

WONDER CITY STORIES

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WHOSE DREAMS COME
TRUE

BY JUDE MCLAUGHLIN

EPISODE #8

The Art of Losing

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The Art of Losing

"The thing is," Madeline Fukuda told us, "I've regenerated the parts of the brain that were damaged by the bullet. Also the bone and skin, both lungs, her liver, and the damage to her leg and hand. Fortunately, there was no intestinal perforation, but she'll still need to be on antibiotics for a while. But she's going to have to reeducate the portion of the brain that was damaged."

Ruth sat in her chair there in the basement of the Gold Stars facility, radiating rage like a dark star, her forehead contracted in a frown. "Can you guess at what kind of therapy she'll need?"

I looked through the one-way glass into the well-equipped hospital-style room where Kayla lay in a medically-induced coma. She looked small and still and frail in the hospital bed, surrounded by monitors and intubated in several ways. I could feel the edges of her mind, still reverberating with terror and pain and horror. I was going to have to deal with that when she woke up, defending everyone in the building and possibly the city from the uncontrolled telepathic lashing-out that was in the offing. I couldn't predict how big her power would be; if she was lucky, it would be much smaller than mine.

And then there was the reported psychokinesis, which... we'd deal with that bridge when we crossed it. Or when it crossed me over my skull, I suppose.

"Other than the psychological sort?" Madeline said with a sigh, running fingers through her short black hair. "I think it's going to mostly be motor control, but we won't know for sure until she wakes up. She's still young, still has some neural plasticity. I honestly think that adapting to her traumatically-awakened power will be the more difficult challenge."

"All right," Ruth said, heaving herself to her feet. "Thanks so much for your help, Madeline."

"It's nothing," Madeline said, and turned to me. "I'm so sorry this happened, Renata. I know you were hoping that the genes would miss the rest of your family."

"Thank you, Madeline," I said. "And thank you for Kayla."

She waved it away. "I'm glad she's alive, and she's going to have a hard enough life as a telepath without having to learn to control her power around major brain injuries."

I looked through the window again. "Why *is* she alive? I saw in the news that they let the boy—Tyrus—die in the street. Why did they call the ambulance for *Kayla*?"

"Because the Wonder City PD doesn't want the Feds to walk in and take over," Ruth said with a shrug, "because they botched the handling of a major paranormal power."

Madeline explained, "The Bureau of Paranormal Affairs has a monitoring presence in town, and any diversion from the protocols for handling an unregistered para would likely mean that the Army would make a bid to take over policing the city again. It was messy enough when they let the civilian police take over back in the 60s."

I nodded and tried to tamp down my rage. She wasn't human to any of them, police or Bureau, just a political liability. "Well, I should go talk to Reesy and Chellé." I glanced at Ruth.

"I'll come with you," Ruth said, gesturing for me to lead the way. "She's here on my authority after all."

"I should be there to explain the medical information," Madeline said, "don't you think?"

"Okay, I guess we're *all* going up to talk to them," I said, glad not to be alone in this.

We left the observation room and went upstairs. Once we got out of the basement, my headache started, since I could feel—even through the alien crystal's psychic defenses—everyone else in the building and in the city for blocks around it. Being underground really *does* help block psychic emanations; I forget that sometimes when I've spent a lot of time in my bunker.

Reesy and Chellé had been waiting for hours in one of the Gold Stars suites; I'd felt them come in early that morning. Sekhmet and Blue Eagle had checked in on them a few times and brought them food. Now I had to face my sister and niece and explain the little of this mess I understood.

When we walked into the room, Chellé was texting someone on her StarPhone, and nearly dropped it in her rush to stand up and step toward us hopefully. She looked tired, the skin around her eyes swollen and red, and it looked like she'd been coping with the stress by finger-curling her hair: it looked great. Reesy looked older than Mama had just before she died: her straightened hair had started to silver aggressively, and her face was deeply lined. She still looked so much like Mama it hurt me to look at her for too long.

I took the lead on introductions. "This is Ruth Thomas—you know her as the Ultimate—and she's the one who got Kayla out of the hospital lockup. And this is Madeline Fukuda, the doctor responsible for Kayla's health right now. This is my sister Therese Foreman and her daughter Chellé Duncan, Kayla's mother." I wondered if they'd called Chellé's husband, Darius, who was deployed overseas, to tell him about Kayla.

Chellé shook their hands while thanking them earnestly. Reesy was more guarded, but also grateful. "Can we see her yet?" Reesy said.

"In a few minutes," Ruth said, with a sympathetic grimace. "I think we ought to sit down and talk a bit first."

Chellé sat immediately, and pulled Reesy back down onto the couch next to her. "How *is* she?"

Madeline pulled up a chair and said, "Like Ruth and Renata, I'm a para, and my power is the ability to help people regenerate damage to their bodies. I've been working on Kayla since she was brought here last night, and I've been able to repair all the damage done to her body. There will be scarring, I'm afraid. There's nothing I can do about that."

"Including the side of her face?" Reesy said.

"Yes," Madeline said, "though the wound was less bad than it looked."

"We only got a glimpse in the emergency room," Reesy said stiffly, "before they took her away."

"The key things now are antibiotics and bringing her out of the coma to see how the brain damage has affected her," Madeline said.

"But you healed it...?" Chellé said, looking from Madeline to me and back.

"I healed her brain," Madeline said gently. "I can't regenerate the connections that she had there. We have to see what she lost—motor skills, memories—and start to give what we can back to her."

Chellé clutched Reesy's hand and tried to fight back tears unsuccessfully. It hurt to watch her and not be able to hug her. But I had to save my resources for Kayla. Just sitting here was tapping my reserves.

Reesy said, "What about—" she glanced askance at me "—this mind power they say she has?"

"We'll have to see what it's like when she's awake," Ruth said, "and not terrified and angry."

Chellé covered her mouth with her hand, and Reesy fumbled out a tissue for her. "It's all right, it's all right, baby girl," Reesy said, sounding *just* like Mama. "They're doing all they can for her. You know that." She looked at Madeline. "Thank you for what you've done. I saw... I saw all that blood—" and my older sister's voice shook as I'd never heard it "—and I thought we wouldn't ever have her back. I thought she was dead."

Madeline said, "I'm glad to do it, but I wouldn't have been able to if Kayla weren't a fighter and hadn't stayed alive until I could get there. You have a remarkable young woman there."

"I know," Reesy and Chellé said at the same time, and then they laughed, cried a little harder, and hugged each other.

I glanced aside at Ruth, who was smiling grimly. She caught my eye and nodded.

Reesy wiped her eyes with a tissue and said, "What else do we need to know?"

Ruth said, simply, "You need to know about the way I got her out of police custody."

She had Reesy and Chellé's undivided attention with that.

"It's called a Writ of Conscription," Ruth said, unfolding the Writ she'd been carrying since the previous evening and handing it over to Chellé. "It's an institution from World War I that got expanded in World War II. Basically, the Gold Stars—the Gold Star Battalion—can conscript any para who has powers that are potentially advantageous to the service of the United States."

"It's how Ruth got me out of the institution," I added. "Technically, it means that I'm a member of the Gold Stars."

Ruth nodded and said, "Because of the Jane Liberty Exception, we can extend the Writ to people who are underage, but whose powers are potentially Class 7 or above."

I shoved down the memory remnants Jane Liberty left in the back of my head when she died. They always rose up when her name was mentioned.

"So what does this mean?" Chellé said, handing Reesy the Writ. "Does it mean she can't come home?"

Ruth shook her head. "We don't have facilities for children or adolescents at any of our sites. She'll be able to live with you and go to school, once she learns to control her powers."

Reesy looked into my eyes and I could feel her thinking about my bunker. "Yes," I admitted. "If her powers are anything like mine, she may not be *able* to live at home."

"It's nasty when you do that," Reesy said reflexively. I remembered her saying exactly the same thing when I was a child, coming into my powers and not realizing it even though I was answering unspoken questions. She remembered it too and covered her mouth. "Sorry, Rennie. I know you don't do it on purpose."

I waved it away. Chellé said, in a small voice, "If she can't come home, can she live with you, Aunt Rennie?"

A fleeting panic shot through me, and desperate thoughts of the Scottish Gynebots rose. But the Gynebots were struggling to civilize Sarah West's children, who had various levels of ability in reading and projecting emotions. Trapped among foaming-racist-raised white children: that was *no* place for a traumatized telepathic black girl to be. I took a breath and said, "Of course, sweetie. I wouldn't have her live anywhere else."

Ruth gave me an opaque look, though I could read right through it that she was wondering if I could handle that. Frankly, I wondered the same thing. But I would if I had to. That's what the women of my family do, after all.

Reesy rubbed her face. "Is there anything else we should know?"

I looked at Madeline, then Ruth, and I pulled two more of the pink and lavender alien crystals out of the pocket of my slacks. "You'll need to wear these around your necks when you go in to see her. They're extra psychic defenses for you, in case she lashes out accidentally, and they'll quiet your thoughts so they won't be as easy for her to read, and won't crowd her."

Reesy and Chellé took them, examined them, and then put them on. Immediately, I felt better, like someone had turned off a malfunctioning, humming fluorescent light in the room. Sometimes, I forget how carefully Ruth and Madeline had schooled their minds over the years.

"You should probably think about physical contact with her the way you do about Renata," Ruth said, rising to her feet. "Let her initiate, once she's awake, and let go immediately if she indicates in any way that she can't handle the contact. Okay?"

They both nodded. Chellé glanced at me, worried, and I smiled at her as comfortingly as I could.

Ruth said, "All right, let's go downstairs and see your girl."