

## **Mind Games**

"In order to destroy something, you must learn something of how it was created. There is no way of destruction without this learning." - Anon.

"...To fully understand anyone you must be that person. Since no-one can be anyone else, no one person can completely understand anyone. Yet we all speak the same language, and understand what we all want. Most of the time...." - Jason 'Redshirt' Taylor

### **Unit 1**

**Target: Ryalto**

**Current\_Age: 2**

**Target\_Location: Zantos Youth Centre**

*Geran's room is nice... And I'm going to be here too. He likes hoverbikes. Well, I rode one to get here... I wonder where Geran went?*

Ryalto is sitting alone on a bed in a room with two beds and a desk. At the foot of each bed is a small chest, and on the wall is a poster of a yellow wolf riding a hoverbike. There is a window above the desk, which looks out upon a night-darkened city.

*What will I do? I have nothing to do right now, but think. Thinking. Thinking of the future. Well, I guess I should start thinking of the future now I have one. Ryalto lays back on the bed. I have a future... What next? That wolf said I was good at math and science... What can I use that for? I'll have to find out. I have to find out a lot of stuff. Like what that crazy girl was saying earlier. What is a 'snuggle coon'? She called me one, but I'm supposed to be a Sirac...*

Geran walks in the room carrying Ryalto's bag. He puts it down in front of Ryalto's bed.

"Here's your stuff. Kind of light, you don't have much do you?" Geran opens it and starts taking stuff out. Ryalto sits up.

"Uh, is it normal for people to just go through others stuff without asking?" Ryalto looks questioningly at Geran, who drops the shirt he was holding.

"Sorry, just curious of what you've got." He picks up the bag and hands it to Ryalto.

"That's alright, I guess..." *Strange new culture to learn... What will I do if they all act like that crazy girl? I wish Amiz had explained that to me.* Ryalto sits down on the floor and takes the stuff out of the bag, putting the stuff onto his bed: two shirts, both blue; a pair of jeans; the sleep sack and a datapad. Geran picks up the datapad.

Geran looks at Ryalto and says, "What's this?" He turns it on and the screen lights up.

"That is something Amiz gave me. I'm not sure what it does, but I remember seeing..." Ryalto stops and his ears droop. Geran puts the datapad down and stands up, pulling Ryalto to his feet.

"Sorry I asked about it. Didn't want to remind you of anything bad." Geran looks at the datapad, noticing the time. "Come on! There's something I want to show you." He pulls Ryalto out of the room, leaving the datapad active on the bed.

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A short black furred male mouse in a blue and green robe sits on the couch. In his hands are a stylus and a datapad. Around him are seven wolf cubs, five Mouny cubs and Hedtra, all putting up various decorations. He tapes the stylus on the pad, then looks up at Hedtra, also wearing a blue robe.

"Fortune's fate of mercy laid, Enter now the few and the Brave. Introduction to the new. Come forward ye, thou art now true..." He raises an eyebrow. "Well, sis. What do you think?"

Hedtra puts down the banner she was holding and looks at the mouse. "Nice, but what is it for? And what are you saying?" She turns back to the banner, adhering it to the wall. It reads 'Welcome Ryalto' in large red letters.

"It is for the new guy, and it's supposed to mean 'Hi, welcome to the club'. But it's kind of hard to write a poem for someone you haven't met yet." He gets up and sets the datapad and stylus on a table near the couch.

Hedtra pats the banner once and turns back to the mouse. "Lask, I haven't yet to understand your poems, so go ask someone else for help. If you want to know more about him, though... He's cute, fuzzy and I like him." She hugs herself and closes her eyes. "So soft and fuzzy..."

Lask raises an eyebrow. "Soft, cute and fuzzy? Why would you describe him like that, you don't describe anyone like that. You only describe racoons as..." Lask raises both eyebrows. He turns to the door and grabs his datapad and stylus as he walks out muttering "This could be interesting, but I need to find out more..."

Hedtra sighs and turns to a table and picks up a decoration. "Coons, wonderful wonderful coons..."

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Geran is dragging Ryalto down the corridor towards the main room ask Lask walks out the door. Lask is looking intensely at his datapad. Geran turns back to Ryalto, not noticing Lask at all.

"Come on, you'll want to see this! Besides, you need to meet the others who live here as well. There's Torik and Rich and Kallea..." Geran lists off, walking backwards. Ryalto's ears flatten more at each name.

*Others... More people... All of them I do not know. And all of them unknowns... Fox and wolf and Mouny... So many shapes and forms. When will this dream of change end? Just one night of peace is all I want...*

Geran reaches on hand behind him, grasping at the door. He bumps into Lask, who jumps slightly, looking up from the datapad. His eyes settle on Ryalto.

"... Uh, Hi. You must be Ryalto. My name's Lask." He extends a hand to Ryalto.

*This one looks like the female that attacked me earlier today... Caution, his jet-black fur and golden hair, I know him not yet he knows my name. When will this golden nightmare end? Ryalto grasps the hand gently and the quickly lets go. Lask looks at Ryalto and then at Geran.*

"Uh, right. Um, Geran, you might want to wait a few minutes, Hedtra's in there, and it looks like he's," he nods towards Ryalto, "been spooked by my sis enough already." He turns back to Ryalto, his eyes gleaming mischievously. "I pity you, Mr. Coon. But I might know something that could help shake her off you..." He walks off down the corridor.

*Why does his ideas give me such fright? His black jets tufts and sibling's kind must be the cause of my state...*

Geran watches Lask leave, then turns to Ryalto. "Well, since it's not 'safe' in there yet, how about some food?" Ryalto's ears perk back up.

"Yes, please." *I wonder what they have here... Can't be worse than the mystery meat the gave us... Stop! Think of the future, the past is gone...* Ryalto and Geran walk to another door, marked 'Kitchen'.

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Lask enters a small closet, closing the door behind him and turning on an overhead light, and pulls over a small stool. He stands on it and reaches up for a small box labelled 'Geran's Stuff Keep Out'. He opens it and looks inside: a package of water balloons and two bottles of blue and red crystals. He grabs both bottles and two water balloons, and puts them in a pocket. He then puts the box back and pushes the stool back against the wall.

"Hmm, Blue and red, that'll make purple if I use both. I'll just use one, but which?" He opens the door and peeks his head out, then exits, shutting the door behind him.

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Ryalto walks into the main room, holding a small sandwich with a bite in it and looking back. Geran enters after him, actually pushing him.

*This is stupid; **they** never let food outside the mess there. I doubt that Takrus will like me eating in here...*

"Geran, I don't think this is a good idea..." Ryalto turns and looks at the room. In front of him all the wolf and mounty cubs are smiling and standing around a table with food set on it. Hedtra is not seen, being behind the door. Takrus is standing off to one side, looking at a small datapad. He looks up and smiles.

"Welcome, Ryalto. The other cubs wanted to have a little party to welcome you here. I see you already found the kitchen," he looks at Geran, who merely looks back, "but please mind that normally you can't eat in here. Parties are the exception of course..." He puts the datapad in a pocket and walks to the door. "Enjoy the party. I have a few things to attend to, but you should be alright here.

Ryalto and Geran step to the side and let Takrus pass, Ryalto standing right in front of Hedtra. Hedtra's eyes light up and she spreads her arms wide. "Snuggle Coon!" She jumps at Ryalto.

*AH! Not again!* Ryalto shrinks away from Hedtra. Geran sees Hedtra's action and steps in front of Ryalto. Hedtra lands on Geran, who holds her back.

"Hey, this is a no glomp area, Hedtra. Can't you see the sign?" He pulls out a small marker from his jean pocket and writes 'No Glomp Zone' on the back of the door. Hedtra just smiles.

"You'll get it for that. But ok, I won't 'glomp' him... What's a glomp?" Hedtra steps back, straightening her robe. "Hi, I don't think you got my name before when we first met... I'm Hedtra," she extends her hand to Ryalto.

*Crazy... Definitely crazy. What is she?* "Uh, um. Hi." Ryalto shakes Hedtra's hand. "Uh, what are you?" He starts to blush, his grey cheeks taking a red hue under his fur.

"I'm a mouse! And I have a brother around here... Where is Lask? He wrote something for you..." Hedtra starts looking around. Ryalto steps away from Hedtra over to the table, not taking his eyes off her till he is standing well away from Hedtra. Geran puts the marker away and walks up to Ryalto, placing his arm around Ryalto's shoulder.

"Well, looks like your safe for a while... Ryalto, meet the 'others'. That's Rich," Geran points at a tall orange with stripes Mouny, "and that's Torik," he points at a short black wolf cub, "and over there is Kallea..."

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Ryalto is sitting on the couch next to Geran and Rich, listening to Rich tell a story. Behind the couch Hedtra leans over Ryalto, although also listening to the story. All the other cubs are standing or sitting around the room chatting. Lask walks into the main room, holding both hands behind his back. He spots Ryalto and Hedtra and walks towards them.

Rich finishes his story "... And that's why I'm here. Not as dramatic as Hedtra and Lask's story, but then I wouldn't want to be stuck in an avalanche. So. What's your story?" Ryalto sits back, and looks at the floor.

Hedtra looks at Ryalto with concern. "Are you ok? You don't have to tell us if you don't want..."

*What is my story... I don't want to tell it though. To tell them my loss, the sores I've gained... But I can't hide it, so better tell them it. At the least, I'll remember Kari from it.* "My story... Well, it's not like yours, or Hedtra's or Geran's. My first memory is of being with my class in a room with a lot of vid screens, and we were all watching them..." Ryalto looks up from the floor and looks around, spotting Lask, then turning back towards Rich.

Hedtra follows Ryalto's gaze, but watches Lask. Lask walks up to Hedtra, going around the couch. His hands are still hidden behind his back. He stands next to Hedtra for a few seconds, listening to Ryalto. Then he turns to his sister, and mutters "Hedtra, don't kill me."

Lask quickly throws two balloons in the air, one at Ryalto and one at Hedtra. Ryalto stands up, trying to dodge the balloon, but instead end up right in its path. The balloon pops, spilling red liquid all over his face and front. Where the liquid passes, his fur turns crimson red. Ryalto starts to try and brush the liquid off, and only succeeds in getting his black hands coloured red also. The other balloon hits Hedtra on the top of her head, and spills blue liquid down her. Her face turns from shock to anger, and she raises her hands at Lask.

"Oh, brother, thou now art a villain! Fortune's fates of mercy cast, thou shalt now know my Fury's last!" Lask starts running out the door, and Hedtra chases him. Ryalto stands in shock, looking at his now dry red hands and chest.

*What is this stuff?! And why did Lask throw it on me?.. To get Hedtra away from me... He angered Hedtra to keep her away from me. But why this stuff? Geran gets up, chuckling.*

"I knew I shouldn't of told him about that stash. Don't worry, Ryalto, it's just some fur dye. It will come out in a few days. At least you're wearing a red shirt, so you don't have to worry about that being ruined. Red shirt... Oh yeah! Hedtra gave you a nickname earlier, Redshirt. Well, now you are red, more or less." Geran chuckles again, then leans close to Ryalto. He whispers "Don't worry, we'll get Lask back in a few days. I have just the prank for him, and have been waiting for an excuses to use it." Geran walks over to the table and picks up some egg-shaped food and hands some to Ryalto. "Here, try this, and continue! I want to learn more about your siblings." He sits down and looks at Ryalto. Ryalto eats the snack, and then sits down.

*Geran isn't angry about this, must be common. Well, I won't be get angry then. My siblings, he must mean the others in my class... Well, I guess they are my brothers and sisters.*

"My siblings? Well... I've told you about Herto and Lena, but there's also Jaon and Kari..."

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Out in the corridor, a blue Hedtra is sitting on Lask, who has his feet, hands and tail tied behind his back. She pokes him with a 2' pointed stick. "Now, where is the dye remover? I ain't letting you go till you tell me!"

Takrus comes out of his office and sees the pair. He raises one eyebrow at Lask and speaks. "Lask, I thought you would know better by now not to mix fur dyes and your sister... Hedtra, try not to break any bones this time." He walks down the corridor and around the corner.

## Unit 2

**Target: Ryalto**

**Current\_Age: 4**

**Target\_Location: Zantos Youth Centre; Woodland around Shivae Lake**

Wearing a red T-shirt and blue jeans, Ryalto lays on his bed reading a large book.

*So this is what they made me from... Weird. I see the resemblance, of course, but why? A tree climbing omnivorous scavenger as a template for a slave? There must be more to this...*

Geran walks into the room, and plops down on his bed. He lays back and stares at the ceiling, muttering to himself. Geran then turns over towards Ryalto. "You're reading Hedtra's racoon book, huh? Finally got curios about what she calls you?"

Closing the book, Ryalto looks over to Geran. "No, I got curious about what I came from. I mean, the made me from these... creatures, and I haven't a clue why. I've heard stories about other creatures that EG has made and they all had some attribute that EG wanted. Hence what they based that creature on. But the more I look at racoons, I can't seem to figure what EG wanted from me and my kind..." He flops the book down next to him and sighs. "And it doesn't help that I am the only one who is from EG here. I feel so... Isolated."

Geran's ears perk at the last comment and he gets up. He sits down next to Ryalto and puts an arm around him, shaking him gently. "Oh, come on. You told me that you couldn't stand to have any of your brothers or sisters here..."

*Except for Kari... I miss you so much...* Ryalto sighs again. "Not quite true, I wouldn't mind having some of them here. But that's not it... I don't know, I just feel like... Like I need to get out, do something to get outa this mood. Maybe go see Centralis, since I've heard so much about it."

Geran smiles and looks out the window. "I don't know about Centralis... I've been there, and there's nothing interesting for us to see in spring. Summer, yes, they have all those fairs and carnivals to go to, and the sea is nice and warm then..." Ryalto scowls, but Geran ignores him and carries on. "I know, how about we go camping? I'm sure Takrus will let us. I mean, you've been out in the woods before and didn't kill yourself. We can go with Rich and Lask."

Ryalto looks at Geran, uncertainty in his eyes. "By Lask, you mean Lask on his own, right? No Hedtra?"

Geran puts both hand on his heart and sits up straight, looking directly at Ryalto. "Nope, I swear on my family's honour. I think she wouldn't anyways, last time I managed to get her tied up in her sleep sack." He smiles.

Ryalto looks at Geran and points his finger at Geran's chest. "You will leave **my** sleep sack alone, or I'll do something so evil, so depraved, you'll wish you had never seen my grey butt."

Grinning even wider, Geran laughs. "No problem. I'll have Lask and Rich to target. Come on, let's go talk to Takrus." Geran gets up and pulls Ryalto up with him. They both walk out the room, smiling.

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A tall black wolf walks into the building with Takrus. They walk through the corridor towards the main lounge, chatting as they open the door.

"Ryalto is doing fine, Amiz. He's doing well in all his subjects, and has made a lot of friends. I know it seems that you brought him here just a yesterday, but he's been here two years now..." Takrus puts his arm around Amiz's shoulder.

Amiz smiles and sighs. "Yes... I know that it's been two years. I am aware of the passing of the seasons. But I haven't spent all that much time with him. I should, you know."

Takrus stops just inside the door and looks around. He sees that it is empty and walks over to the sofa and sits. Amiz walks over to a plush chair next to the sofa and sits down. Takrus looks Amiz in the eyes. "My friend, you have responsibilities, you can't always be where you want to be. You should be glad you were there when he needed you. Ryalto is doing well, and thinks highly of you."

Amiz looks out of a window and sighs again. "If you say so..."  
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"Aw, come on Hedtra! It's not like I hurt him! Let me go! Let me out of the closet!"

Hedtra is leaning next to a door in the corridor, looking at the nails of her left hand. On the floor next to here is a foam bat leaning beside here, and a set of keys hang out of one of her pockets. Ryalto and Geran walk up, slowing as they approach the door. Ryalto edges as far against the opposite wall as possible, keeping Geran between himself and Hedtra. Geran looks at the door and then at Hedtra. Geran gulps and asks "Lask in there?"

Looking up at Geran, Hedtra smiles. "Yep." Then she sees Ryalto and squeals "Hiya snuggle 'coon! You ok? Did the mean Lask-y do anything else to you?"

The door thumps as something large hits it. "Ryalto! Help me! I didn't do anything bad! Help me!"

Hedtra picks the bat up with her left hand and thumps the door. "Shut up, Lask. Teach you to put pepper sauce in his breakfast!"

Ryalto looks at the door, then at Hedtra, then back at the door. "... " Ryalto then looks at Geran, "Uh... Run." Geran nods his head.

Both Geran and Ryalto run down the corridor. Hedtra watches their departure and stands back. "What did I say?"

From behind the door, Lask yells, "You scare him more than I do!"

Hedtra swings the bat behind her and opens the door. "That's it, more beats for you!"  
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"Well, if you want to spend some time with him, Amiz, all you have to do is tell me. So what did you have in mind?" Takrus smiles and leans forward. Amiz sits back, and starts to open his mouth as the door opens. Geran and Ryalto enter. Geran leans against the door, shaking his head and muttering something. Ryalto looks around the room and spots Amiz talking to Takrus.

"Amiz!" Ryalto runs over to right behind Amiz's chair and hugs him. "You're early!"

Amiz smiles and pats Ryalto's arm. "Yes, I managed to sort out business early, so I came by to see you. How have you been?"

Ryalto lets go of Amiz and dashes over to the couch, sitting down next to Takrus. "I'm good. I won the science contest last week for my experiment on compression and it's effect on explosions." Amiz raises an eyebrow and looks over at the door.

Geran walks over to the couch and sits himself on the edge closest to the window. He smiles and adds "Yes, and you blew up my experiment in the process. Guess I shouldn't have short sheeted your bed the night before... I got third place, though. That's the best I've ever gotten."

Amiz turns to Ryalto and shakes his head. "Who gave you the explosives? You're a minor and shouldn't be messing around with them." He looks at Takrus sternly. Takrus just smiles and tilts his head towards Ryalto.

Ryalto crosses his arms, saying very seriously "I made them myself. I know how to. They were just a simple mix of caustic soda and some other stuff I found around. I did take precautions, though. Takrus was there the entire time to watch me."

"Then just how did you blow up Geran's experiment then? That hardly sounds like safe use of explosives."

Ryalto smiles and looks across to Geran. "Who said I used explosives? I just dropped some potassium chips that were dipped in water in his circuit board before he sealed it. When he used it, the current sparked and blew the case open. No debris, just popped the seal."

Geran smiles back. "Yeah, and it reminded me to check what I'm sealing. Especially if I leave it to do after lunch." He leans back, stretching his arms up. "Oh! Takrus, Ryalto and I had this idea. How about a camping trip? We could go with Torik, Rich and Lask... Well, assuming Hedtra leaves him in state that he could come with." Geran smiles.

"I'll take that to mean that Lask is in trouble. Where?" Takrus stands up, looking towards Ryalto.

Ryalto points at the door, and says "Closet, around the corner. Careful, Hedtra's got the bat." Takrus nods his head and leaves.

Amiz raises his eyebrow again. "Bat?"

Geran shrugs and says "Lask got her a foam bat for their birthday. He said something about 'a club to catch Ryalto with'... I haven't a clue what he was on about. The only person she's used it on is Lask, and with great ferocity." Amiz shakes his head.

*And thank whatever's-up-there that she ain't coming with us... Ooh, I wonder.* "Amiz, can you come with us camping?"

Amiz blinks. "Well, I didn't bring my gear with me... I didn't think I would be needing it for a couple weeks. That's when I usually go camping, you see."

Ryalto looks at Amiz, puzzled. "But I thought you said you were camping when you found me..."

Amiz nods his head and explains "Yes, I had a few days free before a big project came up, and knew I wouldn't get my normal chance to go. So I went early. But, sure, I'll go with you. If Takrus lets you. I will have to go collect my gear, but that shouldn't take me long. When were you planning on going?" Amiz looks at Ryalto, who looks at Geran. Geran looks back and shrugs.

Geran then turns to Amiz. "Uh... How about tomorrow? Rich is at the doctor's right now, getting a check up, but he rarely misses a chance to camp. And I know I need today to get my stuff together..."

Amiz stands up and nods his head. "Right. I'll go sort out the details with Takrus then. You two go get yourselves ready." Geran stands and grins. Ryalto jumps to his feet and hugs Amiz.

They both walk out the door chatting about what to bring.

Amiz sighs and walks slowly out of the door.

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### ***Next Morning***

Rich, Lask and Geran are standing outside the youth centre, three bags lying at their feet. Geran looks at the door and down the street, muttering to himself.

Ryalto walks out the door, his bag filled and on his shoulder. "Is he here yet?"

Geran looks at Ryalto, raising an eyebrow. "No, he's late. Just as late as you were getting up." Ryalto smiles sheepishly.

A small skimmer floats down the street and lands in front of the building. Amiz gets out and smiles. "Sorry I'm late, there was something I had to sort that came up. You all here and ready? Where's Torik?"

Geran picks up the black bag and walks over to the skimmer, saying, "Torik broke his leg yesterday after you left. He slipped on the stairs. It's ok though, he's drawing all sorts of stuff on the caste. Really neat stuff, there's one of a skimmer, one of a shivae and even a blue scythetail." Amiz nods his head and opens a compartment in the back of the skimmer.

Rich picks up a red bag and walks over to the skimmer. "Yeah, and we all signed it. Lask wrote a poem.." Rich turns to Lask, "How did it go?"

Picking up the last blurple bag, Lask recites "Your health has taken a turn to the worse, but 'tis not yet time for your hearse. Get well soon, black friend of ours, so next time you may join our tours."

Geran tosses his bag in as Ryalto walks over to the skimmer. Amiz takes Rich's and Lask's bags and places them next to Geran's, moving Geran's bag slightly. Ryalto then hands Amiz his bag. Amiz takes it and places it on top of the other bags, then shutting the compartment. Amiz wipes his hands against his trousers, and motions at the skimmer. "Right, in you all get. We're going to one of my favourite sites, over by Shivae Lake."

They all get into the skimmer, Ryalto entering last, looking one last time at the youth centre.

*Shivae Lake? Where have I heard that name before...*

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The skimmer lands in a clearing beside a river. A roaring waterfall can be heard in the distance. Amiz and the cubs all get out of the skimmer.

Geran and Ryalto walk over to the skimmer's compartment and start unloading it. Rich looks about the clearing, and walks around collecting various sticks and logs. "Are we staying here then? This place looks nice, and there's a fire ring already set up over there" Rich points a stick at a ring of stones standing in the middle of the clearing.

Lask steps forward a few feet and stretches. "Ey, my tail hurts. Now what's so special about this place that we came out here?"

Amiz stands up and looks around. "Yes, Rich. I set up those stones when I first found this spot." He looks around again, walking around the skimmer so that he is standing near the river. "Lask, I was camping here when I found Ryalto. That is what's so special."

Ryalto drops his bag on the ground and looks at the river.  
*That river... That's the one then.*

Geran pulls out the last bag and lays it next to the others. Placing an arm on Ryalto's shoulder, he looks from the river to him. "You ok?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. It's just I didn't realise that's where we are..." Ryalto shudders. "Last time I was near here... Nevermind. Let's get the stuff set up."

Amiz turns from the river and walks over to the bags. "Ryalto, the tents are in the big blue bag, please take it over by the fire ring. Geran, the yellow bag has the equipment. Take out the water pump and filter and get us some water from the river, please." Both cubs nod and go with their bags. Amiz picks up a smaller red bag and opens it. "Lask, come here."

Lask walks over, looking at the bag. "What's that?"

Amiz takes out a small steel box, then takes a key from his pocket and opens the box. He takes out four small oval shaped objects: one red, one blue, one green and one yellow. "I am trusting all of you to use your common sense with these. No playing around, and use them sensibly. There is a reason they call that lake up there Shivae Lake. These won't do you any good against a shivae, but I'll feel better knowing you all can protect yourselves." He hands Lask the blue one.

Lask flicks open a small blade from the device. "Cool... Multi-tools. But what about you?"

Amiz walks back to the skimmer, putting the steel box back in the bag and placing it in the compartment. Slipping the other three multi-tools into a shirt pocket, he pops a hidden panel off the inside of the compartment and takes out a hatchet and small stunner. "If anything happens to you four, you find me. Now go help Ryalto put up the tents, please. He looks like he could use some help." Amiz replaces the panel and shuts the compartment.

"Ok." Lask walks over to Ryalto and helps him take the last few poles out of the blue bag.

Amiz walks over to the river, slipping the hatchet and stunner onto holsters on his belt.

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It is now dark, and Ryalto is sitting on a rock near the river. Behind him a cheerful fire is blazing, and a few feet away are three tents. Lask and Rich are sitting near the fire, chatting. Amiz sits near the fire, cooking some unknown meat.

*So this is where Amiz found me...*

Geran walks up from behind Ryalto and sits beside him. "You never told me what happened before Amiz found you. I bet that's what you're thinking about."

Ryalto looks at Geran, puzzled. "But I told you all about my siblings and..."

Geran coughs, then interrupts. "Yes, but never what happened about you getting away from EG. For all I know you just walked out the front door, and a few days later fell in the river. I doubt that's what happened, though. Care to share the load?"

Ryalto sighs and looks back at the river. "You're pretty close though. I did walk out the front door, but after I blew up some stuff. And I didn't fall in a few days later, I fell in that night."

"Huh? But how could you..." Geran looks at Ryalto. He looks back at Amiz and then to Ryalto. "Wait a sec, does Amiz know how you got..."

Ryalto shakes his head, then speaks. "No, I didn't tell Amiz, but I did tell a doctor. I'm sure he knows a bit about it though. Anyways, that's not what I was thinking about. I was thinking about the lake. That's where I fell in, and I really don't want to go back there."

Geran just smiles. "Then we won't go there. Lask and Rich can go on their own with Amiz to fish, and we'll stay here and fish in the river." Geran looks back at the fire and Amiz, sniffing the air. "You know, I think that dinner might be ready now... How about we go eat, and then you can explain to me how you 'walked out the front door'. Eh?"

Ryalto smiles. "Sure, why not? But you're not gonna like one part of it."

"Oh?" Geran smiles and gets up. "What's that?"

Ryalto smiles and stands up, stretching. "I crashed a Macrarri in Shivae Lake when I fell in."

Geran laughs and starts walking. "Note to self, don't let you near any hover bikes." Ryalto sticks his tongue out at Geran and they walk over to the fire.

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"You don't have to come with us, Ryalto." Rich looks at the Sirac from across the fire ring with concern. "I mean, this is a big lake and I know you're afraid of drowning."

Ryalto stands by the extinguished fire, the morning sun rising through the woods behind him. "I know. I'll just stay away from the cliffs, and won't go swimming. Besides, it's not like we're going over the lake."

Rich smiles and walks around the fire ring. "If you're sure... Hey. I bet we're going past the waterfall! I should take my sketch pad with us." Rich walks into one of the tents and starts rummaging around in his bag.

Ryalto smiles weakly and walks over to the river. He walks up to Geran and Lask, both of them washing up some dishes. "Aren't you two done with your bowls yet? It's not that hard."

Geran looks up at Ryalto and winks. "I was just keeping Lask here company. I'm finished." He stands up, shaking streams of water off his hands. Walking over to a flat rock, he places his bowl and utensils with three other sets.

Scowling, Lask stands up and shakes his hands at Geran. "I though I was keeping **you** company. I finished mine ages ago." Lask shakes his head and looks over to Ryalto. "You would think someone as adept at covering up after himself would be quicker at cleaning." He smiles and Geran swipes his hand at Lask.

Amiz walks into the camp, looking around at all the cubs. "If you are all ready, grab your stuff and let's go then. If we hurry, we'll catch the waterfall right as the sun rises over the cliffs. That is one beautiful sight, the sun rising from the middle of the falls, with a great big rainbow..." Amiz starts looking into space, then shakes his head. "Come on! You really do not want to miss this."

\*\*\*\*\*

*Now that I seen it again, I feel so alive...*

Ryalto sits on a large boulder alone above a cliff looking out over the lake. He stares out at the opposite shoreline. A small red whip lies out and lands by the side of the cliff near the trees.

*I don't know why, but being back here feels so... better. I don't fear this spot anymore. Or the lake... Well, except that I don't want to go in it. Ryalto shudders, then get up. Walking over to the edge, he looks into the lake. I almost died there, but I didn't. And I evaded EG. That spot over there, I'm certain that's where the bike is. Yes, over by the mouth of the river. I don't care, though. That part of my life is over, I'm free. I am not anyone's property, I have friends, Tarn and the others can't tease me... But I lost them. I lost my family.*

Ryalto goes back to the rock and lays down on it, staring at the noon sky. *That's why I feel so bad. So what if I have friends? That's all they are, friends. Not family. I am **Orphan**... No, not even that. Orphans have parents, I came from a tube. I am nothing...*

Lask walks up a path next to the cliff edge, looking out over the lake. He walks over to the boulder and sits down. "For someone who is afraid of drowning, you sure pick the strangest place." He looks over at Ryalto, then asks, "What'cha thinking about?"

"I was thinking about what happened the last time I was at this spot."

"Oh? Care to elaborate?"

"This is where I stopped to rest after escaping from EG. I slept for a few hours right here, next to this boulder. And I was remembering what I lost."

Puzzled, Lask looks over at Ryalto. "What you lost? You didn't lose anything. You gained your life, freedom, friends..."

"I **lost** my family. I lost my brothers and sisters, the person I would call Mother, and I lost my closest friend, my sister Kari." Ryalto turns on his side away from Lask.

"So that's why you've been in a mood lately. Fine, I understand that. You miss your siblings. Understandable, I still miss my mother and father. And I would be devastated if I lost Hedtra, even if she does beat up on me all the time. I understand where you're coming from, if not exactly what you mean." Lask looks down at his hands, then out over the lake. "But you haven't lost them. They still live, and someday, who knows. You might meet them again, or they might also escape. And even if you don't, you still have other family. You have us. We are more than just friends Ryalto. I would like to think that we are brothers of mind, if not blood. I know Geran thinks that way. He has no siblings, and always said he envied mine and Hedtra's relationship. I haven't heard him say that since you came, though. And you say you lost a mother figure. Well, you gained Amiz. You gained a father, and that's gotta be worth something."

Ryalto looks back, tears falling down his face. "Thanks, Lask. I, well...Thanks." He sits up and hugs Lask gently.

Lask smiles and hugs back. "No problem." Lask looks at the tree line, then says, "There's something I was told right after my parents died. It helped me to deal with it. 'No matter where you go, or what might happen, you will always find family'."

Ryalto wipes his eyes and sits back. "Where did you hear that?"

"It's an old mouse proverb. For us, it has to do with how spread out we were, and still are. But it has many other meanings. Come on, Amiz is worried about you. He thinks you might have wandered off in fear of the lake." Lask gets up and looks over the cliff. "Hey, they're right below us. Neat." He turns back to Ryalto. "Got any water balloons?"

Ryalto laughs, then gets up. He walks over to the path, staying clear of the cliff's edge. "No, and if I did, I would throw it. Let's go then."

They both walk down the path.

### Unit 3

**Target: Ryalto**

**Current\_Age: 7**

**Target\_Location: Avistar**

A lone fox in a grey robe covering all his fur sits in a cafe off a busy street. A tall, black furred, male mouse walks up to him and sits down. Both of his ears are ripped and his left arm bears a long scar down half of it. He wears a sleeveless leather jacket, and carries a large knife on his belt.

"You're late." The fox looks at the mouse, his robe obscuring his face and fur.

The mouse scowls and looks around. "I had a little trouble to sort out."

"Whatever," the fox takes a sip from his drink. "Here is the details of the target. Be warned that he has some... Interesting abilities, and he won't be alone. I want him alive, Pols. I don't care what you have to do, but bring him alive and unhurt." The fox passes a small folder to Pols, his hands gloved.

Taking the folder, Pols flips through the papers inside a bit, then looks back at the fox. "A Sirac? Well... This is gonna cost you a bit more."

The fox scowls. "You knew that the target was an EG creation..."

"Yeah, and are you aware just how many EG creations are 'wild'? Or for that matter just how many 'species' they belong to? I mean, if this was one of those skunks or roo-thingies, I wouldn't have a problem. Sure, the skunks can stink, but I have a gas mask for that. Sirac, though... That's another matter." Thwaping the folder on the table, Pols looks straight at the fox.

The fox leans forward, shadow still obscuring his fur colour. "Are you saying that you are not capable of this job?" He leans back, waiting a few seconds and then continuing "Perhaps I should get someone else. I knew a hunter of your race was not up for this task..." He reaches across the table for the folder.

Pols grabs the folder to his chest. "No, just that it will be more... Interesting. Just make sure that you have the cash there. If you don't, I'll kill the target. And I know EG will take him dead."

The fox nods his head. "Fine. Oh, one other thing. I do not want you to contact me before the exchange, Pols. I have business to attend and you will not disturb it. Any problems are yours and you solve them."

The fox gets up and leaves. A mouny waitress walks up to him, offering Pols a menu. He accepts and looks at it, sliding the folder into his jacket.

\*\*\*\*\*

Geran walks out of a tall building and looks around. "Sure is lighter here..."

Ryalto and Lask walk out behind him and look around as well. "Yeah... But not much. Where's this hotel we're supposed to be staying?" Lask looks behind him at a tall black wolf and a female marguay trailing several suitcases on an anti-grav sled.

Hedtra hops around from behind the wolf and stands next to Ryalto, who shudders. "Takrus gave us a map... Just a second." She opens a small bag on the

sled and pulls out a datapad. Pushing a few buttons, she smiles and shows Lask a map displayed on it. "Here, not that far from us. I think..." She turns to look one direction down the street and then the other direction, pointing down the last. "That way." She smiles.

The black wolf looks at Hedtra and shrugs, tapping a button on the device in his hands. "If you're sure, Hedtra." The sled starts moving down the street the way Hedtra pointed.

"I'm always sure, Torik. Just like I'm sure I like Ryalto." Hedtra moves closer to Ryalto, and Ryalto steps around Geran, trying to keep away from Hedtra. The group starts walking down the street, Geran and Ryalto, Lask and Hedtra, the sled and then Torik and the marguay in the back. Ryalto starts to speed up a bit, noticing that Hedtra is right behind him and watching his tail.

Geran grabs Ryalto's arm. "Ryalto, slow down. She's not gonna do anything. Right Hedtra?" He turns back, still walking.

Hedtra sighs and smiles. "I won't do anything..." She turns to look behind her, then whispers "... Till we get to the hotel at least." Lask grins, hearing that comment.

Geran sighs and turns back to Ryalto. He speeds up his pace to match Ryalto's and put a bit of distance between Hedtra and themselves. "I don't get you. I would love having any girl's attention like you have Hedtra's. And she *is* cute"

Ryalto looks at Geran like he's insane. "You would like being attacked every time you walk in a room, dragged to the floor, and squeezed roughly? You would like being called stupid names like 'Snuggle Coon'? You would like having stuff disappear only to materialise a few days later in her room, and know that any attempt to get it will result being attacked again?" Ryalto shudders again and says. "And to top it all of, you have the temerity to say that it's all right because she may or may not be cute?"

Geran chuckles, then responds. "One, it's called being 'glomped', not attacked, and yes. Two, I do not nor ever will look like a racoon, so I don't have to worry about that. As for other nicknames she calls you, you like being called 'Redshirt'. And the third one is Lask's fault. Just be glad that he's going to here to studying Technomagery, and not back home. At least then you'll be some what safe."

*Gah... Too right there. He'd be teleporting **me** in her room, not just my stuff* Ryalto shudders again.

Geran shakes his head, guessing what Ryalto must be thinking. Then he turns back to Ryalto. "So you do think she's cute..."

Ryalto stops and stands, jaws open. "... I said no such thing!" He starts walking again, noticing that Hedtra walks closer, though chatting to her brother.

"But you don't deny it. Maybe Lask is right..." Geran smiles and starts whistling.

Ryalto scowls at Geran. "Don't give him any ideas, Geran. It's hard enough dealing with Hedtra, I don't need him encouraging her. Or Lask trying to push me into anything."

Geran grins. "We're only trying to help you, Red. Besides, for a 7-year-old, you're handling this in a fairly mature way. I think she'd be even more attracted if you went 'Eww, cooties' or something like that."

Ryalto thinks on that again, then shrugs. "Good thing I've always been mature for my age then. Oh, The shuttle on the way back? You're sitting in front of Hedtra. I don't think my tail can take another trip with her behind me."

Geran laughs and nods. "Sure... I'll do that, but just cause I'd hate to have to explain where your tail went to Amiz."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Lay off Ryalto, Lask. You're just making him worse around her."

Lask looks at Geran, shaking his head. He sits down on a couch in a large room with 5 doors leading out of it. "I don't see why I should. He needs to relax around her, all I'm doing is giving him the chances to do so."

Geran walks up in front of Lask and crosses his arms. "But that's not all you're doing. You know that she scares him out of all reason. And your actions are scaring him even more. The thought of a technomage," Lask starts to say something, but Geran continues, "no matter what level of training, acting against you would frighten any sane being. You popping the odd object of his into Hedtra's room sure counts as that, and he's scared."

Lask looks around, avoiding Geran's eyes. "I don't mean to scare him... It's just that she like him, and he does like her..."

Waving his hand at one of the doors, Geran cuts Lask off. "No, he may like her but he hasn't accepted her yet. Ryalto still does not accept Hedtra as a friend, and until he does, he will not admit **to himself** liking her in any other way. And her response around him doesn't help that." Geran is about to continue when Torik walks in from one of the other doors.

"That's enough, Geran. I'm sure that Lask understands now. Don't you?" Torik walks up to Lask, and Geran steps aside.

Lask nods, then looks up at Torik. "So you think I should back off with Ryalto too, eh? Fine, but not cause he's your cousin, cause he's my friend." Lask stands up and walks over to one of the doors. "But I'm not the one you really need to talk to." Lask exits.

Geran stares at the door Lask went through. "Torik, I think he's right."

Torik shrugs and sits down. "Don't worry. I asked Kallea to talk to Hedtra about it. Hopefully she can talk some sense into the mouse."

Sighing, Geran walks over to the door he indicated Ryalto was in, looking back at Torik. "See you in the morning then?"

Torik nods his head. Geran opens the door, walks through and closes it.

\*\*\*\*\*

Pols stands on a rooftop opposite from a tall, elegant glass structure. He looks through a pair of binocs, and a case/stand next to him has several knives, a gun and the folder.

"Target sighted, 10th floor of Hotel Avistar... In one of the suites. Rooming with brown wolf, age appears about 14-15... Accompanied by a black wolf, age 17-18, female mounty, age unknown, two mice, one black male and one white female, both appear to be 14-15, and the brown wolf. Target not accessible from hotel. Been there, got the scar... Have to try somewhere else... No indication that Target is aware of my presence, will continue surveillance tomorrow. If opportunity knocks, I'll get him tomorrow." Pols reaches over and taps the datapad. It beeps and displays the message 'Recording stopped, Compress file?'. Pols taps the datapad again and places the binocs in the case, closing and collapsing it. "First Sirac target I take, and so far it's been easy... Those other guys must've been wimps." He walks over to a door in the roof.  
\*\*\*\*\*

### ***Next Morning***

Ryalto walks out of his room, wearing a red set of pyjamas and holding a rolled up towel-bundle. Yawning, he walks over to one of the doors and knocks.

"Occupied! You'll have to wait a few seconds!" A female voice shouts out over the sound of running water.

Ryalto shrugs and walks over to the couch. Sitting down, he turns on a vid screen, flicking through the various programmes. He stops at a news program, watching an avistarian talk about some conflict at a spaceport a few days ago.

Another of the doors opens and Lask walks out. He walks over to the same door Ryalto walked to.

"It's in use. And I've got it next." Ryalto flicks the vid screen to another programme, this time a weather report.

Lask nods, then walks over to the couch, sitting on a corner of it. "Uh, Ryalto... I'm sorry for putting your stuff in Hedtra's room. I just thought that it would help you..."

Ryalto looks over to Lask, bleary eyed. "Huh? Help me? Putting my stuff in your sister's room, when you know I don't like the way she is to me? Just how did you think I was to get my stuff back. Oh, wait... That is what you wanted. You know, some of the things I've had done to me have been pretty cruel. Most of the worst things were done by one of my brothers. But what you've done... That takes first place."

Kallea walks out of the door, draped in a large bathrobe, a towel around her head. "Shower's free. And it's pretty powerful, so be careful." She walks over to another of the doors and enters it.

Ryalto gets up, grabs his towel bundle and walks into the shower room.  
\*\*\*\*\*

"Target sighted... He's with that group. They're heading into a market place, might be able to separate him there. Stunner is charged, just got to get in position." Pols is on another rooftop overlooking a market place. Below him, the group walk into it, Ryalto at the rear, looking around at the various merchandise. He seems particularly interested in the red fruits.

"Hmm. Target appears to like the fruit stalls... I'll wait for him near the one by the other exit. Gonna try a couple smoke bombs to create confusion and grab

him. Stunner should work on him, nothing to suggest it won't." Pols packs up his case again, sliding a stunner into his jacket.

\*\*\*\*\*

Kallea looks at a jewellery stand, standing next to Torik. "Oooh, pretty. Torik, what do you think, the blue necklace or the red one?"

Torik looks at the red necklace, with more but smaller rubies in it. "Personally? The red one. But Rich likes blue so... Your choice." He looks around the market, silently counting off Lask, Hedtra and Geran over by a clothes stall. "Have you seen Ryalto lately? I don't see him..."

Kallea looks up from the jewellery and then around. She points over to a fruit stall near an exit. "I think I see his tail over there... Yep, that's him. Looks like he's getting some firefruits." She returns to looking at the two necklaces. Torik nods his head, then starts walking over to the fruit stall.

Pols walks up to the fruit stall, looking at some green fruits for a few seconds. Ryalto steps next to him, looking at the red firefruits.

Hmm, firefruits... If they have some of those sweet blue berries here, I can make that punch that Geran made last week. That was great, nicely sweet yet hot... Ryalto starts looking at the other fruit, paying attention to the blue ones near the edge.

Pols reaches into a pocket and asks the avistarian "Hey, you have any Oranges? I heard they're pretty good, and you might have some..."

The avistarian looks back at Pols and chirps back "Oranges? Never heard of them. You must have the wrong stall."

Pols nods his head and walks back into the market a bit, then drops a small ball next to Ryalto. Just reaching the stall, Torik makes eye contact with Pols just as the ball hits the ground, and shouts "Ryalto! Get over hear!"

Ryalto looks up from the stall at Torik, confused, then spins around. A large cloud of blue smoke spews from the disintegrating ball and Pols pulls out the stunner. He fires a shot at Torik, and then shoots Ryalto. Torik drops to the ground unconscious, and Pols grabs the stunned Ryalto as he falls. Pocketing the stunner, Pols pulls out two more balls and flings them between him and the exit. The market starts filling with blue smoke as Pols leaves, Ryalto thrown over his shoulder.

Hedtra looks up from the nuts at the smoke, and notices a fluffy striped tail being taken away. "Geran, Lask! Something's happened to Ryalto! Come on!" She runs off into the smoke.

Geran watches Hedtra run off, then looks over to Lask. "Go with Hedtra, I'll find Torik. And keep this with you!" He tosses Lask a small communicator. Lask nods his head and they both run off, Lask following Hedtra, Geran over to Kallea.

\*\*\*\*\*

Pols struts around a large warehouse, cursing at a communicator. "Come on, pick up!"

The communicator stops beeping and a voice responds. "I told you not to contact me."

Pols grabs a chair nearby and sits on it. "Yeah, well I decided to call you anyways. I was wondering if you wanted your package now or four days from now. Personally, my experience says the sooner it's off this rock, the safer you'll be from the locals."

"You have him? Show me." The screen on the communicator activates, showing an all-gold fox.

Pols points the communicator at Ryalto, lying on a mattress in one corner of the warehouse. "He's perfectly fine, just under a heavy stun. According to the stuff you sent me, he'll wake up in 3 hours. I suggest you get here before then." Pols flicks off the communicator and smiles. "Yep, those others were wimps. You Siracs aren't that hard to capture."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Come on Lask, he went this way!" Hedtra runs along a dirty street next to some industrial buildings.

Lask puffs along after her. "Just how do you know? You aren't a wolf or a koyoti, and certainly not a fox, so can't track him by scent."

Hedtra stops and looks around. "I don't need to. You might have what it takes to be a technomage, but I have what it takes to hunt. Look over there." She points to a door slightly ajar, with a red strip hanging off it. She walks up to the door and takes it down. "I think you'll find that's part of Ryalto's sleeve."

Lask looks at the cloth and then to Hedtra. "So where to now? In there?" He points at the building.

"Yep." Hedtra walks in as she hears a thunk and some curses. "Quick, get in!" She drags Lask into the building, then a robed middle aged gold fox walks around a corner.

Lask looks at the gold, then to Hedtra. "A gold... You think he might be.."

"Probably. Let's follow him, and try not to trip." Hedtra follows the fox, keeping a few yards back from him.

\*\*\*\*\*

The fox walks into the warehouse and straight up to Pols. "Good, I see that my trust in your abilities was not misplaced. He reaches into his robe and pulls out a small package. "Here is your fee, and a bit extra for such quick work."

Pols takes the package, opens it and starts counting it. "Fair enough. Do you want help getting him where you want him? Sometimes they're a bit tough to get moved..."

The fox shakes his head and walks over to the sleeping Sirac. "No, I don't need any of your help now."

Ryalto groans and opens his eyes, looking about. *Oiy, what a headache...* He stops moving at seeing the fox.

"Hmm. I see you're estimate was wrong. Well, no matter." The fox leans down towards Ryalto and looks him in the eyes. "You thought that diving into that lake would get me off you tail. Nice try, but I don't like to loose."

Ryalto's eyes widen and he slides away from the fox, his back flat against the wall.

*How does he know that... Who is he?*

The Fox laughs at Ryalto, then stands up straight. "You don't remember me. Typical, but then I didn't spend much time around your class."

Pols shakes his head at the fox and walks over to the door. "Whatever. He's yours. Good bye." He walks out the door.

The fox flicks his ears in annoyance, then looks Ryalto up and down. "Hmm, better make sure it is you, I'd hate to find out I've been cheated, though a Sirac still is worth a bit in..." He takes out a small scanner and grabs Ryalto's arm. Putting the scanner just above the elbow, the fox smiles as it beeps twice. "Yeah, that's right. Ryalto."

\*\*\*\*\*

Hedtra and Lask walk up to the door of a warehouse. "Are you sure he went in here?" Lask asks Hedtra, looking at another building. "I'm sure he could have gone that way..."

Hedtra picks up a long steel pipe and gives it a trial swing. "Yep. He went in there. And if Ryalto's in there, I'm gonna crack his skull clean open." She walks up to the door and is about to open it when Pols walks out.

Pols shuts the door before seeing Hedtra. Hedtra, however, recognises him instantly. "You!" She swings the pipe at his head, knocking him down. "You \$%&£\$!" She whacks him in the chest as he tries to get up. "Where's Ryalto?" Pols tries to roll away and Hedtra slams the pipe on his chest again, winding him. "Where's my Snuggle Coon?!"

Lask backs slowly away from his sister, then says. "Uh, Hedtra, I think he'd be able to talk if you gave him," she whacks Pols in the groin, "a chance... Ouchies... Thank the deities you lost your bat. You've gotten nastier."

Hedtra drops the pipe and drags the whimpering Pols up by his jacket, throwing roughly against the wall. "Where. Is. Ryalto?!"

Pols points at the door, his eyes closed in pain. Hedtra throws him over into a pile of steel pipes and beams, which collapse with much banging. She picks up the pipe again and points to the door. "Open it up, Lask. That fox's about to wish he'd never met Ryalto."

Lask opens the door, and steps clear aside as she rushes in, giving a battle cry. "I would pity the fox, but I already pity that mouse guy." He flips open the communicator. "Geran, we found Ryalto. You might want to send for the paramedics as well as the police, though. Hedtra's taken a liking for steel pipes as weapons."

The communicator beeps back, and Kallea responds. "Oh, good. Tell her to give that mouse bloke a whack for me. He stunned Torik, the worthless...." Lask sighs as various mouny expletives issue forth from the communicator. A sharp yelp comes from inside the warehouse as well as several bangs. "Kallea, I don't think

that's a problem. She tossed the guy into a pile of pipes, after giving him a nastily thorough beating. I'd better go save the fox that's her current target." He flicks off the communicator and steps into the building.

Hedtra stands next to several empty drums and picks one up. "Come on you worthless wasup! Fight like a fox!" She tosses it across the room into a dark corner, and another yelp can be heard. Ryalto huddles on the mattress, then noticing Lask, he gets up and runs over.

Lask looks around for the pipe. "Hiya Red. Uh, where's the pipe she had?"

Ryalto looks at the dark corner. "She threw it at the gold after he ran in there. You're sister's scary, and finally someone else recognises that." Ryalto looks at the door and starts walking towards it, pulling Lask with him. "I'm never coming to Avistar again, not even for a day. I'll stick to the wolf and mouny territories."

Lask looks at the dark corner, which receives another drum. "You know, I think that's a wise idea. I don't think the Avistarians would like Hedtra rescuing you again." Sirens start blaring in the distance and Lask walks to the door.

## Unit 4

**Target: Ryalto**

**Current\_Age: 6**

**Target\_Location: Zantos Central Community Hospital**

*Stupid skiing accident, why did he have to go skiing? He could have stayed here, had a nice Resolution day here with Torik and me, we could have gone seen some shows...*

Ryalto walks down a busy street, wearing a blue light winter coat. As he passes by a large bank of snow, he starts looking up at one of the buildings.

*Hospitals, I hate them. They always smell so... So sterile. Reminds me of.. Don't go there!*

Walking past a small shop with several exotic fruits in it, Ryalto stops and looks in. After standing about for a few minutes, Ryalto walks in.

*I'll get him something nice, to cheer him up. Maybe one of those large orange ball things, or that red berry. I wonder what they're called...*

It starts to snow outside.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Now just relax, Mr. Trebor. You broke both your left tibia and femur in that fall. We just want to check that there is no damage to anything else." A young blue vixen smiles sweetly at Amiz, who is sitting uncomfortably with one leg restricted on a hospital examination table.

"Fine, check then. But try not to OW!" Amiz howls out as the vixen touches his tail.

She reaches into a drawer nearby and pulls out a small scanning device, then starts clucking disapprovingly. "This is not good.. You've fractured one of the tail vertebrae. Not a bad fracture, but it's resting on one of your nerves. I'll give you something for the pain it's probably causing, if you like, then I need to go get one of the doctors."

Amiz shakes his head, then winces. "No thanks, no drugs. Just don't touch it and be quick."

The vixen leaves, and Amiz sighs, then winces as he moved his tail in doing so. "I should have taken Ryalto's suggestion."

\*\*\*\*\*

Ryalto walks along a corridor in a hospital, carrying a small bag with a few round objects inside. He comes up to a junction and looks at the signs. Failing to find where he wants to go, he sighs and stops a blue person walking besides him. "Uh, excuse me. I'm looking for the A&E..." Ryalto stops speaking, discovering that he has stopped a blue fox. *Fox?! Huh?*

The vixen smiles back at Ryalto, then turns to the corridor on the left. "Just down there, then turn right." She then continues on her way.

*Blue fox... Blue female fox. Working here.* Ryalto stands there for a second, his face a mixture of fear and confusion. *...But she told me where to go. I'd better go.*

Ryalto walks down the left corridor.  
\*\*\*\*\*

The blue vixen pops her head into a small break room with a mouny and two wolves. "Doctor Charla, sorry to interrupt your break, but there's a patient that needs your attention."

All three look at her, and the mouny speaks up. "It's okay, Rena. I was just about to head back anyways." Charla gets up and stretches. "So who's the patient?"

Rena smiles politely. "A Mr. Amiz Trebor, with multiple bone fractures to the left leg and a fractured tail vertebrae."

Charla looks up, concerned. "Amiz? Is it serious?" She places her mug over on a counter and heads towards the door.

Rena shakes her head and moves back from the door. "No, just painful. But I need you to verify..."

Charla puts her hand up. "I'm aware of safety policy, Rena. Come on, let's get Amiz out of here before he starts howling. He hates hospitals."  
\*\*\*\*\*

Amiz sits, frowning and looking out the open door waiting for signs of blue. "Where is that fox? She said she'd be right back..." Ryalto walks past the door, but looking the other way. Amiz sits up, then curses as he grabs at his tail. "Ryalto! In here."

Ryalto turns and walks in, smiling a bit. "Finally found you. I've been here for nearly an hour, but only found this department a few minutes ago." *They really should label their signs better...* He looks around, ignoring Amiz's leg.

Amiz sighs, then smiles. "Who'd you have to ask for directions? I bet it was one of those marguays they have in Paediatrics."

"No, that's the one department I didn't end up in." *Ugh, defiantly didn't want to be there.* "No, it was a Fox, of all things." Ryalto sits down in a chair next to the table.

Rena walks in followed by Charla, her head turned so that she doesn't notice Ryalto. "... And the fracture looks to just be a chip on the vertebrae. Not bad, if it wasn't resting on a nerve." Ryalto's eyes widen as the vixen turns, seeing him again. "Oh, so you're here to see Amiz then. You know that visitors are supposed to wait in the lounge, right?"

Charla smiles and puts a shoulder on Rena's arm. "Don't worry about Ryalto, if anything he'll help distract Amiz while we get our job done." She walks up to Amiz and shakes her head. "You'd think that someone as outdoorsy as you would know better than to take a black diamond course." The doctor starts rummaging through one of the drawers.

Scowling, Amiz retorts "I have taken that course five times in the last three years. And nothing would have happened if that grav board hadn't cut me up." He turns to Ryalto "I was doing very well, too. I'd shaved 13 seconds off last year's time and was sure I could squeeze another four or five off..."

Charla pulls out a large t-shaped object and places it next to Amiz's tail. Seeing that he's involved telling Ryalto his accident, she activates it. Amiz yelps in surprise, then turns back to Charla. "If you weren't a doctor..."

Ryalto shakes his head. Seeing that Amiz is fine, Ryalto stands up and hands him the bag. "Here, I got you some stuff. The guy said they're called 'Oranges', and they're from Earth." Turning towards Rena, he walks out the open door staying clear of her. *A Fox, here...*

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Walking into the lounge, Ryalto slumps into one of the chairs and sighs. *Why did I act like that? I've seen Fox around, it's not like they're rare. Well, maybe but not that rare. But why?*

Rena walks in and sits down next to Ryalto. "I take it my presence surprised you. Sorry. I know that some people dislike Fox. And you being one of those from EG, I guess you have plenty of reasons to be nervous."

Ryalto looks over at Rena and smiles weakly. "Thanks, but you shouldn't be apologising. I might be from EG, but that's no excuse for me being rude."

Rena smiles back and lightly hugs him. "If that is what you consider rude, then you have very good manners. Frankly, I've had worse reactions. One mounty... You don't need to know."

*Ack! What is it with females and hugging me? Maybe that's why EG chose racoons...* Ryalto sits up and looks over at the wall opposite. "The thing is, I only had a few bad experiences with Fox, and those weren't with blue ones. I guess I'm just paranoid about Fox. Now that I think about it, you're the first fox I've talked to since I left EG." He sighs.

Rena shakes him gently and smiles. "Then I feel honoured that you chose me. I must be a very lucky vixen. If it makes you feel better, I know lots of Fox that would love to meet you, and not cause you're a Sirac. You seem like a nice boy, and I hope you find lots of foxy friends." She stands up, then turns back to Ryalto. "And I'm sure that all those nasty Fox that were mean to you got horrible, sticky ends. I gotta go now, but my shift ends in 2 hours. Want to meet up and talk a bit more?"

Ryalto looks thoughtful, then replies "Sure. Best way to loose a phobia is to confront it." *Now if only my fear of water was without reason. Then it would **be** a phobia.*

Rena smiles, nodding in agreement. "See you then!" She walks back out into the A&E.

A few minutes later Charla walks in. "You'll be glad to know that all Amiz's bones have been fixed, but he's to rest for the next few weeks. That means no skiing." She winks at Ryalto.

Ryalto sits back, placing his hands behind his head. "Good, then he has no reason not to spend Resolution day with Torik and me." His head turns towards the door. "That Fox, Rena. She's a bit... Different."

Charla sits down. "Yes, she is. She wasn't brought up in Fox territories. In fact, she's lived her whole life here in Zantos; only just got her qualifications in nursing. But I've met other Fox, just as friendly as her, just as disapproving of

the old Fox ways. You have nothing to fear from them, Ryalto. And Rena is a good friend of mine."

Ryalto smiles. "I think you might be right."

## Unit 5

As a quick note: in this unit, all text in ^^ is words said in English, as opposed to that which isn't encased in ^^ is Cyantian. This is because Cyantian is the more prevalent language in this unit, but some English does show up.

**Target: Ryalto**

**Current\_Age: 10**

**Target\_Location: Zantos (various locals)**

*Centralis Academy for the Arts and Technology... nah, too artsy. Vixinte - NO. No way, no how. Not tempting fate there. Avistar Academy... Lask there, no dice. Didn't Hedtra say something about going there? Either case, no. Where else...*

Ryalto, his head fur longer than usual, sits in the main lounge, tapping a datapad. He looks up after a few minutes and sighs. "So many academies, and none that meet the criteria. This bites." he tosses the datapad into the sofa and gets up, stretching.

Geran walks in and waves to Ryalto. "Finally found you. So how's your search going?" He walks over to the sofa and picks up the datapad before sitting down.

Ryalto scowls and sits back in his chair. "Badly. All the places that offer the classes that I want are either in places I don't want to be or have a prejudice against EG alumni. Apparently they don't want bounty hunters disturbing the students."

Geran looks at one of the academies listed. "What about this one? 'High technological base studies well supported', and it has good accommodation prices."

Ryalto looks over at Geran and raises an eyebrow. "If I recall correctly, that would be the academy in Vixinte. Hardly an ideal place for me, the heart of Fox territory."

Geran looks at the datapad again, then laughs. "Oops, you're right." He turns off the datapad and passes it back to Ryalto. "Still, it can't be that bad. So you might have to go somewhere you don't want to go. There's still loads of places out there. How many have you..."

"All the ones in Rillora, the ones on Avistar, and I've just started to look at the ones on those out-lying colonies." Ryalto's ears droop. "I fear that I might have to go to Vixinte, at this rate."

Geran stands up and pulls Ryalto out of his chair. "No, you will not. If all else fails, I'll take you to Avistar with Hedtra and me. I heard that there's some interesting devices out now to protect against technomages..." Ryalto smiles, "And I sure could use a roommate that I know won't drive me nuts. Now come on, we be going some where to relax, take your mind off all this, and maybe get the attention of some attractive, less-psychotic-than-normal females."

Ryalto smirks, then follows Geran out the door. "Ok, but I didn't know that we were going off planet."

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"...So anyways, I said to her 'Hey, that's my seat' and she said 'I didn't see your name on it.'" Hedtra sits comfortably at a bar in a cafe with Rich, Lask with a

miniwhip on his shoulder and Kallea sitting next to her. "I couldn't believe the nerve of this Fox. I mean, I had just gotten up to go get some snacks, and I come back to find her sitting in my spot! Right next to Ryalto. It had taken me weeks to convince him to come with me to see that show, and this conniving blue vixen just thought she could take my seat..."

Smiling, Rich takes a sip from his drink and ask "So what did you do?"

Lask smiles. "What she always does. She 'removed' the vixen from her seat and escorted her out of the theatre. A few minutes latter I saw Hedtra walk back in, but I haven't seen that vixen since." Rich looks over at Hedtra, frowning.

"It's not like I did anything bad. That vixen left the theatre in the same physical health as she entered. I merely told her that interrupting my date with Ryalto was not a good idea..."

Lask interrupts "And gave her an offer she couldn't refuse, I bet. Sometimes, I worry about you. Then I remember to worry about your victims."

Kallea smiles, then looks Hedtra quizzically. "So you and Ryalto went on a date?"

Hedtra looks down at the bar. "Well... Not exactly. Geran, Lask, Tara and... What was Geran's friend called? Frey. We all went, but I made sure that I got to sit next to Ryalto."

Kallea takes a sip of her drink, smiling. "So not really a date. And I'm sure Ryalto doesn't think of it as one."

Geran and Ryalto walk in, and head over to the bar. Sitting next to Lask, Geran looks at the drinks menu and orders a couple fruit juices. Turning to Hedtra, Geran raises an eyebrow and enquires "You telling them about the theatre?"

Ryalto takes the seat next to Geran, and looks about. *Ugh.. Two hours next to Hedtra, and the few minutes that I wasn't, some blue fox tried to chat me up. What is it with females? Can't they just sit and watch a show?*

Hedtra nods her head and picks up her drink. "Yes, I was. So where are we off to then? You didn't say anything except that it would be interesting." She drinks the contents down in a few gulps then turns expectantly to Geran.

Geran looks thoughtful, then the drinks he ordered arrive. Handing one to Ryalto, he takes a sip and responds. "Since we are all adults here, or adult enough, I thought we might go to that new bar that opened last week."

Lask looks at Geran doubtfully. "BioHazard? You're telling me that you can get us into BioHazard? Get real, they wouldn't even let Torik in, and he's practically Elite."

Geran sips his drink and grins. "No, I can't get us in. Ryalto can."

*Huh?...* Ryalto looks over at Geran. "Uh, mind explaining that to me? Last I looked, I wasn't that much of a party-goer, and certainly haven't been to BioHazard." *Although, I heard that it's got some really nice music...*

Geran grins wider. "'Tis very simple, by Sirac friend. The owner of BioHazard is looking for a certain exotic look, namely the look that you're favourite bands have. All you have to do is show up, spout off that knowledge of nu-metal, hard

rock and heavy synth pop, and they'll let you in. Since we're with you, they'll have to let us in, too. After all, what's more exotic than a grunge racoon?"

Lask looks over at Ryalto, then smirks at Geran. "Slight problem, he ain't grunge. If anything, he's a prep boy."

Hedtra smiles and stands up from her seat. "That's not a problem. We can grunge him up. Good thing we met up early, or we wouldn't have time! Need any help getting Ryalto ready?"

*Squid no!*

Ryalto stands up, but Geran nods his head. "No, Hedtra, but thanks for the offer. I've got it all planned. I will need Lask's help, though. We'll meet you back here." Geran finishes his drink and gets up. Ryalto grabs his drink and drains the rest of it down in one gulp, and places the empty glass back on the bar.

*I have a feeling that I'll regret this latter...*

Lask gets up and smiles. Geran walks out of the cafe with Lask beside him and Ryalto following "So... These plans you have. They involve fur dye?"

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"You're sure this dye is temporary, right? It will come out?"

*I new I should have gotten my hair cut...*

"Yes, Ryalto. Now hold still, I don't want to get this on the wrong fur..."

"OWW! Watch were you put that stuff!"

Geran chuckles outside a door. Holding a bottle of blue liquid, he asks "Lask, when you're done with the red, how about some blue on his tail stripes? To replace the grey."

Lask replies from behind the door "Actually, I was thinking cut the fur off and dye the skin."

"NO! Cut one hair, and I'll disavow ever knowing you, Lask." *Cut my tail fur?*

*What does he think I am, a poodle?*

Geran laughs. "No hair cuts, Lask. And I don't think Hedtra would like you messing with her favourite bit of his anatomy."

"Good point. Could you pass that blue then? I think it'll work better on his head fur." Lask's arm reaches out the door, covered in a plastic glove. Geran hands the bottle to the hand then turns down the hall. "When you're done, bring him to our room. I've got some good stuff for Red to try on, though I'm not sure what will go with him. Maybe we should call Hedtra to give her opinion."

"Naw, she can wait. Besides, I'm sure we can figure something out. Grunge isn't beauty, so how hard can it be?"

*What have I done to deserve this?...*

\*\*\*\*\*

Rich, Kallea and Hedtra stand outside the cafe, street lamps lighting the darkened road. Rich wears a pair of threaded jeans, a dark purple T-shirt with TGFU on the

front, and has his shoulder length hair tied in a loose ponytail. Kallea stands in a short red miniskirt with a light pink tank top, wearing a blue necklace and a purple headband. Hedtra sighs as she looks down the street, wearing a pair of black jeans, a plain white T-shirt, and a denim jacket with TGFU signed on the breast pocket. Fiddling with her jacket, Hedtra sighs and looks over to Rich. "Just what's taking so long?"

Rich shrugs and looks down the street. "I don't know, maybe Ryalto's a bit harder to 'grunge' than Geran thought. Give them a few more minutes, they're only five minutes late."

Hedtra sighs again. "Feels longer than that."

Geran and Lask walk up, smiling. Wearing a black leather jacket, blue T-shirt with TGFU across it and jeans, Geran looks at Rich and Hedtra and grins. "Guess we all like TGFU."

Rich looks at the two, noting the lack of miniwhip on Lask's shoulder. "Where's Ryalto?"

Lask, wearing black jeans, a green T-shirt and a bandanna holding his head fur out of his face, answers "He's coming. He's just a bit self-conscious."

Ryalto walks out from a shadowed alley and walks up to the group. He looks Rich straight in the face, and says very clearly "I will not do this again. Never."

Ryalto's head fur has been dyed blue, except for a red 4-inch crop that hangs out over his face. He wears a black denim jacket over a ripped red T-shirt and a baggy pair of blue jeans with a silver chain latched onto one belt loop leading into his pocket. His tail has been left untouched. However, it is seriously fluffed. He still wears his usual pair of trainers, and has a black pair of sunglasses tucked in the breast pocket of the jacket.

Hedtra looks at Ryalto and grins. "Grunge-y Coon! I like!" She hugs him, careful not to break the glasses.

*!! At least she isn't squeezing. Maybe I should keep the glasses...*

Rich looks Ryalto up and down. "Not bad." He looks over to Geran. "Ok, he's got the look. But are you sure this will work?"

Geran smiles. "Have you ever know one of my plans to fail?" Rich frowns at him. "It will work! We all look fine, and Ryalto's got the knowledge to get us in. We just let him do all the talking till we get in."

*Great. Next life, must remember to like whatever's least popular...*

\*\*\*\*\*

The group stand in a line beside a tall building a few feet from a doorway, only two wolves, a moutny and a rabbit in front of them. In front of the door a tall black Panther wearing dark sunglasses blocks the entrance.

Three wolves and four moutnies exit through the door way, and the Panther motions the rabbit and moutny in. He stops the wolves and looks them over. Seeming not quite satisfied, he asks them "What does TGFU stand for?", his voice deep.

The wolves look at each other, and one of them says, "Uh, Thank Gods For Us?"

The Panther shakes his head and points out on the street. The wolves sigh and walk away. The group walk forward, Ryalto in front. Ok, this is it...

The Panther looks at Ryalto, then the group, then back to Ryalto. "How many of you?"

Ryalto looks at the Panther in the face and answers, "Six".

The Panther scratches his chin, then looks at the rest of the group. A noise is heard from near his ear, and he turns back to Ryalto. "What does TGFU stand for?"

*Eh? The same question? Must use the same one till it gets answered. This one's too easy...* "That's Got Four 'U's."

Geran looks over to Rich, and shrugs. The Panther nods his head and points at the door. The group enter, and Geran pulls Ryalto to the side. "'That's got four 'U's'?"

Ryalto smiles. "TGFU's original name was in the rabbit language, and had four U's in it. But people kept mangling it, missing out one of the 'U's. When they got signed, they changed their name to include that, and later dropped the original entirely. Hence TGFU."

"Where'd you learn that? I certainly haven't heard it anywhere."

"Got it from their forum. I was lucky enough to see one of the band members post it, and right before he deleted it, too. It's one of their less known facts only known to hard-core fans. Funny thing is, I don't really care for their new songs, just their old stuff."

Geran shrugs. "To each their own."

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Inside, not overly loud rock music plays across a large room with a balcony and stage. The stage sits nested in one corner of the room, a rabbit disc jockey sat in front of a large collection of music equipment and the dance floor extending out before it. The balcony stands opposite the stage, extending 1/3rd of the way across the room with a flight of stairs along the wall leading up to it. A small bar selling mainly non-alcoholic drinks resides under the balcony, next to the entrance. Various lights are hung off the ceiling and balcony, and speakers are strategically positioned for optimum audible pleasure.

Ryalto stands alone on the balcony, overlooking the dance floor as he leans over the balcony edge.

*Well, they've got a nice beat going. TGFU, Rally Courageous, Dark Panther... All the usual. But nothing that I haven't heard before. Nothing new. Hardly 'happening'.* Ryalto sighs a bit and looks down at the dance floor, looking for any familiar faces. *Why did I come here? Besides proving that I know some rock trivia...*

The Rabbit slides a round, silver disk into one of the machines and taps a few buttons.

A golden female wolf appears behind him and smiles. "Hello. You're the first person I've seen just stand here alone. Normally they have a friend that they're getting to know better."

Ryalto looks up at the wolf and shrugs. "The only female that would want that, I wouldn't want to do that with. Besides, I have a lot on my mind."

The wolf shrugs and leans over the balcony edge, looking below. "Fair enough. So, what's so interesting down there... I see lots of dancers, that white mouse over there dancing very... Enthusiastically." Ryalto winces. "...But that's not what you're thinking about, I bet."

"Actually, that mouse could be one of the things... But you're right. I'm actually having trouble with something else." Ryalto looks through the crowd, searching for a splash of white. *Last thing I need, Hedtra wanting to dance! I can't!*

The wolf looks over at the stage. "Oh? Do tell."

Ryalto looks over at the wolf again. *Why not?* "I am currently trying to find a suitable academy to attend for my further education. And I'm having about as much success as TGFU had getting everyone to say their name right."

The wolf looks at Ryalto in confusion. "Academy? You haven't even gone to one yet?"

"I may look 18, but I am actually only 10. Wonders of being from EG." *Just couldn't get me old enough fast enough...*

The wolf looks at Ryalto for a few seconds, then says "For a ten year old, you're sure mature. My 12 year old nephew doesn't act as mature. ... Should you actually be here?"

Ryalto takes out a small plastic card, handing it to her. "I may be only ten, but I am physically mature, and act mature enough. So they say I'm an adult. Still gets me lots of headaches from idiots who can't or don't read the small print."

The wolf looks at the card and hands it back. "Fair enough. You said you're having trouble finding an academy? What do you want to study?"

"Computer stuff, science, stuff like that. I can find lots of places for that subjects, but I can't find one that will take me or that I would want to go to. Not here on Cyantia, anyways." Ryalto looks over at the Rabbit, and frowns slightly at seeing it look up towards the balcony.

The wolf shrugs. "Well, if you're willing to travel a bit, I can suggest a good one. I take it that the places that you don't want to go to are like Vixinte. Well, this place is fairly far from that and though there are a few Fox, they shouldn't be too much of a problem."

Shaking his head, Ryalto looks over at the wolf, interest clearly displayed. "I wouldn't mind a few Fox, I've even got a friend who's a Fox." *What the hey? A few fox, I can always avoid them if they're too bad...*

"It's on a small colony that started just a few years ago. Still 'forming the planet, though I hear that the atmosphere is almost done. A bit low grav, but it's only a short hop away."

*This sounds familiar... Maybe Geran's told me about the colony.*

"...And you wouldn't have to worry about EG, since the place is ran by us Wolves." The wolf smirks at that last comment.

"Sounds nice, but where?"

"The planet's called Mars. It's.."

Ryalto interrupts. "Fourth planet from the star Sol. Second planet also being 'formed, called Venus. Third planet called Earth."

The wolf stands up, saying "So you've heard of the place. I guess that you've already discounted it then..." and moves to leave.

Ryalto shakes his head. "No, didn't know that there was an academy there. I have a friend who's mother is 'forming on one of the planets in the system. Thanks for the suggestion, though."

The wolf smiles and moves back to stand beside him. "Don't mention it. Anyways, what do you think of BioHazard?" She tilts her head, gently moving a stray lock of hair back with her hand.

Ryalto tilts his head in a similar manor, then replies. "It's alright, I guess. I don't frequent these kind of places, but besides the interesting architecture, there's nothing new. I haven't heard one song here that I haven't heard before."

Looking over to the Rabbit, the wolf smiles and nods her head. "Oh, don't worry, I think that can be changed."

The Rabbit nods back and slides a few controls. The current song fades and what sounds like wind chimes fill the room as the new song begins.

*"^...I'll tell you something, I am a wolf but, I like to wear sheep's clothing. I am a bonfire, I am a vampire, I'm waiting for my moment...^"*

Ryalto looks up at the alien sounding words, but the new and different beat perks his ears in excitement. "I like the music, but what's she saying?"

The wolf smiles and translates the first few lines to him. "I first heard this song on Earth. I was there doing some... jobs that needed doing. I heard the first verse and couldn't stop laughing. The group is called ^Garbage^, and they have a whole lot of songs just as good as this. This different enough for you?"

"Yes, thank you. I take it you must be the owner then. Sorry to have offended you..." The wolf shakes her head and smiles. "Do many Earth bands play this type of music then?"

The wolf smiles and nods. "Yes, there are a lot of bands playing this music. But most of it wouldn't be appreciated here. The humans, they like using offensive language a lot in their songs. Such a pity, but..."

Nodding his head in agreement, Ryalto notes that the Rabbit changes the music back to a Cyantian band. "Thank you for the song. I shall have to remember them, ^Garbage^..." Ryalto rolls the word around his mouth, noting the difference between it and normal Cyantian.

"Yes, do remember them. And if you make it to the Mars Academy, be sure to explore some of the other bands that Earth produced. See you around, young Sirac."

"Bye..." Ryalto watches as the wolf seems to disappear into the dancing crowd.  
\*\*\*\*\*

"Well, that was an interesting song..." Geran looks over at Lask, both sitting at the bar.

Lask nods, raising an eyebrow at Geran. "That was English, wasn't it? I didn't know any bands made English songs."

Looking back at his drink, Geran looks thoughtful for a second. "Only Earth bands, Lask. Those last few lines though... They reminded me of Ryalto. You know that he's having a hard time finding an academy?"

Lask snorts and takes a gulp of his drink. "He could easily get into Avistar. Heck, that dud Folre could get into Avistar."

Smiling, Geran places his drink up to his mouth. "^You got into Avistar.^" He takes a big gulp to drown his grin.

Lask scowls at Geran. "I may not speak that language, but don't think I didn't understand that. Smarty pants..."

Hedtra bounds up to Lask and Geran, and smiling crookedly looks around them. "Where's my snuggly-wuggly?"

Geran frowns and Lask sniffs at Hedtra, then asks, "How many drinks have you had?"

Hedtra stands straighter and pouts. "I've only had a couple. There was the sweet purple one, the striped green one, and that bitter red one." Hedtra sticks her tongue out, and wobbles slightly. "That red one is nooooooo good, really foul."

Lask looks at Geran, and Geran looks back. Both say in unison "She's drunk."

Geran looks at the drinks menu while Lask tries to get Hedtra to sit down. "Lask, I think that the red one she described was a Red Scythetail. That one's listed as very potent, and it's the only red one listed as alcoholic. Looks like the other ones weren't alcoholic, though." He looks thoughtful for a second then smiles. "I wonder what Ryalto would act like when drunk..." Lask looks at Hedtra, then at Geran and grins.  
\*\*\*\*\*

Ryalto walks down the stairs, smiling slightly as he walks up to the bar. Looking at the drinks menu for a second, he notes a drink called an Azul Sunrise, listed as mildly intoxicating. He signals the bartender and orders one while sitting down near the wall.

*Never really tried any drinks, I'll just try this light one. After all, I don't want to get wasted. Just want to see what ethanol tastes like.*

The bartender brings him a tall, thin glass with a blue, lightly bubbling liquid inside. Paying for his drink, Ryalto turns around and looks over at the stage, noting that the Rabbit has left the equipment but the music still plays. *Must have needed a toilet or something...* Ryalto takes a sip.

*Euch! This stuff's bitter! But sweet?! That makes no sense... Wait a sec, this is the same blue berries I use for that firefruit punch I like. So the alcohol must be the bitter taste... It is foul, I don't think I'll ever get into drinking.* Ryalto places the drink on the bar and looks around.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hedtra flaps her arms at Lask, stepping back from him. "Oh, let me be! I'm gonna go find my snuggle coon, I haven't seen him since we came here. This you're fault, Geran. Bad place to bring my snuggly Redshirt. He could be hurt..." Hedtra wanders off into the crowd towards the stage, then turns abruptly and heads towards the stairs.

Geran just looks at her, then turns to Lask. "It might be a good idea to leave soon. She's not in a good state to be here."

Lask nods his head and looks around, spotting Ryalto. "Hey, there's Red. How about we slip him one of those Red Scythetails and then leave? If he gets wasted, I can just 'port him and Hedtra home."

Geran looks doubtfully at Lask. "Didn't you only just learn how to 'port?"

Lask looks at Geran innocently. "Yes, but I haven't placed anything were I didn't want it to go. And can 'port them both, we'll just have to get outside so Capri doesn't get me in trouble with the management."

Geran grins then and signals the bartender, pointing to Ryalto as he whispers an order. Then both get up and walk over to Ryalto.

Lask walks up first and smiles at Ryalto, sitting on the stool next to him. "Finally caught up with you. So, enjoying the music?"

Taking the last sip from his blue drink, Ryalto sets it back on the bar and nods his head. "Yeah, that one track a while back was pretty nice. Apparently it was from Earth."

Geran walks up and stands beside Ryalto. "Yep, it was, though I didn't recognise the band." Lask moves to obscure part of the drinks menu and Geran continues, "Anyways, the bar has this great drink that I want you to try. It's really good, called a 'Red Scythetail'. Nice and fiery, like that punch you keep making."

Curiosity perked, Ryalto grins and looks over to the approaching bartender. "Go on then."

*A new spicy drink? Definitely gotta try it.*

Suddenly, from behind Ryalto's recently turned back, Hedtra squeals and pounces Ryalto. "Snuggle Coon! I found you!" She knocks Ryalto forward, hitting his head against the bar counter. Hedtra stands upright, Ryalto sitting unconscious in her arms. She looks at Ryalto's closed eyelids and then at Geran. "Oops..."

Lask scowls and stands upright. "I'll go find Rich and Kallea and tell them we're leaving." He walks off towards the stage.

Geran just shakes his head and turns to the startled bartender. Finished talking to him, Geran then turns back to Hedtra and sighs. "Really bad move, Hedtra. Let's just get you home before you hurt anyone else." Rich, Lask and Kallea walk

up and Kallea leads Hedtra towards the exit. Rich and Geran lift Ryalto up and head out too, Lask following behind them.

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### **Next Morning**

Ryalto sits back in the main lounge, a blue pad against his forehead and the datapad again in his hands.

*Mars Academy located on Mars. Stranger things have been know... Good tech courses, viable colony. Founded to make contact with the people of Earth... Well, it's listed as in the future, maybe not while I'm there. ..'Some humans attending', big deal. ...'Languages are English, Spanish, Japanese'. What the heck are Spanish and Japanese? 'Knowledge of the languages not mandatory'... Well, I could take another year and get a few other small courses under my belt and learn English. That ought to prepare me for that. I think I'll go there....*

Geran walks in and sits on the sofa, and asks, "How's your head?"

Ryalto looks up and smiles. "Better. Still have the headache, but no swelling now." He takes the blue pad off his head and tosses it down. "I think I'll take another year of catch-up courses, then apply to an academy."

Geran looks Ryalto strangely, then sighs. "You don't need to, Takrus already said that you're science and tech skills are more than good enough to get you a place."

Looking at the datapad again, Ryalto nods. "I know, but I want to improve my other ones. Besides, I was thinking of learning a new language."

Geran raises an eyebrow. "Which one?"

Ryalto tosses the datapad to Geran and smiles. "English."

## Unit 6

**Target: Hedtra**

**Current\_Age: 13**

**Target\_Location: Zantos Youth Centre**

*Resolution day! Yea! Can't wait to see everyone...*

Hedtra walks out of her room, fully dressed in pink pyjamas. Walking down the corridor, she knocks on one of the doors, and calls inside. "Come on Lask! Get up!" A mumbled groan comes forth from the door, and Hedtra mutters under her breath. "All right. You don't get up now, I'll go get something and wake you up. Your choice, and I'm thinking hard, long objects used to hit things." Scrabbling noises are heard behind the door, and a few minutes later, Lask enters the corridor in a wrinkled green robe. Hedtra smiles, "Good morning, brother."

Lask looks at Hedtra, then shakes his head. Scratching his back, Lask says, "You are crazy. And worse, a morning person. You know that the purpose of holidays is to relax? And that usually means for me getting to sleep in." Lask stretches and tries to suppress a yawn.

*Spoil sport... Last time I get you the Poetic Works of Earth anthem for Resolution day.* "Yeah, but you did that the last three days. Come on, we don't want to miss breakfast." She skips lightly down the corridor.

"I don't know what you're worried about, I bet that Takrus isn't even up..."

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Ryalto emerges from his room, wearing his favourite red pyjamas. He yawns, then walks a few paces, then yawns again. "Forget this, I'm going back to bed.." He turns around, just missing Hedtra and Lask walking down the corridor from behind him.

**SNUGGLE COON!** Hedtra runs up behind and grabs Ryalto, squeezing him while saying "Happy Resolution day!"

Ryalto's eyes widen, and his arms fling out towards the door of his room. "Geran! Help!"

A sleepy looking Geran opens the door, takes one look at the two, then turns back into the room. The wolf cub turns back with a small water balloon and hefts it up. "Hedtra, let him go or I dye him. Your choice."

*Dye?* "What colour?"

"Green. Now how unhappy do you want him?" Geran starts tossing the balloon between his hands.

*Ick, green racoon... Nope.* Hedtra lets Ryalto go and he plops onto the floor. She then smiles at Geran. "Happy Resolution day!" With that, Hedtra skips on down the corridor, Lask grinning as he walks past.

Geran puts the water balloon back into the room and yawns. "Resolution day... Yea."

Ryalto gets up and looks at Geran. "That's not the green balloon. I threw that at Lask last week." Walking back into their room, Ryalto slumps onto his bed, eyes wide and alert.

Geran follows suit and lies back onto the pillow. "I know, that was the red one. But she didn't know that. Wait a sec... Lask wasn't green at all last week."

Ryalto grins. "I know, I never said I got him." He looks out the window at the dawning sun. "Resolution day..."

Geran turns over into his pillow. "Either go back to sleep or be quite. Too early."

Ryalto scoffs at Geran. "Too alert now. But I'll just read some more." He pulls a book of the desk and starts reading, not bothering to turn a light on in the dim morning light.

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Geran and Ryalto walk into the lounge, festive decorations adorning the walls and a large banner reading 'Happy Resolutions Day' spread across one wall. Many mounty and wolf cubs are sat around the room, playing with their new toys. Kallea and Rich are sat on the sofa, talking to each other, and Lask is hugging Hedtra, a large book in one of his hands.

"Looks like we slept in too late." Geran walks up to the small pile of packages, still wrapped and with tags labelled 'Ryalto' and 'Geran'.

Ryalto's eyes wander from each package. "I was up, you slept in." He looks thoughtfully at the packages and then sits down in an empty chair near the pile. "So let me get this right. Every month, there is a Resolution day, but everybody gets really excited about the one near the end of the year. They give gifts to all their friends, but only put their name on one of them."

Geran picks up the two smallest packages and hands one to Ryalto. "Yep. The one you put your name on is for someone special, like you did something really bad to them and are trying to make it up to them or they mean a lot to you. Here, I think these are from my mom." They both rip the packages open to reveal a matching set of toy wrist comms, one red and one blue. "Neat! I wonder what the range on these are..."

Ryalto looks over at the pile and picks up a thin, wide one with his name on it. He then notes the other name on the tag. "Amiz sent me this.. I wonder what it is." Ripping the wrapping off, he reveals a datapad.

Geran looks it over, then looks at Ryalto. "Neat. What did you send him again?"

"I sent him a compass, one of those expensive ones. I had to save up a lot for that, but I know he likes camping..." Ryalto switches the datapad on and smiles at the text displayed in Khasi.

Looking at the foreign text in puzzlement, Geran asks "What's that say?"

"Happy Resolution day, sorry I couldn't make it. Amiz' in Fox. I'd almost forgotten that I can read that." Ryalto's eyes mist over, and he shuts the datapad off.

Geran hugs Ryalto and whispers softly in his ear. "It's okay, I shouldn't have asked..."

Ryalto laughs, then returns the hug. "I guess I just can't stop thinking about that." He wipes his eyes, then turns to the pile. "Come on, we're behind."

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Takrus walks into the busy lounge and clears his throat. Getting no response from the young cubs, he then clears his throat loudly. The cubs continue to ignore him and Takrus sighs. "Attention!" The cubs look up, silence filling the room. "There will be a slight change to the normal schedule. Lunch will be served in a few minutes, and then the traditional snowball fight you cubs like will begin outside in an hour. We will not be going to the annual festival, however, as it has been cancelled to unknown circumstances. Thank you, and try not to leave your new toys in the lounge. I will personally confiscate any left unattended during lunch, so I suggest you put them in your rooms." Takrus turns and leaves the lounge, heading down the corridor into his office.

Geran looks at the door and then at Ryalto. "That's odd, normally they cancel the snowball fight. Eh, at least we can still pelt Rich for that stupid painting he did of me." Ryalto nods his head, gathering his stuff. Geran notices an odd grey object and points to it. "What's that?"

Ryalto looks at the object and shudders. "A racoon plushie, from Hedtra. Is it bad to get rid of gifts you don't like?"

Geran pulls the plushie out of the stack and looks at it from different angles. "Yes, you have to keep it. It's almost scary; the resemblance is very good. Sure it's not some plushie of you?"

Ryalto's eyes widen, and he looks at Geran in terror. "I did not want to think that! It's scary enough that she gave me a racoon plushie without trying to think how she could have one made of me."

Geran laughs and grabs his stuff. "It's your own fault. You're too exotic." Geran sticks his tongue out at Ryalto.

Ryalto shudders and walks out the room. "I can't help it, just look who made me."

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Hedtra skips into a large hall with several tables laden with food. Looking about, she sees a pair of grey ears and walks straight up behind Ryalto. *My lovely Redshirt, I think I'll sit with you...* "Hiya, Red." Hedtra sits down next to Ryalto and nods to Kallea sitting beside her.

Ryalto scoots closer to Geran sitting beside him, and turns towards Hedtra. "Yes Hedtra?"

*He's so cute when he's like that. So cute and racoon like....* "Did you like the plushie? I was looking about for something to get Geran (you know, like a paint pellet gun or something) and I saw it, just sitting there next to this big mouse plushie. I saw it, and thought the markings on it looked just like yours." *And they do, except for that black bit on your ear... Maybe I should have dyed that onto it.* Hedtra smiles and looks over at the food.

Ryalto looks a bit more relieved and turns towards Geran, starting a conversation about snowball tactics.

Lask sits down opposite from Hedtra. "Nice spread they've got out this year."

*Is that all boys think about? Food, games and toys?* "Yes, I guess."

Ryalto looks over to Hedtra, then back to Geran, then back to Hedtra. "Uh, Hedtra? I was wondering... Which team were you gonna be on?"

Hedtra looks into Ryalto's eyes and answers "The same team you're on. I don't wanna end up knocking you uncon..." *Oooh, wait a sec! That's an interesting thought. Sleeping snuggle coon, so cute!* "But if you want, I'll be on the other team." She beams at Ryalto, who's tail is now completely fluffed and eyes wider than before.

"S-same team's f-fine...." Ryalto looks at this plate and starts eating, tail refusing to de-fluff.

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"This is it, men. It's us, the Reds, against the Blues. We've lost the last 3 years, but this year is different. This year we have a secret weapon." Rich stands on top of a small set of stairs outside a building, several cubs before him all wearing red shirts over their winter coats. "This year we have Ryalto and Hedtra. Geran? You wanna explain this one? I don't think I can keep a straight face." Rich steps down from steps and Geran steps up to the top.

"It is very simple. We all set up the usual positions, and keep Hedtra up front. Then, about 5 minutes into the battle, we send Ryalto from the back straight into a position where he's sure to get hit. This will get Hedtra mad at the other team, and we just gotta keep her stocked with ammo. You saw her aim at that wolf who dumped the juice on Ryalto at the cafe last week," The cubs nod their heads, and a few snigger, " so we're just using the same principle. Now, not a word to Ryalto or Hedtra, or we'll be short a secret weapon." Geran smiles and looks behind him through the door's window. He gets down as Ryalto steps out, Hedtra following behind him in a blue shirt.

Ryalto pulls Geran to the side, and quickly says, "I ain't playing! She deliberately switched just to knock me out! She probably wants to play nurse or something with my unconsciousness! You're on your own." Ryalto moves to go back in the building, but Geran grabs his arm.

"No, don't worry. We'll keep you well in the back, so you won't get hit. Now come on, we need every hand we can get to make snowballs! And now that we lost our best aim to the Blues, we'll need every extra help we can get."

Ryalto nods his head, then looks Geran in the eyes "You sure that she won't get a chance to hit me?" Geran nods his head.

Takrus steps out with a whistle and points at both teams. "Right, I want a nice, clean snowball fight. No ice balls, no water balloons, and no switching shirts half way through. Anyone doing so gets their team disqualified and the other team wins. Oh, and Hedtra? Try not to knock too many people out this year. Remember, only 10 minutes, then the team with the least number of hit members wins." Both teams race out to their sides of the clearing, and after the last cub is clear Takrus blows the whistle.

*It's not like I try to knock them out. I just seem to hit them in the head a lot...* Hedtra looks out from behind a small snow fort at the opposing side, and grabs a prepared snowball. She pops out, notes a black wolf's ear about to pop up and chucks. It hits Torik just as he is about to throw a snowball across the clearing. *That black should really learn to hide his ears. I got him the same way last year. Come to think about it, I got the last Red the same way last year...*

Ryalto huddles behind a small snow fort, packing snowballs furiously as Geran chucks each one. "So Hedtra usually plays on the Blues and Lask on the Reds?"

Geran picks up another ball and pops his brown head up long enough to chuck it at a small mounty. "Yeah, but this year Lask said he wanted to be on the Blues, so he traded with Hedtra. But Hedtra must have traded with another, or Takrus wouldn't have let her have the blue shirt." He picks another ball up and pops his head up and grins. "I see her, and she hasn't seen me. I'm gonna bean her right in the ear." Geran chucks the snowball.

Hedtra sees a globe of white head towards her and ducks, just missing being hit by the ball. She scopes up two balls and scurries out from the fort to behind a bush. From behind the bush she sees Geran and Ryalto.

*So you think you can get me, Geran? And keep that cute racoon to yourself? I don't think so.* Hedtra pops out from behind the bush and throws both balls at the boys.

Geran gets hit in the chest, but Ryalto gets hit right in the head, knocking him forward into the fort, and through it to the other side. Several Blues notice the sirac's head and chuck snowballs at it. A few minutes latter, Ryalto pulls his head back through the wall, grabs a snowball from beside him and turns to the approaching Hedtra. He chucks the snowball at her head, but misses and hits her in the chest. She slips off her feet on a small patch of ice, and falls forward into a snow bank.

Geran looks at the mouse and then over to Ryalto. "Good shot."