

Troubled Times

By Gee

Submitted: May 15, 2008
Updated: September 13, 2009

After twelve years, Earth is still infected by the Null Void aliens. It's up to Ben 10 000 and his friends to reclaim our planet and defeat the mysterious nemesis who's behind all this.

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1 - Chapter 1 - Heroic acts

Troubled Times

Chapter 1

Heroic acts

He sat in the room, gazing into the rain. Darkness covered his features, but when a lightning flashed through the sky, it illuminated his face for a second.

He just sat still, watching the raindrops, as they slowly snaked down on the window. He enjoyed the temporal moment of peace. As he suspected, it didn't last long...

The door opened creakingly and a young, red haired woman came inside. The man already knew the time has come once again, before she said anything.

- They're coming. – whispered the woman. She declared, as it would be the most natural thing on the world. The man closed his eyelids and sighed. When he opened them again, his eyes have changed, the lifeless, glassy look disappeared, only courage and audacity reflected in them.

- Brace yourself. – replied the man, and touched the woman's shoulder as he walked beside her. She smiled back at him. They stepped into the elevator. None of them said a word, until they reached the ground level. Two aliens awaited them.

- Are we ready? – asked the man.

- Yes. Their fast, but we're prepared. – answered the tall, crystalline creature.

- Good. – The man said. He and his accompaniment stood before the heavy steel gate of the main hangar. There were about fifty men around them, all held different kind of high-tech alien weapons in their hands. They were the resistance, standing against the hordes of the Null Void aliens. Their leader was Benjamin Tennyson, who knew the gate would not hold the enemy back for long, it was damaged during the previous battles... However, this strategy proved to be the best; the aliens can't overwhelm them only because of their superior numbers. This was the only entrance of the Omni-Tower; the walls were impenetrable for the aliens. This was the only weak point, and the first line of defense. The Omni-Tower was the only fortress in 1000 miles; it surrounded half of the former New York. If this building falls, the only city of mankind on the East Coast falls with it as well.

Ben turned around and looked at his men once more. Nobody required fancy harangues, they all knew what to do; he could see that in their eyes. None of them showed fear or despair. Ben smiled contentedly and focused on the events of the next minutes. They will defeat the aliens one by one. Since he was able to combine his powers, Wildmutt's heat vision easily recognized the enemy heat signatures, even in his human form. The aliens were approaching rapidly.

- How many? – asked Gwendolyn Tennyson. She stood on the left side of his cousin.

- Not sure... I suppose it's a bigger horde... – replied Ben.

Suddenly, they heard a scratch on the gate and then another.

- They're here... – whispered Tetrax, the petrosapien.

Something hit the gate outside and the blow distorted its shape.

- A few more of that, and they will get in. – determined Lantara. The ectonurite was floating beside Tetrax. She was correct, after three more strikes; a breach jawed between the two wings of the gate. A tall and muscular creature was the first. It systematically widened the breach with his paws, and the smaller aliens were already pushing in.

- Stop them! – Ben roared, and the omnitrix flashed, as he transformed into Fourarms.

The black creature jumped inside, as the hole was wide enough for it. The three red eyes on its head looked for a prey. It raised its paws to strike the nearest man with its dirty, but sharp claws. Recognizing its aim, Gwen intervened; her pink energy zap took the alien down. The men behind them ran towards and helped their comrade. They did their best to keep the invading enemy outside, but to no avail, more and more got in. A grey, skinny one tried to punch Lantara down, but she phased through its fists and then wiped its brain out.

- Stay out! – roared Tetrax and shot hundreds of small projectiles at a group of flouranas.

Fourarms grabbed two dog-like creatures and smashed them together. Another one bit his arm and hung on it like a leech. Its teeth did not go through the tetramand's thick skin; he was able to remove it by swinging his arms. However, he didn't notice the huge detrovite who snuck behind him. Fortunately, Lantara's energy beam shot it down. An intense battle evolved between the two parties. Suddenly, a werewolf showed up in the breach. It opened its drooling mouth and made an ultrasonic howl. Fourarms immediately changed into Shockwave to neutralize the threat. He clapped his paws together and the shockwave overwhelmed the werewolf's sound waves. It jumped into the air and attacked Ben, forcing him to the ground. It stepped on Shockwave's chest and wanted to howl again. The green flash of the omnitrix blinded it for a moment, as Ben went Wildvine.

When the loboan howled, he closed the leaves around his head and protected himself.

- Now, it's my turn! – said the flourana. He grew his arms; they coiled around the alien and tossed it away. Gwen just defended a blow with a force field, when Ben joined her as Heatblast.

- Are you okay? – asked Gwen, she was quite worried. Beside them, Tetrax just fired a spiny crystal ball, which smashed a few aliens.

- Let's just barbeque these guys! – suggested the pyronite.

- Agreed. – smiled the woman. A circular hole opened on her force field, right in front of Heatblast, who raised his hands and shot a massive fire beam into the middle of the alien intruders. The burnt creatures ran apart, but they rolled on the ground a bit and continued the fight.

- Hmm, not as effective as I thought so. – determined Heatblast and transformed into Eye Guy. His beams took the aliens down one by one. Meanwhile, Tetrax, Lantara and the other men managed to roll the enemy back to the breach. Ben and Gwen flooded the hole with energy beams, keeping the aliens out.

- We need to close this once and for all! It won't survive another attack! – shouted Ben.

Tetrax ran to the hole.

- I'm on it! – replied the petrosapien creating a crystalline wall. Ben helped him, using Eye Guy's laser as a burner. Concentrating on their work, they did not know about the werewolf behind Tetrax. After Wildvine knocked it out, it lied on the floor unconsciously for a few minutes, but came to and wanted to take revenge...

The sound waves were too close and too intense, Tetrax roared in pain. First, some creaks appeared on the petrosapien's crystalline body, and they widened as the werewolf kept howling. He collapsed.

- Noooooo!!!- Ben shouted and fired dozens of energy beams, but none of them hit the werewolf. He could not succeed even with the help of Gwen and Lantara. Eye Guy changed into Brainstorm.

- I'm gonna fry your brain! – hissed he vengefully. The werewolf sensed the new menace, and jumped up to get away.
 - No you won't! – roared Brainstorm. His thought waves easily reached the werewolf's mind; it chilled, and then dropped down dead.
- Brainstorm panted, he was still furious. Only then, they realized that the ultrasonic howl also destroyed a part of the crystal wall that Tetrax created. A smaller group of aliens jumped inside again. Those who were outside successfully weakened the incomplete blockade. It was a matter of time, before it would collapse. Brainstorm went Artiquana to freeze the intruders, but the breach was getting bigger and bigger.
- Ben, we can't hold them back! – cried Gwen, shooting an energy beam.
 - Retreat to the higher levels... – said Tetrax. He was barely alive; he had creaks and wounds all over his body.
 - We can't give up the hangar! – refused Lantara.
 - We won't. I'm going to blow it on their heads. – replied the petrosapien. He took a grey ball out of his utility belt. It seemed like a hand grenade.
 - No, you can't do this! – said Artiquana and reverted to Ben.
 - We must, or they'll occupy the whole tower! – gasped Tetrax. He was weakening.
 - I won't allow it! – declared Ben. In that moment, the crystalline wall broke into pieces and the aliens pushed inside.
 - You have no choice! – answered the petrosapien and armed the grenade. Three blue lighter began to twinkle on the weapon.
 - No! I won't leave you here! – shouted Ben.
 - I wouldn't make it after all! Go! – commanded Tetrax. The surviving men got in the elevator, only he, Ben, Gwen and Lantara remained in the hangar.
 - There has to be another way... – began Ben, but when he looked at the invading creatures, he knew Tetrax was right.
 - It's been an honor... Now get out of here! – roared Tetrax, right before a huge vulpimancer jumped on him.
 - No!!! – shouted Ben. Gwen and Lantara dragged him inside the elevator. His eyes met with Tetrax's for the last time, and the elevator door closed.

Tetrax held the grenade in his palm, when the aliens forced him to the ground. The blue twinkle on it got faster and faster; finally there was a long beep.

The petrosapien smiled and said:

- It's sack time, boys!

The explosion destroyed the joist and the whole hangar collapsed, killing all the aliens who were inside. The ruins also blocked the breach, so nothing could enter the Omi-Tower again.

Ben Tennyson sat on the floor, resting his arms on his knees. Gwen and Lantara stood beside him, but no one said a word. Tetrax was close to them all, he fought the last twelve years with them, yet Earth was not his own planet. They couldn't believe he's gone. A few crystalline pieces was all that left from him.

- Ben... – accosted him Gwen, after a few minutes of silence.

- It's my fault... I could have warned him a few seconds before... – stammered he.

- No, it's not your fault. Nobody could save him. – said Lantara. She received no respond.

Ben went to his room and locked the door. It was still raining. He sat down to his armchair and watched the rain, just as he did before the battle. Sinister thoughts haunted him.

He attempted to figure out the circumstances, which eventually led to Tetrax's demise.

After a few minutes, he jumped to a conclusion. He even said it aloud.

- They are way too organized...

2 - Chapter 2 - Forebodings

Chapter 2

Forebodings

There was a perfect view to any direction from the Omni-Tower. Ben 10 000 stood at the top of the building, examining the landscape. He turned to West, and saw a great plain; the aliens did an excellent job there. But if he looked to the East, there was the city, which he saved. It was only eight years ago! This time seemed like a whole millennium for Ben.

When he first came here, most of the city was in ruins. He encountered a group of survivors; they went underground after Kevin released the alien criminals from the Null Void. A few years later, Ben finally defeated him and started to rebuild our world. They thought the alien terror would stop, since their leader was not in charge anymore, but they were wrong.

The aliens spread out from the middle of the continent and made random attacks against the few surviving settlements. Ben knew they will discover this place some day, therefore the remaining survivors began to surround about half of the city with a powerful line of defense.

It was not an easy task, but with the help of Gwen, Lantara, Tetrax and of course the omnitrix, the wall completed in two years. Most of it was impenetrable for the monsters, but still had a few weak points. Suddenly Gwen came out with a solution. They needed an observation post, to prepare for an alien offensive in time. The plans of the Omni-Tower saw the light of the day a few months later. Since no architect left, Grey Matter's smart was a major help during the construction. It took another two years to build the tower, even with Ben's arsenal of aliens. When they finished it, the Omni-Tower was the highest building in the city, with its twenty stories. The first three stories were filled with heavy artillery equipments, because the creatures attacked mostly from the ground. The higher levels were storages, observant posts and personal rooms. Fortunately, they have not seen a lot of aliens, by that time, there were only a few weaker attacks, they could keep them back easily. The colony began to accrue under Ben's protection. But things have changed. The Omni-Tower guarded them for five years, when the first bigger horde appeared. That was the first serious and intensive battle, and the test of the fortress. Lucky for them, the tower passed, and held the enemy back, however some improvements were required. They strengthened the walls with a mixture of petrosapien crystals and ectoplasmic material. It wasn't so stylish, but quite effective, not even Lantara could phase through the walls. As the months passed by, the aliens attacked more and more often, and they grew stronger after every battle. At first, Ben didn't recognize that they were too organized for an alien horde...

- Ben? – accosted him Gwen. Her voice dragged Ben out of the reminiscence.

- Yes?

- We need to talk. – declared Gwen.

- Okay. – replied Ben.

- I'm worried about you.

- What are mean? – asked the man.

- I can feel, there's something wrong with you... Inside of you... You're alone too much... Now, that Tetrax is gone, I thought you might need some company. It's awful when you're on your own...
 - Yeah... I still cannot believe, he's no more... But I'm fine... just... weary from battle... It goes nowhere... There's no purpose! I'm not sure what am I fighting for... – he left long pauses in his speech.
 - Look at all this! – said Gwen and pointed to the colony below them. - If you still say, you truly believe that...
 - No... But sometimes it's very difficult to carry so much weight on my shoulders... – sighed Ben.
 - Would you like to talk about it? – asked Gwen.
 - I can handle it. – answered Ben and glanced on the omnitrix.
 - If you feel chatty, you know you can always count on me... – smiled Gwen. Suddenly, Ben hugged her. She surprised first, but a moment later, she returned the hug. They sat on the roof like this for minutes. Then he released her.
 - Thank you, Gwen. – said Ben.
 - You'll always be my doofus cousin! – smiled she and touched his face. – Will you come down for supper?
 - Sure! – replied Ben and watched her, until she disappeared in the hatchway. Then he turned to West, where the aliens always came from.
 - This must end... – whispered he.
- Driven by a sudden idea, he jumped off the roof. As he was falling down, a pair of Stinkfly wings grew on his back. He flew above the city, watching the small lights of the houses. He let the evening wind fondle his face. He enjoyed flying, since he mastered Powersource's amalgamating skills. He didn't have to turn into Stinkfly, if he wanted to fly, his wings were more than enough for this purpose. He just had to think of it, and it was already on his back. Suddenly, an icy waft struck him. It was accompanied by a familiar dread. A few seconds later, the emotion was gone, so as the cold wind. Ben landed. When he touched the ground, the Stinkfly wings disappeared. He was puzzled by this feeling, and didn't know the reason of it. As he stood on the street, he recognized more and more curious heads in the windows. Mostly they were children; Ben's presence got their attention. He's not used to show up among the people for a long time. The searching eyes frustrated him, so he changed into Xlr8 and rushed back to his tower. When he stepped inside the cafeteria, Gwen was just about to serve the dinner.
- You almost missed the supper. – said Gwen and put a plate full of delicious food in front of her cousin.
 - Yeah, but Xlr8 saved the day. – smiled Ben nervously; he was still under the effects of the sinister feeling he had experienced. Everyone ate quietly, when finished; the men went back to their posts. Eventually, Ben and Gwen remained alone in the room. They sat beside each other. Gwen waited for his cousin to say something; she recognized the disturbance in his eyes before. After a few minutes, Ben broke the silence and told her about his strange experience.
 - Hmm. Are you sure, this feeling weighed on your mind? – asked the woman.
 - Yes, however it was so familiar... I'm pretty sure I felt that before... – replied Ben.
 - In someone's presence?
 - Exactly. The only problem is, I can't figure out who aroused these emotions...
 - Okay. Tomorrow you will take me to the place, where you felt this, right? Perhaps I'll be able to track its source down, if it exists. – offered Gwen.
 - Sounds good to me. Yeah, you have improved a lot with your magical stuff... – agreed Ben.

The next day, Ben guided his cousin to the place.

- Are you sure this is it? – asked Gwen.
- No, it was up in the air... – answered Ben.

- Oh, right. – smiled Gwen and flew up. The man followed her example, but he transformed into Brainstorm.
- You might need some telepathic backup. – explained the alien.
- Good idea. - Gwen closed her eyes and thought of some spells. When she opened them again, her visage had a purple glowing.
- Connect your senses to mine! – requested the woman. Brainstorm did as she commanded.
- Grab my hand! We need each other's energy to expand our thought waves to the whole planet.
- Is that really possible? – surprised Brainstorm.
- Of course! It's magic.... Now, concentrate! – exclaimed Gwen. They were floating in the air, holding each other's hand.
- I think I got something... something cold... – she stammered and turned to the West.
- Yes... I feel it too... – replied Brainstorm.

Meanwhile, in the former town of Las Vegas...

- What?! The Omni-Tower still stands?! – shouted the dark, sinister shadow. Even his voice was dreadful, it sounded like two different, raspy voices would speak together.
- It wasn't our fault, my lord! One of the rebels sacrificed himself, and imploded the only entrance to the building. – replied another creature, who's features were not less horrifying, than his master's.
- I don't care about your pathetic excuses! I've freed you from the Null Void, and this is how you return the favor? – roared the shadow and grabbed the creature's neck.
- Please, my lord! Forgive me! It won't happen again! – begged the creature in a dying voice.
- I know. This was your last failure! – hissed the shadow, strangled the alien and dropped its dead body on the ground.
- Dr. Vicktor! – summoned the mysterious shadow.
- Yes, master!
- You're in charge now!
- Thank you, master! – replied the minion gratefully.
- I want that tower destroyed, at any cost! - Suddenly, the shadow moaned painfully.
- What is it master? – asked Dr. Vicktor.
- Aaahhh! Someone's trying to reach my mind! Tennyson... You have no idea who you're dealing with this time! – laughed the specter.

- I feel something... it's cold... – mumbled Gwen, but she couldn't finish her sentence, a concentrated telepathic zap struck her mind. She fell down, luckily Brainstorm managed to catch her. She opened her eyes.
- What was that? – asked Ben.
- I don't know... but it's evil... I've never felt alike... It's pure evil... – and she lost her consciousness again.

3 - Chapter 3 - The defeat

Chapter 3 [br]

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The defeat[br]

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A few days later, Ben and Gwen still tried to learn more about their sinister experience, but to no avail. When they presented their anxieties to Lantara, she found that quite interesting.[br]

- Do you have any idea what happened? – asked her Ben.[br]

- As a matter of fact... – began the ectonurite and rubbed her head. – I do. Perhaps you – (she glanced at Gwen) – and Brainstorm were powerful enough to open a telepathic gateway between your mind and our mysterious friend's. [br]

- Okay, it was our aim, but that still doesn't explain those feelings, the cold, the pain... – reasoned Gwen.[br]

- Hmm... Maybe the gateway wasn't strong enough to transfer actual thoughts, you could only comprehend some fragmentary emotions. – explained Lantara.[br]

- It was depressing; I've never felt anything alike... – said Gwen.[br]

- But I did! Somewhere in the past, but I can't recall when or where! – exclaimed Ben.[br]

- Do you remember the reason of these feelings? – asked the ectonurite.[br]

- Yes. I felt that in someone's presence... One of my enemies, I'm sure, but that's not very helpful... I have a lot of them. – replied Ben and bowed his head.[br]

- If you'll excuse me... I need to be alone now. – declared he and left the conference room.[br]

Gwen and Lantara's eyes met.[br]

- Don't you worry about him? – questioned Gwen. – He's acting weird.[br]

- Yes, I know. I'm afraid he's going to lose his sanity because of this whole situation. You're the magician, you *should* feel he's getting weaker... Well, I *can* feel it. – grabbed the ectonurite and put her arms together. The two females never did get along too well. The alien still couldn't forgive what Gwen did on that black day, very long ago. She believed, partly it was her fault that Kevin 11 could end Max Tennyson's life. In her eyes, it was betrayal; Gwen let her whole family down in the time of need, not to mention the pain she has caused for Ben. [br]

This persuasion became even stronger when Ben got close to her heart. The man tried to convince her it's not that simple, Gwen was only a child back then, and she's different now, everyone can count on her. But Lantara didn't changed her mind, although she began to respect Gwen, for her development in her magic powers and the heroic acts she made on the battlefield. [br]

Both feeling was mutual; Gwen didn't really like Lantara as well. She's always been a thorn in her sight, a scary, incomprehensible and erratic creature, who stands between her and Ben, and she cannot be trusted. Gwen clearly remembers her encounters with Ghostfreak, however the ectonurite has proved to be a reliable comrade in battle, so she earned Gwen's respect.[br]

- Yes, I feel it too, and what's worse, I can see it as well. – replied Gwen after a few minutes of silence.

– We have to do something about it.[br]

- Leave that to me. – offered Lantara. Gwen didn't say a word, but an angry flash in her green eyes

informed the ectonurite about her displeasure. *"I should talk to him; he's MY cousin after all!"* thought Gwen at first. Then she realized she had tried talking with him before, but he did not open for her. Maybe Lantara have other ways to make him talk. [br]

They agreed and left the room.[br]

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In the middle of the night, he still sat in his favorite armchair. He found very difficult to get used to these dark nights, where even the moon hides behind the clouds. His thoughts were circling about the battles he fought, and Tetrax's demise. He still could not believe the petrosapien's gone. He stood by his friends and suffered in every fight with them; however, Earth was not his own planet. He was mad at those aliens... They are primitive, soulless, cold-blooded killing machines; he hates them! When he was young and fiery, he thought with the power of the omnitrix, he's able to annihilate them and cleanse the planet... He was so naive! After he defeated Kevin, there was a chance, but somehow, it didn't happen. The human race was not powerful enough to regain control. The alien hordes kept growing bigger, and more powerful, and they even adapted new strategies. Ben figured out, there must be a source, which controls them, they can't be that organized any other way. Unfortunately, the role of the protector chained him here, to the city. The people trusted him, he can't abandon them, but he also knew this must end soon, or they will be consumed by the evil, and the humanity will be lost in the dust of time forever. Ben 10 000 was torn between his feelings and his duty. His instincts exhorted him to go and do something before it's too late, but also, his task was to defend the colony. [br]

As he was sunk in thoughts, he suddenly heard a soft noise. He didn't move, but tensed all his muscles, preparing to react. He thought of Wildmutt's heat vision, and could already recognize the intruder's heat signature. He calmed down.[br]

- Lantara... How many times do I have to tell you, not to sneak around like this... – said Ben monotonously.[br]

The ectonurite became visible.[br]

- You know me better than anyone else does. – smiled she. [br]

- That, and I have like ten thousand alien heroes, and sixteen different kinds of vision. – replied Ben. – What are you doing here at this time of the night? [br]

- You're alone too much. We haven't talked for ages. You only speak to me before a battle... Gwen feels the same. And the people too. You haven't shown yourself to them for a very long time as well. What's wrong, dear? – purred Lantara, on the softest voice a ghostly being like her could. [br]

- You probably wouldn't understand... – declared Ben, then he stood up and walked to the window.[br]

- You know I hate that! Don't turn your back on me! – exclaimed Lantara and phased through Ben's stomach to look into his eyes. [br]

- What depresses you? – whispered the ectonurite. – Tell me...[br]

Ben hesitated for a moment, his eyes fell, and a loud sigh came out of his mouth. He looked at Lantara again.[br]

- Do you ever felt you know exactly you must do something, but for some reason you cannot do it?[br]

- You want to find the source?[br]

- Yes. But I also must stay here to defend the colony... – answered Ben.[br]

- You cannot decide which one is more important. – said the ghost.[br]

- Exactly. I don't know what to do... – admitted the man.[br]

- Nobody can make that decision for you. It is up to you, but I'm sure you'll choose wisely. – assured him Lantara.[br]

- You think?[br]

- Of course! Now, relax, everything will be all right... – replied the ectonurite. She touched Ben's chin with her first finger. The man could not believe how she could do that so sensitively with those claws.

Then her hands roved up and touched the scar below his eye. Illogically, her caress felt good and reassuring, not what you would expect from such creature. [br]

- You are weary of all those pointless battles... – whispered Lantara. Her chest opened, the black and white tentacles slowly cuddled the man. He returned the unusual hug. Outside, the full moon came out from the clouds and its white light illuminated the silhouettes of the strange couple. The moon was the only witness of this confidential moment...[br]

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About two hours later, Ben startled out of his sleep. It was early morning, but the dawn was still far away. He found another presence extraordinary; Lantara was still sleeping beside him. But, her watchful ear heard the noise Ben made and she woke up after a few seconds.[br]

- What is it? – asked she. Her voice was still sleepy and hoarse.[br]

- Nothing, I just... – he didn't finish. – What's that? – asked he, referring to a rustling sound.[br]

- What's what? – Their visage met and they shouted at the same time: [br]

- Trouble!!![br]

They reacted too late; a strong laser beam exploded in the room. Ben thought it was all over, but he found himself protecting his face with his arms instead. He also felt Lantara's touch on his shoulders. When she released him, his protoplasm became solid again. He smiled at the ectonurite gratefully. Then there was a green flash, Ben transformed into Heatblast to put out the fire. There was a wide hole instead of the window and the ceiling. The pyronite stood transfixed with horror because of what he saw. Thousands of aliens were swarming on the ground, below the Omni-Tower. [br]

- Oh no... – whispered Heatblast – We need to get down![br]

- Allow me! – offered Lantara and grabbed him. They phased through the floor and reached lower levels in a few seconds. There was a big bustle; the men must have noticed the explosion and returned the fire. Even their heavy artillery wasn't enough to cause superior damage. Heatblast met Gwen; she was firing a series of energy beams. [br]

- Gwen, what's going on?! – asked the pyronite. [br]

- I don't know, they just appeared from nowhere, and it seems they have developed! – replied Gwen despairingly. [br]

Indeed, the enemy lines were much more organized than anytime before. Soon, they figured out the source of the problem. An invisible dome hid the army from their eyes. [br]

- It's a reflection generator! They've camouflaged themselves, so we couldn't detect them visually! – realized Heatblast. – I wonder how they could obtain such advanced technology...[br]

- We must trash that thing, who knows how many are still under it! – exclaimed Gwen.[br]

- Hmm... – Heatblast looked around. – Aha! That should do the trick! [br]

He ran to the nearest cannon; changed into Upgrade and merged with it. The weapon grew bigger and had four spider-like legs. [br]

- I hope this will be enough! – said the mechomorph and charged up the lasers. Then he fired a powerful beam, but the dome reflected it. The other two beams went up to the sky ineffectively as well. [br]

- Oh, for goodness sake, it's no use! – cursed Upgrade and unmerged with the cannon. – We need to destroy the source, the generator device itself! Let's try an air raid on them, shall we? - suggested the mechomorph and went Jetray, one of the newer attainments of the omnitrix. This creature was tall, brown, and had bat-like wings. He could also fire laser beams from his eyes and tail. [br]

- Lantara! Stay here and coordinate the actions! Cover us! – commanded Jetray and jumped off the battlements. Gwen followed him. She released energy circles and struck down four alien at the same time. Jetray's green lasers cleared the way in front of them, but their triumph was merely temporal. Five mutant Stinkfly emerged on the horizon. They carried werewolves. [br]

- Is it just me, or those Stinkflies look familiar to you as well? – questioned Jetray and fired a laser from

his tail. [br]

- You're right! Animo created such creatures from omnitrix DNA! – replied Gwen. The first Stinkfly already reached her, but she evaded it with a fancy twirl. Jetray wasn't that lucky. A ball of slime struck him, and he fell down. [br]

- Ben!!! – roared Gwen and tried to find a way to him, but the Stinkflies surrounded and circled around her. An unexpected ultrasonic howl brought her down as well. There was a pale green flash in the seething dust, and Cannonbolt evolved from it. He rolled to Gwen.[br]

- Are you okay? – worried she.[br]

- Yes, I'm fine! What about you? – responded Cannonbolt and punched a weasel-like creature who attacked from the back.[br]

- I'll live. – smiled Gwen. [br]

- Let's teach these guys what does rock and roll mean! – suggested the pelarota and rolled up in a ball. [br]

- I'd rather prefer death metal! – said Gwen while she kicked a blue dog-like alien on the face.

Cannonbolt smashed dozens of aliens on his way to the reflection generator, but he rolled towards too fast, and left his cousin behind. Suddenly, a group of vicious vulpimancers surrounded him. As they approached him slowly, he changed into Spitter. The flood of the green slime hit one of the aliens and opened a hole in their circle. There was another flash, and Spitter was already Xlr8.[br]

- Well, have a nice day though! – joked the kinceleran and ran back. Thanks to his sharp reflexes, he always avoided the confrontation with the enemy, and quickly found Gwen in the battle. [br]

- I can't get near to the generator, there are too many! – declared he and rapidly kicked an orcbeast.

They covered each other's back, but the space between them and the enemy slowly tightened. Xlr8 went Fourarms and punched a few aliens; they flew backwards when he tossed them away. [br]

- We're being creamed here! – cried Gwen. Suddenly, the alien attack stopped. Ben and Gwen were still trapped in their mass, but they showed no intention to harm them. [br]

- What's going on? – asked Fourarms.[br]

- I don't know... – replied Gwen and prepared an energy circle on her palm. After a few depressing moments, the alien horde diverged, opening the way for a very familiar menace. [br]

- It has been a very long time, since we have met, Benjamin Tennyson! – exclaimed a deep voice, and its owner, Dr. Vicktor evolved from the smoke. [br]

- I cannot believe it! I thought I trashed you for good last time! – answered Ben, as a tetramand. [br]

- Last time, you barely managed to hold your ground, and I'm much stronger now! – said Dr. Vicktor.[br]

- That's not how I remember it! Allow me to refresh your memory! – hissed Fourarms and attacked with Xlr8's speed.[br]

- Ben, don't! – warned him Gwen, but she was too late. [br]

- Not this time! – Dr. Vicktor shouted, and threw the little knife-like machine; he was hiding in his hand.

The weapon struck the omni-symbol on the tetramand's chest. Green electricity ran through his body and he collapsed. With a red flash, Fourarms became Ben again.[br]

- Yes, the omnitrix is a magical and powerful device indeed... But what are you without it? Merely a weak human! – laughed Dr. Vicktor and raised his fists. The purple electric beam almost reached Ben, but Gwen's force field protected him. [br]

- Taste this! – roared she and sent two energy circles, but the alien caught them and pushed them back. He even filled them with electricity, they were like flying buzz saws; Gwen had to eliminate them with an energy zap. [br]

- I do not have time for playing games! – mocked Dr. Vicktor. The two electric poles on his back grew longer. [br]

- You're done! – grinned he and fired a very powerful electric beam. Gwen created a pink force field

again, but the beam was too strong. Shiny breaches appeared on the dome, before the electricity destroyed it, and struck her down. She fell on the ground and fainted. [br]

Seeing Gwen's defeat, Ben braced himself up to fight again. He thought of Eye Guy, but nothing happened. When he looked at the omnitrix, it was red. He realized his enemy's device is the reason of this malfunction. [br]

- Clever, isn't it? My invention only for you. It disrupts the omnitrix's circuitry; therefore, you cannot activate it for a while. – smiled Dr. Vicktor arrogantly. He quickly jumped in front of Ben and grabbed the omnitrix. [br]

- As far as I know, it takes a lot of concentration to change from one form into another. – hissed he suddenly broke Ben's left arm. The crack of the breaking bones filled his ear, and then he felt the pain beyond endurance. It was not over yet, a purple electric beam ran through his body and he flew back a few feet. Dr. Vicktor approached him menacingly. [br]

- Like they always say: All good things must come to an end once. Your end is near, but I want you to see this before that! – declared the alien and dragged Ben up from the ground. Behind them, the reflection generator was shut down; that revealed the true size of the invading hordes. It was bigger than ever, Ben knew: this time, the Omni-Tower will fall. [br]

- A small demonstration of *our* might! – said Dr. Vicktor coldly and pointed at an especially large cannon. He said something on an alien language to the three operators. They were from SixSix's species. They pressed a few buttons, and watched the red instruments, as they reached the maximum. [br]

- Fire! – roared Dr. Vicktor. The creatures obeyed and with a loud bang, the gun shot the biggest, most powerful energy beam, Ben did see. The Omni-Tower had no chance against such firepower. The purple beam immediately destroyed the complete upper block, and the lower levels soon collapsed as well. Only a few battlements and ruins remained on the ground. Ben had to watch the destruction of eight year's work and suffering, and he couldn't free himself from the squeeze of his enemy. The operators modified the direction of the gun, and the second shot imploded the wall of the fortress. The alien hordes began to push in at once. Ben could hear the screams of his people. Dr Vicktor suddenly released him; he fell down into the dust.[br]

- Ha ha ha ha ha! You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this moment! Good night, Ben Ten Thousand! – laughed Dr. Vicktor devilishly and tried to stomp Ben. Surprisingly, he evaded with rapid speed and stood up. Dr Vicktor blinked; he didn't understand what happened. [br]

- Nice plan you got! – But you did not thought of something... I almost forgot... I don't need the omnitrix anymore to kick your butt. – gasped Ben and raised his broken arm. With an awful crack, the bone welded. [br]

- What?! This is impossible! – shouted Dr. Vicktor and fired an electric beam, but Ben avoided it with Xlr8's speed. [br]

- You're going to pay for what you've done this day! I'm gonna make you regret everything! – hissed Ben and raised his right hand. Hundreds of small Diamondhead projectiles came out of his palm. Then he opened his mouth and spat some Stinkfly goo on his enemy. His left arm was already in blaze. The Heatblast fireball struck Dr. Vicktor and reacted with the slime, which caused an explosion, the alien drew back. [br]

- Be gone! – Ben roared and dozens of green eyes opened everywhere on his body. They merged into one big eye on his chest and fired a green energy beam. [br]

- Impossible! – surprised the alien, when the beam hit him. Although, his body was very durable resistant against injuries, he could hold his ground. His answer was a series electric wave. Unexpectedly, Ben caught and sent them back to its creator. Dr. Vicktor was vanquished by his own weapon. Gwen just came to, the next moment, her cousin was already beside her. [br]

- What happened? The last thing I remember is Dr. Monster... – whispered she.[br]

- It's okay, I took care of him. – assured her Ben.[br]
- I don't want to be a pessimist, but we certainly won't take care of them... – sighed Gwen and pointed to the vicious, mad aliens around them. They began to approach them once more. [br]
- You're right... Frankenfreak did something with the omnitrix, I'm still unable to make it work... – explained Ben.[br]
- And I'm too weak to fly either... – replied Gwen.[br]
- Hold on, I think of something! – said Ben. He concentrated on a thought.[br]
- Think fast, or we will stay here for dinner! – exhorted him Gwen. The aliens came closer and closer with every second. [br]
- Silence! I almost got it! – Ben shouted. His face distorted because of the intense focusing. [br]
- Ben![br]
- Almost![br]

Suddenly, a pair of Stinkfly wings grew out on his back. He grabbed Gwen and jumped up in the air, just when a werewolf tried to bite her. When they high enough in safety, she asked her cousin:[br]

- What took so long? [br]
- I don't know... Perhaps I had too many emotions in my mind; the command thought was not very clear and exact. When that cannon destroyed the Omni-Tower, I sort of lost my mind, the only thing I wanted then, is to avenge the deaths of my people... and Lantara... [br]
- The Tower! We must go back and help! – exclaimed Gwen.[br]
- It is pointless. They are dead... All of them. I can feel it...[br]
- No, there's still hope, we only have to draw them back to the wall and...[br]
- Gwen, Gwen, Gwen! Listen to yourself, you sound like a maniac! We can't fight them like this! We're outnumbered, you're too weak, and have a nasty wound on your head, the omnitrix's not working, I'm happy I can still fly us away from here! – Ben shouted.[br]
- I don't think it's a very chivalrous deed to abandon the people down there! – declared Gwen. [br]
- There's no one left to abandon, Gwen! If they did not die in the explosion and the collapse of the Tower, the aliens must have killed them all by now. I could hear their last screams! [br]
- You're right... Only we left... – admitted Gwen. [br]
- But I swear, I'm gonna find whoever's responsible for this! I WILL find the source and I'm gonna tear him into pieces! – vowed Ben. – Now, we need a safe place, where we can hide until we regain our strengths![br]

Ben held his cousin, and they flew away on the Stinkfly wings, eventually their silhouette disappeared from the horizon. Only the sounds of destruction remained, as the alien hordes quickly set the city on fire. The orange flames consumed everything by daybreak...[br]

[br]

Ben 10 000 was right, by the time he and Gwen could escape from the deadly circle of aliens, nobody was alive in the city. The aliens were fast, precise and savage.[br]

Ben was unaware of someone, the only survivor of the bloody events... [br]

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4 - Chapter 4 - Separated

Chapter 4[br]

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Separated[br]

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Concentrate the fire on the nearest troops! – shouted Lantara. The men did their best to obey her commands, and shot the swarming aliens below them.[br]

- Don't let them approach the Tower! – instructed the ectonurite and fired an energy beam. [br]

Suddenly, they heard a large explosion; the whole building started to shake. At first, nobody knew what happened, until Lantara recognized the huge, powerful cannon far behind the enemy lines. At this moment, the upper levels of the Omni-Tower were already vanished... [br]

Like a slow motion, she saw the next beam, which headed towards her. [br]

- Oh, no... – That's all she could whisper, before the green laser imploded the rest of the fortress. She didn't even have the time to change her protoplasm, and become a ghost; the Omni-Tower collapsed above her. A bigger piece of the falling debris struck her on the head, and everything went black for Lantara...[br]

[br]

Ben and Gwen escaped from the destruction. However, the distance between them and the Omni-Tower increased slower and slower. When they fought themselves through the mass of aliens, Ben injured on his right leg, so he was limping badly. They could still see the wreathing smoke coming from their destroyed colony. Both of them were exhausted, their strength of will couldn't last much longer.

Suddenly, Ben flopped down. His breathing was fast, more like a gasp. The omnitrix still hung useless on his arm. [br]

- All right, we're stopping now! – declared Gwen.[br]

- No! We must go on! Give me five minutes and I'll be okay... – opposed Ben.[br]

- You can't continue like this, you can't even walk. – said his cousin.[br]

- It doesn't matter...[br]

- I'm serious, Ben. I see something over there... I suppose it's a group of abandoned buildings... We'll find shelter for the night there! – insisted Gwen.[br]

Ben eventually caved in. They walked about two miles, and then reached the place what Gwen recognized. The facility was a former junkyard. As the dusk slowly fell upon them, and the last rays of the sun disappeared on the horizon, the towers of the rusty wrecks looked more and more sinister. Their grill looked like a distorted grin, or a toothless old man's mouth. The wrecks were all covered with the dust of decades.[br]

Gwen found a smaller house, but it was useless. Without a roof, windows, or doors, the bare smoky walls could not protect them from the cold of the night. When they came out, Ben noticed something in the semidarkness. [br]

- What are you doing? – whispered Gwen, if they were some sort of thieves, robbing the place. [br]

- Just a moment... – replied Ben quietly and limped closer to a bigger piece of wreck. Somehow, it looked familiar to him.[br]

- It cannot be... – said Ben to himself, but when he examined the vehicle more carefully, the old memories came alive in his mind. [br]

- Unbelievable! – The old R.V. literally amazed him.[br]

- What's so hard to believe? – asked Gwen.[br]

- The Rustbucket! – said Ben monotonously and pointed at the wreck.[br]

[br]

After destroying the Omni-Tower and the colony, Dr. Vicktor and his wicked companions, the alien hordes returned to their headquarters. They all had a successful day, they finally managed to take vengeance at their arch enemy, Ben 10 000, who imprisoned most of them in the Null Void dimension. Before he could enjoy the taste of his triumph, Dr. Vicktor had other duties. He went to the highest building in the former city of Las Vegas. For some reason, he always disliked entering there, because its owner filled even his hearth with fear. But, he was the Master, Dr. Vicktor owed him everything. The Master freed him from the Null Void, gave him strength and power and more importantly, the opportunity to strike Ben 10 000 down. [br]

He opened the heavy two-winged door, and stepped inside. The familiar semidarkness expected him.

[br]

- Master... – Dr. Vicktor knelt down before a black throne.[br]

- You may rise, commander! – whispered a raspy voice.[br]

- Master! We have finally claimed victory over the Tennysons! – said the alien. – The Omni-Tower is destroyed, and the aliens rampaged through in *his* beloved colony! They set the city on fire, not a single living soul remained there... Except... – he hesitated, he was afraid to say the next words, but he had no choice.[br]

- Speak! – exclaimed GhostKevin. His cold voice echoed all over the place.[br]

- Unfortunately, with the help of his cousin, Ben Tennyson survived and escaped.[br]

- How is it possible?! – thundered the Master. – I have the largest and the ONLY army in the whole planet, and he always slips through my fingers!!! Who's responsible for this?![br]

- Me... I battled the Tennysons, but I underestimated his powers. He was able to use the skills of the omnitrix-aliens; however, my device rendered it useless. – admitted Dr. Vicktor.[br]

- Yes, the mysterious alien... It's capable of copying and mixing any special power... I told you about it, I told you to be VERY careful, I warned you it's not enough to deactivate the omnitrix, you have to tear his brain out, there's no other option! We can't get rid of him any other way!!! Didn't I tell you that?! – shouted the ghostman. [br]

- But, Master! He's just one man! Even with the power of the omnitrix, what could he do? With the fall of the Omni-Tower, nobody left to rebel against your will! – said the alien.[br]

- Fool!!! – GhostKevin roared. He quickly stood up and punched Dr. Vicktor in the face.[br]

- I underestimated him twice! Never again! [br]

- Forgive me, Master! – begged Dr. Vicktor.[br]

- Oh, mercy is a very outmoded concept, but I still need you to prepare a warm welcome for Benjie. – grinned GhostKevin.[br]

- He won't be so foolish to come here! He doesn't even know where we are! – reasoned the alien.[br]

- He'll find out! It's just a matter of time until he shows his face here.[br]

- How can you be so sure? – asked Dr. Vicktor.[br]

- Ah, your brain is very slow... – sighed GhostKevin. – You said the aliens left no survivors. What about the ectonurite? That means, she's also dead, Ben won't resist the temptation to find us and avenge her demise.[br]

- What is your plan to stop him?[br]

- No, commander, not yet. I'll let you know everything in time. For now, rest, and enjoy the moment of

your victory, while it lasts! Don't forget though! Soon, you and I will have to face the wrath of Ben 10 000 once more, but this time, he will not escape me again! – smiled GhostKevin devilishly, his distorted features looked terrifying. [br]

[br]

- Are you sure? – asked Gwen.[br]

- Positive. This *is* the Rustbucket. – replied Ben. For a moment, he forgot the pain in his leg, he was so excited.[br]

- I never found out what happened to it... Our grandfather's car... Do you remember, Gwen? Do you remember that summer? [br]

- Yes... We roved around the country together, you, Grandpa Max, and me... It was so long ago... In a better age... - She recalled the old memories with fond emotion.[br]

Ben opened the door. Stuffy, hot air filled their nose, the smell of old drape and the rust.[br]

They got inside the R.V. It seemed, the time did not damage the interior much, except for the dust and the spider webs, but nothing has changed, everything was still there. They could still sense the aura of Max Tennyson here. Ben and Gwen went to their old beds, just like before. They all grown up, and felt a little less comfortable than they remembered, but the surroundings of a familiar environment soothed their soul, until they fell asleep. [br]

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Next morning, Gwen woke up a little late; the sun was shining far above the sky. The first thing she recognized, that Ben wasn't there, the second was a well-known smell. [br]

Suddenly, a blue face appeared in front of Gwen's.[br]

- Rise and shine sleepy head! Remember? That's what Grandpa used to say all the time! - smiled Xlr8. [br]

- Yeah, but... how's your leg? – asked Gwen. Xlr8 looked down at his leg ironically.[br]

- Never been better. Oops, breakfast's almost ready! – said he and disappeared from Gwen's eyes. He was already outside. The presence of the omnitrix aliens was so natural for Gwen; she didn't even notice that the watch is actually working again. Ben set a little fire in front of the Rustbucket and he was barbequing some kind of meat. [br]

- Is that?... - Gwen began.[br]

- Beef! – replied Xlr8. As he watched the meat, he was excitedly wagging his black and white tail.[br]

- Where did you get it?[br]

- Oh, I dug up a few cans from the Rustbucket, and Heatblast's responsible for this nice fire.[br]

- How did you make the omnitrix work? [br]

- Dr. Vicktor's device created a temporal block in the watch's circuitry. The only thing I needed to do is find it. He's not as smart as he thinks. – explained the kineceleran.[br]

As Gwen watched Ben's best efforts to make the old-fashioned breakfast, a teardrop appeared in her eyes. She didn't see her cousin this happy for years. [br]

- Great, it's crispy enough! – declared Xlr8. He rapidly put three plates on the table he prepared before. [br]

- Are we expecting someone? – asked Gwen.[br]

- No...Why?[br]

- Because there are three plates...[br]

- Oh, the third one is for La... - Suddenly, the black fog of recognition covered Xlr8's eyes. His happiness disappeared, as he reverted to Ben. [br]

- You're right... She's not with us anymore... - said he. The omnitrix flashed and Ben went Brainstorm. He grabbed the meat with his mind and sliced it in the air. When the slices floated above the plates, he released them. [br]

- Breakfast is ready! I hope you will like it... - his voice was lifeless. He didn't move.[br]
- Ben...[br]
- I'm a failure... [br]
- What? – surprised Gwen. She wasn't sure if she heard it right. When she looked at her cousin, she regretted noticing the third plate.[br]
- I wasn't there to save Grandpa, I wasn't there to save Tetrax, and I wasn't there to save *her*...[br]
- Ben, don't blame yourself! Neither of this is your fault, it had to be this way for some reason. [br]
- No! I should have been there! I had the power back then, I have even more now, but that's not going to bring them back! I SHOULD HAVE BEEN THERE! – roared Brainstorm. With a green flash, he transformed into Fourarms.[br]
- I SHOULD HAVE BEEN THERE!!! – chanted Ben. As the fury eventually filled his mind, he could not control his power. He struck the ground with all of his hands. And he repeated.[br]
- I SHOULD HAVE BEEN THERE!!! – thundered Fourarms. [br]
- Ben! Stop this foolishness at once! Like you said: this won't bring them back! You only harm yourself! – shouted Gwen. [br]
Her words worked like a magic spell, Ben quickly changed back to his human form.[br]
- I'm sorry Gwen. I just could not control myself... I needed to let out some steam...[br]
- The way you looked at me when I shouted at you, scared even me for a sec... - admitted Gwen.[br]
- I told you I'm sorry... It's very difficult to handle this much power and to keep your emotions away from them... - said Ben, he was still gasping. [br]
Gwen bowed her head, as a sign of her agreement.[br]
- Now... What about that breakfast? – smiled Ben nervously. [br]

[br]
As far as the eye could see, the land was desolate. Only a few smoky pile of rock and some debris remained. Nobody left to rebuild the destroyed colony, and nothing remained to work with. The wind blew sadly among the ruins. Not so long ago, a pride fortress stood here, which held the alien hordes back several times. It protected the colony and the human race for many years, but as they say: nothing lasts forever. The eight year's work of Ben 10 000 fell in less than a minute, and the enemy finally won. But even in the last moment, the Omni-Tower saved a life, when the laser torn it apart. At the top of the biggest pile of debris, a smaller rock rolled down to the ground. The sound broke the deadly silence. Suddenly, the debris began to move, and a fist emerged from it. Soon, a grey body slowly crawled out from the tight hole. Although she was the only survivor of the colony, Lantara was barely alive. Her body was covered with bleeding wounds everywhere. She just watched the drops of her black blood falling down to the rocks. Her breathing was fast, and half of her tentacles hung flabby. The muscle which opens and closes her chest injured badly on the right side. She spent three days under the ruins, and she couldn't even phase through the debris, not to mention to float in the air. [br]

All of a sudden, a smaller vulpimancer showed up, and comprehended Lantara's heat signs. [br]
- Oh great... - cried she, as the other alien ran towards her. She concentrated to become a ghost... Her first attempt failed. She tried once again, but to no avail. She knew she was too weak. And just when the vulpimancer wanted to jump on her, Lantara's protoplasma finally changed and the orange creature struck the ground only. Then, the ectonurite's blue claws went through the alien's meat and reached its heart. The vulpimancer rattled a few times before it dropped down dead. Lantara heaved a sigh of relieve.[br]

Randomly, Ben came into her mind. At first she assumed he's dead, like anyone else in the colony. But when she listened to her senses, they whispered something else. She decided to find him, wherever he is. That was her last thought before she lost her consciousness again, unaware of the fact: she was still not alone.[br]

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Next morning, Benjamin Tennyson woke up early. Although the dawn was near, except for an orange shining on the horizon, it was still dark. Ben quickly picked up his T-shirt on his muscular bust, and sneaked out of the Rustbucket without a noise. But he could not leave yet. Ben turned around and looked back at his grandfather's vehicle. [br]

- This is my mission. My mission ONLY... There's been far too many deaths... I cannot allow another one... - said he more for himself, then Gwen. He felt, he just needed to say it out loud, to strengthen his heart. A green flash in the dying night, and the fast alien, called XLR8 stormed out of the junkyard. [br]

[br]

He was alone in his residence, at the highest building of the former Las Vegas. However he was only half a human now, his twisted ego still could not content itself with less ostentation.[br]

He removed every mirror from the building, because since that day he truly met Ghostfreak, he was not the same. Merging with the ectonurite led to unexpected physical mutations. Kevin's skin went grey, but peeled off his face, only the bare skull and his long, black hair remained. And of course... those terrible, lifeless eyes... with a purple iris in the middle. His nails turned into bluish black claws, and horrible black and white striped tentacles grew out of his chest. Even with his very look, he was fearful, but the inside was much more terrifying. Kevin had to share his mind with the ectonurite. They needed each other to stay alive, but more importantly, their vindictiveness connected them to one another. The corporate will united their soul, to fulfill their ultimate desire...[br]

What's our most ultimate desire? – thought Kevin. He heard the reply in his mind.[br]

We seek vengeance on Ben 10 000, as our sworn task! – rattled Ghostfreak's deep voice.[br]

I'm not sure if this will work... - doubted Kevin.[br]

Do not worry. We shall see him again. And that day is close now... The day when we finally defeat Ben Tennyson, and make him pay for everything he had done to us! – hissed Ghostfreak.[br]

He kicked our butts in the past. Why would it be different now? - asked Kevin.[br]

Individually, we might have failed, but we're not alone anymore... We shall be victorious this time, if we put our knowledge together. Together, we know everything, every alien he's willing to use, we know their powers and we eventually managed to found out his cast of mind! - exclaimed Ghostfreak.[br]

Yes, my knowledge is yours, your knowledge is mine, I assume we know what dear Benjie's planning to do next, after his precious Tower is blown to bits! – thought Kevin.[br]

Exactly. He attempted before, and he will try again. He will do his best to track our location down... and we will let him. He did that in New York, as we remember. Although, his plan was to rescue his chandelier friend, he almost finished us off. He'll do the same now, but there's a very important difference now... He's alone, his allies are all extinguished, and he even makes it easier for us... He left his most powerful comrade by his own free will. - explained Ghostfreak.[br]

His cousin. – declared Kevin.[br]

Yess... And he will come here blinded by the bloodthirst, even if he gets through our alien army, he won't stand a chance against us. Last time, he barely managed to hold his arm, and now, we're a hundred times stronger now. – An imaginary grin appeared on the ectonurite's face, as the twisted gears began to roll in their mind. As Kevin understood the plan, he afforded a devilish smile too. [br]

GhostKevin just set there, in the darkness, and the two wicked mind wrapped themselves up with the blanket of evil plans.[br]

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5 - Chapter 5 - Divide and conquer

Chapter 5[br]

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Divide and conquer[br]

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The first thing she comprehended from the outside world was the rain. The cold raindrops fell on her face, and refreshed her a little. But then the pain assaulted her nerves immediately and she let her mind sink in the ocean of misery. After she fainted again, she only had a few memories of what happened, only random images of events. She remembered, a blurry shadow towered upon her, but did not know its intentions. Lantara felt, that somebody carries her somewhere, but the darkness came again and blinded her sight... [br]

[br]

Gwendolyn Tennyson startled out of her sleep. At the moment she woke up, her senses recognized that Ben wasn't there. The thoughts chased each other in her mind. *What happened to him? Where can he be? Why did he leave me? Is he all right?*[br]

Outside, the first rays of the sun just appeared on the horizon. She dressed up and got out of the Rustbucket. Her feelings were mixed, she was angry and disappointed at the same time, she felt betrayed and abandoned, however she knew Ben must have had a good reason for leaving her all alone. *But what? What makes him leave the only relative and ally he got? Mysterious... Or some alien captured him? Dark riddles... How it's going to be from now on? What should I do? Where should I go?* For a very long time, Ben was always there to answer these questions, and Gwen gladly followed him. But she was on her own now. [br]

She observed the desolate land around her. Not a single tree broke the dull view. Her eyes found the place where once the pride Omni-Tower stood. *Perhaps there are survivors... Maybe the situation isn't so hopeless after all.* Gwen made up her mind, and prepared to go back and seek for survivors, or their trace. The determination gave her new strength and enthusiasm. [br]

[br]

A white stripe whooshed on the lonely road, the dust seethed behind it. Suddenly, Xlr8 stopped. He has been running around the continent for days now, and still has not found any sign of life. It seemed, the whole world is extinct, the just infinite barren remained, every direction he looked. There were some debris, wrecks and ruins, but no life at all. The aliens did not show themselves. With a green flash, Xlr8 turned into Ben again. He was quite exhausted and wanted to give up his search. After he defeated Kevin in New York, he lost his trace years ago. At that time, he used to think he finally got rid of his nemesis once and for all, and freed the world from his evil reign of terror. Little did he knew, Kevin teamed up with Ghostfreak... They literally teamed up, as the ectonurite merged with Kevin and Kevin stopped being that psychopathic maniac he was, Ghostfreak rational and cruel mind corrected his wrongs. He won't make the same mistake twice. Ben could see the logic now. It's been all set up. Every battle was a part of a much bigger plan. The true purpose of these confrontations were not to destroy mankind, but to weaken his forces and eliminate Ben himself, neutralizing the menace he meant for GhostKevin, by chaining him to the colony, to play the role of the protector and the shield. *How*

foolish was !! – thought Ben[br]

He set down to the bare pavement. He didn't have to worry about a car that would run over him; those kinds of vehicles are out of traffic very long ago. He enjoyed the ground's coldness as it refreshed his body in the hot desert sunshine. Suddenly, the recognition struck his mind. Where would be the most difficult point to locate without modern technology? The Nevada desert is huge and it's climate is very unfriendly as well. What major cities were in the desert? He thought about it for a few minutes. [br]

- Of course! - Ben exclaimed out loud. – Las Vegas! [br]

He was certain, that his theory was right, he checked every single mile on the East and the West Coast, but to no avail. Last time, Kevin's headquarters was in New York, a city near the ocean. Now, he's chosen the opposite, a city in the desert. It all makes sense! He went Xlr8 again and stormed out with renewed strength. He knew, when he arrives at his destination, he will show no mercy this time. Mercy held back his hand before, and that was a mistake. Villains like Kevin and Ghostfreak do not deserve to earn it. Both of them must be destroyed![br]

[br]

Lantara came to. She opened her eyes and looked around, but the surroundings were unfamiliar to her. She was in a room, filled with interesting, mysterious relics; most of them were strongly connected to religion or magic. Since she's been roving around in the galaxy with Ben, he told her much about Earth, and its people, that's why she could recognize some of the symbols. As an ectoplasma-based being, she knew something about positive and negative energies, and dark magic. The second thing she realized, her pain was gone. Well, not exactly, but it was merely a leaden ache. Her tentacles were not out anymore, but she couldn't open her chest and reach her full potential. The muscle needs more time to cure. As she examined her body, looking for other injuries, she sensed someone's watching her. She rapidly turned around and braced herself to fight. [br]

- Take it easy! You're safe now! - said a melodic, however sad feminine voice. Lantara let her arms down and looked at the woman more carefully. She had white skin, long, dark bluish hair, same blue eyes, and she was wearing a black outfit with a blue cape which matched her hair color.[br]

- Who are you? Where am I? – asked Lantara.[br]

- You're welcome for saving your life... - replied the woman apathetically. [br]

Lantara blinked in surprise by the calm, but determined answer.[br]

- I'm sorry. I did not wish to hurt you. These years of battle made my words harsh. Forgive me. My name is Lantara.[br]

- Never mind. I'm Raven. [br]

- Raven? Hmm... Sounds familiar... I think I heard your name before...[br]

- Maybe. Once, I was much more popular than nowadays... - wondered Raven. – So, what alien race are you from? I've never seen alike among those hordes, and I've seen many...[br]

- I'm an ectonurite. My home planet is Anur Phaetos. – explained Lantara. – You fought against the Null Void aliens?[br]

- I used to. But that was long ago. Now, I have nothing to do with them, until they come here. – answered Raven.[br]

- Why did you not continue? [br]

- It's a long story. I don't want to bore you. You can stay here until your injuries heal. – patted Raven, and wanted to leave the room. [br]

- Wait! Don't you think we have more than enough time to speak? - smiled the ectonurite.[br]

- I'm not very a talkative person... - said Raven.[br]

- Okay, if you don't want to speak about it, fine. – replied Lantara and put her arms together. At first, her host looked at her with a questioning expression, eventually Raven caved in. [br]

- Very well then. Please be forbearing, telling stories is my worst skill. - Raven began. [br]

Lantara bowed understandingly, and listened to this mysterious woman's story. [br]

- Once, I was a part of a great team. We called ourselves the Teen Titans and we did heroic deeds all around the world. My teammates became my friends and I finally found a place to be, where nobody looks at me freaked out because of my strange powers. Everything was perfect... Then *he* came... and destroyed everything that was important for me. More and more alien villain showed up and began to take over the cities. In the last battle, we marched desperately against the gatecrashers. We fought till our last breaths, but even that sacrifice was not enough to overtake them. We were outnumbered and eventually defeated. All my teammates were gone that day, I was the only survivor. My heart, my mind, even my body were jaded and broken. After I managed to work off the bereavement, I decided to leave the battlefield, and exile to a lonely place, to never see anything else again. I made a vow as well, that I shall never use my powers to bring destruction upon anyone. I've lived here ever since. You're the first person I've seen in years... - Raven's visage lost in the nothingness. Lantara waited silently for her to carry on.[br]

- I was on my search to supplement my comestible, when I recognized the smoke on the horizon. It was really far away, but since I did not have anything better to do, I checked it out. I flew for one day and night, until I reached the source of the smoke, but when I arrived, there was nothing left... Then I noticed you on the ground. I've taken you to my home, and here we are. – Raven finished.[br]

- I know how you feel, my story is very familiar. I too lost someone who was very important for me. But I believe, he's out somewhere and waits for me to rejoin him. [br]

- I don't believe in miracles, I never did. – answered Raven. Her voice was still veiled, as the effect of the reminiscing.[br]

- You should. He did a lot of miracles.[br]

- The omnitrix. - Raven declared. Lantara's eyes grew large.[br]

- How do you know about the omnitrix?[br]

- Just because I'm a recluse, it doesn't mean I know nothing about the world. I know his name is Ben Tennyson, I know he got the omnitrix when he was ten; I know *he* killed Ben's grandfather, and Ben left the planet for eight years! I know everything about him... because I'd even break my vow to strike him down![br]

- What?! You're carrying a grudge against him? [br]

- Yes. However, our paths have not crossed each other yet, according to my analysis, he's responsible for everything what happened to the world. Not only him of course; the true enemy is *he*, the amalgam creature... But... as a hero, Ben 10 should have halted *his* rampage! He was more than capable! [br]

- How can you even say that? He was only 10 years old! A child! – shouted Lantara.[br]

- Hah... *He* wasn't much older than Ben! Besides, I was younger, when I had to use my powers! Ben had nine times more power than me and my team had! He must have been able to stop *him*. But he was not here to do it. And that's why I blame him. He let his own kind down, on purpose or not, it doesn't matter. We could not stand a chance by ourselves, but if he would have been here, our teams could unite and *he* would have been defeated, before he could ever release those alien villains from that dimension! – hissed Raven, and her eyes filled with hatred. Behind her, a black aura surrounded a vase, and a second later, it broke into hundreds of pieces. Raven looked at her fist, and then surprise and shame replaced the hatred's distorted mask on her face.[br]

- I'm sorry. You shouldn't have seen this. My powers are driven by my emotions... and sometimes I cannot control them. – explained Raven and suddenly disappeared with a black flash.[br]

Lantara just gazed the place where Raven stood a moment before, and decided not to mention her connection with [br]

Ben 10 000.[br]

[br]

A red zap broke the silence of the desolate land. Soon it was followed by many others. On the screen of the robotic guards, a lightning shape appeared. It always evaded their blasts rapidly. [br]

Xlr8 jumped up in the air, when two drones shot two lasers from the opposite directions. The blasts did not harm him, but the robots destroyed each other. There were three more. As Xlr8 was still in the air, he changed into Cannonbolt, and fell upon a drone, smashing it completely. The two other - not having any other weapons – shot dozens of laser beams, but all were reflected by Cannonbolt's armor. He stepped on the ruins of the previous drone and rolled up in a ball. He began to bounce around the place, and managed to strike down another robot. The last one hopelessly tried to shoot him, but when Cannonbolt changed into Fourarms, and his four fists struck at the same time, the drone was gone. But one of the machines was still active. As the tetramand walked towards the former city of Las Vegas, the drone raised its arm and wanted to fire him in the back. A second before, Eye Guy appeared from the green flash. An eye opened on his back, and without stopping, he fired a green energy beam, which set the robot in flames. He approached the city, and there was no sign of any other guards. Suddenly, three Stinkfly showed on the horizon. They all spat slime balls, but could not strike Ben, who transformed into Shockwave, and clapped his paws. The shockwave brought down a Stinkfly, but the other two avoided it. Ben's mind remained cold and calm, precise and merciless. He went Brainstorm. The green aura of his mind torn out a few water pipes from the ground and a powerful spout rendered the Stinkflies useless. Brainstorm continued his march into the heart of the city. Before he could enter, a brown, tall and muscular, dinosaur like creature stood in his way. Ben reacted fast, knowing that Brainstorm is not mighty enough to stand up against this beast, so he thought of Diamondhead, and a moment later, the omnitrix formed the crystalline petrosapien body around him. He shot a few crystals from his palm, and as they flew towards the beast, they grew sharp spikes all around them; however, they broke apart on the alien's skin ineffectively. Seeing this, Diamondhead became Heatblast and created a massive curtain of fire. After the smoke cleared up, the beast still stood there unharmed. Suddenly it raised its fists and punched the pyronite in the face. He flew way back. He stood up, rubbing his fiery face. [br]

- All right big guy! You wanna see a really big alien? – asked Heatblast, right before the omnitrix flashed. The creature ran towards him, but when he recognized Way Big, as he almost blocked out the sun, it stopped. Ben thought he will just carry on, tear Kevin out of his nest and crush him, but the brown beast began to grow as well. It just grew and grew until its size matched Way Big's.[br]

- Oh man, you don't make my work easier, do you? – sighed Way Big and hit the beast in the chest. Except a few steps back, the creature did not fall, but attacked Ben instead. No matter how hard they tried, they could not overcome the other. It was like a huge wrestling match, as fist distended to fist, body distended to body. Suddenly, the brown alien struck the omni-symbol on Way Big's chest. He immediately disappeared in a red flash. Only Ben remained. The omnitrix turned yellow, and Ben could not make it to work. Realizing this, the huge beast wanted to stomp him, but he evaded with Xlr8's speed. He knew even Fourarms's strength would not be enough to succeed. He was about to escape, when the watch turned green again, and a beast icon appeared on the screen. [br]

- Oh, cool, new member. I shall call you... Humangousaur! – Smiled Ben and he thought of the alien. The omnitrix transformed him into the same creature he was up against. Ben's opponent drew back in surprise when Humangousaur grew up, to match its size. Ben knew exactly the powers and the limits of this creature, and with a few well planned punches, he defeated the beast. Certain of his triumph, Humangousaur shrank, and reverted to Ben.[br]

- Wow, that was cool, but know let's insist on the old school style! – exclaimed he, when a larger group of different aliens surrounded him. The omnitrix flashed once again... [br]

[br]

GhostKevin heard the sounds of the battle outside, however he sensed that Ben was near hours ago. He allowed himself a satisfied grin. *Well, well, well, my plan is right on schedule, and working perfectly...*

again. - He thought. Indeed, he predicted that Ben will reveal his whereabouts, and he also knew he will not resist the temptation to confront him once more. Whatever the prize, he wants to fight him, GhostKevin so bad, that even all those aliens among them won't stand in his way. But that was a calculated loss. GhostKevin did not care about it. *When Ben shows his face here, he's going to have a big surprise.*[br]

[br]

Meanwhile, Gwen arrived to her destination. Around her, there were only destruction and death. She began to examine the area, looking for footprints, a piece of garment, any sign of life. It was very difficult to recognize anything in the dust, among the debris, but she did not give it up. Eventually, her effort was successful; she found a hole in the biggest pile of debris and rocks, which was once the Omni-Tower. As she continued the search, she discovered other footprints as well.[br]

- Somebody lied here... - said she to herself, and touched the ground. She followed the traces with her fingers. [br]

- Interesting. Someone else was here... But the footprints start here... and a few feet farther, they stop again... Hmm... that certain someone must possess the power of flight, there's no other logical explanation for these strange kinds of tracks. - Gwen stood up and rubbed her head. Only then she recognized the black gore drops on the ground. [br]

- Lantara... - exclaimed she. - This means she's still might be alive![br]

Near the hole there were more blood, and they led somewhere. Gwen flew up and followed the trace.[br]

[br]

Ben was still fighting, at the moment he was Wildvine. He's been doing that four hours now, switching from one alien form into another, and he surprised, because it wasn't exhausting as well. A mud creature ran towards him. Wildvine threw a few explosive seeds at it, but they only cut holes, which immediately healed. The omnitrix flashed, and Heatblast boiled his opponent with a fire beam. From his other hand, dozens of Diamondhead crystals fell on the attacking aliens. Soon, Ben changed into Spiderweb. He shot elastic, but strong webs from his six hands, and captured six creatures in a cocoon. Suddenly, more and more alien surrounded him, and he had to convert into Stinkfly to avoid them. When he was in the air, his legs became fiery, like Heatblast and dozens of fireballs fell upon the attackers, tumbling their lines. Ben even boosted the effect, by spitting some goo, which instantly exploded when it reached the fire. As soon as he finished off a group, another one appeared to take the fallen one's place. Ben transformed into Humangosaur again, and while he was falling down, his body grew and smashed the alien hordes below, when hit the ground. The newest alien of the omnitrix remained unharmed, and went Artiquana. The icy waft, coming from his mouth froze the survivors. But it was still not over. The aliens kept coming and coming. A large orcbest wanted to strike him, but he disappeared, and the tiny Grey Matter easily slipped off its hands. He jumped behind the creature, turning into Fourarms. The tetramand struck the best's back and it was finished. Recognizing a new threat, he went Spitter and his flood of slime halted a bigger werewolf. Suddenly, a blue laser forced him to the ground. Its source was a machine. It was a battle-bot, the type the Plumbers used back then. Spitter converted into Mudface, a mud alien, like the ones Ben used to fight, when he was young. The liquid mud flooded the circuitry inside, and rendered the drone useless. Mudface went Buzzshock. Another robot grabbed him. Its plan was to crush the little megawhatt. But Buzzshock turned into electricity, and shinned up on the machine's arm. A second later its processors were all burnt out. Suddenly, - after a green flash -the drone's chest broke apart, and Wildmutt jumped out of it. He began to climb up on the nearest wall, but a vicious flourana's fringe coiled around his body and brought him down. Wildmutt struggled to free himself, but the tentacles were strong. He quickly changed into Heatblast. As the pyronite's fiery body touched the green fringes, they turned black and began to smoke. The flourana screamed in pain and retreated. Heatblast grinned sent a fireball after it, and the

plant was consumed by the flames. His enemies slowly drew back, as Ben vanquished them one by one. However, he figured that only the smaller, less powerful and animalistic creatures were attacking, the more intelligent life forms did not show themselves. Ben found that strange and suspected a trap. The events seemed to confirm his theory, when the alien mass began to pile out from every corner of the city. No matter how mighty he was, Ben could not oppose them. He transformed into Stinkfly and flew up, just when the closest aliens wanted to tear him apart. Suddenly, a purple electric beam struck him. With a red flash, he reverted to Ben and fell down unconsciously. The alien hordes below him stood aside and let him hit the ground.[br]

[br]

Dr. Vicktor was standing on the top of a higher building and observed the battle. He couldn't believe his eyes, when Tennyson began to overwhelm the alien hordes. He did not even expect him to last this long. He gave the command for the "SixSix-aliens" to start the final wave. This offensive involved every single alien of the continent. They were summoned telepathically by GhostKevin and camouflaged under the defense of the Reflection Generator's dome, which made them invisible. When the aliens flooded the city, Tennyson had no chance, but he discovered the true aim of this battle, and wanted to escape from the trap too early. Fortunately, he flew towards him, Dr. Vicktor, and he managed to strike Ben down. He jumped off the building and walked to Ben who was just coming to. [br]

- You have been a thorn in our sight long enough, Ben Tennyson! – smiled Dr. Vicktor devilishly and his electric beam knocked Ben out again.[br]

[br]

Gwen followed the trace doggedly; the black gouts led her closer and closer to Lantara's location. Suddenly, she needed to stop. A feeling took over her soul, a feeling of a loss. She immediately knew, something bad happened, and the first word came to her mind was...[br]

- Ben... - she sighed. – I need to find Lantara as soon as possible...[br]

She took a few steps forward, and realized in horror, that the path of drops stopped there. Without any guide through the flat and monotonous landscape, she was lost. She wondered the barren for days; her sense of locality completely abandoned her. The time slurred, and she didn't know the way out from this nightmare. At first, Gwen began to panic, but then forced herself to calm down. Her mind cleared up and searched for an alternative. Suddenly, a blurry image appeared in her mind's eye. It happened only a few days back, but it seemed ages for Gwen. When there were gouts to guide her, she tripped over a rock and fell on the ground. *Perhaps some blood left on my clothes...* - she thought. Soon, her palm touched something harsh on her leg. Her eyes grew large, even she could not believe in her own success. *You're not done yet!* – warned herself Gwen. She wasn't sure, if she's able to locate someone like this. She concentrated and focused her powers on Lantara. After a deep trance, Gwen came to. As she looked around once again, the labyrinth of the desolate land looked more perspicuous. It all made sense; she suddenly knew which direction she should go. [br]

Gwendolyn Tennyson flew up with revived enthusiasm, and certain of the fact: she has roved too far, and have a long journey to complete.[br]

[br]

Lantara's condition improved a lot, since Raven took care of her. Despite how grateful she was, she was more and more certain, that Raven lost her mind a bit. The ectonurite did not blame or fear, but understood her. All these years all alone with her demons, nobody to speak with, just the boggles of the past chased each other in her mind. [br]

Sometimes Raven was very chatty, she told many things about herself and her strange powers, especially her former team, and Lantara proved to be a good listener. On these days, Raven enjoyed the freedom of speech and the alien let her speak, knowing she held her words back long enough. She also had a huge thirst of knowledge and asked Lantara to tell everything about herself. The ectonurite gladly

agreed, and spoke about her natural abilities, her home planet, her journey to the most different corners of the universe, and what she have seen there. The only thing she kept as a secret was her relationship with Benjamin Tennyson. [br]

Sometimes, Raven switched the topics of the conversation very fast; it was difficult to follow her. Another time, she was grim and reserved; built a fortress in her head, locked herself in, and did not let anyone approach her; however one thing was the same in every day: They spent the mornings together. Raven taught Lantara how to meditate and expand her powers. She became capable of moving things with her mind and acquired the ability to comprehend emotions and calculate intentions according to them. The ectonurite showed Raven how to phase through solid objects perfectly, because she had some problems with that in the past. She also taught her how to free the innermost energy of deep within her soul, to add more power to the strike; however Raven emphasized that she swore not to use her powers for fighting again. Despite all the mysterious, unknown things which surrounded Raven, Lantara took a fancy of her, but she acknowledged to herself, that she wouldn't want to meet *her* in a dark alley. As her injuries all healed, Lantara's instincts exhorted her to go and find Ben, if it's not too late already. She knew she wasted too much time here, but the other side of her personality did not wish to leave Raven alone again. Nevertheless, the ectonurite could not prolong the inevitable moment.[br]

- Raven. I need to go. – said Lantara after a morning meditation. [br]

- What? Why? I thought you like it here... - surprised the woman.[br]

- Yes, it's not your fault, but I have to go... [br]

- I understand. Well, you're free to go. – replied Raven and flinched till a shadow covered her features. [br]

- Come with me! – offered Lantara. [br]

- What? – asked Raven. Her blue eyes doggedly raked the alien.[br]

- Come with me! You don't have to live alone anymore! Come with me! – repeated Lantara.[br]

- Go with you into a world where there's war, suffering and death, all the things I escaped from. – declared Raven.[br]

- Yes. But you cannot hide from your demons any longer. You may escape, but they will find you and continue to haunt you! [br]

- Who do you think you are? I like you, but nobody has the right to judge me! Nobody!!! – exclaimed Raven. Her black aura coiled around the door, and it opened. [br]

- I do not want to judge you. I just want to help you. – answered Lantara and floated out. – If you ever change your mind... You'll find me.[br]

- Yes...[br]

Raven stared at her from inside, and the door closed behind Lantara. The alien drifted away, and soon disappeared on the horizon. Now, that the ectonurite has left and she was alone with the specters *she* mentioned. Raven was torn between her feelings. At the very first moment she met Lantara, she comprehended a fragmentary thought of her mind, and it said *Ben*. Since then she knew, that Lantara is connected with Ben 10 000 somehow. Now there's the chance to settle the score with Tennyson, to make him pay because of his irresponsibility, which destroyed the whole planet! He possessed the abilities of nearly twenty powerful alien at the time, but he left Earth cowardly. Maybe it's not only his fault, but there must be a scapegoat, someone she can vent on, to fill out the cold, dark space, to get rid of the fury, which consumes her soul, and leaves nothing but pain, the fury she feels because of the loss of her friends. The fury she feels because this man takes away the only person who's familiar to her, who understood her... well, the second person in fact... She knew it was a twisted point of view, but she could not help it. Suddenly, her eyes went red under the cowl, and her face distorted into an evil grin.[br]

- I wonder if you're afraid of the dark, Tennyson... One thing's sure... when I'm done, you will be.[br]

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6 - Chapter 6 - The true face of the enemy

Chapter 6[br]

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The true face of the enemy[br]

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Ben awakened. He was tied up, and a sinister device surrounded the omnitrix on his arm. Someone also put a metal ring on his head. He tried to free himself, but his efforts were useless. Suddenly, the two-winged door opened and Dr. Vicktor evolved from the darkness. [br]

- I have to admit, you were quite impressive back there. Not even the Master expected you to hold your ground that long, with those aliens... - began Dr. Vicktor without any further introduction.[br]

- What do you want? I suppose your precious *master* wants me alive, you would have killed me otherwise! – hissed Ben.[br]

- You have a sharp tongue, but not for long! The Master will break your enthusiasm down! – shouted the alien.[br]

- Oh, you cannot possibly imagine how long I've been waiting to meet *him* in person! – replied Ben with a wide grin on his face.[br]

Dr. Vicktor punched him in the stomach; all the air got out of his lungs, he could not breath well. [br]

- Is that all you got?! – coughed Ben. The alien's respond was a stronger punch, this time in the face. Ben remained silent, as he tasted his own blood.[br]

- Now, if this settled, let's get back to our work, shall we? – smiled Dr. Vicktor and pressed a few buttons on the control panel nearby him. A powerful turbine revved up, and the machine resuscitated. [br]

- What is happening? – asked Ben.[br]

- You will get to meet the Master indeed; but first, precautionary measures need to be done. Most importantly, I'll remove the omnitrix, and the little crown of yours is blocking your brainwaves. It will prevent you from doing anything hasty, like using your alien's powers in your human form... Brilliant, isn't it? I designed it only for you. – explained Dr. Vicktor arrogantly. [br]

- This will never work! – exclaimed Ben with growing fear.[br]

- I'd had to agree if we had not borrowed this technology from an old friend of yours. – replied the villain pointing at the device which held Ben's left arm.[br]

- Vilgax! That's why it looked so familiar! – realized Ben.[br]

- This time, I thought of everything! Finally! The mighty Ben 10 000 is going to be history! Mu ha ha ha ha ha ha! – laughed Dr Vicktor, maniacally. He pressed new buttons on the panel; they turned green as he touched them. The machine was in operation. The electric waves went through Ben's body, as the device started to tear the omnitrix off him. Ben's face distorted as the pain grew more and more intense. Inside the huge, metal shackle, a few cracks appeared on side of the watch, and it eventually began to rip apart...[br]

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Meanwhile, Gwen was still on her journey. She flew above the barren; as the only thing that broke the sad landscape. Her shadow followed her doggedly all day. Gwen was following someone as well,

namely Lantara. Since she learnt how to locate the ectonurite once, she was able to do it again. Last time, Gwen realized with great relief, that Lantara is moving, which means she's alive, but it'll be more difficult to find her, if her position changes all the time. Gwen did not care, she sensed the alien closer than before. All of a sudden, that cold and creepy feeling coiled out from the darkest corners of her brain, to take over her mind once again. Like the fog when it seethes over the valley, this awful emotion filled her soul. From the previous experience, she knew something happened to Ben, and due to the nature of this strong emotion, it must have been something bad. This even confirmed Gwen on the importance of her mission. When she finds Lantara, they will go after Ben together. And together they will have enough power to face anything that stands in their way. But now, they were both alone... In fact, only one of them...[br]

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It has been a week, since Lantara said goodbye to Raven and set out to reunite with Ben. She has come to a desert, and entered its dangerous, harsh world. The extreme climate tried even her strength and body as well. But, she was very determined; her will defeated the desert and it eventually showed her the city that was hidden among the dunes. The ectonurite was not sure, how she got here, she somehow sensed the correct way, which led to Ben. At first, she thought it was a mirage, but as she floated nearer and nearer, the image did not become frayed, it grew bigger and sharper instead. [br] There was no sign of life, nothing moved in the city, not even the wind blew. Lantara became invisible; she has seen silences like this before, and that taught her to be very careful, to always expect a trap. She only had to worry about aliens with heat vision. She might be able to cloak her body, but her heat signs could reveal her position. However, nobody attacked her, she could infiltrate without any confrontation. Only the dusty streets, the abandoned hotels, casinos, and few rusty car wrecks were there. She sensed Ben closer by every second. The ectonurite turned visible again. Lantara approached the nearest building, and put her hands on the wall. Adapting the technique she learnt from Raven she tried to comprehend emotions, or intentions. She focused and suddenly, a whole wave of most different feelings started to assault her mind. She sensed much hatred and hostility. She also felt struggle, fear and anger. Lantara clenched her fists, her claws torn off pieces of the bricks. She forced herself to close the emotional gateway, knowing exactly that Ben is inside with someone else who's willing to kill. She phased through the wall and let her emotions take control, and guide her to Ben.[br]

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Ben felt the omnitrix less and less on his arm. The device which made him a hero, which cursed him with all this power, was not there anymore... At least that's what he thought. The omnitrix merely began to release Ben's DNA, as Dr. Vicktor's machine triggered the secession method. The alien's insane laughter echoed in Ben's mind. He tried to think of any form, or use Powersource's abilities, both attempt failed. The ring on his head truly blocked his brainwaves somehow... His thoughts chased each other in his mind, but deep within his soul, he knew this time, there will be no way out. Despite of this recognition he kept struggling, he did not want to give up the fight. Before the omnitrix could irrevocably slip off his hand, the power went out, and the machine shut itself down. Ben and his nemesis remained alone in the dark. [br]

- I cannot believe this! What the heck just happened? – cursed Dr. Vicktor. The two electric formations on his back lit up, and illuminated the chamber with a purple light. He looked around, and recognized Ben. At least he was still on the correct place, tied up in Vilgax's device. Suddenly, he felt, something flew by him. He quickly turned to that direction, but nothing was there. Except the small circle of his purple light, the rest of the premises faded in the blackness. Dr. Vicktor felt that thing again, this time from the other side, and it even touched him. His reflexes were fast, but he could not discover the mysterious visitor. He looked at Ben again. The man's expression reflected surprise and relief.[br]

- Enjoy the moment while it lasts. You have merely delayed the inevitable! – hissed the alien. Suddenly,

he gave a start, when that sinister thing flew by behind him. He even fired an electric bolt, but it only destroyed a work-box. He got a peep of that dark thing again, but from another direction. It seemed it could be anywhere; it comes out of the darkness for less than a second, to disappear in it again. Dr. Vicktor began to fear the unknown specter. He shot a few electric beams at haphazard, of course, none of them managed to strike down the thing.[br]

Then he heard the most awful voice of all: The scream of the bursting metal. He turned around and focused the purple light to the machine, which imprisoned Ben, but it was empty. The iron shackle, which held the omnitrix, was torn apart, and Ben disappeared.[br]

He took a few faltering steps ahead, when the metal ring, he put on Ben, rolled on the floor, it bumped against the alien's foot, then settled down. Dr. Vicktor gazed at his invention, then looked up. All of a sudden, four green stripes lit up in the darkness, right in front of him. As the creature stepped inside the circle of light, Dr. Vicktor realized, it was the Mummy, one of Ben's alien forms. The Mummy grunted menacingly, but did not move. Dr. Vicktor raised his fists and fired at Ben. When the electric bolt reached the Mummy, it just simply went through the hole on his chest, and then the bandage strapped itself again, while The Mummy remained unharmed. [br]

- Enough!!! I had to spare you too many times, but this ends now!!! – roared Dr. Vicktor and wanted to attack Ben, but a raspy, feminine voice stopped him.[br]

- I don't think so! – whispered the creepy voice, and its owner finally revealed herself. Lantara became visible right in front of Dr. Vicktor, and the last thing he saw, that burnt into his mind, was Lantara's vicious purple eye...[br]

[br]

Gwen Tennyson finally managed to cut back from the distance that stood between her and Lantara, however her joy was only temporal, because she also found it difficult to cross the desert, but her will was strong as Lantara's. She could only travel at night, the cruel sun was her enemy, and it slowed her down. Therefore, she always found a shady place for the hours of the daylight and tried to sleep a little but it was almost impossible in that hot temperature. Her strength was running low, when she eventually discovered the hidden city, which was once Las Vegas. She focused all her powers to reveal Ben's location and her effort was successful. She took off and headed to that certain building...[br]

[br]

When the lights went out and complete darkness covered the chamber, Ben Tennyson was convinced, that he's going to lose the omnitrix, and yielded to his fate. Although the satanic device was useless, the ring on his head still blocked his brainwaves, so he could not do anything. He heard Dr. Vicktor cursing, then a purple light flashed, and the alien looked around. He looked Ben in the eye and told him, this is inevitable. Then, they both heard a noise, and Dr. Vicktor turned the light to that direction. He must have seen something in the dark again, because he even fired an electro-beam. Then he went mad and began to shoot at haphazard. While he was busy with that, something floated over Ben. He recognized his breath was visible, like tiny clouds, yet the temperature was warm. The cold disappeared a few seconds later. Suddenly, something torn his shackle apart, Ben could free himself. He instantly removed the ring from his head and dropped it. He already felt freer. Interestingly, at the moment he took out his arm from the destroyed shackle, the omnitrix turned red, and without a flash, it transformed Ben into the Mummy. He remembered that last time he encountered this machine; its containment field had a strange influence on the watch's operation, like switching alien forms randomly. Ben suspected the same phenomena this time as well. Meanwhile he thought this through, Dr. Vicktor noticed his disappearance. He observed his enemy, as he took a few faltering steps, their visage met once, however Dr. Vicktor did not know that, because the Mummy was hiding in the dark. Ben saw anger, intelligence, hatred, arrogance, and even fear in his eyes. When he discovered the metal ring on the floor, his fear completely took control of him, that's why he recognized Ben so late. Avoiding his first electric bolt, the

Mummy was ready to fight, but something stood in Dr. Viktor's way, before he could attack. Ben also heard the voice without a source, and he couldn't decide if it was real or not. A moment later, he was certain he was right, when Lantara became visible in front of her nemesis, and then she lost her mind... She's done terrible things, Ben have never seen her this vicious and bloodthirsty before. He just stood there as the Mummy, turned into stone, shocked by the events. He unwillingly changed into Fourarms, but he still couldn't make a move. Then, Lantara stopped. Ben did not know how long she's been doing what she did, and acknowledged to himself, that he doesn't want to know, he did not wish to remember anything what happened in that chamber. The power came back, all the lights lit up. The omnitrix reverted him, Ben stood there in his human form... for the moment. Suddenly, Lantara floated to him and grabbed his neck, and the movement ended up in a passionate hug. At first, Ben surprised by this quick change of mood, but then he hugged back, and put his arm around the ectonurite's waist. They held each other like this for minutes, they visage met and interlocked. Lantara lecherously touched Ben's cheek and said:[br]

- I missed you so much![br]

- I missed you too! I even gave up the hope, that I'll see you again... I thought you were dead... when the Tower collapsed... How did you survive? - asked Ben quaveringly.[br]

- None of this matters anymore; I'm here now, with you again. – whispered Lantara. [br]

Suddenly, they heard an agonized roar, which made the whole building shake. The passion was gone.[br]

- We should get out of here! – urged Lantara. But they were too late. All the light bulbs and neon broke apart, into hundreds of pieces. The chamber's temperature began to decrease rapidly, they could see their own breath, and a weird, creepy hissing noise assaulted their ears. Ben morphed into Ripjaws. [br]

- Oh great... the omnitrix is still not working well. – He determined. They went to the two winged door, and opened it, but some kind of black mass halted them. The liquid got through the ceiling, swirled on the floor and started to take a shape. Soon, GhostKevin's features emerged from the mass. The bare skull grinned at Ben and Lantara, and they drew back.[br]

- We still have a score to settle, Ben 10 000! – accosted them the villain on his strange, raspy, dual voice.[br]

- Kevin? Is that you? – asked Ripjaws in horror.[br]

- Not exactly! – rasped GhostKevin. – I'm only half of Kevin now... And by looking at my body, I guess you have a pretty good hunch who's the other half... You know, I could let you go, if it would depend on only me, but I just can't help it... Every time I see you... - his voice changed at this point, it went deeper, more like a whisper. Kevin was pushed to the background. – Ghostfreak always takes control! [br]

- Lovely, you're a schizophrenic now... - said Ben ironically.[br]

- It's not that simple! – hissed GhostKevin. – We deliberate![br]

- You have done something bad with me back then, you took away all my powers... - declared Kevin.[br]

- And you caused me so much pain... - continued Ghostfreak.[br]

- Now that we have new powers, we both agreed on destroying you! – Roared GhostKevin and he wanted to strike Ben, who was defensively stood in front of Lantara.[br]

- Not so fast! – exclaimed a fourth person, and the next moment, her purple energy blast took GhostKevin down. [br]

- Gwen! – exclaimed Ben and Lantara at the same time.[br]

- Come on, we need to go! – jabbered Gwen. [br]

- No, it's GhostKevin... - Ripjaws randomly changed into Wildvine. – He must be stopped![br]

- You can't fight him like this; the omnitrix is in need of a repair! – opposed Gwen.[br]

- No, I won't let him disappear again! – Insisted Wildvine and went Xlr8. – Oh man, stop it already![br]

- She's right, Ben, you're no match for GhostKevin now! – confirmed Lantara.[br]

- Oh give me a break, look at him! A single energy beam took him down! – Xlr8 pointed at the place where GhostKevin used to lie before. He vanished.[br]

- I'm afraid that's not correct! – said the villain phasing through the floor. He punched Xlr8 in the face and made him fly back. GhostKevin disappeared again. He suddenly grabbed Xlr8's tail and spun him around for a few times, then let go of the alien who hit the wall. When he stood up, he randomly became Diamondhead.[br]

He saw GhostKevin as he approaches him, and fired projectiles at him. They were useless though, because GhostKevin changed his protoplasm, like Lantara. Ben now realized that Gwen was right, he cannot defeat his enemy now; the only wise option is to escape. GhostKevin attacked again, and his blow forced even Diamondhead to the ground. Suddenly, Lantara grabbed the villain's neck, and they both went ghost. [br]

- Won't work with me, I can change too! – exclaimed she and tightened her grasp. [br]

- But, can you do this?! – hissed GhostKevin. His chest opened and six black and white tentacles snaked out from the hole. He fired a yellow energy beam which wrote down a circle in the air and struck Lantara's back. She fainted and released GhostKevin who became invisible. [br]

- We need to get out of here and fast! – shouted Diamondhead and picked Lantara up. [br]

- Leaving so soon? – mocked GhostKevin and turned visible. He was standing in the door. Another yellow bolt came out of his chest, but before it reached the petrosapien, Gwen's purple force field protected them. She sent an energy circle, but with a swing of his arm, GhostKevin broke it apart. Diamondhead fired hundreds of small crystals at his enemy, but they all went through his body ineffectively. Suddenly, the omnitrix converted Ben into Cannonbolt. [br]

- Having problems with the watch?! – grinned GhostKevin and jumped into the air to attack Ben, but simply bumped against the alien and fell on the ground.[br]

- Some people never learn! – gasped Cannonbolt and rolled up in a ball, keeping Lantara inside, where it was safe. He busted through the wall; Gwen covered him. GhostKevin's head appeared in the hole.[br]

- You will not escape! Do you hear me?! – roared he and became that certain black mass, which coiled apart everywhere, merged with the building, and went after the Tennysons. [br]

Gwen recognized that everything's turning black behind her, and she already felt the evil icy waft on her shoulders [br]

- Faster! – She commanded, and Cannonbolt obeyed. Gwen fired a strong energy blast, which broke through the last wall, after that, they could be outside. But GhostKevin took the lead, and the black mass united in front of the hole. [br]

- I told you: You'll never get out! – smiled he devilishly, and shot a powerful yellow laser. The beam was reflected by Cannonbolt's natural armor; that surprised GhostKevin, and Ben was already there.[br]

- Yes, I will!!! – shouted Cannonbolt, and struck his nemesis; both of them fell outside. When the rays of the sun burnt his skin, GhostKevin screamed out in pain. [br]

Gwen landed on the ground softly, while Ditto replaced Cannonbolt. [br]

- You have not won yet, Tennyson! – hissed the villain turning into black liquid, and he vanished in the sand.[br]

- I've heard that before! – answered Ditto. [br]

- Still not good! – yelled Gwen, when she looked behind them. All the Null Void aliens streamed out to the city streets and they rampaged towards them. The Tennysons began to run for their lives. [br]

- Oh, man... Give me someone I can use... - gasped Ditto. Suddenly, he turned into Wildmutt, and continued his stampede on three legs, because he had to carry the still unconscious Lantara. Gwen released energy bombs, to slow the hordes down. It worked, the distance between them increased. They couldn't know that the omnitrix itself will bring the bane upon their heads. Wildmutt disappeared,

and Grey Matter was unable to carry Lantara, they both fell on the ground. The ectonurite came to. [br]

- What happened? Where am I? – asked she on a veiled voice.[br]

- We're in major big time trouble! – replied Gwen and pointed at the approaching alien villains. [br]

- Where's Ben?[br]

- Under you... - mumbled a squeaky voice. Lantara immediately picked Grey Matter up and placed him on her shoulder.[br]

- Get moving! – warned them Gwen, because the aliens were almost caught up. [br]

Lantara and Gwen took off.[br]

- We can't fly forever, and they will come after us! What are we going to do? – asked Gwen.[br]

- Hmm... Go back! – advised Grey Matter.[br]

- Are you nuts? We can't go back! That's insane! – complained Gwen.[br]

- Wait, I think he has something in mind. – said Lantara.[br]

- You bet I have, I'm the small guy with the big brain, remember? – said the galvan sarcastically. [br]

- So, what is your plan? – Questioned Gwen and Lantara together.[br]

- Back at Frankenstein's laboratory, I saw a few things that could help us to create a slider flood.[br]

- A what?[br]

- A slider flood. A Null Void portal, that's big enough to suck in the whole city. – smiled Grey Matter.[br]

- This won't work, even if we get to that lab, the aliens will be on us like flies on a skunk! – declared Gwen.[br]

- We must work together! Lantara, get me as close to that lab as you can. Then distract the aliens with Gwen, keep their attention off of me, I'll do the rest. – explained Ben still as Grey Matter. [br]

- This is not a good plan, it's too dangerous! I won't let you jeopardize your life! – opposed Gwen.[br]

- It's not your choice! We have the aliens of the whole continent in one place; we'll never get a better chance to send them back where they came from! – said Grey Matter.[br]

- Lantara, what do you say? – asked Gwen.[br]

- I say let's do it! – agreed the ectonurite. They stopped in the air and turned around, back to the city.

When they reached above the alien mass, the females separated, Gwen flew to the left, Lantara to the right. Gwen immediately bombarded the aliens with purple energy blasts, while Lantara and Grey Matter quietly snuck away behind the mass's back. They've found the hole in the wall, and Lantara floated inside the building once again. They could still hear the sounds of the battle, when they reached Dr. Viktor's chamber. All of a sudden, Grey Matter was converted to Xlr8. [br]

- It seems the omnitrix will soon be back in operation, the random changes have slowed down. – enthused Lantara.[br]

- Yes. Now go and help Gwen! – said Xlr8 shortly.[br]

- Be very careful! I don't want to lose you again! – smiled Lantara passionately and suddenly kissed Xlr8's blue cheek.[br]

- You won't! When this is over, we will be together, like before! – replied Ben. He was touched. But he had to concentrate on his mission. – Go! Gwen needs you! [br]

Lantara phased through the ceiling, and Xlr8 remained alone. This form was suitable for the task; he quickly collected everything he needed.[br]

- Now, to find a power source... - mumbled the alien. He stopped for a moment when he recognized Dr. Viktor's remains. He turned away with disgust. Some of his combined powers have returned, as a sigh, that the omnitrix was going to restore itself. Ben focused and used Wildmutt's heat vision to locate the thermo reactor at the lowest level of the building. With all the appropriate equipment, he stormed out and whooshed down a few stories. A locked door stood in his way, but after a few rapid blows, Xlr8 could overcome that little obstacle. He carefully approached the thermo reactor and put down the accessories on the floor. Suddenly, he was reverted to his human form. The omnitrix on his arm turned green,

showing that it's ready for operation. [br]

- Great timing! – laughed Ben. Since Xlr8 was the most suitable alien for this, he thought of him, and the omnitrix formed the kineceleran body around him. Ben knew how to put the parts together, knew which circuit goes to which panel, and he combined his knowledge with Xlr8's speed. The trigger was completed within five minutes. He heard there was an intense battle on the surface above him, while a bigger piece of the ceiling fell down, and almost struck him. He placed the detonator on the reactor and entered the initiation code. A red light started to beep and the countdown began. Making sure, the device is active and actually going to explode, he ran out of the premises.[br]

[br]

Lantara and Gwen were overwhelmed by the alien hordes. They fought as hard as they could, but their strength was running low. Suddenly, Fourarms busted through a building's wall and joined the battle. He cleared a way to the females and turned into Heatblast. [br]

- We have to go, now! The trigger will go off in two minutes! – shouted the pyronite. He isolated Lantara, Gwen and himself in a ring of fire, the aliens couldn't harm them anymore, but the flames were getting bigger.[br]

- We have to get father! This portal will absorb the entire city, and hopefully all those aliens! – yelled Heatblast and turned into Stinkfly. He took off, Gwen and Lantara followed him. They flew as fast as they could to get away from the city. The smartened wind intensified the fire created by Heatblast, and that disturbed the aliens, their lines were tumbled. They did not even follow the escaping three. Meanwhile, down in the basement of Dr. Vicktor's lab, the blue numbers on Ben's device counted down. [br]

0:03[br]

0:02[br]

0:01[br]

0:00 Beeeeeeep! [br]

At first, nothing happened. Ben thought he must have done something wrong. But then the ground started to shake. An orange dome emerged from the sand, where Dr. Vicktor's lab used to stand. It grew and grew, until it ate up the buildings nearby. And it didn't stop, the portal widened, became larger and larger, it consumed the half of the city. A few aliens were stampeding in front of the enlarging gateway. The creatures could not keep up, the portal grew faster than they run, and so they were transported to the Null Void, like the whole city, which was once called Las Vegas. The orange dome even blocked out the sun, it seemed it will not stop, nothing can satisfy its appetite, it will eat up the sky, and the entire planet. But, the portal reached its maximum size and began to shrink slowly. White sparks came out of it, and after a few minutes it eventually disappeared. Nothing remained from Las Vegas, just a huge and deep, smoky circular hole. Ben, Gwen and Lantara just stood there and watched the black crater, and could not believe their eyes. All the aliens were gone; finally the planet has been cleansed! *But what about GhostKevin? We can't be sure... The war is still not over, until he lives! He's a threat to us all!* – thought Ben. He was right.[br]

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Little did Ben know, that someone else was there beside them, someone else observed the crater as well. She heard a voice in her head. *Kill them all! They are the enemy...* - it said.[br]

But what if I don't want to do this? – resisted her other half.[br]

Don't you want revenge? Remember what happened to the team... HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN??? – bawled the voice.[br]

I have not forgotten! But...[br]

No buts! Look at him! It's his fault, you saw it he let GhostKevin go again! He still didn't finish him off!!! EVERYTHING'S HIS FAULT!!! – The voice echoed in her mind.[br]

- Yes... It's his fault... and he's going to pay soon... - determined Raven as she watched Ben from a

higher dune.[br]

[br]

- What are we going to do now? – asked Gwen. Her expression reflected perplexity. This time, even Lantara couldn't answer. Ben remained silent and gazed into the nothingness for several minutes. Then he replied.[br]

- We have to find other human colonies. There must be survivors! Perhaps underground. Yes. That's our new task! To find more people, and start rebuilding our world! – declared he.[br]

- What if only we left? – Lantara asked.[br]

- Impossible! We'll travel to the former major cities and search there first.[br]

Both Lantara and Gwen admired Ben for his determined personality. His visage lost in the nothingness again, as he watched the sunset. [br]

- We should go... The nights here are very cold... - said Gwen.[br]

- Agreed. – said Ben and transformed into Stinkfly. He took off, Gwen followed him, Lantara was the third.[br]

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On the ground, Raven saw the trio as they flew up, and she recognized, they headed towards her. She swung her blue cape and disappeared with a small black flash. When they got far enough, she teleported back to her previous place and watched them, as they shrink to tiny little points on the horizon. Raven took off and stealthily flew after them.[br]

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- We've been flying for hours! I'm exhausted, and my wing's heavy! – yawned Stinkfly.[br]

- And it's dark. Why can't we just stop? – asked Gwen.[br]

- I don't know... I think I sense something... someone might want to hurt us... - replied Lantara.[br]

- GhostKevin? [br]

- I told you I don't know. I'm just worried about you. – said the ectonurite. Suddenly Ben switched into his human form. After the green flash, a pair of Stinkfly wings grew out of his back, he kept flying. [br]

- Ah, much better... - Ben sighed. – Why are you worried? I'm here, nothing will happen. [br]

- It's just some sort of feeling, I cannot explain it! – exclaimed Lantara.[br]

- All right, all right! – said Ben softly and slowed down a bit to get behind the alien. He touched her shoulders. He glanced at Gwen, their eyes met. She accelerated a little to leave some space for the other two. [br]

- We had a long day, all of us! We're tired, and we're going to stop now, get some rest, and then carry on tomorrow, okay? – smiled Ben. Lantara finally gave in. [br]

- Gwen! We're stopping now! – shouted the man. Gwen showed her thumb and landed. Ben and Lantara arrived a minute later. [br]

- All we need is a nice, warm fire. – Ben rubbed his palms. – I see a few bushes over there! – He changed into Brainstorm, and pulled the dead plants out with his mind. After he made a pile from them, the omnitrix flashed again, and he was already Heatblast. He raised his hand and shot a little fireball at the pile. A second later, they could already feel the cozy warmth of the fire, and Ben reverted to himself. [br]

- It's much easier to start a fire this way. – Ben grinned widely. Gwen and Lantara agreed. None of them knew they will not enjoy the peace for long, because a pair of blue eyes watched their every move, waiting for the best chance to attack. Raven allowed herself a satisfied smile in the dark.[br]

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7 - Chapter 7 - Darkness

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Chapter 7[br]

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Darkness[br]

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- So it was you who shut the power down? – asked his cousin Ben, as they enjoyed the warmth of the fire. It was priceless in the cold desert night. Even the moon was hiding behind dark clouds.[br]

- Exactly. I've been following Lantara, since I managed to locate her once. I didn't know she was going after you... It seems her senses are more precise than mine. I only comprehended your emotions, when I was close to the city. – replied Gwen.[br]

- It was a really good idea to turn off the electricity though. I've never would have defeated Dr. Viktor any other way. – added Lantara. [br]

- I'm very grateful for both of you! Without you, the omnitrix would definitely be in GhostKevin's hands by now. – smiled Ben.[br]

- Not to mention you. – Lantara said and bowed down her head.[br]

- What's the matter? – Ben asked.[br]

- It's just... I can't believe I almost lost you! – admitted the alien. Ben moved closer to her and put his arm around her waist.[br]

- It's all right now! I'll always be here for you. [br]

Suddenly, Gwen stood up. [br]

- I'm gonna go collect more firewood. – declared she and started walking. Soon, she disappeared in the darkness.[br]

Ben and Lantara set on the ground, and watched the orange flames. Then they gazed at each other. [br]

- You know, when I saw the Omni-Tower collapsing, while you were inside... It was awful, no, it was beyond all bearings! That's why I went after the aliens, and decided to hunt down the source.

GhostKevin took away many things that were important for me... I could not take another loss... your loss... I thought I'll find him, and make him regret everything; make him beg for death's sweet release... to avenge yours... I know I never said it before... but... you're the only one I have besides Gwen. We have been through a lot together, and... [br]

- Say it... - whispered Lantara.[br]

- I love you! – exclaimed the man.[br]

- You don't care how I look? I'm not one of the most beautiful beings in the galaxy... [br]

- It doesn't matter. Looks aren't everything... Over the last few weeks, I realized how much I need you... I love you. - repeated Ben.[br]

- I love you too! You can't imagine how long I've been waiting for you to say this... but I feared I'll remain a hideous alien, just an ally; a comrade in your human eyes... – replied Lantara and hugged Ben tightly. Their heads moved closer and closer to each other, and they almost kissed, but unexpectedly, something else got Lantara's attention.[br]

- What? Did I do something against your will? – surprised the man. He was shocked a bit.[br]

- No, you did everything right... - said Lantara monotonously, she's mind were somewhere else.[br]

- What are you... - Ben began but he was interrupted.[br]

- Wait... Something is wrong... - declared the ectonurite and rose her right hand, like if she would touch an invisible wall. Then she clenched her fists.[br]

- What is it? – asked Ben impatiently. He was more and more anxious. Lantara glanced at him, their visages met.[br]

- Where's Gwen? – exclaimed both of them in the same time. They spread out to find her. [br]

- Ben! Over here, I found something! – yelled Lantara. Ben arrived with Xlr8's speed. The ectonurite was holding a piece of Gwen's costume in her hand. [br]

- What's going on here? GhostKevin must have kidnapped her! – hissed Ben.[br]

- Look, Gwen's footsteps stop here. – Lantara pointed at the ground. – And see? The sand is darker in this little circle![br]

- Yes! – agreed Ben picking up a handful of sand. He triturated it among his fingers then dropped it.[br]

- Inter-dimensional portal. – said he. – Can you locate her?[br]

- No, something's blocking my senses.[br]

Ben's eyes began to glow for a second.[br]

- I can't reach her telepathically either![br]

Lantara raised her hand again, like before. [br]

- What? You sense something? – urged her Ben.[br]

- I... I... - Lantara hesitated. – I feel... LOOK OUT! – shouted she, and the next moment, something evolved from the darkness. Its target was obviously Ben. He evaded with Xlr8's velocity, and the large, black hand struck the ground only. After the attack, it vanished. [br]

- What was that? – freaked out Ben.[br]

- Just a little foretaste! – replied a third person unexpectedly.[br]

- Show yourself, coward! – shouted Lantara, however she already knew the identity of their guest, but she wished her senses were wrong.[br]

- With pleasure! – laughed Raven and revealed herself. Her black outfit matched the complete darkness around her. Fortunately for the heroic team, the clouds cleared up, and the full moon could illuminate the desert, and Ben examined Raven's features. [br]

- Who are you and what have you done with Gwen?![br]

Raven swung her blue cape with a devilish grin, and uncovered Gwen's unconscious body.[br]

- What have you done with her?! – roared Ben.[br]

- It's nothing compared what I'm going to do with you! – said Raven menacingly.[br]

- Raven, what are you doing?! – intervened Lantara. [br]

- You know her??? – yelled Ben.[br]

- Yes, she saved my life back at the Tower...[br]

- Enough! Lantara, stand aside! I have no trouble with you! I only want Ben 10 000![br]

- No, I will not! I know what you feel, you told me what you've been through, but Ben's not the one to blame! GhostKevin is responsible for everything what happened, not Ben! - replied the ectonurite.[br]

- Lies! He's responsible, he should have been here to protect the planet, but he abandoned us instead! GhostKevin could do what he did, because Ben was not here to stop him![br]

- Kevin killed my grandfather that day! I was a silly child, and could not handle that loss alone... but Lantara was there for me. How could I possibly know, that this will happen?! - chafed Ben.[br]

- Silence! This is my last warning! Lantara, stand aside, now! – demanded Raven, ignoring Ben's question.[br]

- Never! If you want him, you'll have to deal with me first! - hissed the alien clenched her fists.[br]

- This is your last word?[br]

- Most certainly yes! - exclaimed Lantara.[br]

- Pity. - simpered Raven and captured the alien in a black force field dome. Seeing this, Ben immediately changed into Diamondhead.[br]

- Listen, I don't know who you are, I don't know why do you hate me so much, but I don't want to fight you... - said the petrosapien.[br]

- But I want to fight you! - roared Raven and took off. She attacked Ben from the air. She stretched her hands, and shot black energy blasts, however they could not penetrate Diamondhead's crystalline skin.[br]

- Stop this foolishness at once! - shouted Ben, still attempting to convince his opponent. But Raven was too headstrong... and she did not stop. She picked up a huge pile of sand with her mind, and threw it towards Diamondhead. Before it could bury him alive, he formed a spear on both of his arms, and sliced the earth into two pieces. Then a black energy rope coiled around his body, and he was unable to get out of its grasp. With the regular flash, he became Brainstorm. The green aura of his mind surrounded the dark energy rope and broke it apart. [br]

At this point, Ben realized, that any persuasion is useless, he have to fight back.[br]

Therefore, he flew up and adapted Xlr8's speed in the air, by creating an energy path before his foot. He ran towards Raven and grabbed her. They both fell down, Ben landed above his adversary. Raven struggled, but Brainstrom was already Fourarms, so she couldn't move, the muscular red arms held her tightly.[br]

- You're really testing my patience. - said the tetramand slowly.[br]

- Get off me! - responded Raven and a black energy beam coming from the gem on her forehead struck Fourarms. The blast made him fly back, but Raven flew after him. Her other energy blast hit the tetramand in the stomach and forced him to the ground. The dust seethed around the place where he landed, then it settled down. [br]

- That's it! You want to play dirty?! Here I am! - growled Fourarms and transformed into Wildvine. His hands enlarged and grabbed Raven's leg, eventually she was dragged down to the sand. The green fringes trapped her arms, she squirmed in their grasp like a fish. Suddenly, two Mummy arms grew out of Wildvine's torso. The bandages snaked around Raven's entire body, even her eyes disappeared among this strange mass.[br]

- You're only making it worse... - ascertained Ben. Unexpectedly, Raven's black aura surrounded all his arms, and she torn her cocoon apart. Her eyes went red.[br]

- You will learn to be afraid of the dark! - Laughed she and dozens of black hands emerged from under her cape. They all grabbed Wildvine and started to pull him closer and closer to Raven. Suddenly, he disappeared, as Grey Matter. A second later, when he got rid of the energy hands, the omnitrix flashed again, transforming Ben into Stinkfly. He took off, and smiled back at Raven, but he realized, the hands were coming after him, so as his nemesis. He evaded them with tricky maneuvers, but he could not last long. He went Heatblast and his curtain of fire decimated the hands, but Raven's dark energy was everywhere, soon he was captured and tied up. With a red flash, the omnitrix reverted him to his human form. Raven towered upon him and created a sharp formation, which pointed at Ben's face.[br]

- You don't deserve the omnitrix! You're too weak to possess such power! - said she disdainfully. She raised her hands, ready to strike down and end Ben's life. All of a sudden she heard an agonized roar...[br]

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Meanwhile Ben and Raven were fighting, Lantara hopelessly tried to free herself from her prison, but her attempt were futile. At first, she wanted to phase through the black aura, however she could not. Next, she shot it with an energy beam, to no avail of course, the it was too strong. She even hit the force field with her fists as she struggled to get out. Something changed in her mind, when she saw Ben lying on the ground, and the familiar emotion filled her soul, the same thing she felt before she battled Dr.

Vicktor. That horrible scream Raven heard, came from Lantara herself, at the moment she neutralized the dome. The black aura broke into hundreds of pieces like glass, then it disappeared.[br]

- Raven! - she yelled, and a second later she fired a very powerful energy beam. The attack caught Raven unexpected. The purple laser struck her, made her fly back, and the spiky formation vanished from above Ben.[br]

- Are you all right? - worried Lantara.[br]

- Yeah, but I can't really do anything with her dark energy stuff... - acknowledged the man.[br]

- Listen, she's lost her mind, she's not like this, I know. You have to let me talk to her, before you go Powersource on her! - jabbered the ectonurite.[br]

- No! She must be stopped, she's too powerful! Maybe she's working for GhostKevin! Besides, you did not seem so chatty a ten seconds ago... - said Ben referring to Lantara's previous action against Raven.[br]

- She's just confused, I doubt that she's working for GhostKevin. - replied she and her new blow knocked Ben out.[br]

- I'm nobody's servant! I don't stand on anyone's side, because nobody stands on my side! - shouted Raven.[br]

- Raven, listen... - began Lantara and glanced at Ben.[br]

- I don't care. I thought we became close, but you take his side! We have nothing to talk about! - declared Raven.[br]

- I will not allow you to hurt him! Why can't we just talk about this for a second?![br]

- If you're not with me...you're against me. If I have to strike you down, to tear Ben up into little shreds, I'll do what I must! - declared Raven. Her voice was sinister and menacing.[br]

- I beg you to reconsider! - said Lantara.[br]

Raven's respond was a sharp energy disk, that cut her on her left arm.[br]

- Raven, don't make me do this! I don't want to hurt you! - begged the alien and drew back, when the sorceress forced her into a hand to hand combat. She just defended herself, avoiding any other confrontation. When Raven released another energy disk, Lantara caught it and threw it back at the sender. Raven avoided her own blast, propelled in the air and landed in front of Lantara. They grabbed each other's hands and tried to force the other to the ground. Body distended to body, but as an alien, Lantara was stronger. Suddenly, she changed her protoplasm, and Raven fell off through her ghostly body. [br]

- I said it before, but I'll say it again: I don't want to hurt you! Stay down! - commanded the ectonurite. [br]

- Not until I get revenge on Tennyson! - insisted the sorceress and quickly took off. She sent two more energy disks, but they were destroyed by Lantara's purple laser beam. Raven formed a black shield to defend herself. Nevertheless, the next blast broke through the dark aura and struck her down. Her expression reflected surprise. [br]

- You're not the only one who's in her element in the dark! AARRRGH!- growled Lantara as she converted to her full potential. She went bigger and more muscular, three spikes grew out of her shoulders, her claws became longer and sharper, her chest opened and the tentacles coiled out of it, and her teeth grew spiky. Seeing this horrible metamorphosis, Raven retreated, but it was too late, Lantara could not control herself any longer. The fury flooded her mind and she fought Raven with great intensity. The sorceress could not attack anymore, the initiation slipped out of her hands. She formed black spikes to cover her escape, but Lantara shot a purple energy beam, which was like a guided missile. It evaded the spikes and went after Raven. She flew faster, but the laser eventually struck her. She fell down. Lantara approached her menacingly.[br]

- What's the matter?! You're afraid of the dark? - said the ectonurite. Even her voice changed; it was raucous, cruel and lifeless. [br]

Raven was cornered, and that made her more aggressive. Those black hands evolved from under her cape again, trying to grab Lantara, but she became a ghost. With a swing of her claws, she broke the dark energy apart. Suddenly, Raven attacked her furiously, even Lantara had to draw back a bit. After a few more minutes of fighting, something happened, something that put an end to this pointless battle. Raven wanted to strike with a powerful spell, but Lantara was faster. Her sharp claws struck Raven right in the face. She flew back and fell on the ground. Her hood was torn apart by the ectonurite's blow; her long hair messed up, and covered her face. She screamed in pain, and used her healing abilities to minimize the damage. She slowly stood up and took a few faltering steps. Only then Lantara realized what she did. Her eyes grew large and she retreated, when she looked at the scar on Raven's face... It was almost the same as Ben's. Then she gazed at her own claws.[br]

- I did this... - whispered she in horror and reverted to her normal shape.[br]

- What have you done to me?! I'm going to make you regret this! - cried Raven and wanted to attack the alien, who was in complete shock. Suddenly, a deep voice yelled at her:[br]

- You will not![br]

- Ben! - hissed Raven.[br]

- You left me no other choice! - declared the man. With a green flash he became Powersource.[br]

Raven shot a massive, black energy beam, but when it reached the alien's gauzy body, Powersource absorbed it. Then, a blue, snake-like thing coiled around the beam and it headed to Raven.[br]

- What is this? What are you doing?! - cried she in panic, because the blue snake reached and surrounded her body, and began to pull her to the creepy alien. [br]

- Let me go! What is this? I can't control my powers! - roared the sorceress. When she was close enough, Powersource's tentacles grabbed her. They snaked around her body. She struggled very hard to get out of this deadly grasp, but she felt weaker and weaker by every second. She did not even see that black clouds exited her and floated towards Powersource. Soon, Raven's body slacked, and she fainted. The method was complete, the alien put her down on the ground softly. The omnitrix flashed and Ben appeared from the greenness.[br]

- Your power is mine... - said he. His voice did not sound victorious, but sad and sympathetic instead. He spent a few minutes examining Raven's features. Besides her pale skin, he found her quite attractive. Then he recognized the fresh scar. His face distorted, as he recalled the moment when he got his scar from Kevin. Lantara slowly floated to Ben.[br]

- Is she alive? - asked the ectonurite.[br]

- Yes. She'll live. I suppose Powersource did a pretty good job on her though.... But maybe, it would be wise to kill her now... if she's still a threat... What do you think? - wondered Ben.[br]

- No. That intention is no more inside of her, I can sense it. - replied Lantara.[br]

- Fine. Let's check out Gwen! - agreed the man and ran to his cousin with Xlr8's speed.[br]

- How is she?[br]

- Still faint. Gwen, Gwen, wake up![br]

Gwen opened her eyes and saw Ben and Lantara beside her.[br]

- The sorceress! - yelled she in panic.[br]

- It's all right now, she's taken care of! - calmed her Ben.[br]

- What happened? - asked Gwen on a veiled voice.[br]

- Got myself a new ability. - smiled Ben, raised his hand, and black fire was coming out of his palm. [br]

- Can you stand? - asked Lantara.[br]

- I guess so. - replied Gwen, and managed to stand up.[br]

- Great, let's get out of here, I had enough of the desert! - suggested she.[br]

- Agreed. - bowed Ben.[br]

- What about her... What a... - surprised Lantara, with her mouth ajar. Raven was gone. Suddenly, Ben

turned around and she was standing right in front of him. Gwen and Lantara braced for battle, but Ben remained calm. He looked into Raven's eyes and they stared each other like this for long seconds. Then Raven broke the silence.[br]

- I'm sorry... For all of you...For everything... - admitted she. - When your alien held me, I unwillingly received memories of your past... I understand you now...[br]

- You see, I'm not a cruel monster... I'm just a man... even with the omnitrix on my wrist. And I make mistakes, like everyone else. Leaving Kevin alive was a mistake. - answered Ben.[br]

- Peace? - asked he.[br]

- Peace. - accepted Raven and shook hands with Ben. [br]

- Why don't you join us? We could use any help against GhostKevin... - suggested Lantara.[br]

- No... I couldn't... after what I did... - resisted Raven, swung her cape and disappeared with a black flash.[br]

- Weird... Do you think we'll see her again? - asked Gwen.[br]

- Something tells me this is not the last time we saw of Raven. - replied Ben mysteriously. Lantara drifted closer to him and touched his hand, as they watched the rising sun.[br]

- Well, that was a long night... - said Ben sarcastically. [br]

- Will things ever be the same again? - questioned Gwen.[br]

- Not until we destroy GhostKevin... - declared Ben. - And he escaped again... who knows where he goes next? [br]

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8 - Chapter 8 - Home

Chapter 8[br]

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Home[br]

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It has been six days, since the trio encountered Raven in the desert. They have left the ocean of the sand behind and crossed the continent. Gwen and Lantara followed Ben's lead, but his aims remained unknown to them. He flew in front, as Jetray, and he didn't hear, that his friends were having an argument.[br]

- Where are we going? We have no idea, and soon we will eat up the rest of our supplies! We haven't stopped for two days, not even for a sleep, I had enough! - Gwen whispered angrily.[br]

- Will you stop complaining? He knows exactly what we're doing, I'm sure. - replied Lantara.[br]

- Then why doesn't he speak with us? Why can't he tell us what are we planning to do? - continued Gwen. - I'm going to talk to him, right now. [br]

- You're so stubborn, he just needs some time alone with his thoughts, that' all. - speculated the alien.[br]

- Oh, no, we will not going to play this game again! He was alone with his thoughts for years, back at the Omni-Tower! I demand to know, where are we going! - yelled Gwen.[br]

- He has so much weight upon his shoulders, why do you want to add more?[br]

- That's why we're here, to help him carry that weight, but if we don't know what troubles him, how could we possibly help?[br]

- You're right. Talk to him... - Lantara caved in.[br]

Gwen nodded and accelerated to reach her cousin.[br]

- Ben, may I have a word with you please?[br]

- Go ahead. - said the man shortly.[br]

- On the ground. - declared Gwen. Her expression allowed no contradiction.[br]

Jetray sighed and a few seconds later, he landed. Gwen and Lantara followed him. The omnitrix flashed as Ben reverted to his human form. [br]

- Ben, what's the plan? Where are we going? Our supplies will run out in a few days, and I'm concerned about you. What's wrong? - asked Gwen.[br]

- Nothing is wrong. Soon, we'll be able to replenish our sources... - said Ben with a rueful smile.[br]

- Where are we? - Lantara asked.[br]

- I don't know. - replied Ben, examined the debris on the ground and after a few seconds, Brainstorm's green aura picked up a dusty, scuffed sign. It was covered with rust, but the letters were still discernible.[br]

- No, it can't be... - gasped Gwen and Ben together.[br]

"Welcome to Bellwood, the most normal city in America!" [br]

- We're home.[br]

The time and the alien invasion spared the town, there were only minor damages. Ben looked around and suddenly stormed out with Xlr8's speed. Gwen and Lantara ran after him, but took them about a minute to catch up. The man stood in front of an old, abandoned house. The windows were broken, the

roof fell in, and even the walls were full of holes. When Gwen noticed what Ben was looking at, her face distorted. Lantara blinked in perplexity, this place meant nothing for her, but she could comprehend Ben's emotions and understood him. She even recognized a teardrop in his eyes, so she quietly floated close to him and held his hand. Ben looked back at her gratefully, then his visage returned to the house.[br]

- This is where we used to live... very long ago... - explained he in a dying voice.[br]

Then he walked through the neglected front yard and entered his former home. As soon as he stepped in, memories began to assault his mind. Inside, everything was covered with dust, and spider webs, but seemed normal. Ben saw a smoky hole in the wall which led to the living room, where he recognized battle scars. The furnitures were knocked over, the floor was burnt, and the plastic casing of the broken TV melted. There were Diamonhead crystals bedded in the wall. Only then he noticed the two skeletons on the floor. Both had a long sea green crystal standing out of their ribs. Ben sank on his knees and roared in pain. Gwen arrived first.[br]

- Ben, what happ...aaahhh! - screamed she in horror.[br]

The man looked at his shaking hands. Then he looked into Gwen's eyes.[br]

- Raven was right... It's my fault... I'm... I'm responsible for everything... ha ha ha ha... for everything... laughed he insanely.[br]

- I'm sorry... I wasn't here to defend you... I'm sorry... - cried h and touched one of the skulls. [br]

Gwen and Lantara watched him silently, they could not do anything. [br]

- Oh, how touching... A family reunion! - mocked a raspy voice. Suddenly, GhostKevin became visible. He was sitting on the sofa. Wakened from the first shock, Ben's mind was flooded with hatred and anger.[br]

- AAAAAARRRRGH! - growled he and instantly morphed to Fourarms. He wanted to smash his enemy, but his fists phased through GhostKevin's body and only destroyed the sofa. The villain jumped into the air and solidified his protoplamsa, so he could kick the tetramand in the face. Suddenly, Lantara grabbed him and forced him to the ground. But GhostKevin's chest opened rapidly, and his yellow energy beam shot the alien, making her fly up. Meanwhile, Fourarms was already there, and he evaded his powerful blow only a nanosecond before. [br]

- I thought you might drop in! Do you like my interior design? - grinned GhostKevin. By the style of his words, Ben figured, that Kevin must be in charge at the moment.[br]

- I'm gonna chop your head off! - shouted Fourarms, and one of his arms turned into Diamondhead's. He formed a spear and swung it. His attempt failed, his opponent went ghost again.[br]

- Benjie, Benjie, Benjie... Haven't you learned by now, that you cannot stop me?![br]

Gwen zapped him in the back. That was unexpected for him, so he became invisible. Fourarms changed into Wildmutt. His heat vision discovered GhostKevin, who was trying to attack Lantara. The vulpimancer was faster, he jumped in front of the villain, and cut his chest with his sharp claws. GhostKevin turned visible and drew back. Wildmutt approached him menacingly, then fired the spikes on his back, right at his enemy. He became ghost, but with a green flash, Wildmutt went Shockwave to preform a new trick. He clapped his enormous paws and the sound waves struck GhostKevin down. He looked surprised. [br]

- The shock wave effects you even if you're not solid! - said Ben and clapped his hands again. The shock wave imploded the front wall, and made GhostKevin fly out of the house. Ben followed him with Xlr8's speed and transformed into Benwolf. Before his nemesis could hit the ground he opened his mouth and the green sound waves went through GhostKevin's body. He fell down. Benwolf leaped there and punched him in the chest. Unexpectedly, the yellow energy beam came and burnt his fur. He flew back and reverted to Ben. After that, Gwen and Lantara attacked him, but he changed into black liquid. When he reached Ben, the mass shaped GhostKevin's skull. [br]

- Between you and me, your family was my first job after you've left. I just wanted to see your face, when

you take a look at my work! Remember, I'm coming for you sooner or later! - hissed he and vanished with a wide devilish smile, right before Lantara's blast could hit him. [br]

- Ben, are you all right? - worried the ectonurite and helped the man stand up.[br]

- I'm gonna tear his spine out and stab his tainted heart with it! - Ben cursed. [br]

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A few hours later, Ben began to dig a hole at the backyard. He knew he could summon any of his aliens to speed the work up, but he insisted on the old fashioned spade, therefore the process was far from over. [br]

- Ben... - accosted him Lantara, and Gwen already jumped in the pit with another spade. [br]

- What are you doing? - asked the man.[br]

- Helping you. - replied Gwen.[br]

Lantara floated down to the hole as well. She also held a spade in her hands.[br]

- Listen, it's very nice of you, but I want to do this alone... They were *my* parents...[br]

- When do you get it on your head? If we're around, you never have to face anything alone. - smiled

Gwen and hugged her cousin. Ben looked at Lantara.[br]

- You feel the same way? - he asked.[br]

- Of course! Remember what I said once, on Galvan Prime? Your battle is my battle, I'll be there to fight at your side, your struggle is my struggle, I'll be there to aid you in the time of need. Nothing can change that, my love, nothing. - assured him Lantara, and kissed him on the cheek. [br]

- Thank you very much! Both of you! You're the only one I ever need. - said Ben.[br]

With three hands, the job was much more easier, they finished within an hour. After that, Ben sewed the remains of his parents in a huge blanket and placed them on the bottom of the hole. He did not say anything, just saluted. Gwen and Lantara followed the example. They stood there like stones, for one minute. [br]

- Goodbye, Mom and Dad. - farewellled Ben and changed into Brainstorm. He picked up the pile of earth with his mind and softly released it above the hole. When he gave his last respect to his parents, he transformed into Jetray. [br]

- We better get going to find shelter for the night. We'll have a long day tomorrow. I want to reach Washington D.C. as soon as possible. - explained he and took off. Lantara followed him, but Gwen stayed for a few more seconds. She looked at the house once more and flew after her friends. Little did she know, that GhostKevin watched the whole funeral at the backyard. When it was done, and the trio left, he became visible. He stood in front of the pile which was the final resting place of Ben's parents and suddenly, a teardrop fell down on his face. It was the manifestation of Kevin's human emotions, no matter how much he hated Ben, even he found his last action cruel and sadistic. This feeling took control of him for only a few seconds, but Ghostfreak's cold mind reclaimed its rightful position. GhostKevin allowed himself a wide and evil grin, and disappeared in the shades. He had a new plan in mind.[br]

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9 - Chapter 9 - New hope

Chapter 9[br]

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New hope[br]

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Ben, Gwen and Lantara spent the night at the Bellwood mall, and continued their journey next morning. They have reached the capital city in a few days; Ben made a slower pace this time. He took a notice with great relief, that they have not encountered any Null Void aliens, which confirmed them about their successful action in Las Vegas. When the trio arrived to Washington D.C., the same view awaited them, as anywhere else on the continent. Abandoned and ruinous buildings, dirty streets and rusty car wrecks.
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- Okay, split up and try to find someone! - suggested Ben, after they flew into downtown. Gwen and Lantara nodded, and set out for different directions to accomplish their mission. In fact, Lantara waited for Gwen to leave, just to have a few minutes alone with Ben. She drifted closer to the man.[br]

- Do you think we'll find anyone? - She asked.[br]

- We must. There must be some people who managed to live through this nightmare. - replied Ben.[br]

- I hope so. But, has it ever occurred to you, what if we are the only survivors? [br]

- Nope. Because I believe in humanity, I *have* to believe there are people still out there... Maybe not here, but somewhere... and we will find them! - determined Ben.[br]

- That's what I liked in you since the first day we met... You don't allow anything to stand in your way to achieve what you have desired. I'm sure this time will make no difference, my love. - purred Lantara and gently cuddled the man. Ben returned the passionate hug.[br]

- You know, my grandfather used to fall in love with an alien as well... It seems this is a family tradition... - he smiled and kissed Lantara. - When this planet won't require us anymore, we shall cruise around the galaxy again, just like before. But now, the world needs us more than ever, and we have come here to carry out a task. [br]

- Yes, I know, I just wanted you to know how I feel. - declared the ectonurite and after a short kiss on Ben's cheek, she floated away. The man stood there for a minute and looked at her until she disappeared from his sight. Then he shook his head and focused on the mission. He chose a street and began to walk. He did not wish to take an alien form, he figured it might scare the survivors and they won't show up. He concentrated all his senses to comprehend even the softest movements, to see even the tiniest of heat signs, to hear a breathing or a heartbeat, or locate another conscious mind. By the end of the day, the trio rejoined in front of the White House.[br]

- Any sign of life? - asked Ben.[br]

- No, not even a fresh footstep. - reported Gwen.[br]

- I haven't found anything either. - said Lantara.[br]

- Ditto. Tomorrow, we'll sweep the other half of the city, and the sewers. People may had better chances to survive underground. - speculated Ben. - But, we've done enough for today.[br]

Their shelter was an abandoned hotel for the night. They were all exhausted, and easily fell asleep.[br]

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- Wow, I feel like a new man! - enthused Ben next morning. - How did you sleep?[br]

- It was great! I thank God; the aliens spared those comfy beds! - replied Gwen.[br]

- How about you? [br]

- Not so good... I had a bad dream... Somehow, Raven got inside my head and she warned me... She told me to be very careful... because we might be in danger. - worried Lantara.[br]

- Hmm. Do you trust Raven? She almost killed me with that dark energy thing... - doubted Ben.[br]

- She did realize her mistake though... - added Gwen.[br]

- Yes. But still... she's weird... - said Ben.[br]

- Shall we get to work? - asked Lantara, just to change the topic of the conversation.[br]

- Yeah, we better start. - agreed the man.[br]

This time, the team stayed together and combined their powers. Nothing could escape their senses. They have been searching for hours, but to no avail. It was late afternoon, when suddenly, Gwen rose her head as they crossed a wider street, with ruined buildings on the sides.[br]

- Do you... - she began.[br]

- I feel it too! - Ben and Lantara confirmed in the same time. Just when they finished their sentence, a fireball fell among them. Ben evaded with Xlr8's speed, Lantara became ghost, and Gwen protected herself with a purple force field.[br]

- What was that? - yelled Ben. Another ball of flame fell upon him. After the explosion, Diamondhead's contours emerged from the seething smoke. [br]

- Look out! - warned him Gwen and her energy rope caught the next fireball and tossed it away. It exploded on a nearer wall. [br]

- Thanks! - Diamondhead nodded.[br]

- There's more! - shouted Lanara. Fireballs began to rain on them, they ran in zigzag to avoid them. One struck Diamondhead, but his crystalline skin reflected it. He recognized something upon a closer building.[br]

- On the roof! - He exclaimed and fired projectiles; however, the shadow was gone. The trio retreated and leaned their backs to each other. This formation allowed them to discover the threat from any direction. They observed the tops of the surrounding buildings, but could not detect their mysterious opponent.[br]

- There! - yelled Gwen and released an energy circle. It only cut a hole in the roof. Unexpectedly, a bigger fireball headed towards them. Diamondhead caught it and threw it up, back at the sender. The roof exploded and a fiery shape evolved from the smoke. It created a carpet of fire and wanted to attack from the air.[br]

- It seems we have left out a Null Void Alien! Get him! - commanded Ben and changed into Heatblast.[br]

- Fire against fire! - grinned he and shot a massive fire beam. The attacker avoided it with a talented move and reproduced the same kind of flames. Heatblast surprised, but consumed the orange beam. In the mean time, Gwen and Lantara took off and both fired a pink laser. The fiery opponent slid between the beams and his fists punched the two, they both fell down. Seeing this, Ben truly incensed and created a supernova-hot curtain of fire. The offender raised his hands to consume the blaze, but Ben was more powerful. [br]

The glowing shape propelled in the air; the carpet of fire disappeared from under his feet. Lantara and Gwen flew up together and grabbed him, then smashed him into the nearest wall. He fell down, and suddenly, the pyronite flames died out, and a human body remained. Ben's eyes grew large.[br]

- He's not an alien! - He recognized and turned into Stinkfly to catch his fainted enemy. [br]

- Gotcha! - sighed the creature, because he intervened in the last moment. Only then he realized, the attacker was a girl. He landed and put her on the ground softly. Gwen and Lantara followed. [br]

- I told you we'll find someone! I didn't expect that this someone wants to kill us though! - said Ben

ironically, after he reverted. [br]

- How could she possibly fly around and throw fireballs like that? - questioned Gwen.[br]

- I don't know... She acted like Heatblast... Never seen anything alike before...[br]

- She's half alien. - declared Lantara. - Perhaps that is why she's still alive.[br]

- Yes, that might be an explanation. She had better chances. - Gwen agreed.[br]

- That still doesn't explain why she attacked us. - remarked Ben and put his arms together.[br]

- Maybe she's gone crazy alone here, like Raven did. - appended Lantara.[br]

- Look, she's coming to! - said Gwen. [br]

The girl suddenly jumped up.[br]

- Filthy aliens! - She screamed and began to throw her arms about. [br]

- Relax, relax! Everything's okay now! - calmed her Ben.[br]

- You will not trick me again! - resisted the girl.[br]

- This isn't a trick; we're humans like you... Well, mostly. - Ben pointed out.[br]

- You're not holograms? - surprised she.[br]

- Of course not. We have come to find survivors. - explained the man. All of a sudden, the girl touched his cheek. Then his chest. Her eyes grew large.[br]

- You *are* real! - She gasped. [br]

- Yes, that's what we've been trying to tell you. - smiled Gwen.[br]

- Do you know anyone else, who survived? - asked Lantara.[br]

- Aaaah! Another alien! The worst kind! The leader of all those others! - screamed the girl in horror and drew back. Ben stopped her.[br]

- Take it easy, Lantara's one of us! She's not with the aliens you've seen. [br]

- Are you sure? Well... Okay... - the girl caved in, but still glared at the ectonurite for a while, then introduced herself.[br]

- My name's Myra Alverton. You see, at first, those aliens camouflaged themselves as citizens, and when enough have infiltrated, they took over the city. I'm sorry for the attack, but I thought you were aliens. [br]

- Nice to meet you. I'm Ben Tennyson, this is my cousin Gwen, and beside her is Lantara. She's a very close friend of mine. - After they all greeted each other, Ben could take a closer look on Myra. She had a skinny and flexible body. Her hair was truly red, and her long, curly locks flooded down her shoulders. Her eyes were deep, dark green, and reflected intelligence. She wore a green top, and threadbare jeans. *"The red hair suits her. Not exactly my type, but still nice."* - Ben thought.[br]

- Since when do you live here like this? - asked Gwen.[br]

- Dunno. I was born into this madness. I had to fight for everything since I was little. - replied Myra.[br]

- How could you do all those fireworks? - questioned Ben.[br]

- My dad was a pyronite. At least that's what T told me. I've never met my parents.[br]

- T? [br]

- Teuron. He's the chief of our clan here. He raised me, like many others. He taught me how to keep my powers under control. - said Myra.[br]

- Could you lead us to Teuron then? We have brought good news. - applied Ben.[br]

- Sure. Just follow me. It's not too far, but we have to go down to the sewers. - explained Myra.[br]

She led the trio to an alley, removed a trash can, and revealed a hole in the pavement. They all climbed down on the ladder into the darkness. A second later, Myra's hand fired up, and provided them light.[br]

- Stay close to each other. It's easy to get lost in these pipes. - warned them the girl. They walked about fifteen minutes, until they arrived to their destination.[br]

- We call this "The Hive". - smiled Myra and stepped in. They went through a large hole and found themselves on a former subway station. The exits to the surface were blocked by car wrecks and

different kind of materials. The blockade was so thick, that not even the sunlight could get in. A whole train stood at the right end of the tunnel. The left end was blocked by the same way the entrances were. Ben looked around and counted twelve people. Myra kept walking, and soon they entered an isolated section of the station. [br]

- T, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I've brought visitors. - Myra enthused.[br]

Teuron was sitting on a raunchy couch, and Ben could only see his contours, but he could tell that this guy was tall.[br]

- Visitors? Who could possibly manage to survive these years? - asked a melodic, deep voice.[br]

- This is Ben Tennyson and his friends. They are here to tell you good news. - introduced them Myra.[br]

- It's an honor to meet you sir. - said Ben respectfully. [br]

- Oh, yes, legendary Ben 10. I am Teh'h Ur'h Rhon'N Shy'y T'ha, but they call me T, or Teuron on this planet.[br]

- This planet? - surprised Ben. Teuron stood up and stepped into the candlelight. Ben's eyes grew large. Teuron himself was an alien too! Ben have never encountered such creature, his head looked like an insect's, with two orange eyes and two antennas. His body was covered with stripes, and he had four dark blue butterfly wings. His arms and legs were icy and as he spoke, Ben could see his breath seething in the air, like if there were really cold. He shook hands with Teuron and the alien offered them a seat.[br]

- I see you are very confused, my friend. I suppose you expected a human, right? - asked Teuron.[br]

- Well...yes. It's just strange. This is a human colony you know... - stammered Ben.[br]

- Oh, I understand. Let me explain how I came to be what I am. I arrived here nearly a hundred years ago. I was in a battle with an alien villain called Vilgax. He wanted the valuable Ghor-crystals I was delivering. My navigation systems have been damaged, but I was able to jump to hyperspace and avoid further confrontation. Unfortunately, my engine broke down in this quadrant. I lost control of the ship and eventually landed on Earth, however my ship was completely destroyed by the impact. I stuck here, because there was no appropriate technical equipment to repair the damages. At first, I thought this planet was a primitive ball of mud, but as the years passed by, I took a fancy of Earth and its people. Using my natural abilities, I learned how to camouflage myself as a human, and soon blended with the populists. I thought I've finally found my place to be... Then Kevin came and destroyed everything that was good. I decided to join the resistance. We fought doggedly, but we were no match for the voracious Null Void aliens. When the commanders have fallen one by one, I took the lead. I naively thought I could win. We did claim victory in a few minor battles though, but we were outnumbered. Eventually, we had to leave the surface and go underground. This station was abandoned for years, before Kevin arrived. The alien hordes could never find us here. We've been waiting in the dark ever since... to survive. - finished Teuron. Everyone remained silent for a few minutes. Then Ben broke the quietness. [br]

- I had a colony too, people I could count on. We even built a fortress in New York. We stood against the aliens for almost a decade, but... I suppose I was a bad leader... The colony has been destroyed, and Gwen and Lantara are my only ones now. They are my family. [br]

- I don't think you have to blame yourself. I'm sure you've done everything you could. - smiled Teuron. - So, Myra told me you have good news?[br]

- Yes. We have sent back all the aliens where they came from. We trapped them in Las Vegas, and even found Kevin, who's not alone anymore. He merged with one of my former enemies, called Ghostfreak of Anur Phaetos. Anyway, hypothetically, all the alien villains are in the Null Void dimension again. - said Ben.[br]

- Is this really possible? Their reign of terror is over? - gasped Teuron.[br]

- Ghostfreak of Anur Phaetos? Yuck... ectonurites... Friend of yours? - mocked Myra.[br]

- Most certainly not! And you could show more respect, sweetheart. I was fighting aliens, when you were

in diapers. - hissed Lantara.[br]

- What if I don't? What do you gonna do about it? - grinned Myra.[br]

- Myra, enough! They are *my* guests, and you better watch your tongue! - exclaimed Teuron. - Now, I need to talk with our new friends in private. [br]

Myra respectfully bowed her head, then left the room.[br]

- Forgive Myra please, she has a sharp tongue, but she's a good girl. And a good fighter. [br]

- No problem. - agreed Lantara and forced herself to calm down.[br]

- We must stick together. These kinds of hostilities cannot be allowed. - declared Teuron. - So, Ben. You say it's safe to return to the surface now? We can reclaim our home?[br]

- Yes. As far as I know, we captured every alien of the continent in Las Vegas. - supported the man.[br]

- All right then. We shall leave as soon as possible. In the mean time, be my guests and share a homely meal with me. You must be hungry. - offered Teuron. The trio gladly accepted. Everyone got one can of beans. [br]

- How do you get the food? - asked Gwen.[br]

- We send out patrols at night, once a week. The "dub-commando" as we call it, obtained supplies from the nearby malls. I used to lead a lot of these missions too, but one night, we were coming back from a successful "hunt", when we ran into a group of alien. Seven people left the hideout, two came back, including me. - replied Teuron.[br]

- Are there more survivors?[br]

- Unfortunately no. At first "The Hive" gave shelter to more than two hundred people. But that was almost a decade ago. I watched helplessly how my colony shrinks from year after year. The people died in disease, many gave up and committed suicide, or lost their mind and ran out to the surface insanely, and the aliens hunted them down. - Teuron bowed and closed his eyes.[br]

- How did Myra get into the picture?[br]

- I found her as a baby, when I was on another "dub-commando" mission, sixteen years ago. She was so little, I could handle her on my palm. I've found her mother as well. According to the footprints, vulpimancers must have attacked her... I don't know where she was from, not from my colony, that's sure. So I adopted Myra, and raised her like my own daughter. At the age of four, I realized what she was, when her powers first appeared. I didn't wanted to involve her into the war so early, but eight years ago, a larger horde of aliens followed one of our "dub-commando" units, and discovered our hideout. They could have killed everyone, but Myra stopped them on her own. She despises and hates all alien life forms but me ever since.[br]

- I can understand her. - Lantara said. [br]

They finished the meal and had a light conversation about less depressing topics. Then Teuron summoned Myra. She came in.[br]

- Myra, my dear! I don't know what were you doing up there, probably, disobeying my direct request...[br]

- I was just...[br]

- Do not interrupt me, you know I hate that! - exclaimed Teuron, then lowered his voice again.[br]

- But... you did a great job, bringing Ben Tennyson here. The other thing: You didn't tell anybody, about what you heard? [br]

- No, of course not. I figured you will tell them when you feel the right time. - replied Myra with a wide smile.[br]

- Good girl. Keep it that way. Now, I shall go up with Ben and take a look around.[br]

- Can I come? - Myra's eyes kindled.[br]

- No. You must stay here and have everything under control. I'll be back in a jiffy. [br]

- Okay. - said the girl disappointedly.[br]

[br]

- Unbelievable! After these years of banishment, we can return to our rightful place... - gasped Teuron, when he was standing beside Ben, Gwen and Lantara. [br]

- It's so beautiful! I almost forgot how it feels, when the rays of the sun soothe my senses. – sighed he, stretched his hands, and opened his wide butterfly wings. He enjoyed the sunlight for a minute, then shortly estimated the city's condition.[br]

- I guess we have a lot of work to do... - he said. [br]

- You do. But now, you have a new reason to work for. - smiled Ben.[br]

- Indeed. It will take years of hard work to restore the city. Like you said: We have a reason now. - wondered Teuron. [br]

- We'll stay for a few days and help you with the first steps. - assured him Ben.[br]

[br]

- Friends! Earth is finally cleansed from the alien villains! Thanks to Ben Tennyson and his team here, it is safe to go back to the surface! Pack your things, because tomorrow, we're moving out! – announced Teuron, after he came back from his visit of the upper world. At first, the people couldn't even comprehend what they just heard. Then their response was general cheering.[br]

After the announcement, Ben, Gwen, and Lantara had a long discussion with Teuron and Myra. The isolated section of the station provided them privacy, nobody else could hear what they were speaking. When they finished, Myra showed them their beds, and the trio easily fell asleep after the long day. On this night, Lantara had another dream. [br]

In her dream she found herself in a T-shaped tower. There was a gorgeous view to the sea and the city nearby. Suddenly the two winged door opened and a dark shape came into the large room. As she stepped in the light, her features could be recognized. Lantara immediately noticed the fresh scar on her face, the scar so familiar to Ben's.[br]

- Raven? Where are we?[br]

- This was my home, Lantara. At least, this is how I remember it.[br]

- Why did you bring me here?[br]

- To talk. Since Ben opened my eyes, I see things different. I want him to prevail, to destroy GhostKevin once and for all! I've entered your dreams, to warn you again.[br]

- The threat is no longer exists. Myra is on our side.[br]

- I know, I'm not talking about her. I sense a new enemy, who has not yet revealed itself to you. The triumph in Las Vegas merely delayed the final showdown. Ben will have to face GhostKevin once again. The battle cannot be over, as long as he lives! He already has a new, devilish plan in mind, beware! - said Raven, and as she finished her sentence, the perfect picture around them has changed. Lantara saw four red eyes in the darkness, the eyes of an alien she never encountered before, but this race was notorious in the entire universe...[br]

Lantara startled out of her sleep. [br]

- Oh, no... - she gasped.[br]

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10 - Chapter 10 - Restart

Chapter 10[br]

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Restart[br]

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- Okay, the main power is on within 10 seconds! - exclaimed Upgrade and released the geothermic generator. The cable-like formations shrank and became his fingers. Then a humming sound filled his ears, as the device charged up. All of a sudden, the lights around him came to life, but some light bulbs exploded, or burnt out, because they were too old.[br]

- Great, now watch the gauges carefully, we have worked two weeks on this thing; we don't want any trouble! – Said Upgrade to his accompanies. Gwen and Teuron nodded. [br]

- Energy level on 5% - reported the alien.[br]

- Good. Report status after every 5% please. - Upgrade requested.[br]

- Energy level on 10%... 15%...20%... - responded Teuron monotonously. Ben watched the reactor absorbedly. The machine was built in the '90s, long ago before Kevin. He converted it with Teuron, who proved to be very supple in mechanics; his assistance was most helpful. They worked twelve or sixteen hours together, not even stopping for a little sleep. Gwen and Lantara couldn't see Ben's face; he remained Upgrade or Grey Matter for the time of the reconstruction. He knew if anything goes wrong today, they can start the whole procedure all over again. He strained his every nerve to react for even the smallest of problems. Teuron's voice echoed in his mind, but it seemed very distant. [br]

- ...50%...55%. - Teuron reported.[br]

- Gwen? - Ben questioned.[br]

- It seems the cables and the transformers are holding on. - confirmed she.[br]

- Excellent. We should maintain energy level on 55%. Let it run for a few days, and if there's everything okay, we'll add more power. - Upgrade suggested.[br]

- Agreed. I already sent Myra to get a few men here to monitor the reactor. - smiled Teuron. [br]

- Good. If this thing works well, it will provide electricity for the entire city. [br]

- We had a rough day, my friend. Now, that we have power for over the half of the city, we must celebrate.[br]

- Sounds like a good plan. I meet you in a jiffy. - Upgrade sighed and finally reverted to Ben. After Teuron left, he walked to his cousin. [br]

- You did real good in the last two weeks, Gwen! Without your help, I don't know how I could fix all those transformers up. - said Ben gratefully.[br]

- It was nothing compared to what you did. - opposed Gwen.[br]

- Nah, I tuned up an old machine with Teuron... Yeah, it was difficult, but not that much...[br]

- It's more than that. You have given hope to all these people. You have given them the chance for a new life![br]

- Yes. This is what I do best. This is my fate. – declared the man and clenched his fists.[br]

The first monitors have arrived, Ben quickly showed them a few simple task, and told them to report even the tiniest of malfunctions to him or Teuron. After that, he got out of the power plant with Gwen.

They flew back to the new headquarters, which was in a former hotel. They heard happy laughter and sounds of revelry. Their eyes met, before they entered the building. The noises came from the conference room. Ben opened the door and stepped inside. Every survivor was there, except the three monitors of course. [br]

- Oh, come my friends, sit down beside me! – greeted them the alien. They did as he asked, and Myra gave them a glass, Teuron filled them with whisky then stood up. The people followed the example.[br]

- A toast! To our new friends and allies! We were strangers to them; they didn't even know we exist! Still, they have come here to help us! Hurrah! – exclaimed he and emptied his glass. The people did the same, so Ben and Gwen also had to, because they did not wish to insult their host. After the toast, the women left to take care of the few children of the colony. At first, Myra didn't want to go, but Teuron allowed no resistance. [br]

- Where are you going? – Ben asked when he saw his cousin standing up from the round table.[br]

- Oh, I'm exhausted...Gonna have a lovely sleep. – Gwen replied.[br]

- I should go too...[br]

- No, stay and have fun. You deserve it. [br]

- Okay, but if you need anything...[br]

- I know where to find you. – smiled Gwen and touched Ben's forehead. The man watched her, until she closed the door behind herself. Then he turned to Teuron who gave a bottle of whisky to him.[br]

- Thanks, but I don't think that would be a good idea... - Ben hesitated.[br]

- Come on, as far as I know, it's a tradition! Go ahead, celebrate my friend! – said Teuron with a wide grin on his blue face. Ben caved in and accepted the gift.[br]

[br]

A few hours later, he felt a little dizzy, but he had a great time. Everyone told jokes and stories from the old times, their laughter echoed in the quiet night. However, Ben was in the center of the attention, the people hung on his words.[br]

- ...Wait, wait, listen, there's more! We stood in front of each other in the middle of a field. He stared at me and I stared back at him. Then he said: "You're one sorry sight, Rockhead!" – Everyone in the room, looked at Ben, and waited. He drank and then continued. [br]

– I was like "What did he just say? With that face?" So I said: "That's Diamondhead. And speaking of sorry sights, have you looked into the mirror lately?" – The men broke out in an unstoppable laughter. Ben told the story of his life, how he came to be, how he found the omnitrix at the age of ten, the battles with the villains, especially Kevin, everything. The hours passed by unawares, and it was dawning when everyone went to bed.[br]

Next day, Ben awakened late. He rubbed his head and recognized the empty bottle on the small night table. [br]

- Oh, man...- he sighed and went to the bathroom. Since the water service was not working yet, Ben opened his mouth and Artiquana's icy waft came out of it. Soon, a small iceberg was formed in the bath tub. Then he stretched his left hand, and Heatblast's fire beam melted the ice, and rapidly boiled the water. Ben looked at his work contentedly, when a familiar voice accosted him.[br]

- You always find a way for everything, don't you? [br]

The man quickly turned around and recognized Lantara floating in the door. [br]

- Where were you last night? I was hoping we could talk a little, now, that the reactor is complete. – Ben said.[br]

- I'm sorry my love, but I needed some time on my own. I needed to think about my dreams... - replied Lantara and drifted closer to the man.[br]

- Dreams? What kind of dreams? – Ben surprised.[br]

- I'll tell you everything later. You should hurry up with that bogie. Teuron expects you to share a meal

with him. And you might need this. – said Lantara and threw a towel to Ben. [br]

- Thanks. [br]

The ectonurite smiled back passionately, and then she phased through the floor and disappeared. Ben stood still for a few more seconds, and then he took a short, yet relaxing bath. He toweled and put his clothes on with Xlr8's speed. He arrived just in time for lunch. Every member of the colony was there. The lunch was corned beef with potatoes. It wasn't the best meal ever, but everyone enjoyed it, aware of the fact that they can eat freely; no alien will disturb them anymore.[br]

- Hangover? – Teuron asked after the lunch.[br]

- Nope. – Ben smirked. [br]

- Good. So... you're able to join me in a friendly combat practice?[br]

- Combat practice? With you? – Ben blinked in surprise.[br]

- Of course. I need to regain my strength, and the best way is through a simple challenge. – Teuron explained. [br]

- Well, I guess a little practice won't hurt. When?[br]

- Two hours later?[br]

- Okay with me. – Ben agreed. [br]

[br]

There was a little crowd in the hotel's huge park. Everyone wanted to see Ben and Teuron in action. Gwen and Lantara were there as well. The "opponents" have arrived, and shook hands.[br]

- Are you ready? – Teuron asked.[br]

- I'm always ready. – Ben grinned. He took a few steps backward and transformed into Diamondhead. [br]

- Then brace yourself! – exclaimed Teuron and jumped up. In the air, his blue butterfly wings opened. On the ground, Diamondhead raised his hands and fired a pair of smaller projectiles. Teuron easily avoided them. He accelerated, and nosed down. The petrosapien ducked, then he made wide crystal grow out of the earth, right in front of the flying Teuron. But he turned around and touched the sea green formation with his feet for a moment, and then he headed back to Ben with new swing. He flew close to the surface, so Diamondhead had to jump up to keep away from Teuron. He fired bigger projectiles this time, but the alien evaded them with talented maneuvers. He landed in front of Ben, who immediately struck, but his fists went through Teuron's body. He became a ghost, like Lantara. [br]

- What a... - Diamondhead went wide eyed. In his confusion, he did not recognize Teuron's punch. Eventually he fell down to the ground. [br]

- You can change your protoplasm too?! – yelled he.[br]

- Yes, and I can do much more! – Teuron replied and gave Diamondhead a hand, to get up. [br]

– You could have change alien form easily. Why didn't you?[br]

- You can't change. I thought, this way we'll be even. [br]

- Wise thinking. Now, try another form, I can show you other tricks. – Teuron requested. With a green flash, Diamondhead became Xlr8.[br]

- Let's see what you can do against Xlr8! – said he, and the windshield closed on his face. He stormed out and attacked with a series of rapid kicks. The alien blinked, but Xlr8 was gone. [br]

- Behind you! – The kineceleran yelled, and Teuron struck. Xlr8 evaded and kicked him on the face again. [br]

- Nice! – Teuron admitted and crunched his chin. Xlr8 ran towards him to attack again, but he grabbed the kineceleran's arm, and tripped him up with one move. [br]

- Good reflexes... - he gasped. Ben couldn't believe he was taken down again. He shook his head and quickly stood up. He began to run in circles around Teuron. Soon, a black and white tornado was swirling, and the people had to take a few steps back. But Teuron stood still in the middle of the tornado.

He drilled his claws in the ground, so the wind couldn't pick him up- After a few more laps, he was able to follow Xlr8 with his eyes.[br]

- Chill out! – he smiled and an icy waft came out of his mouth, which was familiar to Artiquana's. Teuron created an ice streak on the ground. When Xlr8 reached it, he lost his foothold and slid a few feet on smooth ice. Ben changed into Heatblast and shot a ray of fire. Teuron closed his wings, so they covered his whole body, and they consumed the flames. The pyronite formed a fiery carpet and took off. Teuron opened his dark blue wings again and followed him. Their battle continued in the air, where they shot fire beams and ice rays on each other, but none could hit the other. The people were amazed by this friendly fight; they have never seen such moves. Eventually, they landed; their breathing was fast, and both of them were exhausted. Heatblast reverted to Ben. He shook hands with Teuron again.[br]

- Very commendable, Ben Tennyson! You're an excellent fighter. I have not been in such good fight for years! – Teuron said.[br]

- You were great too. I couldn't believe you've easily defeated two of my alien forms! – Ben responded. The people around them clapped for about a minute, and then the crowd broke up. Gwen came over to the man and spoke a few words with him, after that, she left as well. Lantara waited patiently, until Ben remained alone. [br]

- You really held back your powers, dear. – She smiled.[br]

- Yeah, I kinda did, but Teuron knows a few trick of his own, he's a powerful and talented opponent. I'm glad he's on our side. – Ben acknowledged.[br]

- Indeed. Can we talk now? I need to tell you something very important. – Lantara said.[br]

- Sure. Let's walk in the mean time. – Ben suggested. The ectonurite nodded and they began to move to the back of the par, far away from the hotel. [br]

- So you're seeing things? – Ben asked.[br]

- Something like that. These... visions appear in my dreams... and they are strongly connected to Raven. She sends me the images of the future... at least that's what I think. – Lantara explained.[br]

- Go ahead. What do you see?[br]

- I... I see... - suddenly, her eyes began to glow and she converted to her full potential. [br]

- It's still not over... The Earth is in danger... He'll bring a new plague onto this world... The biggest and most powerful threat ever... They never stop... they never lose, and they never show mercy... They called the H...Aaaaahhh...- She unexpectedly collapsed and lost consciousness.[br]

- Lantara! Lantara! What happened?! Lantara! – Ben shouted. He quickly picked her up and ran back to the hotel with Xlr8's velocity. He rushed into Gwen's room.[br]

- Ben for the love of... What happened? – She asked nervously.[br]

- She was speaking about her dreams, or visions, whatever, and then she suddenly fainted. – Ben jabbered.[br]

Gwen touched Lantara's chest. Her eyes had a purple glowing for a few seconds, then she released the ectonurite. [br]

- She's not fainted. It's worse. She's in some kind of deep trance.[br]

- Whatever it is, you must do something to get her out of it! I cannot lose her! I can't live without her! Try to bring her back! – Ben roared almost in tears.[br]

- I'm sorry Ben, but I can't do anything... It's beyond my powers. – Gwen replied sadly.[br]

- No, this is unacceptable! We have to do something![br]

- We can't. If there was a way I'd know... But she's strong... She'll be able to snap out of it.[br]

- But what caused this trance?! – Ben asked.[br]

- I'm not sure... something dark ... [br]

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11 - Chapter 11 - Dreamfight

Chapter 11[br]

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Dreamfight[br]

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The last thing she remembered was Ben's desperate voice. It sounded more and more distant, until it was just an incomprehensible hum, then complete silence and darkness surrounded her. It seemed she drifted unconsciously for ages. After the blackout everything was calm, like deep down in the sea, nothing really mattered, she just existed. Then she felt an invisible hand touching her, and this hand dragged her out of the nothingness. Lantara suddenly came to. [br]

- Wha... What happened? Where am I? – She asked herself. She looked around and realized she was floating in space. Alone. She slowly turned around and saw the blue globe of the Earth. All of a sudden, a spaceship flew away right beside her. The vehicle was large and heavily armed. It did not come alone, soon many similar destroyers followed it, and the fleet was just leaving Earth. One ship headed towards Lantara. It grew and grew until she could see nothing else than the metal body and the hundreds of weapons. Then she recognized something on the commander's bridge. She drifted closer and a few seconds later, she could identify GhostKevin, standing beside a tall white alien with four red eyes on its chest. Both of them were laughing devilishly. The ship slowed down and turned around, facing to the planet. In the next moment, a bright flash blinded Lantara. When she could see again, a horrible sight opened in front of her eyes. The Earth went red; the oceans were boiling and sending thick steam clouds into the atmosphere. Then the entire planet was torn apart with a devastating explosion. Millions of asteroids flew to every direction. The blast wave ripped the Moon in pieces. Lantara turned into stone; her eye went wide, as she watched helplessly, as the rocks slowly formed a ring in the space. Earth was gone. The alien spaceship with GhostKevin aboard jumped to hyperspace and left her alone. [br]

- No... no... no... - that was all she could chant, she couldn't move, just gazed at the asteroid belt, that was Earth once. She felt the pain consuming her heart, leaving nothing else but dark space. She knew Ben was gone too, all was lost. The blood thirst slowly filled her soul, she wanted to fly after that ship, find GhostKevin wherever he hides, and take a vengeance on him whatever it takes. Before she could do anything, a familiar voice called her name. Suddenly, a black vortex opened in front of the ectonurite and Raven stepped out of the portal. [br]

- Raven, is that really you? How did you survive, what is all this? – Lantara jabbered in confusion.[br]

- Relax! All can be explained! – eased her Raven. [br]

- What do you mean? – Lantara surprised.[br]

- Come quick, I'll explain. – Raven repeated and took Lantara's hand, dragging her into the vortex.

After a few seconds of travel, they have arrived to the former Titans Tower. [br]

- I know this place... I've been here before... - Lantara recalled. [br]

- Of course you did, I brought you here the first time. – Raven said and permitted herself a pale smile.

[br]

- Yes, I remember now... This is just an illusion, right?[br]

- Unfortunately. This is a safe zone I've created for meditating. Merely an illusion... but a pretty good

one... I'd say this is a different level of existence, which can only be reached by falling into a very deep trance. I had to enforce you telepathically to get you here... - Raven wondered.[br]

- So, you did that? It makes sense now... What I saw before... that was also an illusion, right? – Lantara asked.[br]

- Exactly. Those events have not occurred yet. – Raven replied.[br]

- It was the future... - Lantara heaved a sigh of relief.[br]

- Yes. I wanted to let you know what I know. My encounter with Ben opened my eyes and revealed the truth before me. – (Lantara glanced at Raven's scar at this point.) - I realized I abandoned my planet in the time of need. The mistake I will not make twice. Those events must be prevented... the future must be changed. – The sorceress declared.[br]

- How could you possibly know such things?[br]

- I somehow came in telepathic contact with your enemy, GhostKevin. However, I only know parts of his new plan, I cannot see it together.[br]

- You sent me those dreams too... they all... images... of the future... - Lantara gasped.[br]

- Correct. If we do not intervene, Earth will end up like this. – Raven said and pointed at the large window in front of her. As soon as she finished her sentence, the beautiful view of the ocean has changed into an image of a glowing asteroid belt in space. [br]

- How much time do we have?[br]

- Not sure... But I do know that GhostKevin will bring this alien race to our world. [br]

The picture changed again, and this time it showed the same white creature with four eyes on the head and the chest, what Lantara recognized before.[br]

- Do you know anything about this species? – Raven asked.[br]

- Yes... Everyone knows them in the galaxy... They are the Highbreed... Some say they were the very first race in the entire universe... and they don't allow any other kind to live except them.... If that's what GhostKevin up to, we'll have to face the biggest, most powerful threat ever... Ben! I must warn Ben, he'll know what to do! – Lantara exclaimed.[br]

- Wait! Before you leave, there's something else you must know... - Raven began, but suddenly, her eyes started to glow.[br]

- What? What is it?[br]

The room's temperature decreased. They could see their breaths, and the windows became icy. By this time, Lantara figured it out. She looked at Raven. Their eyes met. [br]

- It's him... - whispered the ectonurite.[br]

- He found us... - Raven nodded. [br]

In the next moment, the two winged door broke into pieces, and GhostKevin himself entered the room.[br]

- You know far too many things... That's why you'll never leave alive! – grinned he. His chest opened, and fired a yellow energy beam. Raven and Lantara jetted off, trying to avoid the death ray. They flew to opposite directions, but the beam diverged in the air and struck both of them. They fell down.

GhostKevin approached them menacingly. He grabbed Raven's cape and dragged her up from the floor.[br]

- Do you think it was wise to hack into my brain?! – He shouted.[br]

- How... did you get here? – asked Raven, struggling to free herself from GhostKevin's tight grip. [br]

- You did quite a job to isolate this place, but after I discovered the telepathic contact between us, it was a child's play to get a lock on your mind. Now, it's time to put an end to this foolishness once and for all! – GhostKevin hissed. He raised his claws to end Raven's life.[br]

- Leave her alone! – Lantara exclaimed and her purple energy beam struck GhostKevin in the chest. He flew through the wall, leaving a big hole. [br]

- Are you all right? – Lantara asked.[br]

- Yes. I've taken worse before. But we must leave immediately! GhostKevin is still here and the informations we have are too valuable! – Raven said.[br]

- No! We must fight him. Together! Everything he does is just an illusion, like this whole place![br]

- You don't understand! If he kills us here, we'll die in the real world too! – Raven explained. [br]

- So what do you suggest then? Run like cowards? – Lantara asked angrily.[br]

- The only wise option here is to escape, and share this knowledge with Ben 10 000. [br]

- Pity, you do not have a choice! – GhostKevin rasped. He was standing in the hole he made previously. Then he jumped into the air and attacked. Raven swung her hands and formed a black shield in front of him, but he became ghost, and phased through it. Lantara went ghost as well, and she was able to grab his neck, and force him to the ground. However, GhostKevin's next energy beam struck her in the face at close quarters. The beam even busted through the ceiling. Raven took off and caught Lantara in the air.[br]

- Thanks. – The ectonurite mumbled; she was still under the shock of the blow.[br]

- Mu ha ha ha! You are not match! – GhostKevin laughed. Raven suddenly picked up two large pieces of the floor with her mind, and smashed them together around her enemy. But it was not successful, GhostKevin ripped them into shreds. Then the sorceress formed a black hand from her aura. The hand coiled around GhostKevin and captured him. He tried to become ghost, but the aura prevented that. He roared, then looked at Raven. The hatred blazed in his eyes.[br]

- You think you can win?! How commendable... How futile! – hissed he and turned into black liquid, and slipped through his prison. Raven released Lantara and they attacked the villain together. Unexpectedly, he – still as liquid – got around Raven, and tried to drown her. Lantara could not do anything; she was unable to get him off of her. Then she had an idea. She quickly merged with Raven, and with their combined powers, she morphed GhostKevin back to his original shape. Then she punched him in the face with great strength. The villain flew way back. Lantara diverged from Raven.[br]

- What was that all about?! – Raven wheezed. Her lungs heavily demanded their rightful reward.[br]

- You almost drowned... I had to do something, so I... merged with you. – Lantara replied with a little hesitation in her voice.[br]

- You never told me you can do such thing... - Raven complained.[br]

- Yes, it's one of my natural abilities. I'm able to temporarily possess other bodies.[br]

- Thanks for saving me, but next time, ask permission. – The sorceress said.[br]

- How touching! I'm sorry for interrupting, but it's time for you to die!!! – GhostKevin roared and headed towards the heroines. He raised his claws and struck. Lantara went ghost, and Raven phased through the floor, the villain hit the ground only. [br]

- We must combine our powers! It's the only way to defeat him! – Lantara suggested.[br]

- Agreed. Let's take him together! – Raven enthused. She grabbed the ectonurite's hand and they moved together. They evaded GhostKevin's blows as one, they fought back as one, and soon their enemy could not keep up. Then, Lantara took off, Raven followed her. The alien's chest opened, her tentacles snaked out. She glanced at Raven, their eyes met for a second, but it was enough for both of them to know what to do. Lantara fired an energy beam, and Raven focused all her powers around it. Her black aura united with the purple laser in a deadly spiral. GhostKevin put his arms in front of his body and caught the combined beam. However it was too strong, he couldn't last long, and he knew that. His palms resisted the beam, but he was weakening. [br]

- I'm not through with you yet! No matter what you do... YOU WILL DIE! – cursed he menacingly, emphasizing the last three words. Then he turned into black liquid again, and snapped out of the beam, which struck a couch. GhostKevin phased through the floor and disappeared. The ice on the windows immediately melted, and the temperature returned to normal. The villain was no longer there. [br]

Raven and Lantara landed softly. [br]

- I cannot believe we actually won... - Raven said.[br]

- This isn't a victory yet. Not until that coward lives! – Lantara replied. – Anyway, you have showed your true face today. You have earned my trust. [br]

- Thanks. But I couldn't have done it without you. You have not only saved me, but this safe zone as well. This is my only place for deep meditation.[br]

- Don't you afraid GhostKevin will try to get you again?[br]

- No. The telepathic contact with him no longer exists. He won't be able to follow me her anymore. – Raven smiled. – Now, remember the things you have seen here. Share your knowledge with Ben. And if you need any help... you know how to reach me.[br]

- Of course. The future of the entire planet depends on it. – The alien confirmed. [br]

- Now, you'll wake up from trance. – Raven said and touched Lantara's chest. In the next moment, the ectonurite disappeared. She was in the real world again. In the mean time, the entire place regenerated itself, like a movie which played backwards. The broken windows and furniture became brand new. The holes in the wall shrank and eventually disappeared. The safe zone was restored. Raven focused and began to levitate in the air. She needed to meditate to keep her powers under control. She chanted the magic words, and calmness filled her soul. But, she knew the final battle between good and evil will determine the faith of the planet... And that battle was very near... [br]

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12 - Chapter 12 - A day off

Chapter 12[br]

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A day off[br]

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Lantara inhaled, and when she exhaled, she came to. Her eye opened. She was in a bed, in a gray room, and as she turned her head to the left, she saw Ben Tennyson. The man sat beside her the whole time. He did not look so good. His skin was pale; his face was covered with stubble, and he had bags under his eyes. He didn't even recognize that Lantara was awake. He just sat there, sunk into his thoughts, gazing into the nothingness, resting his arms on his knees. [br]

- Ben... - the ectonurite whispered. Her voice gave the man a jump. [br]

- Lantara! You're back! – he exclaimed and immediately hugged her very passionately. They stayed in this position for a couple of minutes.[br]

- The thought of losing you again was unbearable! I know I've never said this, but you're my world. I love you more than anyone else. – Tears flooded down on his cheeks. [br]

- Oh, I missed you so much, my dear! – Lantara purred and put her head on Ben's chest. They remained interlocked like this for another five minutes, the silence and the close presence of the other soothed their souls. But, the moment was gone; they had to concentrate on more important things. Lantara touched Ben's shoulders and looked him in the eye.[br]

- How long?[br]

Ben didn't need to hear the rest of the question, he already knew the answer:[br]

- You've been...away for sixteen days. [br]

- Sixteen days?! – Lantara surprised. – But it seemed only a few hours...[br]

- Where were you? – Ben asked.[br]

- Ben. You must listen very carefully now, because what you're about to hear is an importance of life and death... of Earth. – Lantara warned. Then she told him all about her experiences: Raven, the safe zone, the meaning of the dreams, the future, and the fight with GhostKevin. Ben 10 000 listened quietly and watchfully, every word burnt into his brain. He found out he was responsible for an entire planet... He took it quite well. [br]

- If that's true, we have to leave immediately. We must find as many survivors as possible to establish a communication system around the continent. We'll finish things here and leave tomorrow. – Ben declared.[br]

- No! Look at yourself! You didn't sleep for days, you're too weak. First you'll rest, then get things done. After that, we leave. – Lantara said.[br]

- You can't be serious! The Earth is in danger I do not have time for rest! GhostKevin will not take a day off! How can I?! – Ben yelled angrily. [br]

- You have and you will! Listen, Raven told me it takes a lot to reach that level of existence, you know how deep my trance was. GhostKevin couldn't have done it from a distance; he needed to be here, for his power is stronger if he's near. Believe me; he's still on this planet, and that little action cost him sixteen days as well. That's wasted time even for him. Maybe he does not have such plan in mind yet,

but even if he does and leaves Earth today, it'll take months to locate those aliens. The universe is big, so you will spend this day resting... with me. – Lantara insisted.[br]

- I guess you're right. I do feel a little weak. – Ben eventually caved in. [br]

- Come closer, my love! This bed is big enough for two people! – Lantara smiled sensually. Ben smiled back widely and lay down beside her. He put his arms around the alien and she placed her head on his chest again... They fell asleep together.[br]

[br]

Twelve hours later Ben woke up. His hair was messed up and he blinked sleepily for a few times. Then he realized Lantara wasn't there beside him. He walked to the bathroom. On his way he accidentally kicked the round coffee table in the living room. He almost tripped over, but managed to regain balance. He mumbled a few round oaths, and made it to the bathroom. He quickly took off his clothes and just when he wanted to make some ice to boil it with Heatblast's fire bolts, he recognized, that bath was already filled with warm water. He surprised a little, but did not hesitate, instead he jumped in. After he finished, he went back to the living room in a towel and noticed a bowl of pancakes on the table. He rubbed his forehead.[br]

- Was this here before? – he asked himself. But the smell of the food was so tempting, he could not resist any longer. He sat down and began to eat. He finished off three pancakes and there were five more, when his senses alerted him. He rapidly switched to Wildmutt's heat vision, and discovered a very strong heat signal in the next room. He knew it was not Lantara. He stopped chewing and clenched his muscles, bracing himself to fight. The heat signal approached, and when it came close enough, Ben unexpectedly turned around, forming a Diamondhead spear on his right arm.[br]

- Gotcha! What a... - he recoiled.[br]

- Oh, I'm sorry; Sir, I did not mean to scare you. – excused the girl. It was Myra Alverton. [br]

- Oh, it is you... - Ben relieved and the crystal formation shrank on his arm, until it disappeared under his skin. [br]

- Don't take this the wrong way, but what the heck are doing in my room? – the man questioned.[br]

- Oh, I brought you some clean clothes, Sir. Lantara asked me to take care of you when you wake up. – Myra replied and put the garments on the dusty sofa.[br]

- Lantara, ha? Where is she?[br]

- She's with Gwen and T, they're working on that generator thingy.[br]

- I see. Why did you obey Lantara? I thought she's just a filthy alien to you. – Ben said and eyed Myra evilly.[br]

- Well, I used to think that, but she's your girlfriend and if Ben 10 000 trusts her; she cannot be just an evil, disgusting alien like all those others from the Null Void. Plus I kinda took a fancy of her style. – Myra explained.[br]

The cutting glance disappeared from Ben's eyes; he knew Myra was telling the truth. Besides, he liked her the first time. She reminded Ben of himself, when he was at the same age. He just could not stand when he was brought into a situation he did not expect before. At first, he even felt disturbed, because he was in a towel in front of the girl, but then this embarrassing feeling disappeared. He had nothing to be ashamed of. He was at his physical prime, his body was perfect, and you could see every single muscle. So, after he discussed this with himself, he continued his breakfast. After swallowing a bite, he put the other half of the fourth pancake on his fork. He turned to Myra who stood silently behind him. [br]

- You made these? – he asked with his mouth full. [br]

- Yes Sir, is there something wrong with them? – Myra asked back. She was a bit startled. [br]

- They are perfect! Delicious! Awesome! I haven't eaten such good tasting food for years! – Ben exclaimed. Myra blushed. The man finished off the rest of his meal, then went to the other room to put on his new clothes. When he came back, he recognized that Myra was mark timing; she seemed quite

embarrassed. [br]

- What? I put on my T-shirt the wrong way, or what?[br]

- No, it's just... I was wondering... if you could... um... practice with me a little? – She stammered.[br]

- What? – Ben surprised.[br]

- You know... teach me a few simple tricks... to be a better fighter... like you... Sir.[br]

- Oh, cut that out; don't call me "Sir" or anything like that. You didn't call me "Sir" in the first time we met. Respect is a good thing, but you won't insult me by simply calling me Ben. - The first time I met you, I didn't know who you are. Now, I do. – Myra replied.[br]

- It makes no difference. I'm still the same person. – Ben smiled.[br]

- 'K. So... could you help me? I want to be a better fighter. I want to improve... I want to have my powers fully under my control... Even the simplest tricks will do... just... could you teach me a little? – Myra begged.[br]

- Well, I don't know. I mean I'd like to, but the geothermic generator still needs a lot of work... - Ben hesitated. [br]

- Gwen and Lantara said they can handle it, especially with T's help... Lantara told me she wants you to relax for the whole day... I know what I ask is far from relaxation, but please!!![br]

- All right then. If Lantara says they can keep everything under control there, fine by me. – Ben accepted.[br]

- Cool! When do we start? – Myra enthused.[br]

- Ten minutes later, in the hotel's parking lot. – Ben answered. [br]

[br]

It was bright, sunny weather outside, when Myra stepped out. She enjoyed the warm sunlight for a few minutes and prepared herself to learn from Ben 10 000 himself. She looked around the place. It was a large, wide parking lot, and numerous rusty cars were parking there, on their deflated tires and their dusty body. Soon, Ben arrived; he speeded down on the stairs and stopped beside Myra. The omnitrix flashed, and Xlr8 changed back to Ben.[br]

- Just a sec, I'll tidy up this place. – he said and began to walk among the lines of the car wrecks. He stretched his hands and Brainstorm's green aura pushed the cars against each other. A minute later, a circle was formed from the wrecks; it looked like a little arena. Myra followed Ben into the middle of the circle. [br]

- Okay girl, show me what you got. – Ben commanded. Myra instantly morphed. She looked exactly like a pyronite with her orange, fiery body. She wanted to take off, but Ben stopped her. [br]

- No, no, no. We have to start from the beginning. We'll stay on the ground this time. This is very important. Patience. A good fighter does not start a battle too early. – Ben explained. His right arm became Diamondhead's and he raised his hand. He formed tall crystals on the top of the cars.[br]

- Try to hit them! – he instructed. [br]

- No problem! – Myra smirked and released a fire beam. But, as it reached the sea green crystal, it was reflected and headed back to her. She was struck down by her own weapon.[br]

- Lesson number one: Never underestimate your opponent. – Ben remarked and helped her to get on her feet.[br]

- Got it. – the girl said.[br]

- Now, try again! Be careful, and remember: You never know what your opponent is capable of.[br]

Myra nodded and fired another beam, but it was reflected by the crystal again. This time, the girl was farseeing, she ducked and the beam exploded into a wreck behind her. She glanced at Ben, who didn't say a word, he just smiled.[br]

- How can I defeat my opponent if my attacks are futile? – Myra asked.[br]

- You must find out its weakness, by trying different kinds of attacks. If you fail the first time, you must try

harder. – Ben replied and changed into Heatblast. He stretched his hands and created a huge fireball. He threw it on the same crystal Myra was trying to hit. The fireball was more effective, it could not be reflected, and it broke the crystal into pieces. [br]

- See? Like this. Now, it's your turn.[br]

Myra raised her hands, but failed to create a fireball. Heatblast transformed back into Ben. Seeing this, Myra morphed back into her human form as well. [br]

- You don't know how to make a supernova fireball? – Ben asked. Myra blushed again.[br]

- Okay, I'll show you. Watch and learn it's all about hand coordination and intense concentration. – Ben said. His arms heated up and he already felt the flaming ball in his hands. He threw it onto another crystal; it exploded when the ball hit it. Myra tried to reproduce Ben's action, but she could not.[br]

- Okay, no problem! – sighed. he, then stepped behind the girl and touched her forearms. [br]

- Like this. – he whispered and drove Myra's hands so the movements matched his previous ones. [br]

- Now, concentrate... Feel the blaze in your hands; feel as the fire takes shape... - Ben commanded. He let go of Myra and stepped back. The girl closed her eyes and did as she was told to. She focused very hard. She morphed into her pyronite form, and all of a sudden, she was able to form the supernova fireball. She opened her eyes and surprised by the white ball of flame she was holding. [br]

- Excellent. Now aim it on a crystal, and throw it. – Ben instructed. Myra targeted the nearest formation and then she threw the fireball. It was so powerful, it not only torn the crystal apart, but it busted even the surrounding car wrecks. The concrete melted as well. This action managed to surprise even Ben. [br]

- What do you think? – Myra asked cheerfully. [br]

- Impressive. Do you feel strong enough to try more difficult stuff? [br]

- I guess so...[br]

- Good. This time you'll have to strike a moving target. In fact, I will be that target. – Ben declared.[br]

- What? No way, I can't shoot you... - Myra opposed.[br]

- Oh, yes you can and you will. Don't worry, I will not be harmed.[br]

- I'm still not sure about this... What if I do something wrong and you get hurt? – hesitated the girl.[br]

- Ain't gonna happen. Trust me. So you want to do this or not? – Ben questioned.[br]

- Okay – Myra agreed. Ben went Upgrade and merged with the closest car. It happened to be a 1968 Ford Mustang Fastback. Upgrade revived the car, its tires inflated, the rust disappeared. Then the V8 engine came to life as well, and revved several times. The headlights turned on, and the shift switched to the DRIVE position.[br]

- Are you ready? – Upgrade asked. [br]

- I think so... - Myra replied doubtfully. [br]

- I warn you, I will be fast and relentless. If you want to stop me, you must blow me off the track! – Ben declared. [br]

The rear tires jarred and the Upgrade-Mustang headed towards Myra. She shot two fire beams at the same time, but the car evaded both. And it already reached her, so she had to jump to the left to avoid the crash. She rolled on the ground, then quickly stood up. The Upgrade-Mustang reversed with screaming tires and did a J-turn. Myra's fireball directly hit the front of the car, but it did not stop. It approached the girl, who jumped with perfect timing. She stepped on the hood, then ran on the top, and landed on the ground at the back of the vehicle. She fired another beam, but Upgrade ignited the rocket boosters in the trunk, and avoided the flames. The Mustang rapidly turned around and speeded towards Myra. She released several more fire beams, but Upgrade drove in a zigzag, and evaded all of them. However, one of them struck the side of the car, cut a hole in the concrete, and the Upgrade-Mustang almost fell over, but it was able to stay in balance, by driving on two wheels for a few seconds. A rocket range opened on the top of the Mustang, and Upgrade launched three heat seeking missiles. [br]

- O-o! – Myra gasped, as she realized the danger. She knew she had to do something very fast, so she formed a fiery sword, and threw it as a projectile. The missiles went after that heat signal, and eventually blew up. But, one managed to get through the smoke and exploded in front of the girl. She flew back and hit the ground. She shook her head, and then her mouth went ajar, because the Upgrade-Mustang was already standing in front of her. She heard the rattle of the powerful V8 engine. Then it revved up, as the car came closer. [br]

- I told you: I will show no mercy. – Upgrade said and drove closer to Myra again. [br]

- Your enemies will finish you off without hesitation. – he continued and came even closer. The bumper was almost touching Myra's knees. He revved up the engine once more.[br]

- You still want to do this? You still want to learn? You still want to fight? – Upgrade questioned.[br]

- You bet I do! – Myra grinned and unexpectedly shot a massive fire beam at close quarters. The Mustang's front became deformed, and the car reversed. The engine sounded awful, it could not provide the power any longer. The headlights began to glimmer, then they went out, and eventually the car broke down. It didn't move, only the smoke was streaming out from the block. Myra began to worry. [br]

- Ben? Are you in there? Ben?!![br]

Upgrade released the car and changed back to Ben. [br]

- I'm right here. – he exclaimed. Suddenly, Myra hugged him.[br]

- Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to harm you, I just... - she excused.[br]

- Relax, relax! I'm okay! I was just testing you. – Ben smiled.[br]

- What do you mean? – Myra surprised.[br]

- Not only physical strength makes a good fighter. Emotions are very important. Fight with your heart, but don't let your feelings influence your decisions. – Ben explained. [br]

- So... My decision was right or wrong?[br]

- Don't you know? – Ben asked back. Myra did not reply. [br]

- You did well. I wanted to teach you to never give up. To stand up and fight even if it's hopeless. But you already knew that. – The man acknowledged.[br]

- I think the class is over. [br]

- Already? Can't we learn more? – Myra insisted.[br]

- No, this is enough for today. Remember what I told you. I enjoyed our time together, but I have to check out the generator. See you later! – Ben said and changed into Xlr8. He stormed out, leaving Myra alone. [br]

She decided to stay at the parking lot and practice her shooting skills on the remaining crystals.[br] [br]

Xlr8 scorched through the city and arrived to the power plant a few seconds later. With a green flash, he reverted.[br]

- Hello Ben! – Teuron and Gwen greeted.[br]

- Hey, guys! What's up with the generator? – Ben asked. [br]

- We have everything under control. – Teuron replied.[br]

- We hooked up two more transformers, and exceeded 68% power level. – Gwen added.[br]

- That's great. Need any help?[br]

- No, thanks. There's a little problem with the converter cells though... - suddenly, something cold went through the air, and Teuron did not finish his sentence. Ben sighed, as he realized what was going on.[br]

- Lantara... - he said. The ectonurite became visible right in front of him. [br]

- No, no, no, don't say anything! You're not supposed to be here! I thought Myra told you my message... We can handle things here. You should be enjoying your day off. Even you need a rest from time to

time. – Lantara complained.[br]

- Okay, okay, take it easy! I just dropped in to see you guys... - Ben excused.[br]

- Right. Now you've seen us, we're fine. See you in the evening! – Lantara jabbered and pushed Ben outside. She even closed the steel doors behind him. [br]

- Don't you think you were a little hard on him? – Gwen asked, while she pressed a few buttons on the control panel. [br]

- Nah, he must be treated this way to keep him away from the work. He needs a shutdown and relaxation for at least one day. – Lantara declared. – Now, what's wrong with those converter cells?[br] [br]

Outside, Ben still stood in front of the power plant. He knew he could go back inside anytime, and Lantara knew that too, but he admitted that the ectonurite was right. He needed some rest. So he thought of Jetray, and the omnitrix formed the alien body around him. He took off and flew up high. He enjoyed the fresh wind's touch on his face, the sun's warmth on his body. He propelled in the air several times, the freedom amused him. Then he flew even higher and suddenly changed back to Ben. He fell down with a mighty roar. He whooshed through the white clouds and when the buildings grew bigger, he transformed into Upgrade and thought of an F-18 fighter he merged with previously, and he was able to take that form again. The mechomorph ignited the jet engines and nosed down. The ground was dangerously close when he changed direction and headed toward a skyscraper. He picked up the nose of the plane and flew uprightly, in line with the building. He reached the top and went Wildwine. His plant arms grew and coiled around an antenna. Then he busted through a window. Inside, he became Cannonbolt and began to roll on the floor, destroying desks and other furniture. [br]

He broke through another window on the other side of the skyscraper. He fell down again, but before hitting the ground, he changed into Stinkfly and flew in zigzags among the buildings, then morphed into Wildmutt. The vulpimancer jumped from one building to another, using his claws to hang on. During one jump, while he was still in the air, he decided to take the shape of Heatblast and instantly formed a fiery carpet under his feet. He flew down in a spiral around a skyscraper and landed on the ground softly. With a green flash he reverted to Ben. [br]

- Wow, I almost forgot how much fun this thing really is! – gasped the man and after a few seconds of recuperation, he changed into Brainstorm and took off again. He played in the abandoned city like this for hours. There were no rules; he could do anything he desired; no one stood in his way. The night was falling when he got back to the hotel, just in time for dinner. After the meal Ben and Lantara went to bed, although it was early, but they both felt exhausted. [br]

- I hope you have a little energy for me. – Lantara smiled, and one of her black and white tentacles slowly coiled up on Ben's chest. [br]

- Everything for you. – confirmed the man and kissed her. [br]

- We have to leave tomorrow. – he said. – People are still out there, waiting to be rescued. Maybe they still don't know that the aliens are gone...[br]

- Not necessarily. Gwen came up with an idea today, which worth considering... - Lantara remarked.[br]

- What would that be?[br]

- We should uplink to a satellite. [br]

- What? How are we supposed to do that? At first, we need to break in to a military base, okay, that's fine if the aliens spared at least one. But, how are we gonna get enough juice to power those things? Not to mention how to control it... - Ben exclaimed.[br]

- Ah, honey, you're Ben 10 000 for God's sake! You have all those aliens at your fingertips! I don't know... Go Upgrade... - Lantara smiled.[br]

- Hmm. That's a good idea... If I could fly up to outer space, and merge with a satellite, it could work... But I definitely need a crew down here who controls my movements. I've never done such thing before...

– Ben speculated.[br]

- You know you can count on us.[br]

- Of course. If I could get up there, I could run a thermo-scan of the major cities... We could track down the other survivors... - the man enthused.[br]

- Exactly. It's easier than roving across the continent. – Lantara added.[br]

- Yeah, this might work... It will be complicated for sure, but it might work...[br]

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13 - Chapter 13 - Arrival

Chapter 13[br]

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Arrival[br]

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- Are you ready? – Gwen asked.[br]

- I guess so... – Ben replied. He tried to sound confident, despite the fact; he knew he wasn't sure about this at all. It has been three weeks, since they parted company with Teuron's colony, and all this time, Ben Tennyson was aware, that this moment will come. Their plan comes to fruition! [br]

Although he was enthusiastic about his mission, he also knew it was very dangerous. Only one little malfunction would be enough to blow him to bits in the vacuum of space. The omnitrix was a very reliable device, but it has proven several times before, that it does have a few weaknesses. Ben tried to calm himself down. The omnitrix was connected to his thoughts. The simplest definition: the watch was merely an expansion of his will. This is the key word. If he allows his thoughts to run loose, he's going to wind up as space garbage. On the other hand, this has never happened for a very long time. The omnitrix never failed him like this. At least, it wasn't its fault... He knew, only a very determined thought could start the transformation sequence. It was one of the safety features. At first, when he gained master control over the watch, he had troubles shifting from one alien to another. Now, after more than two decades, it was just a daily routine for him. He remembered the time, when he pulled a very similar stunt as a child, unaware of the high risks, not to mention his lack of knowledge about the device. He recklessly pursued Ghostfreak himself through the space, not knowing, that the omnitrix's circuitry could disrupt for a few seconds, when it has to endure extreme conditions. Only a few seconds... still enough to lose control and panic... No, that was very long ago... He reminded himself, that the omnitrix was not an ordinary piece of technology. His many encounters with the very creator of the machine taught him that. Azmuth revealed that the omnitrix develops with its host body, like an implant. Always improving, always evolving...[br]

- Be safe! – Lantara's voice dragged Ben out from the reminiscing. The man smiled at her, then they kissed. Gwen looked to the opposite direction. She still couldn't find out how Ben could kiss such a hideous looking creature like an ectonurite. Then she realized Grandpa Max was also in love with an alien, that's where Gwen's power originates from. She allowed herself a bitter smile. [br]

After a few more words, Ben 10 000 stepped ahead and the omnitrix flashed, as he transformed into Upgrade. He raised his hands and touched the spacecraft in front of him. The liquid mass coiled around the vehicle's body and assumed control over its circuits. He slowly rolled out of the hangar, and ignited the main thrusters. Since the shuttle's technology was highly enhanced, thanks to Upgrade's abilities, he could take off within a few seconds. He left a path of green flames behind and started to increase altitude. Soon, he was just a tiny black point on the sky for the eyes of Gwen and Lantara. [br]

Upgrade reached the upper atmosphere and entered the space.[br]

- Is anything all right? – Gwen's voice sounded quite raspy through the comlink. The radio signal was pretty bad.[br]

- Yeah. Everything's under control. I'm looking for a military satellite which is capable of what we need.

- Ben replied. [br]

After ten minutes of searching, he eventually found one. The satellite was a huge canister with four wing-like panels on each side. Ben recognized a powerful gun at the lower section. He slowed down the space shuttle near the satellite. Upgrade slowly released the vehicle and floated towards his new target. His body functioned as some sort of sail, which helped him change directions in space. Then he reached the metal canister. As he examined the exterior he could determine, the device was unharmed. It was just orbiting around the planet calmly. Ben started to shiver when he thought of its creators who are probably long gone. Yet the technology remained. There was no wind, no rain, and no rust in space which could devour the satellite. *Enough of this nonsense! Concentrate on the mission!* Ben warned himself. He quickly merged with the machine and felt the old circuits' revival under his control. [br]

- Okay, I'm connected to the satellite's main computer. - Upgrade reported. - Warming up thermo sensors.[br]

- Go ahead; we're ready to receive data. - Gwen confirmed. [br]

- Thermo scanning sequence initiated. - The mechomorph said. -Transferring data...[br]

- Good, we're receiving the result... We got one strong heat signature in LA, one in Alaska, and one in Florida, not to mention Teuron's colony in Washington... Is that all?[br]

- I'm afraid it is. The scan is complete... I expected more life down there. - Ben sighed disappointedly. [br]

- Yeah, me too. Don't you think there's more people underground, where the scanners couldn't find them? - Gwen questioned.[br]

- I don't know... I suppose these heat signatures are masses though... More than a dozen people or so... - Ben answered. [br]

Suddenly, Gwen heard an explosion through the radio.[br]

- What was that?![br]

- Something's coming this way... Holy... It's a... - there was another explosion.[br]

- Ben, Ben, come in, do you copy?! - She screamed. She heard several more blasts, and then the signal was terminated.[br]

- What happened?! - Lantara yelled.[br]

- Not sure... There was some kind of detonation. Then I lost his signal. - Gwen said.[br]

- What?! I cannot believe this! I should have known something will go wrong! I should have gone with him! This is all your fault! I said it was too dangerous, but you convinced Ben to do this alone! - Lantara shouted.[br]

- What are you talking about? This was his idea in the first place! - Gwen retorted.[br]

- Sorry... I'm just worried about him... - Lantara sighed and bowed her head down. [br]

- So, instead of pointing fingers, are we gonna do something about this or what? [br]

- Of course! Ben's in trouble and I'm going after him! - Lantara declared and braced herself to take off. [br]

- Wait! - Gwen grabbed the ectonurite's arm. - You're not the only one who concerned about Ben! Let's do this together! We're on the same side, remember? [br]

- Indeed... I just can't remain cool headed when Ben's in danger... - Lantara admitted.[br]

- Yeah, I've noticed. - Gwen remarked.[br]

- We should combine our powers. Individually, we won't last more than a few minutes in zero atmosphere, but together, we can cover more ground... - Lantara suggested.[br]

- Agreed. - Gwen nodded. She formed a purple aura around herself and Lantara. The alien grabbed her hand and they flew up together, phasing through the ceiling. They have exited the upper atmosphere a few minutes later. There was lots of debris floating around them. [br]

- Are you sensing him anywhere? I only get fragments of his mana... - Gwen urged.[br]

- There! – Lantara pointed to the spacecraft Ben used before. It was torn apart. They drifted to that direction. They have found much more debris, bigger pieces of satellites and other equipment. Suddenly, Gwen recognized her cousin. He was floating unconsciously, but fortunately he was still Upgrade. [br]

- Ben! – They exclaimed at the same time. Gwen expanded her protecting aura until it was an orb around them. As soon as Ben was inside, he was reverted to his human form with a red flash.[br]

- Who did this to him? – Gwen asked. [br]

All of a sudden, something blocked out the sunlight. Gwen and Lantara looked up to see a fleet of enormous alien cruisers heading to Earth. These spacecrafts were huge, but the flagship was at least ten times bigger. Lantara felt fear's grip on her heart. She began to shiver as she realized what race is in those ships.[br]

- Oh, no! It's *them!*[br]

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14 - Chapter 14 - Evil prevails

Chapter 14 [br]

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Evil prevails[br]

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Gwen and Lantara gazed at the alien spacecrafts in horror. The shock and the fear incapacitated them for a couple of seconds. At first, they couldn't even comprehend, that dozens of small interceptors began to swarm towards them. Suddenly, Gwen shook her head.[br]

- Lantara! Let's get out of here![br]

- Too late! – the ectonurite shouted, as the interceptors fired several shots at them. A moment later, they have found themselves in the middle of a battle. Countless ships were circling around them. [br]

- Who are these guys? – Gwen yelled, as she fired a series of energy disks.[br]

- I'll explain later! Protect Ben, I'll clear the way! – Lantara replied, and jumped out of the purple orb.

She accelerated and phased through a ship. A second later, the vehicle sparkled, then began to spin around its angle, eventually it exploded. Lantara repeated the action with several more interceptors, but there were too many. The alien pilots shot laser beams, trying to strike her down, but every time a laser came too close, Lantara just simply changed her protoplasm, and the beam phased through her body. She fought doggedly; she even destroyed a ship with only one blow of her claws. Her purple energy beams decimated the enemy forces; however it seemed more and more hopeless. Lantara was exhausted, and knew she could not triumph. The swarm of the alien spaceships slowly rolled Lantara back. As she looked back, she recognized, Gwen was right behind her. [br]

- I cannot break out! – She exclaimed in the enemy crossfire. [br]

- We're running out of options! – Gwen yelled. [br]

Things got even worse, when they realized one of the bigger ships, as it was approaching them. [br]

- Lantara, you have to save Ben! Phase through with him, I'll hold them off! – Gwen said.[br]

- No! I will not leave you here! Besides, I cannot change my plasma anymore... I'm too tired.[br]

- We have to do something, we can't even move! – Gwen shouted.[br]

- Look out! – Lantara roared, as she saw the powerful laser beam. It was fired from the large spacecraft. Before they could react, the purple energy orb broke into pieces, and the laser struck Gwen. She lost consciousness and would have floated away into deep space if a gentle hand wouldn't grab her. It was Jetray. He immediately returned the enemy fire with dozens of green energy beams. [br]

- Lantara, we have to escape! – Jetray declared and headed towards the planet. Lantara followed him.

They maneuvered quickly to avoid the lasers, as they were getting closer to the upper atmosphere. All of a sudden, the attackers stopped. They have retreated, as a raspy voice in the radio ordered them to. [br]

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Jetray and Lantara landed safely. The omnitrix flashed as Ben reverted. He put his cousin on the ground. [br]

- Is she okay? – Lantara worried.[br]

- She needs medical attention. But where?! – Ben replied.[br]

- We have to go back to Washington! – the alien exclaimed. [br]

Suddenly, a very familiar voice interrupted them.[br]

- You are not going anywhere![br]

Then, a red teleporter beam struck the earth in front of them. The silhouette of GhostKevin emerged from the smoke.[br]

- Missed me? – he grinned.[br]

- Lantara! Get Gwen to safety! I'll handle this! – Ben said.[br]

- Oh, sorry if I doubt that. – GhostKevin retorted. – I will... - he could not finish his sentence, because an iridescent beam struck him on the chest. It left a smoky, burnt gash on his skin. Unexpectedly, it healed within a few seconds.[br]

- Ha ha ha ha! This is the best you got? – the villain mocked. [br]

- That was only a warning shot! This one is for real! – Chromastone winked and shot another beam. This time, GhostKevin evaded and ran towards him, to attack. He avoided a few more blasts, but Chromastone fired them with so great intensity, that he couldn't keep up. Realizing this, GhostKevin quickly morphed into a black liquid form, so that the beams had no effect on him. He took advantage of Chromastone's straddling position, by flowing behind him. The villain became solid and instantly fired a yellow energy beam. The blast struck Ben down, but his crystalline body absorbed the energy and fired it back at GhostKevin, who wasn't expecting this sudden move. He fell on the ground, and disappeared. Ben knew his enemy turned invisible. Chromastone went Wildmutt to capture heat signatures. He looked around and took a few steps ahead. It was quiet, only the wind blew. His senses sharpened due to the intense concentration. Suddenly, he located GhostKevin, but it was too late. He acted very fast, leaving no time for Ben to prevent it. He became visible right on top of Wildmutt and stabbed his deadly, gray claws into the alien's flesh. Wildmutt screamed in pain. The strike caught him on his upper back, near to the neck. He could see the warm drops of his black blood. Ben changed alien forms, he transformed into Fourarms, then Diamondhead, then Cannonbolt, then Upgrade, then Shockwave, and Xlr8, but he was unable to remove GhostKevin from his back, and his sharp claws were still inside his flesh, causing more and more pain. As he struggled, GhostKevin's devilish laughter echoed in his ears.[br]

- Wait, it gets better! – the villain hissed and quickly jumped off of Ben's back. He emerged from the ground and before Xlr8 could react, he punched the omni-symbol on his chest. The symbol breached and green electric discharges came out of it. [br]

- Ha ha ha ha! I find your misery quite amusing! Oh, you can't imagine how long I've been dreaming of this sweet moment! Seeing you crushed, defeated hopeless... ah... it feels so good! – GhostKevin said with the most fulsome voice he could make.[br]

Although he was bleeding from several wounds, and his legs were shaking because of the shock and the blood loss, he managed to surprise his enemy for the last time. As Xlr8, he could deliver a few rapid, quite powerful punches. Ben realized in horror, that he was unable to switch alien forms. The discharges around the omni-symbol were still pretty intense. He strengthened his mind and body to face GhostKevin once more. He ran towards him as fast as he could, but the villain changed his protoplasm, and Xlr8 ran through his body. GhsotKevin solidified himself and quickly grabbed Xlr8's neck, forcing him to the ground. [br]

- You never give up, do you? Maybe I'll have mercy on you, and grant you a swift demise! – GhostKevin laughed and punched Xlr8 on the face, breaking his visor. But he wasn't done yet, he kicked the villain's legs, making him fall off. That gave Ben a little time to catch his breath. He felt dizzy. He looked at his body and noticed he was bloody. He began to see two GhostKevins. He knew his status was getting critical. Suddenly, the yellow energy beam struck him. Fortunately he didn't lose balance and managed to remain on his feet. Ben chose to retreat, aware of the fact, he could not triumph. He ran away as quickly as he still could, as Xlr8. GhostKevin fired another energy beam, but this one was different. Every time Xlr8 changed direction, to avoid it, the beam itself followed the movement. Xlr8

maneuvered rapidly, but the bema eventually caught up to him and struck him down. He raised his head and saw GhostKevin, as he towered upon him. His sadistic grin seemed more like a distorted mask, and Ghostfreak's lifeless eyes were terrifying. The omni-symbol produced a large, green electric discharge and broke down with a bang. Xlr8 disappeared with a red flash, only Ben Tennyson remained. He looked at the omnitrix and saw it was smoking. The control dials were busted too.[br]

- What now, Benjie?! No more girls to hide under their skirts... no more aliens... no watch... it's just us. You and me! And this ends now! – GhostKevin roared and struck down with his claws. Ben instinctively raised his right arm to protect himself against the blow. The sharp claws drilled into his flesh and damaged the tissues in his arm. Ben felt a new wave of pain running through his body. He tasted his own blood in his mouth. [br]

- With the help of the Highbreed I will destroy this planet and all your friends! Unfortunately, you won't be able to see it, because you'll die now! – the villain hissed.[br]

- What are you waiting for, freak?! Do it already! – Ben shouted.[br]

- I told you! Only we remained. You and me! – GhostKevin said and raised his hands to the final blow. [br]

- Think again! – a feminine voice exclaimed and punched GhostKevin on the face. He flew back. A moment later, a purple energy beam forced him to the ground. [br]

Lantara floated close to Ben. [br]

- Raven, are you ready?! – Lantara asked, and her chest closed, after she fired the beam.[br]

- Yes, come closer! – Raven replied.[br]

- Holy... He looks terrible! – said the ectonurite in horror, as she looked at Ben. [br]

- I might be able to help. But we need to go. – Raven remarked and pointed at GhostKevin who was rampaging towards them.[br]

- Do not interfere! Ben Tennyson is mine! I'll destroy you all! – he roared, but he could not reach them in time. Raven swung her cape and teleported everyone away. After the black flash, GhostKevin realized his prey was gone. He collapsed and howled like a wolf.[br]

- Noooooooooooooooooooo!!! Ben Tennyson! You escaped me again, but I'll tear you and your pitiful friends into pieces! I will destroy you, I swear!!![br]

[br]

The last thing she remembered was Lantara's warning... Then the blast... then blackness... Blackness indeed... A few fragment of memories... A black shape... a hood... and a cloak... then nothing.[br]

- Ah! – Gwen startled. She quickly stood up, but she realized immediately, that was a bold move. The pain in her torso and in her right arm seized her body with a cramp. Her face distorted as she tried to take a few steps ahead. She heard voices from the room nearby. She couldn't make it and collapsed in the corridor. When she woke up again, she was in her bed. Lantara was there too.[br]

- What happened? – Gwen asked.[br]

- Relax, everything's fine now. We were shot, but...[br]

- Ben! Where's Ben? Is he okay? – Gwen stammered.[br]

- Don't worry. He's in the best hands. – Lantara smiled and commiseratingly put her hand on Gwen's shoulder.[br]

- In a safe place... My home. – a voice said. Its source was standing in the door. [br]

- Raven? But how? – Gwen surprised.[br]

- Since our last... encounter, my senses are quite acute on you guys. I felt you were in trouble. I followed Ben's energy trail, and I saved everyone before *he* could finish you off. – Raven explained. [br]

- Oh, I see. Well, we owe you our lives. Thank you.[br]

Raven nodded as a sign of her agreement. Lantara glanced at her with a nervous eye. [br]

- I would like to see Ben. – Gwen declared and wanted to stand up. The pain immediately ran through

her body. [br]

- Easy. You need to rest for the moment. You took the worst of that shot. I'm doing whatever I can to accelerate your healing. – Raven remarked. [br]

- I understand. Thanks again. – Gwen sighed, as she bowed to her current status. [br]

- What was that?! Why didn't you tell her?! – Lantara whispered, as soon as the door closed behind them, when they exited Gwen's room. [br]

- Calm down! – Raven said.[br]

- Damn it, Raven! She must know! Ben's absolutely not all right! She's gonna find out, she's not stupid! – Lantara lost her self control.[br]

- If I'd tell her now, I will not be able to keep her in bed, and she'll regenerate slower. We need her at her full power![br]

- What about Ben? – Lantara asked.[br]

- He's injuries are much worse, than his cousin's. Despite my healing abilities, I don't think I will be able to save his right arm. [br]

- What?![br]

- The tissue damage is too intense. It's irreversible. – Raven answered.[br]

- Is there anything we can do?[br]

- As a matter of fact, yes. If Ben accepts, we could replace his arm with a cybernetic implant. I have something that might help, it's far more advanced than Earth's any other technology, but... - Raven stopped.[br]

- But what?! Say it already! – Lantara urged.[br]

- The only problem is I cannot perform such complicated surgery. – Raven admitted.[br]

- Neither can I. – Lantara said.[br]

- But I know someone who can![br]

Raven and Lantara turned back in surprise. Gwen was standing at the table. She was wearing a T-shirt, so everyone could see the new scar on her right arm. Fortunately it wasn't that thick and it was quite blurry, but it was still recognizable. The scar began a few centimeters up from her elbow and ended on her hand, near the ring finger.[br]

- You should be resting. – Raven remarked.[br]

- I felt something was wrong with Ben's mana, so I came after you.[br]

- You hear every word? – Lantara asked.[br]

- Loud and clear. I understand you were driven by right intentions, but I don't like when someone keeps away such things. – Gwen declared. [br]

- Agreed. So, you said you know someone who might help us? – Raven questioned.[br]

- Yes. He's the only person in the entire universe who can save him. [br]

- Who is he?[br]

- Azmuth. [br]

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