

Masked Rider: Fire and Water

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former Samurai Rangers, Saori and Daiki Singuji, and national Kendo tournament Leawood. Though they haven't been Rangers for over a year, they're still at the tops of their games as the Vassal of Fire and Vassal of Water. They meet a pair children that will change their lives and put them back in action. It's Showtime!

*2011

*PRSC/Masked Rider Crossover.

*Heavy Romance.

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Leawood, California 2011

It was a smaller city, but somehow the National Kendo Association had picked it for their biggest tournament of the year. Contestants of all ages and stages were gathering from all over the country to compete. Hotels were filling up surprising fast. Unless your family was already widely known in the Kendo community, owned what was quickly becoming one of the most prestigious studios, and could afford to outfit its representatives in the best hotel in town.

That was exactly the case for Saeko Stapleton. The Watanabe/Stapleton name was well known and respected. It shouldn't have surprised her. In fact, it didn't, but having that same respect shown towards *her* was more than a little disconcerting. Her older brother, Tai, apparently had had a winning streak in every bracket he'd participated in since he was a kid, with one or two anomalous exceptions. He hadn't competed since around his junior year of college when he all but doubled his coursework and began the initial preparations for building the Watanabe Bushido Studio.

Saeko hadn't been aware of any of that. She'd been raised by an ancient, Japanese rogue samurai who had become a monster called a Gedoushu five hundred years before she was born. He'd found her in a car seat where she'd been thrown free of the car crash that killed her and Tai's parents. She'd reminded him of the daughter he'd lost, and kept her. Her upbringing was not what one would term as normal. Probably as far from normal as humanly possible.

But after he'd been defeated in a duel with Tai, Saeko learned he was her brother and she was enfolded into the family, which consisted of Tai, Grandpa, Grandpa's nephews and great-nephews and great-great niece, and their deceased grandmother's niece and nieces. Saeko had met all of them. It could sometimes be overwhelming to think about. Then there was what amounted to Tai's surrogate family; the Harts. From what she'd learned, her parents and the Harts had been really good friends and when they passed away, they were the 'mom' and 'dad' for him when Grandpa just wouldn't cut it. Their son Rex was Tai's best friend and official blood brother, and Rena Hart was like a younger sister. Saeko had met Rex and Rena before he and the older Harts. Rex was frankly awesome and Rena was her first actual friend. But after meeting the older Harts, they'd pretty much engulfed her into the fold as well.

Saeko was actually rather glad to be away from Angel Grove for the next two weeks. After years of no one but her and Uncle to depend on, sometimes all the people in her life now was overwhelming. Living with her and Tai was Kiari Sakakibara, their cousin on their grandmother's side. Kii was great and sweet. Tai's fiancée, Lokelani Lyong also lived with them. Lani treated her like a little sister. Saeko really liked Lani but sometimes she was too motherly. And although he didn't live in the house anymore, Grandpa's great-nephew Kane Watanabe was almost *always* there because he was dating Kii and just generally liked to hang out there.

Saeko could almost handle all that, but the extended families were sometimes too much. Among Lani's brothers, Kane's cousins, Kii's family and the crazy magical witch person with her buff scorpion-like boyfriend who dropped in on her on whim without rhyme or reason to have tea Grandpa, Saeko couldn't

remember the last time she'd actually had a moment's peace.

She stood at the window of her hotel room watching people on the street. They weren't far from the venue where the tournament would be held and many of the contestants were also staying at the hotel. This would be her first big time competition. When she'd started at Angel Grove University, she'd been forced to join a club so she could "socialize more". Her response had been that the only thing she knew was sword fighting. The response she got was, "Well, it's a good thing there's a kendo club."

She'd been a hit. Her fellow club members seemed to idolize her brother and wished they could afford to join the Studio, and never let her be alone. She hated it most of the time.

A knock sounded on the connecting door of the suite Tai had booked. She suppressed an eye roll. Her tormentor was on the other side. Daiki Singuji. He was the one who forced her join the club. He was also the one who forced her enter the competition. He was the one who trained her. He was also the only person besides Tai she'd couldn't beat. "Who said for you to come in?" she asked him when he entered.

Daiki Singuji was tall and lean and every movement was fluid like water. He had dark eyes and wore slim, nearly colorless glasses. His hair, when they'd first met, had been on the long side and shaggy, but he'd recently trimmed and neatened it up as befitting a college instructor. He was always dressed neatly as well. If he wasn't the same age as most of his students, he probably could have pulled it off better. He pushed his glasses up his nose and shrugged. "You didn't say go away and the door wasn't locked so I inferred that you weren't in an undisturbable state," he answered.

Daiki was Japanese, his whole life had been devoted to Bushido under the tutelage of his tyrannical father so that he could one day serve the 17th Lord Shiba as the Vassal of Water. However, he'd always had a knack for languages and he spoke English like the native Californians around him. It was this knack for languages and the cultures they belonged to that prompted him to write a thesis even though he'd barely been permitted to finish high school and never had the chance to attend university himself. That thesis landed him the job he currently had. The 18th Lord Shiba, whom he now served, had allowed him the freedom to follow his actual passion.

Daiki did, however, still enjoy kendo and was in fact representing the Watanabe Bushido Studio alongside Saeko instead of Tai himself. His Lord was much too busy to compete and Daiki didn't have classes to teach in the summer term. It was his honor to represent him. Spending the time with Saeko wasn't so bad either, even if she was prickly. She'd always been prickly. He was used to it.

Saeko shrugged. "What brings you by, Sensei?" she asked him. After being defeated by him in a duel, she'd become his student. He'd released her from that a few months later, when he said he didn't have anything else to teach her, but she still called him Sensei. She'd never actually been able to call him by name. She knew it was strange, and she hoped he thought she still called him that just to aggravate him.

Daiki was too used to the title by now to even pay it any mind. "Tai wanted us to observe some of the young preliminaries," he reminded her.

Saeko nodded and gave a rueful half smile. Another reason they were sent was to scout for potential students for the Studio. "Let's go," she said and grabbed her phone and stuck it in the pocket of her jeans. On the surface Tai's motive was of course more business for the Studio, but she and Daiki knew

his other reason. Reasons he would even train the right students for free.

Tai was the Red Lord, the 18th Lord of the Shiba Clan. He was also a former Power Ranger, as was she and Daiki. He was beginning the process of filling out the ranks of the Shiba Clan samurai and Stagehands. He already had a legion of Ninja at his beck and call but Tai took his protect-the-world-from-certain-dangers duty seriously. That began by training the right students who could one day be called on for such important duties themselves.

Saeko and Daiki left the hotel suite and headed for the venue where the first preliminary rounds were due to start.

They attracted attention as soon as they entered the convention center that had been rented out for the tournament. Each of the spacious rooms was occupied with contestants, spectators, supporters and officials. The distinctive jackets they wore with the geometric flame symbol that was the Shiba crest had also been adopted as the official logo of the studio. An overweight man shuffled over to them. Though he was pudgy now, it looked as though he'd once been a prime athlete. "Miss Stapleton, Singuji-san," he greeted and gave them small respectful bows.

"Why does he get a 'san' and I get a 'miss'?" Saeko asked. Daiki poked her in the back for her tone, but she ignored him. It was a valid question.

The man looked flustered at her question. Daiki cleared his throat. "You must be Director Samuels," he greeted and held out a hand. "Sensei Tai sends his greetings and apologies that he couldn't be here in person," he said, taking it upon himself to be the diplomat. Somehow, Tai had actually done the impossible and taught him patience.

The man took the hand with relief. "Neither of you are scheduled for preliminaries today," he said.

"We just came to watch for now," Daiki explained, not giving Saeko a chance to speak. She cut her eyes at him.

Samuels nodded. "I'll leave you to it," he said. He gave another bow and shuffled off.

Daiki returned Saeko side-glanced stare. She sniffed and strode ahead of him. He shook his head and followed. She was so cute.

Saeko read a few of the printed papers taped to the doors. She entered one room and watched the match in progress. A kid in a dark kimono faced a kid in a light one. It was hard to tell if they were male or female. The door sign had merely read "Juniors 11-13". The dark-clad competitor gave a few testing moves and for a while it seemed as though would be defeated by the white-clad one.

White shirt scored a point. He bounced back to his starting position and got cocky. Saeko shook her head. "Wow," she said.

A woman next her glanced over and beamed. "He's good, isn't he?" she said.

"He's already lost," Saeko answered honestly. The next round started. White shirt strode forward cockily. Dark shirt let loose a series of swings that White Shirt had no chance of defending himself against. Dark shirt won that round and the next in a matter of minutes.

"Winner, Meaghan Stewart," a voice announced as the girl removed her helmet to reveal a pretty young face with tubby blond braids. A younger boy watching from the sidelines whooped. "Yeah! Go Mea-mea!" he cheered and whistled through his teeth.

Meaghan turned beet red when her cocky opponent turned out to be a really cute boy who stared daggers at her. He stalked off to where his no-longer beaming mother awaited him.

"Take it as a lesson. Don't get cocky," Saeko said to them. Daiki rolled his eyes from he stood behind her. She took out a business card and offered it. "My brother can help with that," she said. The youth wanted to take the card but his mother glared daggers and pulled him away.

Saeko shrugged. "Tai only helps though who help themselves," she declared to herself.

Daiki made a sound that resembled a laugh, a cough and choking all at once. "I don't think that's what the saying is," he stated.

Saeko shrugged again. "You saw that, though, right?" she asked him as they moved closer to the combat area.

"I did," he answered.

Suddenly, Meaghan Stewart dropped her helmet and gasped, clasping her hand over her mouth as she stared wide-eyed at Saeko. "Omigosh," she squeaked. "You're her!" she said and scampered over to the duo and looked up at the older girl with huge brown eyes. "You're even prettier in person," she said in a small voice.

Lately, Saeko's life took a rather unexpected twist. While competing against another college kendo club, she gained the attention from some ad executive who'd been there to watch her kid compete. She'd been told she was perfect for an ad campaign for women's athletic wear. "You're the total package! You're slim and delicate but you actually have muscle tone and look like you actually do more than vogue for a living. And that face!"

She'd been extremely reluctant but everyone encouraged her to do it. That ad and an interview she gave a local sports magazine (which included a highly edited version of her early life and eventual reunion with her family) occasionally garnered her attention like this. She took a step back and bumped against Daiki.

The younger boy came up beside his sister and gaped as well. "Nah, that's not her. She had short hair in the pictures in that article," he said.

"Hair extensions. Duh, Devon," Meaghan in a way only a tween girl could. She seemed to realize she was making Saeko uncomfortable and calmed her expression a bit. "I'm Meaghan. It's very nice to actually meet you," she said and gave a respectful bow. Devon bobbed down as well.

Vastly amused by all this, Daiki smiled. He poked Saeko in the back again to make her respond.

"If you poke me again, what happens to your finger will redefine your perception of humanly possible," she warned him with a quiet growl. She cleared her throat and gave a brief head bow of her own. "I'm honored," she said.

But Meaghan wasn't paying attention to Saeko anymore. Her attention finally caught on Daiki. "Wow. Is that your boyfriend?" she asked.

Saeko blanched and jerked away from Daiki. Then she turned red. "No!" she said firmly.

"Oh. Then he's single?" Meaghan asked. Devon made a gagging gesture.

"I am unavailable, Meaghan-san," Daiki answered. Her face fell. He thought laughing wouldn't be the best thing to do at the moment. "Is one or both of your parents here?" he asked.

"Mom went to talk on the phone," Devon answered. Both children went solemn.

"Why?" Meaghan asked, rebounding quickly.

Daiki pulled a card out of his jacket. "We'll talk to her another time then," he said as he handed it to Meaghan. She looked it over eagerly. Having read Saeko's article, she knew all about the Studio.

"Are you competing?" Saeko asked Devon.

He nodded enthusiastically. "My preliminaries start tomorrow," he answered and gave her a gap-toothed grin.

"We wish you luck, Devon-san," Daiki said. "And continued luck to you as well, Meaghan-san," he said to the girl who seemed to light up even more.

The two of them separated to move around in a few more rooms.

When Meaghan's and Devon's mom came back into the room, she was bombarded not only with questions about the phone call but also inundated with information about the two people they just met. She couldn't make heads or tails of any of it, but as long as they were distracted and happy, she was okay.

As Saeko and Daiki walked down the winding hallways of their hotel sometime later, she stared at him. Her attention had first been caught by the way he moved when he fought. Fluid, graceful, efficient. Watching him fight had been like watching a ballet. If she'd been someone who liked ballet, that is. It was still the first thing she associated with him. It did not seem to be what other people did. Others at school knew she knew him, and often asked her questions about him. Mostly girls, more than a few guys. It annoyed her to no end and she never answered. After a while, they learned not to ask. There

was still the occasional person who didn't know better. They quickly learned.

Now she studied his face. He had a tall slim nose, sharp cheekbones and a surprisingly strong brow that kept him from looking too delicate. With his ludicrously long eyelashes and the shape of his mouth he needed that. Though if his hair fell in his face then he would be ridiculously adorable.

"If you stare at me any harder, my face may melt off," he said.

She didn't respond. She frowned fiercely as she glared. What was her problem now, he wondered?

She'd known him for more than a year and yet she never let herself notice. But she understood now what others saw first. "People are shallow," she finally declared. She used her keycard and entered her room. She quietly closed the door in his face, leaving him more baffled than usual.

Shaking his head, he entered his own room.

Saeko's first preliminary rounds were the next day. Daiki woke her up early for morning exercises. She complained the whole time, but did them anyway. She showered and changed and they headed toward the venue. "What the..." Saeko was offended when she read the paper taped to the door. "Advanced Women, 20+." She turned around to find someone in charge. Daiki reached out and grabbed her arm. "Let go. What is that? Don't they know that pretty much only you, Tai and Rex are the only *men* I haven't been able to beat? What's with the segregation?" she demanded. "If I'd known about this I would have never agreed to come here," she declared.

"Then join the NKA board of directors and fix things," Daiki said drily. "For now this is how you have to compete," he said.

"But this isn't fair to the other competitors," she said. Other people were starting to look at her.

"Keep your voice down. No, not everyone was trained by an ancient samurai Gedoushu, but there still be viable competition for you. Don't get cocky," he reminded her.

She glowered at him but entered the room. He had a point. She hated when he was right.

Daiki watched her matches. Despite what he'd told her, he didn't actually expect her to face too much actual competition. Not early on anyway. He admired that she didn't show off or draw things out unnecessarily. When it came to actual matches, she put aside that feisty personality of hers.

Partway through the matches, he was quietly joined by Meaghan Stewart. She beamed at him but quickly turned her attention back to the matches.

"How's your brother doing?" he asked.

"He keeps getting bumped back for some reason," she answered with a shrug and an eye roll. "Wow. She's amazing. Why isn't she your girlfriend? Don't you like her?" she asked absently.

Daiki blinked and was glad she didn't really seem to be expecting answer. Saeko finished a match and took off her helmet shook out her hair as she approached to get a drink of water. The long hair was still a bit disconcerting. When they'd met, her hair had been short, white and nearly shaved on one side. She'd eventually died it a more natural dark brown color and left it short and flippy, but for an ad shoot she'd done a week ago, the company had put extension in her hair to make it long and wavy. Both Lani and Kii had refused to help her take them out. So it draped around her in interesting ways when she didn't have it braided.

Her face was flushed from exertion and sweat clung to her temples. She gave a brief smile to Meaghan. The girl beamed and gave two thumbs up. "You're kicking butt out there. I've never seen anyone that amazing," she declared.

Saeko raised her eyebrows. "Stick around a few days. You might see something even better," she said and made it a point to not look at Daiki.

Meaghan, however, happened to be quite perceptive and glanced at him, her mini-crush growing even more. "I'd better go see if Dev's gotten to go yet. Good luck, Saeko!" she said. She jumped to her feet and waved at them with both hands and dashed out.

Saeko let out a breath. "She's Kii if she hadn't been oppressed by her overbearing mother and wretched sisters," she declared.

Daiki snapped his fingers. "That's it exactly," he agreed. They shared a smile at that. Feeling heat creep up her face, Saeko turned away and took a long drink of her water.

Something strange happened a few nights later. Saeko and Daiki were sleeping in their perspective rooms, when the hotel began to rattle. They both came wide awake and listened for a moment. Then they ran out to the balcony. Admittedly most people probably didn't even notice the vibration of the hotel. They weren't most people. A bright light shot through the sky and quickly disappeared over the horizon.

"That was strange. Should we ask Dr. Billie about it?" Saeko asked and turned her head.

"If it's anything, she'd contact us first," Daiki answered and glanced at her. They both froze. "What are you wearing?" he asked. Even though startled he'd remembered to put his glasses on. And now he stood gazing at a picture he didn't think existed outside of the manga Kii drew. The slight breeze at strands of her hair and it wrapped around and clung to parts of her that were barely covered by whatever she called herself wearing. A loose cami hit about upper-mid thigh with lacy sleep-shorts beneath.

Her cute, pouty, pink mouth tugged downward and she shrugged, one strap of the cami falling over her shoulder. "Sleep clothes," she answered. "At least I'm covered," she declared and jutted her chin toward him, indicating the fact he only wore a pair of blue plaid pajama bottoms.

Daiki sputtered. "You call that covered?" he asked indicating her lower half. She had legs for miles and the shorts did a poor job of hiding that fact.

She narrowed her eyes and strode toward him. She poked him in the chest. "At least I'm not showing off," she said. "You have a bad habit of that. It's like you want me to see," she said.

Daiki reared his head back. "What-what-what are you even saying? Are you talking about when you used to follow me around and spy on me?" he asked.

Saeko colored. "I didn't spy on you in any untoward moments, thank you very much. I only followed you around when you left the grounds," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. "And you should thank me for doing it. There are countless times when I probably saved your life," she added. "But, no, I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about after I moved into the house," she said.

Daiki sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose under his glasses. "I really don't recall prancing around shirtless--"

"Well, you did," she interjected.

"So when I did, you just happened to notice?" he asked.

It was Saeko's turn to sputter. "Well, unlike you I'm not half blind," she rallied.

Daiki stared at her smug expression and fought the urge to smile. She narrowed her eyes. "Are you laughing at me?" she demanded, now putting her fists on her hips. His eyes dipped when that action made her jut out her chest a little. He suddenly didn't feel like smiling anymore. He shook his head. She blinked at his sudden change of expression. A long taut silence stretched. She touched her tongue to her lips briefly. "Daiki?" she asked quietly, heat crawling up her cheeks as she said his name.

He inhaled deeply and let it out slowly. "I may lack experience but I'm intelligent and perceptive. I think I'd perform well," he said suddenly.

"Wh-what? P-p-perform what?" she asked, thrown.

"Kissing to start with," he said and stepped even closer to her.

Her eyes went wide. "Okay, I was raised by an overprotective samurai with a Gedoushu form. I know why I lack experience. Why do you?" she found herself asking.

"I was raised by tyrannical samurai who barely let me have time to do my school work," he answered and reached out, putting a hand on her waist.

"Oh," she said. She didn't resist when he pulled her closer. Before she could ask him to clarify what he meant by "to start with", he'd closed the distance between them and pressed his lips against hers. This time she didn't hate that he was right. He was indeed perceptive and she was fairly certain he performed very well.

Saeko and Daiki finally got a chance to meet Meaghan and Devon's mother the following day. She was a neat, pleasant woman with a workable blond bob. "Hi, I'm Molly Stewart," she said and shook hands with both of them. "I'm so sorry for not being able to meet with you sooner. My husband is," there was a brief pause, "overseas on business and talking with him is essential right now," she explained.

"It's quite all right," Daiki assured her. "My brother is in Japan right now so getting a chance to talk with each is a drop-everything-else ordeal," he said, completely understanding.

Saeko bit her tongue to hold back a quip at his expense. "We wanted to talk with you about the possibility of Meaghan and Devon attending my brother's Studio," she said and handed another business card. "I know we're located in Angel Grove, but he's willing to work with parents and scheduling issues," she explained.

Molly Stewart nodded. "Meaghan has basically guessed as much and they're both very eager for me to look into it. It sounds like a great opportunity," she said. She tapped the card. "It'll have to wait until my husband comes home, I think," she said, her face turning pensive for a moment, as if she wasn't even sure he was even going to make it home. She cleared her face and smiled at them, reminding them both briefly of Meaghan. "I feel like I know the two of you well by now. How would you like to come eat with us tonight? I'm sure by now you are tired of take out and room service," she said.

The invitation surprised them. "Oh, that's very kind of you," Saeko said.

"We'd be delighted to take you up on that," Daiki said.

"Great. We don't live far. Meaghan and Devon will find you when the day's rounds are done," Molly said. Her phone rang. "I have to take this, excuse me," she said and hurried away from them.

They stood together somewhat awkwardly. Their kiss had been interrupted by a sudden summer rain shower, which drove them apart and back into their respective rooms. They hadn't addressed the issue since. Daiki cleared his throat. "Good job," he said, a faint curl to his lips.

"For what?" she asked.

"Not saying whatever it was you wanted to say when I mentioned Nii-san," he said.

Saeko shrugged. "She didn't need to know how much you hated him a year ago," she said and gave him her usual saucy smile.

"Things change. People change. And I didn't hate him. I resented him for leaving me alone with Oto-san. I envied him for having the courage to run away, but I never hated him," he corrected.

"Po-tay-to. Po-tah-to," Saeko said and shrugged. "What kind of guest gift should we get?" she asked.

"Guest gift?"

Saeko sighed. "Lani says when you visit someone, you're supposed to bring a gift, especially if you don't know them very well. She says it's just good manners," she explained. She didn't know whether she

was pleased to be able to teach him something for a change or annoyed at having to have good manners.

"I am aware of that," Daiki said, toppling her totally into the annoyed category. "I've just never heard it termed quite that way," he said.

"You're laughing at me again, aren't you?" she demanded. "Don't think you're going to get out of it by kissing me again," she warned him.

Daiki's small smile widened slightly. "Do you want me to kiss you again?" he asked.

"Well, yes. But it's not going to get you off the hook for laughing at me," she said. She crossed her arms over her chest and began walking away.

"Where are you going?" he asked, puzzled. He fell into step behind her.

"Somewhere quiet. There are too many people here," she said in a tone that dared him to disagree with her. He did not.

Dinner at the Stewarts was a fun affair. Meaghan and Devon were good kids, bright and funny. Molly was a nice woman. Her younger brother, Albie, was around Daiki's age and joined them. He'd been adopted by Molly's father and stepmother when he was a child, thus explaining their racial differences. He reminded Saeko and Daiki a lot of Kane. He was personable. funny.

They got their first glimpse of the man of the house in a large family picture over their fireplace of fair skinned, dark haired, dark-eyed man. None of the Stewarts talked much about him or his business overseas. They'd only just managed to learn his name was Dex.

Molly left the table to retrieve a pie from the fridge for dessert. "I hope everyone likes chocolate," she called out chipperly. A sudden tremor shook the house. Molly's phone rang. She sat the pie on the counter. "Excuse me," she said and dashed off to answer.

Daiki's phone rang as well. His face showed surprise. "Excuse us," he said to the younger Stewarts. He answered the phone. "Just a moment," he said and bumped Saeko's arm to get her to follow him to the back patio for privacy. She followed with a curious frown. "I assume you want to speak to us both, so I'm putting you on speaker," he said to whomever it was on the other end.

"You are a smart boy, aren't you?" the voice of Dr. Billie Davis-Doyle answered. "I don't know whether it's anything, as there has been an increase in extraterrestrial activity since S.P.D officially began operations, but there is activity around Leawood. I'd advise the both of you to be careful. Your samurai gear is powered out and you only have yourselves to rely on," she explained.

"I went a long time without such powers," Saeko said.

There was silence on the other end. Daiki could almost imagine the other woman's sour expression.

"Yes, but you weren't actively fighting monsters and aliens at the time," Billie finally answered. "If anything strange happens--"

"You mean like a giant Furby falling out of the sky?" Saeko asked, her attention caught on the unusual sight in the sky.

"Call me if you need me," Billie said and the line went silent. Daiki put his phone away as the Stewarts ran outside. The creature crashed into the back yard, spewing dirt and leaving a large crater.

"Ferbus!" the Stewarts all went to the creature and helped it to its feet. It wasn't quite four feet tall, but it did resemble a platypus without actually having a bill and was more humanoid. It had a large stone in its forehead. It began to glow.

Surprising both Daiki and Saeko, gemstones also seemed to appear in the foreheads of both of the children. Beams of light from the three of them converged and what was essentially a psychic hologram of Dex Stewart dressed in the tattered robes of a desert warrior appeared. Relief briefly filled his face.

"It's still not too late," he said. "I'm sorry I couldn't come myself. I miss you all, so much," he said. "I can't leave now, but word was brought to me that they sent agents to find my heirs. I sent Ferbus as soon as I heard. You must be protected at all costs. Others are coming as quickly as they can. You must survive until they arrive," urgency colored every word. "You're both so young. I'm sorry, I--" He looked away as a muffled shout was heard. "I have to go. Survive," he pleaded and whatever connection they had was gone.

By now Molly Stewart was bone pale and had to be supported by Albie. Meaghan and Clung to each other. "What are we supposed to do, Ferbus?" Meaghan whispered.

The creature's head jewel glowed again and two rather large, jeweled rings appeared. They hovered brightly before the children. It seemed for a brief moment as if they were to be claimed by the two. Suddenly they brightly flashed, one red, one blue. They winked out of existence for an instance only to reappear on Saeko's and Daiki's hands.

All four Stewarts gaped at them, even as they gaped at each other. Saeko immediately tried to remove the large ruby that now covered almost half of her left hand. "What is going on?" she demanded.

Meaghan gasped. "How did that happen? You can't have the Rider powers!" she said. She felt a mix of awe, relief and a lot of fear.

A sudden, urgent sound began emanating from both Saeko's and Daiki's phones. A warning from Billie. Something else alien was nearby and it wasn't a friendly. "Never mind the why's or how's. Get somewhere safe. Now," Daiki suddenly stated.

"The basement. Dex built a safe room in the basement. Come on," Molly said and began to try to bundle her children off.

Meaghan resisted. "We can't just leave them--" flames suddenly engulfed their back fence. Both children screamed. Daiki was already in motion. A few quick concise movements had their water hose exploding

as he directed water to put it out.

Saeko made a few moves of her own and suppressed the rest of the fire. "Don't worry about us. Get somewhere safe! Take Cousin It with you," she said firmly.

Albie could see that these two strangers were not normal. He scooped Meaghan into his arms, despite her resistance and ran into the house. Molly had similar difficulty with Devon. Ferbus stayed behind a few moments and gave them a quick, blinding blast of physic energy before shuffling off to protect the family he loved.

It was none too soon as two aliens barreled into the Stewart's back yard. "Where are the royal brats of Edenoi?" the voice was rough and gruff.

The creatures that approached them were well over seven feet tall. One was fiery and reds and oranges. He had a gaping maw on fire for a face. Flames seemed to be part of his black and white armor. A jewel in white should have been his forehead glowed blue.

The other was almost as tall but more feminine. She wore blue armor that seemed to be made up of whirling water, even her head. A topaz colored jewel glowed within the whorls. "We have no interest in you humans. Give us the children and we'll let you go in peace," she said in a silky voice.

Daiki sighed and pushed his glasses up his nose. "Life was getting a little too peaceful, wasn't it?" he asked Saeko.

She nodded. "It was kind of boring. This kissing part's been the most exciting thing that's happened in a while," she declared.

"Are you comparing kissing to fighting monsters?" he asked her, suddenly somewhat offended.

Saeko held up her hands and shook them. "No. It's way better," she assured him. She glanced at the two aliens. They were momentarily confused. "But monster fighting is up there," she said and gave them a smile, cute wink and flashed two fingers, imitating something she'd been asked to do at her last photoshoot.

"Hellhound, they don't appear to be afraid of us," Nereid said to her fiery companion.

"We should change that," Hellhound stated. He threw a handful of rocks on the ground.

Saeko cocked her head, "I know it's nice to throw rocks but--oh," she said when suddenly the rocks grew into craggy creatures with horns on their heads and veins of metals shooting through them. Each had one actual hand, with the other topped in sort of weapon. "That makes a lot more sense," she said.

"Of all times to be without a sword," Daiki said even as he and Saeko took stances.

"Golls! Go through them! Find the children!" Nereid called. The creatures stormed forward. The first to reach Daiki and Saeko lashed out with whichever weapons were attached to their left arms. Saeko ducked a halberd blade and kicked out with her heavy, steel-toed combat boots. The impact nearly

turned her leg to jelly and she hobbled back.

Daiki discovered the same thing when he quickly blocked a punch. A kick to the stomach had him crashing backwards. Saeko tripped over him and they went down together. "Well, that was embarrassing," he commented drily.

Hellhound and Nereid laughed at them. "The way you were talking, I thought we'd actually see something interesting," Nereid scoffed.

Saeko fumed and rolled to her feet. Daiki bounced to his. They stood side by side. "They want to see something interesting," he said.

"Let's make a little steam," she agreed. They quickly changed stances as they changed techniques. She ran toward the Golls and jumped, turning a flip and bringing her foot down on the nearest one. He exploded from the fire that preceded her quick just moments before contact. She swept through two more, using fire attacks that reduced them to rubble.

Daiki spread his arms and a dragon made of water rose around, a little technique he learned from his brother. The dragon broke apart. The bulk of it, smashed into a Goll, while the rest hover around Daiki as he engaged the Golls. With addition of the pressure of the water behind his blows, he found cutting through the rock creatures was a lot easier.

"That...may have actually been interesting," Nereid said. "Not that it matters," she said and threw even more rocks on the ground.

"There's always more Golls," Hellhound agreed as the rock creatures formed. "Take them out, we're going for the children," he ordered.

Saeko and Daiki regrouped. The jewels on their hands gleamed. "It's show time," Daiki stated.

Saeko nodded. The ruby ring glowed brightly and another appeared on her other hand. She used the glowing light from the rings to draw a circle in the air in the air. She drew a symbol in the middle of it. She wasn't sure how she knew how to do it, but she did. "Masked Rider! Flame On!" The symbol spun around and quickly engulfed her.

The sapphire on Daiki's ring glowed and its twin appeared on his other hand. He drew a circle and an alien symbol that he knew represented water. "Masked Rider! Splash On!" The symbol spun around and engulfed him.

Black leather-like body suits formed first for both of them. Over that came knee high boots, colored chest armor; red for Saeko, blue for Daiki. Long lined robe/cloak/coats came next. Along each side of Saeko's ruby trapezoids adorned the cloak as shoulder guards formed. Daiki's was adorned with sapphire rhombuses as his shoulder guards formed. Large silver belts with a hand formed for both of them. The last thing that formed were insect-like helmets. Red and silver for Saeko and blue and silver for Daiki. Each had a yellowish gemstone at the base of their antennae, over their foreheads.

All this happened nearly instantaneously and standing before the Golls and the aliens were two Masked

Riders.

"What is this! This isn't possible! Who are you people?" Nereid demanded, her voice a screech now.

The red one held one end of her cloak and gave a mock curtsying bow. "Inferno Rider, at your service," she said.

The one in blue also gave a stiff bow of his own. "Tsunami Rider," he introduced himself.

Though it didn't seem possible, Hellhound flamed even more. "It doesn't matter! Golls!" he shouted. The Golls surged forward.

Bing a Rider felt somehow different than being a Power Ranger. Perhaps because there was no connection to the Morphing Grid. But there was a power. They could both feel it every bit as much, perhaps even more, than when they'd worn the Samurai suits. The ruby rings that Inferno still wore even over her gloves glowed as she dashed forward. Being able to produce flame without concentrating on channeling it through her Ki was strange, but at the same time, much better.

She made her way through several of the Golls while Tsunami split off from her to do the same thing. He was able to channel water as a devastating force with much ease than he'd ever previously been able to. Inferno spotted Hellhound trying take advantage of his distraction by sneaking up behind him with a large double-bladed broadsword. It was too late to warn him.

The yellow stones on their helmets glowed momentarily, leading to a momentary distortion as their minds suddenly became linked. Not deeply, but enough to allow for them to communicate and warn each of danger if need be. He faded to the side, a technique he'd actually learned from her, just as Hellhound swung. The blade brushed against the edge of his shoulder guard and sparked wildly.

Hellhound responded to that by shooting a plume of fire at him from his gaping maw. Inferno was already moving. She'd jumped and used the heads of the Golls as stepping stones and ran. She jumped, landing against Tsunami, knocking aside just in time. The brunt of the fire hit against her back. The ruby rings glowed as she took the brunt. It didn't burn, but it felt like a weight stealing her strength with steady pressure.

Tsunami wrapped his arms around her and rolled them both to safety. He bumped her helmet with his. "Thank you for saving me again," he said and flipped to his feet. He placed his left hand on the hand shape of the belt buckle. His sapphire rings glowed brightly. He held his right arm up. "Sword of Poseidon!" Blue water energy formed a long elegant blade that seemed to be a blend of Eastern and Western style blades. Single edged, no curve with an elegant hilt adorned in the sapphire rhombuses.

"There's no need for you to get involved. Leave them to the Golls. We have our mission!" Nereid said as she sloshed toward the house. Hellhound growled but sank back into the crowd of Golls who now came at the Riders with blood lust.

Inferno came to her feet. She placed her hand on her belt and held up her other one. "Sword of Hephaestus!" She summoned a blade adorned with ruby trapezoids. They dove into the horde. Red and Blue energy followed their swings and strokes.

"We can't let them find the Stewarts," Inferno said out loud, trying to keep an eye on the aliens in charge as they smashed their way into the house.

"There's too many of these for one of us to handle alone," Tsunami said.

"Then we up the ante a bit," she responded. She let go of her sword. It disappeared in a flash of fire. She placed her hand on her belt again. "Vulcan's Hammer!" She summoned a large, heavy hammer with a long handle.

She gripped it with both hands and smashed the nearest Goll with surprising ease. She grinned under her helmet. "I can work with this," she declared and started swinging.

Tsunami found himself smiling. He dropped his sword as well and prepared to summon another weapon. "Neptune's Trident!" A long, large triple pronged weapon appeared in his hands. He swirled around, utilizing the fluid way he moved to take out the Golls with the trident.

They met up on the other end of the yard and turned. There were still plenty of Golls now between them and the two alien assassins. They looked at each other briefly and nodded. They dropped the weapons and their rings began to glow again. They drew circles in the air and began drawing out different symbols.

"Inferno Swirl! Flame On!"

"Tsunami Whirl! Splash On!"

Hellhound and Nereid found the door to the basement relatively easily. They found actually getting into the basement wasn't easy at all. Hellhound was using his sword and Nereid was using a long handled axe to hack at the metal that reinforced the entire structure.

"Blasted Edenoi Prince!" Hellhound said and kicked the door.

A percussion of a sudden explosion shook the house, broke every piece of glass in the house and the shockwave blew the two aliens out into the street. The Riders appeared before them when the dust cleared. "We're doing this on our terms now," Inferno stated.

Tsunami placed his hand on his belt. "Dr. Billie, lock onto the four of us and teleport us out of the city," he said. He wasn't sure how he knew he could use the belt to contact her, he just did. The only conformation he had that she'd heard and understood him was the fact that seconds later they found themselves in the middle of nowhere.

Nereid and Hellhound gripped their weapons. "You can't stop of us from finishing our mission!" Nereid said. She suddenly swung her axe in a downward arc. A blade of water was flung at them. They dove out of its path, landing hard.

Hellhound followed up the attack by spitting fire at them in a conflagration was only rivaled by the one

Inferno produced earlier. Tsunami somehow managed to find the strength to wrap a water shield around himself long enough to go to Inferno. She was struggling to hold off the flames.

He stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her. One supported her at her waist, the other he put on her belt. She gasped when she felt his power join hers. All four of their rings glowed brightly. "You can do this," he said quietly, his helmet close to her hers as if whispering in her ear.

She nodded. A bubble of quickly evaporating water was the only thing protecting them and it was taking everything in him to keep it up aside from what he was channeling to her. She began drawing. It was not a Edenoian symbol. It was MojiKara symbols she'd learned during her training as the Vassal of Fire for the 18th Lord Shiba. "Fire", "Bird", "Unite", "Water" "Dragon" were the symbols she painted in the air.

When she finished the last stroke, the ground began to rumble. pockets of steam began to burst around them. Suddenly there was an explosion as a dragon made of fire and water burst from the grow and flew into the sky.

Nereid and Hellhound gaped as the creature spread wings of flames and then dove toward them. It crashed into them and the world exploded.

Tsunami pulled Inferno around, holding her tightly in the maelstrom of steam and molten rocks raged around them.

Angel Grove, California

Saeko put her very first kendo trophy in the trophy room. Yes, Tai had a trophy room and it was atrociously well appointed. But he'd cleared off some prominent shelf space for the trophies he was sure she would win in the future.

Defeating alien assassins and winning a trophy. Her vacation from her crazy household had been quite marvelous. Not the mention the things that happened with Daiki.

"Looks good," her brother said from behind her.

She turned and gave him a smile. "Thanks. Just so we're clear, this," she said and gestured to her shelf, "is not going to be nearly enough space. Start picking out a room for all my trophies," she informed him.

Tai nodded. "I'll get right on that," he said.

She narrowed her eyes at him, but then shrugged. She was in a good mood. She'd let his attitude slide this time. "Have you settled in the Stewarts?" she asked.

After the battle, the Stewart family came clean about their identities. Through a super computer called Beta Z they had even been able to establish contact with Edeno. Prince Dex was being sent reinforcements. In the meantime, it seemed that Saeko and Daiki were in charge of protecting Meaghan and Devon since their Rider Rings refused to come off.

It was, Dex and Dr. Billie theorized, because Meaghan weren't mature enough in their abilities and bodies to handle the powers, thus they'd gone to the next available options; former Power Rangers with strong spirits and wills. He was relatively sure that once the youths were at a point where they could handle the power, the Rings would return to them as they were meant to.

In the meantime, Dex has agreed that relocating his family to Angel Grove under the protection of the Shiba Clan and those who carried the Rider abilities would be best for them.

"Yes. They're now Dr. O's and Kat's next door neighbors," Tai said with a slight smile. "I think those two kids are going to be good students as well," he said.

Saeko nodded. "We had them pegged even before all the alien stuff happened," she said with a shrug. She pursed her lips together for a moment. "Okay, serious, awkward, weird question time," she said slowly.

"If this is about you and Daiki, just don't bother. It doesn't bother me. He's one of the best people I know, and I know a lot of good people. He cares for you a lot and has since you met whether either of you wanted to admit it or not. I think Kane probably has a pool going about when the two of you would get together," he said. "That's all I have to say on the subject. Just make sure he doesn't have any weird ideas about falling on his sword for daring to love his lord's sister or something, okay?"

Saeko stared at him. She wasn't surprised by him knowing what she wanted to say before she said it. Tai, it always seemed, observed more than he let on. He waited for people to come to him on their own time. "I have to go. Apparently there's cake to be tasted and I'm behind schedule after dealing with the Stewarts. Lani will have my head," he said. He winked at her and disappeared as quickly as he appeared.

Saeko sighed and looked at her trophy with pride again. She left the trophy room and headed downstairs. Daiki was waiting in the living room. Tai hadn't said he was here. She rolled her eyes mentally. He must have come to ask "permission" as if this was still feudal Japan. Tai'd probably given him the same speech then. He did have a knack for speechifying as well.

"What are you doing here?" she asked as she approached him. "Came to talk to Tai about this whole kissing business?" she asked.

Daiki pushed his glasses up his nose. "He is still my Lord. It's only good manners to at least give him a head's up," he said in his lecture-y voice. Saeko always secretly liked his lecture-y voice. Not that she'd ever let him know that. "There's no one else around," he observed, mildly surprised. There *a/ways* seemed to be someone around.

"Not even a Stagehand," she said and eased closer to him.

"It's a rare opportunity," he agreed quietly and lowered his head to hers.

Things were just getting fun when they heard a muttered curse behind them. "Now I have let Rex know he won the pool," Kane complained loudly and dragged himself upstairs, ignoring the twin glares he was

getting.

Saeko sighed. They really should have known better. She grabbed his hand. "I know a place and with Tai and Lani tasting cakes for the wedding, I know we won't be interrupted for a while. Maybe you can clarify what you meant by 'starting' with kissing," she said and led him toward the back door.

"I've seen the books you read. You know exactly what I meant by 'starting' with kissing," he informed her.

She sniffed. "Someone sure is getting ideas in his head," she declared.

"You're the one leading me somewhere private," he pointed out.

She let go of his hand as they crossed the yard and walked a little ahead of him, "Well, if you don't want to go--"

He quickly caught up with her and linked their hands again. "I'll mind my ideas," he assured her meekly.

Daiki being meek was absolutely not right. She burst out laughing. "Come on, Sensei. Let's go," she said.

"My name is Daiki," he said almost absently.

"I know what your name is. If you're really good, you might even get to hear me say it later," she said. She dropped his hand again and faded away, appearing at a tree a few yards ahead of him. She made a face at him and stuck her tongue out him.

Amused and more than a little excited, Daiki ran after her as she led him on a chase, sometimes only her laughter letting him know where she was. He'd catch her eventually. After all, she was already his and he was already hers. They were bound together. The rings that adorned their fingers now only further proof at that.

--End--