

Phantasy Crossing

Episode One: Worlds Apart

Prologue

"It's here!!!" Valentine cheered as he stuck his head out the window of his house and spotted Pete flapping down with a loaded mailbag. "It's finally here! Hey, Pete!" he cheered and raced outside, eager for his package. Pete landed and sifted through the contents of his mailbag as Valentine ran up to him.

"Oh, hey, great. Listen, this package arrived for you from Crazy Redd. Man, what is it? It's kinda small compared to the other stuff he usually sells." Pete remarked as he brought out a letter with a present symbol stamped on it. He handed it to Valentine, who immediately stuffed it into his letter pocket on his backpack.

"I know. But Redd got his hands on something really rare this time. As soon as I saw it, I had to get it!" Valentine replied and grinned, "I'm gonna take it over to Periwinkle's house and try it out." Pete waved and flew off, leaving the human to rush over across the way to his girlfriend's house.

Periwinkle looked up from her redecorating as Valentine hurried in. She gave the Lovely Stereo one last shove and stood back, examining the placement of the furniture with a critical eye. Valentine came to a halt and blinked. Sighing, he shook his head. She was at it again.

"Val, what do you think? Does the stereo look good next to the Lovely Armchair or the Lovely Table with the Birthday Cake on it?" she asked over her shoulder. Valentine, commonly called Val, scratched his head and shrugged.

"Does it matter? You've already earned a ton of points from the Happy Room Academy." he replied. Periwinkle frowned and pulled on her backpack.

"Fine, be that way. Listen, I'm glad you came by. I need to hop the train to the next town. The shop over there has the last piece of furniture for my upstairs Citrus Theme." she told him, "Stay here and watch my house for me. I don't want the neighbors coming in and poking around at stuff. Not when the HRA County Wide Contest is just around the corner and I'm bent on winning it!"

"All right, fine. Can I use your TV though? I just got a cool piece of furniture from Redd and I wanna try it out." Val sighed and then grinned. Periwinkle nodded and glanced at the Red Clock she had placed in the proper corner for 'Ultimate Feng Shui-ness'.

"Yeah, go ahead. I gotta run and meet with Rover for the trip. I'm paranoid about traveling from Animal Crossing to Animal Acres. Only one human over there in a town of, like, thirty animals." she added and blew a kiss towards him, "Bye bye!"

"See if you can get Darwin Grabag to move outta here while you're at it!" Val yelled out and sat down in the Lovely Chair before the Apple TV. Darwin was the only other human who lived in Animal Crossing along with himself and Periwinkle. That wouldn't have been so bad, except Darwin had the bad habit of trying to put moves on Periwinkle. Shaking the thought of him out of his head, Val pulled out the letter from Redd and opened it.

"'Here's that little item you had your eye on. Pleasure doin' business with ya and feel free to shop at Crazy Redd's any time!'" he read and peeled off the present stamp that was attached to the letter. He held it out in his open hand. "Open!" he declared and the stamp popped open to reveal a leaf. "All right! Too cool!" Val laughed and tossed the leaf ahead of him so it landed in front of the TV. The leaf landed on the floor and burst in a puff of dust to reveal a Nintendo GameCube. "Now to plug it in and play my new game!"

Following the letter's additional instructions, Val had the system set up and a game plugged in, ready to go. He looked at the last line of Redd's letter and frowned.

"'Whatever you do, DON'T turn this thing on! Trust me, you don't wanna be around if this thing goes on.'" Redd warned in the letter. Val shrugged and laughed. What could possibly be bad about turning on this never before seen piece of furniture? He reached down and pressed the 'Power' button on the system.

For a few brief moments, the screen was normal, showing the game being loaded. Then suddenly, it flickered and energy began to flow from the set. A strange hole suddenly appeared over Val, who had stumbled back and held up a hand protectively. Winds howled around him and pieces of furniture began to get pulled towards the hole.

"Hey! What's going on?!" Val cried and covered his head as the furniture and other things began to fly into the strange white portal. "Stop! That's Periwinkle's entire Lovely Series collection! She's gonna kill me if it's all taken now!!" The entire room was stripped bare of its decorations and it

all swirled and vanished into the vortex. The last thing to disappear was the GameCube. The portal remained open, however, and Val looked around in dismay. Everything was gone!

"I am so dead." he sighed and looked himself over for injury from the crazy happening. There was a small tear on his shirt, the Lavender Robe he had earned from Gracie during her last trip to Animal Crossing, and his matching hat with its funky horns was still all right. "Okay, I'm alive for now, but if I don't get Periwinkle's stuff back, I'm not gonna be around for that stupid contest." he muttered and sat up. "Okay, now, let's see what I have in my pack." The backpack was empty and he still had a slew of open letters that he never got around to throwing away. "Open space. That's good." Val sighed and stood up, taking a deep breath. "Well, I'd better get to it. If I don't go to wherever this thing goes to and get that series back, there won't be much of a point to me staying here." he muttered and, shutting his black eyes tight, jumped into the portal to another world.

Chapter One

Ragol~

"Waaaah!" a voice cut through the peaceful forest of the planet Ragol as a group of hunters finished cleaning up one sector in their quest for clues and treasure. They looked up, startled, then looked at each other briefly before racing off to see what it was that caused the noise.

"Dibs on the monster and its treasure!" Perrinetta, a little Force newman girl dressed all in shades of violet, declared in a loud voice as she pulled ahead, "Come on, Denwark!" The Rukmin she had received as a gift zipped after her.

"Perri! Wait for us!" her partner, Dular, yelled and sighed. "Man, she's just as annoying as a kid sister." A red-headed Hunter with hair tied back in a braid, Dular usually had to keep a close eye on his partner, knowing she would pull on it and play other little pranks in order to get him moving so they could gather treasure. Tagging along behind him was the most recent member of their little group, a young Ranger named Elliot who loved shades of blue.

"If it's blue, can I have it?!" he yelled out and skidded to a stop as the tiny group reached an open meadow. "Whoa, it's a kid?" he remarked in surprise as Perri knelt next to a small figure lying face-down on the grass.

"Perri, how is he?" Dular asked. Perri scratched her head and shrugged. "Did you cast Resta?" She nodded and poked at the figure's back. "Don't do that. Is he alive?"

"Well, yeah. If he wasn't, I'd be screaming, 'Dead body! Dead body!' right now." the girl retorted. Elliot ran his hand through short, spiky blue hair and looked a little pale.

"Um, could he be a survivor of Pioneer 1?" he asked softly, "'Cause, if he is, we have to get him back to Pioneer 2, like, right now." Dular sighed and walked over to pick up the tiny form. He frowned at the strange outfit the boy was wearing.

"Did the people of Pioneer 1 have such weird clothes?" he muttered as Perrinetta lifted her Twinkle Star rod and cast a quick Ryuker spell. As the pipe opened, Elliot picked up a letter that fell from the boy's hand and followed the group back to the ship that orbited the planet.

Pioneer 2~

"Oogh, whatta nightmare...." Val groaned as he shifted and opened his eyes. He blinked up in shock at the face of an elfin-looking girl with bright blue eyes and long violet hair. "Waaah!" he cried and jumped up from his hospital bed. He saw the other two people there, a red head in a strange orange jumpsuit and a blue-haired teen in weird armor, and jumped again. "I'm not in Animal Crossing anymore, that's for sure! That wasn't a nightmare; I really did lose all of Periwinkle's stuff!" he wailed, "Where am I?! And who're all of you?!"

"He's jumpy." Perri remarked.

"He's not a Pioneer 1 survivor." Dular muttered, "Who are you? And where did you come from, little guy?" Val rubbed his head and winced.

"My name's Valentine Hart, and don't laugh! My friends call me Val." Val answered with a grumble. "I'm from Animal Crossing, which is basically a town full of animals and only three humans. I'm one of the humans, obviously."

"Is this a town on Ragol?" Perri asked, confused. Val blinked and shook his head. "Well, then, what's up? Where'd you come from? We found you in the forest all knocked out and all."

"It started back at my girlfriend's house. I plugged in and switched on a new game system I got and it somehow ripped open a hole in space or something." Val replied, feeling like a little kid again, "It sucked in all of my girlfriend's things and I jumped in to get them back. If I don't recollect her stuff and get home before she gets back from her trip, I'm a dead man!"

"Telepipe gone haywire, basically. No prob! We'll help you out!" Elliot declared with a grin. Perri glared at him.

"We will? Whoa, there. What do we get out of this?" she growled. Val thought hard.

"I do have my usual gear with me. I suppose I could part with my Golden Shovel for payment, if you want." he replied. Perri blinked and grinned.

"Really?! Strange sounding weapon if you ask me. What's its special?" she asked eagerly.

"Weapon? It's just a shovel. And sometimes I find money with it when I dig around the town." Val replied, an eyebrow raised, "What would I need a weapon for?"

"Perri, don't be so money hungry. This kid needs help, so let's help him out." Dular scolded and cleared his throat, "Well, Val, I'm Dular, a Hunter of the Purplenum class. That's Perrinetta, my partner and our Force user. She's

also Purplenum. And this is Elliot, a Ranger in the Oran class."

"Nice to meet ya." Val remarked, "So, you're going to help me get my girlfriend's stuff back? Is there a house we can use to check the items?"

"Yeah, mine. Do you know where your girlfriend's things are, Val?" Dular remarked. The boy shook his head and lifted his hands in despair.

"I don't know! The winds that sucked them into the portal could have scattered them everywhere! Who knows where they could be or who or what might have them?!" he cried.

"Then let's go down to the forest and start our search there!" Elliot exclaimed, "I bet we can get a good start on clues and items if we start there!" Val jumped down from the bed and grabbed his backpack.

"Then, I'm coming too! I'm the one who got us into this mess, so I'd better be there to recollect the stuff and carry them. After all, it's my neck on the line." he pointed out.

"You sure you want to do that? It's dangerous down there on the planet." Dular remarked, "Maybe we should get you suited up as a Hunter and a weapon to keep you safe."

"Nah, he'd do better as a Force, like me. Right, Denwark?" Perri grinned at her Mag. The Rukmin laughed and wiggled its feet, seeming to agree with her. "I know! You can use my old Shadow Wand!"

"No way! He'd make a way cool Ranger!" Elliot declared. Val looked at them all and sighed, shaking his head.

"Forget you guys! I'm gonna be me and just get those items back. Can we go now?" he growled. Dular shrugged.

"Fine, but we still need to get you a weapon." he replied.

"If you're that paranoid about me getting hurt down there, I can use my Golden Axe as a weapon, okay?" Val grumbled.

"Right. Well, then. Let's go back to Ragol!" Elliot cheered and ran out of the building. Dular rolled his eyes and followed, with Perri and Val tagging along behind.

Forest 1~

"So this is where you found me?" Val remarked as the group touched down on Ragol's surface again. Dular nodded as Elliot fished out the letter and handed it back to the kid. "Okay. Well, how should we go about finding my girl's stuff?"

"We kill whatever moves!" Elliot declared. Val studied the letter and

slid it back into his pack, pulling out a gold axe in its place. He gripped it and gave a few swings, then looked up at the group.

"Let's move out then." Dular remarked, "Perri? You know the drill." The Force user grinned and twirled her rod.

"Gather 'round for my famous S and D Hug!" she declared and gathered energy into her body. Using the rod as a channel, she sent the energy into her friends, casting Shifta and Deband to boost their power and defense. The group then headed off in search of the missing items.

They hadn't gone too far when they ran into the first batch of wild beasts. A pair of fat yellow birds dropped down from nowhere and landed on the grass, waddling towards the hunters. Val stepped back behind the group, wary of the birds. A third one dropped behind him and he jumped again.

"Waaaah!" he wailed and scampered aside as the group spun to see what happened.

"Al Rappy!" Elliot whooped and opened fire on the rare blue bird with his rifle as Dular and Perri took care of the normal Rag Rappies that dropped earlier. "Booyah! Drop me a rare!" he yelled as the bird flopped over.

"Are you insane?! That bird was as big as me!" Val shrieked as Dular and Perri joined Elliot in huddling around the blue bird. Confused by their actions, Val only stood by and watched them stare at the creature intently. What were they up to now? It was dead, wasn't it?

"Aw, come on, I ain't got all day, y'know!" Perri growled in a low voice. As if to respond to her irate grumble, the bird twitched and then made a sudden dash for safety. "Ha! Kill it!"

"Blue!" Elliot yelled and fired a shot at it. The Rappy tripped and slid into the underbrush of the forest, leaving behind an item. "Red box!"

"It's mine!" Perri yelled and dove at it as Dular frowned.

"Guys, that wasn't a red box." he pointed out as Elliot jumped after Perri and wrestled with her over the dropped item. They froze and looked up at him in confusion, then at each other. Finally, they looked down at the spot where the item had dropped.

It was a leaf.

"The heck? Hey! That Rappy gypped us!" Perri yelled, jumping up and fuming, "What are we supposed to do with a leaf?!" Val walked up cautiously and brightened upon seeing it.

"That's it! That's one of Periwinkle's furniture pieces!" he cheered and ran up to grab the leaf. Snatching it up by the stem, Val studied it for damage, then slid it into his pack. "That's one down."

"Furniture? Are you saying that we're risking our necks for chairs and tables and stuff like that?!" Perri snapped at him, "Are you some kind of an idiot?! What's wrong with you?!"

"Hey, furniture is extremely important where I'm from, okay?!" Val snapped back, "And my girlfriend will wring my neck if I don't come back with all of those pieces!"

"A promise is a promise. We'll help get back all those furniture pieces. Just a question." Dular remarked, "Why are they in leaf form?"

"It's the easiest way to carry them. I would say, the reason why the furniture is in leaf form is the same as the reason why all of your items come in those colored boxes that the other birds dropped." Val replied, "It's just the way it is, why bother questioning it?"

"You have a point. Well, let's move on. Perri, Elliot, the monsters may have the other furniture pieces. Kill off all the beasts and let Val examine what's left. If we're lucky, the other pieces are here in the forest." Dular ordered.

"If it's a red box, it's mine." Perri grumbled as she walked in the lead again.

"Not if I see it first!" Elliot piped up, "I hit the Al Rappy, remember?!"

Forest One was cleared easily, with none of the beasts dropping anymore of the strange leaves that Val was intent upon finding. Dular and the boy both looked at each other in exasperation when, at one point, a large furry creature called a Booma managed to drop the sought after red box and both Perri and Elliot got into another fight over it.

"What's with the red ones? Why chase after those? Are they good for Feng Shui or something?" Val asked as Perri stomped her platform shoe on Elliot's hand in an effort to keep him away from the box.

"Reds are rare things, hard to find and worth a lot of meseta sometimes." Dular replied as he walked up and picked up the box. Scanning it quickly with something he wore on his wrist, he sighed. "You two are pathetic." he scolded the Force and the Ranger, "It's another Photon Drop!"

"It's MY Photon Drop! There's a difference!" Perri yelled and ground her foot into Elliot's hand. "Isn't that **right**, Elliot?!"

"OW! OW! Get offa my hand, woman!" the Ranger shrieked, "Take the stupid thing, just get offa my shootin' hand!"

"Ha! I win! Hand it over, Dular!" Perri declared with a triumphant grin. Dular tossed her the box and sighed as she shoved it into her pack, getting up off of the Ranger who lay, whimpering, on the grass.

"She's like Periwinkle back home." Val muttered, "Took down a crowd of animals at Nookington's just to get the Lovely Bed because it was on sale for a couple thousand Bells."

"Let's go back to the ship real quick so I can put away MY Photon Drop." Perri remarked with a smile and cast another Ryuker pipe.

"It's just a phase. I'm pretty sure it's just a phase." Dular mumbled as the group headed into the pipe to restock on supplies and heal Elliot's hand.

The hunters' home was rather cozy and neat. Perri stowed away her drop as Dular bandaged up Elliot's hand. Seeing it as a good opportunity to check the leaf, Val brought out the furniture piece and tossed it forward. The leaf bloomed and revealed a Lovely Chair, the heart shaped seat achingly familiar to the boy. He sighed and picked it up, watching the chair transform into the leaf again. How long before he could get all the pieces and go home? How would he get home?

"Ready!" Perri cheered and led the group back to the pipe.

Forest Two was a bit more difficult. With wolves and Boomas constantly surrounding and attacking the group, Val found himself actually swinging his axe to fend off some of the beasts himself. He recoiled when the axe smashed into a Booma, slicing off an arm that fell to the ground and popped into the form of a red box.

"IT'S MINE!" Perri shrieked and dove at it, covering it with her body as a Hildebear, a giant ferocious-looking creature, suddenly leaped into the fray.

"Perri!! Barta!!" Dular screamed out and fell back as the beast made a swing at him, "Elliot!! Where are you?!"

"You got the last red one, this one's mine!" Elliot hissed, grabbing Perri's legs and dragging her around on her stomach as she held the box tightly in her hands. Dular rolled backwards and scrambled to avoid the Hildebear's advances.

"Guys?! A little help here?!" he yelled and lifted his hands as a last ditch effort to protect himself when the Hildebear cornered him, "PERRI!" A sudden wet 'Thwack!' sounded and Dular slowly peeked to see what had happened. The creature swayed on its feet, then fell forward just a few inches short of his feet, a Golden Axe buried in the back of its head. Val stood a few feet away, shaking. "Val?"

"What...was...that?" he stammered and swallowed hard, "You okay, Dular?" The Hunter smiled at him in relief, then blinked as Elliot ran by, still

dragging Perri by the ankles as she held onto the box tightly.

"It's mine! I saw it first!" she wailed.

"You can't even use it! It's a body part and it gets turned into a claw type weapon that Rangers and Hunters use!" Elliot yelled, "Now, drop it!"

"NO! It's mine!"

Val walked up to the beast and grabbed the Axe, pulling it out and sitting back on the grass as Dular walked up and pat his back reassuringly. The boy looked a bit pale and hiccuped once.

"Thanks for the rescue. Come on. Let's see what this thing dropped for us." he murmured softly and walked to the fallen item. "Hmm, another leaf." Val perked up and scrambled over to pick it up. He inspected it, then slipped it into the pack. "Well, let's keep going. Guys...." Dular started and watched as Elliot raced by with the still screaming Perri, "Guys.... GUYS! Knock it off!" he yelled and growled under his breath. He waited for Elliot to run by again, then snatched the box from Perri's grip as she was dragged by, "Give me that!! Man, I can't take you guys anywhere anymore." Dular muttered as he stowed the box away.

"Nice going, Perri, now neither of us get the box." Elliot grumbled and dropped her ankles.

"You shut up." Perri growled and got up, dusting herself off and sticking her tongue out, "You owe me a new outfit!"

"Why not sell your stupid Photon Drop and buy it yourself?" Elliot taunted and ducked, running and screaming as Perri gave chase, swinging the Twinkle Star around and raging at him.

"Ah, Mr. Resetti." Val murmured as he and Dular moved on to a teleporter nearby.

"You guys coming, or do you want to stay here and watch the teleporter?!" Dular yelled out. The two hunters immediately skidded to a halt and raced to join them in the machine. "Kids." Dular sighed as the teleporter took them into the building that was the Central Dome.

The group stepped cautiously along, not trusting the cave-like interior of the dome. Val was muttering to himself, clutching the axe in his hands and shaking.

"I don't like it here. I wanna go home. But I can't go home without the furniture. And I don't know how to go home!" he murmured in a frightened voice. "That's the last time I buy anything from Redd!"

"Hey! Keep it down back there!" Perri hissed over her shoulder, "You don't want to wake up the...!"

"Where's the stupid dragon that you said was down here, Dular?!" Elliot shouted. The group jumped as a huge roar sounded, echoing off the walls around them. Perri immediately whirled around and whacked her rod into Elliot's chest, yelling angrily.

"You idiot! Now it knows we're here!" she raged and brought the rod down on him again when the ranger doubled over, breathless. "If I die here, I'm going to kill you!"

"Perri, stop flirting with your boyfriend and run!" Dular yelled and raced to avoid the huge winged lizard that landed before them and blasted the area with plumes of flame from its mouth. Val jumped again and scampered aside, screaming in terror. Perri beat the ranger down a few times, then turned to lash at the dragon's leg with the rod's special ability.

"Stupid lousy dragon!" she raved as she continued whacking away at it, not bothering with her usual techs, "You burned up my favorite rod the last time we duked it out! Now drop me a freaking red to trade in for a new one!" The dragon roared in pain and took flight to escape the blasts of lightning from the Twinkle Star rod. It had been rudely awakened and wanted to feed on the creatures that had roused it from its slumber. But this creature stung and bit with a familiar attack. It looked around for easier prey and spotted one of the creatures huddled in a crouch on the far side of the dome. It was frozen with terror.

Dular watched in shock as the dragon flapped its wings and made for Val, who stood rooted to his spot, wide eyes taking in the creature that closed in on him. The hunter immediately pulled out a small handgun and began firing desperately, hitting the dragon's wings, tail, feet, anything that was within range.

"Val! Run! For the love of heavens, run!" he shouted. The boy stared up at the dragon, too scared to move. Perri ran by Dular, throwing her rod aside as she reached out her hands for Val.

"Move it, kid!" she declared and grabbed him, darting aside as the huge lizard dove at the spot where they had been moments before. "Elliot! Make yourself useful and shoot the stupid thing!" she yelled out.

"You stepped on my shootin' hand again, woman!" the ranger yelled, waving the bandaged hand and holding his rifle with the other, "After that beating you gave me, defend your own ungrateful tail!" Perrinetta frowned and glanced up at her Mag. Denwark winked and lifted one sleeved hand.

"Denwark, you precious little Rukmin, I could kiss you!" she cooed at him, "Go right on ahead!" Denwark nodded and focused, eyes becoming dark and lidded.

Meantime, the dragon resurfaced and roared in a fury. The irritating creature had stolen away its food! It landed again and took a deep breath, ready to flood the area with flames once more.

"Now!" Perri declared, throwing her hand out at the dragon while her other arm held Valentine close. "Estlla!"

"Meru!" Denmark cried out his pet name for his former master and unleashed a huge multi-colored dolphin that shot straight into the beast. The energy from the summon overwhelmed the dragon and it fell aside, battered and lifeless.

"Perri! How's Val holding up?" Dular cried, running up to them with her rod in hand as the Rukmin sat on her shoulder, resting.

"Not too great and not too bad. I'm surprised he didn't wet his shorts." Perri remarked, setting Val down.

"Big...big...big..." the boy stammered, pointing a shaky finger at the dragon. The Forcer rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, big and stupid. Now, where's that red?" she muttered, walking off to the body for a closer look.

"Not fair! You got one already! It's mine!" Elliot wailed, struggling with his rifle and injured hand. Perri snooped around, spotted the item and frowned. She stood back and scratched at the tip of her nose.

"Yo, Val! It's another leaf thing! Come here and get it!" she called out. Val didn't stop shaking as he very cautiously walked over to her. "It's dead, don't worry about it." the newman remarked in exasperation.

"I'm more worried about it falling on us." Val managed to mutter as he picked up the leaf and studied it. He packed it away and sighed. "I never thought that I'd be in a place like this; fighting monsters to get pieces of furniture. Where could the rest of the pieces be?" Dular packed his gun away and walked up to them.

"Probably scattered in the caves below this complex." he replied and pointed at the hole the dragon had punched into the ground. "We can use that to get down there." Val blinked tiredly at the hole. The world began to spin around him. "Val? Are you okay? You look like you're about to...." Dular went on worriedly.

Val didn't hear the rest, only fell back to the ground and welcomed the blissful darkness that suddenly washed over him.

Chapter Two

Pioneer 2~

Val awoke to the smell of food and sat upright in a flash. Was everything a dream? He looked around quickly and sighed. No, he really was on a weird ship with weird people collecting furniture from the bodies of weird monsters. He put his head in his hands and groaned loudly. He wasn't meant for this kind of thing.

"Hey, Val! You're awake!" Elliot remarked cheerfully and shouted at the kitchen nearby, "Perri! Dular! He woke up!" Val looked up at him and found him sitting on a couch with him.

"Meru!" Denwark grumbled and shoved his head under a throw pillow, also awakened from his nap by the ranger's yell. Perri stuck her head out of the kitchen and smiled brightly.

"Hey, all right! Just in time for lunch! We're gonna stock up on supplies and then head down to the caves, okay with you, Val?" she remarked as she came out with a platter of sandwiches and cookies. "We're basically broke, not many missions available for us, so I hope you like simple meals."

"Um, okay, thanks." Val murmured and looked down at his Golden Axe on the table near him. It had been cleaned up and shone brightly. Dular entered the room with several cups in one arm and a pitcher of juice. He noticed the pensive face on the boy and looked worried.

"Val? Are you sure you're all right?" he asked. Val swung his legs around and stood up, grabbing the axe in one hand. He looked determined.

"Those things have my girlfriend's furniture series." he muttered and reached into his pack, pulling out the two leaves. He tossed them onto the floor and watched them pop open to reveal the Lovely Lamp and Lovely Armchair. Perri blinked at them.

"Hey, that's actually kinda cute. I wonder if we can get something like that for our house." she mumbled. Val took them down and repacked them.

"We eat fast and then head out. I'm not going to let Periwinkle down! I promised to take care of her home until she got back and I'm going to get every last piece of it back!" Val declared angrily, "I was going to play the game I got and work up the courage to ask her to marry me and then this happened! Well, I'm going to get it all back, go home and pop the question! And no monster, no matter how big, no matter how scary, no matter how powerful, is gonna keep me from achieving my dreams!" He thrust his fist into

the air as he finished. The others stared at him in silence.

"Wow. Didn't think you had the guts to take on Ragol, little dude." Elliot remarked and bit into a cookie. Perri grinned hugely and set the platter down.

"Oh yeah! Now we're in business! Monsters, treasure and furniture! Here we come!" she declared and lifted her fist too. Val laughed and grabbed a sandwich.

"Right after lunch." he finished and took a bite.

Cave, Level 1~

Dular, Perrinetta, Elliot, and Valentine, a most unlikely group of heroes. They stood in the first section of the caves, ignoring the lava that flowed around them and the blistering heat that would have killed them had they left behind their hunter gear. Val glanced down briefly at his arm. Dular had insisted that he be somewhat equipped to handle the planet and so gave him a strange wristband that contained many devices he had never seen before. One of them was making sure his temperature was normal and that the heat didn't affect him too badly.

"Okay, everyone ready?" Dular asked. Perri swapped her Twinkle Star at home with a Burning Rod, figuring the fire element and her collection of Foie techniques could handle the monsters better than the rare she had before. She held it up and nodded. "Elliot?" The Ranger pat his rifle and grinned. He had yet to come across a rare weapon of his own. "Val?" Dular asked softly, tightening his grip on the Calibur he had found long ago.

"Let's go!" Val growled, Golden Axe in hand. Perri twirled the rod and cast her spells, then raced out with her friends to clear the caves.

Sensing and seeing the intruders to their domain, beasts of all shapes and sizes descended on the tiny group. Elliot stayed far from them, picking off strange green and pink creatures called Evil Sharks and Pal Sharks before they got too close to the group. Perri activated the special power of her rod each time she swung it at a monster, yelling in triumph whenever they dropped a box as they died.

"Anything yet, Val?!" Dular shouted, swinging his sword through a pair of large white flowers that snapped at him viciously. The boy swung the axe and let it fly, slamming it into the side of a strange small dragon that tried to fly away from the slaughter. It dropped to the ground and added to the mess that was gathering on the floor. Val ran up to examine it and ripped the

Golden Axe out, frustrated.

"Nothing! It must be deeper in the level!" he called back, "What are these things?!" Perri huffed and puffed as she fired off a few quick Foie spells.

"That was a Nano Dragon! And thanks for taking it out! If it killed other monsters first, it would get stronger from their essence!" she yelled, "Don't ask how it works, it just does! And Dular's got his hands full with Poison Lilies! Give him a hand!"

The group cleared the area and traveled onwards, fighting whatever came at them and letting Val sift through the remains in search of the leaves he needed. Dular watched over the hunters as he poked around a mass of bodies in one particularly large and nasty room.

"Meru!" Denwark squeaked happily as Perri handed him a small capsule. He popped it into his mouth and spun in joy in the air, hands up on his cheeks as he squealed again.

"Trimates again?" Elliot asked with a frown, "We don't have many of those, you know." Perri stuck her tongue out at him and cracked open a second capsule. Silvery energy flowed out of it and surrounded her, winking out view as she absorbed it into her body. "We don't have many Difluids left either."

"Nothing!" Val suddenly shouted and kicked at the broken remnants of a Grass Assassin, a giant preying mantis-like creature that he had whacked with his Golden Net as a distraction while Dular finished it off. The hunter lifted his arm and watched a holographic map form above it. It spun slowly as he studied it.

"We have two or three rooms left before we hit the teleporter that was set up here by WORKS. Maybe they have some more pieces." he replied. Val shouldered the axe and sighed.

"Okay, let's keep going then. Funny, my body doesn't seem to hurt as much anymore. At first, all this fighting was killing me, now it just aches a bit here and there." he murmured and shrugged. The group pulled together and headed off once again.

"Incoming!" Elliot cried as the group fought back ferociously. The last room had been pitch black with darkness. Val darted around, weaving past unseen enemies to reach a glowing switch at the far side of the room. When the cave was lit up, they could see the ambush that had gotten them. Taken by surprise, Dular dropped the Calibur in favor of the daggers he carried for up close and personal hits. Perri held her rod out defensively, blocking the

blows from the Sharks' bladed arms and trying to find an opening for a counterattack. Elliot couldn't get out of range to use his rifle well and began punching whatever moved before him to keep them away from his friends.

"Hang on! I'm coming!" Val cried and hacked away at the monsters from behind with his axe. The beasts dispersed some to find him out and fight back, giving the hunters enough room to scatter and really fight back. Perri channeled her energy and thrust out both hands at one group of monsters.

"Rafoie!" she cried and smiled as the Sharks fell under the massive blast of fire that suddenly erupted among them. She jumped when she heard a cry of pain and looked around. Elliot stumbled and fell from a blow dealt by a strangely bulky creature that had joined in suddenly. "Elliot! That's a Vulmer! Get away from it!" she cried and screamed as it chased after the stumbling ranger. "Dular! A Vulmer's chasing Elliot!"

"Hands full!" Dular yelled as he fought to get out of a corner a trio of Sharks put him in. Val scampered in from out of nowhere, a Golden Shovel in one hand, a strange white orb in the other. Tossing the ball up, Val quickly dug up a hole in front of him and watched the orb fall into it. He then covered up the pit and grinned at the star shape that appeared before him.

"Elliot! Run this way and jump when I say!" he cried and took some steps back. The ranger raced towards him, quickly followed by the beast. "Now!" Elliot leaped over the star shape and collapsed in a tired heap on the floor. The Vulmer continued running and stepped on the star, activating the orb. The pit fell open under it and the beast was trapped, struggling and roaring in a fury.

"What in the world?" Perri remarked in surprise as Val tossed aside the shovel and grabbed his axe. Lifting it up high, he brought it down with a satisfying Thunk! right in the creature's head, killing it instantly. "Elliot! Val! You guys okay?!" the Forcer cried. Dular finished off the last Shark and sighed tiredly, walking up to the two boys. He knelt by Elliot and examined him as Val snatched a roll of paper from the Vulmer's claw and kicked it in the head again out of spite.

"He's hurt pretty bad. That was a critical hit." Dular murmured as Perri ran up to them, "Try your Resta spell, maybe it will help him." The newman nodded shakily and closed her eyes, bringing her hands up to her heart.

"Heal, my friend. Resta, restore his strength and health." she whispered and held out her hands, channeling restorative energy through her and into the silent ranger. She pulled back and waited anxiously. Elliot

stirred after what seemed like an eternity and groaned.

"The red box is mine." he muttered, eyes fluttering open and looking around in a daze. Perri laughed in relief and shook her head as Dular smiled and sat back.

"In your dreams, Shooter Boy!" she retorted and helped him to his feet, "Well, Val? Anything?" Valentine walked up to them and held up the roll with a triumphant grin.

"Got the Lovely Wallpaper! And I saw something red over in that corner...." he added, pointing at the distance. Perri immediately shoved Elliot down and ran off, stepping on his chest as she did so.

"Mine! It's mine! I saw it first!" she yelled as Elliot scrambled to give chase. Dular looked after them and sighed.

"That's not a red box. That's the teleporter to the second level." he grumbled. Val laughed and walked with him towards it.

"Well, least they got there quicker than last time." he remarked brightly, picking up his shovel as they passed it by.

Caves, Level 2~

As the group traveled through the caves, Val rubbed his head again and winced when he felt the bump on the back of his head. He had gotten his first whack from Perri once she learned the red he had spotted was the teleporter and not a box. The group stepped into the depths of the caves' second level and paused in awe of the cool air and pools of sparkling water. The crystalline walls and lush plant-life made it look so peaceful, despite the many monsters they had battled through mere moments before.

"I always feel so calm here." Perri murmured and ran to one of the pools, laughing, "I'm thirsty! How about you, Denwark?" The mag cheered and knelt by her to drink some of the clear cool water. The other hunters joined her soon after and sat around to rest. Val took the time to check his pack and began putting leaves into the envelopes. Dular watched with interest as the leaves transformed into stamps on the envelopes. After he had all the furniture and the wallpaper stowed away on them, Val slid the letters into a separate pocket in his pack. He sighed and leaned back against a tree, looking up at the floating jelly-fish like creatures with a wistful look.

"I wonder how Periwinkle's doing. Is she home yet or is she still in Animal Acres?" he murmured and looked at Dular with a grin. "My parents were about ready to blow their lids when I told them some five years ago

that I wanted to go out to see the world and settled in Animal Crossing. I can only imagine how they'd react to me being here on Ragol."

"You look about ten or twelve to me." the hunter replied in surprise. Val snorted and laughed.

"My size. My world has the humans this size, I'm actually twenty-two." he remarked and pulled out the Golden Axe again. "Never in my whole life did I ever think that I would have to use this or any of my things to destroy a life." he murmured sadly, "I can't look at this axe the same way ever again. I've killed living things with it."

"You didn't have a choice." Perri suddenly put in and sat beside him, "They would have killed you first. We have no choice but to fight back."

"Man, this is depressing me. Come on, let's see if the creatures in the next room have red boxes." Elliot remarked and ran off, rifle ready for action.

"Perri, do we have any idea what Level Three looks like?" Dular suddenly asked as he and the others followed Elliot. The new man blinked and looked up at him, worried.

"Not a clue. We never made it to Cave 3. We got ambushed and taken straight to Mine 2 when we were looking for Denwark's master long ago." she replied and sighed, "We wouldn't have been able to escape if this little Rukmin hadn't given us the locket with the coded message about De Rol Lei's weakness to Foie attacks." Elliot suddenly ran into them, breathless and beaming.

"I found a Beam!" he declared and held out the improved rifle, "The scanner says it's unknown, so it must be something cool!" He ran back to the next part of the caves, "Come on! There's more cool stuff! But watch out for the Pan Arms! That thing reeks when it's dead!" The group followed alongside, covering their faces as they ran by the dead creatures.

"We've been here for hours and there's no leaf!" Perri wailed after a few more rooms yielded plenty of items but no furniture. Dular rolled his eyes as he watched Val throw his axe almost expertly at another Nano Dragon, bringing it down.

"Quit griping. For all we know, level three has all the rest of the pieces!" he remarked. Val let out a yell of victory and picked up a leaf from the dragon. "See? Found one already!" the hunter said smugly.

"That's what you said back in Cave One! And in Forest Section 2!" Perri retorted, "For all we know, Red Ring Rico's around here somewhere with a Lovely Sword or something!" Val ran back to join them, grinning

proudly as he shouldered the axe.

"You're getting better at hunting, Val. Sure you don't want to register as one at the guild?" Dular asked, ignoring his partner. Val sighed and looked glum again.

"Thanks, but no thanks. If I become a hunter, I'll just be reminded of all this killing. I'm trying to block it out, but every time a monster comes at me, it's like something takes control." he muttered and shook his head. "Oh well. Next level?" Dular lifted his map and nodded.

"Yeah, the teleporter's in the next room. Let's go and see what's so scary about Cave Three!" he declared and led the way to the third level of the cave.

Caves Three~

The caves looked suspicious. Beams and pillars lined the walls and the floor looked too artificial, too man-made. Dular looked around as the group trekked through them.

"Something tells me that this section was mined out for something. The teleporter at the end of this area must lead to the first level of the mines." he remarked. "What were the people of Pioneer One up to down here?" he added under his breath. Perri clutched her rod and looked around warily.

"There aren't any monsters anywhere here. It's kinda creepy." she muttered. Val walked alongside Dular, whistling cheerfully.

"I like it better that way!" he said brightly and stopped suddenly, eyes wide. The group noticed and stopped with him.

"Val? What's up, little dude?" Elliot asked. Val closed his eyes and held up a hand, sniffing at the air.

"That smell. Can you smell it?" he asked softly. Perri blinked at him and closed her own eyes, sniffing delicately. Denwark sniffed with her and squealed happily.

"Is that...?" Perri murmured in confusion. Dular and Elliot looked at each other, shrugged, and sniffed at the air. Elliot took in a deep breath and let it out, smiling stupidly.

"Ah...sweetness...." he sighed, "Perri, that perfume is niiiiice...." The newman's eyes went wide and she spun around, ramming the end of the rod into his gut. "Goorf!" Elliot grunted and bent over.

"Shut up! Are you coming onto me, you little wienie?!" she yelled and whapped his back with the rod once more. Dular snapped back at them.

"Perri! Knock it off! That smell isn't perfume! It's cake!" he told them. Perri halted and blinked up at him. Elliot managed to lift his head and blink in confusion as well.

"Cake?!" they both exclaimed. Val cheered and jumped, thrusting a fist into the air.

"The Birthday Cake! Periwinkle's Birthday Cake! It's here!" he yelled and raced up ahead. The hunters ran after him.

"Cake, cake, cake! Come and get some cake!" a young woman called out brightly as her sisters tended to a fresh batch from a pink kitchen set next to their cart. Val and the hunters rushed into the cavern and came to a halt, staring in shock at the cart and the women.

"Cool! Chicks!" Elliot declared and earned another gut punch from Perri. While the Forcer dealt a few more blows, yelling at the ranger in a fury, Dular and Val walked up to the cart and the rows of cakes.

"Hello! Welcome to the Naura Cake Shop! Would you like to buy some of our fine cakes?" the first sister asked sweetly. Val scanned the rows of cakes and jumped again. He pointed at one that sat alone, a circle of strawberries surrounding a printed card on top of its white icing.

"That one!" he cried, "That's the cake!" The woman smiled and nodded.

"That cake suddenly appeared on our table, along with this pink kitchen set. We've been using it to bake cakes, since our normal one is broken down for the moment. All of the cakes that come from that kitchen look so delicious!" she replied, "This cake is 1000 meseta. Would you like to buy it?"

"I only have Bells. What are meseta?" Val whispered to the hunter. Dular brought out a bright yellow crystal and showed it to him.

"This is a meseta. It's our currency. We find them as these crystals and put them in banks. We get these cards back that have the amount of meseta you put in written to them." he explained, "I'll buy the cake for you. We've found quite a handful of meseta on our journey."

"The kitchen you talked about. Is it pink and pretty?" Val asked the woman next. She nodded and pointed at it.

"That's it right there. The one next to it is our usual kitchen and the oven broke down." she replied. Val jumped again.

"That's the Lovely Kitchen! Wow! Two of the furniture pieces in the same place! How lucky is that?!" he cried out as Dular bought the cake and handed it to Val. The boy took it and watched it turn into a leaf that he packed away. "Can I have my kitchen back too?" he asked the woman.

"It's yours? Oh, but can we keep it? Ours is broken down!" the sisters pleaded. Dular sighed and scratched his head as Val looked glum.

"If we fix it, can he get his kitchen back?" the hunter offered. The women nodded eagerly. "Yo, Elliot! We got work for you!" Dular shouted back over his shoulder, "You're good at fixing things! Perri! Don't bend his arm that way! You'll pop it out of place again!" he added. Val groaned and put a hand to his head.

"Why do I get the feeling that things will just get worse?" he mumbled.

Val trekked along happily some two hours later with his friends, two pieces of the Lovely Series back in his possession. Elliot sported several streaks of oil and grease on his face, as well as a few lipstick smudges from the cake sisters. Perri walked along behind Dular, arms folded over her chest and scowling, her cheeks bright red.

"That was a cool job. Can I do that again the next time they have an oven break down?" Elliot asked brightly.

"Maybe. We'll see." Dular replied cautiously, sneaking a peek back at Perri, who only scowled worse than before.

"Where to next?" Val asked as they continued marching along the strangely empty caves. Dular checked the map and grinned.

"The next teleporter is just up ahead. It should take us to the Underground Channel. We'll catch a raft there and head for the mines some ten, twelve miles away." he replied and poked his head through one door. "Ah! Here it is!" The group headed into the red machine and waited for Dular to activate it. "Okay, here we go!"

The teleporter dumped the heroes next to an underground river. A raft tied to a small port floated nearby and they climbed aboard. Val sat down and made himself comfortable as Dular undid the ropes holding it fast and pushed off. The raft buzzed and began to float downstream, picking up speed as it went. Perri knelt by the edge and peered over it at the water.

"Ewww! This water looks nasty! I'm not touching it!" she declared and sat back. Elliot grinned and put his hands behind his head.

"How's about I push you in? Can little Forcers swim? Ha, ha!" he teased. Perri jumped up and glared at him.

"How's about I shove you in so's you can wash that lipstick offa your face?!" she retorted, her hands on her hips. Dular sighed and put his hand over his face, shaking his head.

"What did I do to deserve this, God?" he asked under his breath as Val hummed a tune and kicked his feet back and forth.

"This is like Kap'n's little boat back at Animal Crossing. I love boat rides!" he remarked brightly. The hunters settled to enjoy a peaceful ride when a sudden wave rocked the raft. They looked around, confused.

"What was that?" Perri murmured, "It can't be De Rol Lei. We killed it the last time we were here." She looked up at Dular fearfully. "Didn't we?" Elliot turned white and began jabbing his finger out at the water.

"Wha-wha-wha-?!" he stammered, shaking like crazy. Val frowned at the water. What was going on now?

"Speak up, Elliot! What is it?" Dular demanded. Elliot swallowed hard and finally steadied himself.

"What in God's name is THAT thing?!" he screamed as a huge, centipede-like monster reared up from beneath the surface of the river, roared, and then dove back in, chasing after the raft. The hunters panicked for a few seconds, then scrambled to get equipped for battle. Val curled up in a ball and huddled in the center of the raft, clutching his head and whimpering.

"Bana! Let's go!" Dular called out as a dragon-like mag flew out of his pack and took a position beside him. "We know the drill, Perri! Lots of fire!" Perrinetta took up a stance, her hands free for her to use her Rafoie spells that much more quickly. "Elliot! Stop hugging your Pushan like it's the end of the world! Get your gun!" The ranger grabbed the beam and held it ready.

"I knew I should have done as Mom said and become a loan shark." he grumbled and aimed at the water. The monster came up alongside the raft, its head hidden within a strange looking mask. Dular blinked at it as Perri yelled and cast her strongest fire spells to attack. Though the monster took burns and damage from the flames, it didn't seem to react to them like De Rol Lei had.

"Come on, you oversized worm!" Perri snarled, "Fry already! Denwark! I could use a boost here!" The Rukmin bounced in midair and spread its arms, uttering a small cry as a wave of energy flowed over the group, strengthening them. "Oh yea! Shifta and Deband! Come on, worm! Die!"

"That's not De Rol Lei!" Dular yelled as it heaved itself out of the water and bit the raft. Val scrambled to get away and stared at it in horror. "Fire spells aren't working! That's got to be something else!"

"Well, what else could it be?! The worm's twin brother or something?!" Perri yelled back as Elliot set in with blasts from his rifle. Tentacles flew from the creature's head, stabbing at them. The hunters ran, trying to

attack and dodge them at the same time. The Forcer continued using her fire spells, not sure of what else could harm the creature. At least it was doing something, right?

"It's going back under!" Elliot cried as the worm released the raft and headed back to the water. The hunters looked around, wary of what would happen next. All around the raft, the water churned and boiled. "When is it coming back up?" Elliot asked and cried out as the raft suddenly was heaved to one side.

"Now the dang thing's trying to flip us over!" Perri yelled, "If we don't get it out of the water for us to kill it, we're done for!" Val blinked and grinned. Crazy idea, but it just might work.

"Okay! Golden Rod!" he cried and pulled the golden fishing rod from his pack. He swung it back, then cast his line into the river. The hunters stared at him in shock as he stood calmly, whistling and bobbing his head along, the black and yellow floater drifting on the surface alongside the raft.

"Is he, you know?" Perri whispered to Dular, circling her finger beside her head, "You think maybe he lost it somewheres?" Dular shrugged helplessly and shook his head, unable to understand what was going on.

"Oh, come on! No one can resist the Golden Rod!" Val griped and shrieked as the line was grabbed and yanked, dragging him into the river where he vanished beneath the surface.

"Valentine!" Dular cried as Perri screamed in horror. Elliot turned white again, staring with wide eyes at the river.

"He's dead. There's no way he'll survive that." he whispered shakily.

Minutes passed as if they were hours, and as the three hunters tried to shoot into the water in desperate attempts to bring the monster to the surface, the water began to churn and boil again. With an explosive splash of water and exoskeletal pieces, Da Ral Lie burst through and fell heavily onto the raft, squalling in pain. The face mask was cracked badly and clinging to the fishing rod with all his strength was Val, swinging blindly with his Golden Axe. Hat missing and short brown hair disheveled, the little guy shrieked at the top of his lungs as he hacked away at the worm.

"Don't just stand there gawking at me!" he yelled, "GET ME DOWN FROM THIS THING!!!!" The hunters jumped and fell upon the creature, attacking with shots, slices and whacks from the rod.

"Let me try a quick blast of Gizonde!" Perrinetta declared as she stuffed the weapon back into her pack. Val's eyes grew wide and he shook his head.

"Nonononono! Don't do that!" he wailed as she let the electric burst fly out. The trail ran up the fishing pole's line, which was stuck in Da Ral Lie's mouth, and zapped Val. "Yaiaiaiaiaie!" The line snapped and Val tumbled head over heels off the monster and onto the raft. The worm flailed helplessly, tentacles stabbing blindly about as the two male hunters finished it off.

"Let me have the final blow!" Perri yelled and threw out her hand, "Rukmin! Summon Golla, the Elk of Wild Souls!" The Mag cheered and spun, throwing up its hands to create a shape of an elk above him. The creature, stamped its feet and brought itself up, unleashing a blast of energy that crackled and cooked the giant worm. Da Ral Lie heaved itself off the raft, shrieked once, then sank into the water, never to rise again.

"Valentine!" Dular yelled as Elliot threw himself at the item left behind by the monster. Val sat up and rubbed his head, pouting as the last few sparks leaped from the ends of his now spiky hair.

"I liked that hat." he mumbled. The Hunter laughed and rubbed his head as Perri and Elliot set to fighting over the item drop. "So what did we get out of this?"

"Another leaf." Perri grumbled as she smacked Elliot's hand with her rod, "Drop it!" Val collected it and sighed in relief as the raft neared a docking station. "Dular! This is it! The entrance to the mines!"

"I bet there are tons of new monsters and rares in there!" Elliot declared excitedly, rubbing his hand as Dular brought the raft up to port.

"No monsters, just robots gone nuts, or so the reports all say." Dular corrected and helped his friends set foot on dry land. "Well, how much do we have mapped out about the mines, Perri?" The Forcer brought up her holo-map and activated it. After a few moments, she sighed.

"We don't have much mapped out. We bailed out in a hurry when WORKS was on our case." she answered, "I know for sure, though, that there are only two levels for the mines, as well as pathways leading deeper down that aren't classified as mines or caves."

"What could they be then?" Val asked, smoothing down his hair and holding the two golden items in one arm. Perri shrugged. "That doesn't tell us much."

"The only sure way to find out is to explore it and finish mapping the area." Dular remarked with a grin as Elliot rubbed his hands together with glee.

"Who knows? Maybe we'll even find Rico somewhere here! Ya think maybe the reason why you got chased so bad by WORKS was 'cause they had

her prisoner here?" he pointed out.

"That's a possibility. Anyway, I thought another team of Hunters was looking for Red Ring Rico. Oh well. If we find her first, maybe we'll get a good reward?" Dular mused aloud. Perri pumped her fists into the air.

"Oh yeah! Rares galore! Can I get a 'Whooop!'!" she cheered.

"No." the hunters replied as they walked on into the mines.

Chapter Three

Mines 1~

"Yaaaah!" Val shrieked as he ran around in circles. Perri lashed out several times with blasts of Gizonde as Dular led the packs of Gillchics around for Elliot to pick off. "What are these things?! They're alive! They're robots! They're living furniture gone wrong!"

"They're gonna drop me a red box if they know what's good for them, that's what they are!" Perri declared as the machines fell to pices after several blows. A bright red item dropped suddenly from one. "IT'S MINE!" She dropped her attack position and went tearing after it. Valentine quickly recovered and stared at her as she picked it up and cuddled it, cheeks pink and blushing. "Mine, mine, it's all mine!" she cooed. A strange, bulky looking robot dropped down from above and raised a dagger like object.

"Perri! Look out!" Val yelled and hurled the axe at it. The Forcer cried and covered her head as the axe embedded itself into the Sinow Beat's head and short-circuited the machine. "What was that?!" he asked in shock as he ran up and recollected the Golden Axe. Dular and Elliot ran up after the other robots were destroyed and helped her get up.

"That was a Sinow Beat. I don't know exactly why the people of Pioneer 1 would wanted to have built them, or why they have these mines here." Dular remarked, "Well, Perri, are you happy? You nearly got decapitated over a red box!"

"It's my red box." Perrinetta murmured shakily, hugging the item tightly. "TP/Revival."

"From a Gillchic?!" Elliot exclaimed. The girl shook her head.

"It was funky looking. The plate on it said Gillchich." she answered and opened the box. An odd square chip fell into her palm and she plugged it into a slot on her armband. "I'm just wondering if it's normal for those things to drop units for mental abilities."

"Not for our clan, as far as I know." Dular murmured, "Or Elliot's. Don't the Redria boast that they find the best defensive gear?"

"Maybe. Val, did you check the area yet?" Elliot muttered, scratching his head. Val shook his head and set out in search of the next leaf, kicking over bits and pieces of robots to see if a green leaf lay hidden among the debris. "Okay, so while he's doing that, what are we going to do about this place? And Rico? Don't we have any knowledge as to what's going on with everything here?"

"We know that someone is hiding something. It's weird, like the people of Coral are being manipulated to come here. Didn't Zoke say several times before he died for Pioneer 2 to turn back?" Perri asked, "I think there's something really, really wrong with Ragol, and none of the government officials or the military want to let us know about it."

"Rico is missing, the people of Pioneer 1 all disappeared when that explosion went off, the Central Dome is missing a percentage of materials in construction, even the three AIs are involved in this!" Dular sighed, "Remember that one guy who went on that mission with Montague? He said that there were three computer AIs that were sent with Pioneer 1 to Ragol. All three survived, but only two have been found here in this section of Ragol."

"So where's the third?" Elliot asked in confusion. Dular shrugged. "This is too weird. It's a conspiracy!" he declared, "We're all gonna die and we'll never know what killed us!"

"Shut up!" Perri snapped, "We're not gonna die! We're gonna find Rico and she'll tell us what the heck's goin' on and then we'll all get back on the ship and hightail it back to Coral! The planet may be messed up, ecologically speaking, but it sure as heck doesn't have giant monsters that wanna skewer us on their appendages!"

"Perri, what did I say about using big words around Elliot?" Dular sighed and jumped when Val suddenly shrieked. "Val!" The three hunters raced towards the direction of the voice and stopped short of strange red robot that held the little man under one arm. "That thing! It's a Sinow Red! I've heard of those things!" Dular cried, "Valentine! Get away from it!"

"I'm trying! This thing jumped me when I got to the far end of the room!" Val yelled, struggling to get free. The machine faced off against the hunters, who took up fighting stances in preparation for a battle. Instead of launching an attack, the Red merely turned on them and leaped nimbly away, silently signalling a pack of Sinow Blues to drop down and surround the group. "Guys! Help!" Val cried helplessly, reaching out to the hunters as they began to fight off the horde of robots that descended on them, "GUUUUYS! HEEELLLL!"

"We'll come for you soon, Val! Hang on and don't give up!" Dular yelled and suddenly fell under as three more Blues closed in on him. Val could only shriek and kick as the Red sped away deeper into the mines.

It was sometime later that Val was finally dumped onto the floor of one room. The Sinow Red stood nearby as a group of men blinked down at him.

Val scrambled to get up and rubbed his head, scowling. One Ranger tapped another on the shoulder.

"This is the kid that's been reported to be a Pioneer 1 survivor?" he asked the obviously-in-charge Ranger. The leader shrugged confusedly and studied Val cautiously.

"Hey, kid. Who're you and what are you doing with that bunch of troublemakers in our turf?!" he barked after a moment. Val brushed himself off and glared up at him.

"You the guy who sicced this thing on me?" he asked, jerking a thumb back at the machine that still stood waiting behind him. The ranger waved his hand at it and the robot left the room. "How'd you get that thing under your control anyway?"

"That's none of your concern. Just answer my questions!" the ranger snapped.

"Name's Valentine. I'm here in search of furniture." Val answered shortly, "Where are my friends? Last I saw them, your walking robo-stereo sicced a pack of his pals on them. They'd better be okay, or you'll get it from me!" The group only laughed.

"You threaten us? Members of the powerful Black Paper organization? Don't you know anything about us, kid?" the ranger snickered.

"Why should I be scared of stationary? And don't call me 'kid'!" Val snorted, "Where am I? I demand you take me back to my friends! They need my help!" The ranger grinned knowingly at him.

"My name is L'zac Gerun, and this is the second level of the mines. You're not going anywhere. We have some...tests...for you to undertake." he revealed and the dark smile grew wider as the men around him continued laughing. Val blinked and shrank back as they closed in on him, suddenly feeling very small and wishing for the warm comforts of his home in Animal Crossing.

"Down! Down! Back! Back! Go! Go!" Perri yelled as she whacked her rod down on the last Sinow Blue's head, jamming it and the rest of its packmates down a cramped drainage pipe. Dular winced as Elliot wrapped his arm in bandages. The three hunters had finally destroyed the horde of robots, but not without suffering a few injuries of their own. Pushan hung upside down from a beam in the ceiling as Elliot finished tending to Dular's gashed arm and turned to start on Perri's leg, which suffered from a few cuts and was stained deep crimson.

"Perri, cut that out. You'll clog it up and then we'll have weird gunk

backing up on us later on. I know it." Dular sighed and rested his cheek on one fist. Perri ignored him, still jabbing at the piles of parts until the rod finally snapped in two. "Well, now you've broken your weapon."

"I don't care!" she screamed and glared at him, eyes full of angry tears. She was heaving and Rukmin was floating behind Dular, too afraid of Perri's current state to be near her. "That thing's got Val and for all we know it might have turned him inside out and splattered him all over the walls!" Elliot winced and wrapped the white gauze around her left leg a few more times. "We've gotta find him! Fast! Before anything happens to him!"

"In the condition we're in, we're more likely to get killed than Val is." Elliot finally said, finishing up and stepping back to admire his handiwork. "Nice."

"Stop staring at my legs!" Perri yelled at him and shook her fist, not noticing the other assorted bandages the ranger had carefully and easily put on her while she'd been taking out her anger on the Blues. "I may not have my rod, but I have other things to hit you with!"

"Like what?" Elliot teased. The Forcer fumed and pulled off her hat, hurling it at him and then yelping in pain. She held her arm and whimpered. "Dular's right. We have to go back to Pioneer 2 and get healed at the Guild Hospital." he added, scooping up the hat and handing it back to her.

"But what if Val...while we're gone...what if...?" she murmured fearfully, looking up at him, "I'd give up all the reds in my inventory if we could get him back safe and alive."

"Then we'd better get started." Dular replied, standing up and using his sword as a crutch. "Elliot, get your Pushan. Perri, can you pipe us back?" Elliot whistled and the bat flew down to rest on his shoulder, looking drowsy. It had used up two bursts almost consecutively and was worn out. Rukmin looked about the same, staggering through the air to land on Perri's head and yawn.

"Ryuker, coming up." Perri sighed and focused her thoughts on creating a bridge between their current position and the hospital on the ship. A beam of glowing light shone up from an ellipsis on the floor and she opened her eyes. "There." They walked in and headed back to the ship, hurrying as quickly as their battered bodies would allow.

L'zac and the members of one of Black Paper's many small branches discussed what they learned among themselves. They had been baffled, then as the realization of what they were learning from the tests on Val began to dawn on them, the idea of a vast new world of resources and riches began to

become more and more appealing. The only problem was their inability to find a way to reach that world. But then again, with the backing of Black Paper's many sources of wealth, the bridge to the strange world from which Val came would soon be open to them.

"How's the kid doing?" L'zac suddenly asked one of his men. The hunter grinned cruelly.

"Not too well, I'm afraid. Our concoctions of truth serums and tests are pretty much wreaking havoc on his system." he reported. L'zac shrugged and swirled a glass of wine in one hand.

"His sacrifice will be for a noble cause. Black Paper will become even more powerful and the Alliance will be unable to stop our movements on Coral and here on Ragol. Although it would be much easier if the agents on Pioneer 1 actually made it to us..." he murmured just as a blast of fire erupted nearby. Rangers, Hunters and Forces all raced to find out what was happening as L'zac leaped up and roared in a fury. "WHO DID THAT?!" he bellowed in rage. Smoke and flames flooded the room as a young man stuck his head in from a hole in the wall. He grinned impishly.

"Heya, guys! Mind if I start a barbecue here?" he asked and hurled another few waves of Foie into the room.

"It's that demon Forcer again!" one Hunter fumed between coughs, fumbling for his daggers, "Mako Tiburon!" The red-clad Forcer waved at them cheerfully from his position at the wall.

"You guys have heard of me?! Cool! I'm a celebrity!" he laughed, "Hey! L'zac! Ya know where my baby sis is?! I promise to roast you quicker if ya tell me!"

"Why would I know anything about your sister?! Do I look like a Force babysitter?!" the ranger snapped back, "Everyone! Let's get out of here before the equipment blows and kills us all! We got what we wanted! Let him die with that kid!" Black Paper Forces began opening pipes all over, escaping through them with dozens of others racing after them. Mako pouted and leaned against the wall, arms behind his head.

"She's actually a Ranger, but she was supposed to be a Forcer like me." he remarked offhandedly to no one. "Oh well. I'll just ask the next bunch I find." He looked around at the mess and raised an eyebrow. He frowned and looked back through the hole in the wall. "Yami, Hikari, Ryoko! Enough with the illusions! They're gone already!" he yelled. A pair of Pians and a Chao flew in and giggled as the illusionary flames faded away. "You enjoyed that far too much. I'm starting to think you three are more pyromanic than me and baby sis put together!" Mako remarked and headed into the next room, "Now come

on! The bozos were talking about some kid in here. Let's see if he's okay."

In the next room, the Forcer found a small figure lying on its back on a medical table. The room itself was fairly bare, with a few computers scattered about, displaying information that Mako would look at later on. Next to the table and the small body was a tray of syringes. Mako winced and sighed, rolling his eyes.

"Here we go again." he grumbled, "Stupid underground organizations and their experiments on innocent people.... Let's see what they did to you, little dude." He studied the small figure for a second, then yelped. "Yack! That's a nasty mix of serums they used on you! Yami! Hikari! Get over here! I'm gonna need a good boost of strength for this one!" The Pians flew over and floated nearby as Mako lifted Val from the table and held him close. The small figure was pale and trembling.

"M-m-my f-f-friendsss...." he stammered and coughed. The Pians concentrated as Mako closed his eyes and focussed all of his energy on the little figure.

"What was done, make undone. Draw the strength from earth and sun. Purest air, purest sea, give the gift of purity." he muttered as a soft white light shone from his hands and spread over Val completely. "Reverser, bring back the light of life!" The glow burst into a brilliant silver flash that nearly blinded the Chao Mag that wandered into the room, then died away. Mako fell back against the table and grumbled under his breath. "Reverser takes a lot outta a guy. Hey, dude, you better be grateful I saved your life with that technique. My energy's tapped out."

"Huh?" Val blinked in surprise and looked himself over. He felt a lot better than before, when the members of Black Paper started poking and injecting him with strange chemicals. He vaguely remembered what else they had done to him, and decided it was better that he didn't remember. "Uh, thanks. You're not with the stationary guys, are you?" he asked suspiciously. Mako set him on the floor and stretched as Ryoko the Chao fluttered onto his shoulder and scolded him.

"Me? Nah! I'm the Scarlet Tiburon! Scourge of the Underground Alliances!" he replied brightly, "But you can call me Mako. I got rid of those Black Paper dudes a while ago."

"What's with the dress?" Val asked, tugging at the long red gown. Mako frowned.

"It's a sorceror's gown. NOT a dress. I'm a Fomar, a male human Force user. What are you gonna be, kid?"

"Nothing, if I can help it. I'm not a kid. I'm Val and I'm looking for my

friends. We got separated in the first level of the mines and now I don't know where I am." Val replied simply.

"Ah, well. You're in Mines Level 2. Want some help finding your friends? I can go with you if you like." Mako offered, "We'll have to find me a healing rig first, though."

"Yeah, okay. Which way to the first level and a healing whatever?" Val wondered as he recollected his backpack and slung it on. Mako grinned and held up his arm, a holographic map appearing over a black band after he pushed back on the sleeve of his outfit.

"I've got this whole area mapped out. We'll find a rig in this room here, about two rooms to the south." he pointed out and traced a route with his finger, "Then we'll follow this path to the teleporter for Level One and go through that to find your friends." The two of them headed off with the three Mags surrounding Mako, searching first for the healing rig, then the teleporter.

Fully healed and stocked with items, the three hunters ran through the level in search of the Sinow Red that kidnapped Val. Perri attacked a lot more viciously than normal, chasing after a *Garanz* that had materialized into one room and waving a branch threateningly at it.

"Get back here, you stupid hunk of metal and tell me where your stupid friend took Valentine!" she raged and beat at it after Elliot jumped and quickly fired his newly tekped Ice Beam at it to freeze it in place.

"Perri! You're gonna get yourself killed at that rate!" Dular shouted at her. "And don't break that rod! It was expensive!"

"It's MY Branch of Paku Paku and I'll do whatever I feel like with it! I bought it with MY Photon Drops and Meseta!" she snapped back and resumed beating the now defunct machine, "Tell me where the man is, or I swear to God, I'll turn you into a Technical Crozier and sell you to that idiot Montague!" Dular sighed and looked over at Elliot.

"How far have we gotten through this?" he asked. Elliot checked his map and angled it at him. "Okay, we're about halfway through it. It looks like we'll have to go down that hall over there and it should take us to the central room. Once we hit that, it's only a few more rooms to the teleporter for level two."

"Perri, it's dead now. Why don't you just leave it alone and come along with us?" Elliot asked cautiously. Perri glared at the machine as it fell apart, then snatched up a rolled up piece of carpeting. "What is that?"

"My guess is a Lovely Carpet or something. It belongs to Val. Now, let's

find him!" she declared and shoved the carpet into his hands to deal with. Elliot shrugged in confusion at Dular and the two hurried after her.

The room at the end of the hall held an ambush of Sinow Beats and Canadines. Perri's blasts of Zonde techs and Elliots freezing shots kept the machines disabled as Dular cut them down in a few fell swoops from his sword. Beyond that, however, they found the room already swarming with Sinows and Gillchics. They were mostly concentrated in one small area, where explosions of fire were erupting almost constantly.

"Must be another team of hunters." Dular muttered, "Perri! How's Denwark doing with the burst?!"

"Not ready yet! I'll take them all on with this!" the Forcer declared and lashed forward at the group of machines with the branch, a ball of dark violet energy rushing forth and spewing deadly smoke as it shot ahead. "Megid!"

"HEY HEY HEY! I'M WORKIN' HERE!" a male voice hollered, "Are you trying to kill us along with these things?!"

"Who's that?" Dular asked in shock, "And why didn't that blast kill him with those other machines?" Elliot scratched his head, then blinked.

"I show you to the frozen wastes, ice fields as far as you can see!" he yelled out as Perri and Dular stared at him.

"I set the field to burn with my flames of passion, ignited by the spark of life!" the voice yelled back.

"Rise, the figures of humanity, and show the world your light! Rise, the children of the stars, and bring us forth from night!" the two finished together.

"Mako?! What are you doing here?!" Elliot yelled and laughed, running forth as another batch of Sinows fell. Mako stood, slightly smoking from the Megid attack, and grinned at him, holding a black pitchfork in one hand and scratching his head with the other.

"Ah, the usual. Any leads on my baby sis?" he replied, "And what are you doing here, Elliot?"

"No leads on the babe, but my friends and I are looking for a missing member of our party. Have you seen him?" Elliot asked as Dular and Perri joined them. "He looks kinda like a kid."

"Ya mean Val?" Mako remarked in surprise, "Yeah! I just saved his butt from Black Paper! They messed him up pretty bad but Reverser fixed him up. He's right over there." He pointed at the hall he had come in from at the little figure struggling to pry his axe from the remains of a Garanz.

"Val!" Dular called out and Val jerked his head up. Smiling, he ran up to

join the group. "Nice to see you back with us, man." the Hunter greeted with a grin.

"C'mon, Elliot, introductions here!" Mako declared, shouldering the pitchfork as the three Mags around him waved cheerfully at Denwark, Bana and Pushan. Elliot laughed and nodded.

"Mako, this is Dular and Perrinetta. Guys, this is Mako, my best friend growing up in the Oran Class Academy." he introduced the three friends. Dular shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you. How goes your hunting?" he asked the red-head, "I've never met a Fomar in person before. Doesn't it feel weird to wear that?"

"You get used to it. I hated the hat, but the hairband's pretty cool. Goes with my short hair. Hunting's okay, I found a few reds here and there. Traded them off for my Demonic Fork here." Mako replied and suddenly reached out and snagged Ryoko before it could grab onto Perri's branch. "No, Ryoko. Stay."

"Hi! My name's Perrinetta, but you can call me Perri or whatever you like!" Perri fairly gushed at the newcomer, pink cheeked and grinning somewhat stupidly, "This is my Mag, Denwark. I find lots of reds, too. My Branch of Paku Paku is my newest one. Does your Mag like it? I hope so." Elliot stared at her in confusion as Mako grinned and chuckled.

"That branch has a smell my Mag likes, but if it grabs on, you'll get a new weapon and owe me a new Mag." he replied, "Better put it away."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Mako Sir!" the smaller Forcer burred and the branch disappeared into her pack.

"Just Mako. So, you guys are hunting for rare stuff?" the Fomar asked.

"Not really. Val, here, is from another world and he got transported here by accident. He also lost a bunch of items here and we're helping him recollect them. Elliot, hand him that one thing we found." Dular replied. The Ranger scowled momentarily, then pulled out the rolled up carpet. Val cheered as he collected it.

"Yeah! This is the Lovely Carpet! Only a few pieces left!" he declared.

"Ah, 'kay. Need an extra Forcer?" Mako remarked.

"Yeah!" Perri declared.

"Not really." Elliot shot in at the same moment, "Not to be rude or anything, pal, but we've got a full team already." He shot a look at the scowling Perrinetta. "We'd better get moving. Aren't you still scrounging for clues?"

"Ya got a point there." Mako murmured and shrugged, "No skin off my butt. At least let me upload my copy of the Mines map to you so you don't get jumped. The rest of this area and part of the next level are clear, so you guys should be safe until halfway through level two."

"How exactly did you survive Megid?" Dular asked as Mako handed Elliot the small map disc and turned to leave.

"Ever built a house in the middle of a field of Ob Lilies?" Mako replied with a grin, "I built a high resistance with some units and barriers to help. Well, later!" He waved at them as he walked away, the three little Mags floating around him. Dular, Elliot, Perri and Val called their goodbyes, then went on towards the teleporter, happy to meet a new friend and rescue an older one.

Dular noticed peculiarities between Elliot and Perrinetta almost right after they separated from the strange Fomar. The little Forcer was still pink and hummed dreamily as she skipped along in front of the group. Elliot walked along, scowling silently and acting rather grumpy. Val looked between them, then grinned and shook his head.

"You know what's up with them?" Dular asked during one short break. Val nodded and grinned wider. "I take you're not gonna tell me about it." He nodded again. "Figures."

"C'mon, Elliot! I just wanna know if he's got a girlfriend!" Perri whined between bites of her sandwich. Elliot only made a face and bit into his lunch. "Oh you big baby! Dular! Make him tell me if Mako's single!"

"Why not finish your lunch so we can get on with this trip?" the Hunter replied and got up. Perri pouted, but shrugged and handed the rest of her sandwich to Denwark to gobble up. "By the way, Elliot, what was all that about with the poem you two said back there?"

"Something we came up with back in academy." the ranger replied shortly, "He liked fire techs, I liked ice weaps. Opposites attract, I guess, we were friends from the first day we met."

"And the thing about his baby sister?"

"You'll have to ask him about that, I don't know the whole story myself."

"Look! The teleporter's right up ahead!" Val suddenly cried and ran ahead, laughing, "Periwinkle! I'll be home soon enough with your entire set!" That ended the conversation about Mako rather abruptly.

Mines Level 2 was largely quiet, though somewhat smoldering in

portions here and there. Val skipped along, whistling cheerfully. With only five pieces of furniture still at large, he was confident that the whole crazy affair would soon be over and he'd be home again. Though he liked his strange new friends, Val was missing the simplicity of Animal Crossing, where the most effort he ever made to get a rare item was move to Animal Island for a week and fish at the strangest hours of the morning for furniture. And the sooner he got back, the better; his robe was becoming more and more tattered with each new area he found himself having to be dragged into for furniture pieces.

"Well, we've made it to the end of the mines and found only pieces of robots lying everywhere." Dular muttered.

"Must've been Black Paper's handiwork, Mako said he didn't go this far with Val." Perri murmured and shrugged, "Well, easier for us! Let's get to the teleporter on the other end of this room and find out where those unmarked passages lead to, guys!" She marched ahead with her friends behind her as they entered a large round room with dozens of monitors on the wall.

The doors sealed themselves shut behind and before them as they got to the other side. Jumping in surprise and quickly preparing for an ambush, the hunters were startled to see a strange object staring out at them from one of the many huge screens. Lights flashed red and sirens blared as the object began to 'float' across the screen to another monitor.

"Dular? What's this thing and is it gonna kill us?" Perri asked, watching the object out of the corner of her eyes as it continued circling them.

"I think that this is that AI that I was talking about earlier." Dular replied as he watched a strange totem come down from the center of the ceiling. "If I recall correctly, this is Vol Opt." A blast of electricity shot down from the totem at them and the hunters jumped aside to avoid the hit. "And yeah, it's trying to kill us!!!"

"Then let's kill IT first!" Elliot declared and began firing at the totem. Perri shook her head and began shooting Foie attacks at the object circling them. Dular and Val hacked away at the smaller totems that would pop up from the floor at random times.

"The red ones! Those seem to hurt it more!" Val yelled after plunging his Golden Axe into a red pillar resulted in an electronic shriek from Vol Opt. With all four hunters attacking at all sides, Vol Opt was soon erupting from the broken monitors into bursts of flames. Perri yelled and leaped back from one set of monitors, covering her head.

"Perri?! Are you okay?!" Dular yelled out as he ran back from the

center of the room to rejoin the group of friends. The Forcer looked up at him and grinned shakily.

"Yeah. Never had to fight a whole room of computers before, though." she replied and looked around after the flames died away. "I think we got it." Elliot breathed a sigh of relief and began to put his beam away. Val blinked and moved forward cautiously in search of an item that should have been left behind by the AI. A sudden heavy clunk startled him and he scampered back to the group. The hunters looked up in shock as the ceiling opened again and a huge mechanical monstrosity descended into the central portion of the room.

"I don't think it's done fighting, guys." Val muttered and clutched his axe much more tightly. The hunters took up arms again and began attacking the machine. Vol Opt retaliated by spinning around and firing a strange orb at them.

"Scatter!" Dular yelled and the hunters dashed away in all directions as the orb began tracking one of them down. Elliot huffed and puffed as the orb finally slammed into him. Instantly, a prison of stone rose up and surrounded him. Vol Opt spun again and focused a group of targeting lasers on him.

"Somebody get me outta here!" he yelled, "It won't let me shoot!" Perri dashed by and beat at the cell with the branch. "Hurry!" Elliot wailed, staring in horror at the dozen of tiny red dots lighting up his chest.

"I'm hurrying! The rod's not great at this, y'know!" Perri declared and the stone finally fell. She grabbed his hand and yanked with all her strength, pulling them both onto the floor just as the AI fired its lasers. "Ow!" the Forcer grunted as she landed with the ranger almost on her, "Get off!"

"Too close!" Elliot sighed in relief and sat up, grinning at Perri, "You saved my life! Thanks!" She grinned back.

"What are friends for? C'mon! We've got a crazed computer to crash!" Perri exclaimed and resumed her technique attacks with Denwerk and Pushan working together to boost their friends' defense and power.

On the other side of the monstrosity, Dular and Val cut down the healing section of the AI and set to work on the missile silo that threatened to open and hit them at any moment. The targeting beams that danced around the whole group was annoying, once they understood what it meant.

"Will you just die already?!" Dular yelled in a fury and gave one final swipe of the sword at the large creation. The huge golem finally began to explode and collapse as the friends jumped back and watched it tiredly. After a few short minutes, all that remained of the hulking AI were a few

pieces of charred metal and a leaf sitting in the center of the room. Val staggered up and collected it, stuffing it into his backpack

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm beat." he sighed, "I want to call it a day already. How can you stand all this activity?"

"Elliot's five alarm coffee." Perri replied with a smile, jerking her thumb at the ranger, who smiled proudly, "Never fails to get you going for 36 hours straight. Why do you think we haven't stopped to get a full night's sleep in the past day and a half?"

"Well, I want a nice long nap!" Val declared, "And I'm not budging from this room until I get some shut-eye!" The hunters looked at each other in confusion, then shrugged.

"Might as well. Everything's dead in here and the room's kinda warm compared to Pioneer 2's climate controlled housing. I'm feeling a bit sleepy, myself, to be honest." Perri murmured and yawned, stretching her arms and legs before dumping her pack down to use as a pillow.

"I'll set the alarm to go off in a few hours. Get some rest, everyone." Dular yawned out as he plunked numbers into his armband, "I get the feeling that the worst's yet to come."

Chapter Four

The ringing of the alarm woke the four hunters up suddenly and they bolted up, expecting a fight. Finding nothing dangerous and remembering the events of the day before, they laughed sheepishly and resumed their quest. The teleporter in the next room took them to the entrance of a dark and ominous cave. Startled by the turn of events, the hunters looked around cautiously and stepped lightly.

"Hey, there's a tunnel back there." Elliot whispered, pointing at a hall carved through the rock. Dular examined it, then spotted something odd on the ground. He knelt by a few sets of footprints and studied them carefully.

"A female's been here. Not recently, the prints are kinda filled in with dust." he muttered and stood up. "It might be Rico."

"Hey! There's a weird entrance here!" Perri called out and waited for her friends to join her. She pointed at a strangely decorated wall with a door cut into it. Carved on the side of the doorway were three odd words; MUUT DITTS POUMN. "What are these?" the Forcer muttered after reading the words aloud.

"You think the last bits of furniture are in there?" Val asked in a nervous voice, gazing into the darkness beyond the doorway.

"Red Ring Rico, too?" Elliot added. Dular shrugged and looked at his group.

"The only way to know is to go and see for ourselves. Once we get in, we'll make a quick telepipe back to the ship, get our best weapons, then see what this is and why it's not listed on any maps or in any reports." he remarked. The hunters sighed and agreed, then warily entered the door to what may be the final area they could see.

Ruins, Section One~

"Whoa." the collective word was all that could describe the strange surroundings the hunters found themselves in. The 'ruins' of some underground civilization were vast and dimly lit. Perri focused her energy and opened another gate back to Pioneer 2. Once back in their own home, each hunter sought out their very best weapon to use. Dular set down his sword and returned from his room with a strange weapon attached to his arm. It looked like two blue blades extended out beyond his hand. Val looked at it

strangely. Dular smiled grimly and held it up.

"Silence Claw." he said simply, "Special ability; one hit KO." Val winced and looked over at Perri, who tossed her branch into a closet and pulled her Twinkle Star out once again. He looked back at Elliot, who watched her silently and with a strange expression. The ranger set down his beam, went to his own room, then returned a few minutes later and picked up the beam again.

"Ready to go?" the little Forcer asked, grabbing a few pieces of fruit and tossing them towards her friends for breakfast. The group nodded grimly and ate as they headed back to the pipe and the strange underground lair.

The first room they came across seemed empty at first. Dular, Perri, Elliot and Val hurried through to reach the door on the other side and spotted a figure standing near it with a sword and shield.

"Hey! Another Hunter! Over here! What is this place?!" Elliot called out brightly. A strange assortment of colored lights lit up the figure's body and it leaped high into the air, "Whoa! What the heck-?!" It landed directly in front of the group and began slashing away. The creature was almost solid black, with strange tendrils on its shoulders and a saber and shield for arms. Though it looked humanoid, it was clear that the creature was not.

"Agh! What is it?!" Dular yelled, slashing back with the claw and jumping back as it blocked with the shield and started to press in with its own saber.

"Another back here!" Val cried, ducking a second creature as it jumped in and swiped at him. More monsters materialized into the room, tall and in varied colors of black, green, pink and blue. Perri set to work with techniques, quickly learning to match colored monsters to her elemental specialties to take them out faster. Dular pressed back on the creature, now identified by his minicomputer as a Delsaber, while Elliot fired the special ability of his beam to freeze it in place.

"Gah! What is with this place?! This is just the first room!" Perri growled and yelped as one Dimenian circled around one attack and slammed her onto the floor. Denwark cried angrily and used its energy to heal her quickly as the Forcer scrambled to her feet for a retaliatory attack.

Val had his hands full with his own Delsaber, using the Golden Axe to parry the swipes of the saber that kept coming down on him. The creature kept trying to get to him, often circling in angry confusion as Val scampered about between its legs and hacking at any open area with the axe. A flash of

color knocked the Delsaber onto its back on the floor and Perri grinned at Val quickly, before turning to blast the creature with a strange attack. She pointed the wand at it and a burst of light erupted from within the Delsaber, vaporizing it into nothing.

"What was that?" Val asked between gasps of air.

"Grants. Denmark helped me learn that technique. It's a lot more reliable than Megid, that's for sure." the Forcer replied and aimed another burst at the Delsaber that Dular and Elliot fought. With the room cleared, the group took time to discuss the new adversaries. "Okay, so this place is crawling with super-mutated creatures. The Dimenians were obviously from the Sharks, which were mutated from Boomas. What creature got turned into a Delsaber?" she asked Dular.

"I'm afraid to say, but I think those monsters were once human Hunters." Dular murmured shakily. Perri, Elliot and Val gaped at him in disbelief. Elliot was first to recover from the shock.

"Those were human?! Then other people came down here! Why? For what?!" he exclaimed.

"They were probably the team that was sent to find Rico. I hope she didn't get turned into one of those things." Dular remarked and led them onwards.

Later rooms yielded enemies they couldn't explain, like the Claws and Dark Gunners. Val pressed along with them, feeling more and more strange the deeper they went into the ruins. Finally, he stopped and threw his axe down onto the ground.

"SHUT UP!!!" he screamed at no one, balling his fists up. Dular and the group stopped suddenly and stared back at him in shock. Val breathed hard, glaring around him quickly, seeking something out. "Don't you hear it?!" he demanded of his friends, "That voice! It keeps irritating me!"

"Oooookaaaay." Perri muttered, "Val, you okay?" The little man scowled at the air.

"It keeps yammering on about getting free. It's gone now, but man! That was the most annoying thing I've ever had to listen to!" he replied and picked up the axe again.

"What was it saying?" Dular asked in curiosity. Val looked a bit evasive.

"It said something about wanting to be free, to grow and evolve. I don't want to run into it, whatever it was." he finally answered. The group looked at each other, shrugged and continued on.

The next room that had them stop for a good while was one

particularly large room that had a huge portion of it missing. Water fell from above into a chasm that seemed almost bottomless. Perri peered over the edge and whistled.

"What do you think blew this room up?" she asked, flicking small rocks into the gap.

"Probably the same thing that blew up near the Central Dome. It made quite a mess, so whatever it was must be further down below this level. See how you can't see the bottom of this thing?" Dular pointed out, "I bet the origin is at the very bottom of this tunnel and it'll probably be in an enormous cavern of some kind."

"I hope we find Rico soon. This place is freakish." Elliot muttered as they left the hole and went on.

The next strange enemy they ran into was a huge and slow creature that began to fire its arms at the group as soon as they walked in and saw it. The hunters scattered and Elliot began to open fire while the others raced around, unable to get near to attack.

"Perri! Use your Grants!" Dular yelled. The Forcer dashed by, huffing and puffing.

"I can't! I don't have enough energy for it now! I used it up on all the other monsters we've run into since the start of this area!" she cried as she fumbled for a Trifluid capsule, "Give me a few seconds and I'll be charged up again!" The creature fired its arm off again and it slammed into Perri, sending her tumbling across the floor as the identified Dark Belra finally fell under Elliot's shots.

"Perrinetta!" Dular bellowed out as Elliot tossed the gun aside and ran for her, "Elliot! How is she?!" The ranger brushed aside her hair and lifted her head. The little Forcer remained silent and limp.

"Perri..." Elliot murmured sadly and lifted her up as Dular grabbed the beam and ran up to him, "Dular, she's not moving and her breathing's almost dead." The Hunter flinched and hung his head, covering his face.

"Perrinetta. I should have left you back home." he whispered. Val looked up at them sorrowfully, then blinked as a few Delsabers dropped down from the ceiling and began marching towards them.

"Guys! Run!" he yelled, heading for the next door. The two hunters looked over at his direction, looked at the Delsabers, then bolted for the hallway as well. Denwark cried as he floated after them, unable to cast any spells to help his friend and mistress.

"Keep going!" Dular yelled as a quick glance over his shoulder showed

the Delsabers following them into the hall and picking up speed. "How's Perri?!"

"This isn't helping her any! She's fading fast on us! We have to bail out and get her to the hospital!" Elliot called back. Val dashed around the corner of the hall and stumbled over a strange creature on the floor. It puffed and flattened, but not before expelling a strange purple mist. Val blinked, then turned slightly green, coughing as he got back up and ran on.

"Come on! There's a room beyond here we can use to regroup and fight back!" he shouted and stumbled again as the world seemed to slant abruptly. He shook his head and cleared out of the hall in time for Elliot to run in with the Forcer still dangling from his arms. Dular shot in after them and spun around, lashing out with the Silence Claw in an effort to hold back the Delsabers.

"Don't stand there! Run!" he yelled. Val nodded and looked into the next room.

"The...the teleporter!" he called out, leaning against the doorway, "It's over here!" Dular jumped back, took a deep breath, then cast a blast of Gibarta at the group of Delsabers, the first in a long while he had to use a technique since he partnered with Perrinetta. While the monsters toppled over themselves and struggled to get back up, the group ran for the teleporter and warped out of the level.

Ruins, Section 2~

"I don't feel so good." Val muttered after the group stopped in the first room. Dular looked at him in concern, then reached out and felt his forehead.

"You're feverish! What happened?!" he exclaimed, picking up the little man and checking his eyes and cheeks.

"I ran into this weird thing back in the first level. It gave off this smoke and I began to feel sick." he replied wearily.

"Poison. Oh, Val, now we have two members of our group down and out." the Hunter sighed and picked him up. "Come on, Elliot, let's go on ahead and see if we can find a pipe item somewhere. We're relying on Perri for pipes way too much." Elliot nodded, face pale as he stole another worried glance at the Forcer.

The rooms looked more metalized, mechanical, almost like a huge spaceship of some kind, rather than the stony, cave-like portion of the first

section of the ruins. New enemies appeared to harass the group as they ran through in search of mysterious boxes that could contain helpful items for them. One held an antidote, which Dular immediately gave to Val. The little man woke up from his sleep and swallowed the last of it with a grimace.

"Ugh! Tastes worse than Bessie's cupcakes." he complained, then blinked, "Hey! I'm feeling tons better now!"

"Wish I could say the same about Perri." Elliot mumbled tearfully, hugging her close. "My little Forcer, why didn't I say something before this happened?" he added softly.

"Can't we go back to Pioneer 2?" Val asked as they resumed their search. Dular sighed.

"We never bothered to learn Ryuker or carry telepipes with Perri with us. So, we're trapped down here until we can find one of those two items to get us home." he replied, "Now I'm ashamed we didn't do that earlier. We depended on Perri for everything that could be done with techniques, healing, restoring, piping. My Anti is far too weak to have healed you, that's why we needed to find the antidote down here."

The next open room they found was eerily quiet. Dular immediately frowned as they walked across it. No sooner had they reached the center of the room than four of the Dark Belras materialized into it and began to lumber towards them. Dular ran at one and slashed at it with the claw, yelling angrily. Val ducked around Elliot, who danced about in a panic with Perri still in his arms, and hurled the Golden Axe at another Belra.

"We're outnumbered! We're gonna die!" Elliot wailed, looking back and forth between the two teams of Belras still coming at them. Dular fell back when the Belra he attacked swiped at him with its arms. Val couldn't dart in quick enough to get his axe back, which remained buried in the Belra's body.

"Can't we do anything more?!" he yelled and jumped as the axed Belra suddenly vanished and the item dropped to the floor. The three hunters sought out what caused the sudden death of one monster and spotted a figure standing nearby, Demonic Fork slung over one shoulder and hand holding out a pair of leaves.

"Hey, man! You forgot these back in Level One!" Mako called out and swung the fork around. He pulled a quick combo from a distance and another Belra fell to the slashes of the Demonic Fork.

"How's he doing that from way over there?" Dular muttered, then launched himself at the first Belra to finish it off. Val raced out, scooped up the Axe, then spun and flung it at the final Belra in one smooth motion. With all four monsters gone, the Fomar brushed his hands off and walked up to

the group.

"How's it going? You looked like you were gonna need help anyway, Elliot, so I decided to follow you guys. I didn't think you'd come down here into this place." he remarked and stopped short, staring at Perri in shock. "What happened to her?!"

"She got hit by one of the Dark Belras, and hasn't moved since." Elliot mumbled. Mako dropped the leaves aside and studied the girl intently. "Can you help her?"

"I'm saving energy so I'll just get tapped out if I use Reverser. However, I did some shopping earlier this week." the Forcer replied and dug out a pair of capsules. "These were expensive, this one cost me about 5000 meseta for just one pop. Normally, I'd expect someone to pay me back, but you're my best friend, so it's on the house." He cracked open one capsule over her body and watched the silvery energy flow down over her. Perri shifted and sighed, but still didn't wake up.

"She's still not waking up!" Elliot moaned, "My precious little Purplenum won't get up!"

"Hold your horses, Romeo, that was just the Moon Atomizer dragging her butt back from the light." Mako muttered and popped open the second capsule, "This Star Atomizer should finish the job and heal all of us at the same time." The wave of energy spread out in a burst, completely covering the whole group.

"Is she awake yet?" Val asked eagerly. Perri groaned and opened her eyes.

"If it dropped a red box, it's mine." she grumbled and rubbed her head, "Man, have I got a headache to die for!" The group cheered happily as Elliot hugged her tight and spun around joyfully.

"Dude, chill." Mako muttered, inspecting his left arm and rubbing at it, "Well, that should do it for me, the cut on my arm's gone."

"Mako!" Perri cheered and leaped out of Elliot's arms to smile up at him. "Were you the one who saved me? Thanks soooo much!" she cooed and suddenly hugged him. "Thank you! Thank you! My hero!" Mako blinked down at her, then up at Elliot. The ranger had a crushed expression on his face and sighed almost regretfully. Dular looked between the two, then suddenly realized what Val had known since the Mines. The Fomar looked completely clueless for a moment, then lit up in realization. He pried Perri off and pat her on the head.

"Hey, listen. It wasn't all me, y'know. Elliot was the one who carried you all throughout level one to this far in level two of the ruins. He was the

one who told me to save you." he remarked, "So he's the one who should get the hug. 'Sides, my girl shipside would beat me senseless if she caught wind of me playing knight in shining armor for someone else." Perri looked surprised, then glanced over at the startled ranger.

"Mako?!" he yelped as Perri studied him carefully and with a strange expression.

"What? Well, she would! That girl packs a mean punch!" the Forcer replied in self-defense, "I'm not going to cross her if I can help it! My insurance doesn't cover everything she could do to me!"

"Hey! This looks like the Lovely End Table! I know because it's got this bit of red here where I accidentally spilled Periwinkle's nail polish last Valentine's Day. Not sure what the other one is yet." Val remarked happily and packed the two leaves away.

"So, you're joining us whether we like it or not, huh?" Dular asked the Fomar, who grinned and nodded, "Why do I get the feeling that I've just signed on another Perri?"

"I can do distance attacks with my Demonic Fork's special ability." Mako remarked and jerked his thumb at Perri, "The pint sized Purplenum, here, needs something to do the same. Sorry, lady, but that dinky wand ain't gonna cut it in the ruins."

"It's the best weapon I've got, Mr. Fancy-Dress!" Perri snapped at him. Mako raised an eyebrow in mild surprise. "I can't use rifles and shots like Rangers! I'm a freaking Force user!"

"I can fix that." Elliot remarked. The group stared at him. Perri blinked, slightly pink. "I kinda saw this one weapon in a shop and, well, I couldn't use it. Not that I'd want to, it was way too cutesy for me." he went on, turning red. "But I thought that it'd be handy one day, so I sorta took some side missions on the sly when you guys were off doing stuff and I saved up some cash for it. It was gonna be a birthday present, but I guessed that today would be a lot better time to give it to you soooo....." Elliot bit his lip and fished out a present from his pack, holding it out to Perri, who blinked in shock at the white package with its red bow and ribbon. "Uh, happy early birthday, Perri?" he finished with a nervous laugh. The little Forcer blinked again and accepted the present, opening it slowly. The paper and ribbon fell away to reveal yet another red box. That box faded to reveal the contents; a slender, golden rifle with a tiny pair of angelic wings near the butt of it.

"Sweet. An Angel Harp." Mako remarked in an awed voice, "Those are hard to come by for female Forces!" Perri held it up and studied it, silently, then smiled up at Elliot, tearfully.

"Thanks, Elliot. This means a lot to me." she said softly. She walked up and hugged him with a laugh, then proceeded to practice holding the gun and firing it at the distance. "Wow! Feathers! Too cool! This is the best weapon I've ever had! I'm gonna use this everywhere!" she cried and started running for the next room, "Come on, guys! I wanna try it out on another stupid Dark Belra! Let's go! We've got furniture and rare weapons to find! And Red Ring Rico, too!" The group of hunters laughed and chased after her, finding that the ruins weren't quite so intimidating now.

"I thought you were on the great hunt for clues about your sister." Dular pointed out as they headed onwards through the second level. Mako looked a bit sheepish and rubbed his head.

"Ah, about that." he laughed embarrassedly, "Well, the thing is, I ran into her deeper in the second level of the mines. I tried to talk to her, but she was in one of her Chaos Modes that Black Paper plugged into the chip in her head and ended up attacking me. That's how I wound up with the cut in my arm."

"Ouch." Dular grinned, "Hunter weapons hurt, don't they?"

"Oh, she's not a Hunter." Mako laughed, "She's a Ranger, but she keeps using crazy weapons, and they're all red! I mean, have you ever had a tiny little Ramarl come berserking at you with a Red Partisan, then while you're dodging that, spin around and whack you on the butt with a Red Saber? Not fun."

"Hey! Check this out!" Val suddenly yelled and the group hurried to see what he found. Val stood near a door and pointed at a small orange pack on the floor. "What's this thing?" Perri knelt by it and poked at it.

"It's a message capsule. Let's see if it still works...." she muttered and a burst of orange light shone up from it, "Ha! Got the 'on' button!" In a few seconds, a small holographic image of a woman dressed in reds and whites appeared within the orange light. "Hey! That's Rico! See her red ring on her arm?" Perri gasped. The other hunters gathered around in a huddle and watched the figure's tiny mouth move silently. In the image, Rico looked slightly panicked, eyes darting about as she spoke, and she hugged herself tightly. Then she held an arm out as if pointing at something and continued speaking. She shook her head, spoke some more, then took on a determined look. Rico spoke a bit more, then bent to touch something and the image flickered out.

"She looks scared." Dular murmured.

"She looks like she found something out." Elliot added.

"She looks like a Hunter." Perri pouted, who had hoped that Red Ring Rico was a powerful Force user.

"She looks cute. Is she available?" Mako remarked with a sly grin, fingers stroking his chin as he eyed the capsule, "Does that come with a repeat option?"

"I thought you already had a girl!" Perri snapped at him. The Forcer blinked and turned pink.

"Oh yeah! I do! But I gotta keep my options open, y'know? Never know when that really cute girl's gonna pop in!" he said quickly.

"So, that's Rico?" Val remarked, "I guess that this means she's somewhere in here."

"Then let's go find her!" Dular declared and the group headed on to the next room. A new enemy awaited them in that room, a strange horseman that came barreling at them almost as soon as it appeared in the room.

"What's that?!" the Hunter yelled, dodging aside as the others scattered.

"Dark Bringer!" Mako declared, eyes on the computer on his armband. A shot fired off and the creature jerked, then turned in a fury. Perri stood at the far end of the room, grinning hugely.

"I shot it! I shot it! Didja see me, Elliot?! I shot it!" she declared proudly, holding the angelic gun in her arms.

"RUN!" Elliot bellowed as the Bringer charged for her. Perri's eyes went wide and she raced off, screaming as it chased after her.

"Get it away! Help! Help!" she wailed. Mako held out the Demonic Fork and cast a technique at the monster. A burst of light erupted from within it and the Bringer stumbled, but it kept running.

"Aw crud, wrong tech." the Fomar grumbled, scratching his head, "How'd I get Grants confused with Megid?" Elliot lifted his beam and fired the special, freezing one of the Bringer's legs. It flailed angrily, then lifted its arms, which looked oddly like large rifle barrels. A green wave spread out from around it and Perri fell, suddenly feeling weakened. Mako doubled over when the wave passed through him and dropped to all fours before finally falling to one side, completely motionless.

"Hey! What's this?" Dular shouted as he felt a portion of his own Force energy suddenly drain out. Elliot looked the same, but Val remained unchanged. Dular shook his head and darted after the Bringer, which brought its arms down and aimed the rifle-like arm at him. "Oh, that ain't good." the Hunter groaned and rolled down under the huge shot the Dark Bringer fired off. Elliot ran to Perrinetta to find out if she was okay as Val darted past the second shot that was fired to help Dular.

"Val! Get out of there! You can't fight...!" Elliot began to yell as Val wound up the axe and let it fly, "...that..." The Golden Axe slammed into the creature's shoulder, severing the rifle arm before it could fire again and it dropped to the ground, popping into a red box. "...thing. Well, I guess you can."

"Who's the man?!" Val cheered in laughter, then yipped and scampered away as the ice melted and the Bringer charged after him. "Help me! Help! It's after me now!" Perri sat up and looked around dizzily, then spotted the Bringer running after Valentine, minus its arm.

"Oh, you're gonna get it now!" she growled, "You sapped out a good chunk of my energy for techniques, but I got one for you!" She got to her feet and waited for Val to run close by them in his mad dash to safety. "Denwark, watch my back! Gibarta!" she yelled and unleashed a river of ice at the Bringer. It writhed from the painful cold and finally vanished into nothing, leaving behind yet another little red box. "Is this, like, our day for rare stuff? Monsters don't leave behind TWO red boxes!" Perri demanded of the group.

"I'm not gonna question it. This thing here could sell pretty high in the market." Dular remarked, picking up the box containing the Bringer's arm, "When we finally get out of here, we'll sell off the extra reds and go out to a high class restaurant!"

"What's with Mako?" Val finally asked as he panted, "Oogh, I hate running too fast..." Elliot looked around in concern, then spotted his friend lying on the floor.

"Mako! Hey! Mako, wake up!" he yelled, running up to him. The three little Mags circled him in worry, then fluttered back away as the Ranger knelt by him. "Ah, so this is what you were talking about all that time in the academy..." Elliot sighed and dug through Mako's pack in search of something.

"Well, what's up with him?" Perri asked as Dular ran up to join her.

"That whole energy thing again. Mako told me about it when we were younger. I didn't believe him at first, till he showed me what he meant." Elliot replied as he pulled out a trio of capsules, "You know how Black Paper and WORKS like messing with people? Well, that's what they did to Mako's whole family. Black Paper grabbed Mako, and his two little sisters, and did weird experiments on them. Mako was enhanced to be a super Forcer of some kind, but there was a little flaw in the whole thing."

"I thought you didn't know the story about him." Dular growled. Elliot cracked open one capsule and watched the energy fall onto Mako.

"Not the whole thing about his sisters, but him, I know pretty well. The glitch in the system was that his life energy was somehow tied into his Force power. That's why he's like this now, the Bringer drained out a huge portion of his life energy as well as his Force energy." he went on and cracked another capsule.

"Is that why he didn't want to use Reverser on Perri?" Val asked, picking up the red box and walking up to him. "It could have killed him doing it?"

"Not quite, but it'd make him about as weak as a kitten." Elliot remarked and popped open the last capsule, "There, that should do it. Two Trimates and a Trifluid."

"Those were expensive." Mako grumbled under his breath as he started to get up, "Thanks, but couldn't you wait until my Scape Doll kicked in?"

"Nah." Elliot retorted and laughed, grabbing his hand and helping him get up. Val held up the box.

"Mr. Mako! This thing got dropped by the monster! You want it?" he asked. The Fomar brightened up and accepted it, clutching it almost reverently.

"If this is what I think it is, then the near-death experience was worth it!" he declared and hugged it, "Waaaahooo! I can't wait to get it tekked!"

"Teleporter's in the next room, if anyone cares." Perri remarked after coming back from further exploration. The group rested for a bit, then decided it was time to find out what was in the next, and final, level of the ruins.

Chapter Five

Ruins, Section 3~

The group of hunters recoiled at the walls of the last level of ruins. It all looked incredibly organic and everything pulsed like the interior of some massive heart. Creeping along and killing monsters quickly, Dular, Val and their friends continued finding more and more of Rico's message capsules. Although the messages were scrambled to the point that they couldn't understand them, the images of Rico's growing panic was in turn affecting them, until at one point Mako's nerve broke and he ran, screaming, down a hallway on his own. Elliot tried to follow, but Dular pulled him back, shaking his head.

"If you go after him, we might lose you, too. Let's wait here and see if he comes back." he ordered. It took an hour or so, but the Fomar returned, looking exhausted and a bit ashamed. "Feel better?" the Hunter asked.

"Sorry. But this whole place feels like pure evil is stored in here." Mako replied quietly, "Either we get in, grab Rico, and get out fast, or I'm gonna wind up in Chaos Mode like my baby sis."

The next set of monsters dropped a leaf, which Val immediately grabbed. The capsule left there by Rico finally yielded a short message.

"Dark Falz is a consciousness. It has no body." her mouth spoke, then the image suddenly broke. The hunters huddled around it looked at each other in puzzlement.

"Dark Falz? Any ideas what that is?" Mako asked. The others shook their heads. "Sounds creepy. Well, onwards we go!"

Monsters came in waves, each one more aggressive than the last. One huge room had several hordes of monsters, one of which dropped a second leaf for Val. Among the monsters was a floating creature with a long cape, two crystals, and a scepter of some kind in one hand. Perri fired at one crystal and the creature vanished.

"Got that thing! Whatever it was." she muttered and yelped as it reappeared in another part of the room and lifted the scepter, aiming it at Dular. "Dular! Watch out! That thing's behind you!" she shrieked. The Hunter finished off the batch of Claws, then spun around in time to get a burst of Megid head on from the creature's second crystal. He dropped his arms down by his sides and fell straight back onto the floor. "DULAR!!"

Scrambling to reach her friend, Perri darted by the groups of monsters her other friends and teammates were taking out. Dropping beside

the older hunter, she shook him fiercely.

"Dular! Get up! Please! Get up!" she whispered and hugged him, sobbing, "Don't be dead, Dular! You're the big brother I never had! Please wake up!" She sat back and rubbed at her eyes. "Okay, pull yourself together, Perri. You're a Forcer, you should know Reverser. Um, um, I didn't buy that technique disk! What kind of a Forcer am I?!" she wailed and blinked as the creature reappeared again not too far off. "You! You're gonna pay for this!" she raged and picked up her gun, firing angrily at the creature's body. The monster spun and writhed, then vanished, leaving a pool of violet blood on the floor. "Jerk!" she yelled, "Elliot! Do you have a Moon Atomizer?"

"Ask Mako!" Elliot replied, firing madly at a group of So Dimenians, "I'm kinda busy here!"

"Here!" Mako shouted, throwing a small pouch towards her, then turning to help Elliot. Val swordfought with a single Delsaber, laughing almost insanely as it tried to hit him, only to have every attack blocked by the gold axe in his hand. Perri dug into the bag, pulled out a capsule, then broke it over Dular's body. "That one's not on the house, okay? Pay me back with a burger later!" Mako added as an afterthought while Dular groaned and sat up. Perri hugged her friend tightly and laughed joyfully.

"I thought you were gonna be dead for good this time! Thank goodness Mako had some Atomizers!" she cried. Dular blinked in surprise, then smiled and hugged her back, careful not to accidentally touch the blades of the Silence Claw to her back.

The monsters were soon gone and they regrouped to rest. Val peered into his backpack and frowned. Carefully pulling out all the leaves, wallpaper and carpet, he placed them on the floor and counted them. Dular and the others watched in concern.

"What's the matter, Val? Are you missing anything?" Elliot asked. Val stood back and looked up at them in confusion.

"I have the whole set." he replied, "Everything from the Lovely Wallpaper to the Birthday Cake. I have it all. I can go home now."

"That's great!" Perri remarked, "You can go back and ask Periwinkle to marry you now! Decorate her house the way it was before, okay?"

"I can't go home yet." Val went on, "There's one last item I need to get, and it's the one that sent me here. The one piece that has the power to send me back home."

"Which is what?" Dular asked in confusion. Val stared down at the pile of items, then paled.

"My GameCube." he whispered, "My GameCube is still missing." The

group looked at each other, shrugged, then looked back at him.

"The whatis?" Perri remarked, scratching her head. Val shoved everything back into his pack and slung it on.

"It's the thing that sent me here. It looks like a little blue box with a black spot on the top and a little black handle on one side." he replied. Mako raised an eyebrow. "That thing cost me thirty thousand Bells and it stuck me here when I hit the power button! Now I have to get it back and make it take me home!" Val declared.

"If that's the case, then we still have to keep going and see if it's deeper in these ruins." the Fomar sighed and sat back, folding his arms behind his head as he leaned against a tall crystal pillar. "But first, I want a snack. How about the rest of you?" The group agreed. "Okay, who wants roast Delsaber?" He was answered by groans and several boxes of mates and fluids chucked his way. "What?! It's an honest question!! Did ya think I brought Rappy Wings or something?!" he exclaimed.

In the end, the hunters opted not to eat anything the Fomar cooked up and moved onwards. Rico's messages reported on Dark Falz's search for the perfect host body to exist in and how the creature needed to be destroyed or resealed before such a host was found. With monsters of all types still coming at them in relentless waves, the group was becoming more weary of the battles. Mako stopped in one area and looked around suddenly, a strange expression on his face.

"What's up?" Elliot asked as they continued on to the next hallway. Mako shrugged a bit and gathered his Mags closer.

"I had a weird feeling that we were being watched, that's all." he answered. "Didn't you?"

"Nope, but Val here complained about a voice earlier." the Ranger remarked, nodding in Val's direction. The little man marched along determinedly, Golden Axe in his hands. "About something being free."

"Uh huh." Mako muttered distantly.

Dular and his friends stopped in one room full of monsters and fought to get to the door on the opposite end of the room. No matter how many creatures they killed, still more appeared, magically appearing to take the place of the fallen as if some force was teleporting them in. Val dashed and dodged about, using a bloodied axe to defend and attack at the same time. Perri alternated between shooting at distant monsters and cutting loose several blasts of Gifoie to encircle her; Denwark eyed them with evil looks, daring them to get close enough to give him a reason to use Pilla. Elliot fired

the freezing special of his rifle constantly, laughing as Mako danced about, avoiding slashes from Dimenians and lashing out with the Fork.

"Party's getting boring! Can we get out of here and to that hallway already?!" he yelled out and jumped back as a stray monster ripped the Forcer gown, "Dude! Uncool! This was the only non-freakish red gown the Academy had! Ya'll owe me!"

"We've got an opening! Here!" Dular shouted as a path through the swarms of creatures opened, "Move it!" The group rushed from their battles and raced through the clearing to the door. After the group tumbled into the hallway, the door slammed shut and sealed off the nightmare room. They picked themselves up and sighed in relief.

"What's going on? Why is all this happening? Is this crazy ruin the thing that the military was hiding from us?" Perri cried in a panic. She looked at her friends with wide eyes. "I don't want to keep going! I want to go home!"

"Perri, calm down! It's going to be okay!" Dular told her, reaching for her. She jerked back and sobbed, shaking her head.

"No! It's not going to be okay! I'm scared! Something down here is causing all this and it's going to kill us all!" she wailed, "We have to get out of here! Please! Let's go home and never come back here!"

"We can't, Perri. Not without Rico, and the last piece of furniture for Val." Elliot told her, "Once we have them, we can get out of here and we'll go out to eat and check out all the reds we got...it'll be a blast!"

"Promise?" Perri whispered shakily. The group nodded eagerly. "Okay, but the minute we get Rico and the Gamecube thing, we are out of here!" she demanded and marched on down the hallway. The others followed along, grinning.

"This hallway goes on FOREVER!" Mako complained after an hour of walking. The hunters grumbled in agreement as they continued. "Remind me to kill the architect for this place." he added. When the group remained silent, he sighed and looked around himself. "Okay, um, I'm thinking of something small, and yellow, and people can put it in banks...." he began to say.

"What are you talking about?" Elliot griped irritably, scowling back at him.

"It's boring just walking along and we're too tense up. So, let's play a little game. What am I thinking of?" Mako replied brightly.

"Meseta!" Perri shouted and laughed, "I got it! My turn!" She cocked her head and thought hard. "I'm thinking of something square and shiny and

red...."

"Rare item box." Dular sighed, "When are you NOT thinking of those?" The group laughed as she turned pink and stuck her tongue out playfully.

"Okay, let's see. I'm thinking of something yellow and fuzzy and annoying...."

"Perri in her nightgown?" Elliot called out and jumped back as Perri whirled around to hit him again, "I'm kidding! It's a Rappy, right?"

"Yup!" Dular nodded brightly. Val smiled as they continued playing the game, then noticed that Mako's voice wasn't among the calls of questions and answers. He looked over his shoulder at him in concern. The Fomar was walking along, but he looked as if he was in deep thought. He began to invite him back to the game when he heard that strange voice again.

"Set me free. I want to evolve. I want to grow. Come and set me free. Come to me, and set me free. Help me. Let me go. I want to go and open the door. Open the door. Set us free!" the voice whispered to him. Mako looked over at him, then blinked in surprise.

"You hear it too?" he whispered. Val nodded, a fearful expression on his face. "I thought I was going crazy. What could it be, do you know?"

"I think there's something trapped down here and it's calling to us to set it free." Val murmured, hanging back to walk with him as the hunters up ahead continued playing to ignore their surroundings. "But why talk to us and not the others?"

"No idea. But I get the feeling we're going to find out what's doing it real soon." Mako muttered grimly as the group stopped at a room with a crystal pillar and yet another message capsule.

"We must destroy Dark Falz before it finds the perfect body and opens the gate. Before everything we know and love is destroyed. The door has been opened; we opened it. These ruins are actually a giant spaceship, a space borne tomb meant to contain Falz. We broke the seal and now, we must atone for the dark inheritance we have discovered here." Rico's voice declared, "I wish I was with my father, but I know I must help stop this thing! I am a Hunter and as such, I must finish this quarry. If not for my people, then for the future of this universe! It is responsible for the death of my mentor, Heathcliff Flowen, and I must avenge him!"

"Oh man! This thing killed Flowen?!" Perri wailed, "I heard about his death over the news channels on Pioneer 2 while we were still coming here! Dular! What are we gonna do?!"

"We find Rico and help her stop Falz!" Dular declared, "Coral had a legend about a monster that returned every thousand years to open some dark gate, and this must be that monster!"

"And Rico's in the next level fighting to keep it sealed or destroy it!" Elliot exclaimed in shock, "We have to go help her! She may be a powerful Hunter, but she can't do this all by herself!"

"Then what are we waiting for?!" Val demanded and spun his axe in one hand, "Let's go kick Dark Falz butt!" The hunters whooped and raced into the next room, right into another wave of monsters, the last defense for the teleporter that had to be beyond the next door. The hunters banded together and fought viciously, determined to reach the hunter in distress that they knew was in the next level of the 'ship'. Dimenians, Belras, Bringers and Claws, all fell quickly under the combined efforts of the group, each batch of monsters overwhelmed by the sheer ferocity of the attacks. Val dashed back and forth, axe spinning in a golden blur as he threw it at larger enemies to disable or disarm them. All the while, the voice that called to him and Mako grew more insistent, urging him to set it free.

"I've had enough of this! Yami! Hikari! Ryoko! Chain Photon Burst!" Mako yelled as the Mags flew out in a line with him, all facing the oncoming rush of the final wave of creatures. "Wave of Estlla!" he declared and hurled forward a stream of Foie as each Mag unleashed the energy dolphin. The team watched in awe as three bursts charged forward and obliterated the wave. Once the flashes of light ended and the dust settled, they blinked out at the Forcer standing alone with his three Mags, cracking open Trimate capsules. He glanced back at them and spread his hands, looking lost. "What? I was getting tired of having things try to kill me! You gonna stand there and stare at me, or are you gonna go and see if the teleporter's in the next room?" he asked in exasperation.

"Uh, right." Dular remarked sheepishly and headed for the next door. The group scoured the room for items and then followed him. "All right, the teleporter's here. Val, did you find the leaf?" he asked once they gathered at the final door. The little man shook his head.

"It's gotta be in the last level. For all we know, this Falz thing is probably holding it!" he griped angrily.

"Everyone ready? Once we get to the last part, we probably won't be able to get out." Dular added.

"Who's gonna bail out on a pretty Hunter in distress?" Mako cracked a grin and ran into the teleporter, "Come on! Let's save Rico, grab the leaf and save the world!" He stopped and smiled widely. "This is gonna be fun! I kinda wish we could bring my sisters along, but they'd be too busy trying to kill each other to fight Falz."

"Their loss." Perri remarked and jumped into the teleporter. The

others looked at each other, nodded, and entered it with them. After a moment of hesitation, Dular punched in the activator and all five hunters vanished from sight, transported to the final battle ground.

Final Battlefield~

The team found themselves in a open field of green grass and flowers. The sky was clear and beautiful, while butterflies fluttered about a tall stone monolith that stood in the center of the clearing. Startled, the hunters looked around and cautiously stepped out to explore.

"It's pretty here." Perri remarked as she walked around, studying the flowers and insects. Elliot knelt by a stone tablet and peered at it.

"There's something written here!" he called out. Mako ran up and looked at it with him. "Can you read that?"

"I'll give it a shot, but the writing's pretty old." he replied. Val watched them work and sighed. This wasn't at all what he was expecting. Confused by the turn of events, he decided to take a walk around and check things out.

Dular headed for the monolith, thinking the writing on it would tell him what was going on and perhaps Rico was hanging around nearby. The others kept themselves busy. He looked around warily, then began walking up the steps.

"Rico! Are you here?!" he called out, "Rico! We're here to help you!" The clearing remained silent. Shrugging, he leaned forward to study the letters on the monolith, then blinked in surprise as they faded from sight. "Huh?" he murmured and stepped back.

Perri smiled at the flowers before her and breathed in the air. It was all so beautiful, there couldn't be anything wrong. Perhaps the teleporter sent them to the wrong area?

"Oh well, maybe we weren't the ones to find Rico after all." she sighed and saw the flowers shimmer. "Hmm?" she hummed and watched them vanish, "What the-?!" The grass suddenly blew apart at her feet, spreading away and revealing a face staring up at her in terror. For a moment, she couldn't understand what it was, then she realized she was standing on a field of faces, each one giving her the same open-mouthed expressions of torment. She screamed in horror.

Elliot and Mako were still deciphering the tablet when it just vanished, replaced by a floor made from hundreds of souls gazing up at them with empty eyes. They jumped up in horror and looked around, panicked, as the beautiful area transformed before their very eyes. The land became deathly gray, with images of people floating about everywhere and a low moaning filling the air.

"What the heck's going on here?!" Elliot yelled. Mako jumped back from one apparition, face pale.

"That ghost is wearing the uniform of the Pioneer refugees! These are all the people from Pioneer One!" he cried, "They're all dead!!!"

"Dular! Perri! Val!" Elliot shouted, "Where the heck are we?! What's going on?!" They heard Val yell out and come racing by, a strange spiked object twirling after him and puffing out purple smoke. He sniped it and watched it collapse, then shouted again as dozens more of the things rose up out of the ground, spinning at them.

"Perri! Don't stand there! Move it!" Dular yelled out from near the center of the field. He darted and spun to get past the things, cutting down a few that tried to slam him. Perri wailed as Denwark quickly casted Shifta and Deband to compensate for the sudden attack.

"Meru!" it yelled at her and she jumped, bolting for Elliot and Mako blindly.

"Watch out!" Val cried as he swung his axe and knocked aside more bladed spinners. "These things are everywhere! What are they?! Where's Rico?! Where are we?!"

"Kill it! Kill it fast!" Elliot yelled, firing at the objects as they came at him. Mako swung the Demonic Fork madly, using his techniques only if he felt he needed to and calling to Ryoko the Chao Mag for quick heals when he finished using a strong one.

"These are people?!" Dular yelled as he finally realized what he was standing on, "Oh my god! The Pioneer One refugees! Are these trapped souls all the people from the Central Dome?!" He slashed at another group of blades and spotted Elliot near another bunch of them. "Elliot! Watch your back!"

"Geez! They just keep coming!" Elliot griped and continued firing. A ghostly figure floated past him and he stared at it in shock, dropping his rifle. "Oh, god, that can't be!" he whispered in horror.

"Elliot! Your gun! Pick it up!" Mako yelled and jumped back when the Darvants, as he was naming them, pressed their attack, "Perri! Use Rafoiel! Dular! What in the name of all that's sane is happening?!"

"Claris!" Elliot wailed in anguish and went tearing after the ghost, "Claris! It's me! Elliot! Claris! Why didn't he save you?!" The figure of a female human drifted along, arms outstretched towards him and a sorrowful expression on its face. "Why didn't he protect you, Claris?! He promised he would keep you safe! How could he let you die like this?!" Elliot cried, "Claaaaris!"

"ELLIOT! BEHIND YOU!!!" Val bellowed as Perri screamed again. A cluster of Darvants closed in after the Ranger and slammed into him, blades spinning madly.

"Nooooo!" Dular howled as Elliot shrieked in pain and fell silent, vanishing from the battleground in a burst of light. Perri screamed again and made to run for his last position. Mako grabbed her arm and yanked her back.

"Don't go out there!" he yelled, sweeping the Darvants aside with the Fork, "That was the auto teleport going off! He's being transported back to Pioneer Two's medical center!" The little Forcer sat on the ground, sobbing, as the field of Darvants all collapsed and sank into the ground.

"Elliot, please be okay.... Please, please, be okay...." she murmured between hiccuping sobs. Val fell back to the huddled hunters, exhausted and gripping his axe, cuts covering his arms and legs.

"Is that the end of it?" he gasped and shrieked as the ground quaked. Dular looked around in horror, then yelled as a huge beast materialized into the field, howling in a fury and stretching its arms out in a show of power. Around the base of the monstrosity were three dragon-like heads, all turning to aim their gaping maws at the little band of hunters.

"What is that?!" Mako yelled as it slowly began to come their way, screaming in rage. The voice that had bothered him and Val returned, louder than before.

~"Set me free! Let me go! I want to grow and open the door! Open the door and set us free! Set the end of all you know loose upon the lands!"~

"That has to be...Dark Falz!" Dular cried, "Rico must be somewhere nearby if this thing is still here! Come on! We have to kill it and save her!" Perri shrieked suddenly and opened fire on the dark monster, throwing in bursts of Grants when she could think clearly enough to harness it.

"Let's go! Ryoko! Yami, Hikari!" Mako declared and swung the Fork once more, lashing out at the heads. Dular raced in with Val, both swinging their weapons. Falz raged at the pain, swinging its arms to slash at them, then raising its arms to gather huge amounts of energy into itself.

"Hurry! Kill it! We can't let this thing get out of here!" Dular shouted over the roaring of the monster, "It'll go after the Pioneer Two!" He

stumbled and fell back as the creature suddenly slid away from them to gain distance. "Come on! Work together! Don't panic! We can do it!" he kept yelling as Perri continued to shoot blindly.

"You took Elliot away from me! Die!" she screamed at the monster. Denmark flailed helplessly, unsure of what was happening and panicking at the spirits that floated near him. The Mag wailed at times, then squealed as Dark Falz fired a huge white beam into the air.

"Run, everyone! It's coming down on us!" Val yelled and dashed for the far edge of the clearing. A rainstorm of energy beams slammed the earth, exploding outward in a blinding rush. The group was sent flying as the draconic heads released more Darvants from their mouths to finish them off.

~"I WILL be free! I have the perfect host! I will open the door and be free! I will set us all free! I will grow!"~

"Why can't that thing shut up?" Mako griped as he picked himself up, gown tattered and ripped. He let loose a blast of Rafoie to down the Darvants charging at them and crumpled again. "Hey! Can't somebody else blast these things?! I can't spare life energy for hard attack techs!" he yelled as he struggled to get back up, using the Fork as a crutch.

"Ugh.... My head...." Perri groaned as she sat up and looked around, "Dular? Dular! Where's Dular?!"

"Ack! I saw him disappear like Elliot while we were all experiencing the wonders of flight." Val grumbled as he got up, "I'm surprised I actually survived that. What WAS it?"

"It got Dular?!" Perri screeched and screamed in fury, "I'LL KILL THAT THING ONCE AND FOR ALL!" Raising her hands, she gathered into her as much energy as she could. "This is for you, Elliot and Dular! I'll get revenge for you both! Dark Falz! You will never do to Pioneer Two what you have done to Pioneer One! I'll end it here and now!" she raged and threw her hands forward. An eruption of light exploded within the monster, which then shrieked in pain and collapsed on itself.

"Wow...." Mako breathed, "You did it! You finished it off!" Perri huffed, battered and bruised from the last attack, then grinned.

"Is that all? Is it dead?" Val remarked in surprise, "Is it over?" Mako smiled and nodded at him. "Then...that's great! I'll go and get the leaf, you two can find Rico and we'll get out of here!" Val declared happily and raced for the body.

~"I will have the perfect host.... This was not the one.... I will grow, I

will evolve, I WILL be free!"~

"Val! Get away from there!" Mako shouted as the voice returned, more menacing than ever, "It's NOT DEAD!!!"

The little man skidded to a halt as the decomposing heads faded from existence and the main portion of the monster, the body of Dark Fal, spread huge iridescent wings and took to the edge of the field, spreading its arms in a fury.

"I thought that blast of Grants finished it!" Perri screamed as Val scrambled back to them. Mako gripped the Fork tightly as the creature moved faster than ever, shooting around them on the field.

"Yeah?! Well, ya thought wrong!" he yelled back at her, "Come on! Keep using Grants! I'll try my Demonic Fork! Val! Take my pouch! Keep the Star Atomizers ready for us!"

"What are those?!" Val cried as he pulled the sack from Mako's waistband.

"They're the ones with the star images on them, what do you think?!" the Forcer shouted as Perri alternated shots and Grants blasts. The monster stopped at one point and lay one arm onto the field. Eruptions of fire blew across the field towards the hunters and they ran to avoid the blasts.

"It's using multiple Rafoies on us!" Perri cried and halted suddenly when the creature appeared before her and laid another arm down. A blast of ice shot across and slammed the group, sending them tumbling across the earth. "Th-that was R-r-r-rabarta!" she stammered.

"Stay m-moving!" Mako chattered, clambering to his feet as Val popped open the first capsule to heal the group. "Dear g-god, my bank account is gonna die out! I've got eight Star Atomizers in there and they're all gonna get used up, I know it!" he griped, "Does this thing know how hard it was to find that item shop selling those and wipe out half my bank to get a full set?!"

~I will take the most powerful host. It will be the perfect body. I will grow. I will be free. And the door will open."~

"Mako! You've got Grants! Help me out!" Perri demanded as the Fomar winced at the voice thundering in his head.

"Fine already! On the count of three!" he cried as Falz continued circling them, "One! Two!" Val clutched the sack tightly, staring up at the creature in terror. He blinked as he noticed something glint on one of its arms.

"Huh? That's funny. It's wearing a bracelet?" he murmured and jumped as Mako shouted the third time and a huge blast of light consumed

the creature. It writhed and screamed, then fell onto the earth, the shockwave sending the group flying once more.

~"I will grow.... I will grow...."~

"Mako?" Perri murmured tiredly as she sat where she landed, too tired to get up from her kneeling position. The Fomar was lying on one side, exhausted. "Mako, are you okay? Val?" Val groaned and got to his feet.

"Yeah. I'm glad I don't have to do this every time I want a new piece of furniture." he muttered and opened another capsule for the group. "Mako? Are you dead?" Val asked worriedly.

"If I say 'yes', can I go home? I'm tired of this game already." the Fomar grumbled as he sat up and rubbed his head. Perri looked around and spotted Dark Falz's prone form on the ground. "Don't bother talking. It's not dead yet." Mako growled, standing up and held his Fork up defensively. The others followed suit, watching in growing horror as the land shifted and warped. Falz's body suddenly exploded in light, blinding the hunters for a few moments, all the time the monstrosity needed to transform the battleground into an iridescent ring in which he floated in the center, sword blade arms and long, flowing capes spread.

"What is that?" Perri breathed softly in shock as the bracelet Val had seen stood out brilliantly against the glimmering blue of the creature's body. A deep red, the familiar bracelet that made its wearer easily recognized sparkled in the light of the otherworldly battlefield. "No, it can't be!"

"Agghh!" Val yelled in shock, "That's Rico's red ring!!!"

"No way?! This Dark Falz monster possessed Rico!" Mako screamed in horror, "We're too late! It's taken a host body!"

~"I will evolve. I will open the door, open the gate. Set us free."~

"SHUT UP!!" Mako suddenly yelled and spun the Fork over his head as Dark Falz zoomed at them, sword raised, "Grants!" A burst of light erupted from within the creature and it jerked back with a shriek.

"Let's go, Val! Let's get that thing for Elliot and Dular and everyone on Pioneers One and Two!" Perri declared and summoned up her own Force power, "Rafoie!"

"Drop my GameCube, and release Rico, you monster!" the little man demanded, spinning his axe, then letting it fly. It slashed across the dark creature's arm and made its way back to him. Falz swung the sword towards him, missing Val only because he dove to the ground when he saw the arc come at him. "Hey! I lost my hat on this crazy road trip! I don't wanna lose my head!" he yelled, shaking his fist at Falz as it rose high into the air.

"It's up to something! Stay on your toes!" Mako called out, crouched and ready to bolt. Perri watched the creature warily. The Mags glared up at it, sensing that it wanted to do something more horrible than merely kill their masters.

In seconds, streams of some strange blue energy came down from above, aimed right for Val!

"Run!" Perri screeched as Val jumped. He raced away from the beams as fast as he could. "Move those legs, Val! They're on your tail!" Val wailed as he ran, legs a blur as he motored away from the deadly trails. Mako yelped and waved his hands.

"Not towards me! Go the other waaaaayyy!" he cried as he, too, was forced to turn and run. Perri watched in disbelief at the almost comical sight of the two remaining men of the group, zipping away from beams of light that cascaded down from Falz. Finally, the light faded away and the monster pointed a sword arm down at the group.

~"I will have the most powerful body. I will grow and set us free."~ the voice went on, sounding almost smug as a burst of golden light erupted from the sword.

"Agh! That thing has...!" Mako began to cry just before all three of them were engulfed by light, "AAAAGGGGHH!"

"Meruuuu!" Denwark wailed as Perri writhed in agony from the Grants attack, then fell to the floor in a heap, gasping. Val fell beside her, in too much pain to move. Falz descended upon the tiny group, watching them coldly.

"G-g-grants...." Perri gasped, "It had G-grants!" She struggled to lift herself up and failed. "I can't move! Help!"

"Hang on! I'll heal you all! Just give me a second!" Mako panted, standing shakily with one of the Star Atomizers in his hand, "If it weren't for the Scape Doll I had absorbing most of the damage, I'd be like you two right now."

~"I will take the strongest now."~

Val looked up in confusion as Dark Falz placed a blade onto the ring beside Mako, who stared at it, puzzled. Ribbons of energy snaked from it and surrounded the Fomar before anyone could ask what was happening. Brilliant red light suddenly burst forth from the cocoon and Mako was shrieking from within, clawing wildly at the air.

"Mako! What's going on now?!" Perri yelled as Val stretched his hand out and grabbed the fallen capsule. "Val! What's happening?!"

"One sec!" Val answered and cracked the capsule open, sending the healing force within it out upon them all. Perri rolled aside and jumped to her

feet as Falz raised its arms above its head. Mako suddenly went limp inside the cocoon. "Now what?" Val growled angrily, gripping his axe tightly.

"I don't know." Perri whispered, watching the cocoon intently. She gasped as a ghostly image of Mako was pulled from the red capsule surrounding the Fomar. "Oh my God! It's taking possession of Mako!" she screamed as new tendrils of energy began to flow from the monster towards his body.

"We've got to stop it! Or Mako will end up just like Rico!" Val declared, "Quick! Use your Grants again!"

"It's not gonna do us any good! We tried Grants on it and it barely makes a dent in it! How do you expect me to make a one hit KO on Dark Falz with Grants when I'm down to barely enough Force energy for it?!" Perri snapped at him. Val thought hard, studying the energy tendrils still trying to absorb Mako's spirit and body.

"Energy flows from one source to another as long as there is a decent conduit between them. Your Gizonde traveled through my Golden Rod pretty well. Can Grants do the same?" he muttered and swallowed hard. "Perri! I'm going to do something that may look crazy, but trust me on this, okay?!" he declared, bringing out the Golden Rod from his pack.

"All right! What's the plan?!" the Forcer cried. Val smiled grimly and whipped the rod around, releasing a long line and readying it. "Val?! What are you doing?!" she added in shock.

"When I give the signal, cast Grants onto the bobber at the end of my fishing line! I'll make sure it gets under Dark Falz's skin where it'll hurt the most!" he declared and began to run towards the monster.

"What?! But, Val! Wait! If I cast Grants, it could kill Rico and you, too!" Perri called out and jumped as the little man yelled in a fury and launched himself at the monster, "Vaaaaal! What the heck are you doing?!"

"Hiyaaaah!" Val howled and brought one hand up, holding the Golden Axe. Falling towards the monster, he threw his entire force into swinging the axe down and burying it into the creature's shoulder. His other arm swung the Golden Rod out, the bobber arcing away from them towards Perri. "Now, Perri! Cast Grants and save Mako! Rico would have wanted us to stop this thing that stole her life!" he yelled, "For the people that died and for those who will if we don't end it now, use Grants and finish this thing off!" Perri nodded wordlessly and raised her hands, gathering the last of her energy as the Mags surrounding Mako cried piteously for him

~"Little one...."~ a new voice whispered. Val blinked down at the monster in surprise. This new voice sounded feminine and ethereal. ~"Tell my

father I will be waiting for him. Stop the Pioneer Project. Stop Pioneer Three. The three planets seal the gate. Don't let them come here!"~ it urged.

"Rico." Val whispered in realization as Perrinetta threw her hands out at the bobber.

"Light of life, cast out the darkness once again! Grants!" she cried and the technique erupted in the bobber, shooting down the fishing line towards Val, burning it away as it traveled. Val screamed in pain as it passed through him and into the axe. Dark Falz writhed and thrashed as the axe buried in its body channeled the light energy throughout its being. Mako's spirit and body were released from the captive state and the Fomar fell back to the ground, motionless.

"It worked! Vaaaal!" Perri cried as the monster exploded in a brilliant display of light and energy...for the final time. The entire field was consumed by the light and as Perri was cast out of consciousness by the explosion, she was able to catch glimpse of a young girl rising up from the chaos and spiralling towards the heavens, a shining red ring around her arm....

Chapter Six And Epilogue

Perri awoke with a start, a cry bursting from her mouth as she sat up in her bed. Startled, nurses that stood nearby jumped, then hurried to calm her down. The Forcer looked around warily at her surroundings, the sterile white room that was part of the Pioneer Two's medical center. She then looked up at one of the nurses and reached out, pinching her arm.

"Ow! Hey! Why did you do that for?" the nurse demanded. Perri laughed in tired relief.

"You're real! This place is real! It's really over then." she sighed, then panicked, "Wait! Where's Dular and Elliot?! And Mako?! And Val?! Where are my friends?!" She fired questions one after another at the nurses until she heard a pair of voices at the door.

"Hey, Perri! Keep it down! There are people trying to sleep, ya know?" Elliot joked from the doorway, throwing her a thumb's up as Dular rolled his eyes and shook his head in exasperation.

"You guys! You're alive! You're okay!" Perri cried joyfully and scrambled out of bed to them. She hugged them tight then jumped when Elliot yelped in pain.

"Whoa! Take it easy! The doc says my back's in pretty rough shape so I should lay off hunting for a while." he explained and grinned sheepishly, "Well, that was the dumbest thing I ever did, dropping my weapon in a fight. There goes my way cool Ice Beam."

"Where's Mako and Val? Are they okay?" Perri asked Dular in a rush. The Hunter blinked and smiled at her.

"Yeah, they made it out of there with you. It was kind of a shock, though. Val looked pretty messed up. What happened?" he replied.

"Dark Falz was trying to take over Mako's body and Val said to use Grants on his Golden Rod and it traveled through it into him and then into his axe, which was in Dark Falz and it blew up everything and...." Perri babbled and then looked sorrowful, "I saw Rico come out of the explosion. Dular, Dark Falz had taken her over." The two hunters stared at her in horror. "She's gone, Dular. Rico's dead. We never had a chance to save her." Perri sobbed, rubbing at one eye, "What are we going to tell Mr. Tyrell?"

"You set her free." Val piped in and the group turned to see him standing in the hall, a small box in his hands. "That's all you can do. We couldn't save her, but we set her free and she'll be happy now." he added, "But she told me to tell you guys this. She'll be waiting on the other side for

her father, but you have to find a way to stop the Pioneer Project."

"What? Why?" Dular asked in all seriousness.

"The three planets seal the gate. Don't let them come here. Stop the Pioneer Three." Val went on, "Those are Rico's last words. You've got to find out what's going on here and stop Pioneer Three from coming."

"What about Mako?" Perri demanded, "Where is that Trifluid-hogger?!" Dular pointed down the hall.

"He's in bed. We can visit for a short while, but then we'll have to get going. Messages to deliver and all." he added and they headed down to see him.

The Fomar was asleep when they met with him, but he woke when heard the quiet bickering between Perri and Elliot over rares. Looking up at the gang, he smiled in relief.

"Perri, Val, you guys saved me from being Dark Falz's next host. I really appreciate it. Thanks." he murmured softly.

"Ah, you would have done the same for us, right?" Perri remarked brightly.

"That a trick question?" Mako teased and sighed, "I lost a lot of energy in that fight. I'm stuck here until the docs all say I'm clear."

"You won't be hunting for the babe anytime soon, huh?" Elliot snickered. Mako frowned and glared up at him.

"That's the second time you called my baby sis that. You got a thing for my sister?" he demanded to know.

"Just messin' with you."

"Look at this!" Val interrupted happily and held up the box in his hands, "It was sitting next to my bed when I woke up! This is my GameCube! My ticket home!" The hunters cheered and clapped for him as Val rubbed his head sheepishly. "I guess I'll be going home now."

"Awww, why not stay for a little while longer?" Perri cooed. Val smiled and looked wistful.

"I'd like to, really. You guys are great friends. But I really have to go." he replied, "I have to fix Periwinkle's house and get that ring I was saving up for from Nook. I have to go back to my way of life."

"Will we ever meet again?" Dular asked quietly. The little man shrugged.

"Maybe someday, if you can find a way to open a telepipe to my world." he chuckled, "Even if we never see each other again, we'll always be great friends, right?"

"Yeah! Friends for life!" Elliot declared with Mako giving a weak whoop and laugh. Perri bit her lip, then quickly dug out her Twinkle Star. She held the box out to Val, who stared at it.

"Here! To remember us by! I'm giving you my Twinkle Star!" she declared loudly.

"What?! But Perri, that's your favorite wand! And a rare one too!" Val cried. She turned red.

"Yeah, well, I still want you to have it! Take it! Before I change my mind!" she blurted, "It's special is Zonde, the lightning technique, and it's very pretty! It'll look nice in your house!" Val smiled and accepted the red box.

"Thank you, Perri. I'll treasure it and all of our questing together." he murmured and slipped it into his pack.

"So how are you going to get home?" Mako asked, "Does that thing come with instructions?" Val nodded and pulled out the letter that had come with the GameCube in the very beginning.

"This is the note I got with it. Turning it on sent me here, so if I turn it off, I should get home." he replied and tucked it away. He looked at the item and took a deep breath. "Here goes." he whispered and placed his finger on the 'Power' button.

"Goodbye, Val! You would have made a great Hunter!" Dular declared.

"An even better Ranger!" Elliot put in.

"An ace Forcer, too!" Perri and Mako both chipped in.

"Goodbye, everyone!" Val cried, tears of sorrow and joy streaming down his face. He pressed the button and a second portal opened above him. The vortex pulled him up and, in a matter of moments, Valentine Hart was gone with the swirling portal. The hunters were alone in the room. Silence reigned for a few seconds. Perri sighed.

"Well, he's home now." she murmured, "Come on, let's go finish our business."

"See you later, Mako. We'll come visit more, 'kay?" Elliot remarked as they headed out the door.

"Don't worry 'bout me! My Mags'll keep me company, right, guys?" the Fomar remarked. The three creatures looked at each other and rolled their eyes. "Hey! Who's the one who spends hundreds of Meseta a day, feeding ya?! Ingrates!" he yelled. The group laughed as they left the room.

While walking through the lobby out into the city, Dular told Perri all about the 'trials' Elliot was putting himself through over her. The Forcer listened intently, occasionally glancing the Ramar's way when she could. Elliot

looked around, trying to find something to keep himself busy, then caught a glance at the reception desk. He paused, eyebrow raised, as he listened to a conversation go on.

"I'm sorry, who were you asking to see again?" the nurse asked over the counter, smiling down at a very small Ramarl class woman. The tiny figure fidgeted uneasily, looking all around her with dark green eyes.

"My brother. I heard he was auto-teleported here from a big battle." she murmured, "Everyone here is so big!"

"May I have your brother's name? And your's as well?" the nurse asked.

"Mako Tiburon. Dol Fina." the Ramarl promptly answered the first name clearly, then whispered her own so low only the nurse heard, finally wincing, "I spoke too fast. That wasn't a command. Sorry." Elliot blinked in shock, staring at the petite woman with the red ponytail gone wild. The woman's 'ears', the cat-like points on her hat, suddenly perked and she looked over her shoulder directly at Elliot, eyes wide in surprise.

"Mako's sister? The one he told me about?" he whispered, "Enforcer 13?" The nurse checked her computer.

"Mako is currently in room 24B on the second floor." she remarked as a pair of nurses passed in front of Elliot. He jumped aside to get a better look at the Ramarl, but she had simply vanished. He looked around quickly, but didn't see any receding redhaired Ramarl in red and black uniform dashing anywhere.

"Nurse! Hey, lady! Who was that you were talking to?!" Elliot called out. The nurse looked up at him, then at her screen.

"Her name is....what?! My record! It's been scrambled!" she exclaimed, "It's wiped out the information she gave me!" Elliot frowned down at the scrambled data, then heard his name called by Perri and Dular. Muttering under his breath, he ran to join them, deciding to keep what he just learned to himself until he had better proof that he had indeed found the Last Enforcer, Mako's baby sister.

"Hey, Elliot! Don't look so grouchy!" Perri remarked brightly, "Dular's gonna sell off that Bringer's arm and we're going out to eat after we finish delivering the message to Mr. Tyrell."

"I just hope it gets to Pioneer Three in time. We can't let them come here!" Dular added, "Dark Falz was just the beginning. I have a feeling that there are even more dangerous things on this world." He clenched a fist and glared at it. "I'm glad that Val won't have to experience the rest of this. I hope he has a good life, wherever he is...."

Animal Crossing~

Val picked himself up and looked around dazedly at the bare room. For a moment, he couldn't understand what had happened, then brightened as it dawned on him that he was finally home. With a whoop of joy, he dumped all the leaves out onto the floor and set to work pushing furniture around.

"Lovely Stereo over here, and the Lamp over here and the Phone over here! Decorating has never been so much fun and enjoyable before!" he laughed as he dashed back and forth, reorganizing things the way they were before. "Oh yeah! The ring!" he yelped and dashed off again. Animals looked at him strangely as he ran, cheering and howling in joy over the great world he was living in.

"Nook! That ring! I'm here to buy it!" Val declared as he burst into Nookington's. He froze as he spotted Darwin leaning next to the display case that held the prize ring. The other man grinned slyly.

"Here for the bait to catch the mouse?" he purred. Val scowled. "Oh Nook's upstairs right now, checking his new shipment of furniture and clothes for tomorrow's sale. I'm just browsing for gifts." Darwin smiled at the ring. "I think this little beauty will make a fine one for MY little beauty."

"Step away from that case. It belongs to me and Periwinkle and you know it!" Val hissed. The dark-haired rival only grinned wider and suddenly kicked the case over, shattering the glass on the floor and sending the ring tumbling to the carpet. "HEY!"

"Mine now! Both of them!" Darwin laughed, snatching up the ring and running out with it. Val gave chase, running faster than he ever thought he could.

"I've faced down Boomas, Vulmers and Nano Dragons!" he thought to himself as he reached into his pack and grabbed hold of the Golden Axe's handle. "I've clashed with Delsabers, faced down Dark Bringers, and grappled underwater with Da Ral Lie!" Animals watched the whole scene in shock as Val kept chasing the laughing Darwin, his axe out and spinning like a golden discus in his hand. "I've even helped bring down the mighty Dark Falz himself! My body served as the conduit for the Grants technique that destroyed him!" With a yell, Val leaped and sent the axe flying. "I will not be defeated by anything less than that!" he declared as the blur hit a tree branch and sliced right through it, dropping the limb in front of Darwin, who skidded to a halt and spun around in terror.

Val stood fast, arm raised. The Golden Axe spun around and headed

back to him, landing perfectly in his open hand. He spun it once, then swapped it for the Golden Rod, swinging it to release a line and then snapping it like a whip.

"I am Valentine Hart, and what you hold in your hand is rightfully mine. I ordered it, paid for it, and am going to pick it up for Periwinkle." he said darkly, "I've let you push me around long enough. Hand over that ring, or I'll show you more of what I've learned on Ragol."

"Y-you're not supposed to d-do that with the axe!" Darwin stammered, "What happened to that weakling that moved here five years ago?"

"He died in WORKS' secret lab and was reborn with Reverser into a much stronger person." Val replied, "Now, are you going to hand me the ring, or do you want to be target practice for me and my axe?" Darwin looked around quickly and spotted the river. Grinning, he tossed the ring up and down in his hand.

"Sure, Mr. Strong! Here. Catch!" he declared and hurled the ring towards the stream.

"Wrong move, Darwin!" Val shouted, whipping the Rod and snagging the ring in midair with the hook. He snapped it again and the line arced back towards him, tossing the ring into his hand. "I told you already! I'm more than what I was before! I'm a Hunter, a Ranger, and I could also be a Forcer! Cross me and you'll be in too much pain to regret it!" he added, "Leave me and Periwinkle in peace and I won't have to use my tools as weapons again. Believe me, I really don't want to do that." Darwin only yelped at the display and raced off. Val stood with the ring in one hand and the Rod in the other, frowning. He shook his head. "Coward. How could I have been so bullied by him before?" he asked himself, then yelped himself. "Yikes! Periwinkle! Gotta get home!"

Periwinkle was just about to enter the house, shopping bags loaded in her arms, when Val ran up to meet her. She gave him a relieved look as he opened the door and helped take in the bags.

"Thanks, Val, I really appreciate it. It's been a hectic couple of weeks. You wouldn't believe what happened the first time I came back after shopping! Bessie ran up to me and practically begged me to deliver a package to her friend back in Animal Acres and, when I did, someone there asked me to deliver another one to his cousin all the way in Animal Forest!" she told him, unpacking leaves and presents, "Well, long story short, I've been racing all over the countryside delivering things and I just barely got back with all the rewards they kept giving me!" She kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks for

house-sitting; the place looks sooooo good after all that chaos!" Periwinkle stopped unpacking and smiled at him wistfully. "I wish I had that boring duty myself. How in the world did you keep yourself busy?" she asked. Val rubbed his head sheepishly, blushing.

"Ah, I managed to keep from getting bored. Don't worry about it. Listen, I wanted to ask you something." he replied and swallowed hard when Periwinkle cocked her head at him. He brought out the ring and showed it to her, smiling when her eyes went wide at it. "I've been waiting for the right time, and I guess now's a good a time as any. I've learned that life can be gone in a flash, so live it while you can!" he murmured and chuckled, "So, will you marry me, Periwinkle?"

"It's about time you asked me that, Valentine! Of course I will!" the little woman declared and hugged him tightly, "I was afraid that I would have to work up the courage myself to ask you! That's why I was out on that shopping trip! I was psyching myself up to ask YOU to marry ME!"

"Whaaaat?!" Val cried in shock, then laughed as he danced around with his new wife-to-be. "Periwinkle! We're gonna have a great life, you and me!" he declared, then pulled back from her, "I almost forgot! Hold on a sec." He reached into his pack and pulled out the red box, memories of Black Paper's strange questions bubbling to the surface.

"What's that? Is that a new piece of furniture?" Periwinkle asked as he showed it to her. Val shook his head.

"No, it's a gift from a friend of mine from far away. I wanted to show it to you." he murmured, "Peri, I want you to promise me something."

"Okay."

"This is very important. If anything weird should happen one day, like strange big men coming here or you being taken away from me to some weird place, take this box with you and use what's inside it to protect you." he told her seriously, "The item in this box will help you survive if something like that happens. And if you ever have need of this item, I will know that I will have to fight again."

"Val?" Periwinkle murmured in confusion, looking somewhat fearful.

"Promise?" Val pressed. She paused a moment, then looked up at him, confidence renewed.

"I promise." she replied. Val smiled at her.

"All right then. Let's get the wedding planned! When is a good time to get married?" he asked, scratching his head.

"Hmm, I'll ask the girls." Periwinkle said thoughtfully and laughed, "Oh, I totally forgot something myself!" She smiled up at him. "That

GameCube that you bought; what game came with it? Maybe we'll play it together one day?" Val blinked and looked over at the powerless item sitting on the table.

"Oh, that?" he remarked and smiled at her, "I'm not sure how good it is; I didn't really play it that much. The 'Cube's defective, so I'll have to buy another one from Nook this time. But, the title is Phantasy Star Online: Episode One and Two. We'll play it later, okay?" Perwinkle nodded eagerly.

"Phantasy Star Online! Sounds like a blast!" she declared.

The End?