

Justin inhaled the fresh air (or at least fresh for this planet), looking around as he stepped out of Mefudoka's lair once more. It had been quite a while since he'd received his new abilities, albeit against his own will. It had been even longer since he'd even *seen* Mefudoka. Whenever his new shadow form took over, thanks to said powers, it was still an unnerving experience to feel some other entity take part ownership of his own actions. He still had control over himself, but it was shared when the shadow took over. The Tharx wasn't used to being a sort of passenger of his own body, but he would find a way to make it work. Truth be told, he didn't have much of a choice in the matter anymore.

Taking the newfound shadow form came with its perks. One passive benefit was definitely the resistance to heat, which worked well when the sun decided to make its presence known. The agility boost was a welcome touch, too. Even for his size, movement was an easy feat, so long as Justin and his shadow cooperated. Then of course there was his favorite trick so far that never got old.

"Alright, guess we can try some more fun around here for now," the lilac-colored avian said to no one.

Glancing around, Justin saw that nobody was near. Not that it'd matter, with what was coming, of course. "All we need is a little room to breathe, and..."

As if by cue, though Justin couldn't say for sure it was the shadow form listening to him or not, black tendrils of shadows formed into a swirling ball against his chest. Slowly the swirling became bigger and bigger, pressing against the short silky fur it desired to take over. Inch-by-inch the darkness covered Justin's body, overtaking his

torso, spreading up and down to his arms and legs before finally covering his head. All the while, a tingling sensation vibrated through what felt like his very soul.

I doubt I'll ever get used to that....

In just a matter of seconds, the process had essentially turned his entire body different dark shades of charcoal, from his two-toed claws to his spiky galaxy hair that now sparkled like the night sky. His multi-colored eyes were the only drops of color on his overall otherwise dark pallet. Now it was the shadow's turn to co-take the wheel, though it did feel like the form at least took some of Justin's own desires of what to do and where to go. Sometimes. It was a weird, unspoken communication between the two, almost like they had to agree before anything happened. Slowly, Justin had managed to understand the symbiotic relationship between himself and the shadow.

Now for the real fun, Justin felt his body begin to expand and grow. He could feel his skin and bones stretching, using the powers of the shadow skin to become larger than they should. From his eyes, it looked like everything around him was shrinking as his line of sight towered over nearby trees and boulders until he could see clear across the landscape. The process kept going until the Tharx was numerous stories tall, able to see miles across the green world beneath the dark purple skies. Though his expedition to this planet was meant to be temporary, now he felt like he'd be a permanent resident with his shadow form to do Mefudoka's bidding after having this form and power bestowed onto him.

Yeah, just had to get eaten alive to get this kind of power.

Was it really worth it, though? He still didn't know what Mefudoka had in store for him! The shadow had no intention of letting him dwell on the thought, already taking massive, booming steps to the north. Each step was a mini earthquake around his large claws, leaving imprints in their wake.

How about we try traveling in a little more style, instead?

The shadow seemed to agree, his body coming to a thunderous halt. Justin crossed his arms at his chest, a pool of black forming beneath his feet. The darkness spread quickly into a circle pooling outward from him. Quicker than expected, Justin sank into the shadows, watching everything rise as he lowered. When his vision went black, suddenly he was rising up again. The process was quick and smooth, his massive being rising from another pool of shadows hundreds of miles from where he was before.

"Well that's certainly handy," Justin's mixed echoed, now sounding like a mix of his own along with some kind of high-pitched garble not unlike other lesser shadow minions. That boisterous voice bellowed out like thunder, which caused nearby wildlife to scatter in fear in a wave of fast-paced feet along the planet's surface and wings flapping frantically in the wind. A herd of wild cattle was running rampant nearby, and some of them looked to be heading in Justin's direction.

And now for my next trick...

Before the herd could see him, Justin's skyscraper-sized form warped and shimmered, taking on the colors of everything around him. The grass, the dirt, and even the dark sky above. He was invisible. Some lower beings with camouflage would

be noticeable by a faint waver thanks to the reflection of light, but somehow this shadow form had mastered the technique to where even if he moved, no one would be able to see him. The perfect predatory tool for his arsenal. The massive avian's eyes focused on the nearest stampeding herd, seeing it get closer and closer all while kicking up a dust storm behind it.

Just a little more...

It felt like time wasn't the same to Justin when in this form. Everything that should have been seconds felt like minutes. He could almost see every movement of every leg individually in the herd through the shadow's eyes. Every hoof against the ground, every swish of the tails... The sight was almost mesmerizing. More importantly, they were getting close and he could plan ahead.

After a few beats, they were in range. "Gotcha." Justin smirked to himself, balling his hands into fists.

As soon as they came in range, Justin disengaged his camouflage almost as quickly as it started. He was now visible once more, the herd seeming to attempt to avoid this sudden obstacle. Justin slammed his right hand into the ground in front of the cattles' path, and before any of them could react a mass of rope-like tendrils exploded from his wrist. In nearly the blink of an eye, the black tentacles surrounded each individual animal, much like the Tharx's own shadow skin did for him every time he transformed. The shadowy chaos swiftly returned to Justin's body, absorbing itself and the captured wildlife with them into his very being.

Each addition of the tinier organisms vanished in big black lumps beneath his skin, absorbed into the abyss. He could feel each one, though he couldn't tell what was happening to them. Was the shadow... eating them? Was this its way of getting energy?

"Come to me."

A familiar voice echoed through the avian's head, immediately snapping the avian from his train of thought. The guttural, throaty bellow was unmistakable. He hadn't heard voices before, so why now?

This is the first time he's talked since the transformation... I don't understand...

"What do you--"

"It's time for your first task," the booming voice commanded in an authoritative tone, though Justin got the feeling the General wasn't talking to him.

He scowled, opening his dark gray beak to speak again, "Now wait just a minute, you have some answers to give before I listen to you!"

There was a brief pause before Mefudoka chortled, "You don't get to ask questions. You don't have a choice in the matter."

Justin's own body then moved without his intent. Normally it was a joint effort to get things done, but this time the shadow seemed to be in complete control of him. It had to be Mefudoka's doing. Much like before, a pool of darkness opened up beneath his feet, and Justin sank quickly inside. He tried to fight back for control, but only found that his limbs followed what the shadow form wanted no matter how hard he tried. The only thing he could do was watch as the natural land around him rose out of sight...

...and was replaced with the familiar setting of Mefudoka's stone-laden lair. Not only that, but he had returned down to his normal size. All around the familiar small-fry of lanky shadow minions chittered and chirped in their garbled speech. Mefudoka himself sat on a large, clumsily-made throne of stones, tapping a clawed finger on the crude armrest.

"There you are," Mefudoka guffawed, Justin suddenly and unwillingly kneeling down on one knee in front of the large toad-like General.

Justin didn't know where this was going, but he was clearly not the one in control of it now.