave a nod when he asked if she was okay, and said good morning to Uno. She caught the bagel they threw her way and bit into it as she went on. When she reached the room the three universe-traversing girls were staying in, she knocked; when a voice called, “Come in!” she opened the door and peered in.

The pool table Tracy had once bought on a whim was pushed to the wall, along with most of the other furniture. Three sleeping bags were set across the floor, though none were occupied. Peggie looked over with the speed equivalent of a computer's laggy frame rate, while Margret was at a table, surrounded by books.

Dia smiled awkwardly in greeting. “Uh, morning. Can I have a moment, Margret?”

“...Which of you is this that's asking?”

“Dia...if that's okay.”

Marking her place, Margret set her current book down and stood up, motioning for Dia to follow her out the back door to the patio. Peggie managed to walk a couple feet and sit down on the couch by the time Dia met her twin at the door, and judging by Margret's expression, that was progress.

Seeing Peggie like this was just a hint of how bad their situation was. Dia knew only second hand about their world's time freeze otherwise; she couldn't imagine the difficulty Peggie was having trying to break free.

Margret closed the door behind them, and Dia took another bite from her bagel as she tried to figure out how to start. The dream invasions, probably? The supposedly lifted curse?

Beating her to the punch, Margret put a hand on her shoulder. “If this is about what you told Toby
last night, I already looked into it. There's definite signs of energy manipulation leading to a...hole, so to speak, where a curse used to be.”

Dia frowned. “Could you...check around the town, for other merfolk? See if they have that same hole?”

“Of course I can.” Margret pulled her hand back. “There's something else though, isn't there?”

Absently ripping the bagel into pieces, Dia nodded. “We need something to protect our dreams. Melody is...terrified. This is the second time a Mytan's gotten into them, and even if Lilura's a friend, it's not okay.”

She could see the gears turning in Margret's head, the way her brow furrowed and her shoulders straightened. “I'll look into that right away and have something for you by tonight. How is she?”

“She spent the night running through memories like a TV marathon, and still is, as far as I'm aware.”

Margret let out a loud sigh, pushing a bit of her hair back. “Well...did she at least have fun yesterday, at the beach thing?”

“Mmm...mostly. The Mytan from last night is apparently a repeating Tear guardian who was friends with my mom, and she sort of ripped a chunk of Haert out of us.”

“Ripped a—how are you moving?”

“Apparently, and it would be cool if you could check this, I have way too much and she took advantage of that to have extra power for her spell.”

Margret frowned at her, before taking on a look of careful consideration. A spell was muttered under her breath that lit up her eyes, and her gaze scanned across Dia like a painting to critique. All she said when she was done was a stumped, “The hell.”

Before Dia could speak, she shook her head. “Yeah, that's...compared to the people I've seen here so far, that's probably enough for like, at least five...seven people, maybe more. No freaking wonder you glow when your surroundings are happy. It's trying to vent itself out.”

Passing bagel bits to her Characters, Dia bit her lip for a moment. “That...also explains why I'll let out a Haert explosion if something seriously pisses me off or freaks me out...”

“...Exactly how often does that happen?”

“Last time was...last few times were shortly after Spiral Force, and one more since then. Before that, maybe once a year? My best guess is that the Arrangement aggravated it.” She stuck a bagel bit in her mouth, then shrugged. “An emergency exit for when it overloads past even the extra? Tracy looked into it once, and she doesn't think I'm in any danger past the...blowing things up part.”

“...We should still try to find some way to safely lower it if we can. Just as a precaution. I'll look into that after I find a way to lock your dreams.”

Dia nodded. “Thanks. And, um...she didn't get a chance to tell you this yesterday, but we got some general advice at the beach, and...maybe one of you could find a forest shrine and ask a Celebi for input on the time freeze? I mean, they're time traveling fairies, so...they might know something?”
Margret blinked at that, then smiled a bit. “That...sounds like a good idea, actually. Kalia's been wanting to get out, so I'll mention it to her.”

“...How's your sister?”

“She's...managing. Speeding up, for sure. A Celebi...might be able to help her, too.” Margret paused. “I think I'd rather be the one to find them, with that in mind...”

Nodding, Dia tried to remember the other names. “Is, uh...Casey, doing okay? The rest of your team? Ma...Maddie, and Nova...?”

Margret gave a nod of her own. “They're okay. Casey's looking into the...Gorati stuff... I'd guess everyone else is looking for a way to get time going again.”

“Uh, good...that's good. I...I really do hope you get this figured out.”

“Yeah...me too.” Margret tapped at her belt buckle, frowning. “I'll, um...get to that dream thing.”

“Right. Uh, right.” Dia reached for the door. “I'll let you, uh-”

“You'll be coming with me.” Kalia's voice spoke over hers, as the girl grabbed Dia's midsection and lifted her into the air. “There is no food in this house! We need to fix this!”

“H-Hey, put me down!”

Dia was pretty sure this sudden shopping trip wasn't about stocking up the pantry. Her first clue?

“You do realize this is a clothing store, right? No food?”

“Hey, we didn't exactly come here with a wardrobe,” Kalia shot back, holding a red shirt up to herself by the mirror. “Meggie likes stuff like this, but she's busy, so I figure I'll get her something while we're out. Also I want clothes that don't stink. Food can come after that.”

When Dia raised an eyebrow in disbelief, Kalia scoffed and turned to her. “If you're so eager to leave, then go ahead and drag the Characters out of their first store. I dare you.”

With a huff, Dia knew she'd lost. The shop they'd entered had a secret section for Guardian Characters, as the owner had had one as a child. Masamune had boasted about it for years for his little friend – long before she and the others knew about Characters – and had frequented it through the years. From the little viewing window in one of the walls, Dia could see her two Characters excitedly wandering the mini halls with Emily, admiring a number of outfits made just for their kind.

Partly for answers, and partly to distract her frightened other self, Dia posed a quick question to Melody. Is Kalia always like this?

Um...huh? Like what? When given a moment to look through their eyes, Melody hummed in thought. No, from what I know of her, Kalia hates shopping...girly stuff in general. But she's trying to get better about it. That's what Emily is for...

“Whadya think? For Meggie?” Kalia held up a pink tank top with a rose design. “She's got that whole magic rose thing, and I'm...half sure she likes pink.”

Dia rolled her eyes. “I'm not the one to ask, you know.” Melody? Thoughts?
Uh...bad idea. I don't think she's keen on the rose stuff, really...it caused a lot of trouble for her once...bad stuff.

“She says it's a bad idea. No roses.”

Though Kalia frowned, she nodded. “No roses. Got it.” She put the shirt back and resumed her search. There was a short silence before Melody spoke up again, sounding more shy than usual.

Uh...could we...look for something too?

A perfect way to get Melody's mind off the dream stuff. Sure. Purple?

Yeah...I like blue, too.

It was only when Dia had found three new shirts that it occurred to her: this might have been Kalia's plan from the beginning. She glanced in the girl's direction, saw the not-hidden-at-all smirk... Oh, she's a clever one...

Not that she was mad. She was just a little jealous she hadn't thought of it herself.

Kalia kept coming over to get Melody's opinion on things for the twins, then disappeared to check on the Characters. In the meantime, Dia found a few more shirts and a couple of dresses that she and Melody agreed on, along with some leggings at Melody's insistence. It wasn't really Dia's style, but it wasn't anything terrible either, so she didn't really object.

Melody seemed to be cheering up. That was what mattered.

When they'd looked around a bit more and decided they were done, Dia wandered the store looking for Kalia. Her companion had seemingly disappeared...there wasn't a bathroom, so maybe she was in the dressing rooms?

As she neared them, she could hear Kalia and Emily speaking. Weighing her choices between eavesdropping and interrupting, she went with the former and waited.

“I-I don't know, are you sure? I mean...it's nice, I guess, but...”

“Kalia, you look great! It's just your style.”

“It is...?”

“Yeah! Darker colors look best on you. It's long enough to hide shorts if you need to fight, and it has a bow! That alone would put a smile on your mom's face!”

There was silence. Melody suggested, She's probably trying on a dress or a skirt. The whole 'getting better at girlier stuff' thing.

Ah. In that case, Dia should probably leave her be. She'd check on Annie and Hope in the meantime.

Her Characters had the luxury of not needing to pay, as the clothes in their portion of the store were handmade from scraps by the owner. Annie had chosen just another green dress, while Hope had gone on a spree and picked several things. She was currently in the process of talking Annie into at least getting some new bows.

Seeing this through the little window, Dia had to giggle, and the Characters turned. Siding with Hope, Dia convinced Annie to pick two new bows, because she'd definitely earned it. Once the
Characters had used their magic to add the clothes to their wardrobe – Dia wasn't quite sure how it worked, but she'd seen Annie do it before with the swimsuit from Milinka, so she knew it did – they joined her in the main store and they waited for Kalia.

*You think she's gonna get what she was talking to Emily about?* Dia asked while they waited.

*Hmm...maybe? But getting it and actually choosing to wear it aren't the same thing...*

*That's true. I probably would, if only because it's not my money.*

There was a pause. *That reminds me...who's paying for this? You didn't grab a wallet...*

*We're putting it on the Dungeon Gym tab. The food will go on Toby's. Don't worry about it, I've done this before. Having friends where you shop is pretty helpful. Plus the whole 'sister of a Voltron pilot' and 'victim of Ziggurat' things.*

While Melody mulled that over, Dia spotted Kalia walking towards them with a basket of clothes. Dia took care of the payment, and Kalia made sure their clothes were sorted between them in the bags, clearly embarrassed about whatever she'd bought. The group left with their clothes, then headed for the Dragon Cafe as Kalia complained of hunger. Dia managed to convince her not to eat her fill, promising a proper dinner.

“I think-”

“Eat or talk.”

Kalia swallowed, then started again. “I think next we should do some of that karaoke thing. I've never tried it before.”

Dia felt Melody perk up at that. *I like karaoke...*

“Well, it's not open here today...” Dia thought through the places she knew nearby. “Oh, there's a really good one just a few blocks away! We can spend some time there, then buy a pantry.”

“Make that two. There's three of us, after all.”

“...The appetite thing is real?”

In answer, Kalia looked her in the eye while she stuffed two whole sandwiches into her mouth at once. Dia had never been so uncomfortable about food in her life.

“This is seriously freaking me out.” Kalia dropped the songlist book and slumped against the wall. “Alternate dimension stuff sucks. It's weird. Booooooo.”

When Dia raised an eyebrow, she waved her hand at the book now on the floor. “So, Meggie's in a band. She has friends in other bands. Also idols and stuff. I've heard a bunch of these songs, written by those people, and they're listed here under different artists. It's stupid. Bleh.”

Dia just giggled. “Are you gonna pick one or not?”

“Yeah, yeah...” Kalia retrieved the book and flipped through it some more, before heading to the machine and tapping the number in. Giggling, Dia picked up one of the microphones and turned to watch the lyric screen as the song began.

"Can you see me?
'Cause I'm right here
Can you listen?
'Cause I've been trying to make you notice
What it would mean to me
To feel like somebody
We've been on our way to nowhere
Tryin' so hard to get there"

"And I say oh!
We're gonna let it show!
We're gonna just let go of everything
Holding back our dreams
And try
And make it come alive
C'mon let it shine so they can see
We were meant to be
Somebody
Somebody, yeah
Somehow, some day, some way
Somebody"

Taking her own microphone, Kalia took over for the second verse. It wasn't fancy, it wasn't spectacular, but she was able to carry the tune without killing Dia's ears.

"I'm so tired
Of being invisible
But I feel it, yeah
Like a fire below the surface
Trying to set me free
Burnin' inside of me
'Cause we're standing on the edge now
It's a long way down"

"But I say oh!
We're gonna let it show!
We're gonna just let go of everything
Holding back our dreams
And try
And make it come alive
C'mon let it shine so they can see
We were meant to be
Somebody
Somebody, yeah
Somehow, some day, some way
Somebody"

Dia was glad she'd agreed to this, as she took the first half of the bridge.

"We will walk out of this darkness
Feel the spotlight glowing like a yellow sun
Ohohohohoh"

Kalia took it back-
“And when we fall we fall together
'Til we get back up and we will rise as one
Ohohohohoh"

-and they finished it together.

"Oh!
We're gonna let it show!
We're gonna just let go of everything
Holding back our dreams
And try
And make it come alive
C'mon let it shine so they can see
We were meant to be
Somebody
Somebody, yeah
Somehow, some day, some way
Somebody
Somebody
Ooo Oh"

Their Characters clapping excitedly, Kalia and Dia shared grins. “Okay,” Kalia admitted, “that was fun.”

“One more, maybe with Melody?”

“Heck, we've got all day!”

“I understand that you and the twins are a race that needs a large supply of food to keep up your energy, but I think there's a point where a line has to be drawn.”

Dumping about seven boxes of pasta into the cart beside her, Kalia questioned, “And where is that?”

“At pushing around three carts full of food.”

“Hey, I'm only asking you to push one!”

“Kalia this is ridiculous! People keep staring!”

“Well, let them. I don't care. I just want food.” Kalia took her pair of carts and pushed them forward, having no problem with the weight. “You don't have to carry any of it when we're done. I can IT everything back.”

With a frustrated groan, Dia slumped forward and reluctantly followed Kalia with her cart full of assorted meats and cheeses, hoping that no one she knew was anywhere near here.

To Toby: We have three carts of food. I don't know if I can stop her from getting more. I'm so sorry.

From Toby: mmmmmm
From Toby: I'll make sure we have room in the pantry...
From Toby: Saiyans are freaking scary.
Dia continued to follow the hungry Saiyan through the store, pushing her cart of meat and cheese, and hoping to the gods that this would be over soon. Toby might be kind of rich, but this was pushing the hospitality. “Kalia, are you sure you need all this?”

“For a half-Saiyan and two quarter-Saiyans? Yes. If we curb our appetites a bit, which should be fine, since there’s nothing for us to fight here. Plus for now, Peggie can’t really eat.” Kalia surveyed the breads, then carefully picked five loaves. “She loves Italian, though, so I wanna make sure we have stuff for that. For when she can.”

Glancing at the cart that seemed just for pasta and sauce ingredients, Dia supposed she could see that. “Just...we don't have the proper budget for filling you up, I think, so-”

“Don’t you think we know that?” With a flat look, Kalia faced her. “We’re doing the best we can, but we can't help it if we get hungry. Worst comes, Meggie can do some foraging when she looks for that Celebi shrine. So can I. And Peggie...well, she's technically fine without food, but that's not really natural for her.”

It took Dia a few long seconds of thought to figure out what Kalia meant by that. “O-Oh, right...” Supposedly, Peggie was a vampire. Dia didn't know what all that entailed, but sunlight didn't kill her and she wasn't constantly bloodthirsty, so for now it seemed okay. “But...she likes Italian?”

Kalia's grandiose shrug said it all. She didn't get it, either. “Just to be safe, we're not using garlic.”

“...That's...fair.”

“Alright, this is the last trip. We get this food in the house and then we can watch more Power Rangers.”

Arms holding a collection of grocery bags, Dia turned to raise an eyebrow at her equally burdened companion. “You actually like it?”

“Like is a strong word...I prefer 'relate to'.” Kalia walked over to set their shoulders together for the instant transmission. “Basically, my sister had a team.”

Before Kalia could transport them, Dia gave her a startled look. “Your sister is a-”

“Was. She still has the morpher thing, but I don't know if it actually works. Meg and Peg's mom, too, plus some others.” Kalia's hand went to her forehead, the two required fingers touching it. “Eyes closed?”

Dia quickly shut her eyes, while Kalia focused on Margret's energy. Neither noticed how, just before they disappeared, a spark of orange magic dropped something onto Melody's hat.

While they were unpacking the groceries, however, it did catch Kalia's eye. “What's that thing hanging from your hat?”

Her hands full of pasta boxes, Dia let Kalia walk over and take the thing off, then examined it with her. It looked like a green and yellow curled leaf, or feather, like a crescent, attached to a small string with some tiny beads. Dia couldn't identify it, while Melody thought it looked vaguely familiar somehow. Kalia had Emily fly it upstairs to Margret and Toby, who were still looking into the dream help and mysterious charm.
Zeo and Masamune came in to help with the groceries, and informed Dia that the pool out back had been cleaned of its chlorine and was safe for her to go in. After explaining to Melody that yes, some merfolk were allergic to chlorine and she was one of them, Dia stuffed the pasta boxes into the pantry and abandoned them in favor of a joyous cannonball.

Dia sunk to the bottom of the pool, stretching out in the fresh water and letting out a large sigh of relaxation. She even convinced Melody to take control for a bit to feel the beauty, and totally not to let it calm the poor girl down with magic mermaids-love-water whatever, no, certainly not that.

Okay yes, it was totally all for that. Melody desperately needed that right now. There was no point in lying to herself about it.

After a wonderful, long soak, Dia rejoined the others for dinner and Power Rangers, and heard about what Toby and Margret had found out.

“First off, this's your safe dream answer right here.” Margret held up the mysterious little trinket. “It's a Lunar Wing. The ones sold in stores protect its wearer from bad dreams, but this one came straight from Cresselia. Whenever you wear it, or keep it close, your dreams will be locked up from any outside interference. You'll be safe.”

Dia was a little unsure of that, but Melody leaped on the idea, finally remembering the item from the franchise. Still, Dia had to ask, “How do you know it's from Cresselia?”

Handing it over, Margret beamed, clearly pleased she'd asked. “The energy! It's a lot stronger than what a regular trinket would have. I found notes on it in Tracy's library and was hoping to find one and maybe enhance the magic myself, but this is way better! Where did you get it?”

“...It was hanging from my hat when Kalia and I brought in the last load of groceries.”

“So...it could've come from anyone, then.” Margret frowned. “That's disappointing. Having it is better than not, though, so I guess we take what we can get.”

“How about the charm Lilura left?” Annie glanced around, making sure Zeo wasn't back from getting another drink yet. “Is that safe?”

Pulling it from his pocket, Toby nodded. “It's a high-level mage protection charm, packed with a bunch of redundant enchantments like luck increase, intuition boost, emergency barrier...No traces of non-mage magic, so Lilura must have gotten it from one.”

Nodding, Dia consented, “Let him have it, then. Just under pretenses like it's from Tracy or something.”

Once Zeo returned, the charm was delivered, the marathon was resumed, and Dia fell asleep on the couch, leaning against Toby. With the Lunar Wing's string wrapped around her hand, she and Melody dreamed of beyblade, the ocean, and buying out an entire grocery store.

Chapter End Notes

Song: "Somebody" from the movie Lemonade Mouth - English

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I have been waiting to post a chapter with this Dungeon Gym scene in it for months, and I cannot express how eager I am to finally do so.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From Alyssin: I'm heading back today! I'll meet you at the gym.

From Touma: Tsukiyomi-san said you're having a rough time. Is everything alright?

From GPP: [image sent]
From GPP: [image sent]
From GPP: [image sent]
From GPP: [image sent]
From GPP: [image sent]
From GPP: [image sent]
From GPP: [image sent]
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From GPP: [image sent]
From GPP: [image sent]
From GPP: [image sent]
From GPP: I AM SO SORRY ABOUT THE DOZENISH PHOTOS OF COOLING LAVA AND RUINED MER HOUSES
From GPP: SOME MERMAID STOLE MY PHONE LAST NIGHT I'VE BEEN LOOKING ALL OVER I JUST GOT IT BACK I WAS NOWHERE NEAR THE LAVA
From GPP: We're back in Japan and I'm gonna just stick around and like...help.

From Al: We sensed something off about the energies in yesterday. Is everything alright?

To GPP: Now that I'm done panicking those are kinda neat. Nice to know you got back safe. I'll be joining you guys before ToRYumon.
To GPP: I...think that's what the Chinese tournament is called. Might be wrong. But yeah, that thing. Gotta prevent Aguma from joining the side of evil and all that.

To Alyssin: Good. I'll be waiting.

To Touma: We're fine! It's just...not sleeping well. Did last night, though. I don't really know how to put it into words.
To Touma: I'm sorry I haven't checked in with you. It completely slipped my mind...
To Touma: I didn't realize you and Ikuto shared numbers.

To Al: Yeah, it...something happened.
To Al: Actually, do you have a way to check if a mass curse is lifted? Namely a death curse on merfolk? There is inconclusive evidence and a fear of checking firsthand.

From Al: Oh my. We'll look into that, certainly. Thank you for letting us know.

To Al: You keep saying 'we' and 'us'...who's the second? You said your brother?

From Al: Yes, that's right.
From Al: I like to call him 'Tree'.

To Al: ...Why?

From Al: Because that's the last syllable in his name! We're Al and Tree.
From Al: We also have a sister but...estranged.
From Al: I think that's the word for it.
From Al: I only started learning English a few decades ago and it still confuses me. > : (

To Al: Yeah, that's normal. English is weird. Anyway, breakfast is calling, so...bye.
To Al: the food is not actually calling for me, it's an expression that means I'm hungry.

From Al: Oh! Good, I was worried for a second. Food is certainly not sentient in your dimension.

Contact Updated: “Al” renamed to “Al and Tree”

Hey, Dia? Since Alyssin said she'd meet us at the gym...I was wondering if...maybe we could go now-ish? I want to meet everyone. Like, not through your memories.

Uhh...probably a bad idea to battle, but we can go see everyone, sure. Oh, and Mom sent the cookies there! We need to get them before they go stale!

Cookies!

For the first time since arriving in this world, Melody had a full memory of everyone around her.

As soon as she and the boys had walked into the gym, her foster brothers, Samuel and Stanley Summers, had greeted her with bright grins. Several bladers crowded around her in excitement, and she could name all of them. She remembered the moments of each photo taped to the wall. She could recall each tournament that each displayed trophy in Coach's office was from. The sleepovers they'd all had in the gym over the years, the parties they'd thrown here. She remembered so much, and it was beyond amazing.

They tried to get her to battle, but she declined with the excuse that she'd left Leone at Toby's house. She made sure to thank them profusely for the bey, and satisfied them by promising to watch their practice battles.

And, of course, she got the cookies.

While watching a battle between Samuel and Coach Steel's nephew, Ben, Melody noticed an unfamiliar girl walk in. She waved in a cheerful greeting, assuming this to be either a new member
or someone who was interested in becoming one. At the motion, the girl walked over, her gaze wandering around the gym with no clear focus.

“I haven't seen you before, it's nice to meet you!” Melody smiled, to which the girl gave an awkward one back. She didn't speak, but nodded, her attention briefly caught by the battle. “Is this your first time here?”

Another nod, but the girl's eyes were already scanning through everyone, lingering momentarily longer on Toby and Zeo than anyone else. She spoke now, pointing in their direction. “Who are they?” Her voice held a strange monotone, only slightly affected by her curiosity.

“That's Zeo, and Toby. They're two of the strongest bladers here, and good friends of mine.”

The girl's eyes seemed to shimmer. They were unnaturally bright, but Melody couldn't seem to get a good look at them to discern a specific color. “Zeo and Toby. The ones that Dr. Ziggurat experimented on. They still have powers, don't they?”

Melody's smile faltered. The information on the Arrangements wasn't public knowledge, so few outside their friends or Gingka's group knew about them – aside from those who also underwent them, of course. “I'm...sorry, I don't think I follow?”

“Don't act dumb. You were, too, of course.” The girl cracked a sinister looking grin. “All that drawn out potential, wasted. You're all so stupid, you know that?”

Starting to feel uncomfortable, Melody cautiously stepped back. She bumped into Stanley by mistake, and he turned in confusion. “Sis? Are you okay?”

The girl's grin remained as she cocked her head to the side. “Sis? This is your brother? He looks nothing like you.”

Before Melody could quiet him, Stanley puffed his chest out proudly. “Well, that's 'cause we're not birth siblings. But she's my sister all the same!”

An unhinged laugh came from the girl. “Oh, that's so adorably stupid. You can't be family to someone who isn't your real relative. That's so silly.”

As Stanley blinked in shock, Melody gently pushed him aside. “I'm sorry, but I think you should leave.” She wasn't sure who this girl was, but she was starting to really freak her out. “You're being...very rude.”

“Me? I'm being rude? Oh, that's really something, Melodia! Me, being rude. Of all the things to say!” After a short glare, the girl brightened, then whirled around to face in Toby and Zeo's direction. “I know, I'll give you a gift. How about I get rid of their powers? I'm sure you'll all feel much better after that.”

“Don't touch them!” Melody's shout brought the gym to silence, as she aggressively stepped towards the strange, possibly dangerous girl. “I don't know who you are, but leave them alone and get out!”

Sensing something wrong, Zeo stepped forward, eyeing the visitor with suspicion. “Is there something wrong here?”

Before Melody could speak, the girl had moved to stand just in front of Zeo. “I'll say something's wrong! I came all this way to see Melodia, and she's standing there yelling at me for no reason at all. You're her friend, aren't you? Say something to her! This is ridiculous.”
As Zeo looked over at her, Melody viciously shook her head, trying to convey that she'd never met this person before. At the same time, the girl reached a hand towards Zeo's arm, and the charm in his pocket flared to life. It conjured a thin glowing wall of magic between the two of them, and produced a small shock to her hand that made her step back in alarm.

At the activation of the protective charm, Toby stepped in. “I really think you should leave.”

“Is that any way to treat a lady you've just met?” the girl asked sweetly, a vacant smile forming. “You've not even introduced yourselves.”

“You seem to know all about us already.” Melody wasn't keen on starting a fight, but she was starting to sense something very off about their visitor – especially since the charm seemed to view her as a threat. “Why don't you try taking your own advice, and telling us who you are?”

She was grateful that the other bladers were backing away, realizing this was beyond their ability to help. Stanley stuck to her side, though, and his brother joined him; Masamune appeared next to Toby.

When the girl gave only a vague grin in reply, Melody saw as Toby's eyes flashed silver, Faust's more aggressive personality taking control. “I will not allow harm to come to those who stay here. Leave now.”

A spark lit in the girl's icy eyes. “O-hoh? And what do we have here? A rogue mind parasite, latched desperately to his host? How interesting.” Turning smug, she asked, “How do your friends feel about you, dear? After all, you must be the same little parasite that tried to take over the world, yes?”

Most of the bladers looked at her in confusion; Masamune glared. “How dare you speak that way to Toby!”

“Toby? Oh...Oh my.” She giggled. “You haven't told them, have you?”

Firmly, Faust insisted, “Leave this place. Now.”

Pretending to be offended, the girl questioned, “I have just as much right to be here as you do, don't I? After all, if one enemy is allowed within these...safe...walls, then why not another?”

Enemy? The only people this gym considered enemies would be Ziggurat and...

Melody felt her hair stand on end as she hurriedly pushed her foster brothers back. “Everyone get out! Get out of here, it's not safe!”

Trusting her word, the gym's members fled to Coach Steel's office, and she forced the Summers brothers in after them. When her gaze returned to their 'enemy', she was grinning with delight. “You recognize me, don't you?”

A swirling mix of fear and anger was rising in Melody's gut. “How?” she demanded.

The girl laughed. “How? Why, I was here just the other day, of course! Your dear sister wanted so badly to see you. She must not have realized that I was aware of everything she was doing! How adorable! Oh, you mortals really do know how to entertain me.”

With a flash of white magic, the girl's form shifted, revealing the possessed body of Shelly Thompson. The three boys of Team Dungeon cried out in shock, as she bowed mockingly to Melody. “I am Isis of Myta, a survivor of the slaughter your ancestors performed against my
Clenching her fists at her sides, angry Haert sparking around them, Melody stepped forward. “Your people were terrorizing everything! You wanted to destroy our worlds!”

“You mortals have such an odd way of viewing things.” Isis tilted her head back with a short sigh. “We were thriving! Our kingdom grew with every battle, every last breath your human bodies took, and then your stupid gods took it all away!” Her face took on a glare with glowing eyes, fury burning within her. “If they hadn't interfered, your ancestors would have fallen like the rest, and we would still be alive today! But no, you kill our people. You maim our royals. And then you lock them away and throw them to the void, and call it justice!”

“I didn't do any of that! The descendants aren't responsible for the actions of their ancestors!” With a shift and a snap, Melodia stood firm, her sparking Haert taking shape and forming a long handle and a curved blade – the same scythe that had formed in Dia's hands when the second Mytan had invaded their dreams. “I won't let you hurt the innocent! Now let my sister go, and leave my friends alone!”

Isis's eyes slowly narrowed. “Do you really think that you can do anything to me with that? You're hardly trained. I'd imagine you'd do more harm to yourself than good, and frankly, I did not come here to lower myself and fight.” She stretched her arm out, then gained a wicked grin and swung it around towards Masamune. “But if I must!”

As a spear of ice shot from her hand towards the undefended Masamune, Faust lunged forward, his own arms raised in defiance. “Gura!” In a flash of silver-lined black, a wall of energy caused the ice to shatter before it could reach its target. Masamune stumbled back in fear, his eyes wide in panic.

With the assault on her friend, Melodia charged. She only saw red, saw Isis's sick smile, and she swung her blade towards her. While contact was made, it did minimal damage, and a wave of Isis's arm brought forth a sharp blizzard that slammed her against the opposite wall, scythe clattering to the floor.

“Perhaps I'll show a sign of good will,” Isis cackled, her arm now raised to the bent over, coughing Faust. “I'll get rid of that parasite for you!”

“Leave him alone!” Melodia cried in alarm, trying desperately to scramble to her feet. But she was far too slow – the icy beam of magic slammed into his forehead and spread almost instantly to his torso. The ground seemed to shake beneath them as he screamed in pain, and the windows shattered into fragments. Masamune and Zeo dove towards him, shoving him to the ground, and a pale blue flame was left floating in the air.

Isis started laughing as she beckoned the flame to her, taking it in her hands. “You mortals are so adorable in how you think you can stop me. I was only coming to your aid. Such a dangerous parasite should not be allowed to harm your dear friend, should it?”

“S-Stop her,” Toby murmured, his voice weak and his eyes shut. Still, he tried to reach for Isis and retrieve the flame. “Don't let her take him…”

Wobbling, Melodia grabbed for her scythe, part of her firm and part of her terrified. “Give him back,” she ordered. “He is not a parasite. The only one here that matches that description is you!”

“I don't think you understand the position you're in.” With a dark gleam in her eyes, Isis began to laugh once more. “This is beautiful! Such a powerful soul, once we shape it to our needs we'll have
this miserable world for the taking!”

Melodia howled, rushing forward with her scythe again. She was sloppy, though, and Isis easily sidestepped, holding the flame up high when Melodia tried to grab it. “You're such a sad little fool, Xiaolian.” Her eyes flashed, and ice speared down from the ceiling, too fast for Melodia to dodge.

“No!” she heard her friends shout as her mind went blank in terror. She couldn't even close her eyes before the ice-

-shattered into snow.

An orange light blinded them all for a split second, before solidifying into a young teen girl with an orange ponytail, streaked with pink. As she glared, Isis hissed, and before anyone else could react she was gone in a silvery blue wind.

“I will save him,” Lilura vowed, meeting Melodia's eyes in the short instant before she vanished in the same way, her own wind a sharp orange.

A shriek tore through Melodia's throat, uselessly crying Faust's name. At the same time, Toby's voice rang through the gym, a panicked, “TOBY!”

For a long, long moment, Melodia was frozen in place. Her scythe shattered into dust, each pink speck disappearing before it could hit the floor. Slowly, very slowly, she turned her head, a violent shake of fear taking her over.

The eyes on Toby's face shone a powerful, pulsing gray. Faust's eyes.

After processing that, the only thing that Melodia registered was a blinding pink light, before everything went black.

“Well?” Masamune demanded as Margret came out into the hall. “What's going on?!”

“Is Toby okay?” Zeo pleaded.

Margret squeezed her eyes shut, unable to look at them. “The person in that room,” she confessed slowly, “is not your friend Toby. It is an artificially created mind named Faust. According to him...Toby took control just before Isis's beam hit. His soul was stolen by her as he protected Faust.”

Zeo began shaking. “Faust...? N-No...no, no, NO! Faust is gone, w-we beat him!”

“There's no way that's right!” Masamune agreed.

The only thing Margret was able to say was, “I'm sorry...”

Ignoring her completely, Zeo shoved past her into Toby's room, stumbling to the bed and the teen that lay in it, gray eyes dimly staring at the ceiling. “Toby!”

The gray eyes snapped shut. As Masamune entered the room, Faust croaked, “This is not what I wanted...”

“She's lying, isn't she?” Masamune begged. “That's you, Toby! Right?!”

A slow tear escaped one of Faust's closed eyes. He whispered shakily, “I am so sorry.”
Zeo insisted, “It can't be...come on, stop this! This isn't funny!”

“The powers would not have destroyed your gym if it had not been Toby that was taken.”

The desperate rejections fell silent. She had indeed destroyed the stadium, and much of the equipment, in an explosion of Haert energy that would have injured them if not for Zeo’s protective charm. Both boys knew that this had only happened one other time to this magnitude – after her sister-in-law’s funeral. She could not release such energy without experiencing a devastating loss.

As a sobbing Zeo collapsed on the floor, Masamune could only manage to stand there with Uno in a tearful, unbelieving silence.

When Melodia awoke, she stared blankly at the ceiling above her, not moving. She felt dry tears covering her face and a pounding ache in both her head and her chest. Everything looked blurry. The only thing that was clear to her only made the pain worse.

Toby's gone.

An abrupt shudder overtook her, and she curled up into a tight ball, hugging herself and trying to breathe. Her throat felt hoarse and wheezy.

Toby's gone.

It didn't feel real. She felt empty and buried, and when the door opened it didn't register, when running footsteps pounded across the floor it didn't register, and when arms wrapped around her and a voice faded in and out of her hearing she just stayed there in her ball, breathing shallowly, shivering.

Toby was gone, and it was her fault for not being able to face up against her family's enemy. It was her fault. It was all her fault.

She had to...there had to be some way to...

There had to be some way to get him back. To stop this.

With a shuddering breath, Melodia pushed herself up. Through her hazy vision she saw blue and white, a gleam of familiar magic. She blinked a few times, trying to identify the person who was holding her. When her vision refused to work, she lifted an arm to cling to whoever it was, trying and failing to speak. Though she wanted to stand and fight, she was still a shaky mess with a hoarse throat, and she had no idea what had happened since she'd blacked out.

The person brushed her hair from her eyes, their voice...her voice, it was a girl, speaking again. Melodia heard her more clearly this time, getting a full sentence. “Do you want me to sing?”

Sing? Melodia couldn't place the voice, but she nodded. The magic she was feeling felt like a Pearl Tear, so...Alyssin. Was this Alyssin?

She had no time to dwell on it. The girl's pendant lit up, music drifting out. For now, her title didn't matter – her voice held a pure light that Melodia needed.

"When it feels like there's nothing
Worth living for
Everything is broken
The light's not there anymore"
And the story
Takes an unexpected turn
A friend is suddenly gone
We can cry our lives away
But if they were here they'd say
Go forward, you must keep moving on"

“Dia, look at me,” Alyssin whispered gently. When Melodia couldn't quite react, Alyssin put a hand under her chin and guided her head for her. “Dia, listen. I know how much Toby means to you. And we will get him back, alright? He's not gone forever. I promise you that.”

Melodia swallowed, nodding with gratitude she couldn't share any other way. Alyssin sighed, a worried sound; even if Melodia couldn't see it on her face, it was clear. “Let's finish the song together, okay?’”

Closing her eyes, Melodia nodded once more. The light of Alyssin's Tear was gentle and welcoming, so she reached for the song and let it travel to her own Tear, sharing the power. It was a shaky start, but the song was simple, and uplifting, and…it helped.

"Let’s just live
Just one day let's forget about our problems
Let’s fall in love with life
And just be free
The sun will never fade
The night won’t steal our day
Let’s dance and laugh and love and let’s just live"

Melodia's breathing steadied. When she opened her eyes, her sight had cleared, and as the song ended she saw Alyssin, dear Alyssin, her sister princess.

She had so many questions for her, but she couldn't think of a single one right now. The only thing on her mind was finding Toby and getting him back.

“Water,” she managed to croak out. She let Alyssin pull away, and the older teen hurried to the bathroom. Melodia shut her eyes again, trying to focus. With the panic lowering and the situation calm, she felt herself splitting apart. Before that could happen, she threw a memory towards her two halves, one that Melody needed to know and Dia needed to relive.

Melodia thought, before her halves broke and took over again, Don't forget your strengths.

The first thing Melody was aware of was an unfamiliar memory. The view was through Melodia's eyes as she sat on the bed, curled up in her blanket and watching Annie's silent egg.

“We can't back down now, huh Annie?” she whispered. “Heh...I can't believe we're really here. We're really doing this. Meeting my cousin...” A bitter laugh escaped. “By Regina, I'm horrible! I can't even face the family that I know. What am I doing here?”

She sighed, heavy and loud, and turned her gaze towards the window. After a second or two, she untangled herself from the blanket and slid off the bed, walking over to it. She pulled the blinds up and stared out across the city, blinking with building lights in the darkness.

Watching the city-line for a while, Melodia became aware of a light that didn't seem like the others. She watched as it floated through the sky, a small purple glow encircled in the protective
barrier of a rainbow shell.

She wasn't sure when or why she'd opened the window, but suddenly she was reaching out for the strange light, beckoning it closer. Sharp pain seemed to be emanating from it, like the feeling of a corrupted source of Siqu energy. Whatever it was, it was hurting, and she had to help it.

The light landed in her outstretched palm, and almost immediately the rainbow casing lit up, releasing a magic screen much like that of a mage's. Melodia squinted at the sudden brightness, trying to make out the face looking back at her, but it was nothing more than a silhouette.

“At the cost of sharing your mind with another, would you help someone?” The silhouette's voice was distorted, and she couldn't make out any specific tone. Even so, she didn't feel wary at all. Nothing but kindness radiated from the screen, and Melodia briefly wondered if this might be a god like Aqua Regina. The feeling was so similar...

“What do you mean?” she asked in confusion.

The silhouette vanished, replaced by the image of a small teen girl curled up with stuffed animals and blankets on the bed of an RV. Melodia was sure she could hear the sound of heartbroken sobs, and it pushed a familiar ache into her chest. Three years ago, that had been her – huddled in a shivering mess in the cargo hold of Lance's Red Lion, surrounded by soft things that promised comfort. After she'd learned of Ikuto's involvement with Easter, and met the things controlling Shelly and Max...

“What can I do?” she asked desperately. If she could save anyone from that kind of hurt, she'd do it. There wasn't even a choice to make.

The girl's image was replaced with the return of the silhouette. “You have read the books of a mage. Stumbled on the tale of two who joined together with a forbidden spell.”

Melodia swallowed, knowing exactly the book they were talking about. She and Toby had been browsing his mother's library trying to find a way to contact her, tell her all that had happened, ask her to come home... She'd come across a journal telling of a spell that combined two people into one, taking one's body and putting both minds within it. The Live Fuse. It was terrifying, and those who attempted it were lucky when it worked.

“I...I have to do that?”

“Not exactly, but the principle is the same. Her mind will join yours in your body, and the two of you will live within it together. In time, there is a possibility that even those separate minds will decide to become one, if it is the shared wish of you both...”

That splitting pain shot through her again, and she realized it belonged to the girl she'd been shown. “Who is she? Wh-Where could I find her?”

“She lives in a world far away from yours. The two of you could never meet face to face. If you wish to help her, this is your only option. She will still find aid even if you turn away. However, there are those trying to bring her here to you in this way, and you must make a choice.”

“People are trying to put her in my head?”

The distortion made the laugh sound...spooky, but for some reason she still didn't feel threatened. “It is a long and difficult thing to explain.”

“And if I do this, I...won't just disappear? We'll both be sharing...?” This was very weird, but
Melodia couldn't deny that she was already leaning towards a decision. “It'll be like that spell?”

“Essentially. How you work with it is entirely your choice.”

Melodia was silent. She didn't know this girl, or the exact details of what she'd been through...but she could feel her pain. It was stabbing through her like the reminders of what Ikuto and those spirits had done to her.

She could stop that pain.

“...Okay. I'll do it.”

The rainbow casing disappeared from the purple light. As the screen vanished with it, the distorted voice said, “Then lower your walls and let her in. Thank you, child, for your kindness and bravery.”

Melodia clumsily closed the window and stumbled back to the bed, practically falling onto it as she shook.

This is her. Oh Regina, this is her right here isn't it?

She was literally holding that girl's soul. And with every second that passed she could feel it grow weaker without a place to stay.

Melodia sat herself up and closed her eyes, quickly taking down her mental walls. She could put them back up later. When they were all lowered, she brought the light up to her chest and shivered as it disappeared within her.

Everything went blurry. The already dark room faded into black, and the last thing she knew was that she had collapsed across the bed.

As Melody blinked out of the memory, and saw Alyssin walking towards her with a glass of water, a rush of conflicting emotions took over. Gratitude, that Dia had reached out to help her. Fear, that Toby had been taken. Uncertainty. Pain, regret...hope.

“I will save him.” Lilura had promised her that. Lilura...was on their side, and if anyone could track down a Mytan, it would be another Mytan. She had to trust...

She had to be strong enough to ask for help. Use her strengths. Right now, her strength would be her compassion.

Once she'd emptied the glass, the clearly enchanted water soothing her throat, she met Alyssin's gaze.

Her boys needed her.

Holding the shivering Zeo in the middle of Toby's room, where he refused to move from, Masamune looked up as the door creaked. At the sight of Melodia and Alyssin, he felt relief burst through him. Di's okay!

Before he could speak, his eyes flicked to the pendants the girls wore, each one slightly shimmering. He didn't understand all of the mermaid thing, but he knew their songs helped, and Zeo needed that right now. If he stayed like this any longer, his powers would kick in and someone could get hurt.
Masamune nodded, granting them the permission they were silently waiting for. He watched Melodia and Alyssin join hands, and the glow of their pendants brightened. With the music that manifested, Melodia began the song.

“There's a point where it tips
There's a point where it breaks
There's a point where it bends
And a point we just can't take
Anymore”

He was no magic user, but Masamune felt the peace wash over him with her soft words. When Alyssin took the second part of the verse, that feeling only grew.

“There's a line that we'll cross
And there's no return
There's a time and a place
No bridges left to burn
Anymore”

Faust slowly sat up, grunting with the effort. Masamune glanced at him, looking him over. If it weren't for the sharp gray of his eyes, he'd still think it was Toby...

When the two voices joined together, they strengthened the calming energy even more.

“We can't just wait with lives at stake
Until they think we're ready
Our enemies are gathering
The storm is growing deadly”

Zeo had stopped shivering, but didn't make any move to uncurl himself. Masamune didn't rush him, just hoped that he could feel the calming effects of the girls' voices.

“Now it's time to say goodbye
To the things we loved
And the innocence of youth
How the time seemed to fly
From our carefree lives
And the solitude and peace we always knew”

Masamune felt all the love that Melodia was pushing into this song for them, and he opened himself to it. He stopped fighting it. As he held Zeo, he stopped forcing himself not to cry again.

“There's a day when we'll fight
And we're not gonna fall
There's a day when we'll stand
And a day when we won't crawl
Anymore”

“There's a moment in time
Where there's no going back
When we're pushed too hard
And we won't hold our attack
Anymore”
"We can't just cling to childish things
As evil just grows closer
Humanity's in jeopardy
This fight is far from over"

"Now it's time to say goodbye
To the things we loved
And the innocence of youth
With a doubt in our minds
Why we chose this life
And at times we can't help wondering..."

"Were we born to fight and die?
Sacrificed for one huge lie?
Are we heroes keeping peace?
Or are we weapons?
Pointed at the enemy
So someone else can claim a victory?"

Masamune saw as Melodia's eyes flicked over to Faust, her compassion shining through. Her greatest strength, but her equal weakness – and yet, even through his fear, he understood. Faust was not their enemy, not anymore. He was just as scared right now as they were.

Zeo's head finally lifted, and Melodia raised her arm in a gesture of reaching out to him – a reminder that he wasn't alone.

"Now it's time to say goodbye
To the things we loved
And the innocence of youth
How the time seemed to fly
From our carefree lives
And the solitude and peace we always knew"

As she pulled her hand apart from Alyssin's, Melodia slowly walked over to Zeo and Masamune. She knelt in front of them, letting Zeo grab her arm, and smiling sadly, but reassuringly. There was a fire in her eyes that Masamune hadn't seen for a very long time.

“We're going to get Toby back,” she promised.

With how well he knew her, Masamune would be a fool not to believe her.

Chapter End Notes

Songs: "Let's Just Live" from RWBY - English
"Time to Say Goodbye" from RWBY - English

Check out the Tumblr for pointless Mooniverse stats, because I did math! What better way to celebrate the four year anniversary of this story? XD
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/post/169159884930/pointless-but-interesting-mooniverse-stats
Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go: http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I realized too late that I totally could've posted this chapter on Melodia's birthday, which was yesterday (the 27th), and I regret not realizing it sooner. Oh well.

While Melody dumped pillows and blankets around the living room, Zeo quickly buried himself in the materials given, and Masamune situated himself as well. Faust, looking uncertain about simply being in the room, was led to the recliner and promptly given a pillow to hold. The sheer bafflement on his face succeeded in getting a chuckle out of Masamune, if nothing else.

Without request, Melody then went over to the fireplace and traced the symbol carved into the bricks. In response, a fire started itself within – a spell set by Tracy. Faust's attention was immediately drawn to it, and Melody hoped it would help him relax. She turned towards the others – three worried bladers and three worried Characters. Walking over to Faust, she put her hand on his arm.

"There's someone I want you all to meet," she said gently.

With uncertainty towards the situation as a whole, but trust in her, Masamune nodded for her to continue. Melody appreciated that; she smiled softly, and continued.

"This is Faust. He likes watching the fireplace when it's lit, listening to the sounds of the wind, and the feeling of the sun on his face. He's not here to fight us. He's not our enemy. He's lost and confused and he wants the same thing we do – to get Toby back."

Though the song had helped him greatly, Zeo still wasn't quite ready to talk yet. Masamune, however, exchanged a brief glance with Uno before asking, "How do you know that? How long...have you known about Faust?"

"A few days...and I know it because he told me. We talked the day I got back." Melody shook her head a little, sighing. "He's not the kind of person who would want something like this to happen."

Masamune seemed unsure, and she couldn't blame him for that. "Are you positive...?"

"If he was still controlled by Ziggurat, then don't you think he would've started trying to find Twisted Tempo's pieces in a vain attempt to start making Spiral Force again as soon as he woke up?"

"I...still, how do we know that he didn't...make her take Toby instead of him?"

Melody looked at Faust. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

She saw Masamune's gaze flick over to him. For a second, she didn't think he actually would, but he did. "Did you...make Toby be taken?"

"No." Faust didn't hesitate. "I tried to fight. I tried to...stop her. But I was weak." To his credit, even if he didn't understand emotions at all, he looked very much like he regretted his failure. "I
was too weak to keep him from being taken. For what little it may be worth...I'm sorry.”

“Sorry,” Zeo repeated, a venomous tone in his voice. “Our friend is gone, and all you can say is sorry?”

Alyssin stepped forward. “Zeo! We're all on edge right now. But Faust was attacked too, right? Are you going to start yelling at someone who can barely walk?”

“Well I gotta yell at someone!”

“Then yell at me.” With newly found courage, Melody sidestepped, blocking Faust from Zeo's glare. “Go on. Tell me how much you hate him, how much you wish he was gone. I'll counter with the fact that if he wasn't there, Isis could've done a lot more damage. She could've hurt a lot more of our friends. She was there because of me, Zeo. Not because of Faust. He did the best he could, and maybe that wasn't enough to stop her, but it damn well prevented her from killing anyone this time.”

In an uncertain echo, Uno asked, “Th-This time?”

“She was one of the spirits that attacked my village, you know that. With the way my family was split apart, did you really think no one else was hurt? Faust saved us from losing anyone permanently. We can and will get Toby back.”

Still struggling with everything that was happening, Zeo remained silent. Masamune clearly didn't know what to say, so Alyssin took the response. “Do you have any ideas? When I got to the gym and heard what had happened, Coach Steel said that another spirit took chase. Is she someone we can trust?”

“Yes.” With the situation they were now in, Melody couldn't afford to fear what could be their most powerful ally. But right now, everyone's tensions were too high for a proper discussion. “But before we get started, I think we could all use a drink.”

When the momentary silence was broken by, “Yes please,” quietly murmured by Faust, even Zeo surrendered. “Fine. Cocoa. I'd love some goddamn cocoa right now.”

“So who is she?” Zeo asked from within his cave of blankets, once Margret had made the cocoa and passed it out. It took one glance to see he'd taken all of them, but Melody had expected no less in his current state. Toby was practically family to him.

Sitting with Masamune and Alyssin on the couch, Melody stirred her cocoa as she picked her words. “Her name is Lilura. She's a Mytan, like Isis, but she isn't caught in the same darkness. She made peace with the mages a long time ago.” She glanced at Alyssin for a moment before continuing. “She also just broke the sea foam curse for merfolk. Maybe. No proof yet, but...she definitely did something to us.”

Margret nodded, leaning against the fireplace. “Yeah. I'm sensing the same hole in Alyssin here that you suddenly have, so it's a possibility.” When Alyssin gave her a startled look, she gave a nonchalant wave. “I know what the pendants mean, so it's not really a mystery when I see one.”

“I...see...” Alyssin glanced down at her mug. “Though...yes, I remember having a dream about that. I'd just come back from the beach myself for the Day of Light Tide, and passed out in my hotel room. A voice promised to help the merfolk after the recent loss of so many. I felt...something being ripped out of me, and when I finally woke up, I felt...lighter.”
“Well...that's good though, right?” Masamune tried. “That curse, it's something that was too powerful for even Aqua...Aqua...her, to get rid of. So if Lilura did, that means she's not only on our side, but really powerful!”

“Regina,” the two princesses supplied in unison, before Melody nodded. “That's what I'm hoping. She's definitely the best pick to chase a Mytan, being one herself. I do think...we should tell someone. A mage, or at least someone who knows about her. They could give us advice...help us figure out what to do.”

After sipping her cocoa, Margret guessed, “Milinka?”

Melody sighed. “Unfortunately, I don't have her contact information...but there is someone that I'm almost positive is a mage, and I can contact her. What do you say?”

“If it can get Toby back, do it.” Zeo's tone held no hesitation, and Masamune was quick to nod in agreement.

To Noa: If you're a mage, we need to talk as soon as possible. It's about Lilura.

The doorbell rang only a few minutes later. Melody hurried to let Noa in, noticing instantly that the woman had seemed in such a rush that she'd only thrown on sweatpants and a T-shirt – she wasn't even wearing shoes. Her hair was pinned up as well, as if she'd been about to take a bath. Melody tried to apologize, but Noa only shook her head in response and followed her to the others. “What's this about Lilura? Is everything alright?”

While Masamune and Zeo stared at her, their theories about her suddenly being given light, Faust gave her an answer. “They took him.”

“...Who took whom?”

“The Mytans. They took Toby.”

Melody was stunned as the usually calm Noa seemed to practically bristle with anger, to the point that her silvery magic aura sent out half a dozen sparks of energy. Her eyes were similarly glowing – Melodia had never seen something like this from her. “What.”

Quickly leading her to the couch, Melody began to explain what had happened earlier that day. Alyssin brought her a mug of cocoa, which Noa took but didn't drink. Her face went through several changes – twitches, growls, shock, worry – it was so strange to see her being so expressive. It was a comfort, too, though, in a way. It showed that she really did care.

Once Melody reached the point where she'd blacked out, Masamune took over. He explained that she'd let out a surge of Haert energy that had destroyed the stadium as well as taken a huge chunk out of the floor, and damaged several pieces of their equipment. Not having known this, Melody felt even worse than before, and silently promised herself she'd make it up to them.

When Noa prompted for details on the 'why' of the explosion, Zeo picked up the explanation. He recounted that Melodia's Haert would rise in such a way when she experienced emotional loss. There had been a number of shattered windows and glasses over the years when she was upset, as well as an actual explosion that happened after Chiasa's death.

Noa took this all in quietly, stirring her cocoa but not still drinking from it. When she did speak, it was only after a long stare at Faust. “There are a number of things going on, I see. And this relates to Lilura, because she took chase.”
Melody nodded. “I...I just feel so lost. I thought an outside opinion might...”

“I can track Lilura for you.”

All eyes focused on the new guest. Noa repeated, calmly, “I can track Lilura. It's quite easy. She has long since split her energy in two, and her other half contains itself in a book I have easy access to. I can have constant knowledge on where she is, and if she is still on the trail of this kidnapper.” Noa summoned up a screen much like Milinka's, though silver in color. “Let me put in the emergency request...I'll be able to speak with her by your tomorrow morning.”

As she used a matching keyboard to type in her 'request', Melody felt a wave of relief wash over her. “You don't know how much this means to me.”

“Oh, I think I do...” Noa gave a light smile. “I believe you'll find that your eruption has broken a mental wall or two. You're glowing.”

Melody let out a startled squeak, and Dia, trustworthy, patient Dia, worked fast to get all their walls back in place. By the time she was done, Noa had sent her request and was asking Faust if he felt well.

There was a short, painful silence after he quietly admitted, “I would feel much better if I was not suddenly alone in a body that is not mine.”

Noa stood, walking over to him and putting a soft hand on his shoulder. “We shall bring him back, Faust. And perhaps we can also do something for your state as well, afterwards.”

Too overcome by his emotions, Faust couldn't answer past a nod. Noa smiled at him reassuringly, then returned to the couch and picked up her cocoa from the coffee table. Without warning, she tipped the mug and chugged it down, paying no attention to everyone's stares of surprise, and only stopping once it was drained. “Now then, I must be heading off. Thank you for the drink and the company.”

She set the mug on the coffee table and stood, either ignoring or not knowing about the ring of chocolate around her mouth. With a quick wave, she smiled in farewell before disappearing in a flash of silver.

Three seconds later, Zeo murmured, “Do you think alien is still on the table? Because I've never seen a human drink hot cocoa that fast.”

Melody couldn't stop herself from laughing. After everything that had happened that day, a comment as simple as that helped lift her spirits a little.

It was going to be hard. People would probably get hurt. They might be left with more questions than answers. But if they were still able to joke like that at the end of it, it would be worth it.

“The time has finally come, my brothers! We will face the main school and we, the Beylin Fist, will prove our power to them and the world!”

The vision snippet came to her while she was preparing for bed. Though Melody felt exhausted and only wanted to sleep, she couldn't ignore it, especially not with the text that came almost simultaneously.

From Meg: We're heading to China tomorrow. Just heard from Dashan.
Damn it. Why now? Melody finished kicking her shoes off so she wouldn't trip and headed into the hallway to track down the others. No one had gotten to sleep yet, so she was lucky and able to gather them in the hall. She explained her visions and what they meant – the anger of her home village and the reason for it, the war against Beylin Temple over two thousand years ago, and how her cousin would be the one leading the charge in the upcoming tournament taking place in China.

This was no longer her fight alone. Sharing what she knew could only benefit her.

Zeo wanted to go with her. Masamune argued otherwise, saying that they needed to stay and help the gym. Tired and cross, the two fought over who was right, while Faust quietly offered to stay behind. He found there to be no reason to alert Gingka's crew to the events of the day, and he would not be able to pose as Toby very convincingly. Alyssin, on the other hand, stated that she was going as well, so as to not leave her sister princess alone. Melody was grateful for this. Margret, along with Kalia, opted to stay in New York and help the gym, as well as watch Ikuto – after, of course, Instant Transmission-ing Melody and Alyssin to Japan.

They started heading back to bed, Ikuto making sure that Melody would contact them if something happened. Zeo surrendered to Masamune's thought process, unable to disagree with the fact that the gym needed them right now. Being with bladers as strong as Gingka and Kyoya would only make Melody safer, after all. They, too, left to get some sleep, and Melody went to pack.

When Margret and Alyssin were ready to go, Melody was still in the process of saying goodbye to her half-asleep friends. Faust had been quick and simple, Masamune had trapped her in a hug, and Zeo...

Well, he really didn't want her to go.

“If anything happens, you call me, alright? I don't care what time it is.”

“I will.”

“I mean it, Dia. Anything. A freaking paper cut, you tell me.”

“Zeo, how am I gonna get a paper cut with Alyssin hovering over me?”

“I don't know, I just-” Zeo clung to her for the third time since she'd entered the room. “I'm worried, okay? I can't...I can't lose you, too.”

“You won't,” she promised. “Once this is over, I'll come right back.”

Zeo stared at her with eyes that held far more sadness than she felt she could handle. He let her go, though, and she gave him a reassuring smile before turning to leave.

As she reached the door, however, he grabbed her arm to stop her. Worried, but also knowing she had to go, she turned around with a sigh. “Zeo-”

He interrupted in a rush, “I just want you to know I'm not being sneaky or doing this because Toby's not here but because I'm worried and I care about you.”

Before she could ask what the hell he was talking about, he leaned over and gently kissed her forehead, a lot like what he'd do when Kayla did something that freaked him out.

She felt herself blushing, as he'd never acted this way towards her before. He said again, just as red, “I care about you. So...come back.”
Melody had the odd, embarrassing feeling that there was more to that statement than it seemed. Didn't Zeo have a crush on her when they were younger? Did he still?

“I will,” she assured him again. She seemed to get through to him this time; he nodded, let her go, and didn't stop her again.

Melody was certain that Dia was embarrassed, too, so that made her feel a little better. She met the other girls downstairs, where Alyssin was pacing as she waited. When she saw Melody, she gave a sad smile. “Ready to go?”

Melody nodded, and both girls put their hands on Margret's shoulders. They closed their eyes as Margret searched for Madoka's familiar energy, locked onto it, and made the teleport. A startled Madoka shrieked, even with Melody's earlier warning text, but managed to calm down quickly. Margret gave Melody one last look, one last hug, then disappeared back to New York.

“Get some rest,” Crystal urged. “We'll wake you later.”

Melody repeated this for Alyssin, who obliged instantly, barely making it to the couch before falling over. She curled up and seemed asleep within seconds, which frankly amazed Melody to the point of staring. After a moment, she just shook her head, and went to the spare bedroom to try and do the same.

To Meg: Meet me at 315 agency. Dia says one of the idols is from Europe. Might know your kingdom.
To Meg: we're also going to require hugs from both of you.

From Tadase: Would you be able to visit today?

To Touma: Please make sure Pierre is at the egecny I need to talk to him, it's important.
To Touma: Yes i'm back, just for a bit, it's complicated. Traveling. Things.

To Tadase: Yes, I can do that. I have some other people to see first, but I'll have time to come over. Are you back in school yet?

From Tadase: Yes, but today is Sunday. Thank you.

Melody wasn't going to waste any time. She'd promised to help Megan, and she would. She wouldn't let Tadase and his friends go against the other Mytan without information, either. Now that Ikuto was removed from the equation, she had no idea what Easter would throw at them once Lulu returned to France. And if her cousin was asking for help, she would give all she was able to.

So, right now, with the energy they'd regained from their naps, she and Alyssin were taking a train that would get them closer to the 315 Pro. agency. After that, they'd pay a visit to Tadase.

From Meg: the ghosties and I are on our way
From Meg: did I mention Gummy have ghost pokemon
From Meg: CUZ WE HAVE GHOSTIES

Call From: Al and Tree

Melody stared blankly at the vibrating cell phone, her smile from Meg's texts slipping away. Hope and Annie touched her hand, nodding in support. Before she could change her mind, Melody answered and brought the phone to her ear. “He-Hello?”
“Hello this is...Tree, I am calling because something is most certainly and clearly wrong and we are very concerned, is there anything at all that we can do to aid your situation?”

Melody's stomach dropped, both sides of her recognizing the distorted voice. “You're-” She glanced at Alyssin, then at Dia's suggestion, switched to Chinese, a language their friend didn't know. “You're the one that took me to Dia.”

“Yes yes yes we can discuss that later for goodness sake, but is there anything we can do for you?”

Through the distortion, Melody could hear devastated worry. It almost reminded her of a parent, as strange as that was to consider. “I, uh...I-I don't know...”

The gym. Can they fix the gym?

Melody felt herself loosen up a bit at Dia's suggestion. “My beyblade gym was...badly damaged. M-My energy-”

“Say no more. I shall put Al on it at once.”

“...M-Mytans? Is there anything you know about Mytans? C...Can they...manipulate souls?”

“No. No, no, no, they most certainly cannot—what in light's name is making you ask this?”

“...Isis of Myta...took the soul of Melodia's boyfriend. She said she was...going to shape it to their needs...”

The briefest of silences before Tree spoke again. “They cannot manipulate the spirit itself, but they may be able to manipulate the mind. Isis may have been speaking of memory manipulation, such as similar to what I performed in your dimension. I...I can lock Mytan activity into whatever dimension they are currently in, but at this point, that is all I am capable of.”

Dia took a question now. “What if she's already left? Or...another one's chasing her, a-a good one, to get Toby back. What if they get separated and she loses Isis? Loses Toby?”

“...I can...lock them into the dimension they are currently in...and...if they have left your dimension...I can divert or transfer them back.” Tree's tone suggested quick contemplation, trying hard to help however they could. To have such a powerful god on their side...Melody thought she might cry. “As for his well being, if they want to use him, there is no doubt they would protect his spirit from dwindling out.”

Blinking back slight tears, Dia sniffled, her voice quiet and meek. “Thank you.”

“You girls did not deserve any of this. In any possible way, we shall aid you.” Even through the distortion, Tree's voice took a softer tone. “In all of this, there is one piece of good news I can give you.”

“There is...?”

“The curse. The one you asked Al to look into. It is indeed gone.”

“...How do you...”

“I spoke to young Regina myself once it was mentioned to me. She gave full agreement, very teary eyed, telling me it was gone – no trace, no whisper, nothing. Her people – you, are free.”
Shaking, Dia lowered the phone. She turned to Alyssin, who was politely tuning out the unfamiliar language, then switched to English. “The curse is really gone.”

Alyssin's head abruptly whirled around. “What? How do you know?”

“I...I have some interesting...powerful friends.”

Stunned, Alyssin could only nod slowly, and Dia left her to process. She didn't have the same luxury at the moment, but she would...she would handle that later. She lifted the phone back to her ear and returned to Chinese for two simple words. “Thank you.”

“...You know, she is very proud of your decision, Melodia. She wanted me to tell you that.”

Dia couldn't hold back the tears. Aqua Regina was proud of her? Just like that? There were no words to describe how knowing that made her feel. Elated? Exhilarated? Fulfilled?

“Can you tell her she's an awesome mom-god?”

“Of course.”

“I'm kind of excited. I finally get to meet the mysterious Megumi.”

“Mhm.”

“And she's the Green princess, too. Hah! That's three of us right here. Plus your guardian friends, that's six. We've got everyone!”

“Mhm...”

“Well...I guess not exactly everyone, but, everyone that's here. It's still kind of exciting. Or...it would be, if the circumstances were different.”

Melody didn't answer. She wasn't meaning to tune Alyssin out, but it was hard to listen to someone when you were having a vision. They'd just gotten onto the sidewalk, and Alyssin had mentioned that she didn't have to worry about Aguma so much, because she would totally convince him, and maybe that had been the trigger.

A robed figure stood in front of her, face masked by a high collar and large goggles - Pluto, descendant of King Hades, ringleader of the Dark Nebula, Hades Inc., and now the attempt to revive Nemesis. He extended a hand to her, silence overtaking the ancient, unfamiliar room. The two of them were alone.

When she didn't give a response to his offer right away, his hand slowly pulled back. “I see. So you have no intention of cooperating, even with the wishes of your own people. If they found out about this, they would surely think of you as a traitor. Does that not bother you?”

“I won't join them if they follow the wrong path.”

“Hm...this really is such a shame. I was hoping to take you in willingly.” Pluto snapped his fingers, and short seconds later, a blast of energy hit her from behind. “Oh well.”

The last thing she was aware of before she slipped into gentle unconsciousness was Pluto's cackling laughter.

As Melody blinked back to reality, she found Alyssin standing in front of her, holding her arms and
watching with concern. “Melodia...?”

Melody managed, “I need time to...to make sense of this...”

“O...Okay...” Alyssin slowly released her, stepping aside. The two resumed their walk, both a bit more tense than before. Reading the mood, neither Character made much noise, either, and Melody pondered over what she'd seen.

The vision was different. It had come back, which was unusual already, but more than that, it had changed.

No longer was she going to meet Pluto with Gingka and the others. It looked like she was there earlier, maybe trying to convince Aguma to change his mind. And not only did she fail, but she was taken prisoner by Pluto.

She couldn't let any of that happen. She had to convince Aguma before he and the others left the tournament, so this entire confrontation could be avoided, and return to how it had been shown before.

*Permission to punch this-

*We will.*

*And maybe Aguma too?*

*If he doesn't listen.*

*Knowing my cousin, he probably won't. Not at first. But music magic can be very convincing-*

Melody jolted as her phone began to ring inside her bag. Toby's ringtone. She shoved down the feeling of heartache and took it out of her bag, answering, “H-Hello?”

“It is-” Faust began to speak, then cut off. “I mean...um...hello.”

“Hi, Faust. What is it?”

As she expected, he was more than happy to skip past the greetings he didn't understand. “Your microphone is similar to the ancient versions of a mermaid princess’s, before they developed into what they are now. It's made of Aquarius Crystals.”

Aquarius Crystals. What had been written on the note Lilura left. “And Haert.”

“Yes, and I believe that is to enable it to work while you cannot transform. This book I've found on the subject explains that the transformation of a mermaid princess cannot occur if even one Pearl Tear is missing.”

They couldn't transform? At least not while Kimiko was who knew where. It was worrying, but it still did make sense. “I...I see. That's why it responded to my Tear, then...”

“The Haert would have also been the reason that Toby was pulled into the song, if I'm correct in my thoughts. In simplicity, your mother wanted you to be able to channel your power more efficiently, until your ability to transform returns.”

“I...thank you, Faust. It's nice to have an answer to something.”

Through a yawn, Faust assured her, “I am glad to be of some assistance. I believe I shall try for
some sleep now that this research is complete.”

“Go for it. Make sure to eat, too. And...maybe try to contact Tracy, if you can.”

“Yes...that is probably wise.” After another yawn, Faust remembered to say, “Goodbye,” before he hung up.

Melody took a slow breath, returned her phone to her bag, and pushed her hair from her face as the wind picked up. *We can do this. Together, we can...solve our problems, one at a time.*

*We'll help Meg. We'll talk to Aguma. We'll get Toby back. That's all that matters right now.*

As she started walking faster, she almost left Alyssin behind as the older girl read a text. Melody didn't notice the uncertain frown her friend took on, or the way Alyssin looked at her with worry, but she did turn back in time to watch her put the phone away.

“C'mon. Let's go meet Meg.”

Alyssin nodded. “Right.”

“So Megumi is...currently holding someone else's soul, to help it get home?”

“Her, not it. And yes. We're calling them Gummy and Megan, because...well, names.” Melody had been able to explain the basics of the Megs' situation, without blowing her own cover. (Was it a cover? Eh, the phrase was close enough.) “Megan is from a European country, and there's someone from Europe that works with my friends at this agency. I thought he might know something about her home.”

“Huh...okay...” Alyssin slowly nodded. “I think I get it.”

*From Meg: whos she*
*From Meg: im hiding in the shadows til u clear her*

Melody just sighed.

*To Meg: Alyssin, the Indigo princess. I told her the minimal basics.*

*From Meg: so she wont freak if I come out like this*

*To Meg: Like what.*

*From Meg: blond*
*From Meg: we look like me right now*
*From Meg: I mean, megan me. Not gummy me.*
*From Meg: we thought it might help this idol guy think better*
*From Meg: u don't look so good*

*To Meg: I dont feel so good either. Get over here.*

From the narrow empty space beside the 315 agency building came Megan, a Banette by her side. She wasted no time hurrying toward them, launching a hug assault on her friend. “What's wrong?”

Melody took a slow breath, wrapping her arms around Megan. True to her word, she looked nothing like Megumi Watarigani – in all sense of appearance, she was Megan Grant. For Melody,
this was comforting.

But, still...If she were to tell them what had happened, she had no doubt that Megan would drop the search for her father in order to stay at her side, and Melody didn't want that. Melody wanted Megan to get home, to help her family get home. Melody had promised she'd make that happen.

“Mel?”

Melody cleared her throat, trying to speak. “Um...I-I had a few...problems with...my Arrangement. I had one, and uh...there were some moments...a-and I...blew up the gym, a little...”

Megan's arms felt safe, probably second only to her own family – whether it was Melody's or Dia's. “You're okay. It's okay now, I promise. Did you hurt anyone?”

“N-No...” Melody frowned. “I mean, Zeo got cut...the first time...but he says he's okay...”

“Then it's okay. I'm sure they understand and they don't hold it against you.” Megan pulled away slightly to look at her. “Dia? You're okay too. It's going to smooth out and I'm sure that by the time we beat Nemesis, all of this will be behind us. You'll grow past your Arrangement, and...and you'll have better control of your energy, and you'll be stronger in so many ways. Don't give up on anything, okay?”

Melody felt her lip twitch, and she headbutted Megan's shoulder, trying not to cry. “Mhm.”

While staying in Megan's arms, Melody heard her introduce herself to Alyssin, and explain that yes Megumi has green hair, but we look like me since we're here for me. There were also introductions for her Banette, Aeron, and apologies that they couldn't meet the other 'ghosties' because they were asleep for the day.

Megan then complained she was getting cold, so the three mermaid princesses headed inside, Megan returning Aeron to his poke ball. Even with the shadow of Toby's kidnapping lurking over her, Melody felt more secure with them at her sides. As scared as she was, she had to stay strong – both her and Dia. They just had to go a step at a time.

On the third floor, Melody knocked on the 315 Productions door. After a brief wait, they were greeted by the agency's secretary, a green haired man that Dia vaguely recalled being named Ken. He welcomed them, most specifically Melody, before asking why they'd come.

“We're, um, here to see Pierre. Is he here yet? I asked Touma, but he hasn't answered...” Melody was grateful that her voice didn't shake.

Ken smiled. “Oh, I see! Touma-kun is in practice right now, so he might not have seen your message. I'll call Pierre-kun for you right away!”

“Ah, thanks. Can we wait in here until then?”

“Of course!” Ken stepped aside to let them in. The girls walked in, Alyssin thanking him while Megan gave cheerful greetings to the trio inside. While Ken moved to call Pierre, and Melody took her phone back out to text Touma not to worry about it, she heard a vaguely startled, “Melodia-san?”

She looked up, pausing when one of the men raised his hand slightly. She frowned, letting Dia supply his name – Sakuraba Kaoru. One of Aniko's friends? Something about sharing medical classes or something. “Uh...h-hi, Sakuraba-san...”
“I wasn't expecting to see you. Is everything alright?”

“Ah...y-yeah, just stopping by on my way to China. I'm going to see my cousin. I forgot you worked here...” Glancing at the two men with him, Dia identified them as his unit mates, Tendo Teru and Kashiwagi Tsubasa. “Nice to see you three again, though.”

A polite round of introductions went by for Alyssin, and Melody glanced around to see where Megan had gone. She found her friend staring at a poster of the agency's idols, from the joint concert they'd had earlier that winter. “Meg?”

When she didn't receive a reply, Melody walked over, repeating more quietly, “Meg?”

Megan took a slow, shaky breath, not moving her eyes off the poster. “We're here to see Pierre, right?” she asked hesitantly.

“Yeah?”

“He's European? A prince?”

“Yes...”

Megan set a twitching finger against Pierre's image on the poster. “Is he this blond one with the frog doll?” she whispered.

“Um...yeah, how did you-?”

“I know him.” Megan's finger curled back into her fist, and she pulled it towards her face as she tried to keep her breathing steady. “H-He's one of three princes to a kingdom really close to ours...When you said his name, I got a little hopeful, but...I-I didn't expect it to really be...”

Speechless for a moment, Melody felt an actual smile break onto her face, real joy entering her for the first time since Toby's kidnapping. She took Megan by the shoulders, turning her and pulling her into an excited hug. “That's amazing! Meg, that's great, that means you're so much closer than we thought!”

It was Megan's turn to hide in her friend's arms, and shiver with tears she didn't want to shed. Melody just held her, so thankful for this chance. It looked like she was able to do something right in all this after all.

Chapter End Notes

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go: http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I actually finished this pretty soon after chapter 14, but wanted to wait a bit longer than 2 days to post it. Chapter 16 isn't going as fast...but that's okay. I know I'll get it done sooner or later.
BUT! Something I DID get done between then and now is Melodia's profile! -insert cheers and applause sound effects- My drawing programs have been acting up so it took a lot longer than I would've liked, not to mention saving it with like five different names...but it's done! It's finally done! You can look at it over on our dA, or directly linked here--> http://fav.me/dc1zn9b

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Megan had been calmed down by a combination of Melody's hugs and hot tea, she was eager to hear what Kaoru and his unit mates knew about Pierre. While Kaoru himself wasn't interested in talking on the subject, the other two were, so she was quickly taken into the conversation. Alyssin, deciding to keep watch over her for the time being, joined in as well.

Dia and Kaoru let the others have the couch and chairs, willing to stand for their own conversation. Kaoru wanted to know how Aniko was doing, as they hadn't talked in a while; Dia was curious how his idol work was going. Melody was fine letting them talk, as it wouldn't be fair for her to be the only one interacting with people.

When Dia convinced Kaoru to join her in a photo to send to Aniko, Melody mentally giggled. Ken took the photo with Dia's phone and it was sent off with no explanation; Kaoru then asked for Aniko's number, as he'd lost contact some time ago when Aniko had upgraded to Pidge's phone.

During the conversations, Dia was also unlocking a good portion of memories involving 315, something she'd sort of been neglecting – Melody'd had to ask about it, even. Regardless, learning more about them all helped Melody feel more at ease in the unfamiliar surroundings. It was also very welcome in passing the time.

"I'm not quite sure I understand why your friend is so eager to meet Pierre," Kaoru was saying to Dia when Melody tuned back in. Dia chuckled a bit, probably trying to spin some kind of excuse.

"Um, Megan's from Europe herself, from a kingdom pretty close to his, apparently. She's actually royalty herself, just...away for different reasons. She's looking forward to the familiar face, I guess."

Glancing over at Megan, who sat quite straight compared to the others' slouching, held her tea cup gracefully, and managed to look elegant even in Megumi's roughed up clothes, Kaoru nodded. The 'regalness' had never really left her – twelve years of royal upbringing would do that.

God, Melody still couldn't believe Megan was only 12 and handling this so well. She, Dia, and Gummy were all 16, and...well, she couldn't speak for Gummy of course, but all she and Dia seemed to find here was chaos.

Melody was somewhere in between thought tangents of, 'are the Megs the same height or not', 'no
they're three years apart that's dumb', and 'wait am I taller as Dia' when the door was opened, and
Dia's head turned on curious instinct. With his usual beaming smile, Pierre hurried towards her.
“Melodia! You came to see me!”

“Annie, Annie!” cheered the green haired Character that accompanied him – this had to be Kero,
Melody realized, vaguely remembering him being mentioned by Jupiter. And of course, there he
was in the memories, as well.

Annie and Kero's happy hug mirrored that of their Bearers, though included Hope's introduction
and Kero hurrying to include her. True to Jupiter's words, Teru seemed to be able to see the
Characters, though he admitted it took a lot of squinting and careful focus. He assured Dia that hers
seemed very cute from what he could see, though.

“Did you come to play?” Pierre asked hopefully of Dia, who chuckled a bit and eased control back
over to Melody. “Oh, we can go get lunch! You want to?”

Melody carefully turned Pierre to the seats, motioning towards the frozen, nervous as heck Megan.
“Actually, I brought someone to see you.”

At Alyssin's nudge, Megan stood, facing Pierre with clear restraint. When he stared at her
curiously, she seemed ready to break.

When he gasped, his face overtaken by joy, and shouted, “Megan!” she crumbled, ugly sobs
pouring out as she attacked him in a desperate hug. Startled and concerned, Pierre held her tightly,
his smile gone as he tried to figure out what was wrong. “M-Megan? Are you okay?”

Kero rushed to his Bearer's side, and the two exchanged a quick look. Pierre nodded consent, and
Kero activated their Chara-Change – a small hairclip of a frog's head. Pierre then gently pulled
himself and Megan apart, smiling reassuringly, and when she let go, started clapping in a simple
rhythm.

The tiny song that followed next would probably have been even more adorable if either Melody or
Dia knew German, but was still cute all the same.

“Glückliches, glückliches Lächeln
Glückliches, glückliches Lächeln
Ich kenne eine Prinzessin mit einem glücklichen, glücklichen Lächeln!”

Staring and sniffling like a total mess, Megan started to quiet a little. Seeing the progress, Pierre
repeated his little song.

“Glückliches, glückliches Lächeln
Glückliches, glückliches Lächeln
Ich kenne eine Prinzessin mit einem glücklichen, glücklichen Lächeln!”

By now, Megan was lightly clapping along with him, a smile breaking through her tears. Though
her voice was quiet and raw, she joined him in the third rendition.

“Glückliches, glückliches Lächeln
Glückliches, glückliches Lächeln
Ich kenne eine Prinzessin mit einem glücklichen, glücklichen Lächeln”

Their clapping slowed, then stopped, and the two European royals shared smiles – the boy's bright
and relieved, the girl's sad but touched. Pierre's Change Token vanished, its need now gone. He
gently took her hands, asking in English, “Megan, do you want to talk about it? We can go to the
other room if you want.”

Still sniffling, Megan nodded. Pierre led her to the other room, closing the door once Kero had followed. Melody found herself letting out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, and then gulping in air that she hadn't realized she wasn't getting. She didn't know the whole story, that was true, but she knew that Megan had found someone who could actively help her get home.

Ken took a few moments to calm Pierre's bodyguards, who were nervously looking into the room from their post in the hall – probably due to overhearing sobs and clapping and English and not understanding what was going on. Alyssin took Melody by the shoulder and hugged her a bit, smiling. “Looks like you did it,” she whispered. “That girl's getting home.”

After accomplishing in almost a single step what she'd tried to do for an entire year, Melody could only burble out a, “Yep,” as she tried to tell her tears to stop already. Alyssin got her a tissue, which helped.

When she managed to get a hold of herself, Melody pulled her phone out, making a very important text.

**To Al and Tree: Megan's made contact with someone she knows. Thank you.**

In her already emotional state, seeing Aniko's reply to her photo just made her start giggling.

**From Aniko: ??? You met him? How? ARE YOU IN THE HOSPITAL WHAT THE FUCK**

**To Aniko: HE'S AN IDOL NOW CALM DOWN**

**From Aniko: DON'T SCARE ME LIKE THAT**

**From Aniko: WAIT WHAT HE'S WHAT ARE YOU KDDELING ME HOLY SHIT**

Melody fell back into one of the seats, just letting the success of the moment sink in. She'd done it. She'd done something for Megan. Megan was on her way to getting home, and at some point, the rest of her family would follow.

Everything was so nerve-wracking that Melody just kept laughing. She just kept laughing until all the bottled up stress and fear and anger was finally released safely, and when Alyssin asked if she was okay she was able to answer honestly, “Yeah.”

_I did it. I helped Meg._ It's all she'd wanted this past year, and she'd finally been able to do it.

And if she could accomplish that, who was to say she couldn't accomplish her other goals? Save her other friends?

“Melodia-san? Will your friend be alright?” Tsubasa asked her.

Wiping her eyes again, because the laughter had brought back more tears, Melody nodded. “She's gonna be just fine.”

Though Pierre invited all three girls to join him for lunch, Melody had to turn him down so that she and Alyssin could get going to Tadase's. He convinced them to join him for a walk to the convenience store his unit mate Kyoji worked at so the two could get sandwiches, and Melody left the still teary-eyed Megan in their capable hands. Both girls promised to update the other on their respective goals. After that, and entering Tadase's address into her phone for directions (was she ever going to have to charge this thing?), Melody and Alyssin were off once again. This time,
though, with sandwiches. And little fruit pieces for Annie and Hope.

Alyssin expressed that it felt slightly disturbing to see the food disappear into the Characters that she couldn't see. They, and Melody, just giggled.

When the food was gone and Melody judged it would be more efficient to take a cab – she still had some of the money that Hokuto had given her – she received a text from Megan. Two, actually.

From Meg: [image sent]
From Meg: HOLY SBIT I GOT EN AGG

The ordeal had ended up giving Megan a Chara-Egg of her own. It was black, or maybe a really dark gray, decorated with a flame of dark green and pale yellow.

To Meg: Congrats! Send me a picture when it hatches, okay?

From Meg: IM SRILL SCREAMIG

Oh yeah. Meg would be fine.

The cab ride was uneventful, which Melody was grateful for. It gave her time to put her mind towards what Tadase might want to talk about. Easter, probably. Had they done something while she was gone? Did he maybe realize that Ikuto was gone? Oh, jeez, how was she going to explain that Ikuto wasn't the bad guy...

“Anything I should know about this cousin?”

At Alyssin's voice, Melody blinked, pulling herself out of her thoughts. “Um...no, not really. He has a Character...I mean, a mini-spirit like Masamune and I. He's working against the company that my possessed father and sister work for...Oh, don't say the word 'prince' around him! It activates his Chara-Change and he goes all maniacal laughter and stuff.”

“...You know, that's not even the weirdest thing I've heard of someone doing, so I'm gonna let that slide. No prince, got it. Do we know why he wants to see you?”

“No. Probably something about the company, is my guess.”

“Since I'm probably not gonna understand most of that, then...I'm gonna send my dad some update texts in the meantime, okay? So he's got them when he wakes up.”

“That's fine.”

The cab came to a stop, and Melody managed to pay their driver without incident. She was out of yen now, though, so that was a little worrying. Maybe she could call Madoka to have someone at the WBBA pick them up when they were done?

Melody and Alyssin approached the gate, Annie already admiring the garden she could see within. As Melody looked for a doorbell, or maybe an intercom, the gate rattled; when she looked up, someone was already opening it. The only confusing thing was that it wasn't Tadase.

Actually, it was his mother.

Hotori Mizue smiled warmly at the girls, most of her attention clearly on Melody. “Melodia? That's you, isn't it?”
Startled, Melody gave a small bow in greeting. “U-Um, yes! Hello! I guess Tadase's mentioned me?”

“A little...” Mizue raised her hand, revealing a cell phone. “I must apologize. Tadase is actually out with his friends right now. He left his phone, and when I realized that, I was...well, I was hoping I could meet you.”

It took a moment for Melody to put that together. “You're the one who texted me?”

“I'm sorry...I didn't want to fool you, I was just so unsure...” Mizue gave a thin, watery smile. “I mean, my son comes home from the New Year's festival and says he's met his cousin? Of course I have questions!”

“No, No, I get it!” Melody assured her. “I'm really happy to meet you too. I would've before, but...I mean, things were complicated...they still are...”

“I'm just so happy to finally meet you. Your brothers and sisters, how are they? Are there any others?”

“Uh, Lance and Aniko – I mean, Xiaotong...and Xing, are fine. Xing's actually a dad.” ...Sisters?

Mizue finally smiled, a gasp of pride escaping. “He is? Oh, that's wonderful! What about Jinjing? Did she get the pendant like Mingzhu was planning? And Xifeng?”

“Jinjing...Shelly is sort of...that's more of a sitting down conversation.” Melody reached up to touch the pendant in question. “Anyways, I'm actually the one who got it, after some...problems. Um...but, uh, who is Xifeng?”

Blinking, Mizue said as if it should be obvious, “Your mother's fourth child, of course! Your sister.”

Regardless of any chill-resisting magic she had, Melody felt goosebumps prick up all over her arms and legs. The back of her neck tingled. When she couldn't find her voice, she looked to Alyssin for help, hoping her distress was clear in her eyes. Coming to her rescue, Alyssin stepped forward.

“E-Excuse me. I'm Alyssin, the current Indigo princess. I've been friends with Melodia for about four years now, and...I'm sorry to say, amidst all the situations with her memory loss and separation from her family, no one's ever mentioned she had a second sister.”

Though Mizue had seemed confused at Alyssin's announcement of her title, the mentions of memory loss and separation clearly hit more. “I...What?”

“Could we come inside? I think we all need some explanations from each other right now.”

When they were situated in the living room, Melody handed the reins to Dia, who found her voice and began filling in Mizue of everything she had apparently missed.

“When I was two years old, three spirits attacked the Beylin Fist. Dad and Shelly were possessed by two of them, and in the chaos, I ended up in Japan. I didn't reunite with Mom or my brothers until I was ten years old.” Dia took a slow breath, rather grateful she didn't remember the details of the attack. “They told me about the attack, and...how the Beylin Fist suffered a lot of damage and losses. When I finally got to meet everyone a couple years ago, there weren't a lot of people left. Maybe a couple dozen.”
Taking this in silently, with horror on her face, Mizue sunk into the couch, shaking her head. She managed to croak out, “Jiao?”

“...The Pearl Tear curse got her the year before.”

“What about...h-her little girl? The one she adopted?”

Dia felt her stomach twist. “No one's mentioned her, either. But...she did have a son, who's the leader now. His name's Aguma.”

Alyssin wordlessly found a nearby tissue box and delivered it to Mizue, before retaking her seat next to the woman. Dia moved from her chair to squat in front of her and take her hand, letting her aunt squeeze it. “Mom's okay. Xiaotong and Xing are okay. I'm okay. You have two adorable great-nephews and the Beylin Fist is led by your amazingly strong nephew. The Purple and Indigo kingdoms are doing well. We're all doing well, and if you're doing this well with a family of your own out here, then I'm glad you left before the attack happened, or I wouldn't have such a strong cousin.”

Mizue just kept shaking her head, babbling miserably in Chinese. Without needing a signal, Annie instantly provided a Chara-Change, and when the red flower pin appeared in her hair, Dia started combating all the negative things her aunt was saying, trying to blame herself for what had happened to her people. There was no way Mizue could have known what was going to happen, and she hoped she could get her aunt to understand that.

The only one to notice Alyssin stand was Hope, eyes wet with pride for her sister and Bearer. She fidgeted, then Hope watched as she straightened, her pendant glowed, and a gentle piano started to play from the Pearl Tear within. Her hands were clenched tightly together, and it didn't look like she was going to sing, but the music played. When Dia noticed it, she simply hushed her aunt and had her listen.

Taking this cue, Alyssin swallowed, and when the music reached a certain point, did indeed begin to sing.

"Hush your cries
Close your eyes
Stay with me
Let's just dream
Quietly
Of what might be"

As the music took hold, violins adding themselves in, Mizue was slowly starting to calm down. She was still a terrible wreck, but Alyssin walked over and sat beside her again, letting the woman lean on her.

"Calm your fear
I'll be near
To you I'll cling
Rest my friend
Time can mend
Many things"

"I don't know the answers
Tomorrow's still unknown
But I can make this promise
You won't be alone"

Alyssin reached over, gently taking Mizue's hand as she sung. She guided the hand to her pendant, letting Mizue touch the object her sister had worn years ago – letting her have that momentary connection.

Watching all of this from the floor, Melodia finally managed to move. Still holding her aunt's other hand, she let a trickle of her own magic join Alyssin's before the song could end, adding her own promise and reassurance.

"I don't know
Where we should go
Just feeling farther from our goal
I don't know
What path we will be shown
But I know that when I'm with you I'm at home"

"Yes, I know that when I'm with you I'm at home"

Alyssin ducked her head as the music played itself onward, smiling faintly but not meeting Mizue's eyes. The hand she had over hers clenched slightly, both still holding the pendant she wore. “The day I received this pendant was the best day of my life,” she whispered fondly. “The day I received this pendant was the best day of my life,” she whispered fondly. “It freed me from something terrible, and gave me a purpose I'd longed for. I was able to meet Melodia, and learn all about merfolk, and do so many things because I was chosen to carry this pendant.”

She slowly lifted her gaze, and Melodia could see fear in her eyes as the song's power faded away. “I've long since passed the need for such a saving power. This was your sister's. If you wish to take it, then I am honored I was able to bring it back to you.”

For a split second, Mizue's eyes widened, and she pulled her hands away from both girls. “I-I...Me? One of the princesses...Jiao's successor...” One hand went to her face, as she tried to mask her disbelief. “I couldn't...I couldn't possibly...”

As Dia came back to herself, silently blinking from the shift, her aunt shook her head. “After how I turned away from my family so many years ago, I certainly don't have the right to wield this power. You...You are bonded with it, dear. Keep it.”

“But I-” Alyssin's objection was silenced as Mizue set a finger against her lips, smiling proudly. “My sister is the one that would be honored, having you as her successor.”

Dia couldn't explain it, but as her aunt said those words, something inside Alyssin seemed to break. Fear and guilt spread all across her face. Within her, Dia could see her Haert cracking as if it were a physical crystal. While Dia had very little training with Haert sight, and even less with understanding it, she could read one thing from what she saw – both from her friend's face, and her spirit.

Alyssin knew something about the Tear situation, but wasn't telling them.

And with a bit more focus, she could see something else. Alyssin wanted to tell them, but some kind of chain was holding her back. The oath? She said before that she vowed not to say anything...

Hesitantly, Dia reached out to touch Alyssin's hand. She wanted answers, yes – but if Alyssin was sworn to secrecy to an extent like this, getting those answers might come at a price. That wasn't something to risk. Dia couldn't be selfish.
“You said you were gonna text your dad. Why don't you go do that?”

Alyssin's Haert and eyes both shifted to her. The guilt was still there, but relief was washing over it like a slow tide. Shaking slightly, she nodded. “Y-Yeah. I'll...um, I'll let you two talk...”

Dia pulled back so that Alyssin could stand, and her friend bowed apologetically to Mizue. “I-I'm sorry. I...I need some air.”

With complete understanding, Mizue nodded, and Alyssin hurried from the room. When Annie tried to fly after her, Dia stopped her with a hand. “She doesn't need comfort right now. She needs space.” Though her Character looked confused and above all else, concerned, she reluctantly let it go.

Dia then stood as well, stretching her cramped legs. “I'm sorry this is all such an emotional mess...”

Blinking, her aunt shook her head. “No, not at all! If she's going through something, then by all means, I'm not going to try and suffocate her.”

Dia smiled gratefully, then returned to her seat across from Mizue. “Could I ask you something? If you're not ready to talk, it's okay, but...” When her aunt nodded, she continued. “You mentioned I...had another sister? Xifeng?”

Mizue's eyes saddened. “Y-Yes...she was only a year old when Tsukasa and I left the village. I don't know anything, really...she...m-must have been lost in the...”

Dia bit her lip, not sure what to say. She'd been...2, when the attack happened? If Xifeng was born between Shelly and herself, she'd had to have been somewhere between 3 and...6? And for no one to tell her...she really must've been...

_Dia, that's not right. Remember Noa's questions?

At the sound of Melody's mental voice, Dia jolted slightly. Takamine-san's questions...? Her head felt so frazzled, she couldn't remember them at all. Murmuring an 'excuse me' to her aunt, she dug through her bag to find her phone, opening her text messages with Noa.

If you were to discover you had one more sibling than you were told of by your parents, what would your reaction be?

Her phone shaking in her hand, blurring the words, Dia swallowed. She closed her eyes and counted to ten, trying to ground herself.

If this sibling was taken without the parents' knowledge, how would you feel towards those who had taken them?

No way. No, how could...

How would you feel if this sibling, after many years, was able to come meet you?

Dia acted without thinking, having too many questions, too many problems, too many missing pieces in everything that was going on.

_To Noa: re tou freinds with zifenfm
To Noa: friends with my sister
To Noa: is she alive
To Noa: I KNOW SHE EXISTS TSO ANWERE ME IS MY SISTER ALIVE
“Melodia? Xiaolian, what's wrong?” Her aunt was standing beside her, hand hovering near her arm.

Letting the phone slip from her hands, Dia shut her eyes again. Counted to ten. Counted to twenty, thirty. Felt Mizue's hand on her shoulder. Forty, fifty. Grounded herself.

“It's been,” she managed shakily, “a very long day.”

“Would you like some tea?”

“...Yes, please.”

Once the tea was prepared, and a cup was delivered to Alyssin in the garden, Dia sat in the kitchen with her aunt and explained in more detail about the attack on the Beylin Fist fourteen years ago. The Mytans, the way she'd miraculously wound up in Japan unharmed, how Max and Shelly were still possessed and now working for Easter. Mizue was far calmer than before, but still held grief over her family's tale. When she lamented that she could've done something if she'd only known, Dia promised that no one would blame her.

As was becoming a trend, Dia took a photo with her aunt. This was sent out her brothers and mom; Lance was excited, while Mingzhu's reply was a jumble of characters she probably typed through tears. Aniko gave no reply, but Dia figured he was probably busy with his kids.

Mizue was more than content to listen to stories about her family. She'd been oblivious that the Voltron pilot was her own nephew. She was ecstatic to hear that Mingzhu had her own restaurant. She gushed over hearing about Aniko and his sons, and respectably gave Dia a moment of silence after she'd talked about Chiasa.

In return, she shared stories of Tadase's childhood, and moments of her adventures with Tsukasa once they'd left the Beylin Fist. Dia was excited to hear that Mizue had been a blader, and still possessed the surviving pieces of the Ray Aquario that had won tournaments and helped fund the journey. When she told Mizue of the B-Pit and how Madoka could bring the bey back to life, her aunt beamed with eager joy.

When the subject turned to merfolk, Dia was stunned to hear that Mizue had, years ago, given up her mer half in order to be with Yui and have Tadase. The deal had been made with Manaphy itself, and the magic she'd once had was sealed in a crystal conch shell safely stored within the house. Even so, Mizue shared enthusiasm towards hearing that the curse had been lifted, promising to tell all the merfolk she and Tsukasa knew.

As that conversation ended, Mizue started preparing some snacks, and Dia checked her phone.

**From Madoka: Are you coming back soon?**

**From Alyssin:** I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. There are things I wish I could tell you...I wish I could tell you how I got the pendant, but I can't. I want to.

**From Alyssin:** I made an oath that, if I break, I'll lose my voice. The pendant will be torn away to a new guardian and you might never see it again. I can't do that to you. I want to keep this pendant near your family, where it belongs. I'm sorry that means I can't talk to you about it.

**From Alyssin:** It was nice meeting your aunt, but I think I've had enough excitement for one day. Would you be upset if I went to the WBBA ahead of you?
To Alyssin: No, that's fine. Go ahead. Just come in and say goodbye first?

To Madoka: Alyssin's coming back ahead of me. I'm handling some family stuff.

Alyssin was sent off with hugs and a few snacks, and permission for Dia to relay the reason for her silence. Mizue was clearly concerned, but offered a suggestion that she thought might explain the oath.

“You think she made an oath with Manaphy?”

“Well, just think about it. You say that Jiao was caught under the Pearl Tear Curse years ago?” Mizue kept her eyes on the apple she was peeling, but waited for Dia to make a noise of agreement. “Yet, her Tear returned, and Alyssin-chan was granted it. If word of that returning Tear got out, merfolk might become frantic about what that means for the curse and those it's taken. Manaphy-sama would want to quell that fear before it started, so putting Alyssin-chan under oath as to the details of her choosing would be the best short term solution as answers are sought out.”

Thinking about it, that did make some sense. Dia felt a little ashamed of her earlier anger towards Alyssin's silence, but there was nothing to be done about that now. “So...the best option for us is to let her have her silence, until Manaphy makes a decision?”

“For the time being, yes. If she says the price is the loss of her voice and a re-choosing for the Pearl Tear, that is well within Manaphy-sama's power.”

I guess that could explain why she didn't want Mom to know. She wouldn't be able to answer her questions... Dia sighed.

I-it's okay. We know now.

I guess...yeah. Yeah, you're right.

Apples were peeled, and some crackers were brought out; Dia was more than happy to munch. Mizue was a little startled when they started disappearing, but once Dia 'introduced' her Characters, she was a little more at ease.

The conversation, however, started to go downhill. As they talked about Characters, things turned to Easter and their corruption of Heart's Eggs. Dia carefully kept Tadase's role out of the picture, not wanting Mizue to worry or hinder his actions, but she could already see her aunt's face changing.

“Easter...of course, only possessed would Max and Jinjing be able to work with people like that.” Along with her scowl came a bitterness to her Haert, and Dia found herself lowering her food back towards her plate, appetite gone. “That place is filled with no good wrecks, I say.”

While Mizue had a point, somewhat, Dia still felt uneasy. “I think that...things with Easter can be reformed. Something good can come out of it.”

Mizue sighed. “I'm sorry, but I have to disagree. For years I've only seen rude and ungrateful people involved with that place. Scoundrels with no definition of loyalty! Most of all that black cat...”

She knew she shouldn't press, but she did. “Black cat?”

And out tumbled the story of Tsukiyomi Aruto and Hoshina Souko. How Aruto had disappeared, and Souko had grown ill. Mizue's husband and his mother agreeing that they should take Ikuto and
Utau in, even with all the trouble they caused. The 'curse' of Ikuto's violin, and how it brought bad luck to whoever heard it play. Then he had the nerve to disappear, just like his father, only to return two years ago and bring more trouble.

At this point, Dia had had enough. She supposed her aunt had a right to angry about the situation, but this was pushing it too far. “Aunt Mizue-”

“Melodia-san?”

Dia turned, staring blankly at her cousin, who'd just walked into the kitchen. “Ta...Tadase...”

His face wore concern. “I didn't expect to see you here...is everything alright?”

“O-Oh, ah, yes, everything’s fine.” Dia backpedaled in her confrontation plan, trying to shift her tone back to pleasant. “Your mom got a hold of your phone and asked me to come over.”

Having the same strategy, Mizue gave a tired smile. “We've just been talking. Catching up, as it were.”

“I see...” Though Tadase clearly didn't want to bring it up with his mother around, Dia could tell he was confused – she'd claimed it would be dangerous if they were to meet and be caught by Easter, after all.

“It's fine, really. I shouldn't be here much longer.” As she watched Hope introduce herself, she spotted her phone vibrating on the table. A check for ID had her standing – Zeo, probably with another nightmare. “Sorry, I really need to take this. Excuse me.”

She ducked into the hallway, setting her mind to English and answering quickly. “Zeo? Everything okay?”

His breathing was slow and calm, but still loud. “Soft yes...um...” A sharp inhale, exhale. “I...I can't sleep. I-I can't find the CD you made me. I'm sorry-”

“No, no, I get it.” She'd already been expecting something like this, Faust being revealed and present. “I'll get my mom's music disc and play it through the phone, that should do it. Okay?”

“Thanks...”

Slipping back into the kitchen, Dia dug for the disk in her bag. As she found it, though, an idea struck her. It was definitely petty and probably sneaky, but it would definitely help her get the message across...

She lifted the phone back to her ear. Slowly and deliberately, glancing in her aunt's direction, she asked Zeo, “Is Ikuto doing okay?”

Mizue twitched, her brow creasing as she looked to her. “Huh? Um...I think so. He might still be up?”

“Tell him to get some sleep. He needs it after what Easter's done to him.”

“Y-Yeah, good point. I'll go grab him.”

“You'll keep an eye on him while I'm gone? Make sure he eats?” Two birds, one stone – keep Ikuto healthy, while also distracting Zeo from the situation.

“I will, totally. I won't let you down!”
She smiled a little. “I know you won't, Zeo. Gonna set the disk up now, okay? Hope you two sleep well.”

“Thanks again...and, uh, night.”

“G'night, Zeo.”

Once the phone and disk were sitting on the table, and the music was playing, Dia waved for her aunt and cousin to follow her out to the garden where their voices wouldn't compete with the songs. Mizue was watching her carefully now, and once they were outside, Dia dropped the pretenses. Switching back to Japanese, she said bluntly, “I've taken Ikuto away from Easter.”

While Tadase stood in confused silence, Mizue had a bit more of a burst in response. “You...You're involved with that boy? Don't you know the trouble he causes?!”

“I know that Easter was using negative energy to corrupt his father's violin, try to force him into their will, and inevitably cause serious spiritual damage.” She listened to all the memories that Melody had shared with her about Ikuto's life, all that he'd gone through because of Easter, and used that to choose her words. “I know that things have been difficult for him since his father disappeared, and no one was willing to help him and his sister pick up the pieces except for your husband. I know that he's my friend, and I won't turn away from him.”

“You know Ikuto?” Tadase managed. “What do you mean you've taken him from Easter?”

Turning away from her spluttering aunt, Dia faced her more willing-to-listen cousin. “We met a few years ago, had some troubles and split up again. I found him at the New Year's festival just struggling to stand. A mage friend of mine is freeing his violin, and we're hiding him where Easter can't reach. If I say more than that, I might put him in danger again.”

“He'll just bring you more pain!” Mizue cried in anger.

Dia frowned, glancing at her aunt from the corner of her eye. “I don't know what your problem is with Ikuto, but it's got nothing to do with my friendship with him. You can have your opinions, but they won't change mine. Easter hurt him. I'll keep taking care of him until they go down.”

“But.”

“You're not going to change my mind.” Dia turned back to her aunt, watching the scowl across her face, feeling the bitter anger held towards the Tsukiyomi family as a whole. “Aunt Mizue, whatever happened between you and his family, I think it's long since past time to let go. Being angry this long is only going to hurt you. Your spirit's already starting to crack...please don't do this to yourself anymore.”

Though she could tell her aunt didn't fully understand her words, they still had an impact, as the woman stopped arguing. Dia took it one step further, recalling a song her family often shared with each other; she didn't call upon her magic for it, but sang the first few lines in hopes that it might reach her.

"I was so happy when you smiled
Your smile breaks through the clouds of grey
Far from the sunny days that lie in sleep"

She just wanted her aunt to be happy. To be able to let go of the anger she had towards Ikuto and Utau. And for now, it seemed to work - her emotions faded enough that they were no longer in Dia's sight, signaling that her spirit was calming down.
Dia waved her Characters over, heading for the door. She stopped by Tadase, smiling apologetically. “I'm sorry about this. I wasn't trying to fight.”

Eyeing her speculatively, he answered slowly, “You're sure...that he won't cause you trouble?”

“I've got some pretty competent people keeping an eye on him.” She shrugged. “Keep fighting, Tadase. We'll beat 'em yet.”

On mixed terms, she gathered her things and left the Hotori household. She felt a little guilty for pressing her aunt like that...she hadn't yelled herself, though. With the Arrangement still lurking, she felt that was serious progress. It was probably best to leave things for now so that didn't rear up and make it worse.

She couldn't guarantee that things would be easy for the Guardians with Ikuto out of the puzzle, but Easter was still down a puppet. That should at least buy the kids some time to think. As for Tadase and Mizue – maybe her words would reach them, and they could reconsider their thoughts towards Ikuto. She could only hope, really.

Dia paused before the crosswalk, listening to the phone and the music for several minutes until she heard Zeo's faint snores come through. A few minutes more to make sure he was fully asleep, then she turned both off and returned them to her bag, taking a moment to breathe.

“Nice day, huh? At least when you're immune to freezing.”

Wondering what force empowered the ability to make her jump so much today at people's voices, Dia quickly turned around to spot the speaker. It was a man calmly leaning on the wall surrounding the houses of this block, hands in his pockets and most certainly not freezing in that t-shirt. His hair just about blocked his eyes from view, but Dia didn't need to see his face to identify him.

As Melody just sort of sat in the mindscape, puzzled, Dia stood there and asked dumbly, “Aniko? What?”

Her brother lifted his head, one eyebrow raised. “One word responses? I thought we were closer than that.”

Her bag hit the sidewalk. The emotions she'd been fighting to keep stable since the gym bled out, an ugly, miserable groan escaping her mouth. Aniko straightened and faced her in alarm, but it wasn't enough to keep him from stumbling back when she tackled him full force. Hot tears blinded her. She couldn't breathe right. She could barely stand. Everything she'd been doing so well at keeping in melted at the simple presence of her older brother.

His arms wrapped around her felt like heaven. His usually sharp voice, now gentle and hushing and promising her everything was okay, was the song of angels. She'd held up this long only because there was no one to trust to catch her, and now suddenly her brother was here, and he was right, everything was gonna be okay. Everything was gonna be okay because he was here now, and he could help, he could understand.

As Dia sobbed, Melody closed herself off to the outside world, letting her other half have a private moment with her brother.

Chapter End Notes
Songs: Pierre's chant/song by Meg - German
(Translation: "Happy, happy smile/Happy, happy smile/I know a princess with a
happy, happy smile")
(Pierre's a sweet lil dork and we love him okay?)
"Home" from RWBY - English
"For Fruits Basket" from Fruits Basket - English translation (beginning only)
(can be found here: http://sorosings.blogspot.ca/2011/06/for-fruits-basket.html )

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Dia stayed in her brother's arms for a long time, welcoming the peace he brought. Though her friends would always mean everything to her, the presence of family would always mean even more. She couldn't break down in front of her friends like she could her brothers. She couldn't ask for the same advice or have the same arguments. There were things that only her mom and brothers could do for her, and now that one of them was suddenly here, she couldn't hold herself together anymore.

The story of Isis kidnapping Toby was a tumble of half sentences and whines. The second Mytan's invasion of her dreams. Mizue revealing Xifeng's existence. Her Arrangement spike. Shelly's visit and note. It was all spun out of order, spilling out as Dia's rambles caught up to them. Aniko listened to all of it with patience and comforting arms, hands gently stroking through her hair as they stood there on the sidewalk.

When she'd finally gotten it all out, she just let Aniko hold her, listening as he hummed and feeling it as she was held against his chest. His grip was just tight enough to make her feel secure. It seemed like in no time at all, he was able to calm her down.

Finally able to speak without a sob interrupting her, Dia was able to ask, “How did you know where I was?” Her voice was still shaky, and hoarse by now, but it was enough.

“Kaoru called me. Said you seemed off and I should talk to you.” Still stroking her hair, Aniko's answer was simple and logical. “I tracked your ginormous Haert and got myself a teleport to its general location. Hoped I picked a spot you'd walk by.”

Dia smiled weakly. “I'm glad...”

Her brother sighed, holding her just a bit closer. “Me too. Gods, me too. You didn't do anything to deserve all this...” Hesitantly, he started letting go, and when she responded the same, took her by the shoulders and gently brushed the hair from her eyes. “If anything, I want to apologize for not mentioning Xifeng. After finally getting you back, we didn't want to scare you. Telling you there was a sister you could never meet.”

Shoving her hand across her face, trying to dry it, Dia didn't know whether she should tell Aniko about her suspicions. There was so much happening, and she didn't really have any proof, but she wanted to so badly.

She...She couldn't, though. After seeing what Mizue had been like learning of the attack, Dia couldn't bring herself to upset someone like that again. Whether she believed Noa knew Xifeng or not, it just...wasn't something she could share right now.

“I...I understand. I do.” Dia coughed a bit, and Aniko gave a small smirk.
“Does the princess fish need some water?”

With a frail chuckle, Dia shoved against him. “You're awful.” She took her bag as her Characters flew the strap into her reach, then took the crumpled packet of tissues her brother brought from his pocket. When her face was wiped clean, they headed for the park, Aniko making light jokes and filling her in on the stupid things Lance had done since she'd left Arus. When she pulled out the cookies their mom had sent to the gym and offered him one – she'd forgotten about them until now, in all the chaos – he acted like he'd been given a miracle. His goofiness was so out of character that it started to cheer her up.

They stopped by the water fountain so she could get a drink, then sat together on a nearby bench. Dia just leaned on her brother for a while, simply appreciating the good and familiar energy of his Haert. It was around this point that she let Melody know it was okay to 'be' again, and her other half simply commented that it seemed really cool to have an older brother.

After they'd sat for a while, Aniko claimed he had a present for her, and told her to close her eyes. When she did so, she felt him shift around a bit, then place three small spheres in her waiting hands.

When she opened her eyes, she saw three miniaturized balls – a Net Ball, a Heal Ball, and a regular Poke Ball. Dia blinked a few times. Melody questioned, Are those your other Pokemon?

Y-Yeah...some of 'em... Dia rolled the balls around in her hands a bit, starting to smile. “You didn't have to bring these...”

Rolling his eyes, Aniko argued, “I definitely did.”

She just chuckled, taking the Heal Ball and pressing the button so it grew to full size. “Fix causing a lot of trouble?”

“I think Allura is this close to banning him from the castle.”

That gained an almost full laugh. Dia gave the miniaturized balls to her Characters and found Esaria's in her bag, letting the duck out. “Well, I have a Hibiki-chan trained duck, so hopefully a new friend will be a good distraction for him.”

“Good, because I'm not taking him back. I think there'd be war.”

“...How's it going against the Spirit Quartz creatures?”

“Only been one since you left. Out on a smaller planet, didn't cause a lot of trouble before Lance blew it up.”

“Oh, he got center?”

“I hear he demanded it with the case of 'If I don't explode something soon I'm leaving the team to find my baby sister'.”

Dia winced. “Is he that mad?”

With a sigh, Aniko frowned. “I don't really think he's mad, more...worried and disappointed to the fact that it clouds his judgment. For his sanity, and everyone else's, I think I'm gonna keep your adventures down here to myself.”

“...That's...probably best...” she agreed.
“...So, why are your poke balls floating? I was under the assumption you only had one invisible fairy. This is clearly two.”

As the 'fairies' giggled, Dia rolled her eyes. “A new one came along when I first got to Japan. She's kinda ditzy, but really sweet. Her name is Hope.”

Aniko turned to face the floating balls, saying quite seriously, “Well, it's nice to meet you, invisible fairy Hope. Please get along with invisible fairy Annie and keep my sister safe.”

Still giggling, Hope promised, “I will! You're funny!”

“She will, and she thinks you're funny.”

“Me? Funny? Never.”

Dia just smiled and shook her head, pulling her hair over her shoulder to rest in her lap. “Alright, let's get this over with.” The Heal Ball went up into the air, the motion activating the opening mechanism and letting out the Pokemon inside. Said Pokemon immediately latched his jaws onto her hair, snuggling into it like a combination blanket/chew toy.

With a sigh, Dia gave her Totodile a scratch on the head, and adjusted the blue scarf tied around his arm. “Hey, Fix.”

“Mama! I played tag with everyone!”

“Oh, did you now? Does that mean you behaved?”

“Uuuhhhhh...yes!” He beamed up at her, while Aniko snorted in amused objection.

Oh my god he's adorable.

Yes, yes he is. An adorable pain in the ass. Dia proceeded to give Fix more head scratches until he let go of her hair in his bliss, then set him down on the ground in front of Esaria. The duck immediately started sniffing him, and in glee, he did the same to her.

Sighing, Dia admitted, “I'll never understand the apparent joy of learning a new scent.”

Aniko shrugged, “Yeah, well, Pokemon are weird.” He gave her a small smirk. “Kinda like you, sometimes.”

“Shut up!” Dia smacked her fist lightly against his shoulder, smiling at the tease. They sat back and watched the two water-types for a while, Esaria clearly mothering the newcomer. It was hard to tell if Fix was taking her seriously, but he did seem to like her. As they got used to each other, Dia took the Net Ball from Annie and asked her brother, “Any reason you brought Henry?”

He rose an eyebrow. “Kaoru said something along the lines of 'your sister seems a bit unstable'. I figured that even if you wanted to deal with whatever it was on your own, you wouldn't object to having the help of your strongest Pokemon.” He smirked once again as he reached over to ruffle her hair. “He does have orders to steal your phone and text gibberish to me if it looks like you need me, though.”

Dia tried to imagine her Empoleon texting. The next minute was filled with snorting laughter from both her and Melody, while Aniko grinned triumphantly.

When she recovered, she started asking about the boys – if Jinhai was getting ready to go back to
pre-k, if Sho Hai was still floating around being a balloon boy on a daily basis, little things that had nothing to do with the problems going on. She saw her brother's goofy mask fade away as she no longer needed it, and eventually, their conversation turned from the idle chatter she wanted as a distraction to the situations on Arus she was still worried about in the back of her mind.

“How's Daniel's whole...Haggarium thing going?”

“Actually, we've enlisted him into a Mithorian hospital with power reduction bracers. It wasn't pretty, but...it needed to be done.”

“Oh, jeez. I can't imagine...” Dia shook her head. She wasn't exactly best friends with the cadets (or rather, new pilots and Daniel), but it still bothered her to hear that Daniel was still struggling. She knew he had a Character, too – was he okay? Or was Claw infected now, too? “Uh, what about his...fairy? Like mine?”

Aniko sent a long breath in and out through his nose, a silent signal that things weren't great. “One of the doctors there could see his 'egg' and hooked it up to some, uh...basically like a heart monitor. We haven't gotten any test results from that yet, but he said it didn't look like a 'healthy spirit'.”

Normally Dia would suggest sending Madoka up to check it out, but with the whole legendary bladers thing, she didn't want to take her from her friends. Nonetheless, she tried to think of something. Purifying a spirit...keeping an evil magic infection from spreading... Ugh, it was all so new compared to what they'd been dealing with up until now. She remembered when Daniel and Vince had finally come clean about the infection, after it had 'gone away' once King Lotor was defeated. Then a few weeks later, it was suddenly back, and Daniel full out attacked the pilots with the Black Lion. Even if she couldn't remember the things she did under the effects of her Arrangement, hearing the rages that Daniel suffered through since then only made her compare their problems. A condition that might not have a cure, sending the infected into fits of anger and aggression? Oh yeah, nothing in common there, certainly.

Dia flopped backwards against the bench, groaning. “Why does this crap have to happen to us?” she asked rhetorically. “We're the good guys. Shove the cursed infections and shitty experiments on the villains for once.”

The two siblings sat in annoyance with each other, Dia's Characters and Pokemon playing in the background. Aniko fiddled with his key chain a bit, then turned to look off into the distance. Dia didn't think he'd been on Earth in a few months, so she let him have the moment, standing up to get another drink of water in the meantime.

When she returned, Aniko looked...different. Tense. It looked like he'd put Fix and Esaria back in their poke balls, because she didn't see them anymore. It wasn't like him to ball them up in a free public space, so she asked, “Everything okay?”

He glanced at her, and she felt a shiver run through. His guard had flared, resulting in the dangerous razor-edged glare that had terrified her upon first meeting him six years ago. Even now, it still scared her a little. “Wh-What's wrong?” she managed. While he did get like this more often since Chiasa's death, it wasn't usually to this extreme.

He didn't answer right away, instead seeming to almost size her up as if he needed to see her physical strength. She squirmed a little, more used to getting that sort of look from Lance.

Finally her brother asked, “Do I scare you when I fight?”

“When you...fight?” Dia could only remember a few times she'd actually seen Aniko get physical,
not including his semi-regular altercations with Lance. Most recently she could recall him visiting her on her travels the year before, and he went up on his own against a pair of Beartic that had abruptly gone ballistic against them. She'd called out Henry to help him, and they'd chased the bears off, but...

Now that she thought about it, seeing Aniko like that had scared her, at the time. It was the first time she'd really seen him angry, seen him...almost feral. His Siqu was like neon lightning, his eyes glowing black and blue. He'd activated their mysterious paternal heritage, sprouting strange horns from around his head, his hair responding to his instincts like sentient aids, or...arms. By the time he and Henry had won, he'd almost looked like a raging demon. She wasn't entirely sure he even recognized her before he'd pulled himself back to normal.

His eyes had still been black-sclera and blue-irised by the time he'd left her at the Pokemon Center a few days later.

Dia drew her arms up around herself, feeling the need to be small. “Yes,” she answered simply, unable to look at him.

She heard him sigh, and swear to himself. A few moments passed where neither spoke; when she lifted her head to break the silence, her brother had suddenly activated his Siqu to form a crude energy shield, and a man was standing a short distance away.

Every ounce of bravery and courage she had in her body melted away. Dizziness pushed her back into the bench, and she clung to it, praying this was just a bad dream. Aniko stood, brandishing his shield threateningly at- at-

At him. Max. The Mytan.

“Dia,” her brother said quietly, command slipping into his voice, “I need you to take out Mom's present to you.” His eyes had already taken on the eerie blue glow, matching the Menta that was his driver and current shield. The murky black hadn't yet seeped in, but it was only a matter of time.

Fumbling, Dia got the microphone from her bag, and shakily held it out to him. He batted at it with his free hand, activating the Haert inside. “Don't let go of it,” he warned.

She hugged the microphone close, watching the silent Mytan, still just standing there in the form of her father. Aniko took a slow step forward, and she saw his hair lift itself to life, threatening horns rise from his skull. She was too scared to think, but if she could, she'd probably piece things together about his questions and the Mytan's sudden appearance.

Rock music poured out of the microphone, her Pearl Tear lighting up inside her pendant. It wasn't her doing – she could feel the powers channeling towards Aniko, giving him extra power for the battle. She'd heard of him using the music magic like this before, but she hadn't really believed him.

The only things keeping her from passing out in fear right now were Aniko's unwavering protective stance, and Melody's spirit grounding her. Help him, she urged. Dia's thoughts first went to her scythe, but she knew she didn't have the sense to wield it right now. Instead, she poured her strength into her Tear, her belief that Aniko would chase the Mytan off. He would protect her. No one...no one would get taken this time...

Aniko and the Mytan had started circling the area, like Pokemon in a battle sizing up their opponents. The Mytan looked completely at ease, while Aniko was in full battle-mode. “Come
now, children, I just wanted to have a word with the girl.”

“Over my corpse,” Aniko snapped. There was a gleam in the Mytan's eye that didn't belong on Max's face.

“That could be arranged.”

Aniko's Siqu shot from his arm like a bolt, nearly spearing the Mytan in their father's body. The music lurched to move on from the intro, and Dia shoved her energy into it, letting it fight with her brother. His own energy pulsed, then stabilized, the shield now one solid construct of crystal, and a matching sword in his other hand.

Gathering the power shared between himself and his sister, Aniko pushed it from himself, letting it erupt into lyrics.

"We're not gonna be
Just a part of your game
We're not gonna be
Just the victims
You're taking our dreams
And you tear them apart
'til everyone's the same"

The Mytan lifted his hand, sickly golden magic forming into a battleaxe. Aniko sneered, but didn't lose hold of the music's grip.

“I've got no place to go
I've got nowhere to run
You love to watch me fall
You think you know it all"

Dia's brother charged.

"I'm a nightmare, a disaster
That's what they always said
I'm a lost cause, not a hero
But I'll make it on my own
I've gotta prove them wrong
Me against the world"

Sparks of magic and crystal flew through the air at first contact, Aniko's shield blocking the axe while his sword speared into the spot the Mytan's head had just occupied a second before. Dia could sense without focus the corruption of the Mytan's power, both in the clashing blades and in the park around them. It sickened her. Annie was already hiding in her egg, unable to combat the energies. Hope hung on, not wanting to abandon Dia when she needed her. What power she had was tethered to the microphone; even if her base spirit wasn't musical, she wanted to help.

"It's me against the world"

The fight was at such a speed that Dia wasn't used to it; she had a hard time keeping up. Aniko had escaped injury so far, but it didn't look like the Mytan in Max's body had been so lucky. Aniko had gotten a few scratches in, but instead of blood, that sickly golden aura spilled out, collecting into mists near the wounds. Dia realized with a jolt that Max wasn't taking physical damage – the Siqu weapons that Aniko was using only damaged the Mytan within.
He's not hurting Dad by fighting back. In her relief, she tightened her grip on the microphone, and kept pouring energy into it. She would support him. She would help Aniko fight this monster how she could right now.

"We won’t let you change
How we feel in our hearts
We’re not gonna let you control us”

The Mytan's axe finally made contact. Dia bolted to her feet, the cry on her lips fading before it could begin as the wound sparked blue, sealing itself in an instant. The blood that had spilled in the split second beforehand looked unnatural, almost glowing.

The two twisted around, and Dia caught a glimpse of Aniko's face, contorted in rage. Mists of blue energy rose around his eyes, empowering him further. Ice speared through the axe, shattering it. The Mytan stumbled back, and so did Dia, recognizing the attack. I..Isis?

While the Mytan formed a new weapon, Aniko caught her gaze. She felt like she was going to be sick, seeing the magic radiating from him – frozen breath from his mouth, the mist around his eyes forming an ice mask, even his black sclera showing white, glowing veins.

She held the microphone so tightly she felt a knuckle crack. Aniko's next words felt directed at her.

"We won't let them shove
All their thoughts in our heads”

Even with all the magic raging in and around him, for just a moment, he looked like her brother again.

“And we'll never be like them"

The moment was gone, Aniko back into battle against the Mytan's new pair of sickles. Though she still pushed energy towards him, Dia couldn't make sense of what her brother was doing – what he'd become in this fight. How was he using Isis's magic?

And why?

"I've got no place to go
I've got nowhere to run
You love to watch me fall
You think you know it all”

She couldn't afford to doubt him right now. She had to believe he knew what he was doing.

"I'm a nightmare, a disaster
That's what they always said
I'm a lost cause, not a hero
But I'll make it on my own
I'm gonna prove them wrong
It's me against the world”

In one horrible swipe, the Mytan flung Aniko's shield away from the battle, and it shattered upon hitting the ground. The Menta energy coalesced into a mist that shot back into Aniko, but he was already pinned to the public bathroom wall, the Mytan's blades rushing for his neck.

Aniko looked the man dead in the eye.
Just before the blades could make contact, everything turned pink. An unearthly wail shook the sky, its origin unclear. For Dia, everything was fuzzy – she saw Aniko being separated from the Mytan, saw all their weapons disappear, saw tears appear in Max's body like a jagged view into golden space. A spiked wall of Haert crystal shot out from her direction and speared into the space between the two fighters, catching in a tree nearby.

Aniko wasted no time on the sporadic event, not even letting the echoing wail finish before he had a new sword and charged again.

"Now I'm sick of this waiting
So come on and take your shot
You can spit all your insults
But nothing you say's gonna change us
You can sit there and judge me
Say what you want to
We'll never let you in"

Aniko stood in front of her once again, everything about his stance protective, but aggressive. Everything still seemed hidden in a shade of rose, no matter how much Dia tried to blink it away. Why did her throat feel so raw? Why did she feel so weak? Why was she on the ground?

The Mytan rushed towards them, forgoing a weapon in exchange for wild energy. Aniko stood his ground, a wall of ice forming to block her from rampant sparks. She could still see, but it was twisted by the ice crystals.

"I'm a nightmare, a disaster
That's what they always said
I'm a lost cause, not a hero
But I'll make it on my own
Me against the world"

From behind the wall, Dia saw lightning spark between the two men.

"I'm a nightmare, a disaster
That's what they always said
I'm a lost cause, not a hero
But I'll make it on my own
I've gotta prove them wrong
They'll never bring us down"
"We'll never fall in line
I'll make it on my own"

One of them vanished. The ice wall dissolved into a puddle, barely missing her. Down on one knee, that unnatural glowing blood pouring from an already healed head wound, Aniko looked scarier than either Mytan ever had.

"Me against the world"

The last thing she saw before the pink turned to black, and her vision went sideways, was her brother coughing something up and falling over.
“...doctor will...soon.”

“Can...even help?”

“...to try, Ki...”

“...all my fault! I...leave, and she got...”

“It is not your...was not angry with you.”

“But the look...me-”

“Melodia-san is not the type to give up on family just like that, Mother.”

Dia came to slowly, the voices unknown and the words barely audible. She felt blood rushing in her ears, like she'd sat up too fast, and her heart was pulsing up there, too. Everything just sort of hurt in general, honestly.

Now that she tried to move, actually, she found that she couldn't. The ache all over her body spiked when she tried, and she was also noticing a harsh throbbing overtaking her head. She managed no more than a whimper before the collection of pain became too much, and she fell under once again.

When she next awakened, something cold and damp, but fluffy, had been placed on her forehead. The throbbing seemed to be gone, for the most part, but a general shadow of the aches still remained. At the very least, she was able to open her eyes this time, and she squinted against the light of the ceiling lamp. She exhaled loudly, both in release of pain and in annoyance.

The noise attracted someone's attention, as footsteps approached her. She wasn't willing to try turning her head, but she managed to spot a head of blond hair in her peripheral vision. After a bit of blinking, and the person moving closer, her vision cleared and she realized that the one looking down at her was her cousin.

“Tadase?” she wheezed. It was barely audible to her own ears. At least the blood-rush and heart-pounding seemed to have stopped.

“Hope told us what happened,” he said reassuringly. “We've called the doctor in your contact list. He should be here any minute, so just rest for now.”

The doctor in...? Ah, Sakuraba-san. That was best. A friend, one who wouldn't freak out over Aniko's appearance.

“'niko,” was her next attempt at speech, but it resulted in an uncomfortable cough. Tadase disappeared for a few seconds, then returned with a bottle of water, gently guiding the straw to her mouth. She welcomed it, realized it was probably better if she stopped trying to talk for now.

“He's still unconscious, but I think he'll be alright. His...ah, appearance is...Annie said that it was normal for him?”

Unable to talk, Dia went for a stiff nod, wishing she could explain. Tadase seemed relieved at her confirmation. He held up the water bottle for her a little longer, then turned as Dia heard the door open.

“Is she awake?” The newcomer rushed over, coming into view. Dia smiled weakly at Kaoru, then
easily began complying with his abrupt examination. A test of her eyes was first, Kaoru asking Tadase to write 'pink sclera' and 'purple irises' down for him. What? Maybe the Haert? He then relayed that she didn't seem to have a concussion, which was nice.

Kaoru removed the damp cloth from her forehead, then he and Tadase helped her sit up, slowly. The movement jarred her a bit, forcing her to close her eyes and re-calibrate her sense of balance, but it was back by the time Kaoru was gently testing her movement. Once he was sure she could hold herself up and keep hydrating herself (why was that so important?) he moved out of the room, asking to see Aniko. Tadase followed, but in the process let Dia's Characters into the room, and they rushed over to check on her. She managed a more genuine smile than she'd been capable of for Kaoru.

Hope began explaining what had happened after Dia had lost consciousness. She'd led Annie back out of her egg, and had her wait with her and Aniko. Meanwhile, she'd returned to Tadase's house to ask for help. He and Mizue had come and carried them back, then Annie had Tadase call Kaoru for help. Mizue had given them both damp cloths to hopefully jump-start a bit of the mer magic, to help them wake up faster. Dia didn't really understand how that worked, or if it had at all, but she was grateful regardless for all of the help she'd received.

Once the explanation was over, Dia took a glance around the room. Judging by the rocking chair she saw, and the miniature throne on top of the seat, this was probably Tadase's bedroom. She spotted his Guardian's cape hanging up on a hook beside her, and that pretty much confirmed it. Now knowing where she was, she could relax a little bit more. Dia kept sipping her water, wondering how she was going to communicate without her voice.

Something shifted in her head – not an ache or a throb, but something...different. Familiar. Dia wasn't sure what it could be-- unless...

*Oh, crap.* In the earlier chaos, Dia had completely forgotten about Melody. *Are you okay? Melody? Please say something!*

A sort of groaning-whimper mix spun through her mind. It seemed to take Melody some time to be able to speak. *Dia...? What happened? I remember...the Mytan...it was fighting Aniko...a-and Aniko got cornered, then... Something screamed? Howled?*

*I'm not sure, but...that might've been me. I don't seem to have a voice right now... Dia wasn't completely sure on that theory, but she supposed it was possible.*

*Oh...what about Aniko? Is he-

*Sakuraba-san is looking at him now. Hope got Tadase and Aunt Mizue to bring us back to their house. Dia felt herself tense up in worry, but tried to shake it off. It only worked a little. Sakuraba-san knows about Aniko's...battle mode, so it'll be okay. He'll...know what to do.*

...Dia, are you okay?

...I, um...I think I'm really looking forward to seeing Aguma. He gives really good hugs.

There was a brief silence before Melody answered, *I'm trying to picture Aguma giving anyone a hug and it's surprisingly comforting. Is that normal?*

Dia smiled, and probably would have giggled if her throat had let out anything besides some sharp air. *Definitely normal. He's so big his hugs just kinda...envelop you.*

...*Can I get one?*
I'm sure he'll have plenty to give. Dia let Annie have a sip of the water, then frowned, wishing she had some way to talk to her Characters. She didn't have any psychic-type Pokemon, or a good grip on telepathy herself.

Probably noticing her distress, Annie put a hand on her arm. “What's wrong?”

After some thought, Dia put a hand to her throat, rubbing it slightly and opening her mouth, miming her lack of voice. Annie viewed the charade for a few seconds before putting together, “Your voice is gone?”

Dia nodded, and Hope floated over to sit on her shoulder. “That's not surprising. You kinda roared when Aniko...um...almost got hurt a lot.”

So it had been her. If she had to guess, a wail like that multiplied by the power of the Tear, and the Aquarius Crystal, it was no wonder. Depending on hydration, stress, and overall rest, it could be a while before her voice came back. Maybe she could see if there was any honey in the house...? Probably more likely than popsicles, since it was winter.

“I'm sure that Madoka and everyone else will understand,” Annie said reassuringly. “You could use your phone, text out things you need to say? I'm sure there's a text-to-speech thing on there, right?”

Dia nodded, trying to remember if there was. She'd never needed it before, so she wasn't sure. Wouldn't be too hard to check, at least.

_Dia? Is this something that would qualify a need to check in with Lance?_

That...oof. Melody had a point. While she hated to distract any of the Voltron pilots while they were in active duty, she and Aniko had been attacked by one of the Mytans, and received physical damage. Isis's she could brush off, because no one had been hurt...technically. This one, though...

Dia bit her lip, not looking forward to that conversation. Unfortunately, there was really nothing else for her to do right now, so she had no way to procrastinate.

With some gestures and mouthing, Dia managed to communicate to her Characters that she wanted her phone. Annie quickly retrieved it.

**From Touma:** Why the fuck did your Character call Sakuraba in such a panic what's going on
**From Touma:** HEY
**From Touma:** One of you answer me
**From Touma:** Where the fuck are you I'm coming over what happened
**From Touma:** MELODIA

Missed Calls: 4
Touma
Touma
Touma
Touma
Touma

Oh god.

To Touma: if you're really set on coming over I'm at my aunt's and I can give you the
address but I won't really be able to explain because I'm currently voiceless
To Touma: the other Mytan fought Aniko when he came out to see me. I think I let off
another Haert explosion. I just woke up.

From Touma: what the fuck
From Touma: what the fuck do you mean the OTHER one
From Touma: WHERE ARE YOU

Dia copied the address from her texts with Madoka and sent it to him.

To Touma: a lot happened yesterday

Annie, can you find Tadase and tell him that a friend of mine is coming to check on me? Dia held up the phone so that Annie could see her message. After reading it, Annie nodded, gave her face a quick hug, then went off in search of Dia's cousin. Dia then braced herself, and opened the text messages with Lance.

To Lance: You probably already know that Aniko came out to see me. We had a nice talk, I really needed it.
She wasn't sure how to continue. Lance even responded before she could figure out what to say in her next message.

From Lance: Ah. So that's why he was yelling at Kotone over the phone for a teleport. Good to know.

She chewed on her lip. Even Melody couldn't come up with any suggestions.

From Lance: Why are you texting just to say that, though?
To Lance: umm...im not
To Lance: I dont know how to say this

From Lance: Did something happen? Are you okay?

Deep breaths. Dia took deep breaths.

To Lance: the mytan possessing Dad showed up
To Lance: he and Aniko fought. My Haert exploded. We used mom's present and I lost my voice.
To Lance: Aniko managed to chase him off but we both passed out. One of my fairies had to fly to Tadase's house for help.
To Lance: I just woke up a few minutes ago. One of Aniko's med school friends is here checking on him. My friend Touma is coming over too.
To Lance: you don't need to come down. I can move around fine. Aniko's in good hands. We'll recover.

When she didn't receive a response right away, Dia started to get scared. Knowing Lance, he was either throwing things, punching a wall, or already running to get to the Red Lion to fly down. Panicked, she switched to another chat.

To Pidge: don't let lance leave the castle
To Pidge: he's probably upset and worried and might hit you but don't let him leave
Curling in on herself, Dia helplessly waited. It was almost ten minutes until she got a reply.

From Pidge: He's not exactly calm, but he's promised not to leave. What's going on? I haven't seen him like that in months.

Dia wiped away frightened tears.

To Pidge: Um, there was another Mytan incident. But I had Aniko there and he fought back, so we're okay. Just need to rest and recovery.
To Pidge: I don't want to leave you short a pilot. Remind him of that. He needs to stay on Arus.

From Pidge: I know I can't ask you to be careful, because they always sneak up on you anyways, so instead, please just take care of yourself. Don't feel any obligation to rush anything, especially on our account.
From Pidge: Spend some time with your Pokemon! I think Aniko took Henry, Fix, and Lindia.

Lindia. Dia felt lighter just thinking about the Roselia. She'd love going back to China, considering it was where she'd evolved. Maybe they'd even find one of those stones she needed to evolve again while they were there.

To Pidge: ok. You take care of yourself too.

To Lance: We're safe now. I promise. I won't leave until Sakuraba-san clears me, and tomorrow I'll be in China with the Fist for a few days. I'll have plenty of time to rest there. I don't think Aniko will be allowed to leave until he's recovered enough, either.

From Lance: I love you. I worry about you. It hurts when I can't help you.
From Lance: Aside from your voice, were you hurt?

To Lance: No, just a headache. Probably from the passing out and falling, and all the energy that was going around. Sakuraba-san said I didn't have a concussion, so I'm just sort of resting from energy expulsion.

From Lance: Good. What about Aniko?

To Lance: I'm not sure. He's in another room. I'll tell you as soon as I know.
To Lance: Actually, a quick question. Is it normal for the whites of my eyes to turn pink when my Haert explodes? I heard Sakuraba mention that, plus my irises turning purple. I thought maybe using the microphone from Mom might have done that...

From Lance: I think so. That sounds right. If they ever did change to pink, I never saw, but they could just revert when you lose consciousness. That would have to be a lot of Haert for it to still be there.
From Lance: As for the purple, who was using the mic?

To Lance: Aniko was singing, but I was channeling to him. I didn't know what else to do.

From Lance: Let me talk to Mom.
Hope gave her face a reassuring nuzzle. Dia appreciated it – talking to Lance was hard, especially when he was worried or super emotional. He was always so loud about it, so violent with how much he cared. It was hard for her to handle, even after six years to get used to it. She was more used to people like Kyoya, who just sort of hinted at it with his actions, or the guys at the Dungeon Gym, who were vocal, but knew when to back off.

**From Lance:** Who activated the Haert inside it?

**To Lance:** Aniko did

**From Lance:** Okay. First of, Mom loves you and she's glad you're okay.
**From Lance:** Second, she says that channeling that magic, connecting to Aniko, and exuding all that Haert at the same time, all while probably being panicked, is probably the cause. Mer magic focuses on calming, it was probably trying to calm you and overloaded.
**From Lance:** It should fade pretty soon. The pink, we're not sure. Unless you want to explain this to people, you might want to find some sunglasses until then.

**To Lance:** Okay. Thank you. And tell Mom thank you. And I love you!

**From Lance:** Are you sure you don't want me to come see you?

**To Lance:** It's not that I don't want to see you. I just know that Voltron needs you and Daniel's not there to pilot Red if you leave. I have Aniko, Tadase, Aunt Mizue, and a lot of friends. And you definitely know Aguma and the Fist wouldn't let anything happen to me.

**From Lance:** I hate it when you're right.
**From Lance:** Just take care. Please.

**To Lance:** I will. And I'll keep you posted, I promise. When I get to China, when I find the Fist, all that. I'll make sure my fairies remember too.

**From Lance:** I love you, Xiaolian.

**To Lance:** I love you too, Xiaotong.

**From Lance:** Tell Aunt Mizue and that doctor thank you. And to not let Aniko brush off their concerns.

**To Lance:** I will. Go beat up some holographic beasties. : )

**From Lance:** You know me too well.

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*Hey, Dia? Do you think you could explain something to me?*

*Uh, yeah. Sure, what is it? Dia took her attention away from her phone. She hadn't found a text-to-speech program, but a text to Pidge had him promising to code and upload one before the day ended. Right now, they were debating what languages to add in.*

*Just the Chinese name thing. I get from your memories that they're your first names, and you grew up as 'Dia' so that's kinda your reason for not using it, but then Lance calls you it sometimes? And you call him his back?*
Dia smiled a little. It's...sort of a way to indicate we're sending a lot of care through our words. Like, we'll use them when we're worried about each other, or want to reassure. I don't remember exactly, it might be something the memory glitches took, but I think my brothers wanted to honor Dad's choices of their middle names. Because...he can't really make choices anymore. And I think that's why they didn't have a problem with me not going ahead and using mine when I learned it.

Ohh...I get it. And...I guess your mom just loves you that much? She wants you to know all the time, so she uses it more often?

Eh, I wish it was a sweet reason like that. It's more she's terrified of losing me again, and she wants to squeeze in as much love and care as possible to make up for the eight years I was missing.

...Oh.

Ugh, sorry. I'm not trying to make you feel bad. I just feel jumbled up right now. Is it okay if we just chill and not talk for a bit?

Y-Yeah, sure. You get some rest.

After another sip of water and a painful cough, Dia curled up in the bed and just tried to relax a little. She went through her phone programs and found the obligatory Solitaire app, then started playing. She and Melody would spend the next half hour or so taking silent turns with the game.

After that half hour, Mizue came in to say that Aniko had woken up. Melody shakily stood, took the water bottle, and followed her out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

Someday I'll draw Battle-Mode Aniko. Someday. I'll probably get to pink-sclera/purple-iris Melodia first.
There's so much in this story that I want to draw, but most of it I have to work up to because my skills aren't quite there yet. Bah DX

Anyways, between the last chapter and this one, I finished Melodia's mermaid profile, Ocean's Lullaby profile, Melody profile, Hope's profile, Esaria's profile, and recently lil Fix's profile! They're all on dA with full info, and our Tumblr blog has links to all of them on the "Profile List" page. (Or at least, it will once I actually get Fix's profile posted, lol)

Song: "Me Against the World" by Simple Plan (I think?) - English

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings and full profiles are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go: http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Oof, this chapter gave me some trouble, but I like how it turned out in the end. I tried something different, and it's probably gonna be clear pretty quick, but basically I tried some different POVs out in this one. Yeah, solely focusing on Melody and Dia's was stalling me, but luckily that little change-up did some good and helped me finish up. I'll probably try to do that more often.

Mizue led Melody to the living room, where Aniko was sat up on the couch. Kaoru was taking a look at his eyes, having used a piece of cloth to tie his hair back from his face. It looked a bit odd around the horns, but as long as it worked, she supposed.

She let Kaoru finish his examination before she stepped into view, a message ready. **You won! It was kinda freaky, but we pulled through. Only injury I got was losing my voice, but mer magic helps that heal faster and all, so I should be talking again in a week at most. How're your...magically-healed-during-battle wounds?**

Aniko smiled upon reaching the end of the message. “They're fine. I think I pulled a couple things, but other than that I'm good. Pretty lucky, huh?” He handed her phone back, chuckling. “Guess I've got that Haert explosion of yours to thank. Your violent caring saw me as an ally instead of a threat, so it healed me instead.”

Melody just stared at him, eyes wide. Was that really how it worked? She frowned at her phone, typing another message. **I can't tell if you're joking, theorizing, or telling the truth.**

With a laugh, Aniko reached over to ruffle her hair, which felt surprisingly nice. “Okay, so it might've been a mix of that and the singing, but my point still stands. You've blown up enough around me that by now your Haert just kinda knows me. There's a silent agreement about just not questioning it.”

Melody would beg to differ, that was definitely something to question, but since Dia seemed unconcerned – grateful, really – she let it go, nodding in response. **So...when do you think you'll leave “battle mode”?**

Aniko leaned back against the couch, his still glowing eyes wandering to the ceiling as he thought. “After a battle like that...against a Mytan...even with the music, it might be a few days. How 'bout you? Kaoru-san did mention your new colors, right?”

Melody took a few seconds to pull up her text conversation with Lance, and showed Aniko what he and their mom had come up with. When Aniko questioned why she'd thought to ask, she had to think quickly. She couldn't very well say she'd told Dia that Lance should know about the attack. **Hope came to her rescue. “You can just tell him it was my idea!” Melody brightened and typed that up, and it seemed to satisfy him. She then backed off to let Kaoru check a few more things, and nodded obediently when he said her brother should rest for a few more days, while she should be...
good to go after a few hours.

She did have a question for him, though. **If you don't mind talking about it, how do you know so much about Aniko's Siqu and his battle mode?**

After glancing in the direction of the kitchen, where Tadase and Mizue had retreated, Kaoru gave a sigh. “I was present for one of these 'Mytan' attacks while we were in school. It's thanks to Aniko-san that no one was seriously hurt.”

While Dia 'gaped', Melody looked at Aniko in awe. He shrugged nonchalantly, but with the way he just slightly curled in on himself, she could tell it was a topic he'd rather avoid. Thus, she just smiled and nodded, and let Kaoru go to the kitchen to instruct Mizue on how to make sure Aniko got his rest.

When they were alone, Aniko patted the seat next to him. Melody joined him on the couch, and he hugged her tightly, just holding her for a minute. “Are you girls all okay?”

Melody nodded, waiting until she was released to type her response. **Annie needs some rest because of all the negative Mytan energy, but otherwise she'll be fine. She bounces back really well.**

“Good. I'm glad.” He reached up to untie his hair, then waited as Melody typed a question Dia had been desperate to have answered. **Aniko, how did you have the same ice magic as the Mytan possessing Shelly?**

Neither of them were reassured when Aniko went back to staring at the ceiling. Melody pulled her legs up onto the couch, hugging them and waiting worriedly. Aniko's answer started with another hug, followed by a sigh.

“I really didn't want you to find out like this. I'm sorry, Xiaolian.” He closed his eyes, probably trying to think of how to explain. “The ice...when the spirits – these Mytans, attacked the village, I tried to help fight back. The blue one...Isis? She caught my magic and tried to twist it around. Dad stopped her, but I'd already been tainted. And then with Dad...taken, no one else knew how to undo it. By the time I met a mage who could, it was too late. Short of the power of a pure Spirit Quartz, I'm stuck with this ice. It's only really useful against the Mytans themselves.”

Melody slowly nodded, remembering how he'd been able to tear through his opponent. **And it keeps you from hurting Dad.**

“Right. I've practiced with it enough, learned how to control it enough, that I can bypass the way that thing's using Dad as a shield. It works even better against Isis, since it's her energy.”

Dia urged another question on, and Melody reluctantly complied. **Is this why Lance doesn't seem to trust you?**

There was a long silence before Aniko gave a simple, quiet, “Yeah.”

Melody leaned on him. **Lance is a butt. And probably just scared. I bet you for sure we'll find a pure Quartz and we'll pull it out of you, and then you can learn your own ice magic, and it'll be a million times better than Isis's just because it's yours.**

When Aniko turned to smile at her, she wasn't scared of his eyes anymore. Neither was Dia. “Thank you,” he said gratefully.
I trust you, Xing.

Aniko swore under his breath and pulled her into another hug. “I don't deserve a great sister like you.”

Melody felt a jolt at the simple title, and hugged back a little tighter. It's me who doesn't deserve a brother like you, she thought. Having only had sisters, a brother was a new experience for her, but she was starting to figure out that it was something great. She was really jealous of Dia for having such an awesome one.

Don't forget, Melody, he's your brother now, too.

Shut up you're gonna make me cry and then our throat will get worse.

“I...don't think I understand, Mother. You're saying that merfolk are real? That you used to be one?”

Nervously tapping at her leg, a habit developed shortly after giving up her tail, Mizue frowned uncomfortably. After the doctor had said his goodbyes, she'd sat her son down and told him what she thought he deserved to know. “Well...yes. It...It's a bit of a long story, really, about my people...a-about, um, them, I mean.”

She could see her son's careful consideration in his eyes, how after some thought his irises shrunk in realization. “What does that mean about me?”

“You're human! Tadase, you're completely human. I gave up all of my mer heritage before your father and I were married.” There was no way she could blame him for his question – she surely would have asked the same if she were in his position. “You don't have anything to worry about. There's nothing about all that that will affect you.”

More pieces started falling into place, she could tell. “The shells you always put on the mantle during holidays...”

“They represent my sisters, Mingzhu and Jiao. Mermaid princesses. Or...they were. Melodia-chan and her friend, whom you missed, are the Purple and Indigo princesses now.” Mizue was trying not to overwhelm her son with new information, knowing he already had so many questions about Melodia and her brother. “Simply put, there is a kingdom for each color of the rainbow, and each kingdom has their princess.”

Tadase nodded, accepting this without any questions. He'd have some later, though, she was sure. “I see...and is this why the ocean is so important to you? Why you always gave me something related to it for Christmas?”

She nodded, her fingers pausing against her leg a moment. “Yes, I...I was never going to push an interest in it onto you, but I at least...wanted you to appreciate it.” Smiling softly, she added, “It means so much to me that you caught on. You took such good care of everything I gave you.”

“It was important to you. Even if I didn't understand how, I'd be terrible if I didn't respect that.” Now Tadase was looking concerned. Not for the situation – no, she knew how to read her son's face after these twelve years. His worry was for her. “What I...don't understand, Mother, is why you never mentioned this before.”

With a sigh, Mizue pushed a hand across her face, the question expected yet still giving her guilt. “I...I couldn't. There was a curse, for so long... If a mer reveals their true identity to a human,
they...they turn to sea foam. They die.” She bit her lip, seeing his fright. “That was why I had my magic sealed away. If I hadn't, I never would have been able to get so close to your father. You never would have been born.”

She let him have a few minutes to take in what she'd told him so far. Putting her face in her hands, Mizue breathed slowly, trying to calm herself. From meeting Melodia earlier, to hearing about the Beylin Fist...these 'Mytans'...her brother-in-law and niece possessed, her sister and other niece dead. Now she had two of Mingzhu's children sitting in her living room, recovering from a battle that could have cost them their lives, if she was understanding this right. Was there to be no end to her family's suffering? Their ancestors exiled, their childhoods in a wasteland of a village, and now all of this?

And yet, Mizue had to wonder. Was it for these reasons that she and Tsukasa had needed to leave when they did? Had his fortune telling saved their lives, allowed them to create a new family here in Japan? He had always called it an opening, a gateway to new strength and hope. She hadn't understood that for so many years, but... Was this it? Was this point in time the gateway, her niece reaching out to meet them even with the danger of Easter? Offering them a way back to the family they'd left behind?

That was all she'd ever wanted. Through meeting Yui, marrying him, having and raising Tadase, Mizue had still always just wanted to go home. She'd just thought she didn't deserve to.

But...maybe she needed to. Maybe that was the strength that Tsukasa saw, the strength to stand and return to the sister that had lost so many. And the hope...

Maybe the hope was as simple as Melodia's offer of love.

“Mother?” Tadase's voice startled her from her thoughts, her head jolting up to look at him. She'd heard him muttering to himself – to his spirit? Tsukasa had been saying Tadase had a guardian spirit the past few years. The way she'd seen her son grow, it was impossible for her to dismiss it. Right now, his concern and fear had vanished – the doings of talking to this guardian spirit, she'd have to assume.

“What is it, Tadase?” she asked shakily, hoping she would be able to answer any questions he might have.

He considered his words before he spoke again. “I think I understand. You and Uncle left, and...because of that, escaped the fight against these Mytans that control Melodia-san's father and sister. Your journey led you here, where you decided to stay. You gave up everything, which is why it was always so hard for you to talk about your home.” His gaze was sincere, comforting. “And the reason you're telling me this now, is that curse lifted? Are your people free of it?”

Though Mizue did not feel she could rightly call merfolk 'her people' anymore, she nodded. “Y-Yes. Melodia-chan says it was lifted around the second, by a generous spirit. Even if I had given up my magic, I never wanted to take the risk that the curse might still take me. I couldn't risk leaving you and your father, not ever.” She reached across the table, grateful when his hands met hers in the middle. Touching her son's hands grounded her, calmed her. “I have many regrets about my life, but if I were to disappear from your life, that would be my greatest.”

With that gentle smile of his, Tadase turned his hands so that he could hold hers. “To hide all of this for so many years...I've always looked to Grandmother as a person of strength, but I never realized that you held just as much, if not more. So much has happened, and you can still smile and laugh with us. You're amazing, Mother.”
Mizue ducked her head and smiled through her tears, knowing it would be useless to argue. “Thank you, Tadase,” she whispered happily. “I'm just...I'm so grateful that after all these years, I finally get to tell you...”

Years of homesickness washed over her, regret and fear and uncertainty piled within. In a rush of tears, Mizue let everything out, and her son stood beside her and held her, and she was so proud of him. She was so relieved that he was such a kind, brave boy, and that he understood, and...

“I love you so much, Tadase,” she told him softly, hugging him tightly. “You're the most wonderful son I could have asked for, and I'm so grateful...I'm so proud...”

Mizue had many regrets, yes, but giving up her mer side to make this family, to give birth to this strong son – that would never be one of them.

She typed desperately as she hid in the vents of the council hall. Below her, she could hear guards calling search orders; magic swarmed across the entire building, trying to find her.

She had to be fast. She had to use the chance that Noa had given her.

To Melodia McClain: I have to be quick im not suupposed to talk to you but Xiaolian I love you I LOVE YOU I want to meet you but I cant there are rules but I promise ill beet you soon and well seeave Dad and Shelyl and well be together again .But you cant tell enaony eabout me I could get in big trouble and thenint could be years til e meet you cant tell anyone underatnd? Be strong be brave always fight bak and believe me whne I say WE AREONIG TO GET YOUR BOYFRIEND BA

There was a metallic clang as a nearby vent cover was forced open, and she jolted, sending the message without bothering to finish the final word. Curling into herself and trying to lower the intensity of her aura, which someone was probably tracking by now, she waited until the text had sent before quickly pressing down on it.

Delete this message from your phone? This cannot be undone.
YES
NO

She slammed her thumb against YES. The text vanished from Noa's inbox, erasing the evidence.

She hoped Xiaolian would understand. She hoped Xiaolian could wait just a little bit longer.

Someone's head poked around the corner, and she yelped, abandoning the phone to scurry away in the metal maze. With luck, they'd see the lack of message and assume she'd been caught before she could send anything.

Please be strong and wait just a few more days, Xiaolian. We'll stop this. I'll make things right!

Melody.

Yeah...?

Is this a text from the sister I didn't know I had?

Um...it's from Noa's phone, and she's kinda suspected for knowing her with those questions...and
she said 'Dad', not 'Max', so I think it is.

Why would she have to be quick? Why can’t I tell anyone?

...Do you promise not to be mad about my theory?

Dia wished she could look at Melody right now, because she was aching to glare at her. The text had interrupted cuddles with Aniko, and she’d had to retreat to Tadase’s room to keep him from reading over her shoulder. That depends on if I have a reason to be mad at you for it.

Well...Uh...You looked at some of my memories. You know about the roleplay I had, which is Margret’s world...

What does that have to do with this?

Well...there’s a version of you there? And...she has...two sisters? And I forgot which is why I never thought about telling you? And probably wouldn’t have anyway because there’s variants and whatever and you two are really not much alike so I probably wouldn’t consider-

Can you just get on with the theory, Melody?

Right! Right, so...um, in Margret’s world, her not-Shelly sister is Gertrude, and she works undercover for the police posing as a member of Team Rocket. And no one knew so the family hated her? ’Til that world’s you found out and helped her and had to explain ’cause she got dragged to a Christmas party before she could change out of her uniform...and Gertrude followed and helped explain ’cause that you left her bag with her.

Dia breathed in and out as calmly as she could. So because of...variants...and dimension similarity stuff...you think something similar could be going on with Xifeng?

Mhm. Maybe...the position she’s in doesn't allow her to contact anyone on the outside, which is why everyone assumed she died. Maybe something’s keeping her there. It sounds like she’s fighting to come back... And Noa’s been telling her about things! Because she mentioned getting Toby back...

Once again, Dia just breathed. Thank you for the logic. I...I needed that.

Yeah... Are you okay?

This has been a damn awful day with too much crap. I just wanna be in China.

...Do you want me to take over until we get there?

...Mhm. Dia stared at the floor. I just...I need time to think, you know?

As they switched out, Melody gave a wheezy chuckle. I don't blame you a bit. I'll make sure we head out as soon as Aunt Mizue lets us, and we can hide out on a bed ’til we leave for China tomorrow.

Thank you. Dia blocked out the world, curling into her mindscape to process the day.

When his sister returned, Aniko let her burrow back into cuddles before making her explain her abrupt departure. She was...off, he could tell. Since leaving Arus she’d been through much more than she could handle, and it was taking its toll. He truly wished there was something he could do for her.
He took her phone when she offered it, reading what she'd typed to him. **That was Noa, the one trying to help us find Toby. I didn't want to risk an Arrangement spike and hurting you if it was bad news. It was...neutral. Nothing yet.**

Aniko said nothing, just hugged her a little tighter. He remembered hearing about Noa before in Melodia's idol days, and it wasn't too surprising she'd turned out to be a mage. Having her as an ally was honestly a relief – someone with resources, and more importantly, someone that Melodia trusted.

When Mizue came in to check on them, he asked if she could make some tea for Melodia; she hurried back to the kitchen to do so. Aniko reflected on how little their aunt had changed in the past twenty years – she was still quiet and caring, small and sweet. He was a little confused at the lack of 'ocean' feeling to her energy, though. Had something happened to her mer magic? He didn't know if she'd told her son yet, so he decided now wasn't the time to ask. Maybe while Tadase was at school tomorrow, since he was going to be here for a while.

On the other hand, speaking of different energies...

Aniko spared a glance towards his sister, who was quietly curled up on the couch with her head in his lap. Before and during the attack, everything about her had seemed normal – at least, as normal as it could be with what she'd been through. There was some extra Menta, but considering her memory glitches, it wasn't really worrying. Her core was stable, from what he could tell, and that was enough for him not to pry further at the time.

Right now, though, the main focus of Menta within her? It wasn't his sister's. While Melodia was most certainly still in her body, there was someone else as well, someone that she was allowing to take control and act for her. It didn't make any sense to him. Even if the other person was harmless – he couldn't sense any hostility in her Menta – his sister wasn't the type of person to allow anyone in her head. She was private, liked to keep thoughts to herself. Hosting another mind or spirit was as invasive as one could possibly get, and she knew that with their Mytan experiences.

So the questions were, why? Why and who?

And why hadn't she said a word about it when she was talking to him earlier?

Out of his siblings, Aniko had taken the most interest in Siqu magic. Between the years of losing Dia and regaining her, he'd studied it diligently, trying to understand it and learn how to combat the Mytan energy within him. Though his studies had dropped when he'd entered medical school, and almost ended entirely after his wife's death, Aniko knew more than enough to take a closer look at his sister's energy core and see what was going on.

He closed his eyes. Drawing on the bond they shared through their mer magic, Aniko spun his Menta into a guiding light towards hers, using it as a pathway to view the crystals of her core. A normal person would have twelve spiritual crystals making up their spirit, each one of the twelve Siqu energies that existed. The sizes might differ between types, depending on the person's personality and experiences, and if they'd experienced trauma one or two might be cracked or in pieces. But the number was always twelve. Always one of each.

Within his sister's core, a gentle area that couldn't be defined with color or shape, Aniko viewed the supernova of power that was his sister's Haert. This was no surprise – he was already aware that she'd drawn Haert from the family in order to survive being flung into the unknown skies during the Mytans' initial attack. At this point, it had all melded together and functioned as an overload of her own personal energy, though was slowly growing smaller as time went on. This was in part thanks to her meditations, and oddly enough, her Haert explosions – the stolen energy couldn't
regenerate fast enough to fill the 'crystal' before it had shrunken to accommodate the new amount.

Aniko had to direct his mind past the Haert to see anything else. The three energies he saw next were surprising, having doubled in size since he'd last viewed them only a month or so before. That didn't make sense – had she unwittingly drawn it out from others, like she had with the Haert as a toddler? What would've required her to do that?

Past these, the next two had doubled as well. Aniko began growing concerned. Melodia wasn't one to drain power from others, and this was far too much for an unknowing pull. Five of her energies doubled in such a short time...was it, perhaps, because of the other mind within her? Were their spirits merging?

With that alarming thought in mind, Aniko pressed on. He saw four crystals next, two doubles of the other – Fysika and Jusia. The pairs weren't the same in size, but they were circling each other as if syncing their power. He'd seen something like this in a diagram – the matching SiQu between two people bonding due to shared views and philosophies. They didn't merge, of course, being in two separate people, but it was common between those who were close, such as spouses or platonic partners.

Trying to rationalize the presence of two Fysika and two Jusia in his sister's core, Aniko glanced back at the double-size energies he'd passed. This had to be related to the person or spirit within her, right? As their energies found connections and bonded, syncing together, they formed a single spiritual crystal, slowly bonding the two people...together...

Growing more panicked, Aniko passed the spiraling pairs and moved forward once again. The next pair of doubles he came across weren't nearly as close to syncing, no spinning involved. Every few seconds they'd shimmer at random intervals, once in a while matching up by coincidence – or attempting to sync like what he'd seen before? Was he witnessing two spirits merging into one?

Was his sister in danger? Did she even know about this?

There was still hope – none of the energies he'd seen so far were Menta. So long as their Menta remained separate, so would their minds and consciousnesses. They would remain two different people. Now feeling the urgent pull of a protection mission, Aniko pushed forth one more time, and came across the four final crystals present in the core – two Dinis, representing dignity, and two Menta. To his relief, the four crystals all floated independently, no sign of syncing powers or bonding at all.

After seeing this, Aniko allowed himself to be drawn back to the area of her core that held her Haert. He viewed it from all angles, trying to see if there was a second pink energy hovering anywhere nearby, but came up with nothing – the Haert of whoever was co-hosting his sister's body had already bonded with Melodia's.

Part of him wanted to find this comforting. Half of his sister's energies had found common ground with this new mind, enough that they'd bonded into one. With two of these being Haert, the sense of care and loving, and Jusia, a person's sense of justice, it was logical to assume that the two trusted each other immensely – at least, if Melodia was aware of her co-host at all. That was what worried him. The bond didn't have to be voluntary – it could very well be happening without his sister's knowledge at all, slowly turning her into someone else. One thing was for sure – he had to ask her and find out. He couldn't let this go on without knowing his sister was aware.

Aniko gently severed the connection, his physical senses quickly grounding him back in the real world. From her lack of shifting around, the girl in his lap hadn't noticed his intrusion at all. He wished he could sense the direction her mind went – whether her intentions for being here were
good or evil. Unfortunately, that was a search far beyond his skill level; viewing a person's core was as intensive as he could go.

There was something else he could check before confronting her, however – it would be much easier, with Menta being his driving Siqu. After allowing himself to settle and refocus, Aniko closed his eyes once more and took a new target – his sister's mental walls. He had no intention of prying past them, so they shouldn't react to his examination.

A quick overview told him that the walls weren't the same ones he'd helped her repair back on Arus. These walls were newer, all of them, put back up...he'd guess on New Year's Eve. A closer look showed that while Melodia had been the main one creating them, a second person's Menta was present – the other mind within her. So the new consciousness had assisted in raising her walls back up? Surely Melodia would have noticed that. The technique left nothing out of focus; one was keenly aware of the walls and who was helping make them during the process.

Though it risked setting the walls on higher defense, Aniko delved a little closer, trying to see any remains of the previous ones. This would signify a forced break-and-entry, meaning the new mind had forced its way in. No matter how hard he searched, however, he found nothing – almost as if Melodia had been the one to remove the walls herself. It was like she had knowingly invited the mind to take residence in her body.

Buried in his thoughts and theories, Aniko didn't realize he'd grazed too close to the outer-most wall until it flared and strengthened. He pulled his mind away quickly, hoping it wasn't enough to alert either mind to his presence. When he'd settled back into the real world again, and opened his eyes, he carefully glanced down at the girl.

She'd shifted slightly. Her head was still in his lap, but her face was now upwards instead of sideways. She looked slightly unsettled, and with her current pink-sclera purple-iris eyes, it was easy to see why Melodia had been unnerved by his own shifting eye colors.

After a few seconds of them meeting gazes, her mouth drew downwards into a frown. Her confusion gave way to suspicion and annoyance, and she reached for her phone to type something out. Upon finishing it, she held it up for him to see.

What the hell were you doing in my head? You know I hate you doing that without permission!

The words seemed like his sister's, but from what he'd just seen, he couldn't be sure anymore. With a sigh, he glanced around, then chose to take the phone from her to type a response. It was better if their relatives didn't hear his questions. When he was finished, he handed it back to her, hoping there was a rational, easy, safe explanation for...everything.

Are you aware you're housing another mind? I sensed it, and got worried. Your core shows that your Siqu energies are merging, pulling you into becoming one person. I checked your walls to see their condition, and saw that this new mind helped rebuild them after you willingly took every one of them down. Do you know that all this is happening? Did you let this mind in knowingly?

The fear that rose on her face as she read wasn't his sister's. She jolted out of his lap, the quick movement bringing a wheeze to her breathing. The mind in charge had no training in hiding her expression or emotions like Dia had, meaning that as he'd thought, it wasn't his sister in charge. The thought angered him, but he refrained from speaking, not wanting to alert his aunt or cousin to the situation when there was nothing they could do.
She seemed to shrink under his gaze, then reluctantly re-firmed. She took a loud breath, before typing something new. All her focus went into her words; from what he could vaguely sense of them, he 'saw' his sister's little guardian spirits hovering behind her, probably reading along. Maybe offering advice? He couldn't tell. He only knew they were there because Dia had told him; otherwise, he'd be clueless to the presence of their unusual mind structure.

Eventually, the phone was handed back to him, and the girl controlling his sister's body curled up, hugging her legs. She refused to look at him as he read her message.

Yes. She knows. Dia let me in knowing all the risks. I was...it's hard to explain. I'm from another universe, where I'm basically the her of my dimension. A group of mages and spirits from a third universe worked to bring me here, and two gods that had meddled in my life before this were responsible for telling Dia my situation, that she could help me. She...related to what had happened, to what she saw of my pain. I'd rather not go into detail. But she was given the choice, even knowing we could merge, and she lowered her walls to let me in.

Dia doesn't really have amnesia. She does still have the glitches, and they affect me too, but the amnesia was a cover for me being in control and not knowing anything about this world. She unlocks memories for me, and sometimes I can force them by accident. By now I remember everything about the Dungeon Gym, most things about Horizon Productions...assorted others here and there. A lot of mermaid stuff, like previous Day of Light Tide celebrations. We're doing it slowly so there's less chance of an overload, because I'd hate...if she got hurt just trying to fill me in, I'd feel awful. I don't want that.

Dia and I accept that we're merging. We've had some temporary moments of it and...it feels good. It feels like that's what we need to be and what we're heading for. Day of Light Tide was a huge one, and Melodia sang, and it was one of the best moments of my life.

Hope is my guardian spirit. We don't really know what she represents, but it's something like my wish to...become one with this world? A hope that I find where I belong? I dunno...

There are a few people who know. Ikuto, who Dia mentioned before, and Touma, the one who's coming to see us. Those two...were an accident. Then there's Noa, because she sensed me like you did. And...we voluntarily told Toby, because he'd been lied to enough. Past that, the only other one who knows is you.

I've only been here about a week, but this world is important to me. Dia's important to me. Everyone that's important to Dia is important to me. There are people here that we've helped, and are helping. I can't turn away from those people, because it wouldn't be right. I promised to help them. Dia did too. We WILL help them.

I'm sorry if you're mad. But I can't go. I won't leave, no matter what you say. Dia's problems are my problems now too. Her friends are my friends. But I won't push on the subject of family if that's not something you're willing to accept. I know that I'm an outsider and that you've all had bad experiences with people in your heads. I know the Mytans have hurt all of you a lot and I can't take that away. But I want to help. I want to get Dad and Shelly back. I want to stop the Mytans.

Aniko handed the phone back silently, not knowing what to think. When she typed something new and pushed it back into his hand, he gripped it only out of instinct. He read it only because it was in
Aqua Regina knows. I don’t feel worthy to be accepted by her, but...she came to us and said that we had wonderful hearts. That we were both welcome to her power. When I heard her stories on Day of Light Tide, she reminded me of a mom protecting her children. I feel honored that she thinks of me as one. I don't know if that'll do anything to change your mind, but...since she's your deity too, I felt like I should tell you.

Slowly, carefully, Aniko inhaled. He held it for a few seconds, then let it out. Not yet looking over at her, he handed the phone back with a reply. Is there a reason you're in control right now instead of her? How do you two establish who's in charge?

When she handed it back, he heard her shifting into a tighter ball, felt her Menta stinging with fear.

Dia's taking all of this really badly. Toby, Isis, today's attack...I wasn't listening when she was talking to you earlier, at first, telling you all that's been happening, so I don't know what all she's said. But...it's a lot for her. I think I'm handling it better because I don't have the same connection to everyone that she does yet. She's...She doesn't want to focus on the world right now. I think she's resting, or maybe watching good memories in our mindscape (kinda like a voidy place where the one not controlling the body stays) to try and calm down. That's what I've done on a bad day that happened.

Most of the time, in general...I'm in charge. To get used to things. It's also easier for Dia to unlock memories when she's not also trying to talk and keep track of where she's walking. But that's not saying she's never in charge! If she ever wants to be, I always step back. I let her be the one to talk to Tadase when we found him, because that was why she came to Japan at all...She also took control while we were telling Toby what was going on. She can force control, too. Well, we both can, but...yeah.

“And he's okay with this?” Aniko didn't trust himself to type right now. He felt so wound up he feared he'd simply zap the phone with his energy, and then Pidge would kill him.

If you're talking about their relationship, it's on hold until we merge. I...he's nice..but I don't want to complicate things. They agreed that...if our feelings change when we merge, that's not anyone's fault. Right now...I don't hurt as much as Dia, but it still hurts a lot. I failed him. I want him back. I want things to go back to normal.

He finally turned his head to look at her. Hugging herself as tightly as she comfortably could, the girl controlling his sister's body was crying and sniffling, a cough escaping once in a while. Everything about her screamed a level of fear and misery that couldn't easily be faked.

“...I won't tell anyone. For now.” Aniko couldn't even see what good telling anyone would do. “This is...you're halfway to it. I don't know anything about this, but I saw that.”

She glanced up at him, very briefly. He could see the silent question on her face, and sighed. “I...don't know if I trust...this. The situation. You don't mean harm, I can see that. It's just...I don't want to...”

As she started typing, he fell quiet. It was a short message, and she handed him the phone rather quickly. You're not gonna lose your sister again. We promise.

He met her eyes, trying to read them. Fear overshadowed most of it, but beyond that, he could
see... strength. His sister's strength, mirrored in her new... friend. Everything that she typed, she meant with all her heart, including this promise.

Aniko shut his eyes. In the past six years, he'd learned many different sides of his sister. Part of him wanted to reject this entirely, find a way to force this person out. But... that would be going against what Dia wanted. He'd worked so hard to get to where they were in their relationship, finding her fears and strengths, her weaknesses and favorite things. He'd done so much to make up for the time they'd lost because of the Mytans. If he were to go against her now, would she have any faith left in him? Would she turn her back on him? Would he lose her because of his doubts?

If he turned his back on her, he lost her. If he tried to force her friend away, he lost her. If he let them merge... there was no telling. But was it better than the alternatives? The surefire ways to break their relationship, versus something that could have a million different outcomes, good and bad?

“I don't know what to think,” he admitted quietly. “This family is such a mess already...it feels like every year something happens and it all gets worse. You seem like a really good person, but this is a lot to take in.”

He didn't blame her when she didn't respond. The two of them just sat there... three? Two and a half? He didn't even know. He couldn't think straight. Time just sort of stopped. He sat beside her, only vaguely aware of her presence, and he wasn't sure how long they were there.

Aniko didn't hate her. This girl had clearly gone through a lot, and while he didn't know for sure, it was possible that she and Dia had needed this merging, to some degree. Maybe they saw it as some form of new strength? He knew that his sister didn't have many friends she could confide in about the family situation, let alone the Mytans. This new girl, even with their Menta not yet linked, seemed to know everything that was going on. He'd never known Dia to trust anyone that much – not even Toby.

The couch shifted as she stood, and when he glanced over he saw her setting his sister's phone where she'd been sitting. She then left the room, and judging by the sounds after, went outside. Seeing the phone was still in the notepad app, he picked it up, noticing she'd typed a new message.

I'm going to wait for Touma outside. If you want to talk to him about... this, me, whatever... when he gets here, you're more than welcome to. He knows just about everything except for Dia being a mermaid, I think. -Melody

Melody. So that was her name? If she really was some kind of... dimensional counterpart to his sister, then he supposed the similar name made sense. If that was how it worked? Gods, he was just a doctor that dabbled in Siqu magic, he didn't know.

As the screen's brightness faded, signaling it would soon shut off, Aniko tapped it and scrolled to the top of their conversation. He read through everything again, just trying to make sense of it somehow. He didn't know what to think, how to feel... He just wished things would be normal again already.

After several minutes of long, circular thought, Aniko tapped out of the notepad app and went to his sister's contact list. She'd named the people who knew; maybe one of them could help. Touma was coming here... Toby was just freaking gone... Ikuto was in America, so was probably asleep... That just left Noa.

Calling: Takamine Noa
Chapter End Notes

I'm gonna hand this end note here over to my friend Meg, who wrote the original version of Mooniverse and wanted to show up not just on the blog.

Meg: -swipes mic- thaaaank you. hi, i'm Megan, nice to meet you. Like she said, I wrote the thing first, and she took it and made it awesomer. And make more sense. I wasn't focused on plot holes I was focused on crazy fun idk. Aaanyways, I said this all on Tumblr, but I realized that hey, not everyone has that, so not everyone's gonna see this, so I'm saying it here now too. Basically, I wanna talk about Memory Moon, that thing that has two chapters and hasn't been touched in ages. Memory Moon is a way to show off stuff that happened in the past, or outside Melodia's experience. Learn about other characters, yada yada. The reason it only has two chapters is that we don't know what to write for it. (I say we, but really I said "let me think of the scene ideas and you can write them in your downtime" and Mel went "sure" and then I never thought of anything because school sucks and the internet's a black hole)

(Here's where I'm gonna just quote the post directly)
This is where you guys come in. If you wanna know more about anyone (and i mean ANYONE) who's shown up in Crystal Moon so far, shoot us an ask about it. simple as “ for Memory Moon” and yo you're done

Or maybe there’s a certain kinda scene you’re wondering about, like how people met or how a past problem was solved? “how did [name] and [name] meet for Memory Moon” / “how did [problem] get solved for Memory Moon” / “how did [event] happen for Memory Moon” SUPER SIMPLE :D
(end quoting)

We're also up for concepts of "what if"s, or chapters of MM that are just us answering questions that don't warrant a full short story. We might even fill it up with world lore like Aqua Regina's stories in chapter 11! It's up to you.

We take asks on Tumblr (anon is always on), notes and comments on dA, and comments on Memory Moon/Crystal Moon chapters, as ways for you to plug in what you wanna read. If you want us to go "hey this chapter's idea came from [your name/ID/account/persona/whatever] so thanks!" we can totally do that, no problem. If you don't, that's okay too :D

I think I've talked here long enough, but thanks if you stuck around to read this. Means a lot. ^_^ As in every chapter, here's our links:

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings and full profiles are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
ADDITIONALLY, MEL'S ACCOUNT IS GOOD: https://lunarcentric.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go: http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Honestly I finished this chapter without realizing it until a couple days later. Whoops. XD

Other news: Madoka, Margret, Melodia's Empoleon, and Megumi (human and mer) now have their profiles posted. Melodia's was also updated to include her Poke balls. Other, Better, More Important News: I've made art depicting 3 more of the magic music moments in Mooniverse! Link to dA/Tumblr to see them is in the end notes as always.

"You promised that you would keep Gertrude from contacting her family, Takamine. We had a deal."

For the fifth time since being brought into interrogation, Noa sighed. "And I have been consistently telling you that I had no knowledge of Gertrude's plan. I did not even know she had seen her sister's texts, or that she knew my phone's unlock code. I will be changing it as soon as it is returned to me, I promise you that."

Her supervisor, quite used to her collected demeanor, only shook his head. "That's not going to be enough, Takamine. Her sister knows about her, and we don't know how that is. Gertrude must have been able to contact her-"

"-Or perhaps," Noa interrupted, "her family simply decided to tell her. She's certainly not ten years old anymore. I imagine she would be able to handle hearing that her sister passed away when she was a toddler."

She sat passively as her supervisor's eyes narrowed. "Takamine," he said slowly, "you were assigned watch over Gertrude due to your Earth-work relationship with her sister, enabling you to ensure there was no contact or discovery. We let it slide when Gertrude learned you worked with her sister, because we thought watching her sister's performances would be good for her mental health. Being sure her baby sister was doing well, and such."

Noa distinctly remembered a very different circumstance involving her taking the case to Gertrude's caretaker, but knew this was not the time to correct. "I remember."

"We let it slide when Gertrude decided to make herself an idol here, during her free time. It kept her cheerful and productive during work, and kept her spirits up. We didn't want to take that from her."

Rather, Noa had taken the case to the high overseer and convinced him that letting Gertrude utilize her mer magic in such a way would only be beneficial to her health. "Of course."

"And now, Melodia has suddenly questioned you about the sister you said she knew nothing about. Shortly after, Gertrude stole your phone to contact her and escaped into the vents of the council hall. While we have yet to find her, the phone was discovered abandoned with Melodia's texts
open.”

They probably wouldn't find Gertrude. She knew how to hide when she didn't want to be found. “I assume this is how you discovered Melodia's messages to me? I can't imagine you'd be snooping into my personal messages on a regular basis.” Noa had been here a long time. She knew even these people wouldn't stoop that low. “Yes, as I have said many times, Melodia asked about her sister. I can only assume that her mother or one of her older brothers told her about Gertrude. I am starting to feel insulted by all of your circular questioning, sir.”

As her supervisor leaned back in his seat, Noa weighed her options. They were clearly losing time because of Melodia's messages – not that it was her fault, of course. Melodia would have no way of knowing what was going on. However, this might also be a surprising opportunity for them. If they played their cards right...

“Sir,” she began again. When she had his attention, she went on. “Maybe we're looking at the situation in the wrong way. It has been about fourteen years since Gertrude was separated from her family, correct? She's shown signs of full recovery in all circumstances – mental, physical, emotional, and even spiritual. She has full control over the...unfortunate power boost, something we never thought possible. This is her first attempt at contact in all that time, possibly due to how desperate her sister's messages appeared. I can't promise she's not read my texts before, but there's never been any sign of her sending her own until the event that's going on right now.”

“What exactly are you suggesting, Takamine?”

“I'm suggesting that perhaps it's time we take her case to the Council, and see if we can clear her for family contact. She's become concerned for her sister, and if we can't remedy this in the right way, she might do something drastic. No one wants that, least of all me.”

Leaning forward again, her supervisor frowned. “Takamine, she was involved in a Mytan attack. We can't just-”

“Fourteen. Years.”

“Takamine, you are letting your personal attachment-”

“How in Oda's great name is sitting quietly for three years 'letting my personal attachment cloud my thoughts'?" Noa challenged, standing and slamming her hands on the table. She let her calm facade wash away, the scowl she had hidden inside taking its place. “How, please tell me, is lying to Gertrude constantly to keep her satisfied that nothing is wrong with Melodia 'letting my personal attachment cloud my thoughts'? Lying to the family as a whole – to the Voltron Force itself - that even with my wide range of knowledge, I knew nothing about the mysterious spirits that tore their family and village apart? When it is in fact my job to know about those very spirits? How is doing that for three years implying any sort of performance loss due to me enjoying the company of both these sisters?!”

It was a terrifying rarity for Takamine Noa to raise her voice for anything other than acting or singing. As such, when she let her voice loose in a private setting like this, the person on the receiving end never expected it. Her supervisor was out of his seat within seconds, a protective shield of gray magic expanding between them, as if he thought Noa was about to attack.

Frankly, Noa would never stoop so low as to attack someone with no chance of winning.

“Here is what will transpire once I leave this room,” she said evenly, her glaring eyes not allowing him to look away. “I will collect my phone and return to my office. There, I will begin writing up a
report to the Council about what I, as Gertrude Thompson's legal overseer, believe to be the safest and most logical course of action for the next move regarding her care. I will take the case directly to the Council. And you—” She leaned forward threateningly, causing him to not only boost the power of his shield, but to make a second one. “—will stay out of my way. Are we clear...sir?”

“Y-You can't go over my head like that!” he argued. Pulling back from the table, Noa smiled coldly.

“Of course I can. I'm already meeting the Council for emergency approval on an audience with Lilura, and I don't doubt that they'll allow me to bring other worries to light—such as a corrupted power in the station.” Her eyes narrowed. “I never did like you.”

Noa easily walked around the table and past her supervisor, stopping at the door to look back. “You know, sir, I never did figure it out. Why do you hate Gertrude so much?”

The man spluttered, his concentration's failure causing both his shields to drop. “As-As if I were to— to be so unprofessional as to—”

“Is it because she's only a quarter Rontan? That you can't stand the idea of a hybrid being so skilled at what we do?”

His raging silence was all she needed. Of course. “Thank you for your time,” she said breezily, as if she'd been the one to call him in for interrogation. She opened the door and walked out, leaving him fuming behind her. May Oda deem you worthy of redemption, because right now all I see is a snobby brat with a higher position than he ever deserved.

Returning to her office, Noa scrolled through her phone to ensure nothing had been changed or erased in the process of examination. It wasn't likely, but with the way things had progressed in the station the past few years, it also wasn't impossible.

During her look-through, the screen shifted, and Horizon Pro.'s all-star song began to play from the device—the ringtone she had set for all her idol colleagues.

**Call From: Melodia McClain**

Hoping nothing was wrong—and that it wasn't Gertrude related—Noa answered. “Hello?”

The voice that responded was speaking in the same Japanese, but it wasn't Melodia. A man's voice, rather. “Excuse me, is this Takamine Noa?”

“Yes. May I ask for your name? You're certainly not Melodia.”

“No, I'm her brother. Aniko.”

Noa's steps paused. After a quick re-routing to the side of the cafeteria building, she questioned, “So has she returned to Arus, then? Or are you visiting her on Earth?”

“She's uh...we're on Earth. A mutual friend said she might need...anyways, I wanted to ask you something.”

Though she wasn't on expert on reading voices, she could tell there was an uncomfortable edge to his. “As long as I can answer it, I will.”

There was a pause as he hesitated. Noa waited patiently. **Has something happened? Another Mytan**
attack...? By Oda, I hope those girls are alright. Please be alright...

He coughed. “Um...I wanted to talk to you about Melody. She says you know.”

In her mind, Noa cursed. “...I do. She explained the situation to me on New Year's, when they came for our idol agency's celebration. She seems like a strong, wonderful girl.”

“And you're...okay with this?” There was a bitterness to his tone that wasn't entirely surprising. “Okay with Dia becoming someone else?”

“I think you're misunderstanding the situation a little, but I can see why. I witnessed one of their merges and in those minutes, I saw Melodia-san shine brighter in every way than I ever have before.” Noa distantly smiled, thinking of how it seemed a switch had flipped when Melody had seen Nono. Nono had needed Melodia, and Melodia had appeared. “Together they form the comfort and courage that both seemed to lack otherwise. It was beautiful.”

In the silence that followed as Aniko presumably thought this through, Noa reached the cafeteria's walls and leaned comfortably against one. As it wasn’t a meal time, the general area was deserted – people were working, in class, or otherwise gathered elsewhere. For a topic such as this, she was now in the perfect spot.

“Aniko-san.” Noa calmed her voice further than normal, taking a gentle and reassuring tone. “I don't pretend to fully comprehend the relationship you have with your sister, but in the time she spent with us at the party, I could tell why she did it. Do you have experience with Siqu Sight?”

“I uh...yeah. Dia has Haert Sight. I um, I have Menta as my driver, so I can sort of see things...if I focus.”

A Menta driver? That might explain how he'd found out – the same way she had. “So I assume you sensed something amiss and delved into her mind to check on her?”

“...Yes. I could see a second mind...a-and when I checked her core, it...They're already merging.”

“Ah, you saw her core? Then that means you must have seen the extreme lack of damage to her Haert?” Noa hoped he would put things together, but he only made a small noise of confusion. She tried another hint. “You are aware that since Spiral Force, your sister has had an incredible crack in her Haert core, yes? The crack that has apparently vanished all of a sudden, seemingly coinciding with Melody-san's arrival.”

By the quiet intake of breath, she gathered he understood. “I...I was so focused on the Menta, I didn't...h-how did...?”

“It's very simple. Those girls needed each other, desperately, to become what all their pain has taken away. Melody-san needed your sister's courage. Melodia-san needed the simple childishness that she never got the chance to enjoy. The damages that their pain caused became healed by each other, possibly starting as soon as Melody-san's mind was placed in her body. It was mending on the first, and when I saw her not too many hours ago, there was not a crack in sight – even though it was soon after Toby-san's kidnapping. Their merging core is healed, something that would not have happened so readily if they had been kept apart.”

From what she'd heard through Melodia, Noa knew that Aniko was a smart man. She anticipated what he would see as the most important question, and was rewarded with being right - “Does that mean...if Melody wasn't here, Dia...Dia could've been...w-when Toby was taken...”

There was no comforting way Noa could answer. “Your sister would have been entirely,
completely broken. An emotional explosion from such a damaged Haert core would have left her comatose at best.”

She didn't doubt that the hiccup-like sounds coming from the phone were the man's tears. “So she...just by being there, she saved my sister's life?”

“Undoubtedly. Truly, I look forward to the day they merge completely, and hope she shares the news with me.”

As Aniko cried, Noa politely moved the phone away from her ear, giving him a moment of privacy. She'd never intended to share this information with anyone who knew what was happening, but for someone such as Melodia's brother, there was no other way to convince him that Melody was only beneficial – not just to their friend, but to everyone. While Dia was hurting, Melody had learned to step up and act for them. Noa had seen this firsthand in America. It was vastly different from the fear and anxiety that had driven her at the party, when Dia was simply resting.

Both consciousnesses were learning and growing from the merging experience, because the healing they'd given each other had given them both the strength to go on. There was no doubt in her mind at all that the Melodia to emerge from this would have all she needed to live happily.

When a few minutes had passed, Noa brought the phone back to her ear, and noted that Aniko had quieted. Gently, she spoke. “Aniko-san?”

Between a sniffle and a cough, he answered, “Me too. I...I look forward to it, too.”

Relief washed over her. “We are all going through this one step at a time. I'm glad that you've been able to make it past the first.”

“The first..?”

Noa smiled, hearing the resignation in his voice – knowing what she was going to say. “What our people call the first step to anything. Acceptance.”

There was nothing but a sigh in response, and she chuckled lightly. “Let's keep our hairs crossed that we get to meet her soon, yes? And that everything goes well in all else.”

“...Yeah. Yeah, hairs crossed. I...Thank you.”

“Thank you for having the strength to seek answers, Aniko-san. I hope we're able to talk more in the future about less pressing matters.”

“...Yeah.”

Having nothing more to say, Aniko murmured an awkward goodbye and hung up. Noa took a moment to thank any god that was listening that he'd been understanding of the situation, then reluctantly turned her mind away from the topic. She resumed the walk to her office, mentally composing rough drafts of Gertrude’s case for the Council.

She would bring this family back together, even if she had to defy all her higher-ups to do so.

Melody was trying not to take it personally.

She knew from both Dia's memories and her roleplay time that Aniko tended to be a little harsh. He
took certain things badly and personally, and it was hard to change his mind. It was hard to make him listen. He had a very set opinion and it wasn't too hard to set off his temper.

Something like this? Like her? That would set off *all* his alarms. She honestly counted herself lucky he hadn't started yelling at her. She counted herself lucky that he didn't seem to hate her.

She was trying not to take it personally, because she could tell how important Dia was to him. Even so, it still hurt.

A lot.

It was probably good Dia wasn't paying attention right now. She wouldn't have wanted her to see that. She'd have to tell her eventually, of course, but right now? No. No way. Not after Toby. Not after having to see her dad like that. Dia just wanted to go to China and see her cousin, and that was what Melody would do for her.

Melody had never been into tea before, but she sipped from the cup that Mizue had brought out to her. The woman had given her space after, probably seeing she needed it. The tea was sweet, and not really Melody's thing, but it was supposed to be good for the throat so she toughed through it. She could do that for Dia, too. A mermaid with no voice was bound to be miserable.

She stared into the pond, vaguely noticing the pure quality. Mer magic? Maybe Tsukasa had done something to it. Whatever it was, she liked it. It helped calm her down. She was pretty sure Annie and Hope could sense that, too, because they weren't bothering her. Not that they usually did, but...

She didn't hear the footsteps until they stopped beside her. Hopeful, she looked up, expecting Touma – only to nearly freeze up when she realized it was Aniko. She quickly ducked her head again, just trying to breathe. Her gaze returned to the water, and she was momentarily grateful for her throat's condition – it prevented her from being expected to speak first.

“May I sit here?” she heard him ask quietly. Gently, more than she would have expected from him. More than he'd ever been able to manage for his estranged little sister, even after six years. It kind of sounded more like he acted around his kids.

It wasn't that she hated him, or was really scared of him. She was more scared of the rejection. Since he seemed to be reaching out, at least...trying, she nodded, but her eyes didn't leave the water.

He sat, with more than a few grunts. She let him situate himself, then was forced to readjust her focus when he held her phone out in front of her. Slowly, she set her tea down in the grass and took it, though couldn't find the strength to otherwise acknowledge the action. Briefly wondering if he'd typed something, she turned the screen on, and noticed that the notepad app had been replaced with the page of Noa's contact info.

“I talked to her,” he said in explanation. “About you.”

Against her better judgment, Melody felt herself growing hopeful. Noa had accepted her with little trouble. Maybe talking to her had helped him...figure things out? Even if he still didn't like her, she hoped for that.

“I think...I think I get it now. Not so much the how or the why, but...I think I get what I was missing.” Aniko's voice was a bit strained as he tried to put his words together. It wasn't reluctance, just...hesitance, maybe? Melody wasn't good at reading people, especially by voices alone.

“However it happened, it's...it's important that it did. You and Dia healed each other just by being together. She said...when you two merge, you're not someone else. You're just a...a better...you're
just a brighter Melodia. Is that...true?"

Noa had seen-? Oh, at the party. They'd merged for Nono. She didn't know about 'brighter', but...

She returned to the notepad app, scrolling to the bottom of their earlier conversation to add something new. It was a little hard to word, and she wasn't sure it sounded quite right, but it was hard to think about. Trying to describe the merges was...weird.

I wouldn't say we're brighter? It's more like...the fear isn't as strong. As Melodia I feel braver, and I'm not afraid to show how I feel. But I can also hide it, which wasn't one of my strong points as Melody. As Melodia, if I'm angry, I get angry, and people will know. If I'm happy, I can cry about it. If I'm upset, I can hold it in better if I need to. It's easier to think...just sort of in general. Everything clicks in the right way. Does that...make any sense?

She heard Aniko exhale as he read, probably trying to think. She still didn't want to look at him, scared she might start crying again if she did.

Eventually, he spoke again. “Okay...so being separate works, but things make more sense when you have those...merging moments?”

Melody nodded. Apart from the near half-hour they'd spent merged at the beach, merging helped them both focus. It was easier to clear their heads when it was only one head.

When Aniko didn't immediately have another question, Melody picked up her tea and drank a bit more. She was starting to feel a little better – Aniko was talking to her, trying to understand. He didn't seem to hate her.

Thank god.

The phone was handed back to her, and she heard him shift around, humming in thought. “What kind of things do you two have in common? Do you know?”

It was actually kind of hard to come up with a quick list. We both love singing. And they don't exist in my world, but merfolk are really cool. Same with beyblade...well, they exist, but they're toys. No spirits or awesome battles like here. Um...we both have anxiety. I think we take different medications, but hers seem to work fine for me. Maybe because we just have the one physical brain? I took some Taekwondo when I was younger, and got to purple belt. I tried learning flute too, but kinda dropped twice. Haven't picked it up since then. Til Lance's gift, at least. That was awesome. We're both 16...We both love cats!

She heard Aniko chuckle as he read through it. “Those are some pretty scattered similarities. What about differences? Like, things that might...that might affect your merged self?”

This one was harder to type. Not from lack of thought, but because the thoughts just seemed...heavy. I have this...social anxiety disorder. It's sort of like autism? And might be grouped in with it? It's called Asperger's Syndrome, I was diagnosed when I was twelve. I...I don't know if that'll change the way Melodia thinks...it's not really something we know how to talk about. I also don't have her confidence. There's a million things about this world that I don't know.

I don't wanna talk about this. It scares me. I don't like thinking about the changes, I just know that when we merge, it doesn't matter. Right now it matters.
Aniko didn't make any real noises aside from regular breathing as he read this time. He handed the phone back silently, and she set it in the grass, just sipping her tea and watching the pond. She didn't have to think when she looked at the pond.

As they sat in the quiet, Melody became aware of a gentle song entering her hearing. It wasn't coming from her Pearl Tear, so she slowly started to peek over at Aniko, wondering if it was from him. Oddly enough, the tune was familiar, though she was pretty sure she'd never heard it. It was only when Aniko started singing that she realized this was the same song that Dia had referenced earlier that day to Mizue — only this time, it had a piano accompaniment, and the touch of mer magic.

"I was so happy when you smiled
Your smile breaks through the clouds of grey
Far from the sunny days that lie in sleep
Waiting with patience for the spring
When the flowers will soon renew again
Knowing there's more beyond the pain of today"

Gently, Aniko's hand was set atop her head, hovering for a moment before taking her lack of movement as permission. It slowly went back and forth, a soothing petting motion that Melody found just as comforting as Nono did. It meant even more coming from Aniko.

"Although the scars of yesterday remain
You can go on living as much as your heart believes
You can't be born again although you can change
Let's stay together, always"

The final words had Melody gasping, tears once again blinding her. Her tea was left sitting on the grass as she brought her hands to her face, trying to see again, but the relief was too much for her to stop.

Aniko accepted her.

As he pulled her into a gentle hug, there wasn't a shift this time. This time it was a jolt, a violent click of a girl needing to get out of her bindings and hug her brother, and that's just what Melodia did. She clung to him, sobbing, much like her Dia half had done earlier — and just like he'd done earlier, Aniko held her tightly.

She didn't know what Noa had said to him, but she would be forever grateful for it.

She has to stop for rest at some point soon. Even if she has full access to her energy, she's controlling a mortal body. If she runs away like this much longer, she'll lose it... and I'm sure she knows that.

The void between dimensions was a dizzying place, and Lilura had no good feelings for it. Nevertheless, she was forced to jump in and out of it as she gave chase to Isis, tailing her through more dimensions than she cared to count. Even now, Lilura was crossing the boundaries of another world, just trying to keep her target in sight. If she lost her...

No. She wouldn't let that happen. This was too important for her to fail. Lilura bolstered her spirit, using a little extra energy to gain speed. There was a buzz as she sped through the dimensional planes, crossed over alternate timelines, as she passed through a virtual reality--
And a painful crash as she slammed into a barrier, shorting out her energy and sending her tumbling to the ground below. It was so alien to feel pain in her true form that she choked out a harsh scream, and she could hear the distant echo of Isis doing the same from somewhere else within the plane.

She refocused her energy, slowly and carefully. A human form, so that she could recover safely if someone found her. A hidden patch of energy left uncovered on her back, beneath her dress, to better re-strengthen herself. Once these were set in place, she shakily rose to her knees, gulping in air for the simple, living feel of it.

What had happened? She stared at the sky in fear, trying to process the crash. A barrier? That was impossible. Mytans were made to be inter-dimensional beings; there was almost nothing that could trap them in one world. It was simply their nature, their very core, whether they were corrupted like Isis or not.

The ground in front of her cracked apart, a crystal sprout rising from the dirt. She jolted back in alarm, eyes locked onto the Spirit Quartz before her, clear and pure. Sane or not, Lilura was terrified of these things, the only material that could imprison her people – and that had, over and over, millions of times until her entire kingdom was bound to them, stopping their overwhelming invasion.

The sprout gave way to a crystal flower, which bloomed and cast a gentle light above itself. From within the light formed silver shadows, darkening into floating words.

Lilura of Myta. I have locked you and she you pursue into this dimensional plane. I will systematically divert you back to where you came from, in order to return Toby Wallace to his body. Keep on your guard, for Isis may have plans to rewrite his memories against his loved ones. I am lowering all Mytan energy levels during this task, hopefully buying some time. Be aware that your true form will not be available until you are back in Toby's dimension, but this is true as well for Isis.

Melodia believes in you, princess. Furthermore, I believe in you. If we work together, I have no doubt that we will prevail. Blend in and keep watch as I shuffle you through worlds and bring you back.

Currently you have been ensnared in a virtual reality. I am sure you can accommodate to this with your vast knowledge.

Be brave. Be kind. Be strong.

Shivering with a multitude of emotions, Lilura watched as the crystal flower and its message acclimatized themselves to the virtual environment. The flower floated gently above the ground, a text box claiming Item: Crystal Blossom, while the light showing the floating words was adjusted to a similar box. As she felt the Siqu magic pull away from the now virtual flower, she also became aware of her dulled senses, how gravity locked onto her. The Haert she’d stolen from Melodia, streaking her hair with pink, went dormant. She could barely sense Isis.

She’d known all her life that there was one being with the power to weaken her people in an instant, just like this. He was a god of untold power, the creator of Siqu and of Mytans themselves. She knew he existed, but since the war he’d never stepped in like this. It was almost as if he’d taken a personal interest in this situation...
It took all of Lilura's courage to reach forward and take the flower into her hand. No longer holding its spiritual quality, doing such did nothing spectacular, and she released a breath for the sake of its comfort. The message box disappeared into the 'item', as the smaller one adjusted itself one last time.

**Item: Crystal Blossom**  
*Tap for description*

By the time she had figured out how 'tapping' worked in this virtual reality, she had been found by a group of soldiers. As they began to question her, she melted into the persona of a lost player. There were a few comments about her lack of a 'cursor', which she didn't understand, and she let them lead her to the town. When they reached the crowds, she slipped away, heading towards where she had sensed Isis before. Hopefully they'd think her disappearance was just a bug, and leave it at that.

With the Crystal Blossom tucked into her hair, Lilura began her chase again. *I won't fail you, Melodia. I promised I would save him, and I will!*

Melody let her Characters explain things to Touma when he arrived. She stayed curled up in Aniko's arms, drinking her tea and listening to his gentle humming until she couldn't procrastinate any longer.

After gaining permission from Mizue, Melody had her tea refilled into a thermos, which she promised to return when she could. She gave Aniko one more long, tight hug, then typed her goodbyes and let Touma lead her out. Feeling emotionally tired and childish, she clung to his hand, and made him sit in the back of Hokuto's car with her so that she could lean on him. They were politely quiet on the way to the WBBA, Touma knowing the reason for her mood, and Hokuto picking up that it just wasn't the time for small talk.

They stopped at a convenience store to get her a gelatin dessert, and a can of condensed chicken broth that she could probably heat up in the break room. Touma added a small yogurt for her Characters to share. When they were back in the car, Hokuto used his phone to look up Horizon Pro. songs, and they listened to Dia's friends the rest of the way. Melody loved hearing everyone sing, and tried not to giggle when Touma would occasionally sing along to a phrase.

When her phone rang, her default ringtone of the old Wandering Melody theme, she motioned for Annie to speak for her – considering the caller.

**Call From: Al and Tree**

“Hello?” Annie asked once the call was accepted, and on speaker. “Is this Al, or Tree?”

The distorted voice of Tree sounded puzzled. “I...This is Tree. Where is Melodia?”

“She lost her voice. I'm Annie, one of her Guardian Characters. She said you'd probably be able to hear me.”

“I-I see! A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Annie.”

Melody saw Touma raise his eyebrow, and silently nodded at Hope for her to explain. Hope thankfully did so in a whisper, visually stopping herself from her usual yelling tone when she remembered Hokuto was in the car. “This is one of the weird rainbow god people that helped bring Mel here! And they're helping us find Toby!”
Annie thought of the same thing. “Tree, could you speak in...uh, Chinese?”

The switch was so instantaneous that Melody had a hard time noticing it. “Of course. I assume someone is present that isn't in the loop. But! I have good news, very good news!”

“Did you find Toby?”

“Well – indirectly, yes! Lilura and Isis have been successfully locked into a dimension, in fact I just finished securing it!”

Melody's eyes widened, and Annie asked the logical question of, “Is Toby okay?”

“From what I could see past Isis's energy, yes. She seems to be keeping his soul in a similar type of stasis such as I did with Melody's. And she hasn't had time to do a thing to him, thanks to Lilura's quick chase.”

Annie carefully worked out her next question, trying not to alarm her Bearer. “And she won't be able to...do that while she's trapped? While she's not running?”

Tree gave a triumphant laugh. “Absolutely not! It was a tricky task to pull off, but I managed to severely lower all Mytan energy. While I work on diverting them back to you, Isis will be unable to use most of her abilities!”

“And what about Lilura?”

“I've informed her of what's transpiring, and I am confident in her ability to blend in as she goes, even with her power reduction.”

Melody tried not to start crying again, knowing it would only hurt her throat. She nudged Dia, very gently. She hasn't done anything to Toby yet. Tree's diverting them back here, and Lilura's still chasing. H-He's gonna be okay, Dia.

There wasn't a response, but she could tell by the slight rise from misery that Dia had heard her. She gave everyone a small smile, unable to show her emotions any other way.

Tree's voice was far calmer when they spoke next. “By my calculations, it should take me just over one week in your time to bring them back. It's highly unlikely Toby is aware of what's around him, which is a blessing in disguise – he may be very disoriented when he returns, but there shouldn't be any mental trauma. Perhaps a few headaches, at worse.”

Melody slowly nodded, taking this in. A week...a week wasn't so bad. Half of that was China, so...yeah. They could do this. She nodded more firmly at Annie, who said, “We understand. Thank you.”

“I will not let further harm occur to him. I swear it.”

It was a bad idea and she knew it, but Melody took the phone and rasped out, “Thank you.” It hurt, and she started coughing afterwards, but she wanted to say it herself.

“You are welcome, child,” was what she thought she heard through her coughing fit, before the call ended.

When she'd gotten a drink of her tea, and the phone was back in her pocket, Melody gave Touma a
weak smile. In response, he silently put his hand on her head, and she took that as a sign to go back
to leaning on him. Hokuto put the music back on not too long after, not asking a single question.

Melody was really starting to appreciate all the brothers she was finding in this world.

Chapter End Notes

Song: "For Fruits Basket" from Fruits Basket - English translation (first verse)

Meg: hi it's me again. Sup. :D
So last chapter I mentioned Memory Moon stuff. And that's still going! But now there's another question, too. We're thinking about an ask blog for Mooniverse characters. Cycle through them one at a time, one per month, maybe? Let us know what you think or if you have suggestions of any kind. Thanks!!

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings and full profiles are all going to be:
http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
ADDITIONALLY, MEL'S ACCOUNT IS GOOD:
https://lunarcentric.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Touma walked her inside, asking the front desk to send someone down from Ryo's office. After everything was cleared and Madoka was said to be on her way, they sat in the waiting area, Melody just reviewing the instructions for her can of broth and sipping her tea.

Between her Characters and Touma, it was decided that they wouldn't mention the recent Mytan attacks – Madoka and the others had too much to focus on with Nemesis as it was. Annie knew that there was a high chance Alyssin might already know something was wrong, as she could have sensed the music and scream through her Tear, so Touma offered to talk to her. He was...not entirely surprised to find out Melodia was a mermaid, all things considered. As for Melody's lack of voice, they'd go with a simple 'Talked too loud, too much' that would probably satisfy the others.

When someone approached them, Touma stood, ready to greet his friend – however, he and Melody were both shocked to find not Madoka, but Kyoya. It took a couple of seconds, but Touma did find his voice. "Um, hello. You're...Kyoya, right?"

Kyoya was surprisingly polite enough to answer, "Yeah," before he began ignoring the other boy. He walked over to Melody, glancing at the thermos and the can of broth, then guessed, "Sore throat?"

"She talked too much and lost her voice!" Hope replied.

Melody smiled awkwardly at him, hoping he'd buy it. Luckily, he didn't seem to look any further than the answer he'd been given, as he only waved for her to follow him. He and Touma exchanged brief glances, then seemed to acknowledge each other peacefully, and they went to the elevator together. Kyoya tapped the button for the top floor, then leaned on the wall. "I take it you're using this opportunity to see your cousin, is that right?"

Melody nodded, and he then continued. "So you'll be separating from us about as soon as we get there, then." She nodded again. "Make sure you at least get some rest. See if your mother's home."

She squeaked – or would have, if she'd had a voice. As she was, it was more of a quick, hoarse 'uh' noise, and she swiftly covered it up with a drink of tea. Oh god, she hadn't even considered that. Mingzhu. Mingzhu lived in China. She might be home from the winter holidays...

No wait, this was good. This was really good. If Mingzhu was there, then Dia would not only have Aguma for comfort and strength, but her mom, too.

If her moment of shock was noticed, no one mentioned it. Kyoya himself moved on completely. "Is anyone gonna tell me about the eyes?"

Honestly, Melody had forgotten about that completely, since neither Touma nor Hokuto had said a word about it. She glanced over at Annie, but it was Hope that took the leap. "She had a big happy
Haert explosion, while she was doing all that talking, and there was singing and the magic's just kinda like 'hi I'm gonna melt into your eyes for a while!' and stuff.”

Not...exactly how Melody would have put it, but it seemed to satisfy Kyoya. “Right, I forgot about those.” He said no more, presumably because the elevator was reaching their floor. They all headed for Ryo's office, where Touma was quick to give the cover story for her voice and eyes. Alyssin frowned at it, but was soon taken by Touma for the real story out in the hall. Melody got hugs from Madoka, typed out that Megumi wouldn't be joining them for personal reasons, then let Hikaru lead her to the break room one floor down to get a bowl and microwave.

Alyssin and Touma poked in not long after. Touma said his goodbyes, while Alyssin sat with her and said nothing, just holding her hand. She looked guilty, and Melody couldn't really blame her...but it wasn't like she was mad, either.

It's not your fault. I promise.

After reading what was on the phone, Alyssin sighed. “I could've...I-I don't know. We could've...we could've strengthened your brother's song. Something. If I hadn't left...”

Melody shook her head firmly. You did what you needed to do at the time.

“Bu...” Alyssin let the word die on her lips as she saw Melody's frown. Adjusting her grip on her hand, she slowly nodded. The two girls, and Characters, sat in silence while Melody finished her broth.

Though she wanted to talk with the group, her lack of voice and overall exhaustion led Melody to have Hikaru take hers to the room they'd be staying in for the night. Alyssin was kind enough to sing her to sleep, and left the Lunar Wing sitting on her pillow. After the day she'd had, Melody was more than relieved to melt into peaceful dreams.

By ten, they were all long since asleep, so no one noticed the person that slipped into their room. He dug through Melody's bag for a moment, pulled something out, then left again with barely a sound.

To Samuel: This is Kyoya. Did something happen while Melodia was in America? She seems off.

From Samuel: ??? Dude wth why you using her phone. And hi?? after two years??? what's wrong with you?

To Samuel: Answer the damn question.

From Samuel: ...one of the spirits showed up at the gym. We're not really sure what happened past that. She blew up when it left...something about Toby? I think he's in bad shape. Zeo might know more.

Kyoya grunted, not thrilled. Regardless, he found Zeo's contact and hit the call button. With the time difference and Zeo's early morning attitude, Kyoya had no doubt he'd be awake.

“Is everything okay?” were Zeo's first words, instead of a greeting. That only worsened Kyoya's suspicions. He called on his old English lessons in order to answer.

“You tell me.”
“...Who is this?”

“It's Kyoya. What the hell's going on with Melodia?”

Kyoya heard him near-whimper. “Uhh...whadya mean..?”

“I mean that something's off about her. Samuel said one of the spirits was at the gym and something happened to Toby.”

Usually, Kyoya would expect Zeo to comment about going behind Dia's back, or how they weren't tools for his knowledge. Instead, there was silence, only broken by awkward throat-clearings as Zeo tried and failed to speak.

Something was very wrong. “Is his condition bad?” While Kyoya held little attachment towards his old American...friends?, he knew they were important to Dia, Toby most of all.

“...W-Well it's...he's not...I don't know how to...what?” Another voice became present, though Kyoya couldn't make out who it was. After a couple of exchanges, the new voice – in Japanese - took precedence, one Kyoya was fairly certain he hadn't heard before.

“The long and short is that Toby's spirit was ripped out of his body and stolen.”

Kyoya had no words to respond. As he collected himself – his spirit was taken? - the girl kept talking. “We have allies tracking him and bringing him back. Please just make sure that Melodia gets to her cousin.”

“...How the hell does...fuck it, nevermind.” Kyoya had never pretended to understand spirits and magic and all that, and he wasn't about to start. Frankly, he would be more than happy to end this call now that he'd gotten the information he was after, but his eyes had wandered over to Fang's egg, and he had to wonder what he might say to this... Damn it.

He tried not to fumble over his words. “And this happened...at the gym? Is everyone okay?”

“Yes. There was some damage from the spirit's attack and Melodia's Haert, but...well, we're doing fine.”

“Zeo doesn't sound 'fine'.,”

The girl sighed. “He's...he's doing the best he can. We're taking care of him...Hold up, why do you have her phone? Does she know you're calling?”

As her voice shifted away from a serious tone, it clicked – he did know this voice. This was the girl from New Year's...hell if he could remember her name. “That's not your concern. Put Zeo back on.”

“Excuse me, but-”

“Let me talk to him.” Kyoya fought to keep the growl from his voice.

After a long silence, he heard a sigh. Another pause before Zeo returned with, “Y-Yeah?”

Kyoya thought quickly but carefully about his next words. “Do you need funding for the repairs?”

“..Uh?”

“Your gym. Can the coach afford the repairs?”
“I-I don't...there's the floor, and...windows...n-no...I don't think he can. We were thinking of asking Sam-”

“I'll have funds in the gym's bank account by the end of your day.”

There was a very quiet, muffled swear. Kyoya could practically hear the tears when Zeo murmured, “Thank you, Kyoya.”

“A Tategami doesn't forget his allies.” Kyoya once again glanced at Fang’s egg, thought a moment, then amended slowly, “Or his friends.”

Another swear, followed by crying. There was a 'thank you' in there, at least three, before Kyoya decided that was enough and ended the call.

After deleting his messages with Samuel, and the call from the phone's history, Kyoya sighed and picked up Fang's egg from the desk. “Are you happy?” he asked it.

There wasn't an answer, but it was certainly putting off a far better feeling than it had been before he’d...before he and Dia had 'purified' it. He tucked it back into his hood, staring at Melodia's phone for a few seconds.

He didn't hate the people he'd trained with as a kid. He was more just sort of indifferent to most of them. Samuel was fine, he'd been a good foster brother to himself and to Dia, as well as a good challenge. Toby had taken Dia under his wing for simple lessons and was also a good match. Zeo...Zeo was never really at his level, but he made Dia happy just by being around. Masamune was annoying as hell, then and now. Everyone else...honestly, they just blended together.

The gym did hold good memories. He didn't regret training there, or his time in America at all. It was just...he didn't feel the need to reconnect with them. This contact alone was more than he really wanted. He didn't need the cluster of friends that the members of the Dungeon Gym were, not anymore. He was perfectly fine with what he had.

Not so much who, but there was unfortunately very little he could do about that. He had Melodia, he had Benkei, and surprisingly he seemed to have Megumi. Soon, Fang would probably be added...and one day...

Kyoya left the empty office and made his way back to Melodia's room. He slid the phone under the door for them to find in the morning, then returned to his own room to get some sleep.

As he often did, he dreamed of battles and finding his lost siblings.

Alyssin didn't sleep much. Similarly this morning, she wasn't eating much, either. If anyone noticed her lack of appetite, they didn't mention it – she supposed they were too busy discussing the trip ahead.

Frankly, she was busy worrying. They were going to China. China was where Melodia's mother lived. Where her cousin lived. She and Melodia were specifically splitting off to see them.

Alyssin had always hoped that she'd be free from her oaths before this day came. It looked like she no longer had a choice.

When breakfast was finished and cleaned up, the group of seven travelers made their way to the plane prepared for them. Melodia was still half asleep, but stayed conscious until she got to her seat. After that, she dozed on and off through the flight. Alyssin glanced over every once in a while
to make sure her Lunar Wing was still in her hand, spending the rest of the time trying to cook up some kind of strength for when she faced Mingzhu.

She and Melodia parted ways from the others once they made it out of the airport. They found a cab to take them to Mingzhu's house, a small but cozy thing just outside the city. Nervous as all heck, Alyssin rang the doorbell. Something inside barked, and within seconds it was scratching at the other side of the door. She didn't understand the Chinese words that followed, but they dropped a weight in her gut regardless. When the lock began to turn, she nearly turned and ran.

Melodia's mother opened the door, a Vaporeon tumbling out to sniff at the girls. Mingzhu's eyes lit up at the sight of them, and she exclaimed in surprise, "Xiaolian!"

There wasn't even a second before Melodia was wrapped in her mother's arms, and Alyssin let them have their moment. She let the Vaporeon sniff her hand in the meantime. It gave another small bark, but this one mostly sounded inquisitive. She chuckled a bit. "Yes, I know, I'm new. Hi."

It tilted its head slightly at her Japanese, then spoke, the voice identifying it as a male. He didn't seem to be actually addressing her, just thinking aloud. "You smell like my trainer and her family...that's weird..."

With a bit of effort, Alyssin managed to switch over to the basic aquatic Poke-dialect. "Well, if it's ocean you're smelling, I can explain that."

His jaw dropped for a moment, followed by a quick shaking of his head. "Rivers and tides, it is! How do you speak...Oh! You're a mermaid, aren't you?!" He started bouncing in excitement, suddenly trying to set his front paws against her stomach to get a closer look at her. Alyssin stumbled back from his added weight. "Hi mermaid! I'm Arlen!"

"H-Hi, Arlen...You're kinda heavy..."

Mingzhu said something in Chinese that had the Vaporeon dropping back to his feet in an instant. Alyssin smiled awkwardly, noticing the woman's eyes lingering on the pendant for several seconds before she spoke again, this time in English. "I'm sorry, he gets...very excited. You must be..."

"Alyssin." Her own name was a challenge to say. "It...It's an honor to meet you."

"...Please, come in." Mingzhu glanced away briefly, then met her eyes again. "My bedroom has some crystals and shells from the Arctic if you'd like to look at them."

Alyssin nodded silently, following the others inside. Melodia balled herself up on the couch, Arlen quickly flopping against her, and Mingzhu waved to a closed door down a short hall. "It's that room."

After standing there dumbly for several seconds, failing to speak, Alyssin ducked into the hall and left the mother and daughter alone, her face feeling hot with guilt and shame. Mingzhu didn't have to say it aloud – she hated her. Mingzhu hated her for taking her sister's Tear and never saying a word.

She fumbled with the doorknob, vaguely hearing Mingzhu returning to Chinese before she slipped into the room. Once inside, she slid against the wall and tried to start breathing again – tried to pretend the person who owned this house didn't want her here.

She thought of her dad, and felt a little better.

Once she was calm, Alyssin started to look around the room. Basic bedroom items, such as a
There were some photos on the dresser, and Alyssin hesitated before walking over. Not wanting to intrude too much, she only skimmed over them – just Mingzhu and her children. Her and... that had to be Melodia's dad, at their wedding? She didn't know a thing about Chinese wedding wear, but that looked like a typical wedding photo. If Alyssin had to guess... they probably were only a few years older than she was now. She was kind of jealous that Mingzhu still looked so youthful.

As she turned away from the photos, she caught sight of what Mingzhu had been talking about. A collection of shelves filled the final wall of the room, holding various shells and trinkets of multiple colors. Alyssin felt the ocean's presence just by looking at them.

Careful not to touch anything, she moved closer to the shelves, feeling herself drawn to anything in a shade of dark blue. There was a gorgeous oyster shell holding a collection of pearls. Beside it, two spiral shells half-trapped within a crystal orb (an Aquarius Crystal?), bursting out of a flat rock. Above that she found tiny shells worked into a star shape, set into a hairclip.

Sitting beneath the clip was a loose photograph. After a short hesitation, Alyssin slid it out. Upon seeing the twin faces it showed, she choked back a cry.

It was Mingzhu and her sister. Alyssin's predecessor, Jiao Cheng. Worse, she was holding a baby – there was no doubt this was Melodia's cousin, probably not long after he'd been born.

Her eyes swept across the shelves, eyeing every Arctic item with a new, fearful light. How many had been hers? What had Mingzhu taken with her when she'd moved here, in order to remember and respect her sister's memory?

Tears stung her eyes. Her curiosity broken, Alyssin carefully slipped the photo back into its spot and backed away from the shelves. She didn't want to be here. She didn't deserve to be here. No matter where she went, she always seemed to find herself in the wrong place.

She dropped abruptly into a crouch, practically collapsing, her breathing growing heavy. No matter how much she tried to remind herself that she was here for Melodia, that Melodia was her friend and she needed her, the painful thoughts of the past were washing over her. She felt the fear of drowning in their weight. She might have screamed? Maybe it was a whimper. Sound wasn't registering right.

Alyssin hadn't had a panic attack in three years, since her first visit to the Arctic Kingdom. She couldn't seem to remember what to do to stop it. In her wordless noises, Alyssin pleaded with anyone who would listen, Help me.

Her Pearl Tear, along with a scattered array of lights from somewhere in front of her, answered the call.

"I wish to numb my heart, to numb my heart
Against the pain and take it away, because there must be more than this"

The music began to flow from everywhere at once, wrapping around her in a promise of comfort and serenity. The tears on her face were slowly collecting, but she remembered to breathe past it. When the dizzying rainbow before her started to hurt, she shut her eyes. She breathed, let the song surround her, and sang.

"Those countless times I gave up all hope
Because I couldn’t change what’s behind me
I hid inside my shell from the world
Out of sight, tucked away so that no one could see”

"Once again I feel all of the pain rise inside
Rushing back to me like an unstoppable tide
I don’t need the warmth, and no, I don’t need the pain
I’m fine without this thing called ‘love’"

"I wish to numb my heart, to numb my heart
Against the pain and take it away
So I can overcome the dark, just like a shooting star in the sky"

"Into the deep, I sink, nearing the brink
My heart and soul succumb to the fall
I try to scream but there’s no sound
So I accept I won’t be found
But then I hear your voice calling
I’m no longer falling but rising up as you pull me to the light"

Somewhere beyond her closed eyes, a purple light shone brighter than the others. She felt a new voice enter the song, unfamiliar, but warm. In no position to stop them, Alyssin handed them the figurative reins, and didn’t realize who the newcomer must be until she opened her eyes and saw Mingzhu kneeling in front of her.

"The world I knew, once quiet and grey
Began to change when you looked my way
I thought for sure my heart wouldn’t heal
But I guess, you have made the impossible real"

Alyssin was frozen, baffled, as Mingzhu slowly took her hands.

"Look me in the eyes and make my heart skip a beat
Fill my world with color and set my spirit free
I was never falling – I was swept off my feet
The very moment you reached me"

Mingzhu...didn't hate her? ...No. It was more than that. Mingzhu understood.

"I wish to numb my heart, to numb my heart
And find the strength to heal what’s inside
So I can overcome the dark, just like a shooting star in the sky"

Mingzhu understood because she had her own pain trailing after her.

"Into the deep, I sink, nearing the brink
But now I know you’re there if I fall
I’ll show the darkness I can fight
And when I’m lost, you’ll be the light
So now there’s no hesitating
I’m tired of waiting to turn the page and to find out what’s to come"

As the music continued to envelope them, Alyssin found herself trapped in Mingzhu's eyes. They were soft, caring, loving, in a way that...she'd never been in a position to see before.
Alyssin's shell started to crack as Mingzhu leaned forward to press her face against their hands, something Melodia had once said was the way her family and village showed empathy. “I'm so sorry,” Mingzhu whispered, not lifting her head. “You saw my anger instead of my welcome, when I should have just been glad to know the Tear was safe.”

Unable to speak, Alyssin could only watch as Mingzhu gently pulled her head back up, the woman's hands squeezing hers. As she realized that the panic was gone, and that she really was safe here, Alyssin felt the music slip away. The lights from the shelves faded into nothing, and her Tear went quiet. She tried for words, but came up with nothing but more tears.

“You don't have to say anything you're not ready to,” Mingzhu assured her. Alyssin felt her shell crack again, and she silently gave a squeeze of her own. Breathing more calmly now, she could better control herself, and she shifted into a proper, more comfortable kneel. Mingzhu didn't say anything else for at least a minute.

“This may be the wrong question, but are you alright?”

Alyssin's eyes snapped up to meet hers. There was a search for a gleam, a smirk, or even a knowing twinkle, but she found nothing. She found nothing in those eyes except purple and love. Mingzhu's question was genuine, and so was she.

For the first time, Alyssin's shell broke apart. “No.”

Without another word, Mingzhu pulled her forward, and Alyssin fell into a hug. She clung tightly to the woman, desperately trying to attach herself her. “I'm not okay,” she cried. “I can't talk to you. I can't tell you what happened. I can't tell anyone and I really want to.”

Mingzhu shushed her, and consistently shushed her after every other babble that left her rambling mouth. Even so, she listened to all of them, even the ones that didn't make sense to her or had no context to explain themselves. It got to a point where Alyssin didn't even know what she was saying anymore, and she didn't even care.

“Do you hate me?” she asked.

“No. I love you, Alyssin, and not because you have my sister's Tear.”

“Then why?”

“Because you're important to my daughter. That makes you important to me.”

Even the dark thoughts in her head couldn't dispute that. Alyssin buried her face in Mingzhu's hair, finding comfort in the cherry smell. “Mrs. Thompson?”

“Yes?”

“I love you too.”

Alyssin wondered if Melodia would mind maybe having another sister. Gurius probably wouldn't mind sharing her.

After some tea, sweetheart cakes, and time alone with Mingzhu's very cuddly Delibird, Alyssin was herded into the conversation with her fellow mermaids. They were speaking in Chinese (or rather, Mingzhu and Melodia's new text-to-speech program were) so she couldn't understand them at first, but being allowed to sit with them as equals was enough. They seemed to just be catching
up, anyways, and talking about the...what were they called? Mytans?

When the Tear started picking up full phrases after about an hour and a half, Alyssin asked her first question – the reasoning behind Melodia's Christmas present. She knew Dia had said it was something about Aquarius Crystal mixed with Haert, but she didn't understand why or how Mingzhu would mix the mermaid magic with...Siqu? Siqu magic.

It was a slow explanation, with lots of repetition for Alyssin's sake, but Mingzhu laid everything out for them. In 2007, when Lance had found Melodia, they'd quickly noticed her unusual amount of Haert. Mingzhu had gotten a Haert quartz from Tracy and paid a visit to the Purple Kingdom, planting it within the 'seed' of an Aquarius Crystal. Over the past six years, the crystal had grown into its bubble shape around the quartz, fully encasing it by last fall. The mers watching it had taken a second, smaller orb, fashioned them into a microphone reminiscent of the ancient princesses' tools, and mailed it to Mingzhu's house just before December.

As for the why, it was basically what Faust had suggested – a way to channel her power while she couldn't transform. However, while it got some of its source from her Tear, most of it was drawn from Melodia's own inner Haert, via the quartz. That way she could use her mer magic, but slowly drain out her excess Haert as well in the process. The energy might even improve the magic's pure quality.

And Mingzhu had been planning this present for six years. Alyssin was in awe.

The conversation shifted to princesses and guardians once all the serious family business had been discussed. Since Alyssin hadn't had any sort of real training with her Tear, she'd never known exactly how to use it beyond singing, collecting languages, and sensing Melodia's, so Mingzhu gave her a crash course. By the time they stopped for lunch about two hours later, Alyssin knew how to sense what Pearl Tears were active, how to identify an Arctic mer with little effort, the dangers of singing when angered or upset (that explained a lot of broken windows the past few years, actually), and how to know if someone was in dire need of a song.

She also became near fluent in Chinese by that point, which was nice to have. Alyssin could completely agree with Mingzhu's thought that it was a good idea for princesses to be multi-lingual. They could speak with mermaids of any ethnicity that way.

While Alyssin was returning Jiao's pearl collection to the shelves (used in Tear-sensing practice for visual help), she heard Mingzhu give a sharp exclamation from the kitchen. When the oyster shell was carefully placed back in its spot, she rushed back out to see what was wrong, only to find Mingzhu slamming their barely-finished dumplings into bowls and telling them to go get in the car. When she asked Melodia what was going on, her friend just shook her head awkwardly and motioned for her to follow. She didn't get an explanation until they were waiting for Arlen to situate himself in the passenger seat.

“I mentioned that Beylin Fist was somewhere in city and she didn't know that,” Melodia's phone said.

Judging by what she'd learned about Mingzhu in the past few hours, Alyssin could see that their village had made a mistake, and Mom was Disappointed.

When Mingzhu had started the car, she turned around to look at the girls. “Alyssin, this a good chance for you put your lessons in action. Your Tear connected to Aguma, so you should able to sense him. Try it.”

“O-Okay.” Alyssin closed her eyes, focusing on her Tear. Like Mingzhu had told her, she opened
herself to the Tear connection, feeling the pulsing heartbeat they shared. Carefully, she delved past the lights of the other Tears and into the second layer, which held the remaining connections to Jiao's family – her siblings, her husband, and her son. Alyssin tuned out the fully mer and fully human, and was left with the only hybrid light available – Aguma. With his light now found, she asked the Tear to find him physically. “...East. He's somewhere east of here, not...too far.”

Mingzhu pulled out of the garage and headed east. Alyssin continued relaying cardinal directions, causing a few moments of backtracking or abrupt turns at intersections. As they started getting closer, she lost track of the compass and only heard 'left', 'right', 'too far' or 'keep going' from the Tear. Every once in a while, Melodia would confirm that her Tear said the same. By the time they'd finished their dumplings, Mingzhu could sense Aguma herself, and the girls were released from duty.

A few minutes later, the car swerved to block an alley way, and Mingzhu wrestled off her seat belt. She and Melodia got out, but Alyssin shook her head in refusal – she didn't want to be in the way of their reunion with Aguma. Instead, she and Arlen waited in the car. After about five minutes, she climbed towards the front to turn the car off, realizing Mingzhu had forgotten.

She and Arlen held a bit of small talk in the meantime. She learned he was from India of all places, and had been a gift to Mingzhu several years ago by the Orange princess – before she had died and been replaced by the now-missing guardian, of course. In return, Alyssin shared that she knew very little about Pokemon as a whole, but she did think that Vaporeon was pretty neat. As she had no interest talking about her own past, it was about all she could say. Luckily, he didn't seem to mind.

It wasn't too much longer before Melodia returned, waving for her to come out. A bit nervous about facing the son of her predecessor, Alyssin followed her friend into the alley, where a group of about eight young men were gathered with Mingzhu. They all wore cloaks with the hoods down, and they all looked like pretty normal guys. The largest wore a look that reminded her of anyone who'd just been reprimanded by Coach Steel, so she assumed this must be Aguma.

He watched her as they approached, obviously having been told who she was already. She and Melodia stopped next to Mingzhu, and she bowed in greeting. “Um, hello. You must be Aguma. It's nice to meet you.”

“And you are Alyssin.” His voice was strong, which she'd expected, but it still made her twitch. “You are the one inherited my mother's pendant.”

“Yes. I'd tell you everything if I could, but—”

He cut her off, shaking his head. “Aunt Mingzhu has told me you are held under oath. I will hold my patience.”

“Aguma the others are going be staying with us for next few days, since they're in town,” Mingzhu said firmly. With the way no one argued, Alyssin guessed the conversation about it had already been had. “He'll be coming back with in the car. The others will follow Arlen.”

The Vaporeon barked in understanding, having followed the girls out. A boy with long maroon hair nodded to him, saying, “Please lead the way.”

All but Aguma set off, along with the Pokemon Alyssin hadn't noticed at first. They were all fighting types, from what she could tell – it looked like there was one or two per person. As they left, she heard Mingzhu mutter something about buying Poke balls the next day.

The rest of them returned to the car, Aguma taking Melodia's spot in the back. Alyssin felt a little
awkward about it, but figured his reasoning was probably that he would rather be closer to his mother's Tear.

Not needing Tear-sensing to get home, Mingzhu let them talk among themselves. Aguma was quick to catch on that Alyssin didn't like talking about herself, though pressed a little regarding how she and Melodia had met. It wasn't a particularly interesting story – she'd gone to New York via sensing the Purple Tear's strong presence there, had met Gurius, and met Melodia and her friends through him. She could tell they were all curious about where she'd been before that, but fibbed and said that it was part of the information covered by her oaths.

The conversation turned to training, and Alyssin let the Beylin Fist people talk. Aguma's questioning, while polite, had left her stomach rolling uncomfortably. She quietly hummed to herself for a while, trying to once again push back the painful memories.

A few minutes before they got back, Aguma asked her, “Would you allow me hold it for a short while? I haven't seen since I was a toddler.”

She jolted, but just a little. “O-Oh, uh, sure. Of course.” That was okay. That was fine. He had every right to want to hold what was probably one of the few connections to his mother that he had. After so long, he certainly deserved it. And she'd get it back, of course she would.

Of course she would get it back.

Her neck still felt empty without it, though.

“A you guys go on in, I'll wait out here for the others.”

Mingzhu looks grateful at Alyssin's offer, but still asked, “Are you sure?”

Alyssin nodded. “Absolutely. You three should have time alone to talk and catch up. It's been a while, right?”

She could see Melodia's eyes light up at the idea. Aguma seemed on board as well; Mingzhu checked her watch before smiling at them.

“Okay, I have a bit before I need to head to work.”

Melodia beamed, and followed her mother into the house. Aguma followed as well once he'd returned Alyssin's pendant and whispered, “There may be something of interest you behind the house.”

Alyssin frowned as she clipped the pendant back around her neck. Behind the house? Anyways, what would he know about her interests when they'd only just met?

Then again, he was the son of her predecessor... It wouldn't hurt to take a peek into the backyard.

She followed the little stepping stone path that went beside the house, pausing to open the wooden gate that separated the front from the back. Once that was closed again, she peered behind the house to see if she could spot what Aguma had-

Alyssin felt the sharp gasp leave her throat before she'd even finished registering the sight before her. Her knees felt locked up in shock, but she managed to slowly step forward, an excitement taking hold.
The gazebo took up most of the small yard. The roof was a beautiful teal, decorated with designs of coral and ocean life. Seven white pillars held it up, each wrapped by curling patterns that made her think of seaweed. A short path of teal criss-crossed by a lighter shade was set between it and the back door, and the floor held a circular pattern of similar colors.

And the pedestal. Oh Regina, the pedestal. Alyssin could see it once she'd stepped onto the path, and it took her breath away. Carved from the same materials as the mermaid kingdoms, and painted to match the shrine that held it, it resembled the sketches she'd seen in Arctic kingdom scrolls of the hidden chamber of the Sea Temple Samiya, where Manaphy's Sea Crown was displayed. Seven long crystals were set in the risen platforms, each the color of a different kingdom.

It was the merfolk's design for a shrine to Manaphy. Alyssin had never seen one on land before. The little patch of ocean magic made her feel like she'd suddenly stumbled home.

She reached the edge of the gazebo before she stopped, ducking her head. Feeling small, she dropped the disguise she'd worn since she'd been given the Tear, wanting to show her true self in this small but sacred place. The white color of her hair melted off into a dull, dark brown, and the skin on her left collarbone darkened into the true color of her spattered birthmark. As much as she hated revealing herself outside the safety of her home, she couldn't disrespect Manaphy by presenting herself any other way.

Alyssin stepped into the shrine, her feet feeling heavy beneath her. It was hard to find her voice at first, so she didn't speak at all, and instead stood in silent respect. It had been a few months since she'd been able to visit a Manaphy shrine – they weren't very common on the surface – and she always liked to look back on everything he'd done for her when she had the time.

Manaphy had been the first Pokemon she'd ever seen. Her birth father had kept her isolated from the outside world for reasons she still didn't understand, his colleague's son her only friend. When she'd been given the Pearl Tear and the chance to escape, Manaphy had been waiting for her not far out from the cliffs. He'd bound her to silence about how she'd been chosen, and blessed her with a portion of his own power. He'd then taught her just enough to let her sense the Purple Tear, and she had been on her way, not knowing the importance of her new friend until months later, when she'd visited the Arctic kingdom for the first time.

Though thinking of her birth father always hurt, thoughts of the Indigo merfolk lifted her spirits. Alyssin found herself smiling despite the painful memories. Even with the oaths that Manaphy had bound her to, it had been him that had first spotted her, and him that had suggested she be chosen. He had opened the world of merfolk to her, and saved her from following in her birth father's questionable footsteps. He had been the one to name her Alyssin. It was thanks to him that the past three years had been the best years of her life.

Seeing the berries and shells placed in the bowl of the pedestal, Alyssin wished she had something to offer. She usually did, but she hadn't even considered the possibility that she'd come across a shrine while she was here. She supposed...she could sing, but...

Alyssin glanced back towards the house for a few seconds, wondering if they might be able to hear her from inside. She wasn't shy about the power of the Tear – that wasn't what concerned her. What she was shy about was the song itself. If she had no offering and sang instead, it was usually the same song she'd sung the night she'd been chosen, and it had a very personal meaning to her. The only one who'd ever actually heard it was the one who had given her the Tear in the first place, and...Gurius, once.

Thinking of the woman who'd given her the Tear, her throat loosened. She had no reason to be
afraid of this family – she had met them, and nothing bad had happened. They'd accepted the reason for her silence. They'd accepted her.

It wouldn't be the end of the world if they heard this song.

"Itsumo hitori de aruiteta
Furikaeru to minna wa tooku
Sore demo atashī wa aruita
Sore ga tsuyosa datta
Mou nani mo kowakunai
Sou tsubuyaita miseru"

"Itsuka hito wa hitori ni natte
Omoide no naka ni ikiteku dake
Kodoku sae atashi waratterareru yori
Atashi wa tatakaun' da
Namida nante misenain' da"

Alyssin's thoughts skipped past the second verse. For the first time since writing this song, she felt ready to sing past it.

"Kaze wa yagate naideta
Ase mo kawaite
Onaka ga suite kita na
Nani ka attakke
Nigiyaka na koe to tomo ni
Ii nioi ga yatte kita"

"Itsumo hitori de aruiteta
Minna ga matte ita"

Gently, she cut the song short. She lowered herself into a bow and whispered a prayer of thanks.

Someday it would be time to finish her song. She knew when it would be – when she was freed from her oaths, and able to tell the truth about what had happened that day.

For now, this was as far as it went.

And that was okay.

Alyssin was okay.

For the rest of the day, after Mingzhu had left for work and the Beylin Fist had caught up, Alyssin stayed outside. She let them all catch up with Melodia, which she knew her friend needed. She didn't go back inside until Arlen came to find her for dinner, by which time she'd returned to her disguise and relocated the courage Manaphy had inspired in her all that time ago.

Chapter End Notes

Songs: "Startear" from Sword Art Online II - English
LeeandLie video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fp-ykQZQyQQ

"Brave Song" from Angel Beats - Japanese (First verse and bridge)

References for Manaphy shrine: https://sta.sh/0yjrq2mvhud

Upcoming profiles: Megan (WIP), Alyssin (not started)

Contact us for suggestions on Memory Moon chapters: Character history, past events, what ifs, world lore, etc. Anon is always open and credit will be given if requested.

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings and full profiles are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
ADDITIONALLY, MEL'S ACCOUNT IS GOOD: https://lunarcentric.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go: http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
He hates me. Bao freaking hates me.

Melody tried not to roll her eyes. He doesn't hate you, Dia, he's just...trying to process.

Trying to process how much he hates me!

He's not going to hate you just because your memory glitched him out of your head. It's not like it's your fault.

When she only got an upset wail in reply, Melody decided it was time to tune Dia out and just enjoy breakfast.

Dia had been given control as soon as they'd landed in China. Melody had tuned out the initial meeting with Mingzhu, just to give Dia that private moment, but had seen everything else. It had been really amusing to see Mingzhu chew out the Beylin Fist for not telling her they had entered the city. She'd felt a little out of place as Dia connected with Mingzhu and Aguma, but hearing them sing to her had made it worth it.

And, judging by how much calmer Alyssin was looking this morning, some good things had happened with her, too. She was glad.

As she reached for a second steamed bun, Melody noted that Aguma was currently watching Alyssin from the corner of his eye, his eating slowed in the process. She glanced over herself to see why, and ended up following Alyssin's gaze across the room towards everyone's Pokemon. The Beylin Fist didn't have access to Poke balls, so the dozen fighting types had tried to make themselves fit in the small house as best as they could. A couple had slept outside. There was also Arlen, and her mother's Delibird, Xue. She herself had let out Lindia the previous day, and the Roselia was happily chatting away with her old training buddies.

Melody frowned to herself, trying to think. If anything, Alyssin looked...confused? It was almost like she didn't know what they were.

She doesn't. Alyssin only knows a few Pokemon species.

At Dia's comment, Melody paused with the steamed bun stuck in her mouth. B...What? How?

Don't know. She really doesn't like talking about herself.

Slowly chewing, Melody tried to figure out what to do about that. The Fist would probably be fine with introducing their Pokemon to her... She knew that Aguma especially already felt a connection to Alyssin because of the Indigo Tear, so that was unlikely to be a problem.

After a slight distraction as a few of the boys laughed over the disappearing plate of food (her Characters sharing a steamed bun, in reality), Melody took out her phone and typed a message for Alyssin. She handed it over rather than have Pidge's new program speak, not sure if it would be a touchy subject.

Aguma probably wouldn't mind teaching you about their Pokemon if you asked. They might
look rough, but they're really nice.

Alyssin gave her a small nod before passing the phone back. Encouraged, Melody smiled at her, and was happy to get one back.

“If you're up for it, Xiaolian—” Melody turned as she realized Mingzhu was speaking to her, “—we can head out after breakfast and pick up some Poke balls for everyone. Would it be alright if they're registered under your license?”

Melody nodded, seeing no problem with that – until she realized something. “I don't have my trainer's license. It's still on Arus,” she typed.

“That's alright! I have copies of yours and Aniko's for emergencies. We can use that. Oh, and we should probably make sure that Ducklett of yours made it under your license, too. I remember we had a bit of a problem with Lindia when you got her.”

“Can we update my picture, too?”

“Of course! That is a bit old now, isn't it?” Mingzhu smiled, then turned to Aguma. “We'll see about getting you all your own licenses someday, but it's still best to keep under the radar for now.”

“For now,” he agreed. “Perhaps after the tournament.”

Melody set her phone down and resumed eating her steamed bun. She knew she still needed to talk to the Fist about Nemesis, but she and Dia still needed time to put their words together. Aguma had said the tournament wasn't for a few days yet, so there wasn't a need to rush. Preventing as much hostility with Beylin Temple as possible would require a well-planned strategy. She'd only really start worrying if they hadn't come up with anything by the day before.

Now if only she could get Dia to stop worrying about Bao.

“Alright, so we need a dozen poke balls, an updated trainer license for you, and a double-check on your Ducklett's status,” Mingzhu listed off. From the passenger seat, Melody nodded, holding Mingzhu's copy of her license tightly in her hand.

It was surreal, holding the card. While she'd seen, talked to, and touched several Pokemon since joining Dia, a trainer's license put an all-new feel to the experience.

According to the card, she was registered under the “Great Lakes” region – memories said this was the area surrounding the Great Lakes in the United States. She was classified as a “V.Lion Pilot” due to her relation to the Voltron Force, in case she needed to use that status for emergency help. Her registered starter was Empoleon, as she'd applied for her first license in 2007 in order to be legally allowed to accept Henry from Aniko. This license was issued to her in 2012 – going by the date, and her shorter hair in the photo box, it was a few months before the World Championship. Finally, according to the blank bar near the bottom, she hadn't earned any badges from her region.

“Mom? Would it be possible to change my license name from Xiaolian to Melodia?”

“...Well, it wouldn't be out of the question, I suppose. Is there any reason in particular?”

“I don't know. I just feel like I connect with that name more. With everything that's happened recently.”
Mingzhu considered her answer, and for a few minutes the car was quiet except for the radio. Melody hoped she wasn't taking this the wrong way – she loved her Chinese name, but with the situations regarding Toby and her merging with Dia... Well, her middle name just seemed like a better fit. It was the name she wanted to be known by.

With a mental nudge, Dia relayed that she felt that was perfectly fine. It honestly felt nice to have that little bit of validation.

“It might slow the process a bit,” Mingzhu said eventually, “meaning you probably won't be able to get it until tomorrow. But we do have the advantage of being related to Xiaotong, so...it probably won't be too hard to do. Are you sure about this?”

“Yes.”

“Alright then. If you could get my license out too, please? It'll help speed things up if they don't have to search my information up. It's in my wallet.”

By the time Melody had gotten Mingzhu's trainer's license out and replaced the wallet in her purse, the Pokemon Center was in sight. Once they were parked, she followed Mingzhu inside.

Their first stop was at the PokeMart section directly to their right. With Melodia's license, Mingzhu bought 11 regular poke balls, receiving a free Premier ball with the purchase. Melody felt like she'd seen the Premier ball somewhere before...it was in the games, probably?

Afterwards, while ignoring Dia's questions about 'what games?', Melody accompanied Mingzhu to the second floor. They spoke to one of the three attendants behind the counter, then were ushered into one of the back rooms in order to reassess her license information. Aside from re-measuring her height and changing her name, everything was accurate.

While Mingzhu handled the 'yes we want to change the name, here's information things' part, Melody followed another attendant to a photo booth, where they took a few pictures. Dia switched in for this, more comfortable with the camera. They then picked their favorite and signed an electronic form so that their signature would be updated on the new license as well, because legal reasons.

Her old license was confiscated (for legal reasons, of course), though after some debate, the attendant agreed to cut it in half and return the part with her previous photo. Dia was a bit confused about Melody's request, but accepted her reasoning – she just wanted it as a sort of reminder about her first Pokemon Center visit.

Well, she accepted it, but still called Melody a dork.

Dia then guided her through the use of one of the Center's computers, where they used Mingzhu's license (much like a parent being able to access their child's bank account) to view Melodia's registered Pokemon. Once they were assured Esaria had transferred properly from Hibiki's registry, they spent a short while checking other information – purchase history, call history from Centers, and saved photos. This was mostly to help Melody familiarize herself with the system, though Dia also wanted to be sure the poke balls were valid, considering they were updating her license immediately after the purchase.

As Melody logged out of the account and returned the computer to its waiting screen, she heard several voices enter the lobby. Curious, she peered out of the privacy wall, and felt her eyes widen at the person in the middle of the crowd.
Please tell me that's not someone I forgot but you know from the 'show'?

Uh, no...no, that's uhh...that's Chao Xin. He's from Beylin Temple...

She couldn't tell if Dia's silence was from anger or just regular surprise. Regardless, she made her way to the lounge area, trying to politely skirt around the group. When she had successfully made it into a seat without incident, she let herself relax. Honestly, she probably didn't need to worry at all – it was highly unlikely Chao Xin would pick her out for no reason.

As some of the girls talked to the main nurse about Pokemon they'd brought in recently for battle recovery, he did look around a bit. Melody watched him greet some of the staff, then agree to wait as a few girls followed the nurse to retrieve their Pokemon. When she realized what she was doing probably qualified as spying, she awkwardly grabbed a magazine and tried to distract herself until Mingzhu had finished.

“Hey, 'scuse me. Do you mind if we sit here?”

She jolted, trying not to jerk away when she realized he'd walked over without her noticing. After trying to answer verbally, she shook her head, and Chao Xin grinned. “Thanks so much!”

He and his fans filled a few of the seats around her, and started talking about their training – both beyblade and Pokemon. Trying to be polite, Melody tuned them out, and continued to flip blindly through the magazine she'd picked up. Her thoughts were mostly focused on how she would word the explanation about the legendary bladers, and Nemesis, to the Beylin Fist. Putting things together even a bit for now was at least something to do. Though they couldn't exactly read her thoughts, Annie and Hope seemed to understand what was on her mind, and they shared their own ideas every once in a while as well.

If she was being honest with herself – and with Dia – Melody wasn't all that worried about how they'd take the tale. While they'd been led to believe Johannes's lies and promises of power in the show, she was pretty confident that she could convince them of the truth from the start. After all, they were more likely to believe her, one of their own, much more easily than a stranger like Johannes. She didn't have all the details she wanted yet, but she did know she'd include a warning about him, probably passing it off as a vision. It was a little deceptive, but Dia agreed it was likely the best way to go about it. They couldn't very well say how they really knew what he would do.

“Um...excuse me? Could I ask you something?”

Upon realizing the voice was in front of her, Melody looked up. One of Chao Xin's group had approached her, a ponytailed girl wearing mostly pink. For some reason, she seemed familiar, and it took a few seconds for her to realize why – the girl had an 'ocean' feel to her. More specifically, her Tear recognized her as a fellow Antarctic mermaid.

Melody smiled brightly, and nodded to her. Encouraged by this, the girl seemed to gain a bit of confidence. “Are you...Are you Melodia?”

She nodded again, and the girl gave an elated gasp. “I knew it! Oh my goodness, I'm so excited to meet you! My name is Ju!”

Motioning for Ju to wait a moment, Melody grabbed her phone and quickly typed out a response. “It's nice to meet you! I've lost my voice for the time being, or I'd definitely greet you properly. Did you have a good Day of Light Tide?”

“Oh, I did! How about you?”
“It was a great day for me!” Struck with a thought, Melody quickly added more. “Can you do me a favor?”

Ju nodded eagerly. “Absolutely! What is it?”

Melody took her time with her next message, making sure it was worded properly. When she was done, she handed the phone over to Ju for her to read. A powerful spirit was able to lift the sea foam curse, and I have confirmation of that being true. Would you please spread that to all the merfolk you know? It happened on the Day of Light Tide, or maybe shortly before or after depending on time zones.

After looking back and forth between Melody and the phone a few times, Ju whispered in awe, “Really?” At Melody's nod, her expression shifted to one of such surprise and joy that her inner Haert was practically spinning with power. “I-I have to tell my mom! This is—oh my gosh! Really?”

Melody nodded again, grinning. Ju squealed. “This is the best news I've ever gotten! Thank you! This is the best day ever!” Returning the phone, Ju bowed to her, then turned to her friends to excuse herself. As she ran out of the Center, she called over, “I won't let you down!”

Damn, she was adorable, Dia commented.

Melody couldn't stop smiling. Absolutely.

“Melodia?” She turned as Chao Xin said her name, looking quite puzzled. “Huh. You mean, Melodia the little sister of the Voltron pilot? Madoka's friend? Ju never said anything about knowing you.”

Her smile turning awkward, Melody went for the phone. “We've never met in person. It's sort of a 'knows a guy who knows a guy who knows my family' kind of thing.”

Chao Xin stood, coming over with an extended hand. She shook it, and found herself calming down at the sheer joyousness of his Haert. “If I'd known who you were, I'd have introduced myself when I walked in! I'm Chao Xin, from Beylin Temple. Madoka's a good friend of mine!”

“Trust me, I know who you are. Kind of hard to be from China and not know.”

“Yeah? You're Chinese? That's pretty sweet! You come here to see family, then-? Oh, I bet you came with Madoka's group, didn't you?”

Melody nodded. “My mom still lives over here. The WBBA let me hitch a ride.”

“Nice! Hey, if you came here with them, you know why they're here, right?” When she nodded, he continued. “If it's not too much to ask, could you keep a look out for a crimson flash sort of light?”

Before Melody could answer, she saw Mingzhu approaching. Nodding quickly in response to Chao Xin, she waved; when he noticed he was in the way, he moved aside. “Hello, ma'am! You must be Melodia's mother, then.”

A bit surprised, Mingzhu glanced at Melody, who just sort of shrugged. “Ah, yes. Are you a friend of hers?”

“Sort of. I know Madoka. It's very nice to meet you both.” He gave a slight bow of respect, and Melody could see the way Mingzhu seemed a little flustered at the show. “I was just asking
Melodia to be an extra set of eyes for us.”

“I-I see. What is it you're looking for?” Mingzhu carefully walked around the couches where Chao Xin's friends sat, nodding to them politely. At the same time, Melody had replaced the magazine on the rack and stood, circling around Chao Xin to join her.

“Nothing too big, just a blader that's caught our interest. If you see a bey with a crimson light, would you let Madoka know?”

Knowing full well that Bao himself owned a bey that let off a crimson aura, Mingzhu held her composure well. “Yes, of course. I wish you luck in finding them.” Her hand was suddenly on Melody's shoulder. “It was very nice to meet you, but we have people waiting for us, so~”

Chao Xin shook his head in understanding. “Say no more. Thank you for your help, both of you!”

Once they had turned around and begun walking out, Melody glanced up at her mother. Mingzhu looked incredibly uncomfortable; her grip on her shoulder was a bit too tight. She didn't speak again until they were back in the car and she'd taken a few long breaths.

“Xiaolian...sweetie...please be honest with me. Have you met him before?”

Melody shook her head, starting to get the feeling that Mingzhu had been able to identify him. Though, as she herself had told Chao Xin, it wasn't hard to know the Beylin Temple team when one lived in China.

Mingzhu stared at the steering wheel for a few seconds, her hands attached tightly to it. When she looked up again, she asked, “Do you know who he is?” At the nod in reply, she looked down again, humming to herself. Melody gave her the quiet, realizing just how much this was probably affecting her – a member of Beylin Temple had spoken to her, a member of the Beylin Fist, on equal terms. Not knowing this, of course, but still. Dia was having a bit of the same reaction.

After a minute or so of humming, Mingzhu lifted her head again, seeming much calmer than before. “Xiaolian...you have an excuse to visit the Temple. To...to speak with them.”

 Unsure of where this was going, Melody nodded.

“...I think...I think we need to talk about what the Beylin Fist should exactly be doing in regards to the main school, sweetie.”

Melodia and her mother didn't return to the house until Mingzhu had to get ready for work. The conversation about Beylin Temple lasted quite a long time, but in the end, they came to an agreement, and would be acting out their decision the next day.

For the time being, Melodia ran into the house to grab her mother's work uniform, then waved as she drove off. When she was gone, she felt the merge break apart, and stood in a bit of uncertainty in the driveway.

When she had her bearings back, Melodia headed inside. She helped Aguma and the others with officially catching their Pokemon, and showed them how to use their new poke balls. After a few minutes on Mingzhu's computer, with her mother's license, she confirmed the twelve fighting types were now registered as her Pokemon.

As she logged off, Aguma motioned for one of the Machops to step forward. The Pokemon smiled eagerly at her, and Melody gave her own smile in return. She then looked at Aguma expectantly,
“You are free to decline this offer if you wish.” Aguma glanced away, his tone unusually soft, “...but I have been training this Wànì as a gift to you.”

Melody's eyes widened, and she heard Dia gasp in the mindscape. She tried to speak, remembered she couldn't, and instead jumped from her chair in order to hug her cousin tightly. She felt tears in her eyes and let them fall as a new merge kicked in. Melodia sent thanks upon thanks through the Tear, hoping it would get through to him.

She spent the next half hour together with her new Machop, Ting, getting to know her both from a battling perspective as well as a personal one. She brought out all of her Pokemon to meet their new teammate, and was thrilled to see them all getting along. Ting was gentle with Esaria, playful with Fix and Lindia, and respectful to Henry. She was even willing to stand still for a photo, which Melodia immediately sent to her brothers, Touma, Zeo, and the Megs.

Though Aguma left a short while later, he and the Beylin Fist feeling cramped in the house, Melodia watched them go off to pulverize Beylin Temple bladers with a smile on her face and a Wànì at her side.

She and Alyssin played cards and wrote poems for the next few hours. It was a warm peace that Melodia hadn't felt in a long time, and it still surrounded her when she went to sleep.

Zeo was still having a hard time believing what was happening.

The money had appeared in the gym's bank account exactly when Kyoya had said it would. It was more than they ever could have asked for.

A construction company saying that they owed Melodia a favor had appeared to do all the needed repairs. Everything was going smoothly, moving quickly, going well in general. Zeo's home away from home was being brought back to life at an incredible speed.

Through all his fears and doubts, Zeo found himself smiling as he entered the cafe. Samuel waved him down, and he joined the group at their table. Masamune grinned at him. Faust stared silently at the table, not acknowledging his arrival.

Even with all Melodia had said, Zeo admitted that he tried not to look at him.

Once Zeo had ordered his drink, Samuel looked around at them all. “Okay,” he started gently, “I want you guys to tell me what exactly is going on.”

Masamune's smile vanished. Zeo saw him glance over at Faust, and honestly, he did the same. Having known them for years, Samuel caught this easily. “If you fucking tell me that Toby's sick again-”

“No.” Zeo was surprised at his own voice. Massaging the bridge of his nose, already feeling a headache coming on, he tried again. “N-No, that won't happen again. That was...the shortest way I can explain that is Toby used too much magic, and that hurts his physical health. Doctors are idiots. We...We know to look out for that now.”

He wasn't looking at Samuel, but he could imagine the puzzled frown on his face. “Magic...like his mom? I didn't realize...so, wait a second. If that's what it was, then how did-”

Masamune cut him off, trying and failing not to sound irritated. He'd been getting about as much
sleep as Zeo, which was to say hardly any at all. “Ziggurat didn't do squat. He thought he knew what was happening, but he was wrong.”

There was silence from Samuel as he took this in. It lasted for the few minutes it took for Zeo's drink to arrive, and he seemed hesitant to break it. “Is it...Did something happen to your mom, then?”

It took a moment for Faust to realize Samuel was talking to him, Zeo could tell. “Um, no, she...she's doing fine, as far as I know.” He'd barely spoken since the incident. Since revealing who he was and adding another crushing blow to Zeo's already damaged heart. Even now, he fell silent again after his single sentence.

“Then it is about you.” Samuel had put his focus on Faust now, not at all knowing who he was really speaking to. “Something happened to you when that spirit showed up. That's why Dia's all mixed up, and why she had to go see her family. What the hell is going on?”

He watched Faust tense up. Masamune didn't seem willing to speak, either. Zeo swallowed nothing, then slowly turned to look at Samuel. His mouth felt dry, and he felt sick, but he spoke. “Dia needed to keep moving. To focus on something else. What happened with that spirit, it...it's terrifying.”

Samuel met his eyes, and Zeo was almost certain he was going to throw up as he continued. “She took something. She...was scared off, but she took something with her, and...Dia needed to concentrate on something else while someone else gets it back. Her energy...if she's not distracted, she could blow something else up. Hurt someone. She knew she couldn't risk that.”

Zeo had to close his eyes now, breathe into his hands. After a bit of that, he reached into his pocket to grip the protective charm from Tracy, trying to remind himself that it would activate if Faust did anything wrong. It didn't view him as a threat. He wasn't...wasn't a threat anymore.

That didn't mean he was his friend.

He could tell that Samuel was starting to catch on to exactly how serious this situation was. “Took something...something of Toby's? Something Dia can't get back on her own, that we...can't find without help.” The gears were starting to turn. “Something so important that when it was taken, Dia blew up the gym...I'm not sure that I...”

Faust took a loud breath, and Zeo's gaze shot over to him out of habitual fear. “Please remember that we are in public, and...that everything will be alright soon. Do you understand?”

Samuel slowly nodded.

Faust closed his eyes, setting his clenched hands on the table. He seemed to be having trouble getting the words out, but he eventually managed, “I'm not Toby.”

Within seconds, Zeo saw as everything clicked together in Samuel's head. A slow look of horror dawned on him, and from the way he tensed up, he was either ready to run or punch Faust in the face. “What Ziggurat did,” he whispered. “You're-”

“Faust.” The person...thing...in Toby's body lowered his head, before burying it in his hands. In a choked whisper he pleaded, “Please forgive me. I tried to save him.”

Zeo felt oddly numb as he watched Faust start shaking, and quiet sobs came from behind his hands. Their conversation, the table, the cafe itself – nothing felt real, now that they'd told the truth. Zeo felt weightless, like he was floating in space. His vision blurred together, his brain no longer quite
registering what his eyes were seeing. He couldn't feel the chair beneath him, or the cup in his hand.

He could see that spirit, and the blue light of Toby's soul, and both of them vanishing. He could see Melodia rushing towards him in a blind rage, her eyes gray and cold. He could see Ziggurat and Faust. The Arrangement beds. Toby in the hospital. Toby collapsing.

He could see Toby, introducing himself for the first time when he was five years old, after he and his mother had moved to New York.

Zeo couldn't see anything but blue light anymore. There was a collection of muted thuds and screams as he curled himself into a ball, shut his eyes, and tried desperately not to break down. He just—he couldn't breathe—he needed to breathe-

Masamune was calling for him, but he sounded so far away. Everything was bright and blinding and blue and he didn't know how to stop it.

He just wanted Toby back. He couldn't lose him again. He couldn't keep losing people.

He just wanted things to be normal again.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed his shoulder. He jerked away, trying to curl in on himself further. A garbled voice called from somewhere he couldn't see, “Zeo, it's me! Open your eyes!”

Masamune?

When the hand returned, he flinched, but didn't pull back. A second hand gripped his other shoulder, and Masamune's voice spoke again, a little bit clearer. “Zeo, I'm right here. You don't have to be scared anymore, you understand? We're gonna get him back!”

As Masamune kept repeating himself, making the same promise over and over, Zeo slowly found the courage to open his eyes. With barely a glance, he discovered why he felt so weightless – the blue glow of his Arrangement energy covered the floor below them, and they, along with the other customers and tables, were floating aimlessly in the cafe.

Zeo grabbed Masamune's hands, trying to bring feeling back to himself. Once again, his vision blurred, and with what little thought he had he knew things weren't getting any better. “I'm sorry,” he choked out, feeling the wet heat of his tears down his face.

Masamune didn't say anything for a moment, then squeezed his shoulders. “Zeo, look at me. I need you to look at me, right now.”

Blinking through his tears, Zeo tried to focus on his friend. He knew Masamune was in front of him, but everything was tinted with a fuzzy glow of blue, and he couldn't see him through the lights.

“Don't think about Faust,” Masamune ordered. “Don't think about Toby, or Di, or Ziggurat. Don't think about any of it! Think about how I'm here for you. How Samuel, and Coach Steel, and your dad and sister are all here for you! You don't have to do this alone, Zeo! You never did!”

With a few more blinks, Zeo's vision finally cleared. Masamune was staring at him with a glare of raw, unmatched strength, an anchor in the storm of wind and light. Zeo forced himself not to look away, trying to swallow the lump in his throat. “I just want things to be the way they used to be,” he whimpered.
Masamune's eyes softened, and he answered gently, “I know. And they will be. They will be, Zeo.”

After several long seconds, Zeo slowly nodded. Still clutching Masamune's hands, he was able to calm his breathing, and turned his focus to the powers holding everyone in the air.

*Put them down. I'm going to put everyone down.*

Following a short wrestle for control, Zeo was able to tame his energy, and people gently started lowering to the ground. The careful drops were a strain on him, the amount of mass he'd been holding up with his subconscious mind far greater than anything he'd lifted before in his training. There were a few times where someone simply fell, but they were thankfully caught by the people below. A couple of tables crashed down and broke, along with several chairs and almost every single plate. It was about ten minutes before he had finally put everything back on the floor, except for Masamune and himself.

Reluctantly, he pried his fingers off of Masamune's hands, and pushed himself away. The strong trust in Masamune's eyes didn't falter as they separated, and Zeo slowly lowered him to the ground.

*Just set him down. It's fine. You've practiced for this. You can fix this.*

As a twinge of pain shot through his head, his focus faltered. Masamune dropped, and Zeo felt like his own stomach went with him. Before he could scream, he saw a blanket of black energy swirl into view below his falling friend, catching him safely; his head jerked around to see Faust, his arms outstretched, telling Samuel to move below Masamune to catch him. When he was in place, Faust let the energy fade, and though it was a rough catch, Masamune made it safely to the ground.

When he was sure that Masamune wasn't hurt, Zeo found himself staring at Faust, and jolted when the other met his gaze. The cafe now quiet aside from murmurs of fright and relief, it wasn't hard to hear what he said even with the distance between them.

“We can be weapons,” Faust told him, “or we can be heroes. Isn't that what Melodia said?”

Zeo didn't answer. He couldn't. As he floated beside the ceiling lights, he flashed back to the aftermath of Toby's kidnapping, to the song that Melodia and Alyssin had sung to them. They had used the same words.

*Are we heroes keeping peace?*

*Or are we weapons?*

*Pointed at the enemy*

*So someone else can claim a victory?*

As he stared down at Faust, he finally understood. Faust had been *created* as nothing but a weapon. As much as he was the one who could've taken away Toby, he wasn't actively the one who had done it. Faust was never *trying* to hurt them – he was just doing what he had been told was right.

Remembering how quiet he'd been since the incident, how he'd cried upon telling Samuel the truth, Zeo realized something.

Faust missed Toby, too.

He felt his body loosen, uncurling from its ball. Down below, Masamune was watching him, and there was something different about him, but Zeo couldn't figure out what it was. He couldn't figure it out, but it made him think more clearly. It pushed away some of the fears that had been trapping him ever since Toby had first been sent to the hospital.
He saw the trust in Masamune's eyes, and for the first time in a year and a half, Zeo wasn't afraid.

The last remains of blue light faded from the floor. Zeo sunk down, falling carefully into Samuel and Masamune's waiting arms. As he felt the energy in his mind dissipate, the headache began, and he almost knocked them both over as he stumbled.

When they tried to usher him to a chair, he pulled the other way, making them walk with him towards Faust. He stared at him, trying to read him again and make sure he hadn't been imagining it – but it was still there. The dark circles and red rims around his eyes, the lifeless expression he'd seen in his own reflection countless times before. He saw the wilted hunch, the chewed up lips, the tangles of unbrushed hair.

Only shaking a little, Zeo reached out his hand. Faust didn't move, and allowed him to press his palm against his chest, and Zeo waited.


His fingers curled inwards, and he pulled his hand back, closing his eyes. Moments from the past eighteen months swam through his head, everything from Toby collapsing, to Ziggurat, to his Arrangements, to his battle with Masamune – everything he'd done, every fear he'd been shoved into, every sleepless night and terrors of his dreams.

It looked different now. It wasn't Ziggurat *and* Faust sneering down at him, holding Toby captive, chasing Dia into darkness.

Zeo uncurled his fist and shoved it against Faust's chest again, feeling the heartbeat within. Faust's heartbeat.

“A person's heartbeat is like their soul's song, Zeo. Most people can't hear it, but every little 'thump' is unique. If you're ever lost on what to do, just listen to your heartbeat – it'll tell you exactly what you need to hear.”


Zeo ignored the heavy weight in his stomach, and the lump in his throat. He ignored the cafe, Masamune, Samuel – he tuned out everything but Faust's heartbeat.


It was different.


Faust's heartbeat had a different tune. It didn't hold the same song that Toby's did.

Faust had a heartbeat, a soul's song, all his own.


Faust wasn't a monster.


He was a person, just like Zeo.

Zeo had just been too blinded by his fears for the past fourteen months to ever even consider the idea.

He pulled his hand away, slowly opening his eyes and ignoring the pounding in his head. *I'm sorry, Mom. I forgot one of the most important things you ever taught me.*

Looking into Faust's tired, miserable eyes, Zeo said the only thing his mind could come up with. “I'm sorry.”

Faust clearly didn't comprehend. He just stared dumbly at Zeo, maybe wondering if he was going crazy. And maybe he was, but for once it wasn't because of his fears, or because of the Arrangements.

“Let's go home,” he said quietly.

If he was going crazy from anything, it was probably from being stupid enough to forget his mother's most important advice.

Faust gave him an uncertain, shaky smile. “Yeah.”

The transformation wore off once they'd left the cafe.

With a slight jerk, Masamune felt Uno pull his energy away, and after a brief light, his Character reappeared beside him. The strange – but fairly awesome – outfit that he'd received with the join reverted to his normal clothes, and he joined the others in staring at himself with a slight bit of confusion.

Samuel put a hand to his head, possibly trying to fight off a headache from everything that had just happened. “So...I wasn't imagining that.”

Zeo gave Masamune an odd look, like his reversion had been what clued him in to the change in the first place. His confusion cleared after a moment, as he asked, “Uno?”

Still feeling the powerful energy from the transformation fading, Masamune nodded. “I, uh...I just wanted to calm you down. I had to get through to you.”

“So you and Uno were able to join forces.” Faust was quiet, but his tone held no doubt. “Didn't Melodia say that she and Annie could do the same thing?”

Masamune was amazed to see Zeo nod in response. “Yeah, uh, it's like...related to what brought them to life, or something. Annie was all about comfort, or...protection...something like that.”

Exchanging a look with Uno, it struck Masamune that he hadn't really considered his wish at all in a few years – let alone just now, when he was trying to get through to Zeo. *I want to be strong, the strongest ever, so I can stand up for my friends and save them whenever they need help!*

Masamune had wanted to be strong enough to help Zeo. Uno...he'd responded to that. He'd given Masamune that strength.

He held his hand out, letting Uno land on his palm. Calmly, seriously, he told his Character something he didn't say nearly often enough. “Thank you, Uno.”

After the briefest moment of awe, Uno beamed. “Anytime, Masamune!”

Setting Uno on his shoulder, Masamune turned to the others. “Well! I think that the four of us can
handle things 'til Di gets back, considering all that! What do you guys think?"

“Masamune, I just committed a crapload of serious property damage,” Zeo said in disbelief.

“And I'm sure the money Kyoya sent us can cover it.”

Samuel frowned. “Everyone inside probably thinks that Zeo is still unstable from his Arrangements.”

“To be fair, he kind of is, a little, but he did get everyone down without hurting any of them!”

“We're going to have to tell Zeo's father about this incident considering the aforementioned property damage,” Faust reminded him.

“…”

“Well?”

“...Not it!”

“Not it!”

“Not it!”

“What?”

Masamune grinned at Faust's bewildered face. “Well, buddy, looks like it's up to you, then!”

“W-Wait, I don't understand, what exactly just-Hey!”

Laughing, Masamune joined Samuel and Zeo in dashing away, leaving Faust to chase after them with repeated demands to explain themselves.

You don't hafta worry, Di. We've got everything under control over here! We'll be just fine 'til that Lilura brings Toby back!

Chapter End Notes

The Zeo/Masamune scenes were completely unplanned but the chapter wasn't long enough for my liking and honestly they turned out good so it's okay

Song: "Time to Say Goodbye" from RWBY - English (part of bridge)

Upcoming profiles: Alyssin (slow WIP)

Contact us for suggestions on Memory Moon chapters: Character history, past events, what ifs, world lore, etc. Anon is always open and credit will be given if requested.

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings and full profiles are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/

ADDITIONALLY, MEL'S ACCOUNT IS GOOD:
https://lunarcentric.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Dashan held his post-breakfast meditation in high regard. All of Beylin Temple knew this fact.

And it was because this was such a well-known fact that he could not understand why Mei Mei was interrupting him in the middle of it.

Guests at the entrance, she said. They refused to step foot inside, but wished to speak with him. This was unusual at best – those who were able to make the journey to the temple were most often honored to walk among the sacred grounds, rewarded with fresh water to quench their thirst, homemade food to replenish their strength, time to rest and a chance to watch a portion of the training regimen.

According to Mei Mei, their current guests refused all of this.

Quite reluctantly, he left his meditation garden and began the walk to the entrance. He nodded politely to everyone he passed, greeting them as they headed to or from their own breakfasts or meditations. At the same time, he tried to fathom who their visitors might be, and why they would so firmly refuse Beylin Temple's hospitality – at this early hour, as well. Not even Gingka and his friends had woken yet.

He decided to detour toward the kitchen, collecting two of their drinking cups and filling them with fresh water. Even if they had refused the initial offer, it would be disrespectful of him to simply give them nothing.

As he entered the front courtyard, Dashan could see their guests beyond the entrance. A girl perhaps around his age, with long brown hair; alongside her was a woman who appeared to be her mother, by their similar features. Both looked rather nervous as they saw him, the woman especially tensing up as he came closer. That was incredibly odd.

“I welcome you to Beylin Temple,” he told them cordially. “For your long journey to our sacred training grounds, please accept these drinks to replenish your strength.”

Though the girl hesitantly took one cup, he noticed the woman with her refused to move. Hoping to ease whatever discomfort was bothering her, he introduced himself. “My name is Dashan Wang, leader of this temple. Is there anything in particular that I might help you both with this morning?”

After a slow sip from her water, the girl looked to her mother, a look of reassurance, if he wasn't mistaken, in her eyes. Though the woman briefly seemed to wilt, she soon straightened herself, facing Dashan with intent.

“No thank you.” Xiaolian's rasping whisper caught him off guard. Mingzhu, however, seemed grateful for her inclusion. After a few coughs, she added, “Disrespectful.”
That was puzzling. “Disrespectful to enter the temple? To whom, might I ask?”

With a slow sigh, Mingzhu appeared to collect herself. “To our ancestors. They vowed to never again step within the temple, and it would be dishonorable to their memory if we were to ignore that vow.”

Ancestors that vowed never to... Had she said 'to never again' step inside? What people would...

It couldn't be.

“Are you...” He couldn't believe he was asking this, but here he was. “Are you, perhaps, descendants of...the Beylin Fist?”

That was impossible. Surely those ancient outcasts could not have survived two thousand years.

And yet, Mingzhu nodded, suddenly seeming to find her courage. “We are. Please allow us a short moment of your time to speak with you, and we will be on our way without any trouble at all.”

Dia could see how quickly Dashan stiffened at her mother's revelation. She wasn't sure she trusted her voice again, but this didn't quite seem the time to pull out her phone and start typing. Even if they'd spent a good while planning this the previous day, she still felt the nervous twisting in her stomach just standing at the temple's entrance.

“I have to admit I'm surprised,” Dashan eventually said, “and shocked that the Beylin Fist still exists today.”

“We were lucky,” Mingzhu replied. “As our ancestors' numbers began to dwindle, they were joined by a large number of outsiders. Together they were able to build up a stable village.”

As Dashan stood in silence, Dia finished the water he'd given her. Without stepping forward, she held it out, nodding in thanks to him. He took it carefully, now eyeing her with consideration.

“Why is it you have come here today? Does the Beylin Fist intend to challenge us on our own sacred grounds?”

“Certainly not,” Mingzhu objected. She had yet to drink from the cup given to her, but held it firmly in her hands. “Xiaolian and I have come of our own accord. We have no intention to battle you today. We come seeking an end to this feud. We come seeking peace.”

“Peace, you say.” The look on Dashan's face was something Dia could only call incredulous disbelief. “The Beylin Fist seeks peace, after the war they caused and the damages they inflicted upon all of China? Do you really expect me to believe such a thing so easily?”

Though Mingzhu bristled, she did a remarkable job of keeping her tone calm. “We are not our ancestors, Dashan, just as you are not yours. The war was the fault of both sides, as all wars are. The Beylin Fist is not the only one at fault, regardless of what your recorded history might tell you.”

“No, I suppose your own history says the opposite,” Dashan snapped.

“For just one moment, put aside your prejudice and listen to what we have to say! China cannot survive another period of war like that, it simply isn't possible! Certainly not with the threat of Nemesis hanging over our heads already. There is only so much the people can take! I refuse to put them through the same danger our ancestors did two thousand years ago!”
Dia felt goosebumps prickle up on her arms at the dark expression that had taken over Dashan's face. “How is it, exactly,” he asked carefully, “that you know of Nemesis?”

With supporting nods from her Characters, Dia wrestled forth her quiet, recovering voice. “I'm Melodia. Madoka's friend.”

“...You are Melodia?”

Mingzhu shifted her drink to one hand, using the other to hold Dia's shoulder. “Yes. She is. And before you ask, yes, her brother Lance of the Voltron Force is also of the Beylin Fist village. So maybe now you can understand why my family, personally, sees no reason for revenge on the main school. My son has already achieved so much and pulled us back into society as a result – my children and I harbor no grudge against you. I wish I could say the same for the others.”

There was no recognition in Dashan's eyes. “If you expect me to believe you are guiltless in all this, you're gravely mistaken. Your ancestors' dangerous acts are what defeated you. Raised by the misguided teachings of their ways, it is impossible for you to be any better than they are.”

Dia heard Annie gasp, and her mother's grip on her shoulder tightened. “What,” she demanded hoarsely, silently daring him to repeat himself. She felt a shadow rise within her, her body tensing at Dashan's accusatory words and the anger they stoked.

“No matter what one individual may have achieved, the Beylin Fist is still a danger as a whole. The only reason you are still standing here is that this is a place of peace, and I will not sully it with a battle against the likes of you.”

“Take it back!” Dia lunged forward, her mother only barely keeping her from tackling Dashan. The darkness of her Arrangement rippled through her, cutting off Melody's warning cries to stay calm. Even with the whisper her voice could barely reach, she hissed in anger, “Don't you dare call my mother a criminal.”

Dashan had already reached for his launcher, his glare no longer hidden. As Dia wrestled against her mother's grip, wanting nothing more than to throw him off this god-forsaken mountain, she heard his words through the rush of unstable power. “You demonstrate right now that the Beylin Fist has not changed its ways! An attack at the slightest provocation? Yet you claim to be better than them?”

Succeeding in pulling Dia firmly against herself, Mingzhu finally snapped. “Why don't you shut up when you clearly don't know what you're talking about! Xiaolian wasn't even raised in the village. Her anger now isn't even hers, it's the result of those damn Arrangements of that Ziggurat!”

Ripping apart what little voice she had with a howling scream, Dia felt herself sink further at the mere mention of the man who'd done this to her. *Find him. Destroy him. Make him pay. Make them pay for how they treated you, how they're treating you. They're nothing. Everyone is nothing. Win!*

Reality was fading in and out by this point. She could vaguely hear her Characters calling out to her, but their words were garbled nonsense. The dark buzz of the Arrangement flew through her, taking control of her limbs and senses. *They're worthless. Nothing. Don't deserve this world. Insulted mother. Insulted family. Make them pay! Make him pay!*

Dia struggled to rationalize through the pain, but the darkness countered everything she had. *If the temple hadn't kicked them out our ancestors would've lived here. They wouldn't have made the village. They wouldn't have been vulnerable. They wouldn't have been attacked.*
We wouldn't have been attacked.

Everything would've been better if my ancestors had won the war.

The exile saved China. If we'd been in the city-

**THEY RUINED US.**

The voice of the Arrangement shot through her like lightning. She felt herself start screaming, howling, fighting to be freed from her mother's grip. Everything was tinted gray and every sound was muted in her rage.

**THEY RUINED MY FAMILY.**

**THEY DID THIS TO ME.**

Melodia broke free, shoving Mingzhu to the ground. She lunged at Dashan with merciless intent, his martial arts training being the only thing that saved him. Every swing she threw was blocked or dodged, and it only infuriated her more.

As she grew more violent, Dashan grew less defensive. After another failed attack, she whirled around only to have a fist jammed into her gut, and with garbled swears she stumbled back. A palm struck her face, followed by a foot sweeping her legs out from under her and knocking her to the ground. Before she could stand, the same foot was placed on her stomach, Dashan's weight more than enough to keep her pinned.

She was struggling to stop it. Every action, every scream had Melodia crying, begging her body to stop. Like so many times before, she'd lost all control, and for once a physical strike wasn't enough to stop her. She didn't know what to do.

"I... happy when..."

Melodia was terrified. If they couldn't stop her, they'd have to lock her up again. She'd be quarantined. She wouldn't be able to help the Fist.

"Your smile... the clouds..."

Toby would get back and she wouldn't be able to see him. She'd be trapped, maybe forever. She might merge with this darkness and both of her would be lost. She wouldn't be Melodia anymore – She'd just be the Arrangement.

"Far from... sunny days... in sleep"

She... She...

What... was that?

"... with patience for... spring
When... flowers will soon renew...
Knowing there's more beyond the pain of today"

It silenced the violent voice in her head, warmth trickling into the darkness. Her physical body ceased its struggles, and two lights appeared in the mindscape, driving the shadows away and breaking its hold on her.
"Although the scars of yesterday remain
You can go on living as much as your heart believes
You can't be born again although you can change
Let's stay together, always"

Melodia's willingness to fight completely disappeared. She sat in the slowly brightening mindscape, staring blankly at the two vague figures heading the charge. One of them swiveled, almost seeming to look back at her. Melodia almost thought it held a familiar glow.

A strange, wordless feeling hummed around her. She couldn't see the outside world anymore, just the lights and the retreating shadows. Yet, somehow, that was okay. As long as those lights were with her, she knew she would be safe. She wished she could thank them...

She could.

"You came to me when I was alone
All by myself again today
The rain just keeps coming down and washes away...
All of the pain we hold inside
We have to break free and come alive
No more holding back our love anymore"

Of the two lights, the smaller one seemed to glow a little bit brighter as she sang. Melodia wasn't sure what or who it was, but she smiled at it, and its Haert turned the light a soft pink, gentle and comforting. Almost seeming to nudge the larger, beautiful white light at its side, the two strangely familiar voices sung out again.

"Although the scars of yesterday remain
You can go on living as much as your heart believes"

The darkness was totally gone now. Melodia found the strength to stand, found the courage to sing with her saviors.

"You can't be born again although you can change
Let's stay together, always"

She reached out to them, letting herself be buried in their light. Aqua Regina held her tightly, her magic weaving itself through everything around them, taking the pain away and freeing her tears.

Melodia cried.

Safe in the arms of Aqua Regina's mental image, she let her tears flow out, carrying the terror and doubts inside her with them. The Haert-tinted light, a ragged, tired woman with a cracked pink pendant, gently kissed her forehead, and without words somehow told her it would be okay.

_I will always be here for you_, Aqua Regina promised her, letting her go almost reluctantly. _Right now, it is you who must be there for your mother. Tell her that I wish I could do more._

Her hand on what was definitely an old, crumbling Tear pendant, the ragged woman added, _And tell Yukiko that I'm sorry._ Her blue eyes softened. _Your mother, too._

“I will.” Melodia smiled gratefully to her two saviors, a goddess and a stranger, and when she opened her eyes the first thing she saw was her mother's hair dropping against her face as she wept with relief.
Her throat tingling, almost humming really, Melodia lifted an aching arm and set it across her mother's hand. She squeezed it tightly, whispered, “I'm sorry, Mom,” and buried herself in the comforting embrace.

Mingzhu's voice was quiet, murmured reassuringly into her ear. “I know, sweetie, I know. It's not your fault.”

“Aqua Regina's sorry she can't do more.”

“A-...Oh...” Mingzhu chuckled softly, now understanding her daughter's sudden turn-around. “As if I could ever be disappointed in her. I'm more grateful than ever.”

“And...the woman with the Pink echo...she was there too. She wanted me to tell you she's sorry.” Melodia was able to lift her arms enough to return her mother's hug. “Sh-She knew our song. I don't know who she is.”

“Right now I don't give a damn, Xiaolian, I'm just so glad you're alright-” Mingzhu's voice escalated to a tearful squeak, and they took that as their note to be quiet and try to help each other stop crying.

Dashan was looking at his guests with new eyes. He had known of Dr. Ziggurat's experiments and the effects they had – seeing Team Starbreaker in the World Championship had been proof enough. Masamune's friends, Toby and Zeo, were victims to the Arrangements, and from what he remembered, there had been reports of many other bladers being forced through them as well. None of them had exhibited such violent tendencies after they'd worn off, however, so Melodia's sudden attack had caught him severely off guard.

As of now, Melodia and her mother were curled around each other on the ground just outside the entrance. It wasn't hard to tell that they needed some time alone, and though it made him feel a little uneasy to leave Beylin Fist members unsupervised so close to the temple, he still had his sense of honor. For the moment, it seemed...incorrect to refer to them as Beylin Fist. They were just people, hurting.

He could, at the very least, give them a few minutes alone.

As he waited in the main courtyard, Dashan pondered what he'd learned so far. He...no longer knew what to think of the Beylin Fist and its people. So far, this meeting had skewed everything he thought he'd known. They had survived due to accepting outsiders, put together a community. After all those years of living and rebuilding, they were now approaching the temple, asking for peace.

Melodia, one of these descendants, had fallen victim to Dr. Ziggurat's twisted plans. She was cursed with a rage of corrupted origin, which seemed to dissipate as quickly as it came. Mingzhu had said a small slap usually snapped her out of it, but he had struck her twice with no effect. She seemed to have broken out of it on her own.

Dashan needed more information. He wasn't sure if he would be able to find it in the temple, but it was worth trying. He owed it to Melodia, after seeing the pain and fear hidden behind her artificial anger. As one blader to another, he could at least do that much.

He signaled a trainee that had entered the courtyard. When they were at his side, he told them his request - “Please ask Chi Yun and Mei Mei to begin searching the library for all the information we have on the Warring Period of Beylin. I'll join them once our guests have gone. And please be
sure that Gingka and his friends do not know about this.”

The trainee gave a quick bow and left to fulfill the request. Turning back to the entrance, he noticed that Melodia had left her mother's arms, and was now picking up the ceramic shards of the cups he and Mingzhu had dropped. Unintentionally, he met Mingzhu's eyes as she was standing, and she smiled and beckoned him back over.

As he rejoined them, he noticed Melodia glance nervously at him, just before pulling her hair over her shoulder to hide her face. Taking this as a sign that she would rather be left alone, he turned his attention to Mingzhu. “Is...she alright?”

Brushing a few stray tears from her eyes, Mingzhu nodded. “Y-Yes, she...she's fine. Um, a...a f-friend was able to project into her mind and drive the Arrangement back.”

“I'm simply glad that the episode is over. I deeply apologize that I couldn't be of more help.”

“No! No, please, I...p-please don't apologize.” Still working off her worry, it seemed, she was now fiddling with her hair. Honestly, after what just happened, Dashan would be concerned if she didn't show some kind of motherly terror. “From you...I-I can't accept...”

“...Of course.” For someone raised in the Beylin Fist, an apology from a member of Beylin Temple must be incredibly off-putting. He should have realized that. “Even so...if there is something that I can do for you, please tell me.”

He watched her ponder over this, her worry slowly fading as her mind was set to other thoughts. At one point she turned and called to Melodia, asking for her opinion. Bringing over the pieces of the cups and not looking at him as she handed them over, she murmured something he didn't catch.

Her mother, however, seemed to hear it just fine, and her expression turned rather serious.

She faced him completely before she spoke. “We know of the tournament in a few days' time. Two members, my nephew as the leader and his friend as his right hand, plan to enter. If you are to meet in battle, please do so respectfully. Don't battle them as outlaws. Battle them as bladers.”

“...And if they don't wish to do the same?”

“I...” Melodia's hand was at her throat, touching it gently. When she spoke, all hint of her earlier rasp was gone, as if her voice had been returned at full strength in the time since her episode. “I'm going to talk to them. That's the reason I came to China.” Behind her hair, still a mess pulled over her shoulder, he could vaguely see her glancing up at him. “This feud has to end before someone else gets hurt. We don't need an answer now, but please have one by the day of the tournament. Let both our people have some closure.”

Dashan couldn't promise that he would fully understand anything by the time the tournament began. He couldn't promise that his teammates would want to accept this request. But, if this was the fate of Beylin, for the schools to meet in battle once again, then Dashan himself could promise one thing.

“To the best of my personal abilities, I will not let my view of them be colored as it was before I met you. I will battle them with honor.”

Behind her hair, Melodia smiled.

Melody I swear to I don't know what, if you can't tell me who the hell that guy is I think I'm gonna throw this water bottle off the goddamn mountain.
I swear I knew when we went up there! He-He's a freaking important character! I don't know why I can't remember his name!

The two gave a synchronized groan, both knowing the same thing. Damn glitches...

Rubbing her throat again, Dia could at least say one objectively good thing had come of their visit, regardless of the...disturbing experience. Aqua Regina had seen fit to heal her throat, thus returning her voice. She didn't feel like she really deserved it, but she supposed she couldn't exactly give the healing back.

Something else she was thankful for was that...the guy had agreed not to tell Madoka and the others that she'd been there. As much as she loved the younger girl, she didn't want to get her involved in the Beylin Fist's problems. It was perfectly fine for her to find out the same way she did in the 'show' – at the tournament. Dia didn't pretend to understand how anime from Melody's old dimension was able to mirror their world, but for now they were settling on the conclusion of the creators being Seers of some kind.

Mingzhu nudged her gently, bringing her out of her thoughts. “Xiaolian? You look frustrated.”

Dia frowned, looking down at the water bottle that the guy had given her - 'You can return it at the tournament,' was all he'd said. “I, um...my memory...glitched that guy's name out. I have no idea who...”

“Dashan. He's the leader of Beylin Temple.”

What the crap that name doesn't sound familiar at all this sucks- Dia could practically feel Melody flopping over in the mindscape. It's not fa-air!

Dia gave her mom a small smile. “Thanks. Now I just have to figure out how to talk Aguma into not trying to destroy him and his temple.”

“We still have three days to figure that out, Xiaolian. Why don't we stop for some breakfast and talk about it a bit before we head home?”

“...Yeah. I'd like that.”

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From Melodia: Good morning, Haruka-san! I know this is going to sound odd, but are you able to feel any sort of echo from the Pink Tear? We're pretty sure that a second one is active, and I'm trying to figure out who has it. It's okay if you don't.

Sipping her morning tea, Shiori handed the phone back to Haruka, who so far hadn't touched her own breakfast. “This arrived just as you walked into the cafe?”

Haruka nodded, frowning. Every Wednesday for the past few years, the two had met for breakfast, Shiori picking the younger girl up when she was still taking the trains. They usually talked about work or their friends, but the topic seemed much more serious today. “I, um, I'm not sure what to do. I know that it's possible to sense things like that, but I've never had a reason to try.”

“I'm afraid I'm the same,” Shiori sighed. “Perhaps, Abigail-san...?”

“Oh! Y-Yes, maybe...” Haruka set about sending a text to their fellow guardian, and Shiori ate a bit of her rice in the meantime. Even without full connection to the Tears, she and Haruka had both sensed the terrifying dark spike on the fifth. They didn't know which Tear it had come from, but they'd tried their best to send well wishes and hope to whichever princess needed them. They'd
been too afraid to ask Melodia if she knew – she might not, or she might feel they were intruding a bit too far, or...it could've been her.

Whatever the case, the Tear connection had flooded with new, clean energy just a little earlier that day. She and Haruka only knew a little, but they agreed it was probably some sort of intervention from the merfolk goddess, Aqua Regina. It was impossible to tell what was going on, but they both simply hoped the princesses were alright.

Shiori managed to convince Haruka to eat while they waited for Abigail's response, which did take a while. They'd both finished their fish before it came in, and Haruka promptly read it, then passed her phone across the table again.

**From Abigail:** jeez way to scare a girl I almost dropped my coffee. Okay so what you wanna do is picture the seven Tear colors, make sure you add the second pink. Feel the connection then hone in on that one specifically. I can't promise you'll get much, or anything.  
**From Abigail:** when I'm not practically sleepwalking I'll give it a go myself

“We'll both try it,” Shiori said encouragingly. “Okay?”

Haruka nodded. “Okay.”

Once Haruka had closed her eyes, Shiori did the same. In her mind, she imagined the seven colors as large pearls, then trusted Abigail's suggestion and duplicated the pink one. She then opened herself to the connection, something she'd only tried once or twice. The Aqua Tear was closest, though considering it was around her own neck, that made sense. A Pink was right next to her, with Haruka. Green was somewhere in the city...Indigo and Purple both seemed to be beyond the country, though not by much – China, maybe? Melodia mentioned she had family there, once. Understandably, the Orange gave no response at all. Yellow...

Mm. Hm. That was odd. According to the vague pulls she got from the connection, the Yellow Tear was almost right on top of them. Was...Was Abigail nearby?

She would focus on that after this. For now, she turned to the second Pink pearl in her mind, trying to see if she could get anything out of it. It...It definitely existed, she could tell that after a few seconds. However, it was a great distance away, and didn't seem to have the same power that even the guardians did. Shiori tried to fit it to a country, and after some time, managed to pin it somewhere in Central America. Beyond that, it started to get hazy.

Now knowing a bit more, she condensed her focus on that area of the world. She wanted to know what this girl looked like, just a face or even an age bracket. Something to help them find out who she was.

A hand touched hers, and her focus snapped towards the southern part of Central America. Finding courage in Haruka's help, she delved deeper, now having a much smaller space to try and search through. She didn't know anything about the Americas, really, but it was definitely much easier to sense the connections when she knew where to look.

Blue eyes flashed in front of her. They felt tired, but fierce. She clung to those eyes, trying to zoom out, see just a little more. Haruka's other hand piled atop their linked fingers, giving just the boost they needed. Black hair, unkempt and almost seeming to have been slashed short by some kind of knife or other blade. And scars – she could feel so many scars on this girl...woman. This woman had been through some kind of hell to receive so many wounds, to keep so many scars.

A faint pink pulse resonated from the woman's spirit. The pile of hands clenched, both of them
trying to see just a little more. Who was she? Was she alright? Could they help her?

Shiori felt something grab at their power, and nearly drew back. DON'T GO! shot through her head, and she froze, the hand beneath Haruka's starting to feel clammy with discomfort.

Pink, the voice begged. One of you is Pink!

Haruka squeaked. The confirmation seemed to go through, because the new pink light seemed to strengthen, and the grip tightened – was it the woman with the Tear? Was she talking to them through the connection...was that even possible?

Hello? Shiori didn't know if it would work, but she had to try. Who are you?

Instead of answering, the woman gave her own question. Do you know someone named Zeo? Or— Or Xiaolian?

We know Xiaolian, an unfamiliar voice cut in. Yellow shone in, Abigail seeming to pick up on whatever the hell was going on. I think she has a friend named Zeo. Is he from America?

Yes, New York. Tell him something for me!

Haruka was starting to tense. What...do you want us to tell him?

They were losing hold. The woman's pink light was starting to fade. His mother! His mother's study, he - to look inside! She needs him - look in her study! The key – their wedding photo!

Who are you? Abigail was quick enough to ask before they lost her for good. Please, Xiaolian wants to know!

The hold seemed to waver, the pink light tinted with...guilt? I...Tell her – glad she got – to her mom! That – safe!

That's not what I-

The hold was gone. Shiori felt her stomach churn as the connection was split by something dark and cold, and she and Haruka clung to each others' hands as their minds settled from the rebound. They both tried to reach for the Pink echo, but even with their knowledge of where she was, they couldn't seem to find her again.

Shiori swallowed nervously. Something wasn't right. Whoever had the Pink echo was in some kind of danger – she'd sounded frantic. And that darkness...she didn't even want to know what it might be.

Slowly, she opened her eyes, ready to ask Haruka if she was okay. What she didn't expect was the woman standing next to their table, the actual owner of the hand in the middle of the pile. Haruka was already staring at her, and Shiori did the same.

The woman hesitantly drew her hand back, wrapping it around her Yellow Tear pendant for stability – something Shiori often did as well. “Hi,” she said hoarsely, “I'm Abigail, and this is not how I expected my morning to go.”

She ignored the angry ramblings of her captor, and the sickening energy of his ghost companion. After being able to reach Xiaolian, to assist Aqua Regina with saving her, she felt empowered again. She knew she'd get out of here, and she knew she'd reunite with her family.
Today, she'd saved Xiaolian. She'd felt three Tear guardians reach out to her, and she'd told them her message. She hoped Zeo would find what he needed to find. She hoped Xiaolian would remember. She knew that after this, finding her would be a lot more important. Princess or guardian, their kind did not abandon their own. She'd be found, and she'd kick this guy's ass.

*Today, she reflected, was a good day.*

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**Call From: Haruka**

Quickly swallowing her food, Dia gave her mother an apologetic look and answered the phone. “Nǐ hǎo—uh-” She had to take a moment to switch to Japanese. “Hi, what's up?’”

“Melodia-san, I think she's in trouble!”

“...What?”

“The Pink echo. We got through to her, but something's wrong-”

Shiori's voice cut Haruka off. “There's some sort of darkness that broke the connection. We can't reach her again. We have an idea of where she is, but it isn't working anymore!”

“Hey, hey, calm down!” Dia urged. “Start from the beginning. You sensed her through the connection?”

“Y-Yes!” Haruka was the one to respond. “We were able to trace her to southern Central America with our combined efforts. We know what she looks like, but it's not very good. She had so many scars...it looked like she'd been through so much...”

Fumbling to grab her bag, Dia had her Characters hold her phone as she pulled out the notebook inside. Flipping to an empty page, she took the pencil from the spiral binding and set it to the paper. When the phone was back in her hand, she instructed, “Start describing her for me.”

“Blue eyes,” Shiori started. “Um, she seemed to be middle aged, I think. Her hair was black, and it looked like some sort of blade had slashed it off at about her shoulders. And...like Amami-san said, there were so many scars...all over her...”

Dia wrote all of this down. “Any clue on her ethnicity?”

“She looked Asian, I think? I'm not sure.”

Comparing this with the ragged woman she'd seen in her mind, Dia nodded to herself. “That all matches what I saw earlier... Was her pendant chipped up?”

“Y-Yes!” Haruka answered. “But, Melodia-san, she—she spoke to us, too! Is that normal?”


Having only been partially listening, Mingzhu blinked. “Talk through the...No, I don't think so...is this about the Pink echo?” When Dia nodded, she frowned. “Maybe...its holder used the current Pink Tear as a bridge. We don't know what kind of bond two Tears of the same color could have...”

Dia brought the phone back to her ear. “It's not, but she could've caught hold to Haruka-san's Tear. What did she say?”
“She has a message for your friend Zeo.” A third voice came from the phone, and Dia had trouble placing it. “We were losing her at this point, but I think she knows his mom?”

“What? Zeo's mom died five years ago...Uh, who are you?”

The voice scoffed. “You really don't remember. I'm Abigail, Dia. Ran into these two at breakfast.”

“...Hi?” That was a bit awkward.

She heard Shiori arguing for the phone, but Abigail refused to give it over. “Melodia, listen. Zeo needs to look in his mom's study. There's some kinda key around their wedding photo. I don't know what it's about, but it sounded important. Make sure you tell him.”

Dia scribbled a quick note down. “Uh, okay. I will. Is there anything else?”

After a bit of scrambling for who got to hold the phone, Haruka spoke. “She knows you. By your Chinese name.”

“...What? That's not...I don't use that name publicly, only my family and close friends know that name...” Dia tried to put a name to the ragged woman with the extra Pink Tear, but even though she looked familiar by some vague sense, she couldn't place anything. “Did she...say anything else about me?”

“Yes. She said...I think...She said she's glad you got home to your mom, and that you're safe. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Xiaolian, listen to me. I don't know how, I don't know why...there's no easy way to say this. Something seems to have pulled us into another...world, dimension. I'm not sure. But if we just stay together, I'll make sure that you get home to your mom. Okay? Xiaolian?”

“O-Okay...”

“By Regina,” Dia whispered, dropping her pencil.

“Don't cry, Xiaolian, please. I'm right here.” The ragged woman sat by the curled up, 12 year old Melodia, pulling her into her arms. “We'll get you home to Mingzhu, sweetie. I promise.”

“I didn't wanna be here!” Melodia sobbed. “I didn't want this!”

“None of us did. But we'll get back, okay? You just have to be strong. Remember, you're from the Beylin Fist. Show me how strong you are, so you can tell everyone in the village that you beat the Pearl Tear curse! You got home and you brought someone back with you! That's what we're gonna do, okay? We're gonna break this curse!”

Dia whimpered into the phone as the memories rushed back. They were jagged, incomplete, but they were more than enough to solidify what her mother had theorized.

Melodia could still feel the multiple connections to the other Tears. There were so many, she couldn't really tell them apart...counting was impossible, as they all tried to blend together.

She'd been taken to another dimension by the Pearl Tear curse. She'd met the previous Pink guardian, who knew about the Beylin Fist. They'd both gotten back somehow, but while she'd forgotten everything, the woman remembered. They'd beaten the curse and gotten home.

'The Indigo connection returned. Jiao's Pearl Tear, with a new princess.' That was what Mingzhu's
theory had said. In the process of getting home, she and the woman must have found Jiao, or at least her pendant...

No. Wait a minute.

Dia shut her eyes, the pieces slowly falling together. *She knew my name. She knew Mom. She knew about the Beylin Fist. The Indigo Tear came back with us and found Alyssin...The Pink echo appeared...Alyssin was terrified of meeting my family...She knew the family song...Black hair and blue eyes...*

Her stomach churned. Gripping her phone tightly, she told the Tear guardians shakily, “I'm going to send you a photo.”

Without explaining, Dia opened her camera app and pointed her phone at her mother. Not understanding, Mingzhu nonetheless sat still and let her photo be taken. Once she had it, Dia quickly sent it to Haruka, then waited anxiously for the verdict.

At least one of them gasped. “Who is that?” Abigail demanded.

Dia felt the weight of uncertainty fall from her shoulders. Answers she'd been trying to find for four years were suddenly in her grasp, from her disappearance to her amnesia, all the way to Alyssin's request not to tell Mingzhu about her and her anxious behavior the past few days as she finally met her. Part of her was relieved to finally know – the rest of her was desperate for more information.

“That's my mom,” she forced out, not quite feeling the booth beneath her. “I think...I think I know who has the Pink echo.”

“You do?”

It was near torture to look her mother in the eyes as she answered, “I think it's the previous Indigo Princess. My aunt Jiao.”

Chapter End Notes

Temporary Hiatus started 4/16/2018, will check back in middle of May if I can  
I uh, wasn't planning to add this side plot yet, but something kept telling me it was time.  

Song: "For Fruits Basket" from Fruits Basket - English translation  
Upcoming profiles: Alyssin (slow WIP)  
Contact us for suggestions on Memory Moon chapters: Character history, past events, what ifs, world lore, etc. Anon is always open and credit will be given if requested.  
Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings and full profiles are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/  
ADDITIONALLY, MEL'S ACCOUNT IS GOOD: https://lunarcentric.deviantart.com/  
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
Melodia was more than happy to spend a few hours recounting her beyblade training and battles to an intensely excited boy-tealhair-happy, who was devastated that he’d never heard of it before. When girl-tealhair-quiet tried to look it up online, they found no record of them.

Something was wrong.

Boy-tealhair-happy suggested she might be on the wrong planet, but she couldn't tell if he was being serious. Girl-tealhair-quiet chided him nonetheless. Hoping to soak away her worries, Melodia asked where the bathroom was.

She used her Tear to test the water temperature without touching it, so she wouldn't have to wrestle her tail over the side. When she sat in the tub, her body failed to transform for the first time in two years. After sitting there for several minutes with no change, Melodia slowly got out and dried herself off, somehow getting dressed again in her numb state. She then sat on the floor, blankly staring at nothing.

Melodia had no idea what was going on. She just knew that she was scared and alone and she just wanted her mom. She wanted someone to talk to that wouldn't think she was crazy. She didn't want to be alone.

not alone

Melodia jolted, lifting her pendant from her neck as she realized it had suddenly started to glow. As she did, a warmth rushed through her, pulses of familiar power coming with it – Pearl Tears. An endless number, some faint and some burning with light.

You are not alone, princess. The voice spoke again, coming from the Tear connection itself. Melodia didn't know how that was possible, but she clung to it. “A-Aqua Regina-sama? Is that you?”

I'm the Indigo princess. Are you okay? What's your name, sweetie? The voice was...calm, and gentle. It reminded her of her mom's.

“M-Melodia. Xiaolian Melodia. I'm th-the Purple princess...”

...You're...Mingzhu's daughter?

“Y-Yes?”

Oh...Oh, honey, it's okay. It'll be okay, I promise. Where are you? Do you know?
Melodia looked around nervously as she and her new friends approached the huge arena, trying to locate the Indigo Tear that she could sense was nearby. Man-spikyhair-brotherly kept trying to herd her along, and she was starting to worry they’d get inside without meeting the Indigo princess. She knew how tournaments went, no matter what the sport was – it would be impossible to find anyone inside.

“Dia, are you sure you’re okay?” Girl-tealhair-quiet asked. She was wearing a long coat and hat to hide herself, as boy-tealhair-happy was dressing up as her to take her place in the tournament. “You can go back to the hotel if you want.”

“N-No, I’m...just looking for someone.” She couldn't focus as well as she'd like to with all the noise around, so it was hard to get a fix on what direction she needed to go. “But I’m not sure what she looks like...”

Girl-tealhair-quiet nodded, and moved to say something to man-spikyhair-brotherly that Melodia didn't catch. He nodded, though, and led her over to a quieter area near the wall. From there, it was easier to think, and as Melodia kept looking around she made sure her pendant was in sight, hoping that if the Indigo princess already knew who she was, she'd be looking, too. She set her Tear energy as a beacon, now that she had the focus to do so.

She and man-spikyhair-brotherly waited for about ten minutes before the Indigo Tear energy flashed in excitement. From the crowd of people trying to get in, a woman broke through and ran towards them. She looked like a mess – torn clothes, shaggy hair – but her Haert was bursting with relief. “Xiaolian!”

Seeing the Indigo pendant around her neck, Melodia silenced her beacon, launching forward to meet the woman in a tight hug. “I’m so happy you're here. I thought I was alone...”

“No, no, you're not alone. I’m right here, sweetie.” The ragged woman looked up and smiled at man-spikyhair-brotherly gratefully. “Thank you for waiting with her. I’m sure you're eager to get inside.”

The man's smile was soft, and he shook his head. “It’s alright. Are you a relative of Dia's?”

“Uh...” The woman looked down nervously at her, then slowly nodded. “Y-Yes, though I haven’t seen her since she was a baby... I’m Jiao Cheng, her aunt.”

“The mermaid princesses have been under a curse for a very long time. Some of us are ripped away from home, and we’re sent here.” Jiao unlatched the hood of her bag and flipped it open, letting Melodia see the numerous shell pendants inside. “I’ve been able to find all of these through the Tear connection, but I never found their owners. This has been happening for...centuries. Maybe longer.”

Melodia reached inside, pulling out the first pendant she grabbed. It was pink, a little chipped up and missing part of a wing. In response to her touch, it pulsed a few times with light, and Jiao sat beside her, watching carefully. “That’s never happened before...”

“This feels familiar,” Melodia murmured, faintly recognizing the Haert that was still clinging to the pendant. “I think...I think I met the person who had this.”

Jiao's eyes widened. “But that's...Xiaolian, have you been to New York?”
“Y-Yeah?”

“The woman who had that pendant came from there. She...She got hurt, really badly, when she got here...” Jiao looked away sadly. “I don't...suppose that you know a boy named Zeo Abyss? Or a girl named Kayla?”

Stunned, Melodia nodded. Jiao frowned, then continued, “Then you must've known their mom, too. Brooke. That...that one was hers.”

“...But...But Mrs. Abyss died last year...”

“No, sweetie. She was a Tear guardian. She got caught by the curse, with the Orange guardian and the Aqua and Yellow princesses. I don't know where they are, but I can feel their Tears.” Jiao gave the pendant a guilty glance. “Brooke told me to take this, so that I could find her kids and give it to them if I ever got home. Or their descendants, if that much time had passed...”

“Just hold on!” Jiao shouted, clinging to Melodia tightly as winds and red lightning twisted through the stadium. “It won't hurt us, I promise! We just have to wait until the energy dies down!”

Melodia could only wail in reply, the terrified screams of spirits rushing through her head. The marks on her arms felt like they were burning as spirit-dragon-protective materialized, standing above them in an attempt to block the winds.

A bolt of red rushed towards them, and Melodia was pulled into a kaleidoscope of colors, which quickly gave way to an unending black. Jiao was gone, and so were all her friends. She floated there alone, too terrified to move, until an orange light swirled around her, almost comfortingly.

You don't deserve this, a woman's voice said. The light surrounded her, and when everything settled, Melodia was sitting in a field she recognized, a river not too far away. The orange light was gone.

I'm sorry. I really am. But it's best that you forget everything that happened for now. As Melodia turned to find the source of this second voice, a small, light blue hand touched her face. All the memories of her new friends, and her aunt, were shoved behind mental locks. The markings given to her by the spirits faded until they were barely visible, and she collapsed, blacking out.

Melodia dropped the Menta moon, grabbing her head with a pained groan. Across the table, her mother reached for her, putting a hand as close to her as she could. Her phone was silent, the call still going but the device having been placed on the table.

As the Menta's glow dimmed, Melodia struggled for air. Pieces of her memory had been ripped from the vaults created by...whatever had locked them away, and they spun around trying to find their place.

Something tiny and warm touched her hand, and for a split second her vision blurred. New energy swarmed her, leading the memories home and letting them settle. Her headache faded. As she lowered her hands, she saw Hope holding one, her eyes glowing with gentle light.

“Are you okay?” she asked, keeping her voice quiet. Melodia couldn't answer right away, still
trying to pull herself back to the present. Her free hand clenched into a light fist, shaking beside her slightly as she hummed, grounding herself with the power of her Tear. She felt, rather than heard, when Mingzhu joined in. When the guardians on the other side of the call joined in. It only took a minute or so for her body to settle, and she let her fist drop to the table, barely making it jolt.

“Yeah,” she breathed, looking from her mom to her Characters. Hope still held her hand; Annie was right beside her. “Yeah, I think I’m okay.” Her gaze dropped to the Menta moon. “I don’t remember taking that out.”

Pulling her hand away, Hope smiled. “Annie and I did, when you were taking the photo of your mom. I thought you might need it, ’cause it looked like you were trying to remember something.”

Melodia nodded, reluctantly letting the power Hope gave her fade away. The Character’s eyes were no longer glowing, either – she remembered this happening before, in Japan. Just before a glitch stole away whatever memory she’d regained. Was this Hope's Chara-Change?

What was the wish that had brought Hope to life?

“Xiaolian.” Mingzhu’s voice was shaky, and when Melodia looked up at her, she was wide-eyed and jittery. “What are you talking about? Jiao was taken by the curse...my sister is gone.”

Melodia took her mother’s hand, carefully shaking her head. “She was there, Mom. When I went missing. She was there, and...she had at least a hundred pendants with her, she said they all went to that dimension. I...I can't really put together how I got back, but she was there when I did, so I think she got home at the same time.” Mingzhu’s hand was shaking violently, so she held it tighter. “Something must have gotten her. This...darkness that blocked Haruka-san and the others. But it has to be her, mom. She looks like you.”

“No...n-no, she...”

“Mingzhu-san?” Abigail’s voice came from the phone. “I don’t think she meant to hide from you. Whatever's keeping her away, I think...maybe it’s something to do with the curse. I don't know anything about other dimensions, but...if you want, we can try looking into it. Maybe we can figure out why she didn't come back to you.”

Melodia glanced at Annie for just a second, nodding minutely. Annie's Chara-Change activated, and Melodia stood from the booth, circling around to sit beside her mom and hold her tightly. “Our family may be in a million pieces right now,” she whispered, “but we're going to put it back together one a time. I promise.”

Without needing to be asked, Hope ducked into Melodia's bag and retrieved Mingzhu's music disc, bringing it out and pushing it into the woman's hand. Mingzhu clutched it instinctively, her thumb instantly sliding across the activation spot. The cafe was filled with an instrumental of the family song, and for a full play-through of it, Melodia held her shivering mother and reminded her to breathe. She heard her phone through the music, a simple sound as the call was ended from the other side.

For three more play-throughs of the song, Melodia sat with her mother and gave her all the support she could. After that, with her own head swimming with confusion, she helped Mingzhu pay the bill, and they gathered their things, and she very illegally drove her mother home so she could go back to bed.

Alyssin knew as soon as they walked through the door that something had happened. As silent as
the Beylin Fist, she watched Melodia lead Mingzhu to her room, the woman's magic disc playing a soothing tune. Aguma followed them, and for the next few minutes she heard the trio singing along to the disc's music. After that, Melodia and Aguma returned, closing the door behind them.

“Alyssin?” Melodia's voice was quiet, but held no hint to her previous muteness. “Can I talk to you outside?”

She sounded tired. Worried. Maybe a little scared. Alyssin hoped everything was okay.

They headed to the backyard, Melodia absently kicking some pebbles off the path to the shrine. Alyssin waited for her to speak again, not sure how to ask anything.

Eventually, Melodia stopped kicking at rocks and turned to face her. “Alyssin, I need you to do something for me.”

“Okay...”

After glancing towards the house, biting her lip, and slowly looking back, Melodia requested, “I need you to check your Tear's energy and see if my aunt Jiao is still alive. Like we had you practice with my mom.”

Her muscles locked up. Alyssin had to consciously remind herself to breathe. “Um, why?”

Melodia spent a while fiddling with her clothes and hair before she answered. She wasn't looking at Alyssin anymore. “We think she's the one holding the Pink echo. I...I remember meeting her when I went missing. Just before you showed up in New York. I-I'm not saying I need answers for how that happened, because you have that vow, and...” She growled at herself a bit, pulling her hat off to run her fingers across the top of her head. “My mom's a mess right now. We don't have confirmation, and she really needs it. I'm not asking for anything except if the Tear can sense she's alive.”

There were tears in her eyes when she finally looked back at Alyssin. “Please. For my mom.”

Alyssin swallowed. She'd only just met Mingzhu, but she had already promised herself that she'd do anything she could for that woman. She was like the mom she'd never had. “O-Okay.”

She shut her eyes. Instead of reaching out for the Tear connection, she reached inwards, searching for the people that held a bond with her specific Tear. She immediately sensed herself and Melodia; inside, Aguma and Mingzhu. Somewhere farther off was Aguma's father.

There was one more light in the bonds, and she dug deep to find it. It was just at the edge of her range, and she strained to keep it in sight, but she held on just long enough to identify the woman.

She tried not to let her own tears show. “Y-Yeah. It...She doesn't feel as healthy...as the rest of us, but she's there. Your aunt's alive.”

The words she'd wanted to say for four years had finally left her mouth. Her tears betrayed her, the painful weight of lies lifting from her shoulders. Melodia stepped forward to take her hand, but didn't look surprised.

“Did you already know that?” she asked quietly.

It was just vague enough that Alyssin didn't feel the warning presence of the vow. “Yes,” she choked out. “I knew the whole time. I couldn't tell you. I'm so sorry.”
For the second time since coming to China, Alyssin buried herself in a comforting hug, and cried until the feeling of guilt was gone.

“Hi, I'm here to pick up my renewed trainer license? Melodia Thompson.”

“Alright, I'll go see if it's finished processing yet. This might take a bit, so feel free to wait in the lobby.”

“Thank you!” Dia turned to Alyssin and Xue, smiling. “They've got really good snacks in the bakery section of the PokeMart. You wanna take a look?”

Doing significantly better than before, Alyssin nodded. “Sure. I've...never been in one of these before...”

Dia chuckled. “One of these days we should look into getting you a license. I can think of a couple ice-types you might like.”

“Ah, maybe...” Alyssin shrugged, following Dia back down to the first floor. “I've...heard Zeo mention we live in the 'Great Lakes League' region? That's for the gym challenge, right?”

“...Yes, but I'm going to be honest with you, that's something that glitched away my third day hiding in New York. I know the city has a gym, or at least something...but nothing other than that.”

“Right...” Alyssin frowned. “But it has gotten better?”

After a few seconds to consider, Dia nodded. “Yeah. It's gotten a lot less fritzy since the new year started.” She could honestly say Melody joining her might have had something to do with it, with the timing. Or maybe one of the rainbow gods. “It does still have its moments, though.”

With a reassuring smile, Alyssin noted, “Still better than no progress, though.”

Dia nodded in agreement. As the two reached the PokeMart section, they turned their attention to the bakery. There were a number of global foods like donuts, muffins, and the like, but Dia was more drawn to the Chinese goods. She could only ever get them when she visited her mom, after all.

While she fairly quickly decided on a couple of Mahua – and informing Melody that yes it's basically just a twisted donut but it's tasty okay – it took Alyssin a significantly longer time. It was probably from her lack of knowledge about Chinese pastries and sweets; she didn't seem to know what to go for. Eventually she wandered from the glass case to the shelves, checking the basic breads and the like. Dia let her take her time, letting Xue lead her around to find a snack as well. For some reason, the Delibird grabbed a jar of black raspberry jelly. To each their own, she supposed.

After checking on Alyssin, and seeing she was no closer to deciding, Melodia began to wander the shelves to see if there was anything else of interest. She knew she had a decent amount of money in her account, and she'd be able to pay as soon as the attendant brought her license down.

While shopping wasn't her favorite thing to do, she wanted to do something nice for Alyssin, even if it was small. Distracting her was good, too – she hadn't realized just how much control this vow had over her. To know her predecessor was alive, but being unable to tell her family... Alyssin must have gotten the Tear directly from Jiao, shortly after she and Dia made it home.

And then there was Zeo. Due to the time difference, he was either asleep or headed to bed soon.
(she hoped), so it would be better for her to wait until his morning to talk to him. If she had remembered what her aunt had said about his mom...she felt terrible. Hopefully, he'd be able to keep stable. She'd have to be careful about how she said things.

You...don't happen to recognize any of those blurry figures, did you? Dia asked of Melody, who'd been trying to review the unlocked memories since they'd un-merged. I know we didn't get any names, but...

I...I don't know. I mean, I might know, but with you not remembering, it wouldn't mean anything to you. And if I'm wrong, that'd be pretty awkward... Melody sighed. But, if I'm right, they were good people. You're lucky you wound up with them.

That...That was good enough, for now. It would be dangerous to try and unlock more of those memories. Dia could feel them now, professional vaults in her mind, the work of someone who definitely wasn't human. That little light blue hand...what was it that had locked the experience away? More importantly, why?

Why was it 'best' that she forget it all?

She was glad to be pulled from her thoughts by her name being called across the intercom. Sending Xue to stay with Alyssin, Dia made her way back upstairs to pick up her new license. After answering the standard security questions that came with the unique trainer class – a final check to ensure she was who she said she was - she waited a couple more minutes, and it was finally handed over to her. Hey, see? I told you the photo would come out okay.

Mrf...

Her license now in hand, she headed back downstairs to give it a quick check on one of the computers. When she was satisfied it was active and ready to go, she returned to the PokeMart.

“Look!” Alyssin was waiting for her, having gotten a basket and filled it to the brim with some kind of...snack cake? “They have Dorayaki!”

Oh, the pancakes with the red bean paste. Michiru liked those a lot. “I didn't know you liked those. Or...knew what they were.” Dia shrugged. “Whatever. Maybe...just put a few back? That's kind of a lot~”

While Dia was still speaking, someone shoved past them, yanking the basket from Alyssin's hands. The thief walked silently to the cashier, placed it on the counter, and glanced back impatiently.

“Anything else?”

Dia found herself just sort of blinking. “K-Kyoya?”

“Oh, hey!” Benkei peered out from behind one of the shelves, smiling broadly. “I didn't expect to see you here, Melodia!”

Alyssin's gaze shot between the two boys, her brain struggling to catch up. “Wait—what's—why'd you take the basket?”

It was a good bit easier for Dia to figure it out. “It's okay, Alyssin. It's his way of being nice.” She darted over to the bakery case, grabbing the Mahua she'd decided on earlier, and placed the pastry bag next to the basket. Xue followed her example, waddling over to give Dia her jelly.

Kyoya added the numerous Dorayaki and other items to his purchase, which was nothing but a few berry bundles and a gallon of water. He looked a bit scratched up, but that was most likely from the
training he'd been doing since they'd gotten to China. This was Kyoya, after all – he couldn't just not train. “How's your mom?”

That was unusually polite of him. “She's doing okay. Sleeping off some stress right now, we...just learned something kind of intense.”

He didn't say anything in response, but he did glance at her briefly. She was a bit out of practice with Kyoya-language, but did remember that meant he was listening. “Uh, it's kind of complicated, but basically we just found out that her sister's alive. Somewhere. And maybe in trouble...”

“I hope you find her.” She could feel the pain in his words, and felt a little guilty. They might find Jiao, but Kimiko and Kakeru were a different story.

_Dia? Please tell me you're not that stupid._

_Um, what?_

_Two words for you. Orange guardian._

Dia momentarily froze, unable to take the bag full of Dorayaki when Kyoya held it out to her.

_“Kimiko,” Gummy repeated more forcefully. “She disappeared in an orange light, didn't she? Five years ago? As in the same year the Orange guardian went missing?”_

_“She got caught by the curse, with the Orange guardian and the Aqua and Yellow princesses. I don't know where they are, but I can feel their Tears.”_

Feeling a lump in her throat, a few things occurred to her. One, they had high suspicions that Kimiko was the Orange guardian. Two, the guardians and princesses affected by the curse were all taken to another dimension. Three, Jiao had sensed the most recent Orange guardian while Dia had still been there, meaning she was still alive and connected to her Tear.

Fourth, there was no sea foam curse keeping her from explaining everything to Kyoya.

When he nudged her with the bag, she jolted. He was looking at her oddly; she took the bag and passed it back to Alyssin, also taking her Mahua and Xue's jelly. She didn't know if she had all the right words for this, or how she'd explain at all, but there was no way she could just let him leave without telling him.

After the jelly was passed down to Xue, Dia used her now free hand to grab Kyoya's arm as he turned away. “I need to talk to you. Now.”

He paused, glancing over his shoulder at her. “About?”

“...I don't have any proof, but I might know where Kimiko and Kakeru are.”

She saw his eyes widen. With barely a second of hesitation, he whirled around and ordered, “Benkei! Stay here until I come back.”

“Uh, you got it!”

“We'll be back,” Dia assured Alyssin, before taking Kyoya to the lobby. She asked for a room at the front desk, signed the appropriate forms, and took the key. Then, she practically bolted for the hall with bedrooms, hearing Kyoya right behind her. They found the room, unlocked it, and Dia ran through multiple options as to how she could explain everything while she closed the door.
“...I don't know how to say any of this without sounding crazy,” she warned him, “so you're going to have to trust me.”

When she turned to look at him, he only nodded. Swallowing, she put a hand to her pendant. “You know how I got this from my mom when I met her?”

“...Yes. What's it got to-”

“It...means I'm-I'm princess of the Purple m-merfolk kingdom in the Antarctic Ocean.” Dia spilled her title out before she could fully process what she was saying. Every part of her was tensed in habitual fear of the sea foam curse. “My m-magic songs, the way music p-pops out of nowhere, that's where that comes from.”

When she didn't spontaneously explode into sea foam after the first five seconds, Dia was able to breathe again. She felt the color rush back to her face as the panic wore off, and took a moment to breathe deeply into her hand. I said it. Oh Regina, I said it.

Kyoya had exactly one word to reply to her confession: “What.”

It felt like she was going against every warning her family had ever given her about merfolk – and honestly, she kind of was. “I...M-My mom's a mermaid. When I was separated from the family as a toddler, all the messed up energies locked my mer half away, a-and I didn't get it unlocked until I met my mom. That's why I could do the music magic, that's...that's a mer thing. I took my mom's place as the princess of the Purple kingdom, wh-which basically means if something goes wrong there, I'm in charge of protecting everyone. I mean, there's a royal council and guards and stuff, but —but I guess I'm still the highest power there—I'm babbling...”

She forced herself to breathe, and when that didn't quite work to calm her down, she crammed a piece of Mahua into her mouth. The taste and texture brought her nerves back down to normal, and she sighed in relief as she chewed. Okay. Okay, this isn't a bad start. Um, he'll probably want proof. I guess I could...I could transform. I should sit down for that...

“...Right. Okay.” Kyoya had his eyes closed, processing this. “You're a mermaid. That doesn't surprise me as much as it should.”

“...Really?”

“You're allergic to chlorine, suddenly stopped swimming after meeting your birth family, and merfolk are usually associated with music.” Kyoya opened his eyes and looked away, frowning. “So my adoptive sister's a mermaid. What the hell does this have to do with my birth siblings?”

Dia swallowed what was in her mouth. “You...You believe me? Just like that?”

He scoffed. “Since when have you ever lied to me?”

She could think of a few times regarding who ate the last insert-dessert-here when they were kids, but she figured that wasn't what he meant. “I...that means a lot. Thank you.” Kyoya...trusted her that much?

“So what do mermaids have to do with this?”

Right. Back to the important part. “Um... These pendants, there's seven. One for each kingdom, in each ocean. Rainbow, basically. And it's ideal for us to have all seven all the time, but...f-for years, we're thinking centuries, some kind of...curse, has been taking princesses and guardians — um, someone who carries the pendant but can't access all its magic — and making them disappear. Like
me. And...my aunt.”

Kyoya said nothing. That was probably kind of dangerous right now, but she took it as a cue to keep going. “When I was a baby, the curse got my aunt. Um, five years ago, it happened again, taking two princesses and two guardians. Then it took me the next year. Those three months I went missing.”

“How...Five years ago. Are you saying that Kimiko was involved in this somehow?”

“...I'm not completely certain...but Megumi and I both think that Kimiko was the Orange guardian at the time. And...And I still can't remember everything that happened to me, but I know that...the people taken by the curse get sent to another...dimension.” She glanced up at him, trying to figure out what he was thinking. Unfortunately, his expression was unreadable. “I met my aunt there, and she told me about it all. I think time might pass differently there, she...she's supposed to be my mom's twin, but she looks younger. I mean, she did then...there's a lot of details I don't know how to explain...”

She shook her head, realizing she was close to going off on a tangent again. “Anyway. My aunt said that she could sense the presence of an active Orange Tear – the pearl in the pendant – which means that if Kimiko really was the last Orange guardian, she's still alive over there. I just...I don't know how to get to her.” She absently nibbled at her donut. “By this logic, the curse would've been the orange light that took Kimiko, and it may have been the same thing that took Kakeru.”

Dia jolted when Kyoya punched the wall. “She was only six,” he growled. “Why the hell would she be chosen for something like that?!”

“I...I don't know. The spirit that usually takes the role was apparently unavailable...” She lowered her food, not very hungry anymore. “Kyoya, if I had known at the time, I swear I would've stopped her from being chosen. I have nothing but love and respect for our goddess, but I don't have a clue what she was thinking. I'm not even sure if she knew herself.” She sighed. “If I could go back there and find her, I would...you know that. I wish that I could.”

Tears threatened to spill out, unsurprisingly. Every time she thought about her missing adoptive siblings, she got emotional. “I miss them too, Kyoya. I'm sorry I didn't find them when I was there. I would've fought to stay until I did, if I'd known. You know that, right...?”

She tried not to cry, she really did. But the events of the morning were starting to catch up to her – meeting with Dashan and being caught by her Arrangement, realizing her aunt was alive and unlocking pieces of her missing memory, now having to tell Kyoya she knew where their siblings were, but that she couldn't bring them home? Later, having to tell Zeo that his mom was actually involved with merfolk and had been taken by their curse? Knowing her aunt was in some kind of trouble, and she couldn't do anything to help her?

Dia hadn't asked for any of this. She didn't want any of this. She just wanted her family to be in one piece again – and that included Kimiko and Kakeru.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered helplessly, putting her free hand to her face. She wanted to wipe away the tears, but they just kept coming. “I'm sorry I can't bring them home yet, Kyoya.” The hand holding the Mahua was gripped so tightly the donuts were being squished, as her body tried to curl in on itself. Melody was trying to comfort her, but it felt meaningless. Melody didn't know how she felt about her adoptive family. She didn't know what Dia would give up for them, or what lengths she'd go to for them, and Dia didn't think she ever would until they permanently merged.

She felt an unfamiliar pulse, followed by the sound something cracking and the boost of a nearby
Haert. Not even a second later, Kyoya's arms were wrapped around her, her face pressed gently onto his shoulder. There was a strange, dark green fluff around his neck – a scarf? - that hadn't been there before.

“It's not your fault,” he said quietly. She hadn't heard him use such a gentle tone since they were kids. It almost made her cry more. She slowly lifted her free arm around him in return, the other trapped by her face within the hug. Neither of them said anything else for a couple of minutes, Kyoya just giving her some time to cry it out.

As he let her go, Kyoya looked her in the eyes. They were as sharp as always, but for the first time in quite a while, she could see the kindness behind them. It was more comforting than anything he could have said.

Then again, when he opened his mouth next, it wasn't regular words that came out. He wasn't speaking – he was singing. Hesitantly, slowly, but clearly.

"Ikiterukagiri ishikoro darakedemo
Ookinakoede ganbare! Ganbare!
Tomarukotonai uchirano jinsei
Dakara owaranai utawo utaou"

It was the song she'd sung to him when they were younger, and when Fang's egg had been purified just a week ago.

"Wagamichiwo tsukisusume
Detaramena KYARAdeomoi
Rokudenashidemo aishiterunda mai daarin"

As he went on, his singing grew more confident, and within her bag she felt the Aquarius microphone come to life. She didn't know what to say – even though she'd grown up with her love of music, Kyoya had never once sung with, in front of, or for her.

Not until now.

"Bakayaro! Honto no jibun
Itaikoto itteyare
Hamidashitiekundayo chikazuitekundayo yumeni
Konoyaro! Honto no jibun
Detekoiyo kakuretenaide OH YEAH imasugu"

And when he reached the end, the song didn't stop – it kept going. It went beyond what she'd sung to him before.

"Yowakina orega iyanahimo arukedo
Sorede aitsuno kimochiga wakarunda
Kakkotsukeru ore hiichaukeredo
Dakara makezuni mata ganbarerunda"

"Doshaburimo haremo aru
Chicchanakoto kinisunna
Dekkai ashitano tameni KISUshite agetai"

Her adoptive brother leaned over slightly and brought her head closer to his, then for the first time in over ten years, planted a gentle kiss on her forehead. She almost started crying again.
"Bakayaro! Honto no jibun
Yaritaikoto yatteyare
Tobidashitekundayo tobikoetekundayo yumeni
Konoyaro! Honto no jibun
Daijoubusa kowagaranaide OH YEAH imasugu"

She hadn't realized how much she'd missed Kyoya when they'd seen each other before. He'd been so cold and distant since they'd lost Kimiko and Kakeru, and she knew that wasn't his fault, it was just how he dealt with it and who he'd become. Even so, she was so grateful to see him like this again. It was like a small piece of her family puzzle had wiggled back into place, making things just a little better.

"Nannimonai bashokara nanikaga hajimaru
Dakishimetaindaro kakedashitaindaro yume e"

"Bakayaro! Honto no jibun
Iitaikoto itteyare
Hamidashitekundayo chikazuitekundayo yumeni
Konoyaro! Honto no jibun
Detekoiyo kakuretenaide OH YEAH imasugu"

She was the one to initiate the hug this time, throwing her arms around him and fighting off her tears with relieved laughter. The microphone fell dormant again, the music it had summoned fading out. Kyoya tugged her hat off so that he could put his hand on her head, and he didn't say anything else.

When she eventually pulled back again, Kyoya handed her hat back. “It's not your fault,” he repeated.

Dia took a deep breathe in, then nodded and answered, “I know.”

He nodded, satisfied, and the green fluff of a scarf around his neck disappeared. At his side, a Character came into view, one she'd only met a handful of times. “We'll find 'em,” Fang said firmly, grinning toothily at her. “Even if we hafta search the whole universe, we'll find 'em!”

She found his grin was contagious. “Mhm!”

Dia gave Fang half of one of her squished Mahua to welcome him back, then handed the room key to Kyoya, urging him to maybe actually use the room at least one night. After that, she gave him one last hug – back to his stiff self, he didn't return it – then wiped her eyes and went back to join Alyssin.

Hopefully she'd get there before her friend went and made herself sick eating all those Dorayaki at once. Alyssin had a bad habit of not knowing how to pace herself with snacks...

Chapter End Notes

Song: "Honto no Jibun" from Shugo Chara - Japanese

Contact us for suggestions on Memory Moon chapters: Character history, past events, what ifs, world lore, etc. Anon is always open and credit will be given if requested.
Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings and full profiles are all going to be:
http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
ADDITIONALLY, MEL’S ACCOUNT IS GOOD:
https://lunarcentric.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
I...guess this is sort of the hiatus end? I mean, I'm releasing this chapter not too long
after the last one...

Sure. I guess.

Um, anyway, things are still going to be slow. I don't have any sort of chapter-buffer
going on, and it's hard to find the inspiration to write. I'll probably wait until next
month to post chapter 24. Hopefully I'll have 25 finished by then, that'd be cool. Yeah,
I think that'll be my goal.

“Okay, Faust. We've got breakfast set up now, so go for it. What was it you wanted to talk about?”

Faust let his gaze twitch between Zeo, Masamune, and Samuel. He wasn't sure, but he thought that
what was running through him right now might be 'nervousness'. “Well...the Destroyer Dome
preliminaries are today, as you're aware. I know Samuel isn't competing because his mother's
coming home from overseas the day of the tournament...but you two will be there.”

Masamune nodded. “Yeah, that's right. Everyone from the gym besides Samuel and Stanley are
gonna be in the prelims today.”

“...And Toby.” Faust saw as their expressions fell, and they tried to hide it by eating or drinking. “I
wanted to talk about that.”

He waited for them to nod in consent before he continued. “I...want to participate in his place.”

There was an abrupt silence across the breakfast nook. Having expected this, Faust simply went
on. “If we want to keep acting like nothing is wrong, then it would be suspicious for one blader of
the gym not to participate. It's especially questionable when it's one of your strongest bladers. I feel
like the others would start asking questions if I stayed on the sidelines.”

Trying to push past his 'nerves', Faust looked around at his acquaintances. “What do you think?”

Once again, he waited. The three exchanged glances he couldn't hope to read, before Zeo sighed.
“He's got a point. I don't like the point he's making, but he's got one.”

“Yes...” Samuel poked at his ham with his fork, frowning. “If I was able to pick up on it with a
hint, I'm pretty sure the others would notice something if 'Toby' didn't compete. I think the best bet
at playing normal is letting Faust do this.”

Masamune scratched his chin. “I mean...I get all that. It makes sense. But can you really pass as
Toby?”

“Yes.” Faust didn't feel comfortable looking at them. “Since I was an...add-on to his mind, I've
been linked to his personality, in a way. I've simply refrained from doing so as of yet due to the fact
that I assumed it would make you uncomfortable, or angry.”
Sighing, Zeo agreed, “Yeah, I probably would've been pissed. But to keep this secret...to keep everyone from panicking, I'll let it go. We gotta play this game until Lilura brings Toby back. I hate it, but...”

“I'll help you go over Toby's bey and stuff before you guys head out,” Samuel offered. “We can have a practice battle to make sure you're up for this.”

“Just be aware,” Masamune said quietly, “that if...something happens, we will have to stop you.”

Faust felt...tense. “I understand. Please pass it off as trauma if it does come to that.”

“...Yeah.”

Samuel smiled. “Hey, just think of happy things or somethin' while you're out there. Just focus on having fun.”

Fun? Faust didn't even really know what that word meant yet. For Toby, perhaps, but not for himself. “Yes, I'll try that...”

They were able to shift the conversation to a more lighthearted topic after that, and Faust found himself smiling along with them for the very first time. Though they were worried about what might happen, they were still trusting him to uphold the act. He wondered if this warm feeling inside him was what Melody had called 'happiness'.

After a short time, they were interrupted by Zeo's phone, which he excitedly answered. “Hey, Dia! How's it going with your cousin?”

Dia. Faust was 'worried' for her, and Melody as well, of course. They had been gone for a few days now, and hadn't contacted them much.

When Zeo's smile faltered, Faust took note. “No, I'm still at Toby's...oh, uh, I should tell you, Samuel-” He cut off, leading the others to start watching as well. Faust wondered what she was saying. “...Okay. I'm listening.”

It went on like that for a few minutes. Zeo would murmur an “Okay” or “Right...” but otherwise kept quiet. Faust didn't know which was talking to him, Dia or Melody, but he was getting the feeling that something had happened. Unfortunately, he had no idea how to ask.

Eventually, Zeo sighed. “No, I...I didn't know about it. I guess she just felt like it was something to keep to herself.”

Faust glanced over at Masamune, who caught his eye and shook his head – judging by his expression, he wasn't sure who 'she' was, either.

“...Sorry, just...trying to come to terms with this. Uh, what's the message?” In Faust's opinion, Zeo sounded a bit shaky. As the moments passed, he didn't look so good, either. “Okay. If it's anything mer related, I'll let you know.”

Mer related? As far as Toby knew – and thus, as far as Faust knew – the only mers they knew on a personal level were Melodia, Alyssin, and Megumi.

“...I'd rather you gave it to Kayla.”

With a jolt, Faust once again glanced at Masamune. Questioningly, he mouthed, His mother?
Masamune frowned, but his eyes widened after a moment of thought. *I'll ask,* he mouthed back, before turning as Zeo held the phone out.

“Hi guys!” Melodia's voice came through the device, now on speaker. Faust joined Masamune and Samuel's chorus of greetings in reply. “I wish I could stay and talk, but I promised to show Alyssin how to cook one of my mom's dishes for dinner. I miss you!”

“Miss you too, Dia,” Samuel assured her.

“Samuel?”

“I kinda found out yesterday. We'll, uh...fill you in when you get back.”

There was a sheepish chuckle. “Same... I've learned a hell of a lot that I didn't expect to.”

“We're here for ya, sis.”

“...I know. I love you guys. See you in a few days, I think.”

The boys gave a chorus of goodbyes, then Zeo hung up, his expression too complicated for Faust to read. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply a few times, then returned his phone to his pocket. “Dia wants me to check something at my house. I'll meet you guys at the stadium, okay?”

Faust nodded, while Masamune asked, “Was it something about your mom? You mentioned Kayla...”

Zeo twisted his mouth a few times, a tic he'd picked up from his dad, according to Toby's memories. “Well, um...apparently my mom was the guardian of the Pink pearl thing, and...the curse that takes guardians and princesses...got her. That's why...they couldn't find the rest of her body...”

“But Melodia had information about her?” Faust tried to push the subject past the unpleasant thoughts Zeo was probably having.

“A-apparently...” Zeo breathed in again, doing a remarkable job of keeping calm. “They get sent to this other dimension. Dia remembered a couple pieces...Her aunt, also caught by the curse, found my mom and got the pendant from her. It...doesn't sound like my mom made it.”

His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat, trying to push on as well. “But, um, her aunt did, and she's somewhere in Central America with it, and...I think Kayla would want it. A-And, um, I need to go...to my house, and check something. My mom gave Dia's aunt a message, and so...I need to go look in her study.”

Masamune was already starting to stand. “Do you want me to go with you?”

Even with what little he knew of emotions and expressions, Faust could tell that Zeo wanted to say yes. However, he ended up shaking his head. “I think...this is something that should stay within the biological family. I'll meet you guys at the prelims, okay?”

Masamune and Samuel exchanged worried glances, but it was Faust who said, “I hope there is something within that helps you find closure.”

These may not be his friends, but he hoped to change that. The small smile of thanks he got from Zeo seemed like a good step in the right direction.
To Dad; Kayla: Meet me at home as soon as you can. It's about Mom. I'll explain there.

All of the questions Zeo had held since his mother's death were starting to bubble up inside, rising back to the surface. After five years, some of them might finally get answered – in fact, the main one already had.

How did it happen?

While driving home, Zeo tried to keep himself calm. He breathed carefully, kept a firm grip on the handlebars, made himself look around at stoplights so he wouldn't get completely lost in his thoughts. He waved to little kids he saw, and nodded respectfully at their parents. He tried everything to keep his Arrangement from leaking out.

He wasn't so good, however, at doing the same with his questions.

What could be in her study? Did she leave something for us? Why did she lock it so thoroughly?

How long was she alive after she was taken? Was she in a lot of pain? Was she alone when she died, or did Dia's aunt stay with her?

Did she manage to reincarnate when she died, even in another dimension?

By the Riser, please let her have been reincarnated...

His mind was a jumbled mess by the time he made it to his house. Kayla was waiting by the mailbox, and ran to meet him at the door. Their father's car wasn't in the driveway, but Zeo parked his bike and led his sister inside without a word, stopping by the fireplace.

Trying not to let his hands shake, Zeo took a careful hold of his parents' wedding photo, lifting the frame off the wall. He swallowed. Just give us one answer...just one.

With Kayla at his side, he turned the frame around. There was nothing on the back, but he heard something shift inside. He flicked the clasps away, and had Kayla remove the backing. As she pulled it away, something metallic dropped to the floor, making a solid chink as it hit the bricks of the fireplace.

After quickly putting the frame back together and replacing it on the wall, Zeo and his sister knelt down to see what they'd discovered. It was a disc, just the right size to fit in Zeo's palm, made of a green metal speckled with blue and red. One side had been shaved into a small dome, and carved out of it was a symbol they knew very well – the same simple markings on their mother's cheeks. It was also the pattern decorating the top-center of her study door.

Kayla started fidgeting, her nerves getting the better of her. “Zeo, what's going on? What is this?”

He lifted his head, giving the wedding photo a long look. His father, bright and beaming and clean-shaven. He looked happier, less full of worry than he did now. There wasn't any gray in his hair, no wrinkles by his eyes.

And beside his father was his mother, in the middle of a laugh. Her orange hair was dolled up in four buns with braids hanging below, a modest wedding dress that seemed to flow around her like the ocean waves, all as a traditional Mithorian bride should be. Her eyes were as blue as her facial marks, several shades darker than the almost sky-blue of her skin. Ears like butterfly wings were spread out proudly, showing a near glow of bliss. Her feet were bare, showing the intricate swirling markings that had grown and spread throughout her life, the show of white almost looking like sea
foam. By the time Kayla had been born, Zeo remembered those sea foam swirls having erupted onto his mother's hands, making permanent white sleeves almost to her knuckles.

His grip on the metal disc tightened, while his free hand subconsciously grabbed for his sister. She held it without question, letting him take a moment just to breathe and look at her and remind himself that he still had family here. She didn't make him speak, but did help him stand, and followed dutifully when he began to walk towards their mother's study.

Zeo could only stare at the door for a few minutes. He vaguely heard a car pull up in the driveway, then the front door opening and their dad calling for them. Kayla shouted back, and he soon joined his children, putting a firm hand on Zeo's shoulder. It was enough to ground him, and again, he breathed carefully.

Still holding his sister's hand as well as the disc, Zeo haltingly recounted what Dia had told him. Brooke being the Pink guardian, being caught by their curse, dying while in the other dimension. He didn't have to say how, they all suspected the same thing – blood loss, from the...kidnapping, separating her lower legs from the rest of her.

Finally, he lifted the disc, explaining its purpose. Kayla squeezed his hand reassuringly before letting it go; his father nodded. Slowly, Zeo turned the disc around, setting the dome into the matching indentation on the study door. For a brief second, the surrounding wood shimmered blue, before the color spread through the curling wave pattern that led from the circle to the doorknob. The handle glowed, the lock clicked, and the door opened itself, letting the disc fall back into Zeo's hand.

When his children didn't move, Darrian Abyss stepped forward, pushing the door fully open and walking into his late wife's study for the first time in five years. He breathed out a murmur of surprise, noting the clean, albeit musty, state – Tracy's anti-dust enchantments had still been active all this time.

Kayla and Zeo cautiously followed their father, and began wandering around the room nostalgically. Everything was as they remembered – the cluttered bookshelves, the trash bin that always seemed to get knocked over, the piles of saved schoolwork from their childhood.

On quiet display in the far corner were two cracked eggs, each bigger than a bowling ball, carefully reconstructed from the large pieces they'd become when Zeo and Kayla had emerged from them. Zeo's was a faded, pale blue; Kayla's was a fiery orange. Even locked in the glass cabinet without care for five years, they seemed unaged – more of Tracy's magic at work, without a doubt.

Zeo bit back tears at the sight of them. He'd never really understood why his mother had kept the eggs, but now they were bringing back memories of him proudly showing his off to Toby, explaining to all his friends that yes, Mithorians lay eggs and hatch like birds! Isn't that cool? Yeah, I'm Bird-Man! Judging by the choked whimpers and giggles coming from Kayla, she was remembering similar events with her own friends.

With careful hands, Darrian skimmed through the journals scattered across the desk, judging their contents before setting them down again. The silence was finally broken when he spoke. “It looks like she was tryin' to find a way to break the curse.”

Zeo swallowed. Now that he was actually standing in the room, everything Dia had told him felt much more real. His mother had always been drawn to the ocean – water, after all, was her element. Maybe that was why she'd been chosen, why she'd felt determined to stop the curse...

And then that very curse had taken her away.
“Do…” Kayla’s voice wavered. “Do you think that trying to stop it is why she was taken?”

Darrian sighed, his hand gently sweeping over the small plushes lying next to the journals. “I...don't know. This is something she never told me about. Knowing what I do now, about the sea foam curse and the lives lost...I can understand why...” He smiled, even through the tears that were started to prick out. “It's no wonder she got so excited to know our little Dia wasn't just a mermaid, but a princess, huh?!”

Even in his uncertain state, Zeo found himself smiling as well. In the year between Dia finding her family and Brooke disappearing (dying), Brooke had practically been fawning over her – now they finally knew why. But it seemed like she’d never told Dia her title. Was there a reason for that...?

As the others replayed memories involving many of the objects in the room, Zeo collected himself. After five years, all they had were a small grave, a cold case, and a hole in their family. Even knowing what had happened, even having that bit of closure, he still felt like there was something more, something they were missing.

He thumbed through the journals himself, finding them to be filled with notes on the curse, from trying to find patterns in the disappearing princesses and guardians, to possible beings or spells that it could have originated from. She seemed to have narrowed it down to an actively monitoring being, like a minor god or some form of immortal. Zeo couldn't quite follow the processes that led her to this, but he believed it all the same.

As he gathered the journals up, having decided to hand them over to Dia's family so they could continue the research, he discovered that the pile had been hiding a small jewelry box. He paused at this, trying to remember if he'd ever seen it before – then realized that his mother had never actually worn any jewelry aside from her wedding ring. He set the journals aside and tried to open it, only to discover it was locked.

For a moment, he frowned. Then he shook his head and cupped his hand, gently calling on the wind – or at least, the warm air being blown into the room by the heater. Carefully, he directed it towards the key hole of the box, pressing his palm against it and letting the force of the condensed current trick the lock into opening. The simple act of using his Mithorian powers (no matter how weak they might be, given his half-human blood), without the twisted interference of his Arrangements, made him feel a little lighter and brought back a bit of his confidence.

He pulled the lid open. Inside the box sat only one item – an MP3 player. He picked it up, looking it over in confusion, then paused as he noticed the label on the back: If I'm Gone

“Dad, Kayla, you might wanna come look at this.”

The three of them gathered around the kitchen table, Darrian struggling to activate the device. It wasn't a simple MP3 like Zeo had thought – it was a similar object of Mithorian make, only vaguely familiar to Darrian from his past visits to the planet several years ago. As he waited, Zeo was nervous, but not as scared as he thought he would've been. Each step they’d taken up to finding this had reminded him of his own strength, and he knew that for his mom, his family, for himself, he had to be able to see this through.

Five minutes later, the device's screen lit up, projecting a hologram that showed a list of video files. Each was labeled with a simple number system – 'Year 1', 'Year 2', etc., up to 8, along with an additional video labeled 'First Thoughts' and a folder labeled 'Songs'.

In silence, Darrian selected the 'First Thoughts' video, and set the device on the table. As the video
loaded, he sat down; Zeo saw him tensing when Brooke appeared in the hologram, adjusting the camera she was using. She was...young. Going by the amount of white on her hands, Zeo would put this at not long after Kayla was born, 13 or 14 years ago.

Zeo's mom pulled back from the camera, watching it cautiously a moment before relaxing. After a few seconds of fiddling with her hair, she lowered her arms and cleared her throat. “Um...Right. Hopefully you'll...never have to see this, but...H-Hi. Darrian, Zeodore, little Kayla. If you are watching this...well, it means I'm gone. I wish I had more to say than that.” She paused, trying to breathe and calm herself. She seemed jittery and nervous, things Zeo had never associated with her. “Right now, it's the year 2000. A little before Kayla's birthday. I, um...I was just chosen to guard something important. An ocean goddess known as Aqua Regina has given me the task of guarding a pink pearl, until she can find someone who can wield its full power.”

Brooke reached out of view, then held up a pink version of the pendants that Dia, Megumi, and Alyssin had all worn for years now. “It's in this. And...I was warned of a curse that comes along with this responsibility. But if girls younger than me, still children, are being charged with this same thing, with the same risks, then I can hold onto this one and save at least one girl from those risks. Given that I'm not from the mer races that usually take this, or even a human, I was allowed to leave messages for you all in case...things go bad.”

With a forced smile, Brooke set the pendant back down. “I'm...going to try and break this curse. I don't know if I can, or if it's even possible, but for the sake of all these girls holding these same treasures, I feel the need to try. This is my chance to do something for the oceans that I fell in love with, and that brought me to Earth. The ones that helped me meet you, Darrian.”

Zeo reached over to put his hand on his father's arm, not even having to look to know how much this must be affecting him. He smiled, just a little, when his mother waved at the camera.

“I love all of you so much. I hope I get a long time to see you grow, Zeo, Kayla. I hope I get a long time to be your mother. Darrian, I hope you'll have helped me. Just know that...I-I'm sorry for being so selfish. This was something I couldn't leave alone. Not my beloved waters.” There were tears in her eyes now. “I hope one day I can tell you all this in person.”

Just before her calm mask broke, Brooke reached over to turn off the camera. A sob was cut off as the video ended.

Zeo could feel his own tears stinging at his eyes, but he brushed them back, not letting them fall. “Damn it, Mom,” he mumbled. “Of course you knew...”

“Mom would do anything for the ocean.” Kayla's voice was quiet, unsure of herself. “I...I-I wish I could understand...”

They sat there for a few minutes, each of them recovering. When he could breathe evenly again, Darrian shakily reached out to start the 'Year 1' video.

Once again, Brooke appeared. She apologized again, but seemed enthusiastic about her mission. It was now almost exactly a year later, according to her, and she had gathered notes on the curse from helpful merfolk around the New York area. She claimed to have a good feeling about making progress.

As she finished speaking about her progress, Brooke moved a bubble-like pink sphere to sit in front of her, looking excited. “I've been given so much help in so many ways since I started this task. Even if I'm not their princess, or even a mermaid, the merfolk I've met have been so kind and supportive in not just helping me ending the curse, but learning their ways. One of them even gave
me this – it's called an Aquarius Crystal. They say it can help channel musical energy, and I've used it to make something for all of you.”

She set her hands on top of the crystal, focusing for a moment. There was the briefest flash of light from within her pendant, sitting on the table, before it was mirrored in the sphere. A bright glow shone out and, barely affected by the video's quality, Zeo could hear music begin to play. It occurred to him, suddenly, that her mission had been what sparked her interest in music – how she'd discovered the soul's song.

Though they had recordings of his mother singing and they'd listened to them often in the past five years, they were nothing compared to the clarity in this one. It was impossible for any of them not to cry.

"I'm not afraid to fall
It means I climbed up high
To fall is not to fail
You fail when you don't try
Not afraid to fall
I might just learn to fly and
I will spread these wings of mine"

"If I get up I might fall back down again
So let's get up come on
If I get up I might fall back down again
We get up anyway
If I get up I might fall back down again
So let's get up come on
If I get up I might fall back down again
I might fall back down again
And we'll just jump and see, even if it's the 20th time
We'll just jump and see if we can fly"

"I'm not afraid to fall
And here I told you so
Don't want to rock the boat
But I just had to know
Just a greener side
Or can I touch the sky
But either way I will have tried"

"If I get up I might fall back down again
So let's get up come on
If I get up I might fall back down again
We get up anyway
If I get up I might fall back down again
So let's get up come on
If I get up I might fall back down again
I might fall back down again
And we'll just jump and see, even if it's the 30th time
We'll just jump and see if we can fly"

"I'm not afraid to fall
I've fallen many times
They laughed when I fell down
But I have dared to climb
I'm not afraid to fall
I know I'll fall again
But I can win this in the end"

Something within Zeo shifted.

"If I get up I might fall back down again
So let's get up come on
If I get up I might fall back down again
We get up anyway
If I get up I might fall back down again
So let's get up come on
If I get up I might fall back down again
I might fall back down again
And we'll just jump and see, even if it's the 40th time
We'll just jump and see if we can fly"

It occurred to him, just barely, that a gentle wind had broken out in the room, and that the empty chairs by the wall, and a houseplant, were hovering a few inches above the floor. Just as he noticed these things, however, they settled – the chairs replaced themselves, the houseplant set down with a soft chink as the ceramic pot hit the tile floor. The wind circled him briefly, then was gone. Zeo could feel the power still buzzing within him, but it was quieter, more calm.

Zeo had the feeling that even without magic, his mother's voice had brought some kind of peace to his soul's song.

"If I get up I might fall back down again
So let's get up come on
If I get up I might fall back down again
We get up anyway
If I get up I might fall back down again
So let's get up come on
If I get up I might fall back down again
I might fall back down again"

Even as Zeo contemplated the new stillness where the Arrangement's darkness had been, his mother pulled her hands away from the Aquarius Crystal, beaming. “I hope that even if I do vanish, this can bring you a bit of hope. I love you.”

The video ended. Zeo barely registered it. He felt weightless, like his powers were drifting him through the air, but he was still firmly in his chair, and his chair was still firmly on the floor.

He didn't know exactly what had just happened, but he hoped that his mother sang in the other videos, too.

And in all seven other videos, she did indeed.

Zeo hovered his way to the front door and drove off to the prelims, not an ounce of fear in his
body. Even from beyond the grave, his mother's voice had healed him.

Zeo had a pretty good feeling that if she wasn't reincarnated before this, she definitely was now that her voice had been heard.

Lilura was still not entirely sure how she'd ended up in her current situation.

This was the...thi—no, fourth dimension that she'd been to. It had been nearly two Earth months, if she was counting right. True to what she'd been told, she and Isis were being shuffled along in an attempt to return them to Melodia's dimension, and Lilura only hoped that the time streams weren't matching up with hers. An entire two months worrying...Lilura knew that a month was a long time for mortals.

Even so, the dimensions she was brought to each posed their own problems. In the first, humanity had shown its twisted side, with hundreds of humans trapped within a virtual game where they lost their lives once their health points were depleted. The second had been some form of confusing after-life where the only sentient beings, teenagers, assumed her to be a dangerous 'angel' and continuously tried to kill her. With her powers depleted so heavily, their attacks hurt quite a lot.

The third had been a wonderful reprieve. She befriended a family of ventriloquists, the son being interested in beyblade. Though she never expected to pick up the sport full time, it had been fun watching him train. She had his face filed away in her mind, just in case he existed in Melodia's dimension.

Each time, she'd been given a gift from the Siqu god that was shuffling them along. First was the Crystal Blossom, of course, which had retained its powerless shape upon leaving the virtual plane. In the second world she'd been given a Quartz dagger to defend herself with, as she couldn't comprehend the strange dirt-to-anything crafting system and anyone she ended up killing came back without any damage (by the gods, she hated afterlife planes...). It, too, held no magic power, being nothing more than reinforced crystal with a silver hilt and guard.

She'd been given enchanted fabric in the third world, and used it to create her own puppet to join shows put on by the ventriloquist family. They welcomed her assistance, and she genuinely hoped to see them again someday, and join their shows again. At one show, she was even almost certain she'd seen Isis's host watching, but she'd been unable to reach out to try and take Toby back.

However...now there was this world.

It wasn't twisted or confusing like the first two, but it wasn't calming like the third, either. This one was...

Well, it was interesting.

As she'd been recovering from the shuffle, adjusting the patches on herself to continue drawing in energy, she'd been found by the local authorities and mistaken for a runaway from a 'Cultural Exchange Program' of some kind. When they couldn't find her documentation (for obvious reasons) and she had no way to explain herself without sounding ridiculous, they'd written up new paperwork for her and sent her to her 'homestay'. From what she could gather, she was effectively supposed to be learning about human culture and how to integrate herself into it. It had been started in an attempt to ease 'monsters' into human society once they had been discovered.

Therefore, she now sat awkwardly in someone's living room, trying to figure out how in the universe this darn video game of theirs was supposed to work. She was absolutely awful with
"You almost got it that time!" her host told her encouragingly. Lilura tried to smile back, and hoped the woman wouldn't be too upset when she was inevitably shuffled to the next dimension. She'd already been here for about three days, after the two it had taken for her paperwork to go through.

Well, at least it was a nice house. And her host was very kind. She wasn't sure about being labeled a 'Shapeshifter' (capital S, she hated Shapeshifter with a capital S, that race was so unbelievably annoying), as...accurate as it might be, but it helped that she wasn't being asked to show off her abilities. She was also able to pass her open energy patches as 'how she was most comfortable appearing'.

At least Isis is nearby... She recalled seeing the other Mytan being treated similarly just down the road. Maybe she'd be able to convince her host that they should visit, and she could rescue Toby? And...perhaps whoever was supposed to be Isis's 'host' as well. She hoped the poor humans would be alright.

As long as she could sense Isis, and as long as Isis was as low on power as she was, Lilura wasn't too horribly frantic. Her only concerns were blending in, saving Toby, and getting him back home. So she would do that, and in the process, she would figure out this dumb game.

A key part of being immortal was learning patience.

Chapter End Notes

So this was a Zeo-centric chapter. Fun fact, I only came up with him being half-Mithorian earlier this year, when I was trying to figure out who the heck had been the Pink Guardian before Haruka. Brooke slowly came into the picture with the help of...I think it was a picture of a curly-haired red-head and an adorable love song? Yeah she was supposed to be a fire-element, but water seemed to be a better fit when I considered the guardian thing.

But, it helped me finally figure out what Mithorians look like! I imagine Brooke would've been the type to talk all day every day to her kids about their heritage.

(And yeah I'm gonna be honest, I don't remember how I came up with the egg thing, I think I was like 14 at the time. Stickin' to it though.)

Also Lilura's in this one.

Song: "Get Up" by Superchick - English

Contact us for suggestions on Memory Moon chapters: Character history, past events, what if's, world lore, etc. Anon is always open and credit will be given if requested.

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings and full profiles are all going to be: http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/ ADDITIONALLY, MEL'S ACCOUNT IS GOOD:
https://lunarcentric.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Today's my birthday! I decided to post today because why not.

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Call From: Zeo

Dia glanced down at her phone as she picked it up, her other hand still moving to tease Arlen with his rope toy. It was morning now, though it would be night for Zeo, so she answered quickly in case he wanted to sleep soon. “Hi!”

Zeo gave no greeting, instead starting with, “Thank you.” She waited for a moment, and when he didn't continue, she asked in reply, “Did you find something?”

“...My mom was trying to break the curse.”

Dia was so stunned she dropped her arm; Arlen ripped the rope from her hand and ran off with it triumphantly. She barely noticed. “What?”

“The curse on the princesses that you mentioned. She knew about it the whole time, and she was trying to break it. She became a guardian so that she could protect at least one girl from being taken by it.” He paused to clear his throat. “She left some songs for us, too. Made a video every year, updating her progress, giving us a new song...She didn't get to finish the last one.”

Part of Dia wanted to apologize, to ask if he was okay, but...for some reason, she didn't feel like she needed to. There was something different about Zeo's voice, it was...stronger? “But you sound like something good happened?” she asked hesitantly.

“I...” Zeo chuckled. “Man, I dunno. Just hearing my mom singing again, stuff she wrote just for us... There wasn't any magic in her voice, but I think it healed me anyway.” He paused, then laughed with a bit more force. “Did you know it's possible for me to totally kick Ryan's butt?”

A bit startled at the laugh she hadn't heard much in several months, it took a few extra seconds for his actual words to process. “You beat Ryan in a battle?”

“Yeah! Knocked him right outta the prelims for the upcoming tournament!”

“What the hell that's amazing! Who else made it in?” Dia had completely forgotten about the tournament that had been in planning stages the last week of the previous year, having been at the time preoccupied with her memory glitches.

“Masamune, no surprise. We also got Brad, Owen, and Bruce! And...well, Faust.” His confidence gave way to a hint of awkwardness. “He mentioned it would be weird if 'Toby' didn't compete, so...”

“N...No, that makes sense.” It made sense, but it also made her hair stand on end. She still felt
uneasy about Faust, no matter how many times Melody tried to reassure her. “Did everything go okay?”

“He is...a terrifyingly good actor. No one suspected anything.” Zeo sighed, then cleared his throat. “Uh, I packed up all my mom’s research notes. Figured maybe your family could get better use out of them than we could.”

Notes on the curse...? A way to break it? Maybe even a way to bring them back?

A way to bring Kimiko and Kakeru back?

“I’ll make sure they get sent as soon as I get back,” she promised, suddenly feeling hopeful, feeling like she might actually see her younger siblings again. “I...Zeo, it's really nice to hear you laugh again.”

“...I'm sorry I had you worried so long, Dia. I think I'm gonna be...I'm gonna be okay.”

“That's all I ever wanted.” Dia smiled through her tears of pride and relief. “I love you, Zeo.”

“I love you too, Dia.”

Dia stared restlessly at the notebook in her lap, the words she'd written still jumping out at her. Shortly after writing them, she'd gotten an impulsive idea, and to her surprise Melody had been all for it.

Her mother had driven her out to the Chinese WBBA branch, and she'd made an appointment with the local DJ. Right now she was waiting to be called.

She bit her lip. It had been a long while since she'd done this, and she was nervous. But talking to Zeo, hearing his cheer returning to him, something had sparked up within her. He'd found new control over his Arrangement thanks to his mother's music.

Why couldn't she try and do the same with her own?

As she was now, it was impossible for her to battle. The Arrangement she'd received held too much power over her, and she refused to risk letting it out. Now, it was even coming up outside of battles. It was getting harder and harder to pull it back in. She couldn't keep letting it grow stronger, or she might start hurting people.

The simple power of an Aquarius Crystal and his mother's voice had helped Zeo reign in his powers. If she could do that for herself, with her own mother, her own Aquarius Crystal, and a fully powered Pearl Tear, she should be able to help herself. Right?

She managed to walk calmly to the front desk when her name was called. She followed the instructions she was given, taking the elevator to the third floor and finding the DJ's office. She walked in and sat when she was asked to.

Her nerves jumbling around inside her, she placed the notebook on his desk. “I want to sing at the tournament that's coming up.”

She twisted her fingers around themselves as the DJ skimmed over the lyrics she and Alyssin had written. They were new, still tuneless, but she felt confident that with Alyssin, Aguma, and her mother, they could find the right notes and press them into an Aquarius Crystal before the day of the tournament. Just like Brooke had done for her family.
Dia was a leader. A princess to merfolk, a member of the Dungeon Gym, a member of the Beylin Fist. She was a singer, a blader, a fighter.

When the DJ asked her reason for wanting to perform, she surprised herself with her nearly immediate answer.

“I want everyone there to know that even if something goes wrong, they can always fight back. I want to share that with anyone who might need it.”

For the rest of the day, Melodia joined the DJ – Qiang, he said his name was – in his review for the tournament. They flew out to the different locations to ensure they were ready, and to decide when and where she would perform. They checked the translation towers that the WBBA had set up in each location, ensuring that everyone could understand each other no matter the language they used. They checked the transportation methods that the competitors and the audience would use to go between each location.

For the rest of the day, Melodia forgot to worry.

From Melodia McClain: Hi Takamine-san! Hope things are going well. I just wanted to tell you I'm/we're gonna be singing at a beyblade tournament in a few days! I'm excited but also kinda nervous. It's been a while since I performed...

From Melodia McClain: Any advice?

To Melodia McClain: All you need to do is remember to enjoy yourself.
To Melodia McClain: I'm so proud of you two. It sounds like you're doing well. Things are exceedingly busy here, but in a good way. I should be able to elaborate in a week or so, if we are lucky. In the meantime, both of you have fun and continue to grow. I know you'll succeed.

From Melodia McClain: Awww you're too nice
From Melodia McClain: Thank you. Gosh I'm blushing. I hope things go well for you too!

“You are truly a pain in the horns sometimes.”

Gertrude squeaked as Noa snatched her phone away and reviewed the conversation. “I-I just wanted to-”

“No matter how well you can impersonate my texts, that doesn't mean you should,” Noa scolded her. “Do you want to ruin everything we've been working for? Can't you wait one week before you start taking these risks?”

Pouting, Gertrude mumbled about having already waited fourteen years and being so close was torture. She tuned out whatever Noa responded with, a new idea of how to support her sister already forming in her mind.

She was so close. So close to meeting her sister, and this Melody girl, and-and her brothers, and Mom, and—it was just so hard to keep waiting.

Gertrude didn't know if Noa was still talking when she started singing to herself, trying to stave off a fit.

“I was so happy when you smiled
From Noa: I'm sorry that it's taken a few days to tell you, but I've gotten in contact with Lilura's other half. She says that things are going well, she's not lost track of Isis, and Toby is still safe.

To Noa: fffff that really helps a lot to hear...thank yooouuu
To Noa: oh! We were merged almost all day today!! When we were helping set things up for the tournament! It was amaaaaaziiiiing

From Noa: That's exciting. Your longest yet, I presume?

To Noa: Yeah!! Now the only thing I have to do before the tournament is convince my cousin not to be a doofus...

From Noa: Given the musical nature of your family, perhaps calling for a song might help? I'm not certain of the details on how it works, but surely your goddess would reach out to assist?

To Noa: I want to hug you to pieces you're a gENIUS
To Noa: THANK YOU!!!

From Noa: I wish you girls luck.
From Noa: : )

To Noa: adsfmsjgjbh DID YOU JUST EMOTE I'M TELLING EVERYONE

From Noa: If you must.

From Zeo: !!!! Dia guess what!!!

To Zeo: ??

From Zeo: I didn't have any nightmares tonight!
From Zeo: I mean I had one but it was real short and I fought back and Mom was there and she sang and it went away!!

To Zeo: AAAHHHH THA'T'S AWESOME!!!
To Zeo: I'm so happy for you oh my gosh!!

From Zeo: ^_^

To Zeo: ^w^
Yawning the whole way, she shuffled to the backyard, grabbing the small pouch she kept hidden in a bush. She bowed herself into the shrine, stepped up to the pedestal, and pulled open the drawstring. Three items transferred from the pouch to the pedestal, in the offering crown beneath the seven crystals.

She arranged them carefully for her needs. The purple Aquarius Crystal was set in the dip carved just for it. The Lunar Wing was draped gently across it. The photograph of herself and Max was leaned ever so specifically against them both.

Then, from her pocket, she extracted the music disc Max had made for her. This was placed just so in the middle of the second tier, fitting quite perfectly between the green, orange, and aqua crystals. The placement ensured it received a proper balance of power.

As she had done for ten years, ever since buying this house and building this shrine, Mingzhu lifted her head towards the ceiling, closed her eyes, and reached out with every bit of music magic she could possible gather. The music disc activated itself, drawing on the crystals which drew from Manaphy, and drawing from the Aquarius Crystal engraved with Chinese characters asking the best question she'd ever heard: *Will you marry me?*

Mingzhu waited until the Lunar Wing began to shine, reached out further and further until she could reach no more, then began to sing to her beloved Max, wherever on the Earth he might be.

"Somewhere out there  
Beneath the pale moonlight  
Someone's thinking of me  
And loving me tonight"

"Somewhere out there  
Someone's saying a prayer  
That we'll find one another  
In that big somewhere out there"

"And even though I know how very far apart we are  
It helps to think we might be wishing on the same bright star  
And when the night wind starts to sing a lonesome lullaby  
It helps to think we're sleeping underneath the same big sky"

"Somewhere out there  
If love can see us through  
Then we'll be together  
Somewhere out there  
Out where dreams come true"

As always, her voice was calming, peaceful, lovely. It was the only thing that had kept him sane through all these years, and he knew she had no idea that he could hear her.

As always, he wished he could tell her. He wished he could hold her close again, see her smile again, but those were things he could only do in his infinite dreams.

If the Mytan knew of this, it didn't care. It either allowed him this fleeting moment of peace, or was completely unaware. Max liked to think he had this song all to himself.

It was only a dream, he knew that, but he joined his wife in song and prayed that one day it would
"And even though I know how very far apart we are
It helps to think we might be wishing on the same bright star
And when the night wind starts to sing a lonesome lullaby
It helps to think we're sleeping underneath the same big sky"

"Somewhere out there
If love can see us through
Then we'll be together
Somewhere out there
Out where dreams come true"

Mingzhu was still very tired when Melodia called everyone out to the backyard. It may have been 10 A.M., but that was still an hour or so short of the sleep she needed. Thursdays were always late nights for her.

It started with Melodia explaining the current situation to the Beylin Fist – Nemesis, the legendary bladers, things she'd told Mingzhu the first day she'd been here. Because of this, Mingzhu found herself dozing on her feet. She vaguely caught bits and pieces of mentions of the tournament, of a dangerous follower of Nemesis who would try to recruit Aguma. That was the very reason she'd come to China – to warn them of this blader. She also told them of her friends, who would be competing in order to search for the legendary blader they thought to be in China. She told them that Aguma was this legendary blader, and that it was his choice whether to join that group right away, so long as he was with them when it was time to defeat Nemesis.

Mingzhu may have been half asleep, but she was pleased to see that Aguma and the others were being so understanding. They could tell that Melodia was serious, and paid her the respect she was due.

This changed a little when Melodia started sounding accusatory. It was difficult, but Mingzhu forced herself to pay more attention, knowing she might have to step in.

“Attacking the bladers from the main school isn't the way we should go.” Melodia was fixing all of the boys with a glare, and a couple had the decency to look embarrassed. “I know that's what you go out to do during the day. Do you really think that's going to help things? That it's going to help us enter society as equals? Is that how you want our descendants to know you, as thoughtless bullies?”

Aguma was surprisingly calm as he answered. “Those of Beylin Temple need to be taught a lesson.”

Melodia snorted in disgust, an action that seemed very Lance-like. Mingzhu would have to talk to him about that. “And what lesson is that? 'Your predecessors screwed up so now you have to pay'? Isn't that the exact thing we're going through, that we're trying to stop?”

“They follow the same teachings as those who cast out our ancestors!”

“And that automatically makes them the bad guys?! Did you ever stop to think that what you say about them is exactly what they say about us? No, no you didn't, because you're too high on your pride and stubbornness to even care!” Melodia threw her hands up in exasperation. “They're not their predecessors! We're not our ancestors! But the more you go after them, and act like the bad guys, the more they'll be sure that you are! I don't see why that's so hard for you to understand!”
Mingzhu could tell that Aguma's anger was starting to rise, and that Melodia was losing her patience. The others were growing uncomfortable, seeing their leader argue with his cousin. Alyssin was practically hiding behind the shrine, watching from a safe distance.

As Aguma opened his mouth to retort, Melodia suddenly, almost reluctantly, straightened herself. Still scowling, she raised her arms towards him, extending her fingers in a sort of open cup. She took a long, careful breath, then said something in a language Mingzhu hadn't heard in a very long time.

“Sao te Haert.”

Show the Haert.

Melodia's fingertips erupted in a mixture of pink and purple lightning, and each shot forward to make a connection with one of the eight Beylin Fist bladers. Mingzhu's skin erupted into goosebumps, shock overtaking her for a few seconds. When did Xiaolian learn Siqu magic?!

Above each blader appeared a wispy pink energy, forming into different sized 'crystals' of Haert. At the sight of their cracked, broken states, Mingzhu nearly cried out. She knew an extremely little amount of the magic Max had used, and that Aniko once studied, but she knew enough to see in an instant that this was wrong. Her nephew and the others contained Haert energies even more broken than Melodia's had become after her Arrangement.

As this sight was taken in, Melodia put a hand on her own chest, repeating her spell. Her own energy embodiment of her inner Haert flashed into view above her, and—

That couldn't be right.

Mingzhu rubbed her sleeve across her eyes, thinking her exhaustion was playing tricks on her. When she looked again, however, it was the same sight. The projection of her daughter's Haert was completely whole, not a single crack in sight.

Slowly, Melodia lowered both her arms, her hands clutching each other tightly by her waist. “I was talking to a friend last night,” she began. “She's a mage, and...she suggested that if I had trouble convincing you, I should...cast that spell. And that then I should say this.”

Once again, she squared her shoulders, and then said firmly, “Beylin Temple.”

Mingzhu did cry out this time, as an alarming amount of the boys' Haert cracks suddenly lit up furiously, a few spreading just slightly. In sharp contrast, nothing changed about Melodia's at all.

Melodia let them take this in, then breathed slowly. There was a twinkling sound, followed by every projection fading out of view. It was only when the spell was over that she spoke again. “You've let your hatred of our exile completely overtake your emotions, and that's causing so much damage to you. I-I don't even think my cracks were ever that bad, even after my Arrangement.”

Burning worry blazed through her eyes as she swept her gaze across her cousin and the others. “You're hurting yourselves with your anger, and there's going to come a point where nothing is going to be able to fix it. No song, no spell, no magic of any kind.”

Swallowing, trying to remove the lump from her throat, Mingzhu waited for Aguma's response. After staying silent this long, she felt that if she stepped in, her nephew might miss the entire point that Melodia was trying to make.

He seemed to choose his words carefully. “Are you saying...that we should simply forgive them for what they've done?”
“I'm saying you should stop blaming the current members of the temple when they haven't done anything wrong. We can convince them that we're not the bad guys, but not if you keep acting like we are! We can change history and stop this stupid war!”

“And if they don't wish to do the same?”

“Then you can blame me. I'll take the fall.” She reached for her pendant, and Mingzhu abruptly knew there was more to her daughter's plan. There was nothing but a flash of light to warn them before the music started, and Melodia nearly immediately began to sing.

"Can you forgive
And forget your self-pride?
Let it all go
And recover your stride"

"I'll take the pain, so blame it on me
Give me the weight for everything
No matter how large, or how small
I will bear it all
Find forgiveness in your heart,
So you can continue on"

Mingzhu didn't have to look around to know that the others were just as stunned as she was. Melodia had planned this out thoroughly – she knew they wouldn't listen right off the bat. She'd had the spell ready when they refused to listen, she'd had this song ready when the spell wasn't quite enough. Melodia had put more effort into this than Mingzhu realized she felt the need to.

By Regina, Mingzhu was so proud of her.

"Give a name to the rose - it's all the same
It'll still smell as sweet
Give a name to the rose - it's all the same
It won't change what you mean to me"
If you live – live your life with good intent
It returns somewhere along the way
But - would you give – give it a second thought
When saying it reveals the lie"

"There's only 10% you're to blame for
But no one will share the fault
You take the heat, but no more
So now's the time, you gotta hold your own
And stand up tall"

"It's the number one thing you can never forget
Don't let them define you,
There is fight in you yet"

"I'll take the pain, so blame it on me
Give me the weight for everything
No matter how large, or how small
You and I can bear it all
Find forgiveness in your heart,
And you will continue on"
It didn't take long for the music to fade; Melodia, now in a more determined stance, was facing her cousin and waiting. The entire group was reeling from the somewhat harsh-sounding song she'd just sung to them, as it had never been her style - Mingzhu could tell she'd been counting on that. It gave a more serious note to her message. The only question now was how Aguma would react to it.

Her nephew's face was unreadable. However the song had affected him, he'd masked it entirely, as he often tended to do.

Eventually, he closed his eyes. “I have heard all you have to say. I have felt the sincerity in your song, and seen the damage our ways have done to us. Cousin...please allow me some time to think.”

Seeming slightly relieved, Melodia nodded. “Thank you, Aguma.”

Aguma stepped into the shrine, and the others hesitantly began to return to the house. Mingzhu smiled proudly at her daughter before heading in as well, pleased that the meeting had ended without further trouble.

Dia collapsed onto her bed, letting out what felt like a humongous sigh. “That went about as well as I'd thought...” She was a little disappointed that she'd needed to use the song, but not entirely surprised. Noa's spell suggestion had worked wonders, though. She'd have to thank her.

So that's the magic that Dad used, huh? Dia rolled onto her back, staring at her hands as if they'd start sparking on their own.

The magic Tracy and Aniko use... It had felt warm, determined, more complete than the feelings she called upon to summon her scythe. Haert was only one aspect of Siqu magic, and while in her case it somewhat dominated it, she had still felt the intense difference between the two with that simple spell.

She held a great deal of satisfaction at the results. While she'd felt nearly sick seeing the splinters of the others' Haerts, seeing her own, huge and whole, had sparked something in her. It wasn't dissimilar to the feeling she'd had when Zeo had told her his mother's voice had calmed his Arrangement, or when she'd been merged and one for hours helping prepare for the tournament. She couldn't put a name to it, exactly.

What would you call it? she asked Melody. Her other half had been politely quiet during the meeting, too anxious about the confrontation for a merge.

She didn't receive an answer right away. As she waited, she got a rather impulsive idea, and abruptly sat up. She grabbed her phone and stood, sneaking to the next room over where Alyssin was staying. Her friend looked up when she knocked on the door frame. “Hey, could you help me with something?”

Alyssin seemed to jump at the chance. “Of course!” She set her pencil and notebook down, rising from where she'd been sitting on the bed writing lyrics. She'd wanted to help during the meeting, but admitted that she knew so little of the Beylin Fist that it wasn't her place. “What is it?”

“I want to do that Haert spell again. Could you take a picture of it so I can show my brothers?”

Alyssin seemed to jump at the chance. “Of course!” She set her pencil and notebook down, rising from where she'd been sitting on the bed writing lyrics. She'd wanted to help during the meeting, but admitted that she knew so little of the Beylin Fist that it wasn't her place. “What is it?”

“‘I want to do that Haert spell again. Could you take a picture of it so I can show my brothers?”

It took a moment for Alyssin to put her reasoning together. “I...yeah, it didn't used to look like that, did it? When Aniko did that spell a few months ago it looked more like Aguma's...”

Dia nodded. “Exactly. I want to show them I'm okay now.”
In the few seconds that took to sink in, Alyssin started grinning. “Yeah! Of course! I think you should send it to Coach, too.”

“Ah, good idea!”

It only took a couple of minutes for Dia to cast the spell, have the photo taken, and to send it out. Lance was almost immediately demanding answers, but in a proud, relieved sort of way. Coach Steel barely knew anything about Siqu magic, other than that it existed, but he was thrilled as well, promising to forward the photo to the other members. Aniko seemed unable to manage more than a short and simple I'm really happy but it was enough to put tiny tears in Dia's eyes.

As Dia agreed to sit and read what Alyssin had written, Melody finally answered her. I think I'd call it courage.

After thinking on that for a moment, Dia had to agree.

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To: Melodia Thompson  
From: Noa Takamine  
From one idol to another,  
For your big comeback

Bao knocked on the door frame, catching the attention of the two princesses. “Xiaolian, there's a package for you.”

At her nod, he entered the room, setting the neatly taped cardboard box on the bed. When the girls started looking around for something to cut the tape with, he cleared his throat, slipping his travel knife out of his boot and offering it.

Melodia smiled gratefully, and he wished it didn't hurt. “Thanks.”

He wasn't shooed out of the room, so he decided to stick around as she read the note and opened the package. Even after the...interesting meeting earlier that morning, he didn't hold any ill will towards her. It was just...awkward.

In a way, maybe it was better she didn't remember him.

The first thing removed from the box was a small amount of packing paper, which held a pair of dark-purple wristbands with a simple white swirl pattern, and what looked like purple armbands. Seeming confused, Melodia set these aside. The next paper-wrapped item was a pair of slip-on shoes with ankle clasps. Alyssin urged her to take the next item out, starting to get excited. Bao found himself stepping a bit closer, curious as well.

The final piece was much larger than the rest, and Melodia set it on the bed before pulling away the paper. She let out a gasp of shock, and Alyssin started clapping. Bao frowned, leaning in a bit. To him, it just looked like a dress that matched all the accessories that she'd already unwrapped. What was the big deal?

Melodia was already taking her phone out, saying something about calling Noa. Bao paid little attention to this, and decided that his curiosity was satisfied. He took the papers and box and left the room, trying to ignore how utterly childish, immature, adorable, ridiculous, and plain old silly Melodia was acting.
To Shiori: Happy Birthday!!

From Shiori: Oh! Thank you!

To Shiori: I even have a present for you, maybe! If you can tune in to the Chinese Beyblade channel, or whatever it's called, tomorrow, I'll be performing at the ToRyumon tournament!

From Shiori: Really? I can't wait!
From Shiori: I hope you know that I'll be gathering as many of the girls as I can to watch with me~

To Shiori: eep

From Shiori: Hehe. So what will you be singing? Something old, something new? Do you have something to wear?

To Shiori: My friend and I wrote a couple songs, and my mom's going to help us enchant an Aquarius Crystal with the music today. And Noa (and a friend of hers) sent me this amazing dress!
To Shiori: [picture sent]

From Shiori: You look gorgeous~ Like the princess you are!

To Shiori: Eeee thank you
To Shiori: I hope you have a good birthday. If you're able to watch the tournament and see me tomorrow, let me know!

From Shiori: I will!
From Shiori: I'm so glad to hear you're stepping on a stage again. I really am. I know you'll do well.

To Shiori: Heheh~
To Shiori: OH BY THE WAY LAST NIGHT NOA EMOTED AT ME
To Shiori: I TOOK A SCREENSHOT
To Shiori: [picture sent]

From Shiori: What??
From Shiori: OH MY GOODNESS

“Marin-san? I brought them, as you requested.”

Momo entered the room as she was ushered in. Her mother's friend, Marin, looked far better than he had only a little while ago – his wounds were dressed, and his soaked clothes had been replaced with dry ones. He still looked exhausted, but it was an improvement.

Behind her, a ball-jointed doll clattered its way in on unsteady feet. Its brown wig had come a bit loose during the walk down the hall, and she knelt down to try and fix the velcro. She'd been in a rush creating it, and didn't have time to research proper doll-wig attachments...it was a little embarrassing for her pride, but Momo hadn't received any complaints.

“Fine work as always, Momo-chan,” Marin assured her. “Everything went smoothly, I assume?”
“I-I think so.” Momo was still having a hard time grasping exactly what was going on. “I set the sphere against the doll as you said...the casing broke, and the flame – the, er, soul, seems to be settled in.”

Marin leaned forward in his chair, grunting only slightly. “How’s it feel, then? Everything in working order?”

The doll nodded, its movements still stiff and slow. With only a painted-on mouth, it couldn't answer verbally.

Momo straightened herself, frowning with concern at the man she'd known since her childhood. “Marin-san...I'm not sure I follow what it is that's going on. Who is this, exactly? What happened?”

Sighing, Marin scratched at his chin, trying to figure out where to start. “Momo-chan, I've said before that my father was not of this world, correct?” She nodded. “Well, if I'm correct, this poor soul isn't, either. It was in the grasp of a dangerous spirit creature, I don't know exactly what. But I knew enough from my father's tales that I had to do something. I soaked the thing, grabbed the sphere, and I swear I ran through half the city before it lost my trail.”

The doll waved its arms, clearly seeking attention. Marin quickly turned to it, chuckling apologetically. “Sorry there. We're not trying to ignore you. I don't suppose you've got some magic of your own, like my father? Any way to talk to us?”

Momo could see hesitation in the doll's movements before it nodded. Nothing happened at first, but within a few seconds, she felt a slight weight within her mind, something unfamiliar. She blinked, while Marin exclaimed, “You've got telepathy, then! Good, good!”

Telepathy? Yes, that would explain it. Momo wasn't sure how that worked, but she tried to give the weight permission to continue – a polite welcome, maybe. This seemed to be what was needed, because the weight vanished, replaced with a male voice that had to be coming from the soul within the doll.

Is this...Is this coming through in Japanese? I, uh, I haven't really done this before...

Momo nodded. “Y-Yes, I hear you perfectly.”

The doll would probably be sighing if it – he? - could. Good. I'm not sure if I can keep this up, I'm...I don't hold up well when using magic.

“Well, that's peculiar. But, why don't we start with your name, hm? Put our heads together, figure out what's going on. I'm Marin.”

Momo bowed her head slightly. “Yaoyorozu Momo.”

Toby. Toby Wallace. You mentioned a...spirit creature... Momo could sense frustration. Thank you. You might've just saved my life. Um, let me start from the beginning.

Chapter End Notes

A lot of scenes with a lot of different people in this one. Also two days in one chapter! Next up is finally the tournament. -starts screaming-
Songs: "For Fruits Basket" from Fruits Basket - English translation (beginning only)  
"Somewhere Out There" by James Ingram - English  
"Itteki no Eikyou" from Blue Exorcist 2 - English  
LeeandLie video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6MX0zh3iNc&index=44&list=PLgYAivc85cgYdVcntKX-YuvNgzRa9AgVA

There are 5 new background character profiles!

Contact us for suggestions on Memory Moon chapters: Character history, past events, what ifs, world lore, etc. Anon is always open and credit will be given if requested.

Our DeviantArt, where story related drawings and profiles are all going to be:  
http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/  
ADDITIONALLY, MEL'S ACCOUNT IS GOOD:  
https://lunarcentric.deviantart.com/  
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:  
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

The ToRyumon tournament begins!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From Lance: [picture sent]
From Lance: How dare you not tell me about this tournament. You're so lucky Mom invited us. I expect apologies in the form of hugs.
From Lance: Allura is on Red backup if anything happens today.
From Lance: Don't Say A Damn Word About The Hair.

To Lance: OMG
To Lance: purple looks awful on you
To Lance: but yeah that's a perfect disguise alright also THANKS FOR MAKING ME CHOKE ON MY MAHUA BECAUSE OF YOUR STUPID PURPLE HAIR
To Lance: no wonder you hate your mer form

From Lance: SHUT. UP.

From Aniko: Please tell me Lance didn't send that stupid picture with the purple hair and my floating son

To Aniko: I mean, it looks like Sho Hai is having a lot of fun clinging to your very purple ponytail.

From Aniko: I'm going to kill him.
From Aniko: I want to talk to you after the tournament.

To Aniko: Please don't bring Lance's corpse with you, it'll scare Madoka.

From Aniko: Damn, you're right.
From Aniko: I guess he can live for now.
From Aniko: By the way, Aunt Mizue and the others will be watching the tournament on TV, so that's a thing.

To Aniko: Well dang it now I have to be even more awesome to impress them.

From Noa: I thought you ought to know that I am at a viewing party with the others to cheer you on. Additionally, the friend who so rudely used my name to send you yesterday's package is making me record the tournament for her, even though she's watching it as well...

To Noa: I sincerely can't wait to meet your friend.

From Noa: I know.
From Noa: Not too long now, I think.

How’re you feeling, Melody?

Slightly terrified. Not as much as I expected, but slightly.

You’ll be fine! If our voice fails you, I’ll take over – but I know it won’t come to that.

Are you sure you wouldn’t rather-

It’s going to be okay. Remember, this one's your song. The one before the finals is mine. You can do this.

Sitting on the stairs at one side of the arena, Bao's cloak hiding her from view while the audience all settled in, Melody just sighed. Beside her, Annie patted her shoulder, and Hope gave her a supportive grin. She smiled gratefully at them and lifted her gaze towards the WBBA blimp as Qiang began welcoming everyone to the tournament.

Swallowing, she gripped the Aquarius Haert microphone a bit tighter. Noticing her slight distress, Alyssin's energy reached for her through the Tear connection, reassuring her. Feeling it from someone on the 'outside', as it were, let her shoulders loosen just a bit.

Qiang finished introducing the stadium and the legend of the river, marking her cue to stand. As everyone was distracted by their excitement, she made her way to the center of the stadium, keeping herself hidden in the cloak. Her hands were shaking, even as she felt everyone's support – her family, her fellow idols, Annie and Hope, Alyssin.

“I didn't send any package to you. I do have a friend who tends to do such things in my name, however, so it's possible that it's from her.”

Additionally, the friend who so rudely used my name to send you yesterday's package is making me record the tournament for her, even though she's watching it as well...

Not too long now, I think.

Melody's free hand grabbed at her skirt, clenching it tightly. Gertrude. Gertrude's watching, too. Her sister had sent this outfit to her, probably hearing of her plans to perform from Noa. Her sister was watching the tournament today, just to see her.

“But before we begin, ladies and gentlemen, we have a very special guest for you!” Melody jolted at Qiang’s words, which had come far sooner than she'd expected. Now? Already? “Show the folks at home what you've got, my friend!”

She reluctantly removed her hand from her dress, breathing deeply. “Everyone, please welcome-

In one swift movement, she grabbed at the cloak and swept it off over her head, letting it fall to the stadium floor behind her. In the same moment, her microphone lit up, and the music enchanted into it starting to play.

“-Melodia McClain!”

Her heart pounding, Melody stared at a spot between two of the floating stands, tried to ignore the nervous sweat covering her palms, and tuned out the stunned silence of the crowd. She focused on nothing but the music, and the song that she, Dia, and Alyssin had written together.
"I spend too much time thinking about who I'm supposed to be
I play by everybody's rules that don't seem right to me
I'm cool and polite, on the outside
When I get a chance, I run and I hide
If your eyes are closed, it's hard to see"

"What if I back down now
'Cause I'm afraid of what might happen
What if they turn away
When I show them who I truly am
What if I lose my breath
When I throw those big doors open
Or tonight, just tonight
What if I shine?"

One of the boats carrying the competitors passed through her view. For a brief, startling moment, her gaze settled on Kyoya, Madoka, and finally Dashan. She breathed quickly, pulling her eyes away as she began the second verse.

"Should I even care?
They're all sitting there, and everyone's staring at me
If I step out in the spotlight, maybe I'll be set free"

"What if I back down now
'Cause I'm afraid of what might happen
What if they turn away
When I show them who I truly am
What if I lose my breath
When I throw those big doors open
Or tonight, just tonight
What if I shine?
I... shine..."

For a short second, she remembered her first performance as an idol. The fear, the nerves, the tears of relief when it was over. But most importantly, she remembered the glow she'd felt, the cheers of her friends and of the crowd, and the tight hug she'd received from none other than Kyoya, who'd traveled back to town just to watch her sing.

"I spend too much time thinking about who I'm supposed to be"

Suddenly, Melodia wasn't so afraid anymore.

"But what if I sing out loud?
Because anything can happen
What if I stand up proud
And I show them who I truly am?
They're gonna call my name
And I'll throw these big doors open
'Cause tonight, just tonight
I'm gonna shine
I... shine..."

Melodia was nearly deafened by the waves of applause and cheers that rang out from the crowds. A rush of clear, positive force shot through her, so strong she almost lost her footing, so pure that
tears sprung up instantly in her eyes. Everywhere she looked, Haerts were glowing, resonating, even mending. None of these people had come here for a concert, but they had no qualms showing their support, and it was almost too much for her to take.

There wasn't even an ounce of self-doubt, fear, or misery as she began her bows, tears streaming down her face. Though the microphone had de-activated, she still felt the tune ringing in her head, her words spinning around her.

She gathered up Bao's cloak, waved to the crowd once more, and carefully stepped into the rowboat waiting for her. As the WBBA staff member directed the boat towards one of the audience stands, she buried her face in the cloak. Only Annie and Hope were there to know how harshly she was crying – not in sadness or pain, but in sheer, glowing joy and relief.

The last time she'd felt that strong a wave of cheer and love had been two and a half years prior, at the final concert she'd sung at before retiring to return to America and watch over Toby. She'd had no idea she'd missed this feeling so intensely.

When this was all over – when Toby was back, when Nemesis was defeated – maybe she'd re-audition for Horizon Pro. She didn't want to hide anymore. She just wanted to sing again.

Curled up in Bao's cloak, Melodia leaned on Aniko and held Sho Hai in her lap as the tournament officially began. When she'd joined her family, still crying, her younger nephew had been passed to her without a word, and they'd let her sit quietly with him on the floor, her back against the wall. Aniko had joined them soon after, and the Beylin Fist bladers practically surrounded them to keep them from being bothered.

Aniko hadn't said anything to her yet, not even to ask which side she was. Not that it mattered – he didn't have to speak. She could feel his support rolling off him like the waves on the sand, and she was the seashell being uncovered by the tide. Just being with him calmed her, and just holding her nephew brought her smile back to her face.

“Wǒ ài nǐ!” Sho Hai didn't know anything except that his aunt was crying, and he wanted nothing but to cheer her up. His small hands pushed against her cheeks, trying to brush away her tears. The act made her giggle, and she nuzzled his nose with her own.

“Wǒ yē ài nǐ, Sho Hai.”

Lance called her when Kyoya and Benkei were up next, and she stood to watch Benkei's quick annihilation of their opponents. She giggled at her brothers' stunned faces.

The first round was nothing exciting, with bladers like Wang Hu Zhong and Gingka's group competing. Matches were won in seconds, aside from Mei Mei and Chao Xin's battle against Gingka and Yuki. Melodia didn't pay much attention to any of it, her focus being drawn to what would come in the end.

Would Dashan keep his word and see Bao and Aguma not as outlaws, but as bladers? Would Aguma understand what she'd tried to tell him and stop his quest for revenge? These were the only two things she didn't know the outcome of for this tournament, and they were the things that worried her the most.

“Looks like our boys won't have much trouble unless they go up against your friends, Wang Hu Zhong, or that Johannes guy,” Lance noted as the first round came to an end. “Whadya think, Dia?”
She had to chuckle. *That* was the least of her concerns right now. “I think they're gonna kick butt.”

Amidst the shuffling around to get to the second stadium, Melodia found herself, Sho Hai, and one of the Beylin Fist bladers separated from the rest of their group. Rather than searching the crowds, they elected to sit where they were, knowing they could find the others when they moved on for the third round.

To Melodia's surprise, they were sat near Ju, who greeted them cheerfully. The girls had a brief chat about the curse, Ju having been able to spread it throughout the city rather quickly since they'd first spoken. She was more than thrilled to meet Sho Hai as well, taking a quick liking to the toddler.

“It's too bad that Chao Xin lost in the first round, you know?” Ju commented as she took the offered apple from...Melodia was pretty sure his name was Gen? The girl broke the apple in half without much trouble, then broke one half further and gave a quarter to Sho Hai. “I thought for sure Gingka would go down with that anxious partner of his, but I guess any blader can surprise you!”

Melodia shrugged, subtly waving for Gen to keep his mouth shut. She could feel him tensing in the seat beside her just at the mention of Chao Xin, and she didn't want to start any trouble. “Yuki spent the last few days practicing at the temple with Gingka and Wang Hu Zhong, so nerves or not, he's got some real strength.”

“Really? Well, I'll just have to root for him, then! After hard work like that, he's definitely earned my support!” Ju bit into her half of the apple, ruffling Sho Hai's hair as he continued to eat his own. “By the way, your nephew is super cute. Does he transform?”

After shuffling through her memories a bit, Melodia nodded. “Just like the rest of us. But he's also half-Mithorian, so that takes a bit more precedence. I think he only appears human because of mer shape-shifting powers, or...something?” A thought occurred to her, and she corrected herself. “Actually, I'm starting to suspect my dad was some kind of alien, so maybe we're shape-shifters from that, too.”

At Ju's gaping look, she chuckled. “It's something I should've realized sooner, actually. My brother can grow horns and manipulate his hair, so...y'know.”

“Whoa.”

“Is that really something you should be sharing?” Gen asked, only just audible over the crowd. Melodia shrugged. “I don't see any harm in it.”

She could tell her answer didn't quite convince him, but he didn't pry further. Melodia just sighed and asked Ju if she could have the last quarter of the apple.

The first two matches were over quickly, as Gingka and Yuki were quickly able to knock an opponent out, followed by a double-knock-out from Dashan and Chi Yun. Knowing the next battle would be far more interesting, Melodia perked up. “This one's gonna be good!” she promised Ju and Gen.

It didn't matter if she knew the outcome. Watching Kyoya battle was one of her favorite things, and it always had been. However, it seemed like a few things were different between this timeline and the one Melody knew from the show.
Kyoya wasn't making Benkei stay back and do nothing. The two charged against Johannes together, their months of training together making them a greater team than Melodia had ever imagined. Benkei knew exactly when to retreat or back off, Kyoya not having to say a single word to him about it. The battle went on like this for several minutes, until Bull's stamina began to run out, and Benkei urged Kyoya to continue on his own as he stayed back to prevent Bull from a sleep out.

Even from a distance, Melodia could see the fur scarf appear around Kyoya's neck. She didn't hear what he said to Benkei, but his partner seemed to agree, and Bull shot towards Motti's Gasher and started chasing it desperately. Kyoya took this chance to call on the wind, Leone summoning one of its trademark tornadoes. It picked up both Bull and Gasher, spiraling them out of the stadium and knocking them out simultaneously – letting Bull rest, and allowing the battle to continue.

Melodia was amazed. In all her life, Kyoya had never been one for teamwork, never shown a side quite like this. Was it thanks to Fang? She'd never seen him Chara-Change in battle before. She'd thought that Fang was a wish involving their family, but what if it was more than that? She'd never thought to ask. Had regaining Fang woken something within Kyoya, the part of him that his Character's wish was meant to represent?

Here he was, mercy-killing Dark Bull with permission, in order to continue the battle. That moment of lull must have been him instructing Benkei, knowing that his partner would follow whatever he said. More than that, he had let Benkei fight, let Benkei help him.

She'd had no idea that the timeline could change like that. Whatever her hopes for Aguma's change of course had been, part of Melody had feared the timeline was set in stone, but this proved that things could and would go differently than she knew.

“Kick his dumb cat butt, Kyoya!”

She was on her feet before she realized she'd moved. Melodia cheered loudly and shamelessly for her brother, yowled in joy and praise when his newly created special move defeated Johannes and ended the battle. She didn't care what anyone around her thought, didn't care if anyone knew that she and Kyoya had a connection. For the first time in months, watching a battle, she cheered for someone and fully enjoyed the experience.

As Bao and Aguma took their places for their own battle, Melodia entrusted Sho Hai to Gen and Ju, hurrying down about seven rows to where she'd earlier seen Gingka's group. They were startled at her sudden appearance, and Dashan gave her an uncertain look, but even that couldn't lower her spirits now.


Dashan's gaze sharpened, but he said nothing.

“Well then, let's begin!” Qiang's voice rang out, pulling Melodia's attention away from Dashan. She waited eagerly for her cousin and his friend to take their stances and launch, but...they only did one of those things.

Their launch was standard. Basic. There was no sign of their Beylin Fist heritage in their movements. They launched, Bao's Crown swiftly knocked one of the opponents' beys out of the stadium, and the battle was over. There was no crimson flash, no call for attention.

“But...” Melodia stood in muted shock as the boys called back their beys, barely giving each other a glance. “N-No, they should've...this is where...”
As they turned to leave, she couldn't take it anymore. “What was that? Aguma!”

Though Bao continued walking as if nothing had happened, Aguma paused, then slowly turned around. As he met her gaze, his expression was solemn, grim, uncertain.

“What are you doing?” She couldn't understand why he would've had Bao hold back like that. There was no reason for it. Didn't they want to show off?

After staring at her for a few seconds, Aguma said four simple words that threw her off completely.

“I don't know anymore.”

Aguma followed Bao out of the stadium. Melodia stood frozen in front of the stands, her merge slowly cracking apart. Her feelings of pride and joy were gone.

_Dia...?_ Melody could feel their body shaking violently with her fear. _Did...did we do something wrong?_

_I- There was pain in Dia's mental voice. Confusion, confliction, a complete lack of understanding. She tried desperately to run everything she'd told Aguma through her mind, to find something that might've drawn him to this uncertainty. I don't know. I-I thought..._

A hand touched their shoulder, and Dia jolted slightly, their head whipping around to see who it was. Madoka looked at her worriedly. “Dia? Are you okay?”

Dia could barely think. They had only made things _worse_ by trying to stop the fighting, hadn't they? They'd tried to help, and now things were _worse_ and-

And she had to _do something about it_. She couldn't just keep sitting on the sidelines and crying. She had to fight.

Wasn't trying to do that again the reason she'd volunteered to sing today?

Dia swallowed. She still didn't know exactly what it was for, but she had a feeling that she needed something. “Hope?”

“Yes?” Her Character, eager to help, floated to a stop in front of her.

“...I need a Change.”

Something lit up in Hope's eyes. As Dia pushed away from Madoka, the Character gathered herself and stretched out a tiny hand. Dia extended her index finger and let Hope grab onto it.

The glow wasn't just in Hope's eyes. Her hand held the same shimmer, leaking and spreading into Dia from their small physical connection. There was a jolt, warmth encompassing her, calmness circulating through her mind.

When Dia broke the connection, this time the energy remained. It empowered her to step forward, to put her hand atop the stone wall in front of the stands.

Her feet left the ground, but she didn't remember jumping. She vaulted over the wall and dropped down into the stadium area, barely noticing when she touched the ground again. Reaching the center of the bowl within seconds, she wasn't entirely convinced she wasn't floating. Her Tear buzzed with the words she wanted to tell Aguma, and even before the crowd had noticed her and
started to quiet, she called on its power and let it out.

"This empty heart runs past you time and again
I'm sorry that I can't be any help to you
I wish I could, but more I wish that you understood
That even now, your pride won't let me share your pain"

"I'll live on and leave all of this fear far behind me
I'll get back on the track, all without looking back on this lonely rail"

"You know that I would follow you no matter what we go through
Bring all the darkness the world can offer,
Because you'll shine no matter if the future is bleak"

"We'll aim out just beyond the boundary,
And even if it scares me,
Nothing can shatter my soul
Because your way is my way
Forever on this railway
As if we were god blessed"

She could see them now. They were still hiding within the darkness of the hall that led out of the stadium, but they'd moved just close enough to the light that she could make them out. Bao and Aguma watched her silently, emotions masked. Presumably, with their mer heritage, they knew she was aiming her song at them.

She was just lucky that she could pass it as another performance to the public.

"This tenderness, a feeling I cannot express
Melting my walls, it finds a home inside my heart
We don’t need fate, no rhyme or reason to correlate
Only the now, that overflows, loving you"

"Let’s escape and chase after the dreams we both create
And maybe then we’ll mend
So then you can transcend beyond your lonely heart"

"Don’t you dare lie, it isn’t like you
Please, tell me it’s not true
Look in my eyes, we can work this out
We’ll put it in the past, so let’s begin the future today"

"Even if everything around us seems as if it’s hopeless
I am prepared to take on the world
It’s all for my wish, I ask if it will come true
But that only God knows..."

At last, she saw something spark in Aguma's eyes. It was faint, and she could've imagined it, but she was sure. She knew that Aguma had figured out the turmoil in his mind.

No matter what it was he'd decided, she would stand with him.

"I’ve found where I belong
I once was all alone, but now you’re standing here
The world around could disappear"  
"The beauty of our dream, we’ll capture it on canvas,  
You and I can trace over our permanent scars"

"You know that–  
Please know that I would follow you no matter what we go through  
Bring all the darkness the world can offer,  
Because you’ll shine no matter if the future is bleak"

"We’ll aim out just beyond the boundary,  
And even if it scares me,  
Nothing can shatter my soul  
Because your way is my way  
Forever on this railway  
As if we were god blessed"

Melodia knew that music couldn't fix everything. It couldn't solve every problem she came across, and one day she'd come against something like that and she might not know what to do. She did know, however, that the right words – sung or spoken – could set the gears in motion, let new thoughts flutter up, re-order the chaos that was keeping one from making up their mind.

It helped, in this circumstance, because merfolk tended to think more clearly when music was involved somehow. They understood the emotion put behind a song if it was directed at them. Melodia had pushed in her feelings of apology, of support, and of strength into her song, hoping that Aguma would hear it within her words.

It didn't manipulate him. It didn't trick him into thinking her way. All it did was help him settle the opinions she'd presented, clear away the noise of the world, and make a decision based on his own thoughts.

As the music faded, she smiled at him. She didn't care what his decision was anymore – she just cared that he believed in it. She'd made him doubt himself, but she'd also helped him make up his mind. She'd fixed her mistake.

Aguma gave her a slow, deliberate nod, then turned and disappeared down the hallway. Bao followed close behind, after returning her smile.

Melodia listened to the cheers of the crowd, who were oblivious to the true meaning behind her words and music. She felt the multitude of Haerts soaring around her, all of them glowing and thriving.

And she laughed.

He couldn't stop the tears.

As much as he tried, Aniko couldn't stop crying.

He'd just peeked. He'd just taken a glimpse into her core to make sure she was okay. She'd just appeared in the stadium so suddenly, he knew something had to have happened – but he hadn't expected to see it so clearly.

When she'd started singing, it had been just Dia using the Tear. Her Courae was shining brightly in the core she shared with Melody, but it was soon joined by the two pairs he'd seen close to their
synchronization when he'd first learned what was going on.

Jusia was blazing. It was burning brighter than he'd ever seen it do so before in anyone, fueled by both girls' desire to do the right thing, to help her people do the right thing. He barely knew the extent of what she'd talked about with Aguma, but he knew she'd tried to turn him away from revenge.

Fysika was flickering and crackling like a bonfire, their aspiration to keep moving, keep fighting, lighting it up. He'd seen it so many times before in Lance – the will to never give up, the drive to grow stronger. He didn't know what had triggered it, but it was the strongest he'd ever known her Fysika to be.

The pairs had spun around each other at such speeds that he only saw rings of light within her core. Slowly, the remaining four Siqu energies had lit up, one pair at a time, coming to life along with those that were already merged.

And then there weren't pairs anymore. The eighteen energy crystals were suddenly twelve, not a duplicate in sight. Her power skyrocketed; any cracks that had formed in what used to be pairs were gone without a trace. He no longer felt the weight of the one-and-a-half spirit the girls had.

It was twelve. It was one - she was one. She was whole.

He finally understood, completely and absolutely, what it was that Noa had tried to tell him. He was so, so happy for them. For her.

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“Melodia, may I speak with you a moment?”

Melody blinked, still in a bit of a daze from the abrupt re-merging and un-merging that had just happened. Dumbly, she nodded, and Dashan sat beside her in the stands, where she'd been resting. The others had gone ahead to catch transport to the semi-finals, and Ju had stopped by with Gen and Sho Hai to check on her before doing the same.

She fumbled for words. “I'm...I'm a bit out of it right now...things are kind of...”

He shook his head, and she gave up on talking. “I only have some simple questions, that's all. I was wondering if...you believed something was supposed to happen during that battle?”

Holding her head, Melody sighed. She really didn't want to think right now, but...simple. He said they were simple questions, and this one wasn't so bad. “Y-Yeah. They, um...they were gonna... I thought they'd reveal themselves. A-And they didn't. Because I messed up.” She covered her face for a moment, breathing into her hands before pulling them away again. “But I fixed it. I...”

She breathed in sharply through her nose. “I don't know, exactly...what they're gonna do. What Aguma decided. But I know...that I'm gonna stand with them, no matter what. Even if they...”

“Even if they ignore what you've asked of them?”

“...Yeah.” She stared at her hands, trying to make her vision focus. “I made a...I made a promise.”

Dashan didn't speak right away. He sat quietly with her, giving her a minute to try and pull herself together. When her hands stopped having visible echoes, she glanced over at him to see what he would say.
As he noticed her looking, he smiled, just slightly. "As did I."

While she blinked in surprise once more, Dashan reached into his coat and pulled out an old scrap of paper. "After your visit, I did some digging into the history of the war. I was curious to see if any of Beylin Temple's historians saw things in a different way than I had read before. It isn't much, but I found the remains of one account that surprised me."

After taking a moment to concentrate her thoughts, Melody nodded. Dashan took the cue, vocally translating the ancient writing for her.

"'Once again, I see the fall of another great power from within itself. Will humanity never learn from its mistakes? The Warring Period of Beylin has ravaged China and will continue to do so. Both sides are wrong, and yet, neither are right. Their anger creates judgment, envy. I cannot bear it anymore. I will take my leave from Beylin Temple and wait out this war, and I will hope it ends before there is nothing left to salvage. I will hope that humanity will not follow the path that destroyed the great kingdom I never had the opportunity to know. China, Beylin Temple, may you not break apart from within like the people of the sea before you. May you find peace, even if it must be done without me. Qiangdu Hou'."

"It kind of sounds like a goodbye letter," Hope commented. Stammering, Melody repeated this for Dashan, and he nodded in agreement.

"Though many details of Beylin Temple's history were lost in the period of war, such as the names of those who trained within, Qiangdu Hou is a name I recognized easily. He was a member of Beylin Temple for almost twenty years before the war broke out, and at first, he was on our side – if you'll pardon the term." Dashan frowned at the scrap, then carefully rolled it up again. "He became neutral in the passing years, then eventually disappeared altogether."

Dashan paused, then looked to her with a question clearly in his mind. He hesitated only for a few seconds before he spoke. "Melodia, may I ask if his name means anything to you?"

Frowning, Melody tried to roll the name around in her mind. Qiangdu Hou... It did sound familiar, but she was still in enough of a daze that she couldn't place it. "I...I'm not sure. Maybe?"

"...Forgive me. You've already told me that you're worn out, and I'm overwhelming you." Dashan stood, then turned to offer her his hand. "I'm sure your family is worried. We should head on towards the transports."

"Y-Yeah." Melody took his hand, glad for the help. Everything still felt slightly off-balance. She tried to smile at him, then picked up her bag and followed him up the stands.

Just before they reached the waiting Chi Yun, she stopped. Her head was still spinning a little, but she'd remembered something. "Um, Dashan?"

He turned, giving her his full attention. "Yes?"

"Could...Could you tell Aguma that I'm okay? Uh, music is...a big deal in our family, and...I don't want him to worry because my song sounded..." She struggled for the right words. "Just tell him I'm okay. Please."

There wasn't a speck of hesitation in his answer. "Of course."

As Dashan entered the helicopter that would take him and Chi Yun to the next location, Melody felt her heart finally calm down. Aguma's made up his mind. Dashan's keeping his promise. Things are going okay.
Things are going to be okay.

From WBBA-China-DJ-Wireless: I'm sorry if I'm intruding on something personal, but are you alright, Melodia?

To WBBA-China-DJ-Wireless: Oh! Yeah, I'm sorry. I'm okay. I didn't mean to go off schedule like that.

From WBBA-China-DJ-Wireless: Don't worry about it. I understand.
From WBBA-China-DJ-Wireless: Again, sorry for poking my nose in, but was there something wrong with the bladers in that round? I didn't think you'd be using your Pearl Tear during this.
From WBBA-China-DJ-Wireless: I've been aware of merfolk and the princesses for a long time; I'm not one myself, but you could call me an ally.

To WBBA-China-DJ-Wireless: Oh. Um...Well. Aguma is my cousin. He didn't act... “right” in that battle, because of something we talked about yesterday. It's cleared up now. Again, I'm sorry.

From WBBA-China-DJ-Wireless: Don't be. I'm just glad everything's alright.
From WBBA-China-DJ-Wireless: Your magic is stunning, by the way. I've never had the privilege of hearing a princess sing with her Pearl. It's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard.

To WBBA-China-DJ-Wireless: That makes me feel really good, Qiang. Thanks.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
"What if I Shine" from Barbie Rock 'n Royals - English
"God Knows" from The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya - English
Lyrics reworked by AmaLee: http://leeandlie.blogspot.com/2016/05/god-knows-english-lyrics.html
LeeandLie video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yu1mpsaRe40

Our DeviantArt, where story-related drawings and profiles are all going to be:
http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
ADDITIONALLY, MEL'S ACCOUNT IS GOOD:
https://lunarcentric.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first thing that happened upon Melody reuniting with her family at the next location was Aniko shoving past everyone to hug her. He didn't speak, didn't explain himself, he just clung to her. Not even their mom knew why.

Lance praised her on her quick thinking with her song; she got a dozen texts from Shiori that were full of nothing but photos of herself and the others making silly faces and hearts with their hands. Jinhai told her that her song sounded like an angel's, and Alyssin did nothing but gush and beam almost as much as Mingzhu.

Aniko didn't let go of her the entire time. He didn't say anything until they were in their seats – a gentle whisper in her ear, nothing more than, “I love you.”

She had no idea what had affected him this way. But...he seemed happy? Still, she was worried.

As Qiang reintroduced the teams, Melody poked gently at Aniko's mind, asking silent permission to open their telepathy link. He let her in almost immediately, and she was hit with a wave of mental joy that almost startled her into closing the link.

'Aniko? What's up?'

'I just...I fucking love you, okay?' He held her hand tightly. Now that she thought about it more, she hadn't seen him this happy in a very long time. 'I'm so proud. Fuck, you're amazing.'

'I-I'm Melody...not Dia. You know that, right?'

'But you were. You were and—fuck.' Aniko was grinning like a child, trying to hold back proud laughter. 'I get it. I get it now.'

...Oh.

Oh.

He'd seen the merge.

When he looked at her, seeing her dumbfounded face, he finally broke into laughter, pulling her back into his arms. “Wǒ ài nǐ.”

The sheer acceptance radiating from his Haert brought tears to her eyes. “Wǒ yě ài nǐ, Xing.”

It was only the sound of Qiang ringing his gong that brought the tournament back to the front of their minds. Melody wiped her eyes, and Aniko ruffled her hair, and by the time they'd situated themselves back to the event at hand, the teams were already at the stadium – Dashan and Chi Yun against Gingka and Yuki.

“Gingka!” Dashan called. “I've been looking forward to this. The time has finally arrived when I get to battle you again!”

Gingka smiled. “I'm pumped too, Dashan!”
“However.” The serious tone in Dashan's voice quieted Chi Yun before he could speak. “Today there is a promise that I must fulfill, and to do that, I simply cannot lose to you. Do you understand? We will be winning this battle!”

On her other side, Melody felt Mingzhu begin to shake. She quietly took hold of her mother's hand, squeezing it reassuringly, and smiled when she glanced over. She didn't break eye contact until Mingzhu smiled hesitantly back.

_We've got this, Mom. Bao and Aguma will definitely win this, no matter what changes were made._

The four bladers locked in their beys and took aim, and the countdown began. Melody joined the rest of the crowd as the masses shouted in sync, “Let it rip!”

The beys flew into the stadium, their bladers calling to them. The battle began in its familiar way, Melody's memories of the show being mirrored in what was now her real life. Though Gingka and Yuki's teamwork had certainly increased since the first round, it was still tough for them to face Dashan and Chi Yun, who had practiced together for years. However, there was a slight difference – far more subtle than the way Kyoya had allowed Benkei to battle with him.

It was Dashan. His focus was absolute, his attacks holding more power – she wasn't sure how she could tell the difference, but it was there. Dia guessed it might have to do with him having time to prepare for the Beylin Fist's appearance, rather than being caught off guard by it. The battle had only just started, but it was clear that there was nothing on his mind but winning this battle to keep his promise to her and face the Beylin Fist honorably.

More differences surfaced as the battle went on. When the force of Zurafa and Lacerta's attacks on Anubius threatened to push Yuki off the edge of the stadium, an almost immediate burst of wind knocked him forward onto his face instead. Lance started laughing, and Aniko made a comment on Madoka appearing to be out of practice.

When she pressed Dia on that comment, Melody learned that as a Mithorian, Madoka had access to an elemental power – specifically for her, wind. She tended not to use it on Earth, but...well, considering Yuki could have fallen to his death, this was an understandable use for it.

The whole family was on edge during the fight. The ones to win this would go on to the finals and face the winners of the second match. Melody knew that would be Bao and Aguma, unless she'd somehow shifted enough that _that_ would change as well. She didn't think it was likely, though. Still, she could feel it in their Haerts – her family felt a little off about cheering for Beylin Temple, but knew it was the only way for their people to find any kind of peace.

Dashan and Chi Yun's joint special move, Heavens' Supreme Destruction Bomb (or Palm?), created an incredible blast of bright orange light. The smoke and winds once again almost threw Yuki off the stadium, but they were blown away by Madoka's counter-strike. Even from several yards away, Melody could now see Madoka at the front of the stands, her hair shoved forward by the current she was creating, fighting hard to keep Yuki from falling. This, paired with Gingka's quick leap to catch him, was enough to save him, though Madoka was clearly exhausted at the end of it. Melody didn't move her eyes back to the battle until she saw Chao Xin helping Madoka sit back down, and even letting her lean on him.

Respectfully, and possibly apologetically, Dashan and Chi Yun made no moves to attack while their opponents recovered, though it may have been in part due to shock. The counter-wind Madoka had created was more than enough to keep Pegasus and Anubius within the area directly over the stadium, so they were able to land safely even among the debris.
When everyone was certain Yuki was unharmed, the battle continued. There was no second attempt at the joint special move, which was another difference, but Melody wasn't too concerned about it. With Dashan knowing more now than he did in the show, there was no telling what choices he'd make differently.

Regardless of that, he refused to let up against Gingka. While Yuki took on Lacerta to keep the two from teaming up properly again, Dashan poured his strength into defense against Pegasus, as it switched to Smash mode, then Upper mode. The fact that Zurafa was matching the power of a legendary bey still had Melody amazed. He was even able to knock Pegasus into the rock of the stadium when Gingka was momentarily distracted by his thoughts. The bey was now stuck, still spinning, but unable to move from its spot.

“Sorry, Gingka!” Dashan's voice rang out through the sky. “It's over. We just cannot allow ourselves to lose here today.”

He called to Zurafa, directing it to join Lacerta against Anubius. “We must win. I promised to face a certain opponent today, and I will not allow myself to break my word! We will claim victory in this battle, it is the way it has to be!”

With his lack of hesitation, Chi Yun seemed to have been filled in on what was going on regarding the Beylin Fist. “You've done well to survive until now, goody. But you simply will not-able to withs...Yun and Dashan's...get it?”

Melody blinked, confused as the sounds and voices around her started to cut out. Her vision spotted as well, and she only realized what was going on when it all went silent and white.

Her vision was, strangely enough, the very battle going on right then. Gingka and Pegasus were erupting in their blue aura, but the focus wasn't on them – it was actually on Dashan. His face was clouded with uncertainty and panic, his gaze switching between Pegasus and the still-fighting Anubius.

As she still didn't know him well, the vision was faulty, noiseless, full of static and jumps. The choice Dashan was meant to make wasn't clear to her at first, but as her mind returned to the real world and she saw that her vision was already playing out in real life, it hit her. She jumped to her feet, her body moving before her thoughts could truly catch up.

“Dashan! Go for it, do it now!”

She couldn't see him past the blue light that was now flashing over the stadium. She couldn't tell what he was doing, or if he'd been able to decide fast enough. Though her head was spinning, she knew that depending on what he did, it might just be possible for him to win this battle, even with Gingka's new special move on the rise.

The light faded, and she could see the speck that was Pegasus now flying above the stadium, diving towards it. Anubius retreated from his battle, clearing the way for Gingka's attack.

Zurafa took chase immediately. There was a rolling lump in Melody's gut that told her this was it – Dashan's choice. His crossroads. He'd chosen his path, and she had no idea what would happen next.

As Pegasus dove down, Lacerta and Zurafa both kept pace with Anubius, refusing to let it escape. Yuki insisted Gingka continue, even if it meant he was taken out in the process, and respecting that decision, Gingka pushed Pegasus harder.
“Hit 'em hard, Pegasus! This is our special move, let 'em have it all! Pegasus, Cosmic Tornado!”

Lacerta and Zurafa did not rise to meet the attack. At the last second, when smoke was just beginning to fill the stadium due to the rushing winds and rising heat, they swerved away from Anubius.

Pegasus hit something. The force blew smoke all across the stadium, flooding violently over the stands. There was nothing to be seen but golden light, so harsh that Melody felt blinded even when she covered her eyes. Then, just as quickly as it had shone, it was gone. The four bladers, the crowd gathered, everyone watching from their homes, waited in tense silence for the smoke on the stadium floor to clear.

Two beys had been trapped in the cracks of the stadium, their movement ceased. Melody strained to see which they were, but the distance along with her still recovering sight made it impossible. She had to wait for the official call from Qiang.

“Unbelievable! Pegasus' amazing special move knocked out not only Lacerta but his own partner Anubius! It was a simultaneous knockout, meaning this battle is still on!”

For a brief second, as the crowds went wild with shock, Melody was stunned into silence. Her mental gears spun in overdrive trying to catch up with what had just happened, and when they did, she let out a screech of joy and praise, nearly falling onto the person in the seat in front of her.

Though she felt a little dizzy from the lights, the smoke, and the garbled vision, it was completely clear to her that Dashan had just changed the timeline. Dashan could really, truly, have a chance at winning this battle now, and she would throw her full support at him no matter what.

This wasn't about Beylin Fist and Beylin Temple. This was about Dashan proving that he could change what she had feared was set in stone, and she wanted nothing more than for him to succeed.

She didn't care about anything other than the amazing battle that was going on in front of her right now.

While the battle came to a pause to allow Chi Yun to retrieve the fallen beys, Dashan mentally ran through everything that had happened so far.

Gingka and Yuki surviving his joint special move with Chi Yun had been disappointing, but not entirely surprising. They weren't 'legendary bladers' for nothing, as he had seen during their training in the past few days. For Gingka to create a new special move for this new Pegasus was troubling. However, with some quick thought and, he would admit, uncharacteristic slyness on his own part, Dashan had managed to survive the attack as well as take Yuki out of the picture. It was unfortunate that Chi Yun had been caught in it as well, causing the battle to continue, but Dashan would not fault him for it. He had given his teammate no time to prepare for the change in plan.

He couldn't quite wrap his head around how unlike him his moves had been. For a blader of Beylin Temple to use such trickery...a part of him felt ashamed of himself. Yet at the same time, it had felt necessary to him in order to win the battle.

No matter how well the act had worked, Dashan assured himself that he would not use such tactics again. It had been a spur of the moment decision, and though it had aided him, it went against the straightforward defense that Beylin Temple stood for.

As Chi Yun returned to his side after returning Anubius to Yuki, Dashan put his thoughts aside and focused once more on the battle at hand. Zurafa, while escaping the brunt of the attack, had still...
taken considerable damage. On the other hand, Pegasus was still spinning strong, riding the new energy given by its Final Drive mode. He wasn't certain how long that would last, but he could almost guarantee it would be longer than Zurafa could hold out.

Gingka called to his bey, ordering it to attack. Mustered all the strength he and Zurafa still contained, Dashan shouted for a Solid Iron Wall, at least certain that his defense could hold while he strategized.

The crowd was roaring with cheers for him. This was something Dashan was used to, something that he had learned to tune out when in battle. However, only moments ago, one voice had called out above the rest, seeming to know that he'd been trapped with indecision.

“Dashan! Go for it, do it now!”

He hadn't known her long enough to be certain, but he had the strangest feeling that the one to call out to him in support had been Melodia. Even among the crowd, it almost felt like she was straining for her cheers to be heard, that she wanted him to win more than anyone else today – even his own teammates.

She truly wished for the schools to meet in battle, didn't she? She wanted this to be brought to an end.

“To the best of my personal abilities, I will not let my view of them be colored as it was before I met you. I will battle them with honor.”

He'd promised her that he would do his best.

Gods damn it all, he'd promised.

Dashan Wang was not one to break a promise if he could help it.

He had to win here.

At his sides, he felt his fists clench. Zurafa, my friend. I need all of the power you can possibly give me. Allow me full access to your strength so that we can win this for the sake of that promise!

While Zurafa continued to defend against Pegasus' attacks, Dashan allowed his mind to calm. He opened himself to his bey, letting its energy flow through him. Within seconds, he could feel the warmth of Zurafa's golden aura surrounding him.

It's not about justice. It's not about revenge. It's not about honor. Dashan felt the power of Zurafa's aura lifting his hair, whipping at his coat, spreading jolts of power throughout his fingers. This is about being true to my word.

His eyes snapped open. Through Zurafa's aura, everything looked brighter, sharper. The world was more clear as Zurafa opened his senses, allowed him to see what it saw.

It saw a weak point.

“Zurafa!”

Legendary bey or not, Cosmic Pegasus was not invincible. Every bey had a weakness, and there was one that was universal. When one created a new special move, no matter how strong it was, the residual energy afterward would put the bey off balance as it struggled to master itself.
Though it didn't appear as such on the outside, Cosmic Pegasus was just another bey trying to recalibrate after reaching new strength.

_I don't need to be a legendary blader to win this fight!_

Dashan felt Zurafa's aura surge around him, a fiery blaze the likes of which he hadn't experienced since his battle with Julian Konzern during the events of Spiral Force. “Gingka! This is the end of the line for you, I'm afraid!”

With every ounce of power, every speck of skill and ability he had left, Dashan channeled his essence into Zurafa. It blew Pegasus across the stadium, lighting up with burning fire that took shape in Zurafa's spiritual form. “Zurafa, special move! Crushing Storm Barrage!”

“Pegasus!”

As Pegasus' spirit took form, Zurafa attacked. In a series of consecutive hits, Pegasus was driven back further and further. Dashan could feel every part of himself burning with power, and he sent it all to Zurafa, only aware of his roar as his throat began to sting.

Clash after clash, explosion after explosion. Dashan could no longer see the stadium through his own eyes. Zurafa led him through, guided him to Pegasus, drew in everything he was giving it. It delivered all of that power to the spiritually off-balance Pegasus.

And then, Zurafa spoke.

It wasn't words so much as a feeling. Dashan recognized the spirit of his bey, understood immediately what it was telling him: _That's enough. It's time to end it._

Locking into his mind that this would be the final strike, Dashan gave Zurafa absolutely everything he had left. The final fiery explosion covered the entire stadium in smoke, threatening to push his now weary body over the cliff. He stood as firm as he could. It felt like hours before the smoke finally cleared.

One bey was left wobbling on its last pieces of strength. The other lay motionless on the stadium floor. Drained as he was, Dashan's blurry sight couldn't identify which was which. Had his attempt succeeded? Or was it Zurafa that had stopped spinning?

“I just saw it with my own eyes and I still don't believe it! After almost losing, an amazing comeback victory! The winner is the Dashan, Chi Yun team!”

The crowd erupted around him. He couldn't process it. Had he really done it? Had he defeated Gingka?

Dashan could barely call Zurafa back to his hand, but he smiled at it with pride. “Thank you, my friend.” He held the bey to his face, sending nothing but praise to his beloved partner.

When everything caught up with him and he crumpled to the ground, he still clung tightly to Zurafa, refusing to let go even when he'd slipped into unconsciousness.

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_Well, I'll be damned. Pissed, fucking pissed, but damned._

Kyoya's mind was locked in turmoil with itself. On the one hand, he was _damn well impressed_ that Dashan had managed to defeat Gingka. On the other hand, he was _damn fucking pissed_ that Gingka had lost to Dashan.
Gritting his teeth so hard he felt his jaw start to ache, Kyoya tried not to growl. He gave some sort of snappy reply to whatever Benkei said at that moment, not really hearing himself speak. It was supposed to be him that defeated Gingka, not one of these martial arts clowns! That wasn't how this was supposed to work!

He was supposed to face Gingka. He was supposed to beat Gingka. It was supposed to be him!

A low rumble sounded in his ears, chasing all attempts at thought away. Leone appeared at his side, its sharp eyes watching him, its very presence disrupting his mind. Moments later, his thoughts were at peace.

Too low for Benkei to hear, Kyoya growled. It was a noise of disappointment, frustration, anger, all directed at himself. Once again, he'd let his thoughts carry him away. It's not all about Gingka, he could hear Leone reminding him.

I know. Damn it, I know... Kyoya let his gaze wander from Leone to Fang, noting his Character's expression of worry.

With a few sharp words, he had Benkei walking on ahead, giving him a few seconds alone with his guardian spirits. “I'm trying,” he promised them, speaking in a quiet murmur.

Fang smiled at him reassuringly, placing a tiny hand on his shoulder. “I know.” At his other side, Leone tossed his head.

We're with you, cub.

Kyoya snorted, then shook his head clear of the troublesome thoughts that had been popping up. This tournament wasn't just about defeating Gingka. He'd have many more chances for that in the future. Right now, it was enough to show his power to the world.

As Leone's spirit returned to its bey, Kyoya approached the bridge stretching out towards the stadium, joining Benkei in walking across it. He ignored the shouts of the DJ, instead taking a long, curious look at their opponents.

The one with red hair, Bao, was definitely strong. He'd taken out all the pair's opponents on his own so far, leading his partner to not have to do a thing but launch. There was something about the guy that just struck him with a sense of I don't like this guy. Not hatred, just mild distaste.

His partner, Aguma...he was puzzling. Though Kyoya'd never laid eyes on him before today, there was something about him that looked familiar. No matter how he looked at him, however, he couldn't place it.

As if sensing that Kyoya was watching him, Aguma turned to meet his eyes. There was a brief silence, neither of them speaking at first, before the smallest smile of recognition hit the man's face.

“You are Kyoya Tategami, is that correct?”

Interesting. So the big guy knew who he was. “So what if I am?”

Aguma chuckled. “Xiaolian...rather, Melodia, has spoken highly of you. I'm not sure if she would have mentioned me, but I am her cousin, Aguma Cheng.”

Kyoya's eyes narrowed. Dia's cousin...? That's right, he knew Dia had a cousin in China. It was part of the reason she'd joined them on this trip, to see them. With this information, and looking closer, he was able to figure out the parts of Aguma's features that had stood out to him. His jaw was angular, but strong, a lot like Dia's biological brother Aniko. His overall build reminded him of
Lance. The sharp blue eyes, though darker, made him think of Dia herself.

So this was the guy, huh? Thinking further, he recalled that Dia had mentioned meeting him a few years back, shortly after the funeral of her sister-in-law. Shit, this was him? He quickly grunted for Fang's attention, not needing words to communicate what he wanted. Without a single question, the green fluff appeared around his neck, opening Kyoya's mind to the words he'd wanted to say to this guy for years.

“If you're her cousin, then that means it's you that I need to thank. Whatever you did while she was visiting you that summer, it's more than I could do for her.” Even with the Change, it was hard for Kyoya to admit all this – let alone do it in front of so many people. He had no shyness or stage fright, but he certainly preferred to keep matters like this private. Still...he might not get this chance later. As off as it made him feel, he had to say it now. “Thank you.”

It wasn't just Aguma's gaze that softened, but Bao's as well. They both gave him slight, respectful nods. “Thank you for being her family while we couldn't find her,” Bao said to him. “It's thanks to you watching out for her all those years that she's who she is today, and we'll never be able to repay you.”

As much as Kyoya liked having people in his debt, this...was different. “Just give me a good battle, and we'll call it even.”

Aguma cracked a smile. “I think we can work with that.”

Kyoya dismissed the Change, no longer requiring its support. The calmness it brought him melted away, letting him feel the full excitement of the battle to come. “Benkei!”

“Yes?” The response was immediate, and Kyoya would certainly give him credit for paying attention.

“Listen. Aguma is all mine! You hold off his partner, do you understand?” As much as he recognized Benkei's strength, this battle was a bit more personal than anything else that day.

“Leave it to me! I will not allow him to get in your way, Kyoya pal!”

Thinking of what was about to happen, Kyoya could only grow more and more pumped. A battle against Dia's cousin, who she'd claimed to be the strongest of their village – their leader, even, two and a half years ago? Here he was now, right in front of him. Kyoya could already feel the power of his bey, waiting to be released.

This was going to be an awesome battle.

_Dashan Wang, you must wake up now. Let the winds turn to your breath and give back your strength. Rise!_

Dashan came to quite abruptly. Oxygen rushed into his lungs, overwhelming him for a brief moment before gently settling. With the help of supportive hands, he sat up, coughing slightly.

At his side, Chi Yun broke into a relieved smile. “Dashan! Are you alright?”

As soon as he was able, he answered. “I'm fine. How long was I out?”

“Just a couple of minutes. One of the medics came down and used some kind of wind magic to bring you to.” Chi Yun nodded to a girl kneeling beside them, a baggy WBBA t-shirt thrown over
her clothes. She smiled at Dashan reassuringly, then took a few seconds to check his pulse and examine his head for any kind of injury.

“That was an impressive win,” she complimented. “I wasn't sure you had it in you, but you definitely showed me. Beylin Temple really has grown strong.”

Not really sure how to take that comment, Dashan elected to stay quiet as she looked him over. They'd only moved him back to where he and Chi Yun had been standing before the battle, so he had a decent view of the stadium. The Beylin Fist team and Gingka's friends seemed to be conversing about something – if he had to guess, Melodia was probably involved in the topic somehow.

After the medic cleared him and returned to the small building behind them, Dashan carefully rose to his feet. He gently put a hand on Chi Yun's hat, just for a moment; their personal sign of affection. He hated to worry Chi Yun – the boy was like a brother to him. “I'll be fine before the finals, I promise.”

Always trusting of him, Chi Yun slowly nodded. “And there, we will face the Beylin Fist, won't we?”

“So long as they win this battle, which I have been all but assured that they will.” Dashan was relieved that Chi Yun had taken the information so calmly, though he felt troubled that he hadn't had a chance to speak to Chao Xin or Mei Mei on the matter. “Please remember this, Chi Yun. I've promised to face them with honor, and I ask of you to do the same.”

There was clear hesitation on the boy's face. “And what if they don't wish to battle with honor? This is the Beylin Fist we're talking about. The descendants of the outlaws who caused so much destruction to China!”

“In the words of Qiangdu Hou, 'Both sides are wrong, and yet, neither are right.' We have been blinded by the records calling Beylin Temple the savior of China, when in truth we were just as responsible for the damages caused to it.” Dashan's eyes settled on the Beylin Fist duo as they took their stances, their movements surely revealing themselves to Chao Xin and Mei Mei. He would have to speak with his teammates before the finals and reassure them. “No matter who they are now, or what their goals might be, we must uphold the honor of Beylin Temple. Even if that means admitting that our predecessors were wrong.”

“...I don't like it, Dashan.”

“Nobody likes war. That's why we have to end it.”

“But...does it mean that we have to hope that the Beylin Fist wins this match? Are we to cheer for them?”

Once again, Dashan tapped a hand to Chi Yun's hat. “If you don't wish to, I won't make you.”

“3!”

“2!”

“1!”

Dashan threw his voice in with the crowd. “Let it rip!”
Melodia was absolutely amazed at the battle before her.

Nothing had really happened yet – Kyoya and Aguma were still testing each others' strength, their clashes more curious than fearsome. Bao and Benkei were in a similar match-up, though it seemed they both knew their job was to stay out of the way for now and not end the battle even if they could.

Each clash sent a rush of joy through her. Each spark and cloud of dust made her giddy. This was more than the previous battle had felt to her – this was her friends. Her boys. Aguma and Kyoya, on peaceful terms, having fun.

It was enough to make her cry. Then again, that could be said about a lot of things lately.

While her family cried out cheers and encouragement to Aguma, set on him winning the fight for their people, Melodia didn't dare choose between them. Every shout she made was for both teams, both her boys, and for just this moment she was able to forget everything else.

It seemed like she wasn't the only one, either.

The power of Haert was something incredible. Unlike the other Siqu types like Jusia, Courae, and Fysika, which all represented aspects of personality, Haert represented emotion. Everything a person could feel was contained in their Haert Siqu, directed and pulled out by the world around them, connected directly to their physical mind and heart in a way that couldn't be explained. For someone like Melodia, who had Haert as a main driving force, that meant her emotions could be clear as day and she could see the same in others.

For someone like her, who had so much Haert it made her glow, it was easy for her to see the Haerts of others. Especially when they were all lit up like they were now.

The power and drive behind the battle was drawing out everyone's passion. To Melodia, everyone was starting to hold a bright, beautiful pink glow, no matter how strong or weak their inner Haert was. She could see those with damaged Haerts finding solace in this overwhelming feeling. She could find those with dangerous cracks piecing themselves together, everyone's energy unconsciously wanting to share and feel and express, and it was beautiful.

But nothing about the experience affected her more than the Haert she saw right next to her.

It was practically shattered. Fragments floated in his spirit, dull and barely shimmering. It was the weakest she'd ever seen from anyone, torn apart by grief and fear and rage.

She forgot all about the battle.

To Noa: How can I give someone a part of my Haert to fix theirs?

No one noticed how she'd stopped cheering, the mass of energy and passion all focusing them on the battle. Melodia started clumsily gathering parts of her Haert together, trying to prepare it for whatever spell Noa could give her.

Let her have something. Please, please let her have something.

From Noa: That depends on how close you are to the person emotionally.

To Noa: It's my brother.

Melodia was finally understanding why Aniko had kept his Haert hidden from her.
To Noa: I think it's been this way since his wife died. Things just keep making it worse. I didn't know.

To Noa: Please tell me I can help him.

The crowd roared as Aguma called upon his special move, Exploding Fist, and the winds drew in a ring of rocks and dust from the stadium. His entire spirit was blazing within him, the true enjoyment of the battle giving him life.

If she wasn't so focused on helping – no, saving Aniko, she'd be nothing but proud of him.

From Noa: If one of his drivers is Menta, then for now, you can use a telepathic connection to leak Haert into his spirit. I'm going to ask one of my friends who is more versed in Haert spells what to do.

To Noa: thank you

With Aniko distracted by the battle, Melodia was easily able to slip back into their link and start pushing Haert at him without him noticing. It was something she'd never done before – the only training she'd ever received for Haert magic was how to contain it, or to control her sight of it. She couldn't tell if she was doing it right, or doing anything at all.

But she had to try. She knew part of this damage had to be related to her – her Arrangement, her run-ins with danger during her travels the year before, the confusion over Dia and Melody now. She knew it was unlikely she could put his Haert back in one piece, but if she could even get it back to say, ten, she'd feel like she had made a difference.

Part of his pain was her fault, and it was her responsibility to help heal it.

From Noa: Forward from Kuzunoha: There's no exact spell for it. What she needs to do is push the energy into a word or phrase that holds an important emotional meaning for both of them. She will be led through his psyche and see different points of his pain, and from there she should choose only the moments that she knows she is able to heal. If she over-exerts herself, she could still heal him, but her Haert will be severely drained, and losing that much that fast could put her in a coma until it refills itself.

From Noa: Please be careful. Haert spells are incredibly dangerous. I'm only letting you do this because, with the amount you have, it should be nearly impossible for you to drain it with one spell.

From Noa: Don't overdo it. Remember that one can't heal another person's Haert by themselves – the person being healed has to want it.

To Noa: Thank you

A word or phrase that held an important emotional meaning for both of them.

Gently taking her brother's hand, Melodia waited until he'd stopped his cheering and looked over at her.

She tightened her grip. Gathering all the energy she'd put aside for this – nearly half of her enormous supply – she shoved every bit of it into one of the first things Aniko had ever said to her.

“If I believe in anything, I believe in you.”

Their hands erupted in a lightning storm of pink. For a brief moment, Melodia was blinded.
When she could see again, she had a pretty good feeling the spell had worked.

Chapter End Notes

Just as a fun fact, the friend that Noa contacted is one of the SideM game idols, Amehiko Kuzunoha. His background involves cleansing spirits and the like, so I thought he fit pretty well! He's not working for 315 Pro here, though; I'm only using the units that the anime chose.

Our DeviantArt, where story-related drawings and profiles are all going to be:
http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
ADDITIONALLY, MEL'S ACCOUNT IS GOOD:
https://lunarcentric.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

A brief break from the tournament to help Aniko not die from a broken Haert.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She felt like she was going to be sick.

Everything around her pulsed dimly, muted and dull. Shards of Haert were splintered across the clouded magenta sky, crackling with broken energy as they tried to do what they were made to do. They let off a false, forced sense of joy that made her head ache. Large pink bubbles, shrouded in shadows, floated aimlessly around her. When she tried to get her bearings and focus her feet on the ground, she found there wasn't any.

“This looks bad,” a voice whimpered. She whirled around in alarm, fearing she'd done something wrong and brought someone in with her-

Oh, thank Regina. It was just Melody.

It took a simple push of will for Dia to float herself over to her other half. “It is,” she agreed. When Melody grabbed her hand, she squeezed it tightly. “W-We have to focus. We're only healing what I'm directly involved in. We need to find...somewhere easy to start.”

Melody nodded, and the two began to float through the clouded murk that Dia supposed was a... 'spirit-scape' of Aniko's Haert. It took a very short time before they deduced the only things in the area were the bubbles, so they turned their attention to the nearest one.

“Do you think these are what's holding the...heart pain?” Melody was even newer to this than Dia was, but she was catching on quick to what her other half knew.

Dia nodded. “I'm not sure what pain it is, though. Maybe...if we push some Haert into it, it'll clear up a bit and we can see inside?”

“It won't hurt him more, will it?”

“N-No, I don't think so. We...don't have to keep it there. Just use it like a flashlight or something.” Dia was feeling a bit in over her head, but she had to look past that. This was for her brother.

Still holding hands, the two raised their free ones to spark a bit of Haert onto the bubble's surface. It swirled into a bright spot, acting like a small, round window. Just to be safe, Dia had Melody hold back as she peered inside. She trusted her, of course, but there was no telling what might be inside, and Melody was more easily scared than she was.

She'd barely looked for a second before she shoved herself back, turning away and trying to breathe. “Not this one,” she forced out. “N-Next.”

Looking slightly horrified, Melody pulled her away, not asking what she'd seen. Dia tried to pull herself together, tried to push the sight out of her mind. She knew Chiasa wouldn't have wanted herself to be seen in that state.
She couldn't do anything for his grief from here. Maybe...Maybe she could ask Madoka or Kotone to talk with him. It would be more their place than hers.

Putting a hand to her waist, where her belt – Chiasa's belt – usually was, she moved onward with Melody.

They soon came to another bubble, and repeated their 'window-making'. Once again, Dia hesitantly peered inside, and this time it took her a bit to figure out what was going on and when it was.

“This one.” She drew back, nodding to Melody. “This is from when I ran away. It's recent, so it shouldn't be too hard.”

Melody smiled hopefully. “Especially since he knows we're okay now, right?”

Dia nodded again, then carefully reached her hand out and placed it on the bubble. With a bright flash, she felt herself pulled in like she was being swept away by the ocean currents. She hit the sudden ground with a painful thud, Melody landing on top of her moments later.

Almost immediately, they could hear shouting. When Dia found her bearings, she tapped Melody's leg and pointed to the source.

From what she could tell, it was a suite in the Mithorian castle. Aniko was on the other side of the room, pacing in circles as he screamed into his Voltcom.

“What do you mean she's gone?! You just let her leave? You said she was unstable after the mental assault, why the hell didn't you keep watch on her?”

As the girls untangled themselves from each other, they could hear Lance's voice ring out from the device. “You think I let her go on purpose? Vince was watching her the whole time! It's not my fault Daniel had a breakdown and dragged him into it through their freaky mind-link!”

“At least tell me you know where she went!”

“If I knew that, I would've started this conversation with that information to begin with, don't you think?”

“You better be grateful you're in another fucking solar system right now, or I'd punch your gods damned snarky face off! Now shut up and go fucking find her!”

Aniko forcibly cut the connection, then slammed a fist against the closest wall. An explosion of ice shot out from the point of contact, coating it in a sheet of spiky cold. His roar of anger quickly melted into a wail of frustration, and he sunk to the floor, eventually ending up curled into a ball and trying not to hyperventilate.

By this point, the girls were on their feet, and Dia felt as frozen as the ice her brother had summoned. Guilt rolled through her gut, making her just as sick as she'd felt outside the memory. She jolted when there was an urgent knock at the door from the other side, and stumbled backward in alarm when Aniko thrust his arm out and shot a beam of freezing air at it. The door was covered just as quickly as the wall, sealing it shut.

Dia couldn't move. She'd done this to him. This was her fault.

Melody was already at his side. As he curled inwards again, she knelt beside him, and the only thing she said to him was, “Cup your hands and breathe through them. Slow your oxygen intake.”
It didn't seem like he heard her at first. He showed no sign of recognition, so she repeated herself a few times, very gently, until something finally seemed to click. With jerking motions, he brought his hands to his face, and as he made himself breathe through them, Melody gave Dia a reassuring smile.

*I got this,* she seemed to say. Dia could only nod in reply.

Melody waited patiently for Aniko's breathing to settle, then put a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Your sister's okay, Aniko.”

“She ran away.” Aniko's voice seemed warped, but maybe it was just how things sounded here. “Sh-She left, why would she...”

“The Quartz monster messed with her head. She didn't know what she was doing at the time, but she made it safely to New York. Okay? She went to see Toby and the others.”

“R-Really?”

Melody nodded, smiling softly when he turned his head to her. “The Menta that the monster was made of threw her head out of whack. She's going to have some memory problems, but they'll get better, and she's going to do some amazing things while she's on Earth.”

“Why would she...go to Earth, doesn't she....doesn't she trust us?”

“That's not it at all, I swear. If there was any control in her actions, I'm sure she left because she didn't want to end up hurting anyone, or making her own family fight her. But in New York, she's surrounded by people who aren't afraid to pin her down or even punch her to snap her out of something. She left to protect M-Mingzhu, and Lance. There's no way they could've done that.”

She reached over to put her other hand on his clenched fists, just lightly hovering over them. “And it's the same for you. If she'd come here, she could've hurt you or the boys. You know Dia would never want to do that.”

As Aniko slowly nodded in agreement, Dia felt like things were starting to click into place for her. She still couldn't remember a thing about how or why she'd left Arus, but what Melody was saying made perfect sense. Whatever state of mind she'd been in, she'd held together enough to realize she might be a danger.

That was why she'd left. It had to be. This felt like the right answer.

She suddenly felt like she could move again.

Slowly, she crossed the room, giving Melody time to help Aniko uncurl. She struggled to remember what she'd done after getting to New York, she'd...she'd definitely done something important, something related to Aniko.

With a jolt, she remembered. *I texted him.*

As if summoned by her simple desire, her phone appeared in her hands, already open to a conversation with Aniko. She quickly typed the same message she'd sent him in the real world, trying to match the words as close as possible.

*Please don't panic. I'm okay. I need some space right now and I know that if I tell you where I am, you'll try to come get me, so...I can't. Not yet. I love you, and I'm sorry. Please tell the boys I said Merry Christmas and not to forget to leave cookies out for Santa.*
She hit the send button, and almost immediately, a chime rang out from where Aniko's phone sat on the dresser. Aniko jumped, but let Melody help him to his feet slowly before he raced over to it.

When he read it, he started laughing. It quickly turned to tears.

*Are you safe? Are there people to watch over you?* The same message he'd replied with before.

*Yes. Plenty. When I'm feeling more secure about my situation, I promise I'll tell you more.*

*Does Mom know? Lance?*

*We both know if I try to text them, they'll have Pidge track my phone. Could you tell them for me?*

*You know I'll do anything for you, Xiaolian.*

*Thank you. I love you, Xing.*

*I love you too.*

As Aniko finally smiled through his tears, the room took on a pink glow. Before she could be blinded, Dia closed her eyes; there was an audible 'pop', and when she looked again, she and Melody were back in the mass of bubbles and clouds.

The bubble they'd just been in had cleared to a soft, pale pink. What she'd seen before – Aniko curled up on the floor, clinging to a photo of her – was now replaced with how they'd left him: Standing by the dresser, smiling tearfully at his phone.

Melody touched her shoulder and pointed above them. “Dia, look.”

Dia raised her head and saw it instantly. Fragments of pink dust were gathering together, forming shards; pre-existing shards were pulled to each other and melded into slightly larger pieces.

*It worked.*

The weight in her gut was gone.

They had work to do.

The next bubbles weren't as easy as the first.

After a bit of searching, the second one they tackled was when Dia had gone missing at age 12. They mostly comforted him and promised she'd come back, and the end of that bubble-scene had indeed been her return. However, they hadn't been expelled from the bubble this time – rather, there had been a new one *inside* where they already were.

The second-layer bubble had gone through the trouble of Dia’s amnesia regarding her disappearance, and Aniko panicking that it might be a defense mechanism to protect her from some sort of awful experience. While Dia had taken the first layer, it was Melody that took this one, promising that Dia had been in a safe environment and the amnesia wasn't a counter-measure to any sort of trauma. He didn't believe her at first, until Dia stepped in and explained how she'd remembered those memories being forcefully locked away by something. His panic subsided, redirecting towards determination to find what had done it, and they were finally released from both layers of the bubble.
As they searched for the next Dia-memory, Melody praised her other half for the quick thinking she'd done to explain herself – they couldn't expect him to believe they were in his Haert, after all. Dia had just blurted out, “I'm your sister from the future!”

It worked out pretty well. More than she thought it would, really – it assured him that 'in the future', she was still strong.

They found a couple more options for their next target, but decided to pick the one regarding Spiral Force first. Once again playing the 'future' bit, Dia was able to promise him that he'd helped her tremendously in her recovery and that she, Toby, and Zeo were all doing far better now.

This bubble had a second layer as well. It was about the first time she'd become truly angry after her Arrangement, causing it to spike up and make her attack the Force again. Everyone had been reluctant to fight her, and Aniko had collapsed into a panic attack just before Larmina finally snapped her out of it. Melody helped him through it, and Dia assured him she'd never be mad at him for trying to help. It took a lot of convincing, but they got through to him.

After a short break – very short, as they couldn't tell how much time was passing in the real world – they moved on to the fourth Dia-bubble. It also had two layers, but they were relatively simple, regarding Dia's traveling during the previous year.

First, Dia talked about the countless fun experiences she'd had on her journey, easing his worry that she would see it all as a chore trying to find the source of the Quartz monsters. Then, in the second layer, she'd praised him for his hard work fighting with Henry to chase off the Beartic and protect her, even if his battle form had scared her.

When they picked the next bubble, it was decided that Dia would go in alone. Melody remained in the general Haert-space to keep an eye on the slowly reforming shards – but also to give Dia a private moment with a very delicate time in Aniko's life.

*You've got this,* she thought as Dia disappeared into the bubble.

Upon her arrival in the bubble, the first thing Dia did was will herself to her mermaid form, to better blend in with the lake caves around her.

The second thing she did was knock on the opening of the cave 11-year-old Aniko was hiding in, and ask quietly, “Can I come in?”

He didn't look up, but he gave a grunt of approval, so she slowly swam in. “Xing? Would you look at me for a moment?”

There was no response. Worried, she swam closer, stopping a few feet away. “Xing, please. I have something really important to tell you.”

“Why can't you just leave me alone?” he mumbled, his quiet voice barely audible. “Go away.”

Her heart ached. “I can't do that, Xing. I can't leave you alone like this.”

“I said go away!”

“The Mytans might've taken Dad and your sisters, but we're not dead! Xing, I'm right here! I'm Xiaolian!”

His head jerked up, anger rising instantly on his face. The still fresh infection of Isis's energy
caused the water around him to drop in temperature, and the mask of ice appeared around his eyes.
“You're lying! Xiaolian's just a baby! And she's gone!”

Dia closed the distance between them in an instant, grabbing his shoulders. “Xing, don't you ever believe that they've won! Do you understand me? The moment you tell yourself there's nothing you can do, that's when they win! That's when you lose Dad and Jinjing! Do you want that to happen?”

“You're not my sister! Xiaolian's dead!”

“Then why am I wearing Mom's pendant? Why do I have the Purple Tear?! If I'm not Xiaolian, then answer that!”

He opened his mouth to retort, but as his eyes fell on the pendant around her neck, he faltered. As his anger was replaced by shock, the icy magic faded to nothing.

Dia slowly released one of his shoulders, then reached up and pulled the lid of her pendant open. The Purple Tear sparkled gently upon its reveal. “Xing, I am Xiaolian, but I'm from the future.”

“What...?”

She moved her other hand to his cheek, holding it just as carefully as he'd done for her over the years. “The magic catapulted me over the ocean, to Japan. Then I move to the United States when I'm six, and that's where Xiaotong finds me when I'm ten. I finally get to meet you all again.” She smiled. “And that's the happiest day of my life.”

Between the Tear and her words, belief was slowly starting to sink in. “You...You're really...?”

“And you wanna know something else?” Dia looked around them, her movements and expressions exaggerated, acting as if she was about to tell him a huge secret. Then, she leaned closer to him and whispered, “You're my favorite brother.”

“I am?”

She nodded.

It finally hit him.

Tears flew from the young Aniko's eyes, quickly pulled into the lake water as he lunged forward. Dia caught him in her arms and held him tightly, whispering comfortingly in Chinese as he bawled. When she ran out of things to say, she sang.

"I was so happy when you smiled
Your smile breaks through the clouds of grey
Far from the sunny days that lie in sleep
Waiting with patience for the spring
When the flowers will soon renew again
Knowing there's more beyond the pain of today"

"Although the scars of yesterday remain
You can go on living as much as your heart believes
You can't be born again although you can change
Let's stay together, always"

“Always, he echoed, with a teary, red face and a large smile.
The bubble popped.

“This one?’

“Yeah. This should be our last one.”

“...I think you're right. Thank you, Melody.”

“I think we both know what you want to do for it, so...is it okay if I join you?”

“Yeah.”

The Haert-scape around them was much lighter than it had been when they'd started. The dust and shards of Haert symbolizing the state of his emotional balance were in fewer, larger pieces now – still scattered, still many, but better. They could probably leave now and Aniko would still be in a much more stable shape than he was before, but...

This bubble, Dia knew, would be easy, because she already knew what to do.

They gently put their hands on its side and let it pull them in. It deposited them in the attic bedroom of a house Melody hadn't seen before, and Dia just barely remembered. This was the house her family had been living in at the time they'd found her, six and a half years ago. The bedroom was Aniko's, and 19-year-old him sat on a keyboard bench, absently pressing keys.

Dia walked over to him, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Hey.”

Startled, he glanced up, then gave her a suspicious look. “Who are you? How'd you get in here?”

“Magic. I'm kinda from the future.” She shrugged. “About six and a half years from now.”

“What-?” His eyes fell slightly downward, then widened at the sight of the pendant around her neck. “Xiaolian?”

She smiled. “Could I sing something for you? My friend and I want to share my favorite song.”

After a quick glance behind her revealed a shyly waving Melody, Aniko slowly stood, and let his 'future' sister lead him to the wall. The three of them sat there together, Aniko in the middle, and Dia called on the magic of her Tear.

The soft chimes of a piano began to play, a tune more than familiar to Dia by now. For the first few seconds, Aniko's eyes were narrowed in confusion, then shot open wide once more as it hit him.

"Looking at the storm above us
It doesn't look like we can get through
It won't be easy, but I'll make it with you by my side"

It was the song that he'd magicked up for her when they'd reunited six years ago – the alternate lyrics to what she'd written for her TV production theme.

"If we always stay together
The lightning wouldn't even stop us
Beyond the clouds, another adventure awaits"

When he'd first sung it to her, it had instantly become the most important song in her life, passing
even the family's song. A tune she'd created, with words he'd written – her song. Their song.

"But you say wow wow wow wow wow
The tears from yesterday will keep us from flying
And I go wow wow wow wow wow
We'll leave all those memories behind and be free"

Dia reached over to take her crying brother's hand; on his other side, Melody joined the song.

"Let's fly like butterflies on the wind
Just believe all the dreams in your heart
Meant to be friends from the start
I'll be with you forever until the very end"

"Even though these troubles tear at our wings
I know we'll reach for the sky through the rain
Wait for tomorrow and see
On my love"

Aniko swallowed a sob, pulling them both into his arms.

"On my love..."

You're more than great, Xing. You mean the world to me.

I could never hate you for the way we were separated. I could never hate you for things out of your control.

You're amazing.

You're better than the pain holding you down.

It's okay if it still hurts, but don't forget that it's okay to heal, too.

I love you.

“I think she's coming to!”

“Oh, thank Regina...”

“Melody? Dia? Can you hear us?”

“Hope, you'll scare her being that close!”

Aware from many experiences that she was going to be blinded by sunlight as soon as she opened her eyes, Dia covered her face before anything else. “Ugh...H-How long was...”

She felt Lance's hand on her shoulder. “Just a couple minutes. Are you okay?”

“I-I'm fine. Sorry. There's...so many Haerts, I couldn't...stop from seeing them all.”

“I should've thought of that, I-”

“No! No, it wasn't the reason.” Dia moved her fingers minutely, letting the light hit her eyelids. “I was...I went in one to try and heal it.”
Past the cheers that were still ringing out around them, Dia could still feel the silence surrounding her family. Her mother was the one to break it. “Xing?”

She couldn't find the words to answer. Dia nodded instead.

It was definitely Lance that sighed. “How did you even...”

“I asked a friend how to do it. I...just wanted to help.” She finally let her eyes crack open, lowering her hands. “I knew I couldn't fix everything, but if I'd just done nothing, he could've...You can't possibly understand how completely shattered it was. I had to do something.”

A groan sounded next to her, and she braved the sunlight to open her eyes and turn to the waking Aniko. She quickly switched to Haert-sight, then broke into a grin and nearly tears at the state of it. It wasn't even halfway whole, but it was a far cry from the dust and specks it had been before.

“Did I just get slammed with a bunch of sleep spells, or did something go in my head?” he muttered drowsily, putting a hand to his face. When his fingers brushed against tears, he pulled it back in confusion, then slowly noticed through squinted eyes that Dia was watching him. “Did...did you do something-?”

It seemed to come back to him in a rush. “Y-You cast a spell. I saw...m-magic...you can-?”

She cut him off with a hug. “I'm sorry I didn't know how much you were hurting.”

“...You did something to my Haert, didn't you...”

“Just the pain I was involved in.”

Though he sighed, Dia could feel the soft, slow pulse of his newly revived Haert. “You nosy little shit...”

“I'm sorry.”

“You know I can't be mad at you, Xiaolian.”

Lance's hand shoved itself onto her head, affectionate but careful. “You're really getting the hang of this Haert stuff, huh?”

“That's my girl,” she heard Mingzhu praise.

When she'd had her fill of hug, Dia pulled away, then turned her attention to the stadium. “I didn't miss everything, did I?”

They didn't answer, but the sight before her was clear enough. The same battle was still going on, Aguma and Kyoya fighting head-to-head with their partners just trying to keep out of the line of fire. A wave of relief rolled through her.

“You might want these,” came a voice behind her. A pair of sunglasses was held over her shoulder, and Alyssin smiled wryly at her. “You've got the pink again. And word to the wise, don't ever freak me out like that again.”

Dia smiled sheepishly, and took the offered item. “I-I couldn't wait...”

“How 'bout you just let yourself enjoy things for a while, huh? You can save the Haert healing for when we're not in the middle of a tournament.”
“Right...”

Dia slipped the sunglasses on, letting the dark lenses hide her pink sclera as she refocused on the battle. She hadn't missed the end.

Then again...she didn't regret turning away from it at all.

When Aguma ended the battle a few minutes later, his Great Ring of Destruction knocking Leone and Bull onto their sides, Dia and Aniko stood and roared out their cheers together, hands tightly clasped between them.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was not part of the plan.

Songs:
“For Fruits Basket” from Fruits Basket - English translation (first verse)

"Butter-Fly" from Digimon - English
Lyrics reworked by poisonousparadox; video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_Y7m9ZE10c

Our DeviantArt, where story-related drawings and profiles are all going to be:
http://among-the-stars-3.deviantart.com/
ADDITIONALLY, MEL'S ACCOUNT IS GOOD:
https://lunarcentric.deviantart.com/
Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
“So, let me get this straight. You didn’t see part of our battle...because you were dealing with your brother's hidden trauma.”

“I mean...when you put it like that, it sounds worrying.”

“For fuck's sake, Dia, it is. What the hell possessed you to do something that dangerous?”

“Says the guy who regularly climbs canyons for his training.”

Kyoya snorted, while Aguma gave him an intrigued look. “Canyons?”

Dia just sighed. “Look, my Haert-sight got forced on, I saw his was in...horrifying shape, I couldn't just leave it. And it's not like I tried to fix everything!”

“Be that as it may, the task tired you, so please be careful during your performance.” Aguma put his hand on her shoulder, as gently as he could. “While I'm glad it ended well, it could have easily gone the other way. Please think more about your actions in the future.”

“Exactly!” Kyoya cut in as if he wasn't a walking disaster of impulse.

“I will. Promise.”

Both of them gave her a stern warning look, before Aguma relented and turned to the helicopter behind them. “I'll see you after our victory, Xiaolian.”

She smiled. “Yup.”

_You heard that, right? He said 'victory'. Not 'revenge'._

_Melody shut up we don't know for sure-

_Let me hope!

When the helicopter had taken off, Kyoya turned to face her again. “By the way...”

Uh-oh. There was annoyance in those words. “Yes?”

“Is there any reason you didn't mention your friend has the bey with the crimson flash? Or that your cousin is the legendary blader we came here to find?”

Yeah, he was a bit mad. “Um...well...to be fair, I haven't seen them battle before today...”

“So?”

“Look, things with my family are...complicated when it comes to beyblade.” Dia wasn't sure how to explain it. “Our ancestors were cast out of Beylin Temple two thousand years ago, and we've been considered outlaws ever since. Beyblade isn't just a sport to us, it's our lives. I...wasn't going to meddle in this. They had to be the ones to reveal themselves.”
That much was true. As much as she'd meddled to turn them away from revenge, she'd never once considered the option of revealing them early to Beylin Temple. She hadn't named Aguma or Bao when talking to Dashan at the temple, and she'd only pointed them out in battle earlier because she thought they'd been about to announce themselves.

“...You're too damn loyal sometimes, you know that? Gives me a headache.”

“Right...”

Kyoya stormed off, and she couldn't help but feel a little upset about the situation. She had no regrets about what she'd done, but dealing with Kyoya's perspective always made things complicated.

Maybe Qiang wouldn't mind if she slipped the smallest bit of magic into her song before the final...

Sengenji Martial Arts Hall was overflowing with memories, emotions, and energy from countless people who had trained there. As both a blader and a martial artist herself, Dia was beyond honored to step onto the sacred grounds, as was her family. The hall's very aura seemed to light a fire in them, and most clearly in Bao and Aguma, who were struggling to contain their excitement about the upcoming battle already.

She joined the two in their walk towards the stadium, removing her sunglasses on the way. The Haert magic hadn't left her eyes yet, but it wouldn't be visible to the audience from the distance. Bao held on to them for her, and the three stood together as the crowds settled in and Qiang began his announcements.

“Don't look so nervous,” Bao joked as he saw her fiddling nervously with her microphone. “You've sung in front of an entire kingdom before, what's a tournament crowd compared to that?”

“Merfolk and humans are two very different races,” Dia reminded him, trying to smile. “Merfolk don't care if you're a little off, because music is music. Humans...can be picky.”

From his perch, she heard Qiang sound the first gong, signaling for quiet – and for her appearance. Leaving the boys and her Character at the sidelines, she made her way to the stadium.

As she started calling on the song enchanted into her microphone, the crowd came to a hush. Dia was given full silence before her performance began.

"Like a small boat
On the ocean
Sending big waves
Into motion
Like how a single word
Can make a heart open
I might only have one match
But I can make an explosion"

"And all those things I didn't say
Wrecking balls inside my brain
I will scream them loud tonight
Can you hear my voice this time?"

"This is my fight song
Take back my life song"
Prove I'm alright song
My power's turned on
Starting right now I'll be strong
I'll play my fight song
And I don't really care if nobody else believes
'Cause I've still got a lot of fight left in me" 

It was at this point that she started trickling in the magic.

"Losing friends and I'm chasing sleep
Everybody's worried about me
In too deep
Say I'm in too deep
And it's been two years
I miss my home
But there's a fire burning in my bones
Still believe
Yeah, I still believe"

"And all those things I didn't say
Wrecking balls inside my brain
I will scream them loud tonight
Can you hear my voice this time?"

"This is my fight song
Take back my life song
Prove I'm alright song
My power's turned on
Starting right now I'll be strong
I'll play my fight song
And I don't really care if nobody else believes
'Cause I've still got a lot of fight left in me
A lot of fight left in me"

It wasn't her fault she got a little carried away with it.

(Okay, maybe it was.)

"Like a small boat
On the ocean
Sending big waves
Into motion
Like how a single word
Can make a heart open
I might only have one match
But I can make an explosion"

"This is my fight song
Take back my life song
Prove I'm alright song
My power's turned on
Starting right now I'll be strong
I'll play my fight song
And I don't really care if nobody else believes
'Cause I've still got a lot of fight left in me"

"No I've still got a lot of fight left in me"

“Are you folks ready for the best battle you've ever seen?!”

“YEAH!”

“Then let's get this final match started! Wǒmen huì jìxù!”

We will continue on!

“Yeah, baby! Here come the two teams! The first to arrive is the Dashan, Chi Yun team!”

After a moment filled with the cheers, Qiang continued, “And there, the Bao, Aguma team arrives!”

Dashan watched with silent apprehension as the Beylin Fist team approached the stadium. His eyes met Aguma’s, and the chill in the air was abrupt. All sounds of the crowd died out as his focus tunneled towards his final opponents – wondering what they would say, what they would do.

After two thousand years, the two schools were finally meeting in battle once again. He only hoped it would be on peaceful terms.

Among the four of them, no one moved. They were given the customary time for pre-battle talk, but it appeared at first that no one wished to speak. It was only when Dashan began to open his mouth, an attempt to welcome his opponents, that Aguma spoke and beat him to it.

“Two thousand years later, I stand before those of Beylin Temple, and I sense my ancestors bellowing and raging for me to claim their revenge.” Aguma's voice was strong, carrying easily across the stadium. His words made Dashan tense – had he decided not to heed Melodia's advice after all?

“For two thousand years, my people have lived in exile,” Aguma continued. His tone was far from casual, but it wasn't quite accusatory, either. “We have lived through harsh climates, unforgiving terrain, droughts, famine, and even outside attacks by those who sought their own revenge against our families. We have not lived – we have survived.”

Bao spoke now, for the first time Dashan remembered hearing him. “We have considered our course of action upon arriving in this city, being in civilization for the very first time. There is so much culture and change that we’ve missed because of the war, another life we can never know. But since coming here and seeing this place, and its people, and the pedestal that Beylin Temple has climbed upon in the past two thousand years, we've come to a decision.”

Dashan and Chi Yun both waited in respectful silence as they paused. It was Aguma, firm and unmoving, who continued.

“We are not our ancestors.”

The rolling, uncomfortable weight in Dashan's gut slowly started to lift away.

“I have thought long and hard about the exile our people have suffered throughout these two
thousand years,” Aguma went on. “And while it is true that our ancestors could have very well destroyed China in their quest, that is not what we desire. We want to show our power to the world, but not with pointless destruction. What would be the point of that, to destroy everything, when there would be nothing left in the end for anyone?”

Dashan felt himself starting to smile – from relief, pride, excitement, he wasn't sure. The weight was gone and he wasn't facing an enemy anymore – he was just facing another opponent. “There wouldn't be.”

Aguma raised his fist in the air. “Hear me now, Beylin Temple! We will win this tournament today, and prove that we have the right to live as anyone else! We shall not be left in the shadows any longer!”

“Bao and Aguma, of the Beylin Fist.” Dashan's voice carried throughout the stadium, rang above the hushed crowd. “I promised your family that I would face you honorably, and I am not one to break my promises. I will not seek anything but an honest fight to test your skills and see the strength you have come to show! Beylin Fist, show me the power you have developed for the past two thousand years!”

He raised his fist in a mirror of Aguma's; upon seeing his action, Chi Yun immediately did the same, adding his own words to the conversation. “Show us a good fight here, understand?”

Bao's arm shot up to mimic the others, a large smirk growing on his face. “We won't hold anything back!”

“We wouldn't want you to!”

Satisfied that the pre-battle talk was done, Qiang took over. “Now check this out, friends! The stadium for the final battle!” Maze walls rose from the stadium floor, catching the four bladers' attention. “The red wall work o' beyblade genius! Red walls block the path in the stadium like a maze. You may choose to use the walls in your fight, or try to get through them quickly, and fight in the space at the center. Strategy is the key to this battle!”

At long last, the war has reached its epilogue. Qiang watched the two teams as they conferred with each other, his hands almost shaking with excitement – almost, but not quite. Finally, it'll all be over.

His eyes shifted to the stands, where he could just make out the bright light of Melodia's plum-colored mer energy as she tried to make her way to a seat. It shimmered with just as much hope as he felt in his own spirit. And it's all thanks to her. I never thought I'd see the day I'd be on the same side as a mermaid princess, but now here I am! And at the same time as the Beylin schools finally meet again, too.

“Time to get it on!” Qiang's thoughts could wait for after the fact, though. Right now, he had a job to do.

He'd already been waiting two thousand years, after all. What was another ten or twenty minutes?

“Three! Two! One!”

“Let it rip!”

“The Dashan, Chi Yun team is racing through the maze at high speeds!” Melodia heard Qiang's
voice even as she ran through the halls behind the stands. “What about their opponents, the Bao, Aguma team?”

Even if she missed the beginning of the battle, she knew she'd see at least some of it no matter what. If she hurried, she could reach her family before she missed too much of it, and Qiang's commentary would keep her in the loop until then.

Finally, the two schools were meeting head-to-head. The confrontation the show had never given Melody was now part of her new, very real life as Melodia. Maybe it was her Beylin Fist heritage, or the days she'd been spending with them until now, or some sort of mer connection, but this felt like the most important battle she'd ever see.

Screw Nemesis' revival. This was the battle of the century, and she wanted to watch it with the family and friends who had been waiting for it longer than her memories could reach.

“The Crimson Flash catches Zurafa and Lacerta!”

With a touch from Hope and a spark inside her, Melodia skipped the stairs with a single leap, bouncing up to the third floor in seconds. She refused to miss more than a few minutes of her family's moment, and she was so set on her decision that when she sensed two Haerts rushing up behind her, she didn't stop. Without thought, she flipped herself around, slowing just a bit as she began running backward with the help of Hope's balance and her martial arts training.

Her eyes widened at the sight of Chao Xin and Mei Mei, the two Temple bladers chasing after her. Her footing faltered, and she was forced to spin back around before she fell, but she called back to them regardless. “Can I help you?”

“If it's okay, we wanted to watch the battle with you!” Chao Xin's answer was quick and without hesitation. “Dashan filled us in on everything. If your family will have us, please let us join you!”

“We want to see if it's really possible for the two schools to find peace!” Mei Mei added, nothing but curiosity and hope in her voice.

As she adjusted her steps for the upcoming corner, Melodia made a swift decision. “As long as you don't antagonize anyone and don't ask questions!”

“Promise!”

'Aniko! Beylin Temple bladers are coming up with me to watch, be nice and tell the others to do the same!'

'Wh-! Damn it, why?’

'They followed me and asked nicely!'

She was relieved when he gave no further argument, and shifted her attention as Qiang's voice rang out again.

“While Lacerta bravely manages to hold off Hades Crown, Zurafa quickly escapes the maze! But is it safe?”

As she reached the doorway closest to her family's position, Melodia finally slowed, feeling her stamina begin to dwindle. Note to self, I need to get back to exercising after this, yeesh! She came to a stop as the sunlight hit her face, and she let Chao Xin and Mei Mei, along with her Characters, catch up, before leading the way to where she sensed the Beylin Fist's mer energy.
Almost immediately, the feeling of Aguma's spirit below skyrocketed, and she knew that he was about to enter the battle. Sounds of the walls being broken apart by Kronos' charge reached her ears. She practically danced around spectators, keeping her eyes focused towards the stadium and her Tear sense focused on her family. She couldn't quite see the battle yet, but she could just make out Bao and Aguma over the edge of the stands.

“Oh snap! Kronos uses sheer force to break through the walls in its path!” Qiang's voice no longer echoed through the halls now that she was outside, and his words sounded clearer. “And with that amazing power, it delivers a direct hit!”

Melodia excused herself through two more rows before finally stumbling into Lance's back. She quickly moved in front of him, catching her breath and trying to catch the beys below in her gaze. After a brief struggle with the darkness of her sunglasses, she whipped them off and nearly shoved them at Lance's chest, not even looking to see if he'd caught them so she wouldn't miss another second of the battle.

“Kronos' wicked attack is deflected fiercely by Dashan's Storm Surge!” Qiang cried. Using Aguma's power as a reroute, Melodia located Kronos and Zurafa in the stadium, and watched each of her cousin's attacks being knocked aside by Zurafa.

“Kick his ass, Aguma!” she shouted, pushing her support through the Tear sense to make sure he could hear her. She heard Chao Xin and Mei Mei calling out to their friends as well, having taken spots at the edge of the group, beside Ju.

Like the battle before, perhaps to a further degree with her Haert energy already active and strong, Melodia saw the bright glows of pink all across the stands. From the people in front of her to those on the other side of the arena, their pulses and cracks all showed themselves, and it was hard not to focus on them.

It was hard to ignore them when she felt like she could do something.

As Dashan readied himself for a counter-attack below, Melodia momentarily glanced away to look behind her, catching Alyssin's eye. She lifted her microphone slightly, using her other hand to tap her pendant, and tried to push her message through.

It seemed to take a few seconds for it to click. Alyssin seemed alarmed, pointing at herself with uncertainty. Melodia nodded firmly.

After some thought, Alyssin nodded back. No words were needed, as ironic as that was for their magic – after the tournament, they'd sing one final song. Together.

With that settled, she turned her attention back to the battle, trying to tune out all the Haerts around her. She wasn't going to miss this one.

Dashan was currently fighting back with his Strong Arm Barrage, Zurafa slowly gaining ground against Kronos with its furious attacks. At the same time, still in the maze, Lacerta was evading Crown's attacks while also trying to conserve its strength. No one had the upper hand, and it was impossible to tell who would come out of this the victor.

“I can't believe Aguma's being pushed back!” Lance complained. “Man, Beylin Temple's stronger than I gave them credit for.”

“To be fair, Dashan is their top blader,” Melodia replied. “We've got the two leaders going against each other here.”
“No kidding, huh?”

As the battle raged on, Qiang continued giving his all in commentating the fight. “Zurafa's amazing Strong Arm Barrage is actually pushing Kronos back! This is beyblade! This is a heated battle! In this birthplace of all Chinese bey arts, Sengenji, where we've witnessed the origin of the bey battle!”

Dashan's mighty cry could be heard across the entire structure, his barrage not letting down for even a second. Since his battle with Gingka and Yuki, he seemed to have unlocked a hidden reserve of strength from within Zurafa, and the defense-type bey was delivering harsh and steady attacks.

Melodia and everyone around her called out cheers and roars, so loud in her ears that it was getting hard to hear Qiang at all. Her Haert-sight started splotching, other Siqu flashing into view from the bladers below – Courae, Fysika, Stratea, Menta. The reds of courage shot through the green of strategy, which melded perfectly with Menta's blue, and the trio of colors circled perfectly around the black aura of their physical strength. It was so much to take in that Melodia was forced to take Hope into her hand, letting the Character's peaceful balance flow through her and sort her out.

She was getting a headache, but that was okay. It was worth it to be here.

Her focus turned to Chi Yun as he struggled to continue evading Bao's attacks, constantly utilizing his Thunder Sword Waltz to hook Crown. Lacerta made a break for it when their spinning led them to the end of the wall behind them, then countered and pinned Crown against another. Rather than fighting back, Crown pushed its power to the wall itself, hurtling through it with a little too much force. It flew too far as it tried to escape, slamming into the next wall back and becoming trapped by the falling debris.

As Chi Yun sent Lacerta to aid Zurafa, Chao Xin and Mei Mei cried out praises. The rest of the group called condolences to Bao, and pushed strength to Aguma. Once Lacerta arrived in the center of the stadium, Melodia could feel the almost immediate rise of Chi Yun and Dashan's power, a familiar orange light growing around them.

“Joint special move! Heavens' Supreme Destruction Palm!”

“Hang tight, boys!” Mingzhu cried.

For a brief moment, Zurafa and Lacerta's spirits were visible in the blast of light, before it shifted into a fireball that shot down towards Kronos. Melodia shielded her eyes before the blast hit, but lowered her arms as soon as the light dimmed, trying to find Kronos among the smoke below.

Lance's trained eye caught sight of the beys first. “We're still in this, boys and girls! Sucks to be you, Beylin Temple, we've got this in the bag!”

“Hey!”

He wasn't at all deterred by Mei Mei's cry of complaint. “Joke's on you, Kronos is a stamina type! It's quick and it dodged the he-”

“My kids,” Aniko cut in.

“-heck outta that attack!”

With Zurafa and Lacerta both recovering from their joint attack, Aguma seized the moment. “Beylin Fist, Iron Wall Fist!”
“No way!” Chao Xin almost bumped into Ju as he leaned forward. “How can the attack-style Beylin Fist use Beylin Temple's secret protective technique?”

“We originally came from the same style, remember?” Unlike Lance, Aniko made an active attempt to be courteous to the Beylin Temple duo. “Our ancestors passed it down, molding it to our style of battle.”

Even as Aniko spoke, Kronos was surrounded by a swift wall of wind. The force spun it up into a tornado and pulled up the red walls within the stadium, breaking them apart and drawing the debris in. Lacerta rushed in, undaunted, but even with the distance, Melodia could see Aguma's spirit rising around him in a ghostly purple aura. “Exploding Fist!”

Abruptly, the tornado shrunk in height and widened to a ring of condensed wind, the pieces of broken wall continuing to be sucked in by the sheer power. The spirit of Kronos took form, the frightening appearance of the grim reaper itself, and both Beylin Temple beys were forced back. They only recovered when Dashan and Chi Yun pooled their power into Solid Iron Walls, which they struggled to maintain as they evaded the rocks being thrown through the stadium.

Kronos began its march, heading straight for its opponents. Zurafa and Lacerta, though still holding their Solid Iron Walls, were being pushed back inch by inch, the force of the wind slowly pushing them to the edge of the stadium. There was a moment of brief conferral between Dashan and Chi Yun, followed by Lacerta's spirit flowing from its bey. It spun its tail at the ring of wind and rock, mimicked by its bey rushing forward and using its energy to disrupt the flow.

“Tempestuous Whirlwind Sword!”

“Hold your stance, Kronos!”

“Don't dare back down! Lacerta!”

The harsh attack failed to destroy the ring, but the winds were beginning to lessen. Ignoring what was clearly a warning from Dashan, Chi Yun threw Lacerta forward again, making a second, identical assault against Kronos' ring, as Aguma channeled his own energy to it.

“Tempestuous Whirlwind Sword!”

Chao Xin and Mei Mei called out in panic at their friend's recklessness, but even as they did so, the winds faltered. In mere seconds, the ring fell apart, rocks being thrown to the stadium floor.

“That was risky.” As reckless as he was himself, Lance knew the behavior when he saw it. “Lacerta's on its last cycles, he'd better be careful now.”

“We've almost got this won,” Aniko insisted, confident.

“For once, I have to agree with you. All Aguma needs to do is take Lacerta out, and it's over.”

Having just as much faith in her own friends, Mei Mei argued, “Not if Dashan takes out Aguma first! Don't underestimate Beylin Temple, boys!”

Though she would normally step into the friendly banter, Melodia found herself too overcome with her headache to do so. The world around her was starting to blur together, but she only had to hold out a little longer. The battle was definitely almost over, she could feel it.

*Just a few more minutes. Then I can...have Mom hum, that should calm my senses down.*

A golden light shone from Zurafa, Dashan attempting to take the lead in the battle. “Zurafa, special
move! Crushing Blast!"

“Not so fast!” After his near expulsion from the battle, Bao spoke up for the first time. “Here we go! Flash Attack!”

Crown's crimson light shot across the stadium, the winds of Exploding Fist having freed it from the debris. In an instant, it blocked Zurafa's attack, causing the energy it had built up to vanish.

“Do it now, Aguma! Don't worry about me!”

Mingzhu let out a gasp at Bao’s request, while Lance gave a cry of dismay. “What? No! Bao, you're being stupid, get out of the way! You don't have to go down with them!”

Aguma's aura exploded, the crawling dark purple surrounding him, his eyes flooding with bright red power. At this point, colors were starting to swirl together, so he ended up looking like a purple and blue snowman with demon eyes. Melodia squinted, trying to hold herself together. She just had to see the final move, she just had to hang on.

“You need to stop putting yourself in danger,” echoed her younger voice through her mind. The abruptness of it startled her, causing her to shut her eyes just as Aguma's Great Ring of Destruction took form. The headache had become a pounding, and she nearly lost hold of her microphone. She squeezed Hope maybe a bit too tightly as the back of her eyelids let out a swirling nonsense of colors, her sight officially overloaded by the flood of Siqu around her. Melodia tried to breathe, tried to wait it out for just a minute more. She couldn't focus enough to hum. She couldn't feel her hands, or what she was holding in them.

“You're being over-dramatic, Xiaolian! I'm not that stupid.”

That one was Bao. It was Bao's voice, a bit higher than it was now.

“No? You literally almost died last week!”

“...That doesn't count.”

A hazy vision of a wooden cottage started to replace the blinding colors in her sight. Bao sat at a table with her, a few years younger, his hair even longer than it was today – she suddenly remembered cutting it because of a dare from Gen.

Unbidden, memories of her time with the Beylin Fist began rushing through her head, blank spots and cut-offs being filled with Bao. Every moment she'd spent with him, everything she'd forgotten about him – it piled into her mind until she felt ready to scream from the pain. This was nothing like the unlocking she'd experienced before – as Dia opening her mind to Melody, as memories returned by the Menta.

This was nothing but pain. It was lightning in her brain, a burning that surrounded her head and flooded everything about her with memories that had been taken away. She had no idea if the scream she heard was in her head or in reality.

“You know what? I wasn't even surprised by that. I'm that used to you.”

She stood with Bao at the edge of what remained of the village. He'd just dropped down from the tree beside them, trying to scare her, but it had failed. Regardless, he wore a goofy smile that seemed entirely unlike him. He was completely at ease.

It felt like the memories were ripping her apart – not to Melody and Dia, but to a mess of vague
awareness and jumbled memories.

*I should've asked for help,* she thought weakly, watching fragments of Bao-related memories slip by.

Her right hand went cold. Water splashed against her. The memories were dragged away by the currents, the pain slowly subsiding. Her sight went dark, the sounds faded, and she dimly felt a strange warmth surrounding her. It felt like the ocean, so she welcomed it openly.

The pain was gone as quickly as it came.

“Unbelievable! I don't know how it happened, folks, but the battle...is a draw! Kronos was somehow flung out of the stadium, and with the light and smoke of his special move, it's impossible to tell when it happened compared to the three sleep-outs of the other beys!”

Cool water brushed over her eyes, droplets streaking across her face and spreading the feeling of safety. Melodia's senses started returning. Someone was holding her. The crowd was quiet, trying to process Qiang's announcement.

A draw...? Is that what he'd said? What in the world had happened during her episode?

“Dia? Dia, come on, open your eyes.”

It was Alyssin – was Alyssin holding her? No, her arms weren't so well built. Too small for Lance, but too bulky for Mingzhu or Aniko...

With the help of the healing water, Melodia opened her eyes as slowly as she could, trying to let her vision adjust. The figures above her started out blurry, but cleared into Alyssin and Chao Xin – the latter holding her, the former levitating a ball of water just above her face.

“She's waking up!” Chao Xin turned his head, presumably to call to her family. Melodia tried to sit up, but didn't have much success until he helped her. Alyssin hovered the water towards her again, this time brushing it gently against her forehead. She felt her mind clear and settle.

“Was it the Arrangement?” Alyssin asked quietly. It took Melodia a few seconds to figure out how to work her mouth again. “No...”

Annie shot into view, her tiny hands trying to cup her chin. Huge tears filled her eyes, and it looked like they were still running wild. “I-It's okay, it's okay! You're okay, I promise.”

Melodia didn't know what to say. Instead of speaking, she set her lips against Annie's hair in a gentle kiss, trying to assure her it was alright. She'd never seen her in this state – what had happened?

*What had just happened to her?*

Alyssin was joined by Aniko, whose eyes were shining with Menta as he looked her over, both body and mind. “It looks like a memory vault was just blasted open. I don't understand, she doesn't have the Menta with her, what caused it?”

“I-I think it was one of her fairies?” Alyssin seemed hesitant to state her guess. “It looked like she was holding one when it happened. Look at her hand.”

The water moved from her forehead to her right hand, cushioning it and easing the ache she was just starting to feel from it. Aniko leaned over slightly to look closer, and the face he made wasn't
reassuring. She tried to speak again. “What...happen'to me?”

After her two overseers exchanged a look, Alyssin let the watery cushion lift her hand into her view. A blue stain was smeared across her palm and bits of her fingers, pulsing with a dull sense of wrong that didn't fit anything she'd experienced before.

She tried to piece it together. “Hope...I-I was holding...where is she?”

Absolute fear took over Annie's face, and it scared Melodia more than anything else in her current situation. “She...She lit up with this awful light...Wh-When Alyssin was able to wrestle her out of your hand, she vanished into her egg.”

Melodia leaned back against the wall behind her, silently consenting to Aniko's frantic examination. She tried to think. There had to have been a trigger, right? There was always a trigger.

She'd been holding Hope, trying to stave off the knockout from Siqu overload. The battle had been going...she'd only been focused on the battle. What had happened in the battle to-?

“Bao, you're being stupid, get out of the way!”

“You need to stop putting yourself in danger.”

For a brief moment, her Haert flared up around her. Instead of the warm and fuzzy feeling she usually got, it was burning and sharp, and a wail broke out of her mouth before Alyssin's water and Aniko's spells settled it down again.

Bao had done something stupid.

Bao had always done stupid things. She remembered that now.

She remembered because Hope's feeling of balance had forced her memories to unlock, and it had overloaded her mind to the point of meltdown.

As she sat there and let herself be calmed and healed, Melodia wondered what the hell Hope was meant to do for her, if she could bring this kind of pain accidentally just by trying to help her remember.

She also wondered if Bao would be able to forgive her for forgetting him in the first place.

When Aniko said she could, she closed her eyes to let them rest. I need to thank him. I need to let him know that I remember.

I need to tell him how much he still means to me.

Ten minutes passed before Melodia was back to normal. Alyssin had gently coached her through covering her blue-stained hand with a mask of normality, giving her a visual example by revealing and re-covering a birthmark she hid at her neck. Aniko had set a healing Menta barrier around Hope's egg, and was watching over it for the time being. Annie hadn't left her shoulder.

According to Lance, the battle had indeed ended in a draw. After the teams had been given a few minutes of rest, Dashan and Aguma had elected to have a martial arts match to determine the winner of the tournament, and it was still going on.

Now that her mind was cleared and calm, and she trusted her body to stand, Melodia returned to the seats. Gen and the others surrounded her in a protective circle, giving her a bit of distance from the
other spectators. The only one standing with her was her mother, and she couldn't tell which of them had a tighter grip.

After the chaos of power that had been their bey battle, Dashan and Aguma's martial arts match was incredibly calm. It was hard to see the subtle movements from the distance they were at, but she enjoyed it all the same. It seemed Annie did, too – perhaps now that her Bearer was safe and well, she felt more secure.

Melodia didn't blame her at all. She swore to herself that she would do something special for Annie as soon as possible – she had more than earned it. And while she was worried about Hope, she had a feeling that if she were to stay in her egg for a long period, it wouldn't be anything about her health – it would probably be from fear.

She'd see about playing some music by Hope's egg when they got back to the house. Maybe that would help settle her down.

In the end, Dashan conceded the victory to Aguma, his praises to the Beylin Fist's strength reaching all through Sengenji. On peaceful terms, the two promised to battle again someday. Bao and Aguma were declared the official winners of the ToRyumon tournament.

Before the event came to a close, Melodia, Alyssin, and Ju approached Qiang. After discussing her plan with her family, it was agreed that using her music magic – with her sister Tear, no less – could do nothing but benefit her, so she'd been given the all-clear to perform one last time. It took mere moments to convince Qiang, and the only hold up was an attempt to find Alyssin and Ju microphones – it turned out, however, that Alyssin didn't need one.

As Qiang continued his search for something Ju could use, Alyssin took a strange black, blue, and yellow disc out of her pocket. Melodia remembered seeing it a lot during their friendship – she'd had it for years. Actually, now that she thought about it, she was certain it had been in the non-water-moving hand while she and Aniko had been looking over her. Was it the source of that magic?

Alyssin hesitated for a moment now, glancing up at her. “I...can't explain what this is. Or how I got it. I-It's part of another vow I made...I'm sorry-”

“I'm just glad I get to sing with you.” Melodia didn't care about vows or secrets right now.

With a shy smile, Alyssin nodded. She pressed her thumb against the black center of the oval disc, and the entire thing shimmered. Within seconds, it had shifted into the form of a blue microphone, Aquarius crystals set into the ends just like the one Mingzhu had made for her – though these were a dark blue, not purple. There were also two small bumps on the handle – one red, and one a tiny yellow.

“Princess?” Ju stepped closer to the two, her focus on Melodia. “I know I don't have as much power as the two of you, but...please let me be your equal here. You still need time to recover, and I want to give you some peace of mind. I'm already honored to sing with you at all, but as one of your citizens, I can't let you risk yourself further!”

Melodia stared dumbly at her, shocked at the raw loyalty Ju was showing. She knew the girl had seen her episode, but she hadn't realized she'd wanted to join their song for such a reason.

It was the most touching thing any of her people had ever done for her.

“Of course, Ju. I know I was stupid, of course I don't want to make it worse.”
“You promise to let Princess Alyssin lead it?”

“You promise to let Princess Alyssin lead it?”

“Only if you stop calling us 'Princess' and start using our regular names.”

For a brief moment, Ju's face flushed, but she nodded firmly. “Okay! Melodia, please let Alyssin lead us in the song!”

“I-I mean, I guess I can do that-”

“Shut up Alyssin, you're great,” Melodia interjected.

“Yeah!”

“O-Oh, okay...”

Qiang interrupted the moment, delivering a wireless microphone to Ju and herding them to his commentary balcony. The two princesses each set a hand on one of Ju's shoulders, letting their magic flow into her and strengthen her own. Both of their microphones and pendants glowed; Ju's brown eyes shifted to purple and lit up along with them.

A mesh of Indigo and Purple magic already weaving together a song, the girls waited as Qiang called for the crowd's attention. “Alright! After that awesome battle, and the spectacular martial arts match to decide our winner, our very own Melodia McClain wants to sing one last song with her friends! Here's to the ToRyumon tag team tournament, give these girls a big hand, everyone!”

He stepped aside, and the girls stepped forward, the two magic microphones and pendants releasing the song they'd concocted. Words sprang up in their minds, and Melodia handed the reigns to Alyssin, letting her start as she'd promised Ju she would.

"Earnestly we're chasing all our dreams; fearlessly we'll run for all to see
All our little wishes will create the future in our hands
Undoubtedly they will come true, if our hearts agree"

"Do your very best and in the end, the passion in your soul will rise again and again
The breeze will guide the way and our path will be plain as can be"

"Raise your hands with me; watch your wings unfold
We'll take to the dazzling sky, our bright destiny"

"Listen right now, our youth is glowing; hear us right now, we're overflowing
Let your smile show, for I surely know it will be okay
Listen right now our hearts are glowing; here in this moment, I can see it"

"Forever we're standing side by side (Oh what a beautiful sight!)
You'll always be smiling by my side"

For the first time in a year and a half, Melodia didn't pay attention to the mending her song was doing. She just sang, knowing it was best for her to do nothing more.

And she was okay with that.

"Earnestly I'll run into the light; tirelessly I will share my life
Underneath the blue sky, let us meet together face to face
And from the bottom of my heart, there's no need to hide"
"Take a leap of faith and you will see there is not a single thing you cannot achieve
A miracle will spring up inside and you'll learn how to fly"

"Though our wings may fail; we may strike the ground
The scent of the flowers guide the path we will blaze"

"Now you can see our youth is blooming; share with me now this joy I'm giving
Everywhere we go, shout it out and show how the flower grows
Now you can see our passion blooming, spreading this joy I feel within me"

"To find that you're standing by my side (Oh what a joyful feeling!)
You're really there smiling by my side"

“Miss Lilura, you've been staring at the wall for almost ten minutes.”

Lilura jolted. “H-Huh?”

Her host sighed, setting down his tools and giving her the vague basis of a worried expression. “I thought you said you were going out to find Isis.”

Still hearing the cheerful, encouraging music in her head, Lilura could only manage to blink at first. “Uh...Y-Yeah, yeah I am. I'm sorry, Julius. I thought I heard something, but it must've been my imagination...”

“Is it your friend's singing again?”

Lilura glanced away, fingering the heart-shaped crystal pendant that had been her gift in this world. “I mean...she's not really my friend, but...Y-Yes. I think...when I took some of her energy, I must have connected us somehow...she's worlds away, it shouldn't be possible for me to hear her.”

“...Miss Lilura, do you honestly believe that theory?”

She lifted her head, giving the man a startled look. “Um...what?”

Julius sighed. “Haven't you told me that you are friends with the deity that gifted this girl and others with their magic? If you are connected to anyone, it's more likely that goddess. These phantom tunes you're hearing are probably a result of her having a hand in that pendant you were given upon your arrival here.”

“I...you think so?” It had been decades since Regina had given her a gift, so she hadn't thought about it. But...she did have a thing for pendants...

“I certainly don't know enough about your world to be sure, but you seem to have a deep bond with her.”

Her fingers still hovering by the pendant, Lilura slowly nodded. As clueless as Julius was about anything outside his own world, he could usually make some rather accurate guesses about how hers functioned – though that might be in part related to her babbling while she tried to find Isis.

Just before Julius resumed his clock repairs, Lilura decided to ask one last thing. “Would you...mind if I sang along?”

His eyebrow arched just slightly, but he quickly conceded. “I suppose not.”

She smiled a little, then leaned back and tried to re-connect with the song.
"Listen right now, our youth is glowing; hear us right now, we're overflowing
Let your smile show, for I surely know it will be okay
Listen right now our hearts are glowing; here in this moment, I can see it"

"Forever we're standing side by side
You'll always be smiling by my side"

While Lilura sang, Julius found himself smiling. *You really are a clueless creature, aren't you? You don't even realize you've begun to use the same magic.*

*Well, I'm certainly not going to spell it out for you.*

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
"Fight Song: by Rachel Platten - English

"Kitto Seishun ga Kikoeru" from Love Live! School Idol Project - English
Lyrics reworked by Mathew @ Sepia Days Music; video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCCin20JMu0

Our Tumblr, where updates on writing progress and such go:
http://mooniversenews.tumblr.com/
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

If you've been paying attention to the Tumblr, then you'll know that this is the final chapter of Mooniverse. The project has been completely discontinued, for personal reasons. Among those is that I'm now working on an original story, and I didn't want there to be a conflict of interests.

Melody and Dia's story is now over, but I assure you, closure was in their future on all ends. But, after almost five years, I just can't do this anymore.

Thank you for reading.

Thank You Image: http://mellythedork.tumblr.com/post/177455405176/after-almost-five-years-mooniverse-has-reached-a

“I have to admit, I still wasn't sure what would happen when the battle began, but I've never felt a spirit burn with such intense promise as yours.”

“Me? Beylin Temple has far outgrown the 'weaklings' our history taught us you were. That's not to say, of course, that I don't intend to crush you the next time we meet!”

Aguma's response had Dashan and the others laughing. The two teams and three singers had gathered in one of Sengenji's outer courtyards, waiting for their friends and family to join them before heading out. Bao was holding the trophy Qiang had presented them with, but seemed to have no idea what they were meant to do with it. Melody somewhat suspected he thought it was a weapon.

“I still can't believe you tried to take out Kronos while it was using its special move,” he said to Chi Yun, catching her attention. She whirled around to look at the boy in shock, and he only chuckled with embarrassment.

So that's why the battle ended in a draw...yeesh, Chi Yun! Reckless, much?

She let the boys banter for a few minutes longer, then was about to grab Bao's attention when the others arrived. The group dissolved into praise and condolences, and for the time being, Melody remained at the side, waiting it out.

It wasn't that she held no pride for her cousin's victory, or relief that Beylin Temple and Beylin Fist had finally met and made peace...She just didn't want to take the chance of being overloaded again. There was still a slight twinge in her head, and not all of her Haert-sight was gone yet. Luckily, those who knew about it made no attempt to include her, and those who didn't were too distracted to notice.

After a short while, they were joined by Gingka and the others, and Aguma was pulled into a conversation about Nemesis. Melody let him handle it himself, knowing he was perfectly capable. And while she wanted to take the moment to approach Bao, there was someone else she needed to
speak to, and he was already saying his goodbyes.

She tried saying his name a few times, and when that failed, she decided, *To hell with it.*

“Xiaotong, get your stupid butt over here!”

The conversations quieted at her exclamation, and Lance gave her a look of confusion. After handing Sho Hai's harness to Mingzhu, he walked over to her. “Is everything okay?”

“...You know what? No, it's not.”

There was silence, even from Gingka's group. Everyone who knew her well gained concerned looks, and she waved them away. “This is personal. Back off for a minute.”

Her friends obliged, though some did so reluctantly. Melody led Lance over to the wall, trying to figure out how to word what she wanted to say. Her excitement over meeting him face-to-face was completely overshadowed by her anger towards him.

“First off, you're too tall for this. Get down here.”

Not really seeming to follow, Lance knelt regardless, and closed his eyes when she told him to. For a few seconds, Melody tried to calm herself, then gave up and let her anger out.

Basically put, she punched him square in the jaw. “This is for being a *shit brother* to Xing!”

While her strength was decent, Lance had more battle experience – even off-guard, he only reeled for a second. She took this second, however, to go at him again, this time shooting a left hook at his nose. “You're a jerk! What the hell is wrong with you?!”

“Whoa, whoa, what is *this* about?” he demanded, his eyes flying open as he caught her fists before she could swing again. They'd caught the attention of their family, and they were watching now, but Melody didn't care.

“It's about how you've been treating him like trash for no damn reason!” She wrestled her hands free. “I'm not going to sit back and ignore it anymore! *You're a horrible person to Xing!*”

Lance stared at her in silence, her accusations clearly causing more confusion than her physical assault. Behind him, Aniko slowly let go of Jinhai's hand and left Madoka's side, walking over now that he realized he was being mentioned. “Melodia, what are you-”

“You're making a scene,” Lance interjected, trying to be stern. In response, she shoved him.

When the Arrangement tried to rear up, she shoved it, too. This wasn't pointless, hate-everything anger. This was justified, and brought from wanting to make things right. “Ever since I met you, the only thing you ever did was antagonize Xing. I tried to ignore it because it wasn't my business, but you know what? After seeing his Haert and realizing how much of that damage is your fault, I don't care anymore!”

Realization dawned on Aniko's face, while anger seeped onto Lance's. “You...Listen, you don't know what you're talking about-”

“It's not his fault Isis infected him!”

Her words rang through the silent courtyard, the accidental power behind them making everyone wince. Pausing briefly, she wrestled it back, having not intended to activate her Tear like that. When she spoke again, her anger was quiet, controlled. “All you ever do is yell at him. You blame
him for everything, even when it's got nothing to do with him. When you called him to tell him I was missing, the only thing you did was freak him out and make things worse! And you know what?"

Though her fists were clenched, she forced her arms down. With Dia keeping dormant, it seemed the Arrangement didn't have as big a hold as it usually did, and she wanted to use that to her advantage.

Melody met Lance's gaze with one of complete disgust and fury. “I don't want to see you again until you can understand that he is a person, and that he deserves respect. Do you hear me, Xiaotong? Don't talk to me until you're done being an asshole.”

When he appeared too shocked to give her a response, Melody decided she'd done enough. Purposefully, she turned and walked away, brushing Aniko's hand with her own on her way to Mingzhu.

“I'm ready to go home now, Mom.”

The Arrangement-induced headache she had on the helicopter and car rides home was...bearable. It hurt, but she clutched Alyssin's hand through it, and it passed with only slight incident. Her mother and friends all understood she'd taken yet another risk, and didn't blame her for her snappy outbursts or demands for them to shut up when they'd done nothing but breathe. With the help of Alyssin, and Kyoya as well – he'd sat on her other side when they'd gotten in the car, and no one had dared argue – Melody made it through without causing anyone physical damage. Aside from the ache that was probably going through Alyssin's hand from how hard she'd been squeezing it.

When her fit had passed, Mingzhu changed their course, and within the next ten minutes, the four of them sat in an empty parking lot eating ice cream. Alyssin and Mingzhu gave her a bit of space, while Kyoya let her lean on him as they watched Annie and Fang try to eat their way through the smallest cone available.

“He deserved that,” Kyoya assured her suddenly, while Annie was chastising Fang about his violent burp. “I didn't want to say anything before, but he really is kind of a dick.”

Melody sighed and took another small bite of her chocolate cone. A million words rolled around in her head, and it was hard to pick an answer. “I...should have stepped in sooner. It shouldn't have mattered that they're adults...”

“They needed the intervention. And before you go on the guilt-spree, whatever happens between them now is not your fault.”

“...I know.”

“It's no one's fault but their own. You understand that, right?”

She sighed again, not feeling up to much else. “Yeah.”

From Madoka: Aguma asked me to tell you that while he's all for helping us, he'd like to have some time before joining the group. He'll meet you at your mom's house before dinner.
From Madoka: How are you?

To Madoka: I'm fine. I guess. I don't know.
To Madoka: I'm sorry you had to see that.
From Madoka: It looked like it needed to be done.
From Madoka: Lance left pretty much right after you did. Aniko and I just made it to town and we're wandering around with the boys right now. I think he wants to talk to you later.

To Madoka: is he mad at me

From Madoka: Actually, I don't think I've seen him this happy since Chiasa was alive.
From Madoka: He keeps saying something in Chinese that I think translates to “beautiful melody”?

To Madoka: oh
To Madoka: I think that's a good thing

From Madoka: Yeah, I thought it might just be some sort of gushing over you.
From Madoka: Speaking of, sort of, your songs were amazing.

To Madoka: djghfgkj thank you

From Madoka: Are you okay?

To Madoka: yeah
To Madoka: I think I just need a nap
To Madoka: thanks for being so awesome

From Madoka: I don't know what I did to earn that praise, but thanks. : )

To Noa: tell you friend I love her and give her hugs for me
To Noa: and warn her lance is a butt

From Noa: Did something happen?

To Noa: we're very tired
To Noa: I may have called lance an asshole and a jerk and a shit brother
To Noa: because he is all of those things to aniko
To Noa: sorry to use you as a messenger when this has nothing to do with you

From Noa: If it helps, we all loved your performances.

To Noa: Noa
To Noa: I know I've been a crappy friend to you and the studio since I left
To Noa: but if I could ask you to be a messenger one more time
To Noa: would you please tell everyone I love them and I'm grateful beyond words for their support
To Noa: because I don't think I could've gone out there and sung today if I didn't know you were all behind me

From Noa: We love you too. It sounds like you've had a long day. Try to get some rest.

To Noa: ok
Melodia fell into bed as soon as they got back to the house, not bothering to change out of her costume or even take off her shoes. She wrapped herself up in her blanket and clung to her dolls, and within a few minutes, she was out. Mingzhu slipped in for just a moment, made sure she had her Lunar Wing on her pillow, then ducked back out and closed the door behind her.

“Can I talk to you?”

She jolted at the voice, and tried to relax when she saw its speaker. “Kyoya. Yes, of course, what is it?”

The boy didn't continue right away. Mingzhu ended up leading him to the kitchen and starting some tea before he found his words, and she had a pretty good feeling she knew what this was about.

She wasn't really happy when she turned out to be right.

“Why did you let your sons' situation go on like this?”

“My sons are adults-”

“Dia says this has been going on since long before we found you! I don't know if you're blind or just trying to ignore it, but those two have a problem, and no matter what circumstance your family is in, I can't believe you'd just let it go on like that!”

Mingzhu stared at the tea kettle, trying to keep her temper. Just calm down...He doesn't know everything's that's happened. He's working with incomplete information... “Kyoya, I know that the way things went down after the tournament made it seem like Lance has no control over himself. And to a point, that's not entirely untrue. But I haven't spent all these years just ignoring that, understand?”

She turned to face him, working hard to keep her composure. “I've made Lance go through about ten different programs to try and control his temper. I've put him through professional counseling, I laid out punishments according to his behavior as he grew up, I've done the best that I could to help him. But the problems he has now aren't normal, and they aren't just going to up and walk away.”

“You're making excuses for him.”

“Kyoya, how much has Melodia told you about the way she was taken from us?”

“What does that have to do with this?!”

With a sigh, Mingzhu turned off the stove and massaged her temples. For the past six years, she’d honored Melodia's wishes to let her explain things to her adoptive brother, and her friends, but maybe he was right about one thing – maybe she needed to step in far more than she did.

“This is a long story, Kyoya, so you're going to want to sit down. I'm...going to tell you some things that I'm not certain even Melodia knows yet, depending on what her brothers have told her.”

“I'm sorry to interrupt you while you're working, but I need to speak with you.”

“Don't worry about it, Dashan. What's on your mind?”

“Your name is Qiang Hou, correct?”

He saw the DJ frown slightly. “Yes, it is.”
Nodding, Dashan reached into his coat and pulled out the scroll he'd shown Melodia earlier. “Do you by any chance know if you are descended from Qiangdu Hou, a Beylin Temple blader from two thousand years ago?”

Qiang seemed to falter at the sight of the scroll. Dashan was a bit surprised at the show – not only was it out of character for him, but it meant that he did indeed know something.

“Why do you ask?” Qiang managed to respond.

“Curiosity, nothing more. He held an interesting perspective on what was happening at the time, and I wondered if you might know anything about it.”

“...Interesting good, or bad?”

“Considering all that's happened today, I would say good.”

That seemed to calm Qiang, as his shoulders relaxed. He didn't answer right away, appearing to consider his words carefully, and for someone as upbeat and spontaneous as he was, it confused Dashan more than a little.

After a minute or so, Qiang seemed to come to a decision. “To be honest, no, I am not his descendant.”

Dashan's brow furrowed, the situation puzzling him even more. If Qiang was so certain this wasn't his ancestor, then why was it so difficult for him to answer-?

“I am Qiangdu Hou.”

“...I'm sorry?”

Qiang smiled thinly. “I'm not descended from him, I am him. You're asking me about this because of the Beylin Fist's presence today, right? And in your hand, that's one of the notes I took during the war. I'm surprised any survived.”

Glancing down at the scroll, Dashan tried to process this. “What you're saying is...you were there, two thousand years ago? How is that possible?”

“I've never once claimed to be human, Dashan. But I would like it if this information was kept between us. There are those who...I would rather not find out about this.” There was a brief expression of discomfort on the man's face.

Not human? After knowing Qiang and working with him for months, Dashan held no doubt that what he said was true. “If you're not human, then...what are you, exactly? And what does it have to do with 'people of the sea'?”

“...I doubt this will mean anything to you, but I'm of an extinct ocean race known as the Panthalassa. As far as I know, I'm the only one left.” Qiang sighed. “My people were...vicious. I hold no attachment to them, and I'm quite happy with my life the way it is now. If you could keep this secret for me, I'd be in your debt.”

Questions whirled through Dashan's head, but he settled with, “If you would honor me with an eye-witness account of what happened two thousand years ago, just between the two of us, then I would more than consider that debt to be paid.”

Slowly, the smile he knew best from his native DJ returned to the man's face. “That...may be
something we can arrange.”

Every once in a while, Dia appreciated the blank dreamscape that came from Haert-chaos recovery. She could summon random little doohickeys, practice her apologies for when she woke up, or just comfort herself with happy memories.

Or, in this case, she could talk face-to-face with Melody, and they could comfort each other.

“Dia, do you think Hope is gonna be okay?”

Currently sprawled out with her other half on a comfortable, fluffy carpet, Dia let out a hum of uncertainty. “Hope is a lot different from other Characters I've met. But she also seems a lot stronger, so...yeah, I think she'll be fine. She probably just needs some time to rest, like Annie does sometimes. And like us.”

Melody folded her arms tighter over her Raggedy Ann doll, which she'd summoned immediately upon finding out she could. It was far more tattered than Dia's, even missing an arm, but she supposed that just meant Melody had loved it for a very long time. “I guess...”

“Hey, Melody?”

“Hm?”

“You did amazing holding back the Arrangement. I dunno if the Haert craziness was already doing something, but...jeez, I wish I had that kind of strength. I've never been able to stop it in its tracks like that.”

There was a definite blush taking over Melody's face. “I-I'm definitely not strong...I think it's just harder for it to latch onto me, compared to you.”

“Not strong? You punched Lance in the face. Twice. That's something I could've never brought myself to do.” Dia adjusted her head's position on the carpet, meeting her other half's frightened gaze. “You stood up for Aniko like I never could. How did you do it?”

For a moment, Melody's eyes flicked down to the floor, then settled on her doll. “I...I just...I don't know. When I got here and found out Lance of Voltron was going to be my brother, I got so excited, but...the more I saw of him in your memories...the more I saw how awful he treated Aniko, and how bad his temper is, I...I just got disgusted by it.” Her grip on Raggedy Ann tightened, and she curled inwards slightly. “That's not a brother I want to have. I know he can be better than this. But I also know he's too stubborn to listen to just words.”

Dia felt her gaze soften. “I guess we both wound up with high expectations of our new family, huh?” She rolled over a bit, staring at the starry sky she'd put up above them. “When I was a kid, even though I was happy with Kyoya's family, I'd always end up fantasizing about who my birth family could be. That only got worse when Mr. Gurius started Wandering Melody. And when I found out that my brother was the Lance, all I could think was, 'my gosh, my brother's saved the universe. Who cares about some dumb, malfunctioning robot lions? My brother's awesome.'”

She sighed. “And then I met Aniko, and he sang to me, and...there was a pain from losing me that Lance just didn't have. And the more time I spent with him trying to help heal it, the more bitter towards him Lance became.”

The girls lay in silence for a few minutes after that. Neither of them really knew how to take Lance's behavior, now that they'd stepped back and seen just how rude he really was. Now that
they'd all but told him never to speak to them again.

As much as the thought hurt, she was proud of Melody for saying it. If she could've said it without risking an Arrangement fit...well, after seeing Aniko's state, of course she would've.

Aniko could've died. The realization still sent a chill through her, so much so that she used her lucid dreaming to conjure up the doll he'd made for her. She breathed deeply, slowly, holding the precious gift to her chest. She never would have been able to forgive herself if something had happened to him because she ignored his Haert.

And until he turned himself around, she'd never be able to forgive Lance for being one of the people that put it in that state.

Melody rolled over until her and Dia's backs were pressed together, offering a silent warmth. Dia knew that, as inexperienced in Haert as her other half was, even she knew the danger Aniko had been in. That he was still in. He'd had no real time to recover after Chiasa's death, and most of the bubbles she'd seen were memories of her that had turned sour.

“We should find Aniko a babysitter,” she murmured. “The best one. We'll do all the background checks and all the Haert reading to make sure.”

Melody hummed in agreement. “Do you think we could convince Kyoya or Kotoka-san to fund his return to medical school?”

“Shit, that's a great idea. Let's ask both of them.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“...”

“...”

“Dia?”

“Mhm?”

“I know Mom's done her best to help Lance's problems, but...do you think it might be a side effect from the Mytan attack? Like how Aniko was infected, but with anger instead of magic?”

“...Maybe. Could be. I never thought about it.”

“Do you think Noa or Gertrude could help him?”

“I think just seeing Gertrude alive and accepting that fact will help all of them.”

“...Yeah. You're right.”

“...I'm glad you're here, Melody.”

“I'm glad, too.”

From Al and Tree: This is Tree. I'm sorry we haven't contacted you in a few days. We are not well-versed in constant communicating.
From Al and Tree: I thought you might like to know that Isis, Lilura, and Toby are still in the process of being redirected back to your dimension.
From Al and Tree: Well, of course you'd know that, by common logic. I wouldn't just stop that from happening.
From Al and Tree: They should return in just a few days of your time!
From Al and Tree: I apologize that it's taken this long already. Mytans are tricky to handle, especially when they have a host.
From Al and Tree: I promise that your sister remains unharmed.
From Al and Tree: As does Toby!
From Al and Tree: Oh. Perhaps I should stop badgering you with these messages.
From Al and Tree: Apologies.

To Al and Tree: due'd you're lucky I was asleep or I woudl've gotne off on you so bad for those NINE FLIPPIN DINGS
To Al and Tree: More importanly I've been trying to reach the Megs but they're not answering. Are they okay?

From Al and Tree: I will investigate immediately.

To Al and Tree: Thank you.

“Sweetie, are you going to come out of the bath anytime soon?”

“...Maybe.”

“Xiaolian...”

“Mo-oom.”

“As long as you're not moping in there.”

“I'm not. I'm just trying to think. And...I don't think it's something you can help with.”

“...I'll have tea ready when you're done.”

“Thanks.”

Dia was in the backyard leaving a dumpling and tea offering for Manaphy when she heard the side gate creak open. She took a moment to finish her prayers, then stepped out, waiting for whoever it was to join her.

Madoka came first, she and Crystal both giving her a smile in greeting. She stayed at the gate, ushering someone else through. Dia rushed over immediately as soon as Aniko came into view, and hugged him before he could get a single word out.

“I'm sorry if we overstepped our bounds,” she whispered. Already shaking – or maybe he was before – Aniko just shook his head and clung to her. Madoka took the hint and backed off, closing the gate behind her as she departed.

“I thought you said you only fixed things related to you in my Haert,” he mumbled. Dia sighed, then slowly pulled away and took his hand.
“We did. But I had to see a few other things to find them.”

“...Which one of you...”

“Punched Lance? Melody.” Dia gently led him to the shrine's pathway, then pulled him down to sit in front of her. “She did a pretty good job keeping the Arrangement back, too.”

Aniko chuckled wryly. “You two make quite the team, huh?” He ran a hand through his hair, taking a moment to let the purple finally melt out. Dia swiftly removed the hairband from his ponytail, and without a word, Aniko let her start braiding it.

She didn't make him talk. For a while, they sat there, and she just quietly ran him through all the memories she'd seen in his Haert, all the ones she'd visited and how she’d fixed them, and all the ones she'd only seen through the outside of the bubbles. He hummed or grunted in response a few times, but didn't seem up for actual words.

When she finished braiding, she wrapped the band around the end, then maneuvered herself in front of him, letting him start the same for her. She kept talking the whole time, making sure she gave him every detail – he had a right to know, after all. They were his memories.

He finally spoke when she reached the final memory she'd visited. She'd only barely started it, actually, before he told her to shut up and leaned over to hug her.

She shut up and let him, falling backward into his arms. Even if she hadn't seen the memory in his mind, she knew that finally meeting her again back then had probably been one of the most emotional days either of them had ever been through.

Dia didn't dare interrupt when he started singing.

"Looking at the storm above us
It doesn't look like we can get through
It won't be easy, but I'll make it with you by my side
If we always stay together
The lightning wouldn't even stop us
Beyond the clouds, another adventure awaits"

“But you say wow wow wow wow wow
The tears from yesterday will keep us from flying
And I go wow wow wow wow wow
We'll leave all those memories behind and be free”

"Let's fly like butterflies on the wind
Just believe all the dreams in your heart
Meant to be friends from the start
I'll be with you forever until the very end"

"Even though these troubles tear at our wings
I know we'll reach for the sky through the rain
Wait for tomorrow and see
On my love"

“Aunt Mizue said she told you about Xifeng.”

Dia glanced over at Aniko, both of them now stretched out across the path. “Yeah.”
“Are you-"

“I'm not mad. I understand why you never told me. 'Hey Dia, you also had another sister, but she died so it doesn't matter'. Not really something you want to say to the newly-found ten-year-old.”

Aniko nodded, then rolled over from his side to his back, staring at the trees. “I'm sorry anyway.”

She smiled, lightly tapping her fist against his cheek. “You really don't need to be.”

“...Guess I don't, huh?” He wrapped his hand around her fist, his brow furrowing. “You know how I texted you before the tournament? Said I wanted to talk to you?”

“Mhm?”

“Well...while I was staying with Aunt Mizue, I got a visit from Takamine-san. We talked about things. You two, mostly.” His eyes shifted toward her, and he smiled. “She really is the most extreme mom friend.”

Dia snorted. “You doubted me?”

His smile shifted to a smirk, but he then fell silent. She let him be for a minute, then asked, “What else did you talk about?”

His eyes flicked back up to the sky. “My infection. She said there was someone else who was going through the same thing, and they might be able to help me.”

“Really? That's awesome!”

“I mean...I guess.” He didn't seem all that thrilled, which puzzled her. She rolled onto her side to put her other hand around his, and he sighed. “I'm very conflicted about this. About...who it is.”

Dia frowned. “How come? I mean, yeah, it's horrible that someone else is going through it, but you two can help each other, right?”

“...Dia, this person is supposed to be dead.”

After her gears turned, the world seemed to freeze.

Dia stared at her brother, the realization hitting her instantly. “She...She told you about...”

His hand slipped out of hers, moving to her head and ruffling her bangs. He didn't look at her. “I'm not sure how I feel about Takamine-san right now. Or...any of this. But I think I get why you didn't tell me...us.” Aniko breathed deeply, giving himself a few seconds before he continued. “Hey fam, that sister who died and you never told me about is actually alive and being effectively held captive by corrupt mages'. Yeah, that wouldn't have set anyone off.”

Aniko's mimicking of her earlier tone made her smile. “Pretty much... I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up when I didn't even know if we'd be able to see her.”

“Takamine-san said it should happen soon. They're going to trial tomorrow, and they'll get their verdict in a few days.”

“Seriously?!”

“Yeah. And that's why I've been constantly screaming on the inside for the past couple days.” He pulled his hand away, his fingers curling into a fist that he just blankly stared at. “It's like finding
you all over again.”

Dia considered that for a moment, then brightened as Melody suggested something. “If that's the case, why don't we treat it like that?”

“What?”

“When Lance found me, you re-wrote the Wandering Melody theme into a song for me. Why don't you write a song for her?”

Aniko's head turned towards her in surprise. “You...think she'd like that?”

She nodded. “I bet she'd love it. She's a mer, after all. Even if it sucks, it'll be her favorite thing in the world.”

At that answer, Aniko gave a weak laugh. “Yeah, I guess you're right. And I've definitely got nothing else to do here.”

“You're staying with Mom?”

“Probably the best thing I can do. I don't think I should go back to Arus any time soon.”

“Yeah...”

“How about you? What're your plans now?”

“Mm...I'm heading back to New York. My friends need me. And...I have to wait for Toby.” She paused, then bit her lip. “Um...Could I bother you for advice?”

He smiled reassuringly. “Always.”

“I...so, my memory glitched out everything involving Bao...”

“Ouch.”

“...But my fit at the tournament brought it all back. How do I tell him...How am I supposed to thank him for...”

Her brother ruffled her hair once more. “I think you just need to tell him 'thank you for the awesome memories'.”

“...You don't think he's going to hate me for forgetting?”

“If he does, then just punch him in the face for being a shit friend.”

Dia snorted.

The Beylin Fist made it home about twenty minutes later. Dinner happened ten minutes after that.

Dia’s head was in a whirlwind the whole time. She didn't have much of an appetite, but she ate anyway, if only to keep the others from worrying.

Kyoya left after eating, promising to keep in touch with her. Aniko took his boys up to the guest room to put Sho Hai to bed, and the Beylin Fist started helping with chores around the house.

She procrastinated for an entire half hour before Annie practically dragged her to the backyard,
where Bao was carefully brushing the shrine clean. Her traitor Character then flew back into the house and somehow succeeded in slamming the door shut, leaving her to do this alone.

The noise caught Bao's attention, and he turned. She gave what was probably the most awkward smile in history. “H-Hey...”

“Xiaolian!” The arm holding the brush lowered, and he glanced back at the shrine. “Ah, did you want to-?”

“N-No, no. I, um...” Over an hour of time to think, and she still had no idea what to say. 'I remember you'? 'I'm sorry I forgot you, but I remember now'?

Dia groaned. Be upfront and hope for the best, huh? “Bao, we...we need to talk.”

The brush was set down immediately, and he walked over. “Okay...about?”

Biting her lip, she stared at the trees for a few seconds, wishing her brain would cooperate. “Um...uh, well...” She kicked the path a bit, then shut her eyes, unable to look at him. “D-During the tournament...I, um...I remembered you. I remembered...us.”

“...I-I see...” Bao sounded about as awkward as she felt.

She exhaled sharply, already feeling her face warming up. “Um, look...I know we ended things on good terms. I know we were at that age where everything about a relationship just made us giggle, and all that...” She refused to open her eyes, not wanting to see or guess the look on his face. “I realize that it hurt a lot when I showed up here and couldn't remember you. We made some really fun memories...a-and I'm glad I remember them. And I'm sorry I ended up hurting you like this.”

She paused, then forced her eyes open, forced herself to meet his gaze. “I know this is a couple of years late, but I wanted to say thank you. Even if we broke up because I wasn't staying at the village, you gave me joy and stability that I really needed back then. Being with you...it's given me some of the best happy memories of my life, and since I'm already miles deep in this cheesy shit, I really hope you find someone that isn't going to move halfway across the world after two months.”

There was a brief silence before Bao started chuckling. “By Regina, I thought your cheesiness two years ago was from your Haert glitching out over Chiasa's death and dating me. I didn't think it was just who you were.”

“Shut up I know! I'm trying to be serious!” Even as she retorted this, Dia couldn't help but giggle. “So am I! You're a cheesy little cheese wheel!”

After staring at each other for only a few seconds, they both broke into laughter. Dia stumbled forward to hug him, and Bao gave no argument.

“Do I still get the 'sit and cry with when things go to shit' privileges, or has that position been taken by Toby?”

“That position has multiple spots and there are always openings.”

“Could I possibly take one of those openings and be your traveling buddy when you inevitably head back to deal with life? I have an offering to bribe you with.”

As she pulled back to raise an eyebrow at him, Bao reached into his coat and took out a bey. She recognized the blue and gold parts immediately. “Hades Lynx,” she whispered in surprise. The
sight of her old partner had her nearly in tears – with all the chaos, she'd completely forgotten the Beylin Fist still had it.

Smiling, Bao held it out to her. “Even if you can't use it yet, take it. I...should've given it back the first day we were here, but...I dunno. It didn't seem like it was the right time.”

Dia's hand was moving to take it before her thoughts could catch up with her. As soon as her fingers touched the fusion wheel, an aura blazing with blue and gold swirled into being around her. Every emotion felt heightened. Her wishes, her hopes, her fear and her anger all surged through her, providing energy she hadn't reached since ending her visit to the Beylin Fist. Tears streamed down her face as the dark lynx took form beside them, and she could barely manage to speak to it before she melted into sobs.

“Welcome home, Lynx.”

The way Lynx curled around her and purred, gently assuring her that it would be alright, made her realize she'd missed it far more than she'd realized. She held the bey in her hand as tightly as possible, promising she'd never leave it again.

For this moment, nothing else mattered, and nothing could bother her.

Chapter End Notes

Song: "Butter-Fly" from Digimon - English
Lyrics reworked by poisonousparadox; video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_Y7m9ZE10c

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