

Sequestered Mind

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Starling requests the Storm Hawk's help once again, but it's for a personal reason: she needs to find her missing teammate who's stolen something valuable-a map that's supposed to lead to a rare and powerful crystal. They aren't the only ones looking for her either; the Raptors, whose map was stolen, and Cyclonians are on her tail, and they're gaining! StorkxOC

Status: ongoing

Published: 2011-05-11

Updated: 2012-11-27

Words: 22304

Chapters: 18

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Romance/Suspense -

Characters: Stork - Reviews: 41 - Favs: 17 - Follows: 18

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/6982784/1/Sequestered-Mind>

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Chapter 1

Hilo! Wow, my first Storm Hawks fanfic, and possibly my only one. I know that the chapters are short, but it's because it's been hard typing 2000 words per chapter lately, for all of my stories. In addition, if I keep the chapters short, I might actually be inclined to type them up faster (maybe, we'll see). I hope you enjoy the story when it really starts developing, and if you don't I hope you at least enjoy the quotes. We all know Stork needs a bit more love anyway, right?

"If there are any idiots in the room will they please stand up?" Asked the sarcastic teacher. After a long silence, one freshman rose to his feet. 'Now then mister, why do you consider yourself an idiot?' Enquired the teacher with a sneer. 'Well, actually I don't,' said the student, 'but I hate to see you standing up there all by yourself.'"

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Thick dark clouds grazed through the sky, coveting the sun. Liquid spears hit the *Condor's* hull with high-powered winds fueling their speed, shattering on impact, having a scattered residue on the windshield before another one hit near the same spot, having its own residue. The Storm Hawks were only thankful that lightning wasn't hammering down on them, but due to the weather, they were all bored nonetheless. So they were hoping that someone would ask for help from their radio, or even for something to attack them. That was how desperate some of the members were.

Stork focused at the helm, looking out for any signs of lightning, other fly-goers, or even mountains that could pop up out of nowhere just to maim them. It had almost happened before. He was humming a tune that sounded more gauntly than cheerful to relieve a few more ounces of his boredom, and maybe his anxiety. Piper was in her room working on stabilizing unknown crystals that could do who knew what and were viable to explode in her face, possibly singeing her eyebrows off and cover her face in soot. Finn was polishing his

crossbow, grunting and moaning just because he was bored; his 'quiet' way of complaining. Junko was in the kitchen fixing himself a snack before going to his room to check his candy stash and his metal-junk collection. Last to be mentioned, Aerrow and Radarr were at the helm with Stork and Finn playing a simple game of cards; however Aerrow was more focused on waiting for the radio to make some sort of sound, thus allowing Radarr to peek at his hand without getting caught.

After Radarr's twenty-eighth consecutive win, Aerrow threw down his cards and yelled, "You cheat! You were looking at my cards weren't you?" Stork and Finn looked at the distraction, silently thankful that there was something to occupy them, but Stork looked back and forth from the bout that was about to erupt, and his windshield.

Between the split second of Radarr smiling, and then scurrying away, and Aerrow about to chase him down, the radio sputtered to life. "This is Starling, requesting aboard the *Condor* . I repeat: this is Starling hailing the Storm Hawks, requesting that you open the hull." She had an urgent tone between all the static.

Aerrow gave Stork a curt nod, the okay signal, and called Junko and Piper to the bridge. Within seconds, Starling rode in with her modified purple Slip-wing Fighter Ultra and skidded to a halt inside. She hurried to meet the team again for another mission. "What's up Starling?" Aerrow asked in a resolute tone.

"I need help finding someone." Starling was known for her mastery of disguise, and also for her tracking skills. It would have been extremely difficult for someone to give Starling the slip enough to where she needed to ask someone else for help. She didn't want to ask because it was personal, but she had no choice.

Aerrow and Piper knew that it must have been important if she asked for help on anything, so they complied verbally. "Where do we head to first?" Piper asked, retrieving a few maps.

Starling took a glance at the map hanging from a three-legged stand and pointed to small clumps of terra only about sixty tics off Terra Atmosia. "We'll start here." Stork stepped up to the stand, saw where Starling was pointing at, and turned a full one-eighty.

"Who are we looking for?" Aerrow asked. He gestured everyone to sit at the table.

"Her name is Kite. She was one of my teammates." Starling sat down last, and rested her elbows on the table, interlinking her fingers together.

Everyone's eyes widened, although Junko did it because he didn't quite understand. "Your... teammate?" Aerrow tested. "I thought the raptors... ." He couldn't complete the sentence.

Starling set an old photograph in the middle of the table so it could be passed around. "She and I escaped, but we went on different paths and hadn't kept in touch. Recently, I heard that Repton had been trying to get her because she stole something from him. He hasn't been able to find her either, thankfully, but I'm still worried."

"Why haven't we heard of Kite before?" Piper asked. An expert on anything from crystals, to maps, and even to squads, but she had never heard of a Kite. She had sat next to Aerrow, so got the photo next. Piper recognized all of the Interceptors except one, whom Starling was wrapping an arm around by the waist in the center. Kite was young, probably around fifteen or sixteen (certainly not as young as they were), but Starling looked younger also, making the black and white picture fairly old. She was shorter than Starling by a full head, and wore loose, ratty, clothing with dark stains on them. She wasn't smiling, but she was completely relaxed, slumping on Starling and having one of her arms around the other's neck.

"Kite mainly helped get parts and fixed our rides, but she helped in many other ways. She was good at getting information from other terras, which was a key component on our successful battles, and she was a great distraction. Kite said she merely wanted to be a part

of the Interceptors without being mentioned as one, and we kept that deal going."

None of the Storm Hawks understood the kind of relationship the Interceptors had with Kite those years before, but they were willing to help all the same. "Can you give us anymore information? Like what she stole?" The young red-headed sky knight asked.

"It was a map of some kind. Supposedly, it was supposed to lead to a mine with a rare crystal somewhere inside, but I couldn't hear what kind. The Raptors were on their way to deliver it to the Cyclonians before Kite managed get a hold of it."

When the picture finally got around to Finn, his eyes widened in glee, obviously she was physically attractive to him. "Oh, yeah," he said with a grin and a few nods. "We'll find her." Starling caught the flirty tone in his voice and plucked the photo from his fingers. He obviously didn't understand that she was much older than in the picture, but that never stopped him from chasing older women anyway.

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"A man said to his wife one day, 'I don't know how you can be so stupid and so beautiful all at the same time.' The wife responded, 'Allow me to explain, God made me beautiful so you would be attracted to me; God made me stupid so I would be attracted to you!'"

Chapter 2

Hilo! I was pleasantly surprised that I got a review so quickly. Unfortunately, I'm still in the middle of the third chapter. Please don't ask me to 'update soon' and such. I'm glad you like it enough that you want the next chapter, but I find that it adds unneeded pressure, and I find it a tad rude. Thank you.

"Life is indeed dangerous, but not in the way morality would have us believe. It is indeed unmanageable, but the essence of it is not a battle. It is unmanageable because it is a romance, and its essence is romantic beauty." - E. M. Forster

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The storm had passed by the time they arrived at the terra. They eventually found a person who knew Kite, but had to turn them away because she had left several months before. The Storm Hawks terra-hopped from one place to another until Piper had noticed a strange pattern a couple of days later. "I think I know how to find Kite!" She exclaimed excitedly. She hung a map on a wall and put in pins to all of the places where they had tried. Starling and Stork noticed the circle of pins, but still didn't quite know what to think of it. "Look, all the places where people have said she stayed in circle around one terra."

Finn, confused, asked, "What terra?"

Piper grabbed another chart and pointed to a specific location. "The terra is so small that it wouldn't show up in larger maps. Plus, it's the only terra within the circle." She was set to go to the terra.

Starling, however, wasn't fully convinced, but it was certainly worth a shot. She gave the okay, and Stork headed in that specific direction. "What terra is that anyway?"

"It's called Terra Errador." Piper had several maps out, and a book with little notes about each terra; a handy guide of which terras were safe, and which to avoid. "There are only a few hundred in populations, and from the looks of it, they depend on trading, fly-goers that stop to rest, and repairs for finances."

"And what do we do if she isn't even there?" Finn complained. They had "just missed" Kite so many times he was about ready to give up on her. He was tired of asking people the same questions. Starling explained that Kite always kept to herself, and all the places she stayed at for a while were huge with thousands of people, so it was already hard to find people who had heard of her name, let alone where she actually lived or knew the direction she went.

Piper had already thought of the answer. "Then we wait for her. Every time we were pointed in a different direction, she passed right over, or near Terra Errador, so it would only be a matter of time before she passes over there again. That terra has to be her permanent safe-spot."

"Excellent," Starling said, having more confidence that Piper's plan would work after her explanation.

"Unless of course, she goes AWOL and goes in a completely different direction to find another 'permanent safe-spot,' " Stork piped in, taking a break from the steering to look at the maps, and to foil Piper's plan. "In addition, if we noticed the pattern that easily, the Raptors-if they haven't figured it out already-will also notice it soon." He looked at Piper, who was giving him a deflated look for poking a hole in her plan, and then shrugged. "Just saying." He didn't want to go to Terra Errador mainly, because he didn't want to see the Raptors. Again.

Starling sighed. "Stork's right. If she is there, the Raptors won't be too far behind. We'll have to check the terra out. If she really isn't there, we'll have to stay anyway just in case the Raptors do show up. When they do, we'll just slow them down while we continue our search for Kite."

"Sounds good," Aerrow nodded affirmatively. He felt as if he had to say something, since it seemed that the girls had already worked out a plan, despite Stork's holes.

Stork groaned and shook his head in defeat. There was no way that nothing was going to happen. At that point, doom was just right around the corner, and he was flying the *Condor* right to it.

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Dust kicked up when they stepped on the terra. From an aerial perspective, Terra Errador was empty, except for a small thick patch of green on the eastern edge. The shops were homes, and the markets had little variety of anything, but people were busy. Besides the *Condor*, there were a few more ships engaging in trades and business. Overall, it seemed like it was a friendly place.

They split up in three groups: Aerrow and Radaar with Starling, Finn and Junko, and Piper with Stork, to ask around. The only places they didn't, or couldn't check, was the thick forest, which was rumored to be highly booby-trapped, and a junkyard. Piper and Stork couldn't get past the guards of reptilian hounds-who looked ferociously mean, and might have a form of terrible diseases or flesh-eating bacteria in their oozing saliva-that protected the junkyard. From what they heard, the owner was just as mean as the guardians, if not more so, so the two left it unchecked. After a couple of hours, everyone met back at a shabby diner, their chosen rendezvous point, to report their findings. Everyone had nada, zilch, zero, nil, zippo, and nothing. It was as if Kite didn't exist to this place, even if there was proof that she had flown over several times.

"I knew this was an utter waste of time-more of a waste since I think I'm getting a rash from all of this dust. I wonder if I'm allergic," Stork groaned. The guards to the junkyard were still having a shaken effect on him. He thought that he might have had contracted something from them. "Maybe this 'Kite' person just doesn't want to be found by anyone, including us. She's been pretty successful so

far, so maybe she has a better handle on things than what we're worrying about."

Starling was hurt, but didn't want to show it. If Kite really was hiding, not only from Repton, from her, then it was equal as distrust. It hurt more to the fact that they had an argument the day they separated. "We have to find her," she said, looking directly at Stork, "and not just because she stole something from the enemy. I have to make amends to her."

Stork saw the hurt in Starling's dark green eyes very clearly. He was good at seeing through people's walls, even without his x-ray peepers, mainly because he could see she regretted something. Stork regretted a lot of things. It was a list that increased daily, but mainly for minor and trivial things, like forgetting to put on sun block, or not getting stuff on the *Condor* repaired before they fall out of the sky. He didn't say anything more, and just looked down at the edge of the table, wishing he could be on his ship .

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"God then made man. The Italians for their beauty. The French for their cuisine. The Welsh for their voices. The Germans for their cars. And on and on until He looked at what He had created and said, 'This is all very well, but no-one is having fun. I'll have to make Irish man.'"

Chapter 3

Hilo! Wow, you guys are awesome. Two-for-two with the reviews. Anyway, I had two and a half chapters in my arsenal, finished the half, and now here's the third. Hopefully you all won't have to wait too long for the next.

"Wit makes its own welcome, and levels all distinctions. No dignity, no learning, no force of character, can make any stand against good wit." - Havelock Ellis

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After Finn and Junko stuffed themselves with food, they decided to search for a couple more hours together to see if they had missed anything, and then call it a day. The junkyard and the forest were going to be a search for the next day because it was already getting dark, much to Stork's relief. He would find some excuse to stay away from the viciously guarded junkyard and the booby-trapped forest, and now he had plenty of time to think of something valid, and not too crazy or over-the-top that could be easily detected as an obvious excuse, and then be forced to go anyway.

Right as they exited the diner someone crashed right into Stork, smacking her face against his X-shaped metal chest plate with a loud clang and two sets of groans. The young woman sluggishly rolled off the green Merb, holding her face in one of her hands. "What'd I hit?" She muttered, mostly to herself.

Stork was already quite irritated by the dusty nowhere that the terra was, so to think that her saliva or worse, her blood-if she was bleeding at all-was on him, or the thought that some microscopic parasite that lived in the dust could get inside him via his hair follicles set the final tick. Right when he stood up and was about to yell, Finn saved the moment, and elbowed Stork's ribs to shut him up.

"Hey there," Finn flirted. "How are ya doin'?" He offered her a hand to help her up.

She checked her hand to see that there wasn't any blood, and took it. She was half a head shorter than Starling, fairly thin, with long blonde hair that was loosely tied back. Her light brown eyes matched her tanned skin, and her nose was slightly crooked, but not because of her run-in with Stork's chest-plate. The young blonde woman wore loose clothing with the sleeves of her shirt ripped off to survive Terra Errador's heat and boots. She seemed frantic, and looked behind her as a couple of chilling howls struck the air. "Gotta go!"

Finn reached out for her arm, yelling, "Hey, wait!"

She turned around and looked at him, and farther behind him.

Finn put on his macho act and said, "Don't worry, we can handle this. You just sit tight here and watch all the action."

The blonde woman just stared at him in disbelief, as did Stork.

Stork was about to make an excuse to run for the Condor when the howling got considerably louder, and he recognized them as the junkyard guard dogs, but Aerrow, also getting ready for combat, gave out an order. "Stork, take her around the corner and hide there."

Darn! Stork cursed his ill luck, but went with it. The woman grabbed something that Stork wasn't able to identify from the ground and put it in her leather satchel before following him. There were yips, yells from Finn, which brought a sardonic grin to Stork's face, before the menacing growls made it disappear.

"Stork!" A yell from Aerrow, especially in the current situation, was never a good thing. "One's coming your way!"

Stork's worst fear at the moment came true. A scaly hound with glowing red eyes rounded the corner with jaws that were coated in slick saliva. It looked hungry.

As it charged them, Stork screamed as loud as he could while covering his face with his arms, frozen in place, waiting for his very painful demise. There was a loud thud, which he thought was his head hitting the ground but nothing else. Stork thought it was strange that he couldn't feel the large teeth of being thrashed around, or the pain in his head for hitting the ground. He thought that maybe it was his adrenaline dulling everything, but after a couple of minutes, he opened his eyes and unfolded his arms to see he was just fine. Not even a scratch. He heaved a sigh of relief and then wondered what really happened.

He looked and saw a large metal pipe with blood on the end of it on the ground next to the blonde woman who was looking down at the beast and breathing hard. It was still breathing, but it was unconscious.

That had to hurt. Stork thought.

She turned back to him and said, "We're even now, 'kay?"

With all the blood that rushed to his head, what she said confused him.

"I bumped into you, I took it out," she explained, pointing to the hound.

"Oh," Stork said, shakily. He was still in shock. "Yeah, OK, we're even."

The gang of young teens and Starling ran around the corner and saw the heap of unconscious flesh, the pipe and the woman. "Are you two alright?" Starling asked, still being on alert just in case there was another.

"I'm alright," the blonde said. "Not sure if the string bean behind me is though."

Stork glared at her, his shock instantly gone to unmask his full irritation. "I'm fine."

"So," Finn said, flirting with her, "where do you live? I'll make sure to protect you so you'll get there safe and sound." He added his signature smile full of his pearly whites, and shrugged his eyebrows suggestively.

She smirked coyly and responded with a light accent, "Yeah, right. I heard you scream like a little lass around the corner. Some protector you are."

Finn tucked his head between his shoulders and his winning smile instantly vanished. Stork snickered at that inside, not daring to show it. If Finn saw, he would start teasing him worse than the usual.

Seeing as there was humor that meant everyone really was fine. "What's your name?" Piper asked. She too recognized that the beasts were the same hounds that were guarding the junkyard, and was really curious as to why she was being chased by them. However, she dismissed the thought when she remembered that the owner was rumored to be quite cruel.

"The name's Gully and you all are Sky Knights? Aren't you all a bit young?"

Finn groaned, and muttered, "Every time."

"We're the Storm Hawks. I'm Aerrow. That's Finn, this is Piper, Junko, Radaar, Starling, and the Merb behind you is Stork."

Gully's face changed into a shocked expression. "Starling? As in part of the Interceptors?"

"Yes, that's me." Starling hesitated before asking, "Do you happen to know a person named Kite?" She took out the photograph and pointed.

Gully looked at the picture, and said, "Yeah, I know her. She lives here."

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"Death can sneak up on you like a silent kitten, surprising you with its touch and you have a right to act surprised. Other times death stomps in the front door, unwanted and unannounced, and makes its noisy way to your seat on the sofa." - Hugh Elliot

Chapter 4

Haha, I hope no one 'puts the hate on me,' or accuse me of making Gully a Mary-Sue. She isn't, I promise, I know the difference (look in my profile for the link to the article I wrote). If it's the whole pairing Stork with an OC in the first place, then there was no reason for someone like that reading this story, but if you like it then keep reading. Don't let me stop you. I'm not going to tell anyone to get out. If you do have a legitimate reason for not liking this story though, go ahead and tell me, despite that the story is barely in the beginning stages and I haven't revealed much of anything. In the meantime, enjoy the quotes.

"There are two ways to pass a hurdle: leaping over or plowing through... . There needs to be a monster truck option." - Jeph Jacques

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"Really?" Starling asked with hope-filled widened eyes. "So Kite's here?" She was getting ahead of herself with excitement.

"I didn't say she was here, I just said she lives here-whenever she comes around. She doesn't stick around for too long," Gully said. "What do you need from her? A spare ship part? Usually, if someone needed her, it usually meant that they either needed Kite's information or Kite's and my 'special recovery' skills."

"Special recovery?" Stork quoted.

"She and I liberate the stolen parts from the old junkyard. That's why those things were chasing me," Gully explained.

Stork's eyes widened, "You mean you steal!"

Gully shrugged, "What? That guy's a walking lawsuit anyway; if only we had a court building. The parts he sells are so rusted you'd be

lucky if you didn't fall from the sky."

"So what's the point?" Stork yelled.

"I can fix them, usually."

Before Stork can continue to argue, Starling held up her hand. The theft wasn't their business at the moment. Kite was the main objective. "We don't need anything from her specifically," Starling said, disappointed, "it's just that she might be in danger. She took something from the Raptors-."

"And now they're tailgating her, right?"

"If you know where she might be right now, that would be really helpful," Arrow said, trying to lighten Starling's spirits.

Gully hummed in thought, before answering. "To be honest, she doesn't share much of anything, even to me, so I have no clue where she could be right now or how long she could be away." Everyone groaned. "However, if you say she took something from the Raptors, she might have left it at home. Would that help?"

"Are you kidding? That would be great!" Piper exclaimed. She wanted to know as much as she could about Kite. In addition, she might have left something behind that would give them a clue to where she was, or what kind of rare crystals the map was supposed to lead to-or better yet, the map itself.

"Alrighty then, let's get to it." Gully lead the way, but when they got to the edge of the forest, Stork had to speak up.

"Hold it!" He held up his hands in front of the group. "Why are we going into the forest? Isn't it booby-trapped?"

The blonde woman shrugged and said, "Yeah. Kite and I live in there. The traps are supposed to keep people out. So, what's the problem, String bean?"

Stork's eye twitched at 'String bean.' "It's getting too dark. What about the traps? How are we supposed to get to your house unscathed? The forest goes in a downward slope, so if one of us trips there's no telling what will happen. We could get stabbed by one of these stray branches or even tumble off the terra!"

"Whoa, String bean." Gully raised both of her hands to show him that he didn't have to worry.

"My name is Stork! Not String bean!"

"You need to calm down before you give yourself an ulcer. There's a path that's one hundred percent trap-free. Plus, I have a flashlight with me." Gully took her crystal-powered flashlight out of her satchel and clicked it on to make a point. She walked around the tense green Merb and led the way through the forest.

"Come on Stork," Piper said in a soothing calm tone. "We won't be in any danger. Maybe that hound still has you all sprung up."

Stork followed, but unwillingly. The truth was he got a bad feeling around Gully. The fact that they were blindly following a person whom they didn't even know into a booby-trapped forest, who steals for a living, and who claimed to know Kite, left a sinking feeling in his gut.

"You mentioned your home also, do you two live together?" Starling asked.

"Yup. I needed a place to stay at, and she didn't use it much, so she let me stay in with her, granted I give her a huge amount of privacy."

A person who just happened to live with her too? Stork definitely didn't like where it was heading. He walked right behind Junko, which was convenient because he made a path just walking. As he looked around, with all the tree branches looming over him, with no sound besides feet crushing twigs and leaves, he got chills just walking through it. To him, it was both frightening and exhilarating.

True to Gully's word, they hadn't encountered any traps, but Stork did trip. Luckily, Junko got a hold of him before anything worse happened. Their home looked like a normal house in the town, except it was old, foliage was growing all over it and it looked plain abandoned. Nope, nothing dangerous about that. Stork couldn't wait to meet any insects and snakes that could just creep right next to him to bite, injecting their toxins which could possibly dissolve his flesh to liquid soup.

Ignoring Stork's repulsed expression, they headed inside anyway, with Piper dragging him along by the hand unwillingly. To everyone's surprise, when the lights were turned on, it was rather neat inside; however, it was pretty obvious that more than one person lived in the house. Stork didn't think that Gully was one to organize the books alphabetically, or type up a set of House of Conduct Rules.

"Kite's a bit of a neat-freak, so it should either be rather easy to find whatever you're looking for, or very difficult. So good luck with ye."

"You're not going to help us look?" Stork asked with an obvious disdain in his tone.

"Pssh, naw. Last time I looked through her stuff, even when I thought I was careful to put everything back, she kicked me out into the rain. It took me three days to convince her that I was just looking for a wrench and not 'looking through her personal belongings.'"

"Did you happen to find anything?" Starling asked.

"Well, I found schematics to some old device, but I don't know all that mechanical stuff. I just know how to clean parts, and sell them to the Lenny's Part Shop."

"The parts you 'recover'?" Stork asked rhetorically.

Gully caught the sarcasm and let out a smug grin. "Yup."

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"My pessimism extends to the point of even suspecting the sincerity of the pessimists." - Jean Rostand

Chapter 5

Hilo everyone, and yay, I got another chapter in! Ah more suspense and a cliffie. Hope you like it so far.

"Sometimes you cannot believe what you see, you have to believe what you feel. And if you are ever going to have other people trust you, you must feel that you can trust them, too-even when you're in the dark. Even when you're falling." - Morrie Schwartz

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Gully, who was merely observing while every one else looked through the house and Kite's room, was right. Everything seemed to be in order, except the map or anything that described where Kite would be. There weren't any personal logs or diaries, charts, or even a will (Stork suggested looking for that). They did find the schematics that Gully had talked about, and it was Stork's job to find out what it was supposed to be. The paper and inks were so degraded that it was hard to tell the shape of the drawings; it had to be at least fifteen, maybe twenty, years old. After a couple hours with a couple of inputs from Starling, he had figured out the basics.

"After analyzing it all this time, the only thing I can come up with is that it's a board."

"A board?" Finn asked. "Like a surfboard?"

"If a surfboard was made out of high-grade steel. Other than it being relatively flat, and a board shape, I don't know what it's supposed to do. The handwriting is too smeared and some of it, like the name of specific parts, was deliberately scribbled out. If Kite was really building this thing, she would have had to know what parts to get before this schematic was practically useless."

"Well she always rummaged around for parts whenever we made a stop, but I never saw those schematics before, or anything that resembled like she was building it," Starling said.

In other words, they were back to nowhere. Stork rolled his eyes and glanced down at the old paper again and yelled, "What?" He held the schematic closer to his face.

"What is it Stork?" Aerrow asked.

"How did this get off of Terra Merbia?"

"What do you mean Stork?" Piper asked, confused on how his home terra had any relevance.

"Do you see this insignia, right here at the bottom?" Stork asked, pointing at the lower right corner. Then he held it up in front of a light and pointed at the faint watermark. "And this means that this diagram was created by Professor Falco, a Merb that specialized in mechanics, engineering, crystals, and had theories on other dimensions. He was, and still is, my idol."

"OK," Finn droned. "So what? He could have left the terra like you did and took it with him, and somehow lost it."

"He probably would have-except for losing it-if the Cyclonians didn't kidnap and torture him until he died. His body was left in the middle of the street as an example for the rest of us. Because of his death, I snuck out." Stork seemed distraught remembering those times.

Starling put a hand to her chin, and said, "So maybe this is what she really stole. A map for a rare crystal was probably a lie so no one would know what it really was."

"A schematic of a board that we have no clue what it really does, and no, that also wouldn't be possible. When he saw that the Cyclonians were coming with a huge army, he sounded the alarm and then

burned his house down with all of his plans and supplies inside, and tried to hide away." Stork deadpanned.

Finn wondered if all Merbs really were as paranoid as Stork (if not more so).

After looking around Kite's room with fresh eyes, Stork noticed something off. "Hey, is it just me, or does another person live in this room?" Half of the room was labeled, while the other half was semi-neat but not labeled, and a huge bed in the middle of the room.

"You noticed that too?" Piper said. "I assumed I was wrong since Gully didn't mention another person."

"OK, this is getting weird," Finn said.

"I'm confused," Junko said. "So how many people are living here?"

That was when Gully made her entrance in Kite's room with a sandwich in her hand. She took a bite and didn't even wait to swallow. "So, what's goin' on 'ere?"

"How many people are really living in this house?" Starling asked with a suspicious visage. Finally, someone else was noticing the holes in Gully.

Gully's eyebrows sank to between her eyes. She swallowed the bite before speaking that time. "Me and Kite. Two."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure. Kite may have been a private person, but I would have known if there was another person living around here."

Starling didn't counter the comment, not that she didn't want to, but it would have just wasted time. "Where does she put her skimmer?"

"Sorry, the garage is locked with or without the skimmer inside. Kite has the key."

None of the Storm Hawks or Starling fully believed in Gully, but they didn't have any proof that she was lying either. However, maybe it wasn't Gully who was lying, but Kite; maybe she was the one who was hiding a dark secret, besides whatever she stole. The old schematic was definitely a strange clue.

When they arrived back on the *Condor*, it was late, but questions had to be asked; specifically, Stork had some questions. "How did you meet Kite?"

Aerrow, Piper, Stork, and Starling sat at the round table, trying to get to the bottom of the mystery. Finn, Junko headed off to bed since it was going to be a boring night, and there wasn't anything that they could do. Radaar was drowsing off on the floor next to Aerrow's feet.

"We basically found her," Starling said. "About eight years ago, our ship was in bad shape after a battle with some low-life pirates, so we had to make an emergency landing. The terra was a place where people would abandon useless parts, a junk terra basically. After a day, parts would mysteriously be placed in front of the ship. They weren't the right parts but they were good guesses to what we might have needed, so we searched the terra to find who tried to help us, and found her hiding place under a bunch of rusted rubble. She was probably around your age," Starling pointed at Aerrow and Piper. "It took some time, but we convinced her to come with us, and as we started traveling, we found that she was helpful in a lot of ways."

"Where was this junk terra?"

"Now that I think about it, even if our charting equipment was damaged, I'm pretty sure it was around the borders of Cyclonia. Some Cyclonians landed at one point, but only to throw away spent crystals and broken parts. Sometimes they sent patrols, so we had to park our carrier somewhere else and use our skimmers."

"Do you know how long she had been there?" Stork asked more urgently.

"She said not very long. Maybe a month or two."

"What is it Stork?" Piper asked.

...

"I used to think of all the billions of people in the world, and of all those people, how was I going to meet the right ones? The right ones to be my friends, the right one to be my husband. Now I just believe you meet the people you're supposed to meet." - Diane Frolov and Andrew Schneider

Chapter 6

Hilo, wow two chapters in one week. That's a bit odd, even for me. It must have been because I was on a role last time. Anyway, enjoy the drama.

"When you think of the long gloomy history of man, you will find more hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion."
- C. P. Snow

...

"Eight years ago?" Stork enquired with slightly narrowed eyes. "Are you sure it was eight years ago?" He had gotten a bad feeling all over.

"Yes, I'm positive it was around eight years ago." Starling was growing slightly defensive and the tone in her voice proved it.

"Stork, what is it?" Piper asked. She didn't want a fight to erupt, especially not with Starling.

"Eight years ago was when Professor Falco was killed," Stork said. "That means that Kite had to be on Terra Merbia before he burned his home-before he ruined his schematics. If she was getting parts, she had to have extensively looked at the schematics before he made it useless."

Starling suddenly stood from the table, and harshly asked, "What are you saying Stork?"

"I'm only speculating that Kite may have been a Cyclonian spy, of course!"

Starling slapped a hand down on the table and leaned toward Stork, challenging him. "That is a preposterous accusation. She was

thirteen at the time we found her and she's had minimal contact with the Cyclonians and Raptors because we wanted her to stay on the ship."

"A few months ago we found an academy for child soldiers training for Cyclonia. Some of them were as young as eight. You don't think that they would be above training a little girl to be a spy in hibernation?"

Aerrow and Piper remembered the academy they tore down, and had to agree with Stork's point, but they still weren't sure which side to take. They wanted to be hopeful for Starling's case.

Starling, on the other hand, became revolted. "Kite is not a spy. She can't be."

"Are you positive? Wasn't there ever a time where you had a smidge of doubt in her loyalty?"

"No, I shared everything with Kite." Starling told the truth, but it was only after hearing Stork's accusation that she started to think things over. She thought about her memories with the Interceptors and Kite. It was hard, but even though she could envision that Kite could have been a spy-even had the opportunities where Kite could have been a spy, Starling wasn't willing to believe it. Kite had never betrayed her or the Interceptors, or at least that's what Starling hoped.

"Did she ever share anything with you? Like where she came from or who her parents are?"

"No, I never asked. I figured, if she wanted to tell me, she would, if it was important enough. Her past never mattered to me or my team."

"Well, it should have mattered."

Starling dismissed herself snappily.

Piper elbowed Stork's ribs on his comment and then excused herself. Aerrow found the air too awkward, so he picked Radaar up and left the hull, saying goodnight to Stork.

Stork sighed melodramatically and started mumbling to himself about no one taking any of his predictions seriously. He went to the rail and looked out the windshield toward the forest with disdain. Then he remembered his first home and Professor Falco with all of his inventions. He was the one who insisting on creating a company that invented life-saving helmet devices, like the Brain-Worm Preventor, and the Hypno-Helmet. Professor Falco had created a lot of safety devices that Stork always wanted. Even as a young scamp, Stork was always taught to be careful, but he chose to be extra careful ever since he risked not washing a scraped knee and it got infected so badly he was afraid that it would need amputation. After a while, he too went to bed, but not before checking, rechecking, and triple checking all of the alarm systems and traps he had set up on the *Condor*.

In the morning Stork stayed on the *Condor* while everyone else went back to Gully to ask a few questions, and possibly apologizing for their behavior before. Stork was still set on Kite possibly being a spy. She could have squealed Professor Falco's whereabouts to the Cyclonians, and yet, after a sleepless night of nothing but thinking and over thinking, he had asked himself a lot of questions he should have thought of before. Thus, another addition to his list of regrets.

If Kite was a spy, how did she stay hidden for so long? As a human, and not a Merb, she would have gathered a lot of attention and suspicion. Stork didn't even remember seeing a red-haired little girl before he escaped. Why did she go back to the junk terra if she had already spilled Professor Falco's location? Maybe she was a double-crosser? Did she have anything to do with the Interceptor's demise? So maybe she was a triple-crosser? He had been over thinking so much that he had gotten himself confused.

Unfortunately, he didn't have time to think things through because in the distance he noticed new fliers flying towards the terra. He pulled

down the periscope and looked around to gasp in dread. The Raptors had made it to the party.

With Starling and the Storm Hawks, they had convinced Gully to give them Professor Falco's plans so Stork could do some tests to confirm the authenticity and the age of the paper and ink. They hoped that Stork had only assumed based on the signature and the watermark. Starling hadn't forgotten what Stork said, and based on pure assumption and his severe paranoia, it would make sense, so she did forgive him, but certainly wouldn't forget it. This mess had to be figured out though, and soon. Once they got out of the forest, they faintly heard the *Condor's* horns blaring that the trees absorbed. Something was definitely wrong, so they ran to the *Condor*, only to see familiar bone wing skimmers zoom right over them, skidding to a one-eighty halt.

They turned around, getting out their weapons, ready for a fight.

"Starling, nice to see you," Repton growled, hissing out the S's.
"Where is that teammate rat of yours?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Starling said, trying to have an even tone.

Repton's pupils narrowed dangerously as he hissed. "I know she's here with my crystal! That coward was clever in wasting our time and setting us on a wild goose-chase, but we've figured it out. Where is she hiding at?"

...

By the way, you guys have been awesome with your reviews, so thank you.

"I don't believe in intuition. When you get sudden flashes of perception, it is just the brain working faster than usual. But you've been getting ready to know it for a long time, and when it comes, you feel you've known it always." - Katharine Anne Porter

Chapter 7

Hey, it's been a little while but I'm back for now. Life, you know? Anyways, I hope you like the chapter, even though Stork might be a little bit OOC; I personally think that he's in character, but it's up to individual's interpretation of the character. Everything will become clear within the next two chapters, so be prepared for some mind-boggling if you haven't figured it out already. If you have figured it out by now, shhh!

"Whoever said, 'God made dirt and dirt don't hurt' forgot that God also invented Tetanus." - I made that one (I think Stork would approve).

...

"She's not here," Starling said. "She left yesterday morning and said that she wouldn't be back." She was trying to gamble, but she was caught.

Repton grinned, revealing his pointed teeth. "Liar. I have an *associate* who says he saw her land here four days ago. If she really did leave, then why are you still around?" He turned to his subordinates and barked out, "Find that rat now!" They took off on their rides while Repton stayed, just to say, "As much as I would love to stick around and play with my food, I have a higher priority to get to," before taking off in his skimmer leaving only skid marks and a dust cloud behind.

The Storm Hawks went back to running toward the *Condor* to see Stork bugging out, waving his arms erratically, and hailing the horn wide-eyed. He stopped when he saw his teammates running towards the ship and opened the hull.

The speaker crackled and then Arrow ordered, "Stork, we need you on your buggy!"

Stork nearly choked on his spit, and when he was sure he could breathe, he yelled, "*What?* Why? I'll be much better off on the *Condor* behind you!"

"We need you to find Kite while we fight off the raptors."

"Kite isn't here! Gully said so-"

"She lied," Aerrow said in a sharp tone that ended all comebacks from Stork.

"I knew it. I knew I didn't like Gully for a reason," Stork mumbled, not into the speaker so Aerrow could hear. He pushed the button and ungratefully muttered, "Fine, I'll be there in a minute. Let me prepare."

"Hurry," Aerrow urged before the speaker fell completely silent, and he could hear the skimmers take off after the raptors.

Stork uttered a whining noise before he gathered all of his safety devices, got on his Storkmobile, locked the *Condor* down so tightly that not even a dust spore could get inside. "This is gonna get bad," he predicted as he flew over the spot where Gully and Kite's abode was and immediately spotted a little clearing to land. There were skimmer tracks that weren't more than a couple days old that rolled toward the house, not away. "Should have seen these earlier," Stork mumbled disdainfully. He hurried to the house on foot and pounded on the door until Gully finally answered.

She didn't look happy to see Stork-what with accusing her of something she didn't have anything to do with. "Whoa, it's the string bean, your buddies already left-"

"Stork!" He corrected. "Now where is Kite!"

"I told you all yesterday," she said, cocking her head, "she's not here. She left days ago, and won't be back for a while."

"Liar! There are fresh tracks leading right to your garage, and don't even question me-I know tires!"

"Well, I don't have to question ya to know yer still stupid! I ain't a liar!" She hawked before spitting the phlegm remnants near his feet, causing Stork to flinch away from the door with an absolute appalled expression.

Even though he was disgusted with the act, he pressed on. Stork was ordered to do something, and he didn't come out of the *Condor* while the raptors were around just to run away from a rude fiend that spat at him. "Prove it. If she isn't here, then you won't mind me opening the garage."

"I don' have the key, Kite does," Gully exasperated. "It's not like ye have the key either."

"Don't need one," Stork snapped back, holding up a few lock picking tools, the very same tools he used to get inside the *Condor* when he first found the ruined mess.

"Wait, ya can't! If Kite found out I let some stranger inside'er garage, she'll never forgive me." Gully followed, trying to stop the annoyed Merb, but Stork merely shrugged her off, determined to find out what was in the garage that Kite kept locked up.

As if it was a flip of a switch, Stork unlocked the garage and opened the door to reveal a stripped and modified Slip-Wing Fighter Ultra adorning the Interceptor's crest. Stork looked at Gully, surprised to see utter confusion on her face. She really didn't know?

Before Stork could question her, the both heard a snap and a thump loud and powerful enough that they could feel the vibrations under their feet.

"That was one of the traps," Gully confirmed Stork's suspicion. "That means that the Raptors are coming. You go back to your ship and do what you can to stall them."

"I can't stall them! They'd skin me alive and feast on my internal organs! And besides, I was ordered to find Kite. So where would she go if she was nearby?"

"I need ya to stall'em so I can contact her with the radio. If she really is 'round, then she should be in range."

Stork began looking around for any excuse. "But, but-."

Gully looked at Stork straight in the eyes with a serious expression. "Stork, it's the fastest way she's gonna get here. Ye have to go stall them."

Stork whined, thinking about the harm he might have to face.

Gully slapped a hand on his shoulder and cheered, "C'mon, buck up, string bean. You're a Sky Knight aren'tcha? You have to have some bravery in ya, right?"

Nope. Not a bit. He just had to force himself to do what he feared the most, only if he absolutely has to. Otherwise, he would have run like any honest coward. He sighed and got in his buggy anyway, flying out of the forest, and seeing Gully run towards her house before heading towards the Raptors trying to create a distraction. Unfortunately, it wasn't hard at all getting the Raptor's attention and his buggy couldn't out-fly their Bone Wings; however, he did run into Starling who helped him knock a few out of the sky.

"Stork, have you found Kite yet?" Starling asked, bewildered that Stork of all people was out in the open.

While he was with Starling, and before anything-like his untimely death-could happen, he decided that he might as well tell Starling some good news, while there was some good news left. "Her skimmer was in the garage, but Gully's calling her on the radio."

While the Raptor's were gone, Starling kept turning her radio dial.

"What are you doing?"

After Starling went through every radio channel, her face turned to anger and pounded a fist onto her handlebars. "Gully isn't calling for Kite. She isn't doing anything but lying to us!"

Should have seen that one coming.

...

The nice part about being a pessimist is that you are constantly being either proven right or pleasantly surprised." - George F. Will

Chapter 8

"Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there." - Will Rogers

...

Starling called everyone on the radio and told them to meet at the rendezvous point to set a strategy. By the time everyone confirmed, a horn was blaring. It was the terra's alert system, which meant that everyone knew of the Raptor's presence. That meant that things were either going to go smoother, or get a whole lot worse.

She and Stork were the first at the diner, now empty because of the horn, then Aerrow and Radarr, Piper, Junko, and Finn was last on foot and soot his face.

"Sorry guys, my skimmer kinda blew up, so I'm hitching with Junko," Finn explained with a disappointed look. It definitely wouldn't be the last time his skimmer was in pieces.

"No you're not," Starling said. She explained what Stork told her, and what happened with the radio. "The only thing we can do right now is chase the Raptors off of this terra."

"But there's, like, fifty of them!" Finn complained enthusiastically, waving his arms.

"It's better than hundreds of them," Starling countered.

Stork paled at the thought of hundreds of Raptors on one tiny terra. His spine gave in to a violent shiver.

"So what do we do?" Aerrow asked, letting Starling lead his team.

"Stork?" Starling looked at him.

Oh no.

"We need you as bait."

"Why?" Stork felt he was on the verge of having a panic attack. He was doing way too many risky in one day, but being bait was by far the worst thing he had to do. Ever. "Why can't I be on the *Condor*?"

"The Condor, any carrier ship, doesn't have the accuracy an individual on a skimmer has."

"OK, I see your point, but why do I have be bait."

Starling's eye's winced empathetically. "Your buggy is slow." She tried to heighten his hopes when she added, "However, since Finn's ride is out of commission, he'll be with you."

"Say what?" Finn asked with raised eyebrows. He didn't want to go with Stork, but mostly he didn't want to be bait.

"You'll sit behind Stork and shoot at any Raptor behind or around you to keep them at bay."

"Where will you guys be then?" Finn argued, taking Stork's place of rebelling against a seemingly bad plan.

"We'll be behind the group of Raptors, taking them down."

"OK, so where are we going to lead them?" Stork inquired with narrowed eyes. He was afraid of the answer.

"The forest," Starling answered all too bluntly.

"Oh, yeah. This is a horrible plan."

...

Strangely, the plan was going smoother than Stork had ever hoped. A bit too smooth. Finn's insults and crystal arrows had attracted so

much attention, that just about every raptor on the terra were on their tails. Stork weaved in and around their shots, screaming when a shot zipped by too closely, and Finn had taken out at least eight before some turbulence made him lose count. Unfortunately, he only had about ten arrows left, and he couldn't use them recklessly.

Starling and the rest of the Storm Hawks were doing great at shooting the Raptors out of the sky, but they couldn't shoot the ones close to Stork's buggy who were catching up.

When Stork and Finn had gotten close to the forest, Stork remembered the loud thump and chickened out, flying straight up over the trees.

"Dude!" Finn screamed. "What are you doing? This isn't part of the plan."

"Forget the plan! I am not going in the forest where all the traps are. The Storkmobile may be able to detect them, but there's nothing it can do about the traps themselves. It's design is to avoid them at all costs!"

Some of the Raptors couldn't steer clear in time and flew in the forest where crashes, explosions and huge clouds of smoke proved that Stork was right to avoid the forest. The rest that were quick to react halted to a stop, creating a pile up in midair, and then crashed to the ground. There were only a few that flew out of the way in time, and ended up flying away, seeing as they didn't have the advantage in numbers anymore.

"OK, you're right. The forest was bad," Finn commented, surprised that the paranoiac green Merb was right.

The gang caught up with them rather quickly. "That wasn't part of the plan, but excellent maneuvering Stork," Starling complimented.

As soon as Stork was able to catch his breath, and release his grip on his handlebars, he rasped, "Thanks." He was still shaking.

Suddenly, they were taking on fire from Repton. Obviously he was angry with the Storm Hawks for scaring his remaining comrades. One of the first shots hit the Storkmobile, but it didn't do any lasting damage except give Stork a fright. Just as suddenly as Repton appeared, a red blur slammed into his wings giving him a few flips before he could recover.

"Hello, Repton," the new rider said, flying to halt between the lizard leader, and the group.

"That's the skimmer from the garage!" Stork yelled, pointing.

Starling's eyes widened, truly hopeful that it really was Kite. The rider wore an unfamiliar armor, and wore a red closed-face helmet, matching the paint on her skimmer, with tinted eyeshield.

Repton hissed, "So, you really were here, you little rat!"

The rider took off her helmet to reveal red hair that was cut short, and put up in a bobtail.

"Kite!" Starling called, immediately recognizing the newcomer.

Kite merely glanced at Starling before setting her sights fully on Repton. "You're here for the map, right? Well, why not ask for the crystal instead?" She held up a metal cylinder, and an eerily purple crystal in both hands, showing that she had the crystal and the map.

Repton's pupils narrowed and he hissed. "Is this some sort of trick?"

"Why want the map that may or may not have more crystals, when I possibly have the only crystal here?"

"So you're just going to give me the crystal?" He asked, bewildered by the offer.

...

Ooh, so who's side is Kite really on? I feel like I'm on a role so I may be able to get the next chapter up soon.

"An ounce of loyalty is worth a pound of cleverness." - Elbert Hubbard

Chapter 9

OK, so the mind-boggling will be done next chapter. I apologize. I can fit so much in 1000 words, but not this chapter. Hope you enjoy.

"Quit now, you'll never make it. If you disregard this advice, you'll be halfway there." - David Zucker

...

"Tick tock, Repton," Kite said, antagonizing the overgrown lizard. When he could not make the decision fast enough, trying to decide between greed and impatience, Kite took the map out of the cylinder and burned it using her skimmer's thrusters behind her.

"NO!" Repton's pupils narrowed to mere slits, and he bared his pointed teeth.

Kite quickly put on her helmet, tucked the crystal in her pocket, and raced off with Repton hurrying after her.

"Stork, Finn!" Aerrow barked. "Hurry back to the *Condor* and stay close."

Stork didn't need to be told twice on that demand, and gunned the engine to his precious ship as fast as his buggy could carry him and Finn. Unfortunately, the shot that had hit the buggy had a repercussion; they were half flying and half falling, and they barely made it back onto the dirt path, but the buggy died only a few feet away from the edge of the forest. "That was too close," Stork mumbled.

Finn yanked on Stork's collar to drag the Merb toward the *Condor*.

Meanwhile, Starling, Piper, Junko, and Aerrow with Radarr sitting in the sidecar raced after Repton. Annoyed by all the fire he was taking on, Repton threw his crystal-charged boomerang behind him, hitting

Junko's skimmer right in the engine, officially grounding him, and narrowly missing Piper's heliscooter before flying back to Repton's awaiting hand. Kite twisted and turned in ways that should have been impossible for normal skimmers, but she slowed down enough to let Repton catch up. It didn't go unnoticed.

When it was blatantly obvious that Kite was waiting for him, he screeched, "What are you planning?"

Kite merely revved her engine and sped toward another terra just off Terra Errador into a canyon. Repton closed in on her and threw his boomerang. Kite checked her rearview mirror and swerved just in time for the ring of crystal-charged fire to clip one of her wings, which made steering her aircraft harder in a place where pillars of rock jutted out all over the place, forcing her to land. She looked around, still riding at full speed, and then started twirling a three-crystal bolo that began to illuminate in an eerie yellow color before throwing it straight up.

After landing also, all Repton knew, was that she was slowing down, so began to quickly catch up to her. Starling and the two remaining Storm Hawks followed their lead and landed.

Starling, who was steadily catching up, recognized the bolos and what they signified. The bolos were a signal. She looked up and around and found her suspicions were correct, seeing large boulders at the edge of the canyon walls from both sides. Starling called on the radio to Aerrow and Piper, "Get out of the canyon now! Kite set up a trap!" But it was too late.

Piper, after hearing Starling from the radio, and seeing the boulders, tried to release the propellers to get back up in the air, but a boulder had brushed the underside of Piper's heliscooter, sending her spiraling. Aerrow, having just evaded a boulder of his own, saw and flew back to Piper, catching her after she jumped out of her ride just in time to see it smash into a pillar. When she quickly situated comfortably behind Aerrow, they flew straight up over the canyon to see what was going on below.

Kite was still barely ahead of the chase, and flawlessly avoided the pillars and oncoming oversized stones.

"How is her skimmer able to make those turns?" Piper wondered aloud.

"I'm wondering more on why the people are cheering on Gully and not Kite," Aerrow commented, staring at the civilians, cheering on the edge of the canyon.

"Come on Gully, lose that lizard!" Was more prominently yelled. It seemed that everyone that occupied Terra Errador was on the peaks of the canyon.

"What's going on?" Piper inquired aloud, although it was more to herself.

"Let's go down and ask them ourselves then," Aerrow suggested, flying toward the crowd. They both knew Starling could handle Repton, and with her friend around, Aerrow and Piper thought that they could handle things down in the canyon despite the boulders. After all, Starling and her ride weren't called the "Red Streak" for nothing.

Down in the canyon, it was getting increasingly difficult for all of them to avoid the boulders and protruding rock formations, and not to mention Repton throwing his boomerang at Kite every chance he got. Starling snuck up to Repton's rear wheel and bumped it with her front, causing Repton to lose traction and spin to the side, but caught his ground a moment later, still giving Starling a small lead. Starling was steadily catching up to Kite, but when they were about to take off at the edge of the terra, Repton's boomerang bit into Starling's tires, causing her and her ride to tumble off. She barely got a hold of the cliff side of the terra, and saw Repton take off after Kite, forgetting about her. All Starling could do was climb back up to the terra and watch, safe enough not to worry about the boulders anymore.

Kite seemed confident because she didn't swerve and twist in the air as much as she had been, so Repton threw his boomerang and rendered her ride totaled, forcing her to jump and release her parachute. The raptor leader flew past and caught her chute with his Bone Wing. Kite couldn't even struggle. Repton grabbed her arm to bring her closer to grab the crystal. "You're not even fit to eat; just a pathetic rat," he hissed before taking his weapon and bringing it down on her abdomen with the blunt end, knocking the wind from her lungs. When she stopped struggling, the telltale sign that she was unconscious, he cut the strings to her parachute and then dropped her.

And just like the day when her teammates were massacred, all Starling could do was watch and reach helplessly for Kite. "KITE!"

...

" I despise the pleasure of pleasing people that I despise." - Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

Chapter 10

*"And since you know you cannot see yourself,
so well as by reflection, I, your glass,
will modestly discover to yourself,
that of yourself which you yet know not of."* - William Shakespeare

...

Starling screamed out her lungs as she saw her only remaining teammate plunge lifelessly into the clouds. Tears streaked down her face as Kite disappeared from her sight forever. Once again, Starling felt the bludgeon of defeat crush her insides as she lost another one of her dearest friends, but this time, she didn't even have a body to bury. She didn't even know if Kite had any family or friends. Starling sank to her knees and fell to her hands to continue to weep, hiding her face from the shame she was feeling. She never even got to apologize to Kite.

All of a sudden, horns blared, making Starling snap her head up to see what was going on. Despite the utter turmoil she was feeling, she was a Sky Knight first. Tears could come out later. The *Condor*, with its horn still resonating strongly, rose up from the clouds with a huge net between the massive engines. There, Starling saw Kite crumpled in the sunken center, seemingly alive. She sprung to her feet with a huge smile and more tears, but out of pure relief.

"OH YEAH!" Finn yelled with a pumped fist.

When Finn decided to celebrate their heroism by dancing and practicing his air guitar, Stork cleared his throat, showing that he was already annoyed. "As much as I understand your enthusiasm, Finn, you need to bring Kite inside before Repton tries anything new."

"Oh. Right," Finn replied with a toothy smile. Bashful because he celebrated too early, but he also thought carrying the hot miss Kite back on the *Condor* made him seem more manly.

"And make sure you be careful with her head and neck. We don't know what the helmet or the net could have done during the fall.

Repton was furious that the thief-slash-Interceptor was still alive, but since he had smugly crippled Starling, saw Aerrow flying his way, and he had the crystal that he wanted, he decided to retreat for the day. He would deal with the rat later when the time came. The raptor leader may have a hot-blooded temper, with a red-hot pride to match, but he still had enough sense when enough was enough for the time being. His foremost duty was to give the crystal to Master Cyclonis for his reward.

Aerrow and Piper picked Starling up as Aerrow radioed Stork, telling him to meet them on the other side of the canyon, where Junko should be. Stork replied promptly with a "Will do," and the *Condor* steered off over the terra.

On the *Condor* Kite had woken up in a panic. She was situated on a couch where the two Storm Hawk members were and yelled, "I can't breathe! Get this helmet off!" She stood up and started flailing, trying to push the helmet off of her head.

Both were startled at how fast she awoke, but tried to help her. Stork had to stop steering the *Condor* since the helmet seemed to be really stuck. The helmet wasn't dented, so Stork couldn't see how the helmet couldn't just slip off. "Finn, you grab her around the waist, and I'll pull on her helmet," Stork ordered. If she really couldn't breathe, then, brain and neck injury or not, the helmet had to come off, and they didn't have time to argue. Stork counted backwards from three and with a few good yanks the helmet came free from her head, but the force of it was great enough for the woman to land on Finn, and Stork to flip backwards over the couch.

Stork was the first one on his feet, even though he just had a tumble, but who he saw sitting on top of Finn's chest gave him the surprise of his life.

When the *Condor* stopped in the air suddenly, Aerrow and Starling grew anxious. Aerrow tried the radio, "Stork, what's going on?" When there wasn't an answer, Aerrow tried again, but with more force. "Come in Stork!" Again, there was no answer. "OK, Piper, you stay here with Junko. Radaar, Starling and I will see what's going on with Stork.

When the two Sky Knights landed on the strip, Aerrow tried the radio again. "Stork, we need you to open the bay."

After about a minute, the bay doors opened, giving Aerrow a mild surprise. They both nodded to each other, silently showing that they needed to be cautious. He rolled his skimmer inside while Starling looked around for traps, whether they were Stork's or the enemy's was anyone's guess. Once the area was clear, Aerrow closed the doors and they both stepped into the halls, looking around at any noises they heard.

They both tensed when they heard footsteps that seemed to be running, and got out their weapons: Aerrow with his twin energy blades, and Starling with her nunchucks. Right as a nearby door opened, Starling swung, barely missing Finn as he barely dodged the white energy coming towards him.

"Geez! What was that for!" Finn yelled, holding on to his chest as if he was about to get a heart attack.

"Finn!" Aerrow yelled back, relieved that it was him and not a raptor. "What's going on? And where's Stork?"

"Right here," Stork reported in from behind, startling his leader.

"Stork, what's going on? Why didn't you answer the radio?"

"Where's Kite?" Starling cut in in a demanding tone.

Stork flinched, but answered anyway. "Yeah, about that," he said, raising his hand to the back of his neck to start scratching. "It wasn't Kite."

"Then it was Gully," Aerrow answered. "The townspeople of Errador were cheering Gully on down in the canyon. None of them had ever heard nor seen Kite, even when we showed the picture."

Starling was beginning to get confused. Gully had said that she only stole and cleaned parts, she didn't know how to build anything with them. With those heavy modifications to the skimmer, Gully couldn't have possibly tweaked the ride. In addition, Starling had seen Kite herself in those clothes and on that skimmer. Starling hadn't lost sight of Kite once except when Repton threw her into the clouds, so when did they make the switch? And if that was Gully, where was Kite?

"Actually, it isn't Gully either," Stork replied, interrupting Starling's inner worries.

"WHAT?" Aerrow and Starling both yelled.

"Who is it then?" Starling inquired forcefully.

"I have no clue dude, but she's hiding in the vents and won't come out until she sees Kite," Finn answered for Stork when he flinched again from Starling's anger.

"And did we mention she's a Merb?" Stork added on in a rather higher tone of voice.

...

Anyone mindboggled? As the writer, I'm curious on how you are all taking it. If all the back and forth between the *Condor* and the

different characters are getting confusing, let me know so I can try and improve.

"There's a dark side to each and every human soul. We wish we were Obi-Wan Kenobi, and for the most part we are, but there's a little Darth Vader in all of us. Thing is, this ain't no either or proposition. We're talking about dialectics, the good and the bad merging into us. You can run but you can't hide. My experience? Face the darkness, stare it down. Own it. As brother Nietzsche said, being human is a complicated gig. Give that old dark night of the soul a hug! Howl the eternal yes!" - Stuart Stevens

Chapter 11

I'm glad you guys are liking it so far, and I hope you continue to like it. And don't worry, I still have plenty of secrets for this story, so you might want to stick around. If you find any plot holes, since I'm trying to stick with the original storyline of the show as much as possible, please let me know. I have watched every episode, but it isn't as if I keep extensive notes on every one. I actually refer to the Storm Hawks site for the weapons and skimmers quite often, and there isn't much information on other topics like the Interceptors or Terra Merbia. Well, I hope you get a laugh out of this one.

" I love how in scary movies, the person yells out 'Hello?' As if the bad guy is gonna be like, 'Yeah, I'm in the kitchen. Want a sandwich?'" - Anonymous

...

While Finn showed Starling where the Merb was last seen hiding, Stork steered the *Condor* toward the other side of the terra to pick up Piper and Junko where Aerrow would explain to his teammates what just happened. Piper was more than stunned by the sudden turn of events, and Junko was still trying to process that Kite could be Gully- or vice versa somehow. No one had an explanation for the Gully and Kite switch, so where did some random Merb come in? When everyone met up with Finn and Starling, they were in the hall looking up at a fairly small ventilation shaft with the door hanging open.

"She went in there?" Piper asked, almost skeptical. The space was small, but she supposed it wouldn't be impossible to try and escape or hide there.

"No, I just opened it to dust," Stork quipped, earning a harsh glare from her.

"Hello?" Aerrow cautiously stepped under the vent and looked around the opening to try and get a better look at whoever was in the vent. "Can you come out?" He couldn't see her, but she answered.

"I'm not coming out until I see Kite," she uttered quickly.

"We're looking for her," Starling said. "Do you know where she is?"

"No! And it doesn't look like you're looking for her either, so stop screwing with me." The Merb was completely distrusting toward the group, and wasn't afraid to show it.

Aerrow looked to Finn to see if he wanted to try. Even though Finn was a skirt chaser, he could be just friendly if he wanted to, and Aerrow knew Finn had a soft spot for people that were in fear.

"Don't look at me, I already got kicked in the face when I tried to look in there," he said, waving his hands in refusal. That was three down.

Piper stepped up to give it a shot, "Hi, my name's Piper. We're really looking for Kite, we're just stuck right now. You don't have to come down if you don't want to, but maybe just tell us your name, and how you know her?"

"Hell. No," was her only reply.

"We're wasting time," Starling said, shaking her head in frustration. "Junko drag her out."

"What? Me? I don't know about-"

"Do it." Starling gave Junko a stare so deadly that the Dark Ace might have taken a couple steps back. Everyone else gave her a look that held concern, except Stork who wondered if she should be locked up for a little while to cool down.

Junko looked at Aerrow, who gave him a reluctant nod, before trying to get the Merbian out. He grabbed a few boxes to stand on before reaching around in the vent and found an ankle. There was some

banging and screaming along with the violent struggle in the vent, before Junko yelled and yanked his arm out. "She bit me!" He yelled, sucking at his wrist where the bite impression was.

"And I hope you catch an infectious flesh-eating disease you overgrown dinosaur!" The vent yelled back.

Piper grunted. "Stork, maybe you should talk to her and get her to come down?" Piper whispered, just low enough that the one hiding couldn't hear.

Stork sighed loudly, but replied quietly, "Just because I'm a Merb doesn't mean she's going to trust me."

"It's worth a shot Stork," Aerrow said, backing Piper up.

Stork's shoulders sank as he sighed. "All right. But you guys are gonna have to leave."

"Why?" Starling inquired a tad too forcefully. She was still irked that the Merb in hiding had somehow switched places with her best friend, and she wouldn't divulge a location or hint.

"Because I'm a Merb. I know the habits of most Merbs." It wasn't a complete lie, he just needed to be alone because he didn't want anyone to hear what it was like for him on Terra Merbia after the Cyclonians took over.

As soon as everyone left the vicinity, and after he locked all the doors to make sure that no one could overhear what he was going to say, he looked up at the opening of the vent. Stork didn't mind talking so much, it was the whole getting started and sharing his guts that he had kept under lock and key all of these years. He wasn't even sure if she would care since she seemed so focused on wanting to see Kite. Stork sighed loudly and decided to just suck it up.

"Er, hi. I'm... . The name's Stork, I'm the carrier pilot for the Storm Hawks and I'm a Merb." After introducing himself, he realized he

sounded like he should go to an Anonymous support group. He sat down against the wall directly under the opening. "I know what it was like on our terra, especially after the Cyclonians. At one point they had caught me, and locked me up just to increase their prisoners quota, and I was terrified. They jabbed me with their spears as if I was some savage animal in a cage, they hardly gave out food or water if they bothered to remember, and I saw one of my friends get beaten so bad he couldn't even crawl back to his cell." Stork dug his nails into his legs as he recalled the painful memories. "I was the resourceful one and escaped with some hidden lock-picking tools and knew of some of the underground escape tunnels, but it wasn't enough because I couldn't save any of my friends. The Cyclonians killed them, and I only found out a half year ago. Because I escaped, because they had one less body than the day before, they killed some random prisoners until the boss figured that there was no point. I wanted to get help as soon as I escaped, but I didn't have the key-if only I had the *Condor's* key I could have went to get help but... . Some other Sky Knights helped free them all from the prison, but the terra is still under siege by the Cyclonians and... . Well, the point is, I understand why you're hiding, and I understand why you only trust one person, but we're not the bad guys. We're not the Cyclonians. We just want to find Kite as much as you do."

Stork sat and listened but couldn't hear anything coming from the vents.

"Hello?" When he still couldn't hear anything, he cautiously climbed the stack of boxes and slowly peered into the vent. Nothing. She escaped down somewhere in the vents. Stork wiped a finger along the inside of the vent and merely mumbled, "Wow. I really do need to dust these vents."

...

"It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen." - George Orwell

Chapter 12

I'm not sure if I've explained this yet, but if I have, I'm repeating it. Merbs in general were never really described, or took part in a big scene (besides Stork), so some people believe different things about them. While most think they are cave dwellers, some think they are reptiles, and others think they are just humanoids with green (human-like) skin but prefer warmth. I even saw one person claim that Merbians are amphibious. I definitely don't believe in the last one because I think Stork would have died in the Wastelands when he found the *Condor* (there's not a lot of water down there after all), and he had apparently been there for quite a while and seemed just fine, but to each his own I guess. My point of view of Merbs' living arrangements are explained a little bit in this chapter, but I'll probably keep it basic until I can find more information. Well, enjoy.

"A newspaper in Ireland published this headline: Half the Council are Crooks, but was asked to retract it. The following week it ran the heading: Half the Council are NOT Crooks."

...

To put it mildly, Starling wasn't at all thrilled to hear that the Merbian had escaped, but this time, they had no clue where she could be within the *Condor's* web of ventilations system.

"I do have a plan though," Stork offered to try to appease the ticking time bomb he called Starling.

"Climb in there after her?" Finn sarcastically suggested, as if that was the only rational plan out there.

"No... . There's an excessive amount of dust in there. Moreover, probably have spiders too. It's practically a hazard zone." He made a mental note to add dusting the vents to their already long list of chores and repairs.

Stork went to his controls and slowly turned up the air conditioner. It was only a matter of time before she had to find a way out of the vents to get out of the cold. Despite all of the earthquakes and erupting fissures, underground caves and tunnels were warmer, especially during winter. Merbians had above ground homes too, but most at least had a basement to escape the cold as much as possible. To be as blunt as possible, Merbs hate the cold. Period. Extreme heat could be terrible too, but Stork didn't want to chance suffocating her by mistake; if he had done that, the heat would also advance the decay stage, and they would eventually have to find her by smell and the number of Cad Flies. That definitely wouldn't be good. In addition, there could be a chance of Starling actually killing him if that happened.

It was only a matter of time, but during however long it would take, they all split up and covered different areas of the *Condor*. That particular ventilation system covered so much of the *Condor*, that besides Aerrow and Radarr, everyone had to cover that certain area alone. Junko had the boiler room and the surrounding area in case she found the warmth; Aerrow and Radarr had the bedrooms; Piper, the hanger; Finn had to stay in the bridge in addition to having to wait by the kitchen and check the entrances of the surrounding hallways; and Stork and Starling had to cover different parts of the halls. They all agreed to keep silent and to let the Merbian girl come out on her own before talking to her, and if need be, restraining her.

After only an hour, screams reverberated throughout the *Condor*. Everyone gathered at break-neck speed to find Starling's arms under the Merbian's armpits, with her hands behind the latter's head. The position should have been painful, but the Merbian was too scared and panicked to have noticed, and kept struggling.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" The Merbian screeched. "Starling, I'm sorry! Please don't take me back to Cyclonia! Please! KITE! KITE!"

"How do you know my name?" Starling yelled, but the Merbian kept struggling and screaming.

When Finn, Junko and Aerrow tried to help, Finn was kicked in the gut, and she somehow managed to swipe at Junko's head when Starling bent backward to get her to stop kicking her legs. Aerrow barely dodged a foot of his own.

"Let's put her in your room, Starling," Aerrow suggested, still perturbed about the Merbian's behavior.

"No," Starling grunted. "We need answers now." Starling used her elbow to open the closet door, and shoved her in.

The Merbian's voice shrilled at a much higher note, and started banging and scratching around the walls. "Please don't take me back to Cyclonia! Starling! I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Kite! Kite! Where are you?"

The screaming reminded him of when he was in the Cyclonian prison.

"You know where Kite is!" Starling yelled above the Merbian. "Tell me!"

"I don't know where she is!" She was starting to sob. "Let me out!"

"Starling!" Piper yelled. "Let her out."

"She knows! I know she knows where Kite is, and I know she knows what the Raptors were after. She knows everything! She's just lying!"

"Why would she lie? Listen to her. She's obviously not working for the Raptors or Cyclonis."

"How did she switch places with Kite in mid air?"

"We'll figure it-." Piper just noticed something very wrong. The banging and scratching stopped, and the screaming stopped.

Stork noticed as soon as Piper noticed and felt a chill. Normally, when the screams stopped, it meant that the Merb had screamed out their last breath during the torture. They were painful endings.

"Move!" Stork shoved Starling away and opened the door to find the Merbian curled like a fetus on the floor with things that had fallen off the shelf scattered around her. They weren't heavy enough to knock her unconscious or harm her, so she must have fainted. Her breathing was shallow, there were tearstains on her pale brown face, and she had a layer of sweat. She was terrified for her life.

"Junko, take her to Piper's room. Make sure that Starling doesn't go near her, and make sure she doesn't get out or hide in the vents again," Aerrow instructed.

Junko nodded, and picked her up as if she was a broken piece of glass, and went the long way around to the bedrooms to avoid Starling. Stork noticed that she had wet herself, and the tips of her fingers were raw, with a few of her fingernails ripped off. "Terrified" had become an understatement.

"I'll go with her," Piper suggested, after picking something up. With her expertise, she could tell that it was a shard of some sort of crystal, but she would find out what kind it was later. First things first, the Merbian needed a change of clothes, and her fingers needed to be bandaged up. After cleaning and wrapping her fingers with gauze, Piper had to find pants that would fit. Her everyday pants were too small, but she figured that the Merbian wouldn't mind wearing her sweatpants that she used for pajama bottoms. They were a couple of sizes bigger on Piper, but fit her just fine. Even from her room with the door closed, she could hear the echoes of an argument.

...

Note: when I mentioned Cad Flies, Cad is short for cadaver. Got to love Irish quotes!

"May you die in bed at 95, shot by a jealous wife!" - An Irish toast for Father's Day

Chapter 13

I was in a good mood, so this came out a ton sooner than normal. Hooray! Just to clear one thing, the whole prison experience that Stork has-I'm making it up, it's not in the original show. And what do you think about how I'm writing Stork? I agree with someone else that the seriousness is a tiny bit OOC because Stork's hardly ever really serious, but because I made up the prison-life, I think I have some sort of liberty for slight changes. (It is fanfiction after all.) What do you think?

"After attending a wedding for the first time, a little girl whispered to her mother, 'Why is the lady all dressed in white?' 'Because white is the color of happiness, and today is the happiest day of her life.' The child thought about this for a moment, then said, 'So why is the man wearing black?'" - Irish joke

...

No one trusted Starling anymore, at least not to be around the sleeping Merbian female-especially not alone with her. Aerrow finally called her on it.

"What was that, Starling?" Aerrow asked forcefully. He had been cautious around Starling, inwardly told himself that she was a professional and trusted that she wouldn't cross the line. He should have stopped her when she ordered Junko to try and yank her out of the vents-that should have given him a clear warning that something wasn't right with her, but he didn't, and now the Merb on Piper's bed would probably never trust any of them.

"It was an interrogation tactic," Starling explained tartly. "She wasn't going to get hurt or die from it. It was just for her stop struggling and to keep her from escaping again or hurting someone else. I was hoping that it would calm her down enough to get answers."

"Interrogation tactic'?" Stork mumbled sarcastically. No one heard him. He hadn't moved from the closet's frame, and hadn't even turned around. The irony of the Cyclonians using a very similar "interrogation tactic" just for fun and her justifying her methods made him repulse. His disgust worsened when he noticed the streaks of blood all over the walls. Memories of Talons dragging bodies down the hall, not bothering to cover them or pick them up started to creep up behind his eyelids. Some even left a trail of blood from the successful suicides. When those days came, they would make him and the other younger ones clean it up. It seemed like there were only two options then. Stick with the torture and hope that someone will rescue you in time, or end your life early and end everything else with it. Let your friends clean up your ending. Even Stork was considering the second option before he took his chance to escape.

"You wouldn't let her out when it was obviously making it worse!" Aerrow's voice brought Stork back. The discussion had escalated when he wasn't paying attention.

"If I let her out we wouldn't have gotten anything from her!"

"We didn't get any answers from her anyway! And now we probably won't."

"Then what would have you suggested? Let her keep kicking everyone and screaming about some nonsense?"

It was better than her not making any noise at all. It was better when she was still conscious and making snappy remarks from the vents.

"Aerrow, she knew me from somewhere. She knows where Kite is. We need an-."

"-No," Aerrow interjected. His tone demanded that he was taking back his role as a leader. "You, get out until you've calmed down."

"What about her?" She pointed towards the direction Junko and Piper had taken the Merbian.

" You will get answers when we do." Aerrow narrowed his eyes to her, telling her he wouldn't concede.

Starling got the message clearly. She wasn't trusted anymore. They weren't going to look up to her until she made things right again, but she couldn't see how she could fix it, not when she didn't know how she deserved that kind of tone or treatment. She was doing what she thought was necessary. With the Interceptors, they had to do it sometimes with dangerous criminals, or even ordinary people who kept struggling, and no one had ever gotten hurt before. Of course, these were children. They couldn't understand the difference between necessity and callousness. Starling stiffly nodded and turned on her heels to get out, but not for fresh air.

Aerrow took a breath and softened his voice so Starling wouldn't hear. "I'm going to follow her to make sure she doesn't start trouble. She's probably going to go find Gully. Stork, I'm putting you in charge until I return. In the mean time just make sure not to lose whoever the Merb is and don't let Starling near her in case I lose sight of her."

"Will do," Finn saluted. He hadn't known what to do during the argument so opted to just stand there, listen, and support Aerrow by nodding occasionally. To be honest, he probably would have shoved her in the closet too, if only for her to stop kicking instead of getting answers, but after seeing her being carried by Junko with bloody fingers and all, he knew it was a mistake.

"Stork?" Aerrow called for Stork's attention.

Stork turned to look at Aerrow. "I heard."

"No, not that." Aerrow got out the schematics Gully had given to him to give to Stork. "Can you authenticate if this is really as old as you estimated, and not a forgery? I honestly doubt this would be a coincidence with another Merb showing up and all." Aerrow was worried about his Merb friend. Ever since the schematics popped up, he had been strange. He was more hostile, and had turned more defensive. Then when the Merb girl showed up, and right then, after

the interrogation, Stork didn't look all right. Arrow had to give him something to do, or at least something for him to look forward to, to keep his mind off whatever it was.

Stork snatched the parchment away, but more through anxiousness on what he would find instead of anger. Arrow saw the small shine, and now he was at least a little bit excited. "Yeah. It'll take a while. Maybe even a couple of days." After Arrow left, Stork looked back in the closet.

Finn looked at Stork, staring inside of the closet, and not moving. On a closer look, Finn could see that Stork's shoulders were shaking. "You don't have to hold back, you know. If you want, I could set up a target dummy and you can shoot berries or hit it as much as you want to. Heck, I might do it anyway for myself. It's not good for ya to hold in all that anger."

However, Stork wasn't angry—well, yeah, he was, and maybe it would be better if he showed that he was, but it wasn't what he was focusing on. He was more concerned over whether that female would be intact when she woke up. Stork took a breath and rubbed a hand down his face. He had to go back to normal. If anyone saw that something was wrong with him, his friends might not trust him to do as good a job as usual, when nothing was wrong. "As fun and extremely tempting as that sounds, Finn, I'll have to decline." He made sure to look at the young blond kid in the eyes. "Go find Piper and see if she needs help. I'll clean this up." Stork figured if someone had to clean up someone's blood it should be him. It was probably better cleaning up someone who was still alive than dead. Of course, he needed the full-body suit and double gloves before cleaning the closet.

...

I might have to change the rating, because I think I'm on the border between a T and M. It's just a possibility though, so don't be surprised if it does or doesn't change.

*"That's the Irish people all over-they treat a joke as a serious thing,
and a serious thing as a joke." - Sean O'Casey*

Chapter 14

Some stuff has been happening lately so I might not be able to update as much for the next few or more months. Sorry. I really do appreciate the reviews though, and the PMs. Usually, after I get one after a while of time, I get to writing it, even if it's not much-at least it's a start. Anyway, I hope you enjoy what's in store, and the quotes. Right now I'm obsessed with Irish quotes and jokes. And before anyone asks, yes, I'm Irish, but that's not all of the reason why I'm obsessed.

"What do you call an Irishman who keeps bouncing off of walls? Rick O'Shea!"

...

After informing Piper of the argument, along with what Aerrow and Starling would be doing, and the status of who was currently in charge, Finn decided to help Junko with watching the Merb. Piper wanted to find out what the crystal was as soon as possible, so went to her lab. She trusted Finn at least enough to keep the Merbian contained and not to hurt her anymore than she already was. In addition, if things got hairy, Piper was sure she would be able to hear the commotion from her lab since the Merb would probably continue screaming. Besides, she could see that Junko was getting bored, so Finn keeping him company would probably be more of a good than bad thing. Hopefully.

After a few hours, Stork came into Piper's crystal lab. He had finished cleaning the closet-the thought of finding nails imbedded in between the welding still sent him chills-and he had done what he could do with the schematics from his room. He had exaggerated on the age by half a decade at least, but he still needed to do some tests in which the proper materials were in Piper's crystal lab.

"Hey Stork," Piper greeted. "Finn and Junko are guarding the door. There aren't any big vents in my room so I don't think she'll have any places to hide in that are out of our reach."

"Unless she's a contortionist and can fit into the vent in the floor of your closet," Stork uttered with a slight wit. "Is that a crystal?" The crystal had a light purple hue, and it was barely the size of Piper's fingernail.

"Yeah. She dropped it when she and Starling were struggling. I'm still not sure what it is or what it does. The fragment is so small." Piper sighed. "So what's up with you?"

Stork held up the schematics. "I'm positive that this is real, and not a forgery, however I'm trying to find out how old it is. Can I use some of your equipment?"

"Yeah, go ahead, Stork." Piper at least trusted Stork with her tools; if he was super careful with his own things, he would be extremely careful with other people's.

Taking another look at her own work, she had never seen the crystal before—at least not in extensive detail. Under a microscope, she could see that the crystal had adaptive capabilities, and it still held a slight glow radiating with some energy. Piper continued to refer to her notes, which were limited to the crystals she had experimented on, or when ever she got a book which was a rare occasion. She began to try and see if she could figure out what kind of crystal it was by trying to seeing what it could do; however, not knowing what it could do made it challenging. Maybe the shard was too small to gather enough energy to do anything. Piper was stumped, which meant that she probably had to wait until the Merbian girl would wake up.

...

The sky was thick with red clouds, polluted with an evil miasma, creating an eerie backdrop, illuminating the terra, sitting in the center

of the wastelands, covered with a single, large building-a palace for all the henchmen and lowlives and for one royal, spoiled, girl. Cyclonia. Repton arrived alone. His followers-cowards-went back home to terra Bogaton, in which he would deal with later, but, first, he had business with the princess, Master Cyclonis.

Her room was dark, and the crystal machine with its many arms holding an array of crystals was foreboding as usual. Master Cyclonis stood in front of the machine, while the Dark Ace stood by the door with a smug grin, showing his obvious superiority. The only reason Repton worked for this spoiled little girl was because of fear-and it was well deserved.

"Do you know what this is, Repton?" Master Cyclonis inquired lightly, holding up the purple crystal Repton had taken from Kite. She was smiling, but her hood was up, hiding her eyes from the reptilian.

"That's the crystal that was on the map." Repton hated being questioned when he knew he had done the job.

"Is it?"

Repton paused. He sensed danger immediately.

Cyclonis pelted the crystal square on his head. He hissed, and his pupils narrowed in anger. "This is a DUD! It's no more than a grower crystal used to help plants and flowers bloom faster!"

Repton hadn't had the map for very long before it was stolen, so he definitely didn't know what kind of crystal was the prize. Master Cyclonis's orders were strictly to find the map, find the crystal and give it to her; she didn't feel the need to even tell him what kind of crystal was where the "X" was. He also had no idea if even Kite had found the crystal or not. Impatience and anxiousness had taken hold and assumed she had the crystal when she pulled it out. The thought that it wasn't the right crystal hadn't dawned on him at all.

Cyclonis's voice turned calm again. "So, Repton, what happened?"

How would he tell her that a sky-rat had tricked him and destroyed the map without getting himself killed?

"Who stole the map from you?" Cyclonis's voice turned cold.

He had to answer this question. "Some red-headed sky-rat who's with the Interceptors."

"Interceptors? I thought you killed all but Starling?"

Repton hissed again. "Apparently I missed a baby rat."

"You're becoming more worthless by the minute, Repton."

"Then allow me to regain some worth by going after-."

"No. The Dark Ace will clean up your mistake. You just tell us where the map is, otherwise, I don't want to see a single scale until I call for you again. If I decide not to blow up your pathetic terra first."

"There is no map. The sky-rat burned it." That he was sure of. As Kite was holding the map over the thruster, the map unfurled and he could see the similar details.

"WHAT?" Cyclonis was holding back on killing him. He might have still had a slim chance of use later. She turned her back to him and forced her voice to remain calm. "Was this 'sky-rat' the last one to have it?"

"Yes."

"And Starling's with her?"

"Yes."

"Is there anything else the Dark Ace and I should know."

"Those Storm Hawks brats are with them too."

...

Everything after the line break ("...") was originally going to be in the next chapter, but since I was having a tough time, I figured that it would be OK if I just put it in this chapter. So it's not much, but it progresses the story. Now the Dark Ace is after them!

"Irish patient to the fellow in the next bed, 'Look, the doctor's coming round soon. Try to cheer him up because he's very worried about you.'"

Chapter 15

Finished moving so I finally got around to continuing on with this story. With the way I left the chapter, I'm hoping that the next chapter will basically write itself out.

"Burn everything British,' he once advised his Irish countrymen, 'except their coal.'" - Jonathan Smith

...

So dark. She didn't have enough room to move her arms away from her body. The room, the walls-it was getting smaller! The air was depleting. Quickly. Echoing laughter. They said she would never get out. Her screams couldn't escape.

The Merbian bolted up. Instead of screaming herself awake, she woke up choking on her saliva. She shook until she realized she wasn't in *that* place anymore; she was somewhere else. Whether she was in more danger or not, she couldn't tell yet.

Starling. She couldn't trust Starling. At first, she thought she could, since she was teammates with Kite, so she climbed out of the vents to talk. She couldn't talk to her when those other people were around. Now she knew better. It was just like before. No one was to be trusted. Except Kite. Where was she? What if they flew away from Terra Errador? Kite wouldn't know where she would be, so the escape would take some time. She looked out of the window to see that she was thankfully still on the terra.

She slowly got out of the bed, noticing that she was wearing different pants that she had never seen before, and realized that she was wearing Kite's leather jacket. Odd. The next thing she noticed was that her fingers were carefully bandaged. Maybe Kite came back? Her hopes lifted, but only a smidge; it was always better to be skeptical. She carefully crept out of bed and tiptoed to the door to

press her ear against the cold metal. It reminded her to hope that someone had turned the AC down.

There wasn't anything, then as she was about to push the button that opened the door, she heard snickering, and then a round of guffaws. "You should've seen it Junko! If you thought me telling you this is funny, you should have seen it!" She recognized the voice as the blond, and the laughter from the Wallop.

There had to be a way out. The windows couldn't open, so she looked for any other doors or vents, but there weren't any. At the floor of the closet was a vent, but it was far too small-only twelve by four inches at most.

Could she fight them, at least long enough to run? Probably not. She raised her fingers to her mouth, and saw that some of her nails she had a habit of chewing on were gone. A slight nauseas feeling arose when she saw the thin line of blood absorbed into the bandages, and thought of how much blood there could have been. She took a few deep breathes. This wasn't the time to make herself sick. She needed to formulate a plan.

Meanwhile, Piper didn't have anything. The only thing she did have was a list of what the shard could not be based on the color and the pattern that crystals form. Even so, there were only a few on the list. Normally, she would have found out what the crystals were by then, but the shard was just too small.

On the other hand, Stork had an idea of when the schematic was made. It was at most fifteen years old, but the scribbling and smearing was fresher, maybe by five years fresher. There weren't any scorch marks, so it was saved from the fire somehow. To make it even more puzzling, it was one hundred percent authentic. It was definitely Professor Falco's.

He knew because they were neighbors, and the professor let him visit from time to time when he wasn't too busy. Whenever there was a disaster, he always knew what to do, and had enough room for a

few people. It was because of this that plenty of Merbs thought he was a hero, but most thought he was a nutcase because of his wild theories about the other side and his conspiracy stories. Some of the ideas did seem crazy, but it didn't change Stork's feeling of admiration.

As for what the schematic was supposed to be, Stork still hadn't a clue. Whatever it was, it was board-like, and had a small crystal-chamber. Stork speculated that the kind of crystal that was needed was just a fuel crystal, but it didn't seem like it was Professor Falco's style. He always had some sort of flare when it came to his inventions.

Either way, it seemed that Piper and Stork needed the Merbian girl awake so they could ask some questions. They both doubted if she would even bother answering them, but it was always worth a try. Piper decided to take a few of her sand cookies-Stork helping himself to a few of course-as peace offerings.

They met up with Finn and Junko and opened the door to see the stranger standing on her own. Afraid, she screamed, almost ran into the closet, but turned around mid-step to run to the opposite corner, and pressed her back to it. She didn't have a hiding place, and without any shields or weapons, she didn't have the courage to say a word. All she could do was cross her arms over her face and hope that they wouldn't harm her.

"Hi," Piper welcomed in a soft voice. When she didn't react, and kept hiding behind her arms, Piper brought out the cookies. "Are you hungry?"

The thought of food was tempting, but the after-thought of sedatives or a truth serum kept her from even peaking. She stood stone-still.

"OK, maybe later then." Piper set the cookies on her desk as Stork, Finn and Junko slowly crept in the room. "Um, well, this broke when you and Starling were fighting," she took the shard out to show the Merbian, "and I was wondering what kind of crystal it was."

"Crystal'?" The Merbian started patting her chest through the leather, and grabbed at cord that was around her neck. When she pulled it all out from under her clothes, the vial that contained her most treasured item was gone, probably as broken as the glass vial it was contained in. She looked at the shard in Piper's fingers and lunged at her, shrieking, "Give it back!"

...

"I am a confirmed believer in blessings in disguise. I prefer them undisguised when I myself happen to be the person blessed; in fact, I can scarcely recognize a blessing in disguise except when it is bestowed upon someone else." - Robert Lynd

Chapter 16

Hey, it's been a while. Even this only took me less than a hour to type up, I had been putting it off because I thought it would take me longer. I guess it's a good thing I ended the previous chapter the way I did. Enjoy!

"I would rather be a coward than brave because people hurth you when you are brave." - E. M. Forster

...

The angry Merbian and Piper were tumbling on the floor, one trying to get the crystal shard, and the other trying to prevent the other from grabbing it. There were hair-pulling, screeches, scratching, putting the other in several forms of limb-locks and head-locks before Finn and Junko thought that the few seconds of fighting was getting out of control. Stork didn't even want to try to get in the middle of them.

Finn tried to grab the Merbian's arm in an attempt to yank her from his teammate, but she broke her arm free and elbowed him in the chest, knocking the wind from him. So while the two females were still struggling, and Finn moved away to lie down on a different section of floor, Junko grabbed the Merbian by both shoulders and lifted her up at arm's length. After a few tries at kicking Junko and Piper, she quit and hung her head down, allowing her black hair to cover her eyes. Her ragged breaths showed her exhaustion and her anger.

Stork helped Piper up, who was gasping for breath, but she was angry also. "Why is this crystal so important to you?" She demanded.

When the Merbian refused to answer, the questioning continued on.

"Did you steal it?"

"No. I'm not like that thief, Gully." She shivered in disgust when she said the blonde's name, but it wasn't from her profession, it was the fact that that girl had no manners, and was filthy. The only reason she had consented to letting Gully in was so Kite had more freedom to come and go so without suspicion, once Gully had the role of pretending to be Kite for a while. It was all so she had a better chance of staying hidden.

"So Gully was lying? She said that only she and Kite lived in that house."

"Where's Kite? I want to talk to Kite." The Merbian resorted back to asking where Kite was, closing the door on the questioning.

Piper took a deep breath, knowing that if she just started yelling at her that it wouldn't get anywhere. "OK. Can you tell us your name at least, so when we do find her, we can tell her we have you?"

She looked up through the sections of her hair, looking at Piper skeptically. After a long while, she mumbled, "Maggie."

"Hello, Maggie. I'm Piper, this is Stork," Stork's right eye winced as he wearily raised a hand, "the one on the floor is Finn," Finn raised his hand and groaned, "and the one holding you is Junko." Junko smiled, but Maggie couldn't see it from her angle, not that she was looking at anywhere but Piper. "Aerrow went after Starling, whom I think you've met before."

"Yeah," Maggie snapped out.

"Junko, I think you can put her down now," Piper nodded.

As soon as she was let go, Maggie held out her hand. "The crystal- or what's left of it-please." The politeness wasn't at all sincere, but Piper had taken enough notes on it anyway. She only needed it as leverage until she knew of her name. Maggie didn't trust anyone at all, and seemed totally dependant on Kite, so getting anymore

important answers from her would be impossible. Piper figured that she had to gain her trust first.

She placed the crystal shard in her open palm, and asked, "I'm just curious, but do you know what the crystal does? I've been trying to figure it out, but the shard's too small."

Maggie took the crystal and held it up to her chest to look down on it. "No, I don't know what it does. It never mattered to me."

"Did someone give you that crystal? Kite?"

"Not Kite."

As Piper and she continued talking, allowing Maggie to ask some questions also, Stork signaled to Junko to get Finn and come out of the room. Things were finally looking up... at least until Starling got back. Stork predicted that when that happens, all hell would break loose.

Maggie reminded him of the other Merbs who had it worse off than him-the ones who stayed behind until the day that the prison was taken down. In the Terra Merbia Cyclonian prison, he stayed as invisible as he could. He never talked, never looked at anyone in the eye, and, for the most part, did as what he was told. The only reason he would disobey, was if he was ordered to take part in the torturing. He acted submissive, so was treated as if he wasn't worth hitting or torturing. The fighters, like Maggie, were the ones who received the physical and mental scars. It was obvious that she went through something awful. It was strange, though. Most of the fighters he had seen during his travels as the Storm Hawk's pilot, had either allied themselves with rogues (those who agreed to take part in the torturing), enjoying hurting others and not having to trust anyone, like the Murk Raiders, or had been essentially broken, tried to hide themselves as much as they could, and stayed as alone as possible, only trusting their Merbian friends, if them. Those that weren't completely broken, or had tried to move on were still afraid of other species, and sometimes their own kind. Maggie didn't fit in either

category. She was afraid, yes, she definitely still had psychological scars, and she did seem to be the type to want to remain hidden; however, now that she was out in the open, talking somewhat, she somehow seemed relatively fine compared to the others that he had met. Maybe she had also somehow escaped, before her mind permanently cracked.

Or her mind did crack, and she was having a lucid moment. If that was the case, it would probably be better to leave her on Terra Errador while finding Kite, lest she snaps and starts to slit throats in our sleep, Stork thought.

Piper came out with a huge smile, in which Stork could see Maggie testing a cookie from over Piper's shoulder, "Guess what? Maggie says she wants to stay with us to help look for Kite!"

...

Poor Finn, he keeps getting hit. And, yes! I can finally stop with the "Merbian girl" phrase! Was anyone else getting annoyed by it?

"We all cry alone in the dark sometimes. The ones who don't are the ones to fear." - Davey Havok

Chapter 17

Yo. What's up? How's everyone? Lately I've bee obsessed with rewritten nursery rhymes, tongue twisters, famous last words and epitaphs

"Mary had a little lamb

Her father shot it dead

And now it goes to school with her

Between two lumps of bread."

...

"Piper!" Stork whispered. "I don't think it's a good idea to have her stay." He kept peeking at Maggie to make sure she couldn't hear him. Maggie took her cookie and was walking around the room until she decided to occupy herself by looking more closely at Piper's bookshelf. She barely nibbled at her cookie as if she was taste-testing it for poison, or preparing for some drug-induced coma-like affect.

"Why not? We're both looking for Kite, aren't we?"

"What if she's some crazy lunatic who's only *pretending* to look for Kite as a cover? She could be a spy or a serial killer or something!"

"How do you explain the fact that she's wearing Kite's jacket, and that you thought you had caught Kite? And that she knows Starling?"

"We don't even know *how* she knows Starling! She could have heard about her anywhere!" Stork argued, avoiding that he had no clue why Maggie was wearing Kite's jacket, or how she had somehow switched places with her, provided that no one had lost eye contact

during the high speed chase. As for Starling, she was pretty well-known.

"OK, OK, but, Stork, look at her. I don't think she wants to hurt us."

"You sure about that?" Finn piped in his two cents from his position on the floor leaning against the wall with his head between his knees.

"She just wants to find her friend," Piper continued in a notably harsher tone.

"And she obviously doesn't want to be here with us looking for her," Stork retorted.

Piper looked down. "I know. I just thought that if we had the same goals... ."

Stork hated that look. He knew Piper had a point, somewhere, but as long as Maggie was untrusting toward them, it seemed that Maggie staying with them would do more harm than good. Whether it was to herself, or to them, Stork was unsure of; however could predict various horrifying possibilities. He looked at Maggie who had chosen a book and was scanning through page after page. A large sigh made its way out. "If Aerrow agrees," which he knew he would agree without question, "I guess-if we're highly cautious during her stay-it would be fine. Maybe. Indefinitely."

"Dude, WHAT!" Finn yelled out.

"But if someone other than her ends up lying in their own pool of blood don't say I didn't warn-."

"It won't happen!" Piper hugged him tightly around his shoulders, causing him to flinch, her mood instantly turning around. She went back to her room and started talking to Maggie about arrangements. They had one extra room to spare, and it was right next to Piper's; however, it was also across from Starling's temporary room, but

Piper didn't mention that part for obvious reasons. She thought that the problems could be fixable when they arise.

Maggie meekly nodded her head as her sightline switched from Piper to Stork and back again. For now, these kids were her only hope of finding Kite. She couldn't stay on Terra Errador anymore since the Raptors found their hideout, and where there were Raptors, Cyclonians were bound to show up, and on her own she had no chance of victory, let alone a survival. If the Cyclonians got a hold of her, she was afraid of what they would do to her, especially if they somehow recognized her.

Finn finally recovered and stood next to Stork. "Dude," he whined. "Why?"

For once, Stork understood his pain.

Aerrow and Starling came back to the *Condor* together. Starling had significantly calmed down, yet still held her bitterness, and because of this, Aerrow was hoping that the Merbian had woke up with a sudden change of heart and told them everything that they needed to know. What he and Starling found-or rather, hadn't found-had only left them with even more questions and frustration.

"Stork," Aerrow greeted the wandering Merb. "How's everything here? Did she wake up?"

"Um, well, yes, she did, wake up, but she hasn't really told us anything," Stork cringed, scratching his arm and his fingers fidgeting. "Well, actually, she said her name is Maggie."

Aerrow exhaled. "It's a start." They all started to walk towards the bridge, in which Stork started to ramble, acting panicky. Something about not being a good idea to let Starling-he opened the door to see Piper and Maggie sitting at the round table with maps.

"Hey Aerrow," Piper greeted excitedly.

As Piper was about to explain their current situation, Maggie made eye contact with Aerrow, and then saw Starling to the side behind him, and immediately jumped from the table and leaped over the couch between Finn and Junko to hide behind it. "Don't let her near me!" Maggie yelled out more in anger than fear. But she was definitely afraid of Starling.

"Then tell us where Kite is," Starling responded with a raised voice.

"That's exactly what I want to know," Maggie retorted, speaking louder.

"OK, OK," Aerrow stepped between the two women and raised his hands, "let's all cool it for a few minutes. Maggie, right?"

Maggie nodded with narrowed eyes.

"I'm Aerrow, the leader of the Storm Hawks."

"The Storm Hawks died."

"Well, we're the new Storm Hawks."

"Are you registered?"

Aerrow turned sheepish. "Well, no..."

Maggie sighed and turned on the couch. All of a sudden, it seemed like these kids couldn't help her after all. "Just drop me off on Terra Bogaton or Cyclonia. Whichever is closer."

More sarcasm. Well, in Stork's opinion, it was better than her not responding at all. He could deal with sarcasm, as he was the same way sometimes. Still, it was going to be tense as long as Starling and Maggie were in the same room. Stork didn't see a way for them to ever get along.

"So did you guys find anything?" Piper asked Aerrow and Starling. Starling had been glaring at Maggie, so wanted to distract her, at

least for a little while.

...

"Little Miss Muffet

Sat on her tuffet

Drinking gasoline.

Along came a spider

With a cigarette lighter

And blew her to smithereens."

Chapter 18

There's going to be some tongue twisters for a while.

"I wish to wish the wish you wish to wish, but if you wish the wish the witch wishes, I won't wish the wish you wish to wish."

...

Maggie wanted to head back to Piper's room to look at her books, but Aerrow and Starling needed her to answer some questions.

"Do you have any clue where Gully is?" Aerrow asked.

"Gully? I thought we were looking for Kite," Piper responded. Maggie chose to stay quiet, mostly because Piper summarized her thoughts. The rest of the reason was because Starling was still making an angry face pointed at her.

Starling grunted. "Aerrow and I went over to Kite and Gully's place, but didn't find either one of them. We went inside and looked around. We checked all of the rooms and only found what was presumed as Kite's room. The other bedroom was completely empty. There weren't any pictures, or books-the only thing in there was a few clothes in a drawer, and a small bed in the corner."

"Well did you check the garage?" Maggie retorted. "She goes in there all the time despite Kite telling her not to. I'm sure you'll find magazines and her tool box in there."

"Shouldn't there be anything else of hers around?"

"What? Food? She eats all the time; I can hardly get to the kitchen without seeing her in there. I would be surprised if it wasn't empty. Did you check the junk yard? She's probably 'recovering' something else."

Starling was on the edge of her last nerve.

Piper's plan of distraction wasn't working. "Maggie, let's go back and see for ourselves. In the meantime, you can pack some of your things."

Starling snapped her face toward Piper with a look of utter shock. "What?"

"Well, I figured since we were all looking for Kite anyway, that she could come along. We have one more room up for grabs anyway, right Aerrow?" She sounded innocent, looked innocent, but Stork, Finn, Starling, and even Maggie knew she wasn't. They all knew that Piper was sending subtle cues to Aerrow to just agree to whatever she said. With a simple look directly into Aerrow's eyes, Stork knew she had him; she almost always did. "I mean, what's the harm of having one more? And besides, if she does stay on this terra, she might be in more danger in case Repton or the Cyclonians decide to come back."

Stork could write a fifty page list of all the possibilities that could go horribly wrong if Maggie was to stay with them, mostly involving if she and Starling got into a fight, but after spending some time observing her, he wasn't sure anymore. If he was absolutely certain that she was normal-mentally stable, at least-then he wouldn't mind much, but he didn't know; she seemed pretty OK, hyper aware of her surroundings, but Maggie wasn't talking or answering anyone's questions, which was just about the only problem they were encountering. She wasn't violently angry or trying to rip out someone's throat at the moment. For all Stork knew, Maggie seemed relatively normal, which made him want to ask if she had gotten away early, like he had.

Flustered, Aerrow somewhat agreed, just as Stork predicted. "Well, um, I don't see why not. We're all on the same team, I guess."

"Great! Come on, Junko." Piper grabbed Maggie's arm and started tugging her away with Junko following after.

Stork walked to his Storkmobile, where he had to leave it and began to work on it. Piper had told him to fix it before Starling and Aerrow came back because his ride was more capable of lifting boxes than Aerrow's or Junko's skimmer, the only skimmers which weren't totally useless or missing. It wasn't hard fixing it; the parts were merely slightly damaged, but it was just enough to bring his craft down. He added onto his mental list to add a crystallized energy shield to neutralize offensive crystal energy somehow. Before he knew it, Piper was calling him on his ride's radio, waiting to use his services.

He flew back to the *Condor*, hooked a trailer to his ride, and flew down to the house in the middle of the forest to see Junko carrying a couple of trunks, figuring that Maggie might be packing some of Kite's stuff as well since neither of them could stay on Terra Errador anymore. As soon as he landed he walked inside and heard rustling from Kite's room. Not much of a surprise when it was also obvious that they shared a room. What did surprise Stork was when he saw the bed overturned and an opened hatch in the middle of the floor.

"Be very careful with this please," Maggie stated from the hatch bringing up an old record player. "It's an old model-probably older than my grandfather-and I've already had to fix it over a dozen times." It even had a hand-crank instead of using crystal energy. Up next was her box of records for her record player.

"Oh, cool, what kind of music do you like?" Piper asked, admiring the record player and lightly looking through the records. "I haven't heard of a lot of these."

"That's because a lot of them are older than the record player. They were really hard to find, considering I found most of them in the garbage. Shame. It seems no one has any taste for the classics anymore."

"So you're into classical?" She didn't like old classical stuff, but she could stand it. It was better than listening to Finn's music at least.

"Nope. Opera. I do have a few musicals, but it's mostly opera."

Piper winced. She couldn't, however, stand opera. "Oh." Piper turned her head to the doorway. "Hey, Stork. Come help Maggie while I help Junko drop off the trunks." Stork's eyes widened in disdain, and before he could complain, Piper slapped a hand over his shoulders and dragged him a few yards down the hall. "Look, Stork," Piper whispered, "I'm not asking you to socialize with her, or even start up a conversation. Just help her pack and be nice to her, OK?" Piper had gotten attached to Maggie already.

Stork rolled his eyes, and before he could even agree vocally, Piper thanked him and skipped off.

...

"There was a fisherman named Fisher

who fished for some fish in a fissure.

Till a fish with a grin

pulled the fisherman in.

Now they're fishing the fissure for Fisher."