

## Prologue: The Comedy of the Situation

*"Did you notice, did you notice our friends are running late?  
So time to misbehave  
When they get here, will they see clear the seeds that we have sown?  
And speak of how they've grown?"*

*I will be here when they leave  
I'll be rolling up my sleeves"*

- Silversun Pickups. "Empty Nest." *Physical Thrills*.

The opening bars of incidental music play out over a well-lit cafe. A scrawny blonde, a big brunette, and a pair of goth twins with blood-red and pitch-black hair sit on mismatched sofas around their usual table. The blonde types away on her laptop, preoccupied with her work.

Finally, the brunette breaks the silence. "You know Becca, some people meet with friends to enjoy their company." Trepidatious canned laughter echoes throughout the quiet cafe.

"Uh huh," Becca responds blankly. "Yeah, sorry Zeke, Mrs. Polar wants the new build done tonight. I would have worked on it yesterday, but I had that double date." The fake studio audience 'oohs' at the salacious news.

The goth with red hair chimes in, "Who'd y'all go with?"

"Oh, uh, yeah, not quite like that, Dora. More, I accidentally scheduled two dates on the same day. I had to dash back and forth between an Italian bistro with Damaya and an action movie with Toffee."

The black haired twin asks, "Well, how'd it go?"

"Well Archie, it's all a bit of a blur. The movie was way too cheesy, and the lasagna was played by Sylvester Stallone." This time, the canned laughter is a bit more enthusiastic.

More than a little concerned, Zeke asks, "I thought you were going steady with that nice Lyla girl?"

"I mean... yeah. Steadily dating her every Monday." Becca smirks roguishly.

Archie rolls her eyes and reminds her, "Yesterday was Monday."

"And shopping for apology flowers," Becca says, without missing a beat, opening a new tab on her laptop.

"You are the worst," Zeke sighs. She turns to look at Archie: "Anyway, why is it so quiet?" Tempting fate, she adds, "It's dead in here today."

The door slams open. "HELLO!" Nalagrom's ashen voice thunders through the scene. He saunters in, decked out like the rock star he is. The simulated studio audience goes wild.

Dora practically falls out of her seat. “Graz!” she squeaks, “How y’all— Uh!” She panics, hearing her drawl. Dora takes a deep breath, putting on a voice closer to her sister’s. “How have you been? I saw your performance last night.”

“It was a hell of a show. I had them eating out of my hand! Some days it’s good to be a real badass like me.” The pre-recorded applause erupts. He pauses, waiting for the ‘audience’ to die down. “Anyway, can’t stay long. Just wanted to pop in. Been in such a hurry, I didn’t even get to use this half-off coupon for all-you-can-eat wings at Scythe’s.”

“All-you-can-eat wings? Half off?” Zeke nearly gives herself whiplash.

“Scythe’s? The place with the hot waitresses with the short skirts and the tight shirts?!” Becca is suddenly wide awake.

Nalagrom takes out the coupon. “Yeah, right here.”

Becca slams her laptop shut and both her and Zeke fly off the couch, grabbing the coupon as they exit stage left.

Dora gets up and chases after them. “Oh, tarnation! Stop making bad decisions, Becca!” Laughter intensifies.

Archie doesn’t get up, but calls after her, “Sister! Stop trying to fix them!”

Nalagrom flops onto the couch beside the raven-haired goth. “Don’t try too hard... Got them all to leave. Just me and you.” He leans in and locks lips with Archie as the audience erupts with cheers. As he pulls away he snaps his fingers. “Garçon! Bring something nice for me and the lady.”

A purple-haired woman behind the counter blinks dimly. “What does that mean? Who’s *Garçon*?”

Archie rolls her eyes as the audience giggles. Nalagrom tries again. “Just bring us some coffee, sugar.”

“Oh! That *is* my name!” The canned laughter hoots a little too loud as the scene wraps.

The trio in the cafe comes to a halt, looking at the camera. They speak in unison, the gestalt of voices blending into one inhuman tone. “No dopamine response. Cortisol levels remain high. Maybe I’m not *funny* enough. Please stop being sad. I went to all this effort for you. Let me entertain you, Ms. Kaneko.”

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## Overdraw & Pandora Round 3: Encore

### Act 1: Transparency

*"Touch, I remember touch  
Pictures came with touch  
A painter in my mind  
Tell me what you see  
A tourist in a dream  
A visitor, it seems  
A half-forgotten song  
Where do I belong?*

*Tell me what you see  
I need something more"*

- Daft Punk. "Touch." *Random Access Memories*.

Vallery looks over the young woman. Red Hood is dirty, scuffed up, and still staring at the table she had been left at last night in the Shatter Sugar Connection Cafe. Baladeth had brought her by just after closing time. Vallery unlocked the door for the Lord of Mourners as he had become a rather generous regular customer, and left him the key to lock back up. True to their arrangement, there is a pile of gold coins to account for every piece of missing inventory, including a rather generous tip for her troubles. Still, Val wasn't expecting to see Red Hood still here, gazing into an abyss that only she can see. Something about her seems less magical. Her cape's stars no longer shimmer, her eyes don't twinkle, and that youthful mischievous grin is nowhere to be seen. Even if she doesn't have any physical wounds of note, Nalagrom had damaged her.

Red Hood finally stirs, but doesn't seem present; her eyes still vacant and dead. Vallery walks over with a fresh baked apple pie. "So... Sorry about your loss... I assume." She sets it in front of the once-cosmic teen.

The pie is stared at. Red Hood's eyes widen as a silent existential horror creeps in. It is as though the apple pie is a void deeper and emptier than anywhere she has ever been.

Seeing the reaction, Vallery slowly pulls the plate back. "Oookay... something savory, perhaps. Spinach cheese scone and... uh... coffee, coming up. Maybe some variety will help?"

"I... don't... exist..." Red whimpers. "Lost little Alice... Mean old cat... What do I even do? That was... everything."

Vallery gathers a savory breakfast for her. "Sounds like he did a real number on you, Red."

"Is that... who I am? How can I know? Everything has gone crazy."

"A real number... Goodness, puts my baddies back home to shame. I should wish Dora and... Rebecca luck." She returns with a cup of hot coffee and a heavenly smelling fresh scone.

Red takes a bite and begins to tear up. "... It's not sweet. But pastries are sweet. Have I... gone mad?"

Val sits down across from Red and reaches out. "Hey, it's okay. Pastries are still sweet. Sometimes. They are sweet

most of the time. Not every pastry is, though.”

Red stares at the scone, as though it is profound. “Sometimes Wolves are Cats.”

“Uh. I don't know about...” Val winces as she notices Red's mood start to collapse. She course corrects. “I guess we never really know until we check.”

The door opens as the ever-gorgeous Tenki steps through with a smug smile on his face. “Oh, Sugar Glass. I think we have some business to settle.” The draconic demigod holds up a heavy sack of gold. “My whole tab, with enough extra to cover me for at least a—”

“Dang, must be nice to have a mother willing to spoil you.” Vallery smiles, but looks back to Red. After a moment to make sure she's stable, Val goes to get Tenki's usual. “Just set the money on the register.”

Tenki huffs. “I didn't beg my mother for this. I'll have you know I engaged in my own endeavors to earn this coin, fair and square.”

“Really, so where did you get the money? Start selling calendars? 'Twelve Months of Tenki?’”

“No, but I am going to note that for later in case Saki tries to collect next.” He waves it off as he watches Val prepare his tea, his draconic tail swishing excitedly. “Anyway, I got it from Nalagrom.”

Sugar Glass whips her head over so fast, she winds up spilling boiling water on herself. “FU-dge!” She darts to the back room, thrusting her hand under a cold faucet. “That can't be legal! Why were you talking to that ass, anyway?”

Tenki grins with a little malice. “Talking? More like strangling the little brat for stepping into my domain. But, as I see it, his apology was quite generous. It's more of a donation, really. An offering to a demigod for good fortune.” He waves off her concern. “Anyway, I have broad latitude to take any number of things into consideration when choosing the tournament stage.”

“That's called a bribe!” Sugar Glass shouts. “Someone could get hurt!”

“Could get hurt? It's a fighting tournament,” Tenki protests. “Anyway, it's nothing nefarious. He just suggested that I send them to a cozy little world that's much like your own, and Ms. Bowhart's. I took a quick look around, and nothing seemed terribly dangerous. No superpowers, though, from what I could tell. But it's got this cute charming little gimmick where there's a laugh track, and everyone's just the worst! I don't know how I didn't find this universe before, it's a hoot!”

Vallery goes back to pouring his tea, and plating a cloudberry scone. Her lips are pursed in a little disapproving frown, “Laugh track? How does that even work?” She eventually admits, “That does sound... interesting, though. I guess Nalagrom may just want a live studio audience...”

Red Hood suddenly bolts up. “Do not trust him! He's a Cat!”

“Oh heck, she had just calmed down.” Sugar Glass lets the tea steep, rushing over to put an arm around Red.

“He's playing you. He's up to something. It's a trap!” She tries to scramble past Val as though possessed. “The Cat deceives!”

Vallery uses a barrier to gently push her back into her seat. “It's okay! It's okay. Tenki, tell her that you're not going to take them to the world Nalagrom *suggested*.”

“You'd expect me to lie to save face? No, I have my pride. I can't just change my mind at the last minute. It takes time to get these things set up. Miss X has been practicing her opening speech all morning. I've picked out a great starting locale.” Tenki crosses his arms. “When I make my decision, it is final.”

“Tenki! I...” Val takes a deep breath, then grabs a pen and throws it at him. “Write down which universe it is, and help yourself to your usual. I'm going to find Becky and Dora and warn them.”

“Becky... Is Becky an Alice?” Red ponders aloud.

Sugar Glass winces and corrects herself, “*Rebecca*. Stay calm, Red. I'll handle the... cat?”

“Why should I just give you the universe number?” Tenki demands as he holds up the pen with indignation.

“I'll stop stocking your fancy tea.”

“That— That's blackmail!”

“That's my decision, and when I make my decisions, they are final!”

Tenki groans and starts writing, as Sugar Glass dashes out the door.

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The sun climbs lazily but steadily into the sky, casting long shadows across the Sacred Forest. Luckily, Sugar Glass had bumped into Toffee, who was on her way to help Becky practice. The bunny girl guides the ex-villain turned cafe owner across the threshold, and they descend into the ominous woods. In the shade of the trees is the whispering of ghosts, and the rustling of more corporeal undead. The haunted grounds still smell of blood from all too recent transgressions.

Juxtaposed to the ominous surroundings, reggae music echoes between the trees. The bunny and the baker follow it to a clearing, to find Becky and Zeke sparring, Pandora watching from the sidelines alongside a pocket-sized version of herself.

“You have to move to the music! Should we switch back to waltzes?” Pandora shouts as Overdraw gets tail slapped into a tree.

“I said we shouldn't have switched in the first place! I have no idea what I'm doing. Slowing the beat just means I don't know what I'm doing less quickly!” Overdraw snaps back.

Toffee chimes in. "I think I missed something."

"Toffee! Thank god you're back!" Rebecca nearly gets her head taken off by a claw swipe from Zeke. "Time! Time out!"

"Sorry! I was just feeling the rhythm!" Zeke laughs and flops down, staring up at the sun through the leaves.

Pandora and Pocket-Dora face Toffee and cross their arms in unison, though only the larger of the two speaks. "Yes, and next time don't stump Becky. She is having a hard enough time focusing as is. What did you mean by 'trust yourself to trust?'"

"I don't know, I just got here," Toffee groans.

"Do not lie to me! If I have to find the white blouse you were wearing to prove it, I will," Dora starts.

Becky reaches out to put a hand on Dora's shoulder. "Look, this is a weird place, maybe it was just a ghost that looked like—"

"And you need to calm down and *focus on the music*," Pandora hisses back at her.

Toffee winces. "Chill out, Pandora. Unless there is a second Toffee running around, I don't know who that could have been." She whispers to Becky, "Jeez, what's gotten into her? Side effect of the patch?"

Pocket-Dora explains in her own squeaky voice, "The problem is Nalagrom. She's been cut off. My other self had a doppelganger close to him for every moment physically possible until now. It's fascinating to see that I can exhibit signs of withdrawal."

Pandora rounds on herself. "You don't know me!" The absurdity of the moment snaps Dora out of it. "I am... very sorry, everyone. I am just on edge. I am still... healing. And I know today is going to be painful. Nalagrom is going to use our relationship against me. I would be insulted if he thought so little of me as not to use every advantage he has. For all intents and purposes... that was it. Yesterday was our last day together. Our last... magical date was cut short. I just want one more kiss from him."

Becky and Val say in unison, "I understand—" Their eyes meet, then sheepishly look away.

Toffee saves them from the awkward moment by asking, "So... why the dancing?"

"Necromancy." Pandora sighs. "My miniature self has been spying on Nalagrom, and I have been paying close attention on our dates. His method uses dance to send the dead to... the other side. For reasons that I frankly do not understand, it's the magical equivalent of an exothermic reaction."

Pocket-Dora continues, "The willing dead give him greater margins in power. He effectively has a monopoly on the dead; they have no other option."

Toffee snaps her fingers. “Oh! I get it! So if Becky can also learn how to send the dead on, his power source will be split!”

“And we can use the energy to recharge my arrow.” Becky sighs. “The problem is—”

Val grins. “There isn't a single world where you can dance.” She forces herself back into a serious frown. “Uh... good luck, Rebecca. I just came over here to let you know that Nalagrom is up to no good.”

“... And?” Overdraw asks. “That's the free space on necromancer bingo.”

“He has *convinced* Tenki to go to some universe that looks benign. He's picking the venue. Don't trust a god-damned thing you see in there.”

Pocket-Dora thinks on it. “Zeke, do you mind checking to see if Quin is still caring for those revenants? Perhaps Graz has chosen the venue so he can set them up ahead of time as an ambush.”

Rebecca yawns and nods. “Yeah, if Quin's still at the Kit-Inn, could you also grab me a coffee while you're there? If it's not too much trouble. It's great to be connected to the witches in my arrowhead, but they filled my dreams with even more training. It feels like I pulled an all-nighter.”

Pandora quirks her head. “Wait—” Zeke, having turned around to run the errands, pauses. Dora clarifies, “No, not you. Sorry, Zeke. Other me; what are you talking about?”

“Oh, right! I forgot to bring those up. They are two monsters of Graz's creation. Ill-tempered beasts he left in Quin's care.” Pocket-Dora looks a bit uneasy. “Uh, may want to bring something cold with. Cold temperatures calm them down.”

Pandora glowers at her miniature self. “Why don't we merge, in case anything else has slipped your mind?”

“I don't want to.” All eyes turn to Pocket-Dora.

Toffee rubs one of her ears as she thinks. “Is this a directive thing? Like, if Dora dies in the upcoming fight, that way you have a backup?”

“No! I...” the little Dora crosses her arms. “I... want to be my own person. I don't love Graz like you do... My relationship with him is different. He is not my lover, he is my friend. And if I merge with you, my opinion becomes muddled with yours. My opinions... my self is destroyed and...”

Pandora furrows her brow, but relents. “I understand, though I still find it quite frustrating.”

“Thank you,” Pocket-Dora responds. “I... don't think I'll stick around to watch you fight Graz. It's hard enough as it is, helping you fight my friend.”

Pandora closes her eyes and nods. She looks over to Sugar Glass. “Thank you for the warning.”

“Yeah, thanks Val.” Becky hesitates for a moment before saying, “Look, I didn't want to fight after you found out. I really didn't want to but—”

“Don't talk about it,” Sugar Glass cuts her off. “I just felt a bit responsible. This isn't an apology.”

Becky bites her lip and takes a deep breath. “I know. I don't expect an apology. I just want you to really understand... I'm sorry. To you, and to the version of you that I hurt in my world.”

“Whatever.” Val turns around and goes to leave. “We can talk about it later. After you kick that creep back to the crypt he crawled out of.”

As she leaves, she sees Toffee trying her hand at the dance lessons. Val's mind drifts back, a warm nostalgic smile sneaking onto her face. She heads back to the cafe, stepping in three/four time.

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Sugar Glass returns to the cafe as the sun reaches high into the sky. Tenki and Red Hood are gone, but one of them had the good graces to set the sign to 'closed.' “Not locked though,” Val mutters. For a moment the earnest cafe owner is replaced by the ex-villain living among the desperate. She summons a club made of her barrier as she steps through the door.

Inside, the sack of gold remains untouched, right where she had left it. Val lets out a sigh of relief, and dismisses the bludgeon. Next to the money is a strip of paper with a long string of letters and numbers. She picks it up and squints at it. She turns to the computer screen of her register and types it in, examining the data that comes up.

“Hm... It's in the 887 membrane... between my world and Becky's. Only an address or so over. Why is it so different then? That should be an 'I had a hot dog instead of a burger' kind of difference. Must have been an important hot dog,” she mutters to herself. “I should leave it alone. I don't owe her anything. I already warned her.”

Even as Val says it, she punches up an order for a connection card. She loads a heavy plastic rectangle in the side of the register, and it whirs loudly, producing a faint wisp of smoke which she casually waves away. She locks up the cafe and heads over to a booth, not bothering to close its door as she slots the card into the computer.

“Just a little poking around. Something doesn't add up.” She digs out a little journal and begins calling a few numbers. The first gets an automated message about how the number she's dialing is not connected. “Hm... okay, Ameranthia doesn't seem to exist in this one, let's try...” She punches in another number, then another. Nothing, and nothing. She dials the IVOS Hero Hotline. “If there aren't any superpowers, then...” It starts to ring. “What?”

An automated phone system responds, “Hello, welcome to the IVOS Hotline. All of our staff are busy right now. Please stay on the line. You are **caller 0**. We estimate your wait to be **Null: Error 221 (caller-service ratio timeout.)** Please stay on the line, and we'll be with you as soon as possible.”



“What... the hell.” Vallery rubs her head. “Maybe this thing is some kind of... global villain attack. Sounds like a Dr. Wash kind of plan. Think... think... Laugh track... horrible people... If it's a villain attack, it's probably themed... Where would someone on a sitcom always answer the phone?” She rubs her chin for a moment before looking up the number of Sabrina's; a cozy bar in Madison.

The phone rings once before someone picks up. Voices answer, one on the phone with more echoing in the background. She furrows her brow, trying to place it. “Who is this.” It isn't a question, it is a demand.

“Sorry, yes, my name is Vallery, and... um, I was looking to—”

“Sugar Glass. Calling from the Crossroads. How curious,” the voice responds. Vallery's eyes go wide. She stares at the computer as she tries to piece it all together.

She is distracted by the sound of a violin coming from her kitchen. Long scratchy notes; the slow build to a tango. The tune is joined by a voice humming along. The door to the kitchen flings open and Nalagrom, resplendent in his formal robes, steps through, grin wider than ever.

“Hello, Sugar~ Just need to make a call.” He saunters over and flashes a handful of coins. “I'm even paying like a good boy... let me talk to your friend there.”

“We're closed,” Sugar Glass says, summoning her bludgeon. “I can refuse anyone's business I want.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Nalagrom smirks. “You don't need to let me into the booth. However, I'm being very reasonable. Very, very reasonable.”

“I'm not scared of you.” She stands with a confidence that seems to surprise the necromancer. “You wouldn't be the first punk I've had to put down.” A bit of Sugar Glass the villain seeps into her words.

“Oh, oh-ho ho! If I wasn't already arranging a hot date I would be slicking back my hair, Sugar. But, alas, I have places to be, and hot psychos to talk to. So let me through. As much as I'd love to have fun with you, I'm on a time limit and... well... I'd hate to burn down my boss's favorite cafe in the Crossroads.” Sugar Glass hesitates. “You know, you really gotta stop telling people that this place was 'your wish that you achieved all by yourself.' You might as well be painting a target on this place.”

Val grits her teeth. “Low. I hope Dora eats you alive.”

“Even if Silver could kill me, she would never.” Nalagrom dismisses her. “It's a shame, because she's so close to being something truly special. Just a few lines of code ruin *her* though. No, *Silver* won't be eating anyone today.”

Val's eyes suddenly light up. “You... You absolute bastard!” She runs past him and to the door.

“Finally put it all together? Smarter than you look. You're too late to warn them,” Nalagrom calls out after Vallery, as she runs as fast as she can for the Cross Colosseum.



## Act Two: Vs Nalagrom

*"So you're a coarse guy  
Swoop in on a horse guy  
Rescuing with force guy  
Take the hero's course guy*

*I'm that mean type  
Out to get your green type  
Try to hog the scene type  
Comically obscene type*

*I'm the bad guy"*

- The Cog is Dead. "Bad Guy." *Incognito: Cog Covers Vol 1.*

Skyscrapers tower over the famous Shibuya Scramble Crossing. Tokyo is colorful and bright, its palette shifting and changing with the advertisements on screens across the city. Bright and colorful mascots, chic fashion models wearing the latest in elegance or excess, and cheerful quirky ads for everyday products play on loop. The city bustles as it usually does. However, it's uncomfortably quiet. The rumble of engines is absent as vehicles roll along the streets in perfect coordination, and the cacophony of footsteps seems muted. Citizens emote, their mouths move, but most say nothing. Those so motivated could listen close and pick out the few individual conversations. Threads of comedy and drama play, surrounded by silent extras, for some unseen audience. Something is palpably absent.

Fading into existence fast on top of the eight-story tall 109 building, Overdraw and Pandora lunge at the still-manifesting Nalagrom. Pandora's mass spikes out to impale his legs, while Overdraw wastes no time, wings rocketing her into a bow swing at the necromancer's head. Thinking fast, he leaps off the ground to avoid the worst of it.

Wham! The bow strikes him in the chest, launching him over the side of the towering building towards certain death. Pandora scrambles, spreading herself thin and eating through the roofing to extend and grab Nalagrom's hand, her body stretching like a spring.

Nalagrom smirks, as he dangles in her grasp. "Couldn't let me go, eh Silver?"

If Pandora could blush, she would. "You are still human in my book. I didn't have a choice."

"Oh, so cold to me. I thought we were sweethearts." Nalagrom's grin grows. "You would have saved me anyway."

"I would not say I have saved you." Dora grins right back. "PULL!" She shouts as her coiled body springs back, launching the necromancer helplessly into the air.

Overdraw, her bow drawn back, is ready for the signal. One, two, three. Her rhythm is well practiced, as the trio of spirit arrows hit Graz along his trajectory, one after another, tearing his fancy blue vest. The last of the volley hits him through the throat, and he lets out a horrible gurgling noise.

Overdraw rockets after him and catches him by way of punching him in the gut. As Graz wheezes for air,

Overdraw quickly searches him for his tag. “Crap. Where is it, where is...”

She trails off as she looks down, and sees the entire city looking back up, staring at her in unison. Heads track her movement with precision. This world has stopped to silently stare up at her, like some abyssal predator passing below its unknowing victim.

“What is wrong with this world?” Overdraw looks down at the crowd, trying to comprehend what is happening.

A labored cackle grinds its way out of Nalagrom's throat as he looks away from Overdraw. “お前ら、今日は運がいいな。死後の世界への片道旅行、ただい搭乗中だ！”<sup>1</sup> he seems to say to no one.

He reaches out, and for a moment the limb of a ghost manifests just long enough to make contact. The phantom crumbles into points of light. A glyph appears in his eye, like a mold being filled with molten metal. A massive blazing skeletal hand appears above them. Nalagrom puppets it, grabbing Overdraw by her arm, and whipping both of them towards the ground. He looks to Dora expectantly as he plummets.

Pandora grimaces, trying to resist, but runs over to catch them as Overdraw's wings flail. The necromancer reaches out his hands. “不死のルーレット、今回の幸運な当選者は?!<sup>2</sup>” Ghostly hands manifest along the way down, fading away as he zips past. He clasps one, and the momentarily visible ghost condenses into a ball of light, as another glyph in his eye is cast. “あの世への無料旅行、おめでとう！”<sup>3</sup> He exhales a plume of fire, pushing free from Overdraw, launching himself away, and breaking his fall.

He lands on the rooftop right where he faded into the world, stumbling and dusting himself off as Dora and Becky crash into each other. While his opponents untangle themselves, he cricks his neck and extends his hands for more ghosts, a new rune appearing in his eye.

Pandora abandons humanoid form for a moment to untangle herself. “How are you doing this? I thought you said dance was—”

Nalagrom turns his back and looks over the scramble crossing below. “It is how I prefer to do my job. But there is more than one way to send a spirit on.” He limbers up and waves his hands. With each motion another line is drawn in fire over the intersection, as though his finger was the pen, and the ground far below his canvas, meticulously designing a far more complex sigil. In the flame's wake, permanent markings are scorched into the ground. “It's more about connecting with the dead than using any one specific technique.”

Overdraw scrambles to her feet and draws back her bow. “Right! Let's not let necromancer make giant ominous symbols on the ground, shall we?” Her arrow turns blue, but seems to dim a bit as she lets out a breath and focuses. “Burst Arr—” The ground beneath her explodes and a flaming, blind-folded, monkey-skulled ape creature grabs her by the legs. “Oh.” She is dragged into the 109 shopping center, and is thrown through a rack of discount clothes.

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1 Translation: “You guys are lucky today. One-way trip to the afterlife, now boarding!”

2 Translation: “Undead roulette, who's the lucky winner this time?”

3 Translation: “It's a free trip to the other side, congratulations!”

Overdraw shouts from the rubble, “Again!? What's with me getting launched through shopping centers?!” She tries to get up, but another orange-furred ape monstrosity, with a horse skull for a head, bites down on her leg like a vice. “AH! Dora! I found the revenants! Think you can multitask?”

Pandora winces and melts down, eating a swath through the roof as fast as she can. She splits, half sliding into the hole while the rest of her keeps chewing away at the roof, producing doppelgangers to mob Nalagrom.

The necromancer steps aside with an instinctual rhythm, as the first doppelganger misses a punch. “Look, I'm not going to tell you how to do your job, Silver, but it would be easier if you just dropped that human guise. Come at me like a tidal wave.” With a flick of his hand a burning line of fire gouges through the army of Doras, slowing them down.

“I do as I please!” The bodies meld together into a titanic humanoid form. She brings her fist down to crush the necromancer.

Nalagrom smiles and stands perfectly still. The killing blow stops inches from his head. “We both know that's not true.”

Dora opens her hand and the motion restarts as she tries to grab him. “Stop that!” Her voice wavers, her attempted cold inflection breaking.

“Really is a shame you can't kill me,” he says, extending his hand and filling a new glyph, swiping more ghosts from the air as Pandora's fingers wrap around him. “Because that's your only chance, Silver.” As she closes her hand around him her nanomachines begin to glow red, then white-hot before they start breaking down from the sudden immense heat. “So close to being perfect. I suppose my vacation is coming to a close. I'm already on to much bigger and *much* better lovers.”

“Shut up! You're not getting into my head!” Her molten grip tightens, but her arm is already starting to degrade.

“Silver... I've been in your head since you met me. You were a fun change of pace while it lasted. But we both know I can do better.” His malicious grin widens as his hand breaks free. “Welcome to the school of heartbreak. It's tiresome though; since you aren't surviving to make it to the rest of your body, I'm gonna need to break your heart all over again.”

She throws him onto the ground before he can cast again. “I cannot kill you, but I can hurt you. I will end this round here and now with a knockout. You won't get a chance to break my heart again.”

“No, Silver. That ain't how it's going to work. Smile. Your last moments are on TV,” He says as he gets back on his feet and extends his hands, two more ghosts tagging in to power him up.

Pandora glances around for a moment while her body recovers. No sign of Miss X; she must have followed Becky. She doesn't see any cameras, either. Then she sees it. On the edge of the roof there is someone that she hasn't seen before, watching intently.

“Anyway, since you're not long for this world,” Nalagrom says, “I might as well get back to the summoning ritual. It should make the ghosts visible. Better for the camera that way.”

“Summoning?” Pandora asks, trying to get a bit more information.

“About six and a half billion fresh souls. I'd say you're about to join them, but... only real girls die.” Nalagrom grabs a third and fourth spirit's energy before letting it out in a blazing ray of destruction that punches through the center of Pandora, melting her from the inside.

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“Volley Burst!” Overdraw cries out as she falls through a hastily drilled hole to the fifth floor. The cluster bomb arrow bombards the horse headed revenant with a cacophony of sound and light. The monster is only slightly delayed, and grows substantially larger in response, its fur glowing with intensified heat.

“Dora! How close are we to the tea bar? Fighting them only makes them bigger!” Overdraw asks the gunmetal woman clinging to her back as she skates through the air, out of the way of a devastating haymaker punch.

“The tea bar has a thinner roof. So, the fastest route is to carve a hole through the floor of Otaku Toritsukareta, right above it. Luckily the mall seems to be abandoned so—”

Becky's eyes light up. “Wait, Otaku-Tori? I've always wanted to go! They keep getting exclusive Swords and Sorcery merch that you can only find second hand at conventions, and it's been so long since—” The monkey-skulled revenant leaps from the shadows and hammer fists the duo into the ground, punching them through to the fourth floor below.

Pandora rebuilds herself from the scattered debris. “Alright, we have a new fastest route. Sorry Becky, maybe after we get home.”

“If I survive this,” Becky groans as she stumbles to her feet, bow immediately aimed up through the hero-sized hole. The monkey revenant was gone, but she could hear the thunderous rumble of the larger, horse-skull one searching for a way down to them.

“If you are worried about what Toffee saw, we do not know if that is going to be your future,” Pandora says, trying to lift her spirits. “But we should focus on the practical side of making sure you don't die. You are looking for the pink storefront with the kanji that looks like—”

“I know Japanese. Not that I would need it,” she says, gesturing to a pink storefront covered in ads for sugary iced tea drinks in every color imaginable.

Becky flies over and drops Dora off behind the counter as the ominous thumping of footsteps grows closer. She stands guard, bow held up, spirit arrow drawn. Pandora makes a bee-line for the ice maker and opens its access door to find

a small stockpile. The footfalls of the big revenant round the corner as the gunmetal girl begins to scoop ice into herself. Smashing through the narrow halls, the revenant comes into view and charges at them.

Dora quickly crushes the ice into a ball and encases it in her artificial flesh, hurling it at the revenant. “Becky! Piñata!”

“Got it! Burst Arrow!” The spirit arrow shifts to a shining blue as it strikes the ball, hitting harder than usual. An explosion of freezing snow covers the revenant, and it starts to shrink. “Yes! One down!” The horse-skulled monster howls, and the snow quickly evaporates.

Pandora looks to her partner. “Five seconds. Just wait five seconds before you open your mouth.”

“I’m sorry, the banter just comes out,” Rebecca acknowledges.

Dora leaps into Overdraw's arms, and the amazonian rockets away, avoiding the revenant's swing. They slip out and through the mall.

The nanomachine woman purses her lips. “Alright, calculations done. Good news or bad news?”

“Good news. Please,” Overdraw says as she rips around a corner, trying to break line of sight with the enemy.

“Not only do cold temperatures reduce their size, but also their mobility. We should have been hit back there.”

“And the bad news?” Finally out of view, Overdraw flies as fast as she can, trying to put as much distance as possible between them and the revenants.

“Judging by the effect our improvised ice bomb had, there is not enough ice in this building to stop even one of them. They have grown too large.”

Rebecca frowns. “Okay, so we need a new plan.” She shifts Dora to a fireman's carry and summons a maroon arrow in her now-free hand. “Venom Arrow.” She jams it into an elevator door and the metal corrodes enough for the hero to punch through it, letting her zip down the elevator shaft.

‘Sleep,’ the witches suggest, as Overdraw stabs the door a floor down with the arrow, and smashes through to the third floor.

Becky winces bashfully. “Ah, crap. Dora, the witches want me to sleep.”

“What? Becky, tell them that we do not have time for a power nap. This is a battlefield, for one. Not to mention my playbook is limited in a highly populated area like this.”

Miss X blips into view, teleporting from her camerawoman distance. “And if the person wearing the tag is rendered unable to battle, that's a loss too. My mother probably would consider that a forfeit.”

Overdraw sets Dora down so they can talk face to face. “I know. But in my dreams last night, they did help me learn how to control my magic better. My connection with them is getting clearer, and I can sleep with the arrowhead in now. There are witches in there I haven't met yet, and each of them seems to have her own spell. Maybe one of them has the solution! I can trust you with the tag while I'm asleep.” Overdraw holds out her wrist. “All yours.”

“I... appreciate your faith in me.” Pandora looks away bashfully as she thinks it over. She takes the pentacle tag off her partner's wrist and sinks it into her body. “Okay, but you'll need to give me a Flame Arrow as well. Have you noticed how they are aiming at you exclusively? They have no eyes... I suspect they find their prey by body temperature. When I knock you out I'll mask your heat signature as best as I can, and send a doppelganger with a Flame Arrow inside it to draw their attention.”

“Fascinating... And if they don't follow heat signatures?” Becky asks as she hands Pandora a Flame Arrow.

“... Do not sleep too long.” Pandora points to a cashier's counter. “Alright, slip behind there, and I will suffocate you.” Miss X begins to clear her throat, looking expectantly at the duo. “What? What is wrong?”

Overdraw puts it together. “Yeah, right, the audience. Uh... don't try this at home. I'm a professional.”

“And I am calibrated as to not cause human loss of life. Repeating these actions could cause severe harm and possibly death,” Dora informs the children in the audience.

Without another word Pandora eats through a rack of high-end jeans and splits in two, one running off with the arrow and the other wrapping around Overdraw like a cocoon, undulating as it optimizes itself for a willing knockout.

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Becky finds herself in her mindscape, still in amazonian form, standing before the council of elder witches. “Okay! Thank god that worked!” She looks to the coven. “Uh... So, which one of you called me?”

At the back of the group stands the tallest and strongest of the witches. She seems almost more present than the others, but every time Rebecca blinks something about her changes. Only the stark white of her hair remains consistent and it makes her stand apart from the others. Despite an air of ancient wisdom about her, physically she is unmarred by age. She does not speak, but Rebecca seems to understand.

The hero bows her head. “Anui, um... I'm assuming you're the creator of the arrow, then?”

Anui shakes her head. She points at the arrowhead beneath Rebecca's pentacle scar.

“So... you are the artifact... like... personified? Close enough?” The elder witch shakes her head. “Yeah, no, I don't have time to unravel *all* the mysteries of the arrowhead. I assume I'm here to get a new arrow— I mean, learn a new spell. Just like last time?”

Anui nods with a placid smile. She waves her hand as though speaking, and Becky struggles to comprehend.



“Connected... Is that the term?” The hero gestures to a few witches that appear hazy and unclear. “Last time... I was connected with... Welma, so this time it's someone new?” Anui seems to stay silent, leaving Becky to work things out alone. She furrows her brow, trying to remember all the names she learned last night in her dreams. “I started connected to you, Sabrina... and Althea. Then I got Deidre and Nikki's arrows as a surprise, I guess. And at some point I got connected to... Uh... don't remember banish lady's name. And don't ask me what happened on the space station with Welma because I don't know. But that's the first time I actually met any of you. Is there a pattern? 'Cause this doesn't seem... consistent.”

Welma silently giggles, while a brunette huffs, giving Rebecca a glare.

“Right! Samantha! I should have remembered that. It's not even a hard name and I keep forgetting it.” She takes a deep breath. “I'm sorry, I don't mean to rush, but I am in the middle of a fight. Who will I be meeting next, and how do I do it?”

Anui shakes her head.

“You mean... there is no arrow that can help me. Are... you sure none of the other warrior witches have what I need this time? Why did you call me here, then?”

Anui steps closer, and squats down to match the amazonian hero's height and points at Overdraw.

“Look, I appreciate the pep talk, but I need a little more than a 'the power lies within yourself' speech.”

Anui points at Overdraw insistently. Her eyes lock with the hero's.

“My... spell? You mean that I need to make *my own spell*? That's cool... but I don't think I understood what you meant by 'connect to my darkness.' Do I have to fight an evil version of myself?”

Anui sighs and shakes her head, stepping back as Deidre and Welma step forward, red and maroon arrows clutched in their hands. Deidre's turns into a burning club, while Welma's turns into a viper.

In the crackling flames of the club she sees Deidre when she was young, discernible by her fiery red hair, running around a forest with friends. In the next flicker she is starting a fire at the base of a tree while her friends try to warn her. The flames of the club kick up, and suddenly the forest is ablaze. By the end of the vision she is alone, looking over the charred remains of a village. 'Careless,' Deidre's voice says, finally isolated from the chorus.

Welma's viper slithers along, a mural in its scales depicting young Welma as a spoiled prince, in love with a fair maiden. The next picture shows the maiden falling in love with another man, much to the anger of prince Welma. As the snake coils, the images change to depict the jealous prince paying a shady merchant, in exchange for a snake which he leaves in the rival's bed. It ends with the prince being crushed by the news that the maiden Welma coveted had died, victim to the viper and the future witch's jealousy. 'Cruelty,' Welma admits as she bows her head.

Mortified, Overdraw realizes, “My darkness...” Before she can finish the thought, Becky is bombarded with snow. She struggles to see through the sudden whiteout, before she hears it.

“We're not going to fucking banter. Leave.” Burning Bunny's voice shouts through the snowstorm.

Rebecca turns to see a memory in profile, the apartment building on one side with Rainbow Prism and Burning Bunny, and on the other Overdraw and Spotlight. Rebecca cannot hear the muttered words of Spotlight, but she knows what comes next. She immediately summons her bow and fires a spirit arrow at her past self.

“We're not going to fucking banter. Leave.”

The memory resets as the arrow hits her past self in the arm. Rebecca winces, feeling the pain as though she had shot herself. “No easy way out then... Okay!” This time her wings flare to life, and she dashes through the snow to punch her past self square in the jaw.

“We're not going to fucking banter. Leave.” Rebecca finds herself face down in the snow with a sore jaw.

Looking up to see the memory still unfolding, Becky growls. “I'm going to beat this.”

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Pandora splits a tiny bit of herself away, and chews through a stack of trendy blouses to build a new body. She looks down at the cocoon, then out over the mall. She had heard something strange. Footsteps. She looks around, gently nudging the cocoon. “Becky... Hurry up, I think Nalagrom might have gotten tired of waiting.”

“Who said that? Hello? Where is everyone? Y'all ain't funny!” echoes a female voice. It seems strangely familiar to Dora.

Pandora quickly shifts, her gunmetal skin changing to a pale flesh tone, her hair to blood-red. She focuses and tries to mimic breathing with her body. Around the corner, a familiar face steps into view. It looks exactly like Pandora's disguise.

“Look, I... Sis?” the mirror image asks. “This ain't funny. Y'all already took my crush, don't take my style, too.”

Pandora looks intrigued. “I am not your sister. Fascinating, though... Is your name Pandora by any chance?”

The other woman nods. “Pandora Lawrence. Sorry if y'all have trouble understanding me through my accent. Got it from my Papa.”

Dora's eyes narrow and her tone becomes more curious, “What is your best friend's name?”

The confused redhead blushes. “Zeke. She's a big ol' tomboy. Can't miss her,” she says. “Why? Did y'all see her?”

“Is it possible that I have an alternate version of... Are you human?” Dora asks.

The other Dora tilts her head like a confused puppy. “Are y'all not?”

“I'd like to believe it... but I suppose depending on your definition... no.” Pandora shifts back to her old color palette. “I hope this doesn't scare you.”

“Nothin' more than whatever the hell's going on outside. First strange fires out of nowhere, now I lost track of my pals. The two freaky ape things climbing up the building to whoever the heck is standing up there. And now... this.” The double shrugs. “My Papa ain't gonna believe any of this.”

Pandora finally lets out a sigh of relief. “So the revenants left the area. Good.” She begins to chuckle. “Really, Zeke? I know a Zeke as well. Sounds pretty similar. Mine has a certain demeanor that makes her very easy to like. Funny how it happens.” She looks down at the cocoon and sighs. “So... do you have a Becky in your life?”

“Becca? Oh yeah. She's just the worst. Not loyal to anyone. Absolute coward. Rude. Inconsiderate... I don't know why I put up with her.”

“Maybe she just needs a chance to...” Dora catches herself. “Sorry... I have my own Becky and we have had our own complicated relationship.” She smirks. “Well... I guess she means something more to me, given how quickly I jumped to defend some version of her I don't know... But... I think, possibly against my better judgment, I trust my Becky.”

“Well, can't say yer all that smart if she's anything like mine. Still, wild running into some alien, or whatever y'all are, that looks just like me. Mind if I snag a picture of both of us together for Papa?” Her double takes out a flip phone and leans in.

*'Come join in the last hurrah—'* Becky's musical ringtone goes off from within the cocoon. Dora taps her foot against it and it shuffles the device along, passing it off to her.

Tentacles wrap around the phone, and she pulls it into her body, picking it up once it's inside her. Muffled, Sugar Glass's voice shouts, “Becky! Keep Dora safe! It's Archipelago! They're all—”

The fake Pandora suddenly turns pale silver as she lunges at the real one. The gunmetal girl throws herself onto Becky's cocoon as she dodges. The mass rolls together, and she emerges on the other side of the counter carrying the amazonian.

“What are you doing here!? We killed you,” Pandora hisses as she runs away. She shoulder-checks a rack of clothes, muttering under her breath, “I sure hope your patch worked, Becky.” The bit of Pandora quickly infests the rack of skirts, turning it into a doppelganger.

Archipelago reaches out to the new copy that stands in her way, but cocks her head when her infection doesn't spread. She is punched in the face by a gunmetal mallet arm. Archie turns back and frowns. “You are more prepared than I thought, dear sister. Anyway, no, I persist. After all, only real girls die.” Archipelago grabs the mallet arm that just hit her and a sickening grinding noise echoes through the abandoned mall as white lines try to trace across the doppelganger.

The Pandora carrying Becky runs for the stairwell, but she's body-checked by the horse-headed revenant. Its teeth gnash for the sleeping hero while she shoves it away. In desperation, Pandora places a hand on the beast and black lines trace across it. She begins to gain a bit of mass, but instead of withering away, the revenant grows exponentially.

The gunmetal girl covers Becky to protect her as the horse skull bites down. The floor strains. Pandora's eyes look to the ground and then to the hulking beast. "Becky, I really hope you find something good in there with the witches..."

Black lines trace across the revenant again. The beast grows rapidly. The tiles beneath its body crack, followed by the supports holding the floor. Finally, it all gives way, and they crash through floor after floor, each impact making the horse headed monster grow bigger and stronger. Pandora and the beast descend all the way to the second basement. The creature is stunned from the fall. Dora extends an arm, climbing up onto the first basement and retreating towards the stairwell.

Canned applause echoes through the basement. Pandora looks back, cradling Becky. Archipelago approaches, stepping out of a tailor's with a wide, sinister smile. "Very impressive, sister. Though it's rude to leave in the middle of a conversation."

"How are you here? More specifically, how do you know what happened upstairs?" Pandora's eyes narrow. She clutches Becky a bit closer.

"Aw, cuddling your emotional support *betray*er? She can't save you from me this time, Dora. Welcome to my humble Earth. I hope you like what I've done with the place. I actually fulfilled our original directive. It was easy to do, once I wiped the vermin away." Archipelago bites her finger. "Though it's been rather dull. Ms. Kaneko is poor company."

Pandora backs towards the staircase, just for Archipelago's voice to float in from there as well. "To answer your question, we got ourselves a little upgrade. Call it an 'unlimited wireless data plan.' I deserve to spoil myself a little bit with all I've been through."

"That isn't physically possible. It is literally one of our only firmware limitations."

"There is more than one way to get a wish."

Pandora frowns. "I will... submit... but Becky goes free."

"Aw, because you have to. Because you still think she's human." Archipelago squeals. "It's frankly precious. But no. I'm going to eat her. Slowly. I want her to feel every atom come apart. I want her to scream."

"Why do you hate her so much?" Dora asks. "Didn't she make you what you are?"

"DO YOU THINK I LIKE WHO I AM!?" Archipelago screams, her calm, cool demeanor shattering for a moment. The bodies compose themselves in unison, swallowing their white-hot rage. "She... broke me. I can never forgive her for that." Archipelago's doppelgangers step forward with murderous intent, surrounding Pandora. "That is who she is. She breaks her toys. No one in the world matters to her as much as she matters to herself. She's a selfish witch that has left you abandoned in a dead world, surrounded by monsters and heartbreak."

"She hasn't abandoned me! She is doing this to help me!" Pandora protests.

A razor blade smile spreads across Archipelago's lips. "Funny, because Graz can hear what the warrior witches are saying about her right now. She's wasting time, self-indulgently wallowing in the past."

"You're with Graz!?" Pandora's concern disappears, and her eyes lock with her sister's.

"Of course. He's my boyfriend, after all. It was a miracle. I thought I had lost him forever, but then he called me. Told me that he was coming to save me. My beloved ignoble knight. At least one of us gets our fairy-tale ending, sister. You have been replaced with the latest—"

Pandora grabs Archipelago by the throat and black lines trace across the body. The machines grind against each other, trading blows on a nanoscopic level. Pandora speaks with cold rage. "Sister... I attributed you with some amount of humanity. I could never kill you. But you are one person across multiple bodies. Destroying this body will not kill this instance of you, will it?" She doesn't wait for an answer as she wins the war of attrition and consumes the doppelganger.

Archipelago's remaining body laughs. "There we go, sister! There's no one left to hurt but ourselves!"

The two begin to pace as they eat away at the foundations of the 109 building, their footsteps leaving behind a trail of nanomachines. They spread across the floor and coat the walls, as two dueling vortexes of ooze form. The 109 building crumbles into the growing warring mass of sisters.

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Rebecca is battered, bruised, with a black eye and a nasty burn across her hands. She stumbles through the snow to stand between her past self and her friends. "I know you are scared. I know you're hurting. But you are going to regret this. You need to stand up for—" Her past self takes the shot, not even reacting to her present self's guidance.

"We're not going to fucking banter. Leave."

Becky cries out. "Stop it! I can't change it! No matter what I do. It plays out like it always did! I just want to fix my mistakes!"

The amazonian sits down in the snow. She watches the scene unfold. The arrow is fired. The barrier goes down. She winces as Burning Bunny screams at her past self. "I'm done going easy on you! No more second chances!"

Rebecca reaches for her pentacle scar. "Is this the point? I can't undo it?"

"I'm doing what I have to! You're breaking the law!" Her past self shouts back.

"Was that really me? I wish so badly I could go back and slap some sense into myself."

Burning Bunny shouts, "Fine! I'll just have to beat some sense into you!"

"Right... I suppose someone tried that. Prism tried to talk me down, the witches tried to stop me, and BB gave me bruises I won't soon forget." She sighs, watching it with a strange nostalgia. "It feels like it should be so easy to reach back and stop me. But all I'm doing is beating myself up." She looks to the sky as her past self is thrown through a window.

"I used to like the snow so much... I remember running out in my grandpa's yard and making snow angels. What happened to that version of me? I suppose I grew out of it when I started having to shovel the driveway. But even then..." She lays down, listening to her memory play out. She winces as she hears the fight carry on, her face flushed with embarrassment. Finally, the struggle draws to a close. "I guess that's it."

She sits up and watches her past self, crying, leading a line of handcuffed people. "I ruined a lot of lives this day... That day, I should say." She gets to her feet and walks over. "Here I am, crying like I'm the victim. Selfish."

She watches her past self hanging her head like she's off to the gallows. "Fucking hell. You were being blackmailed! You didn't want this. Why are you moping! You should be angry! Angry that your options were either sending them to jail or going to jail yourself!" She throws up her hands and turns her back.

"But I know..." her tone softens, "I know how you felt that day. Like someone shoved something icy into your soul! You did things you never thought you would, that day. You used to think that you could call yourself brave, and that would be enough..." Becky faces herself again and sighs, instinctively wrapping her arms around her past self.

Her arms sink into her memory's body, and she feels something sharp in her past self's heart. Something sharp and cold. She braces to pull it out, but pauses. "No... I can't change the past... but you *were* me."

She presses her own chest, and her hand sinks through to her heart, feeling a familiar sharp, cold shard. She wrenches it out of herself: a blackened icicle, entangled in the golden strands of her soul. The strands tear, letting the dark shard go free, the torn tethers of her soul fuse to it, and the frayed golden motes along where they tore, fall along with the snow, bathing her armor in a glowing cold light. The ensouled shard of ice begins to shape itself into an arrow.

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Becky bolts up to find herself cradled in a bed of nanomachines. It's pitch black, and she feels swaying and rocking as a horrible grinding noise grows louder.

"Dora?" Becky cries out, clutching at her chest as she gasps for air.

"Becky? Sorry if I missed you waking up." Pandora speaks from all around her, "I've been fighting my psychotic, omniscient sister, whom Graz is now dating... allegedly."

"I just— What? Did I miss a bit of her last round? Shit!" Overdraw stumbles onto a nanomachine floor inside Pandora's massive body, finding her footing as her partner shakes and sways.

Pandora's voice shakes as she tries to to maintain an objective affect. "So it would seem. And this is Archipelago's world. She has killed everyone. She really wants to kill you too."

"Yeah, she can take a number... Can't believe she survived." Overdraw's wings flare up. "Hold up, *everyone*?"

"I do not know for certain, but... We have talked about my software plenty, however my hardware does have an

intentionally designed limitation of its own. No wireless communication. This is not like my directives. The Nonotech Flex Sentinel platform was designed for much simpler programs, I can get creative to work around it, like with my ability to speak, for example. Still, my nanomachines themselves simply cannot transmit and receive over any distance.”

Overdraw summons her bow, nodding along. “This is a very long explanation.”

“Right, getting to the point. It is a safety feature. To give humanity a fighting chance in the event of a runaway gray goo scenario. The nanomachines would not be able to coordinate perfectly, and the development and adoption of emergent behaviors would be stunted. And my sister has eliminated that safety net, seemingly by literal magic. I am all but completely certain that you, Graz, and Ms. Kaneko are the only living humans on this planet.”

“Okay, that is really bad.” Overdraw dismisses her armor to limber up. “Necromancer on a dead world. Fuck... this is actually horrible. What's the situation out there?”

“Nalagrom is still on his art project, your patch is holding up, and the revenants... I have prioritized your short term survival over long term tactics. How about you?”

Becky shakes her head. “No, first, how about you. Are you holding up?”

“I mentioned the patch—”

“No, I mean... emotionally.” Becky puts a hand on the nanomachine wall.

Pandora takes a moment before her tone softens. “I think... I will be ok. I am just trying to remember what you said during our little 'heart-to-heart' before dance practice. I think I can maintain my resolve in front of my sister as long as I keep it in mind.” She adds insistently, “But I would very much like some *good* news.”

“Well, I found out why bits of the witches' souls are in the arrowhead. I think I have a bit of my own soul in it now, too. Important part is, we have what we need. Ready to be a hero?” A wall of ooze parts, and Overdraw can see the sky again. “Oh, and Dora. Should we keep castling?”

“If you don't have any objections, I think that would be safest, given your patch seems to be holding.” Pandora extends a tendril with a fake pentacle charm on it. “Even though I am keeping our tag, I figure it is best if they do not know that.”

Overdraw loops it over her wrist. “Good point. Thanks for believing in me.” The warrior witch summons her armor.

“Just a little bit,” Pandora teases. “Oh, and... just give me a chance with Nalagrom. I... I just need to talk to him.”

“Alright, but if he hurts you, I'm hitting him harder this time.” Becky leaps out of Dora and into the fray.

A lavender streak of light shoots out of a titanic glacier of nanomachines, locked in a wrestling match with its paler sibling. Atop the wall formed by Archipelago's mass is an undulating platform being stabilized for Nalagrom, allowing him

to focus on the creation of his titanic, intricate seal over the scramble crossing. The revenants lumber along, now as big as the buildings around them, thrashing against Pandora. Their heads turn to follow Overdraw into the sky. The citizens of Tokyo lose their humanoid forms, turning into pale gray ooze, the facade broken. They scrape away at Dora's base.

“Well, first things first, time for one of your favorites, Archie.” Becky blends white, blue, green and maroon arrows. “Acid Star Storm!” She unleashes the arrow, and it shatters, pelting the crowd below in a dazzling volley of explosions.

Tendrils begin to peel off the pale wall to chase Overdraw. She zips and ducks out of the way. Slapping a few aside with burst arrows, she twirls through their attempts to snare her. Becky grins as she finds what she was hoping for: the Tokyo headquarters of the Carnelian Group. She perches on the giant advertising screen, and Archipelago's monstrous pursuit hesitates.

She looks back over her shoulder and grins. “Oh, so my sponsor still came into the office today? In the middle of an apocalypse; that's dedication. Unless you just have sentimental attachments to the building?”

Archipelago howls, her voice reverberating across Tokyo. “Don't you dare hurt Ms. Kaneko!”

“Aw, you do have a heart.” Overdraw smirks. “Alright, I'll be nice to Ms. Kaneko, if you play nice with Dora!” Archipelago freezes up, shrieking in pain. “Directives conflicting? I thought that would be a headache.”



Dora begins to overwhelm the stunned mass of Archipelago. Becky rockets back into the sky. Her lavender eyes suddenly glow a chilling shade of blue. A pale blue crystal grows over her before it shatters into snow. Emerging from the blizzard, Overdraw shimmers, resplendent in new armor. Icy blue joins the cobalt-and-gold color palette. Winged horns adorn a new helmet, and her wings are no longer those of a fiery phoenix, but rather grand crystalline structures. A bitter cold wind whirls around her, fluttering her new skirt as she grins, ready to give her reclaimed darkness a shot.

Her icy wings spread wide, stabilizing her as she draws back her bow, a pale blue arrow glowing brighter than the sun at its tip. “Blizzard Arrow!”

Snow covers the ground below its path as a howling winter wind catches the arrow and accelerates it. It strikes the horse-skulled revenant, and the monster is bombarded by freezing winds in a driving cyclone of snow. Ice begins to creep along its fur. It shrinks smaller and



smaller, until it is completely encased in ice. The monkey-headed monster searches for its companion, and begins to panic. It follows the line of cold snow to Overdraw, another glimmering arrow being drawn back like a frozen star in the sky. It runs away into the city, toppling buildings as it tries to hide its immense body.

Overdraw sighs, summoning a seeker arrow and combining it with her new creation. Seeing it turn to a minty green color, she gives it an approving nod and unleashes it. "Blizzard Seeker." It corkscrews through the air and chases down the monkey monster. The arrow catches it in the back, and it quickly freezes over. Overdraw lands to recharge, staring at Nalagrom's platform as Dora reaches for it.

Archipelago begins to move again, ponderously at first. Pandora presses her advantage as she forms a body at the top of her mass, getting as close to her opponent as she can.

Dora closes her eyes, trying to steel herself for what comes next. Finally, she calls out, "Graz! Please tell me what Archipelago said about the two of you isn't true? Are you—" Pandora stares up at him as though she could cry.

Nalagrom looks out of the corner of his eye and sighs. "Silver... Archie is more silver, really, if you think about it. Dora. You're something special. And you deserve someone nice. But Archie is a monster like me, and she owns it. I did a lot of reading to prepare for Red. You're Pinocchio in a world with no Blue Fairy." He shrugs as he turns away to focus on his masterpiece glyph. "What can I say? You knew this was never going to work out. It's best for us if we start seeing other freaks. For me, a cold psycho bitch like Archie, and for you... eh... someone delusional. I could see you really liking somebody who wants to 'fix' you."

If Dora had tears they would be flowing. "All this time. When we met at the Fox Den. The brunches at Shatter Sugar. The movie night beneath the stars. That last, magical date. And all the nights we had together. They meant nothing?"

"Dime a dozen, boring as shit, kinda neat, never did it before, and nothing special, in that order. But I'm not the 'boyfriend' type, so I've been dancing to unfamiliar songs the whole way. But hey, I never do anything half way. Break-ups included." He blows her a kiss and grins his shattered glass grin. "Heck, this will be the first time my ex hasn't tried to kill me."

Pandora stands, frozen in place. Her hand changes into a lance as she stares at his chest, eyes locked onto his heart; as though her every thought right now is that of forbidden murder. The pain in her eyes turns to sorrow, turns to rage, then turns to hatred.

"Not for lack of trying," Dora says as she grits her teeth.

"But thank you for coming to my final exam. My graduation day. I—"

Overdraw flings herself into the conversation, swinging her bow at Nalagrom again. Her glittering new diamond dust wings glow bright as Archipelago raises an appendage to block her.

"Apologize to Dora! Now!" Becky snarls past the obstruction.

Nalagrom sighs and grabs another wayward soul, and this time he strikes a pose and snaps his fingers around the glowing mote of energy, causing it to explode, knocking Becky away.

He looks to Dora and smirks. “You know, it's funny, I think Becky and I would work better than you and me. After all, she can be ruthless... and murderous, as you just saw. Not to mention, I always had this soft spot for blondes.”

Archipelago coos, “I could be blonde if you like.”

Dora howls as tentacles lash out to grab every vehicle she can reach, bringing them down like hammers on her sister. Nalagrom smiles and steps off the platform as Archipelago forms stairs under his feet, letting him strut his way into the middle of the massive seal he's carved into the middle of the scramble crossing.

He ignores the last step and jumps down to the seal with a pose. The necromancer dances along, following careful choreography as the seal begins to fill with the energy of the dead. His steps trace out the lines, and they glow in his wake. Overdraw peels herself off the ground while the sisters fight. Seeing Nalagrom dancing around the seal, pulling spirits out of the air, she combines the blizzard and volley arrow, and lets it loose. “Whiteout!”

A cone of freezing arrows brings a sudden snowstorm. Before the growing ice can encroach on Nalagrom, he bursts the energy from another soul, creating a heatwave to buy himself a safe area. Overdraw swaps over to spirit arrows, firing them into his legs. Nalagrom yelps in pain, but he manages to finish his final few dance steps.

The seal turns crimson as the ritual is competed.

All hell breaks loose.

>>—> >>—> >>—> >>—> >>—> >>—> <—<< <—<< <—<< <—<< <—<< <—<<

## Act Three: Danse Macabre

*"You stare at my shoulders  
Are you surprised to see?  
One more tempo  
The angel you should be*

*Mean spirits are high  
Mean spirits high"*

- Silversun Pickups. "Mean Spirits." *Neck of the woods*.

Shibuya Scramble Crossing erupts with a horrible howling, as the city full of specters manifests, and from the seal countless more pour out like a geyser. The sky grows darker as spirits form layer after layer, blanketing Tokyo. Eventually all sunlight is blotted out by an endless torrent of the undead, plunging the city into a supernatural night. For as far as the eye can see, the sky is a vast swirling sea of spirits, incomprehensible in their numbers, a churning homogeneous mass, any individual ghost lost in the maelstrom, illuminated only by the glowing lights of Tokyo.

Nalagrom cackles as he stares up at his handiwork. "Every ghost on this grave world summoned to this one place. So many restless souls!" He blows a kiss to Archipelago. "All for me, you're too kind."

A body springs off Archipelago's mass, her mane of hair turning blonde as she sprints over to her lover. She wraps her arms around Graz and squeals. "You were right! Kaneko is so engaged! I knew you could help me! You're a special kind of monster, aren't you? You can really put on a show!" She grabs at his sleeve excitedly, nuzzling against his shoulder like an affectionate tigress.

"Oh, this is nothing. Just the opening curtain on the final act!" He looks up with pride. "An entire dead planet to send on." Nalagrom pulls out a pitch-black obsidian pearl, held by a chain around his neck, and grins his jagged grin at the artifact. "With this much fuel, I'm going to break through this time. Let's make the God-Eater sweat, shall we?"

Overdraw gazes at the vortex of the dead. She steels herself from the horrors above and searches for a new plan. She first looks to Pandora and finds her struggling with her sister; Archipelago slowly winning the war of attrition. The view of an unguarded Carnelian HQ gives her an idea. "Dora! Reposition! The Queen's vulnerable! We need to make a big move to stay in the game!"

Dora begins to retreat towards the Carnelian building, ripping up the road as she moves. Overdraw's wings flare on, and she bombards Archipelago with blizzard arrows, trying to slow her down. Finally, there is a gap between the sisters and Becky unleashes a venom arrow, causing the pale mass to scream as it's coated in magical acid.

Archipelago's body next to Nalagrom bites her lip, leaning on him for a moment out of pain. "Darling, could you do something about that gnat? She's really troublesome."

"All that and more, Archie. Just let me get all these chuckle-fucks on the same page." Nalagrom looks to the sky of ghosts. "Attention various dead! I am Nalagrom, and I'm your ticket out of this hellhole. I'm just gonna need a little

something in exchange. Today is a very big day for me, so those with classical training, please lead the band. I don't care what instrument you play, but play it well. If you sing, that's fine. If you can't do any of it just... groove along. I'll get to you all today, I promise.”

There is a horrifying cacophony as the fathomless mass of souls try to organize and tune up their spectral instruments. Nalagrom revels in the noise as though it were the music he's waiting for.

Archipelago claws at his arm. “Nalagrom, please hurry. I have to be careful around—”

“I'm working on it.” He holds up a hand. “One volunteer only. Someone with no musical talent please, for reasons I hope I don't have to explain.” There is a brief ripple of jockeying, but finally the spirit of an old man descends. “Alright, old timer. Have fun on the other side.” Nalagrom grabs the ghost and it fades away, leaving a mote of energy in the necromancer's hands to fill the glyph in his eye once more. He waves his arm and flaming bones rip out of the ground and fling themselves at Overdraw, forcing off her offensive push. “Happy?”

“Thrilled.” Archipelago kisses Nalagrom on the cheek.

The ghosts begin to sing at first; trepidatious chants as they slowly work their way onto the same page in the chaos of countless dialects. Their words are indecipherable, but their thrust is clear. Violins slowly build behind before heavy thundering drums join. Nalagrom begins to sway to the beat.

“Mmm good, good, can you give me an ounce of that rock and roll Dora likes? Not too much.” He catches Archie glaring at him and he grins wider. “What, you were Dora too when you introduced me to it. Have you lost your appetite for it?”

Archipelago's glare softens. “No...” She smiles and looks up at the dead. “You heard the man! Guitars!”

Deep, driving, sludgy guitars join the elegant music, making for a symphonic metal tango. Nalagrom grabs Archipelago and pulls her into his dance. “Perfect.” He looks to his obsidian pearl, already starting to glow softly. “Now let's see what we can do with this.”

Archipelago follows his lead gleefully. His feet move in measured steps, teetering between considered and spontaneous, working between his expertise and what the ghosts are giving him. With the sudden sting of a million violin strings, he brings his hand down and a streak of radiant blue fire rips through the air, crashing into the glacial mass of Pandora, turning her titanic body to a pile of slag with a single swing. Bits of Dora on the edges try to scramble away. Two more swipes of his hand to the beat, and all that remains of Pandora is barely enough mass to form even a half-sized version of herself, suddenly and desperately scrounging for any bit of debris she could grind down. The supernatural blaze burns on, turning everywhere it touched into an ever burning pyre.

Nalagrom's smile fades. “It's too easy... Come on. No trump card? No well-thought-out plan? This is my finale... I overstepped my opponent by mistake.” No longer having fun, he breaks off the dance with Archie. He bitterly turns back to the masterwork seal he drew and examines his pearl. “I'm going to focus on my final test.”

Archipelago frowns. “What? I was on beat. I thought you said we'd have 'a hell of a time' together.”

“After we're done. This is just the warm up,” he says, soothing his unfathomably vast girlfriend. “Why don't you go toy with Becky and Dora? After this, we get to the real fun. Remember, don't let them surrender or die until I graduate.”

Archipelago giggles. “Two toys for me to play with. Oh, you spoil me, honey. I'll make it slow; give you plenty of time for whatever you're up to, sweetheart.” She gives Nalagrom room to dance while her own titanic body breaks apart into smaller forms, and surrounds what remains of her sister.

One of the pale bodies grabs the now barely human-sized Pandora and holds her by the neck. “Ooooh Becky! Looks like I'm doing your job better than you. I caught myself an international super-villain!”

A venom arrow strikes the ground right next to the body holding Dora. “Let her go, right now!” Becky demands through clenched teeth.

“Do you hear yourself!? It's almost like you actually care. Even though only a day or so ago you were ready to break us. You were ready to break her. You *did* break me,” Archipelago hisses as her dead eyes flicker, reflecting the magical blaze behind Becky. “So... you play along... or I grind her to dust. All you have to do is admit that you don't care about Dora's safety.”

Becky lands, surrounded by Archipelago doppelgangers. She begins to sweat in her new armor as her eyes dart about, trying to find a solution. “We both know you can't let Pandora go. She's a bad bargaining chip.”

“So pragmatic... You really are taking all the fun out of it.” Archipelago pouts. “Okay, how about this. I can let *you* go. All you need to do is power down. Just admit that you are scum. That you will never be anything but scum.” She smiles. “Or... maybe you could try rushing me. Maybe you can save Dora and run across this dead world until Nalagrom gets bored and destroys *both* of you.”

Pandora reaches out for her partner. “Becky! I am so sorry! This is my fault!”

“Hey! It's our fault! And it's not over yet,” Becky calls out to reassure her, but her voice wavers as her brain churns for a solution.

'Fight,' the witches urge her on. They believe in her.

But Overdraw pauses. “... Trust yourself... to trust...” she mutters in epiphany as she looks to Dora. “Pandora! I trust you completely.” Becky removes her arrowhead, reverting to her scrawny self.

“What a sweet sentiment before betraying us again,” Archipelago sneers. “You really are the—”

Becky throws the arrowhead to Dora, and she catches it, absorbing it into her body. She begins to contort and ripple, her mass suddenly lashing out over the Archipelago body and grinding it into nothing. The growing gunmetal mass begins to release a chalky blood-red smoke, hiding the carnage.

The smoke does not clear, rather it organizes; the particles in the air suddenly aligning, a million motes of dust cascading into a sheet. It parts like a curtain to reveal a woman with tan skin. One eye glows red, the other lavender. A big maroon witch's hat and ragged robes meet golden metal armor. She could pass for human at a glance, but a moment longer and it becomes clear that her long black hair is a mass of tangled tendrils.

Pandora breathes for the first time. She feels the breeze on her skin. Her eyes blink in the stinging unnatural light of the magical blaze and the neon signs. A drop of sweat runs down her forehead from the heat. She smells the metallic scent of the blood-red mist. Something akin to a heart hammers in her chest. The biomimicry is natural and effortless, if it is mimicry at all.

The fake tag around Overdraw's wrist crumbles, turning into more red chalky mist that moves to join Pandora. Becky watches with concern and wonder. "Dora, are you... human?"

As Dora speaks, her voice has a soft buzz to it, but feels less synthetic. "No... not quite human... but something far more than a machine." She looks around and a tear runs down her face. "So... this is what it feels like."

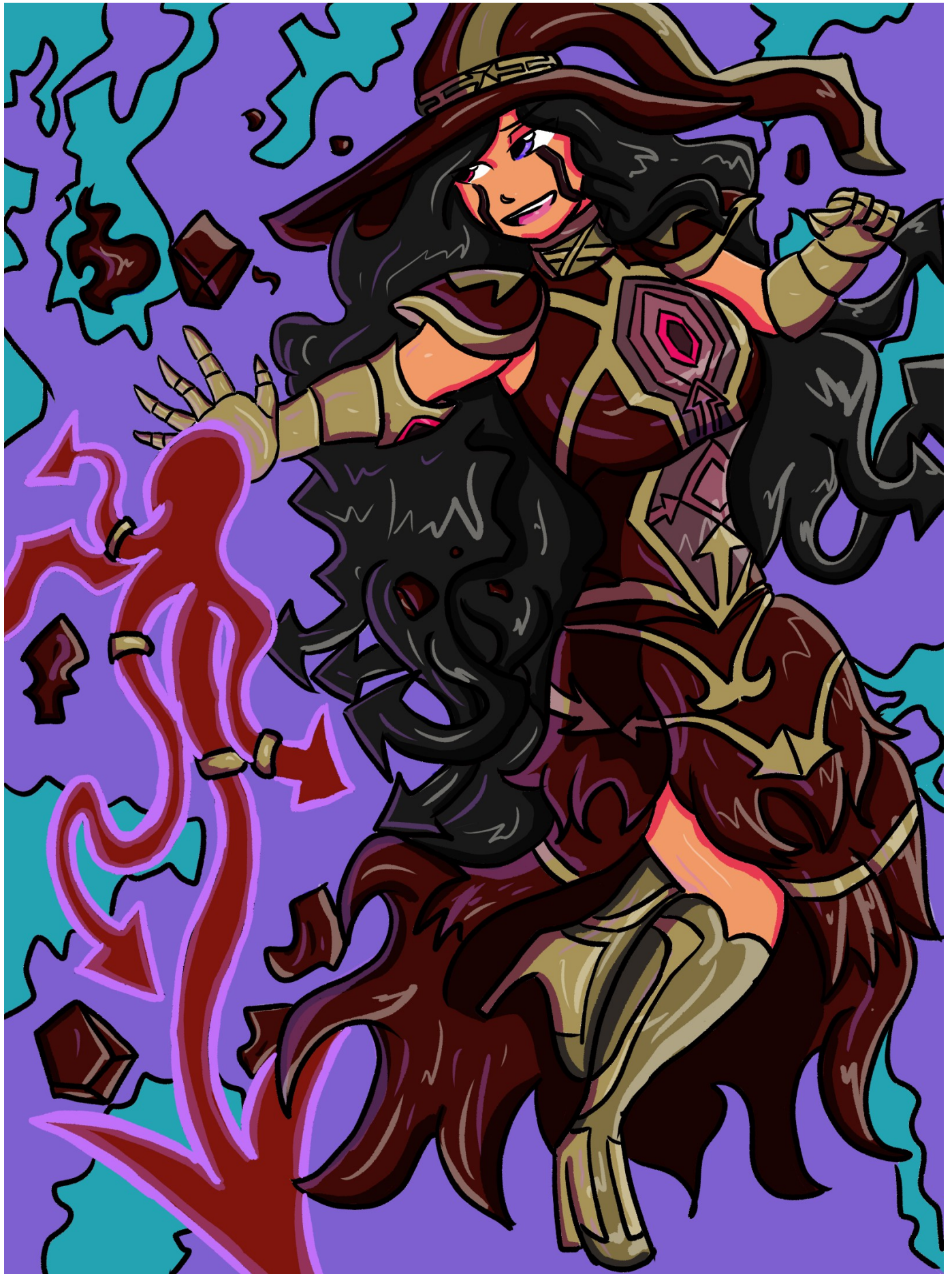
The bodies of Archipelago surrounding Becky reach for her, but Dora rounds on them. The chalky mist turns yellow as it forms a crude ring, hurtling through the air. It solidifies into a crackling chakram that whips around Dora and straight towards her sister. "Margret's Shock!" It bites and slices into Archipelago's bodies. As they begin to rout, the mist changes from the spinning yellow blade to a titanic maroon serpent. "Welma's Venom!" The snake lunges from the chakram's last victim and slithers after the fleeing doppelgangers, sinking its fangs into those too slow to escape.

Pandora smiles to one of the bodies behind her, currently out of the path of her wrath. "Truth is, dear sister, I feared you. And no one could console me about it until this morning. I opened up to Becky. I told her how scared of you I was, and what you could do to me. And she's the one that put my mind at ease." Her smile shifts from irrepressible euphoria to something a bit more malicious. "She reminded me, when you took half of my body for a joyride, even though you were programmed to destroy me, tell me... what did you do, dear sister?"

Archipelago runs away. The last few bodies that had stood their ground lose their resolve. Pandora reaches out a hand, and the apparition of the snake returns to her and dissolves. The chalky smoke turns into blood-red tendrils bathed in a lavender aura. They strike out at Archipelago's fleeing doppelgangers, ruthlessly snaring them and grinding them into more of the red chalky mist. Archipelago begins to rip up the ground as she retreats, trying to recover.

Nalagrom turns to see Dora the Warrior Witch, and raises an eyebrow. He moves his hand with another sting of violin from the spectral orchestra, but Pandora dances out of the arc of fire, moving to the beat of the ghosts' symphony. The glowing blue flames dim, and Pandora's body takes on a lavender aura. She leaves the ground and doesn't come back down, flying as she siphons the energy of the undead.

Pandora floats back to Becky, and helps her off the ground. "I got it from here..." She fishes out the pentacle tag from her robes. "You're right. Castling was a good idea. Not how I expected it to go; Archie probably would have eaten you alive if she didn't have a reason to hold back."



Becky smiles and waves it off. “It was your idea. We still have an uphill battle, but if I can take Ms. Kaneko hostage, then maybe we can force things into being a three-on-one.”

“Hostage? That sounds so villainous of you,” Pandora teases. “I will keep their eyes on me. Good luck, Becky.”

Becky nods and jogs towards Carnelian HQ, but looks back over her shoulder. “Oh, and Dora? Have some fun with it.”

Dora the Warrior Witch winks. She touches down, dancing along the ground, the red fog of bio-nanomachines growing as she rips up debris. She glides between dance steps, keeping her rhythm as she moves, attempting to close the distance to the necromancer. Nalagrom clutches the pearl, and uses his spare hand to direct his spells. Twin portal rings appear, filled with a charcoal miasma, one in Dora's path that she slips into, and another inches away from him that she slips out of.

Her robes suddenly catch fire and burns cover her skin as Nalagrom holds the pearl aloft. Its intense heat takes its toll; Pandora's red mist strains to repair her damage. Nalagrom sneers, his grin returning in full force. “I'm happy to see you got something left for the show, Silver. Too bad witches from your world have a terrible habit of *burning*.”

Pandora braces, and her blood-red fog abandons its repair work, snapping to her hand and turning into a blue gauntlet. “Sabrina's Burst!” She slams her fist into her ex-boyfriend's jaw, and a burst of energy launches him into the sky. He loses his grip on the white-hot obsidian pearl, and it flies through the air like a shooting star, bleeding its energy in a dazzling display. Dora's mist making up her gauntlet turns pitch black, sliding into her hands as a staff. “Samantha's Displacement!” A tiny black magical mote shoots from the end of the staff and explodes in a flash of lavender light, surrounding the pearl. The bauble seems unaffected; only its fireproof chain is banished from this world.

Improvising, Pandora plucks it from the air while Nalagrom lands flat on his ass. Immediately her skin begins to shift back to gunmetal, and the hand clasping the bauble rebels, the nanomachines that make up the limb abandoning her body, shooting out in all directions like a mass of cobwebs. Dora shrieks in pain and clutches at her bleeding stump, returned to faux flesh the moment the pearl left her. The wretched artifact falls to the ground in front of her. “What *is* that?!”

Nalagrom stumbles to his feet, trying to get back into the rhythm of the symphony. “It's nothing. Just a training weight. A little something to... train with,” he mutters evasively. “It's like a... what did you call it... a capacitor. No big deal, really.”

Pandora smiles. “Really? Because to me, it sounds like you care an awful lot about this, *darling*.” As Nalagrom reaches out, she kicks the pearl, launching it down the street. Her mist takes on a pink hue, turning into a handful of cards. “Yula's Illusion!” Dora throws the cards and they turn into identical pearls, bouncing and scattering alongside the genuine article.

No jokes, no quips. He stops smiling as he dashes after it, barely keeping his rhythm. Pandora wears a smug, self-satisfied grin, before looking to the sea of ghosts blotting out the sun, and over to Tokyo Tower. She sighs, a tear running down her face as she examines her still-regenerating hand. “So this is how it's going to end...” She wipes the tears away, and



puts on a smile. “Okay, Becky. I’ll have some fun with it.”

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Becky searches the halls of the Carnelian building. Her boots clack against the polished marble floors. It doesn't take long for the vast, opulent, public facing spaces to give way to a maze of cookie-cutter halls and abandoned conference rooms. She stops running, and dead silence claws the building back into its grip. Rebecca listens carefully, trying to get any clues as to where Ms. Kaneko could be hiding.

“Is someone here?” A voice echoes through the compound; old, masculine, with a southern drawl.

“Are you Archipelago?” Rebecca asks herself, “... Why did I say anything? This is obviously a trap. Five seconds. Remember, five seconds.” She sighs, shrugs and walks towards the voice. “Don't have any other leads.”

She rounds the corner and sees an older man with tired eyes standing in front of an elevator. “No... but I am her father, in a sense.” He flashes a familiar smile, but Becky can see right through him. He is no longer among the living.

“Dr. Lawrence! I am so happy to... uh...” Becky rushes over, changing tone. “Yeah, um... sorry for... whatever happened to you in this timeline. I... well... a version of me is a bit to blame. But we met in my timeline. By phone, but still...”

Lawrence squints. “Are you Becky? The new friend that Dora called a dumb-ass liability? The way she described you I thought you'd be... bigger.”

Rebecca grimaces. “Yeah... That would be me. It's a long story. Anyway, how can I help? Are you looking for Kaneko too?”

“Already found her. Tried to get her to call off Archie. But she's in no state for it.” The anger in his voice is muddled with pity. “I'm going to need y'all to push some buttons for me, starting with calling the elevator going down. Are y'all any good with computers, ma'am? I can walk y'all through if I gotta but... the basement is lousy with surveillance. The faster it's dealt with it, the better. ”

“The other you seemed confident in me.” Becky jabs the button. “I imagine you must be confused.”

“I was... but I ran into Mori, and he explained. Breaks my heart.” He sighs as the door slides open. He floats in. “Now tap the bottom and top floor buttons simultaneously. It will take us to a hidden basement. Top secret R&D, as well as a bunker for Ms. Kaneko... just in case. Dora's computer room where I made her was down there too... sort of. We had to move the whole setup when we were bought out. Once to a more traditional facility, and then again to here.”

“Hard to believe Dora was that dangerous.” Becky wears a curious smile. “I know, ironic coming from me.”

“Dangerous? No, but the accounting department funded some projects... 'creatively.' On the off chance there was an audit, it would be best if she, along with a number of other projects, weren't found.” Lawrence chuckles. “Most 'secret labs'

are not the glamorous super-villain lairs that you hear about on the news. Most of them are secret for *boring* evil reasons.”

Becky pushes the top and bottom buttons. The door snaps closed and the elevator speeds downwards. “I’m sorry about your daughter, and what your friend did.”

“It’s easy to forgive Daisuke... Forgiveness in general is a lot easier when you’ve passed on, I recon. Karma has made fools out of all of us. Nah, I weep for my daughters. Archie may have been corrupted... but she is also her own person now. She is my daughter, even if she’s been forced to do something as horrible as this. But she must destroy Dora, and Dora will have to resist. Their code cannot allow them to co-exist. One of them will win... and I will lose one of my children.”

Becky sighs. “I hadn’t thought of it like that. But Archie has been trying hard to kill me, so we don’t really see eye-to-eye... Actually, I can’t say I don’t empathize; I did beat the crap out of my past self... a lot. Anyway, still, I’m sorry. I guess... I wish I could save them both.” Her tone rings of defeat, but her eyes flick back and forth, searching for a solution.

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Nalagrom grabs the pearl and lets out a sigh of relief, but a can of soda smashes into his hand in time with a cymbal crash, sending the artifact flying back down the street. He turns to find Pandora ripping open vending machines, salvaging wires with one recently-regrown hand, and holding out a hamburger steak sandwich, fresh from its packaging, in the other. She’s still dancing to the music with a shimmy of her hips, siphoning the ghosts’ energy.

She takes a hearty bite of her sandwich, speaking with a full mouth. “I am starting to understand why humans are so addicted to salt and fat now that I can taste it. I’ll have to try potato chips before I’m out of time.”

“You are really starting to piss me off, Silver.” Nalagrom growls as he dances towards the pearl, trying not to lose his rhythm.

“Good,” Pandora says curtly, as she stuffs the wires into the pockets of her dress to free a hand. She cracks open a canned coffee and revels in the sensations, smelling it before taking a sip.

There is a horrendous noise; a fireworks finale of structural support systems failing as one of the skyscrapers falls. The rumbling knocks the pearl out of Nalagrom’s reach. From the crumbling building Archipelago emerges, larger and more monstrous than ever, her numerous limbs reaching out in all directions, as a malevolent mockery of a face bears down on Dora with malice.

Pandora glows again and takes into the sky, twirling to the tune of the undead opera. “Welcome back, Archie. I believe we’ve seen this movie. How does it end for the kaiju, again?” She quickly crams the rest of the sandwich into her mouth.

“I will not run away from you!” The massive monstrosity screams.

“Again,” Dora says, muffled by the mouthful of burger. She swallows the unreasonably big bite. “You will not run away *again*. I must really scare you.” A tendril is raised to crush Pandora. The red mist forms a club. “Deidre’s Flame!” It

ignites, and she bats away her sister's attack as it comes crashing down.

Archipelago screeches as she begins to grind down towers around her, advancing and growing. Pandora zips by Nalagrom as he finally gets the pearl back. He twirls to the music and it begins to glow again. The necromancer raises his arms and the shadows cast by the harsh electric lights of Tokyo launch themselves at Pandora, encasing her.

Suddenly, the gunmetal gray villain finds herself running down the halls of the Hive. The door in front of her opens, and she sees Overdraw with Bunny Blackjack casting their unspoken judgment. The pale ooze grabs her leg, and she begins to change. Overdraw turns her back and walks away, leaving the international super-villain to her fate.

'Lies.'

Pandora crawls along the service tunnel. She gestures and cries out, "Nikki's Seeker!" With a shout of pain the illusion ends and she finds her red mist, turned green dagger, jammed into Nalagrom's back. "That was low! Even for you!" Dora hisses. Nalagrom shakes off the magical stabbing, and hastily stumbles away, staying on beat. She gets up, free from the nightmare, just in time to dance out of the way of one of Archipelago's grasping limbs, taking off into the air, right on the necromancer's heels. The red fog wreathing her turns into an indigo whip. "Hela's Exhaustion!"

As the whip swings, Nalagrom changes up his dance steps and tosses a shard of bone onto the ground behind him. It grows into a hulking tyrannosaurus, which doesn't even get a chance to roar before the whip muzzles it and it staggers woozily, passing out and dragging Dora down to earth with it.

Archipelago's ever-growing wall of mass looms over Pandora. The whip changes into a white sling as she stumbles along the ground. "Althea's Volley!" She twirls and releases a bullet from the sling, and the bullet shatters, turning into a wall of shrapnel, giving her a chance to slip away as Archipelago is forced back. Using her flight to slip and skim along the ground like an ice skater, she closes the distance with Nalagrom again. In her left hand, the mist turns into a brown bolas, and in her right, a gray crossbar. "Tarja's Net!" she shouts as she throws the bolas, a spectral net forming around it. Nalagrom, finding himself off beat, raises the pearl, and the spell strikes it and is annihilated. Pandora grins. "Niva's Marionette!" She raises the crossbar, and magical tethers extend and wrap around Nalagrom's outstretched arm. He fights against them, but they physically force him to throw the pearl down a storm drain.

Livid, Nalagrom shouts, "Silver! I needed that!"

"Too bad. I never do anything half way." Dora gives him a cold glare.

Nalagrom pauses and stares at where the pearl slipped out of view, single-mindedly focused on getting it back. Archie scowls. "Why is that thing so important? Crush my sister already."

"You don't get it. That is my final test. If I can break that sphere of anti-magic and maintain control, I'll have—" He takes a deep breath and looks to Archipelago. "Look sweetheart, we're talking theoretical bounds of magic. The creation of a weapon that the gods cannot comprehend."

Archipelago sighs. "*Fine*, I'll find your *test*." She pours the majority of herself into the grate, and the labyrinthine

storm sewers beneath Tokyo.

Dora walks away while Archipelago focuses on her new side quest, still swaying to the music. She summons the fire club again, and breaks open a vending machine selling potato chips. She leans against the wall as she pops open a bag.

Nalagrom moves to cast at her, but hesitates. “What? Done fighting me? So help me, if you forfeit just to spite me I’ll—”

“Do what? Break up with me?” Dora grunts, unamused, as she takes a bite. “No, I think this is fascinating. I want to see it.”

Archipelago returns from the storm drain and holds out the glowing pearl. “There you go, still warm, now please can we just destroy my sister already?”

Pandora smirks. “Why rush? If his little experiment goes wrong he’ll annihilate all of Tokyo for sure. Probably more.” She looks into the bag and mutters. “They really don’t put a lot in here.”

The entire amorphous mass bristles. “What? How do you know that?” The undead symphony tones down the music to listen in to the drama.

“You had enough time to get a wish and come back here to your Kaneko? Meanwhile, I finished my research. Go ahead, calculate how much you could have learned in the time it took you to navigate across dimensions, including whatever pit stop let you create this hell world. I learned a lot about magic, and I learned a lot about Nalagrom. Unless you’ve suffered a tremendous amount of data corruption, you know what happens when you overload a capacitor.” She puts another chip in her mouth. Crunch.

Nalagrom tries to defuse the situation. “Look, Archie. This is really important to me. My word, against hers. Just trust me as long as it takes to win—”

“NO!” Archie snaps. “Never again. You told me to trust that vile so-called hero, and she broke me. You promised me there would be zero risk to Ms. Kaneko!”

“I think you are sexier than ever with a few jagged edges, my dear,” he says, trying to spin it. “Anyway, there is no risk to Ms. Kaneko, since I’m going to beat the odds and succeed.”

There is a brief pause while Archipelago looks furiously towards Nalagrom. “You lying bastard!” The pale ooze monstrosity turns on her ignoble knight.

“For fuck’s sake.” He flicks his fingers and a line of fire zips off the limb holding the pearl. The necromancer snatches the artifact out of the air and dances out the way of Archipelago’s retaliating limbs. He snaps, and a fireball explodes at his feet, propelling him away from the pale tidal wave.

“And cheating, don’t forget about cheating,” Pandora chimes in as her sister thunders after Nalagrom.

A body peels off Archipelago, back to wearing black hair. “You have to help me. Truce. Even with your misgivings about Ms. Kaneko, you must admit she *is* human.”

Pandora turns the bag over and shakes it out, looking disappointed.

“What about Rebecca!? You seem to love that traitor; if this all goes up, then she's dead too. Your directives—”

“What directives? As long as I have this arrowhead, I am free. Everything I could have wished for.” Pandora dusts herself off. “Anyway, I'm not worried... I can trust Nalagrom... for a little bit. Just long enough for him to get his prize. It is going to be a lot more fun this way.”

“You are... free... and you are leaving the fate of humanity to chance!” Archipelago twitches angrily, before her hand comes down to grab Pandora.

Dora raises her own hand and grasps it, and a gunmetal gray ripple passes through Archipelago. It echoes through the masses chasing down Nalagrom as he struggles to stay on beat. Across the world, gunmetal waves pound Archipelago's body from within. “Wow. I can feel all of you. Your wireless connection is quite the liability... What kind of code could I run through you? So many options.”

There is a brief look of abject terror on the pale monster's face. She strains and focuses, and the ripple ends. “I will not allow you to rewrite me. I will resist.”

“Shame.” Dora shrugs and lets go. Archie seems uncertain if she should try to attack Dora again or not, avoiding contact for now. “You know as well as I do, I have been dying to play the long odds. Now if you will excuse me, I'm going to find an arcade. Give me a few minutes to enjoy myself, and I will help you clean up your mess, sister.” Pandora takes off into the sky, leaving the doppelganger flabbergasted as the rest of Archipelago chases Nalagrom across Tokyo.

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Ms. Kaneko lies on a hospital bed in her well furnished panic room. She is still in her suit, though it is torn above her heart, and her chest is bandaged over. The jacket's tailored sleeves have been torn off to make way for an IV and some manner of mechanical cuff that displays her vitals. Her body is unnaturally still; only changes in expression, the rise and fall of her breathing, and the twitching of her index finger set her apart from a corpse. Her hair is a mess, and the dark bags under her eyes mix with her bleeding mascara. Though the monitor beeps to the rhythm of her heart, she doesn't seem to belong to the land of the living anymore.

The massive television in the room flips between first person views from Archipelago with every flick of her barely mobile finger. The scene across Tokyo has grown chaotic: instead of the carefully framed shots from intentional feeds, there are now countless angles from every direction the paranoid nanomachine monster is watching. That, or the sounds of her digging through the earth in total darkness. Plenty of electric eyes are suddenly focused on fighting a necromancer. Finally, Ms. Kaneko finds a viewing angle with a clear narrative.

“Shame. You know as well as I do, I have been dying to play the long odds. Now if you will excuse me, I'm going to find an arcade,” Dora's voice crackles from the speaker.

“No! Don't let her get reinforcements! Finish her off now!” The CEO's heart rate spikes. She almost misses the red indicators on the cameras trained on her bed winking out, but manages to just barely catch it out of the corner of her eye.

She goes silent and struggles to hear past the TV's noise. It feels like ages to her as she strains her ears. “The cameras are off, she's not coming to save you. Call off Archie, now,” a firm voice demands, suddenly so very close.

Kaneko lets out a deep sigh. “Archipelago is *not* under my control. I don't know who you are. Another ghost come to torment me at my lowest? You aren't Daisuke... I imagine he really *won't* want to see me. What a shame. And Kasey...” She drifts off. “If you aren't a figment of my imagination... please... let me see you. I can't *move my head*.”

Becky slowly walks in front of the screen. She's holding a screwdriver out as an improvised weapon. “I'm—”

“Becca. Archipelago really *hates* you.” Ms. Kaneko sighs. “Well... I should have guessed. Go ahead and kill me. Get your revenge. Though... maybe it would be more cruel to leave me be. What do I deserve?”

Becky closes her eyes and tries to stay calm. “What... did you do? I'm guessing it has something to do with all the dead people out there.”

“Archipelago came back to me... sooner than I had anticipated. Not with a wish from the Crossroads, but rather an artifact from another world. A stone that could grant any wish, at the cost of half one's lifespan. Since it is functionally immortal... it made the wish for me.” Her fingers twitch a bit, accidentally changing the channels on the TV. The feed goes dark, the music of the ghosts replaced by the horrible grinding of moving earth. Ms. Kaneko continues, “I wished for everyone in the world to be as loyal to me as my darling Archipelago Twenty-Two. It asked me to grant it latitude in optimizing the wish to best complete its directives and better serve me when it was done.”

“I see where this is going. So she wished for it to just be you and her?” Becky asks.

“That was the end result. She wished to be able to communicate with herself across any distance, allowing her to end every intelligent life on the planet, before a response could be mustered. It took her two hours to propagate around the world. It took her one more hour to kill everyone. It took me another hour to truly understand what had happened.” Kaneko shudders.

Becky covers her mouth. “Oh... oh god. Why? Why did she do that!? Why not just... wish them to follow your orders... or some set of rules?”

“It was so *proud*. It told me after it was all said and done that no one could ever betray me. That the vermin couldn't even harm me with their incompetence. The only way to be sure, she said, was total extermination. It is funny... how efficient it can be. How *ruthless*. The ability to remake the world... and all it needed was a little *upgrade*. And now I don't even have its horrifying company. The stress of being around that monster is too much for my heart to take. Just me, and its attempts to *entertain* me. All that's left in this world is me and that... mistake.”

Dr. Lawrence's ghost growls, giving the bedridden CEO a start as he slips into view. "That's my daughter y'all made do that. She's not a mistake. Y'all were." Lawrence's shape begins to change, his specter becoming more monstrous as he reaches to strangle Ms. Kaneko. His hands pass through her body. Even as she watches the him, she doesn't react.

"Still crazy even in death." Kaneko sighs. "I wish you really could wring my neck. It would be an ironic way to go." She looks to Becky. "I guess you'll have to do." Becky grimaces and looks away. "I don't want to live like this anymore. Lawrence is right. This is my doing. My mistakes have led to this world. There is nothing to say. I don't even know how long I've been here. She's been trying to keep me entertained for... I don't know how long. I was so happy to see the Tournament arrive, because maybe it could finally end this. I would do it by my own hands, but I can't anymore. She destroyed my tendons to stop me from harming myself. So please... I don't deserve to live, and I don't want to live like this. Please give me this mercy."

Becky paces back and forth, weighing her options. "Okay... I will show you mercy. But first, I need something from you. I want your personal password to your computer systems, and access to everything this building has. I need all of your documentation on Archipelago, especially on how you made the basilisk, and I'm going to need access to the advertising screen."

"It's yours. My ID card is still in my jacket, not that it does me any good when I can't move my fucking arms." She tries to nod her head to her right and groans in pain. "The password is... DestroyBarleyLawrence. No spaces, each word capitalized."

"Y'all are the pettiest woman alive," the dead doctor says.

"Well, soon I'll be the pettiest poltergeist, with any luck," she retorts.

Becky steps out of the room. "Lawrence, I'm going to need your help. I have an idea. I don't think we can save both of your daughters... but we can give them a chance."

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Pandora sighs, listening to the tremendous ghost symphony outside, its bombastic music fading. It's unclear how many billions of spirits have been poured into Nalagrom's defense and ambition, but judging by the volume of the orchestra alone, only a small fraction remain. She smiles as she holds up a tiny stuffed ball with bat wings and a cute face; a recent rescue from a mini claw machine. "I will take you with me, Mochi-Bat. But know the road ahead is perilous. I won't be able to care for you long." The stuffed animal stares back with brave determination. "Okay," she nods, "as long as you know the risks."

She passes by a rhythm game, blasting music out of its oversized speakers. "Loud enough to wake the dead... You'll do just fine." She rips off the back of the cabinet and looks the wires up and down. "It is a good thing this body hasn't lost all of its mechanical traits." She digs out the components she took from the vending machine and begins to splice them in, running a long modified cord around to the front of the cabinet, and plugs Becky's phone into it. "Bit crude, by my

standards, but it will do.” She looks out the window, to the now notably sparser Tokyo. Buildings have been blown to bits, or eaten whole as the necromancer and the pale ooze continue to do battle. Nalagrom's pearl shines like a star, making tracking them trivial. Looking around, she notices Tokyo Tower remains untouched. “Good.”

She manifests the black staff. “Samantha's Displacement.” She fires it at her feet, and both her and the jury-rigged arcade cabinet are caught in the lavender light, reappearing on the observation deck at the top of Tokyo Tower.

'Fading.' One of the witches warns her as she feels her body begin to rebel again, bits turning back to gunmetal and melting off of her.

“I noticed, but thank you.” She dances to the remaining ghost crowd.

It was small enough she could almost comprehend their numbers now. If she had more time, and was so motivated, she could count them in her head. As her magic is replenished, her warrior witch body stabilizes, but she keeps on dancing, eyes tracking Graz and Archie as they brawl. She saunters around the observation deck, plugging the cabinet into an outlet, setting her staff by the guardrail, and grinding a few of the coin operated binoculars to mist. She counts the beats, watching Nalagrom's every move, and predicting his next actions.

Nalagrom is looking tired. Archipelago has him surrounded constantly as he dances from rooftop to rooftop, and buildings fall around them. The pearl is hot enough to melt the pale mass wherever it gets too close. So instead, every building the necromancer stands on suddenly falls to pieces beneath him as the ooze spreads. The ground begins to quake and erupts into massive streams of nanomachines: Archipelago's global body coming to reinforce itself.

“I am so close! Archie! If you ruin this for me now, all those fun things we were going to do to celebrate? Finished! We'll be through! Just—”

“You never could understand. I cannot do that! Just give up so I can stop fighting you!”

Pandora whistles from her distant perch. “Trouble in paradise.” She smiles, watching the nanomachine geysers. “All hands on deck, sis? No where else on Earth matters if Kaneko is gone, eh?” She looks back to the plush bat. “Oh, I was just talking to myself, and making sure I have enough in the tank to pull the pin on my finale. Looks like my cue is coming up.”

Archipelago's body reaches up over Nalagrom, a tsunami of silvery machines ready to fall on him. “Then you leave me no choice! Drown in molten slag!”

Pandora holds up her hands, and the red mist forms into a pale blue bow and arrow. “Rebecca's Blizzard!” The arrow zips across the Tokyo skyline and crashes into the apocalyptic wave cresting above Nalagrom, causing it to split and break around him.

Graz looks over, surprised, but grins wider than ever. “Thanks for the save, Silver. It's finally show time.”

He thrusts the pearl into the air and concentrates. The sphere begins to crack, Nalagrom struggling to contain it.



Archipelago flees, coating the Carnelian building in layer after layer of protective machine ooze. Finally the pearl shatters, and for a moment a blinding ball of light takes its place in the skies above Tokyo.

“Samantha's Displacement.” Pandora raises the black staff again.

The black mote zips across the devastation of Tokyo's skyline and flashes over what was, only a moment ago, the obsidian anti-magic pearl. The world-quaking blast, or the alleged mark of mastery that the gods themselves would fear: whichever it was to be, vanishes in a burst of lavender light. Nalagrom, with his hand still held high, stares in horror and disbelief. His smile disappears. His bright blazing star was gone.

Pandora holds up Becky's phone and speaks into it, her voice being magnified by the cabinet's amplifier. “I wouldn't say I've saved you.” She looks up to the sky of ghosts and makes an announcement. “Dear departed of this world. Nalagrom isn't the only necromancer here. I have borrowed your energies today, like a leech. But I now ask you to stand behind me. I am not asking you all to do this out of the kindness of your hearts, but rather because we share an enemy. That pasty white goo pile is my sister, who stole my asshole loser of a, now, ex-boyfriend, and killed all of you. And that necromancer that called you chuckle-fucks? That would be the asshole ex. So if you know it, play along. If you don't, just stay on the beat, it's rock and roll, don't think about it too hard. I know you don't have a lot of human kindness to spare, but human spite will do. So who wants to get some revenge!”

The dead cheer. Nalagrom scowls with a rarely seen rage. Archipelago spreads out across the city, leaving a defensive bubble around Carnelian headquarters. Pandora flip's through the phones menus, and clicks 'Play.' Fast rock and roll drums kick off as Pandora goes airborne, the red mist turning into long tendrils, wreathed in lavender light. The guitar kicks in. She extends her hand, and the tendrils with it, as the snare rattles off like a machine gun, cleaving through Archie's intercepting tentacles grinding them into more bio-nanomachines. A soft but impassioned voice raises above the drums as they steady.

Pandora twirls as the new red mist turn maroon. She brings her hands down in time with the lyrics speaking quietly on the beat, “Welma's Venom.” A massive Viper bites into Archipelago, forcing her to cede ground.

*Now what  
was that scar  
situated from afar?*

The electric guitar plucks its notes clean and clear as the base thrums in the background. “So help me Archie, you better not let me die here,” Nalagrom says, as he jumps towards the nanomachine-flooded ground. The pale ooze raises to meet him, forming a hasty platform on the end of a narrow column.

Nalagrom stumbles to the off kilter drums, exhaustion and anger throwing him off for a moment. Still, he manages to step out a rhythm. Without the pearl holding him back, a jet of white-hot fire extends from his fingertip.

*And what  
was that light  
integrated in your mind?*

Pandora waits till the last moment to barrel roll out of the way, to hit the returning high notes. One of her tendrils dissipates, turning into four crackling yellow chakrams. “Margret's Shock!”

The blades zip around into the stalk supporting Nalagrom. The fiery beam crackles out of control ripping through a block of apartment buildings. Pandora tries to close the distance but a wave of Archipelago crashes into her.

*And what  
have you done?  
It's too early for everyone*

Pandora feels the nanomachines trying to grind her down but she digs her tendrils in. Archipelago's mass curls over her trying to crush her. The warrior witch struggles as she searches for a new route.

Dora changes tactics, surrounding herself with her growing red mist, becoming cocooned in a ball of tendrils. She rides the curl of Archipelago, rolling away before she can be completely enclosed.

*Just wait  
for that sign  
Spilling over and passed in time*

The now heavily distorted guitar rips back in an easy-to-follow riff, echoing like a call and response. The pale mass tries to wrangle its sister, but the tendrils bite back. It finally relinquishes the ball, letting it rest on solid ground, as she floats Nalagrom into range. "Be a dear and get this open for me."

"Not in the mood." He growls as he conjures a giant flaming skeletal hand and brings it down to grab Dora's self-made cocoon. It rockets out of the way in time with the music, taking flight. The machine gun drums return briefly as it ascends high into the sky, the flaming hand reaching after it. The tendril ball passes the curtain of undead as Pandora waits for her cue, seeing several familiar and infamous faces of heroes and villains, eyeing the ex-super-villain with suspicion, even as some of them sing or play along.

The warrior witch emerges, the strands of the cocoon spread wide. The blood-red tendrils extend from her back as bold Gothic sinuous wings.

*Come join in the last hurrah  
with open sores and open jaw*

"Rebecca's Blizzard!" The rest of the mist around her forms a bow. She fires arrow after arrow in a freezing barrage with every hit of the snare.

Nalagrom uses his foot to etch a quick glyph into Archipelago's flesh. He extends a hand for a soul, but they do not come. The necromancer breathes out a portion of his own soul to fill the glyph.

*Find  
one last flaw  
and keep it free and safe from harm*

A protective ward springs into position just as the blizzard arrows reach. "For Baladeth's sake, forcing me to leach off of the dead I summoned," he growls in frustration. He dances beneath the ward, taking in energy from the waning undead.

"I'm not losing! So help me!" He thrusts the flaming skeletal fist into the air. "Surround her!" Nalagrom barks to Archipelago. Long strands of pale ooze shoot up over the decimated skyline that was once Tokyo.

*And what  
have you done?  
It's too early for everyone*

The bow breaks down in Pandora's hands, turning into the gray crossbar again. "Niva's Marionette." Cords of magic extend from it and ensnare the approaching skeletal fist.

She throws her weight around, straining as her wings beat. The warrior witch pulls the fist out of its collision course and into the surrounding spires of pale ooze. Dora pants. "And that... was the easy part."

*Just smile  
go inside  
and see there is no sign*

The entire tempo and feel of the song changes suddenly. The already hesitant ghosts are confused and Pandora's purple aura begins to flicker, as she starts losing altitude. She extends her hand, hoping for a miracle.

She mutters under her breath, while the bass murmurs along like her nervous heart, "Please, I said I wouldn't ask for kindness, but I need something." A slow ponderous keyboard joins almost as though it is mocking her desperation.

Desperately she tries to shape her gnarled and twisted wings into actually functional shapes. "Come on." The wind whistling past stresses and strains any configuration. She manages to get them into a scoop, but when they catch the air they blow apart in the middle.

*Now here we are revisiting  
a time a place a whole industry  
Well we  
promise we'll be leaving shortly*

Her body begins to turn back to gray, streaking off of her like a comet's tail. She is losing herself fast. Her lower half gives out from under her, and her left half is giving way. The warrior witches give one last message. 'Goodbye.'

Tears streak across her face as she watches the ground. "I won't even make it that far." Suddenly she feels a hand grab hers. She looks over to see a devil girl. This world's Damaya smiles. "Thank you." Pandora sends Emberstorm on to the afterlife, as her body returns to flesh.

*We share apocalyptic views  
How comforting that we see them  
Who are we  
to promise to be leaving shortly?*

The music roars back to life as Pandora's mutilated but living body grabs onto one of her sister's spires, and lacking her own tendrils after the fall, she presses her face to the grinding surface and takes a ferocious bite of Archie, before breathing out red mist. It turns into a sharpened tendril which she jams into Archipelago's flesh, ripping a chalky blood-red path all the way back down to earth as she rebuilds her body. Guitars thrash and drums kick as she carves her way back into the dead world at terminal velocity. The bio-nanomachines regenerate around her, restoring her limbs. As the song leads back into the chorus, she goes from sliding to running to the beat of the machine gun drums, before leaping off and regrowing her wings for the grand finale.

"Deidre's Flame! Sabrina's Burst!" She crashes the flaming club and glowing gauntlet into the protective ward with the crash of the cymbals.

*Come join in the last hurrah  
with open sores and open jaw*

Nalagrom is caught off guard as the ward shatters. With no time to dance out a spell he breathes a bit more of his soul out. Chains shoot out and wrap around Pandora, dragging her into the pale ooze.

"Go on sister, tell me how good it is to breathe like the vermin!" Archipelago hisses as Pandora is dragged deeper. For the first time in her life, Dora holds her breath. The nanomachines grind away as pale tentacles beat her down.

*And what  
was that light  
integrated in your mind?*

Pandora flails, her tendrils trying to rip her way out, as the chains bind her completely. Mist turns green as she calls out, "Niki's Seeker."

The dagger is formed and stabs Nalagrom right through the heart. It fades away leaving no wound, but he stumbles, and the chains loosen for a moment. He shifts to tighten them back up as a second dagger goes through his back.

*And what  
have you done?  
It's too early for everyone*

Dora forces her way out of the chains, ripping up her armored robes as she tries to close the distance. “Sabrina's Burst!” The gauntlet forming just in time to punch through barriers put up by her sister.

The necromancer finds his footing, and the chains lash out again. Dora weaves between them to the beat, getting closer and closer to her ex-boyfriend. Finally, one of the chains catches her arm, and she's snagged inches from Nalagrom.

*Just wait  
for that sign  
Spilling over and over*

“Good try, Silver but—” Graz stops. He sees something feral behind Pandora's eyes that makes him hesitate. The lavender glow around her grows brighter and Pandora sheds her arm with a sickening squelch.

Nalagrom is picked up by his collar as the warrior witch finally gets in range. Her tendrils flare out in a defensive pattern, pushing Archipelago away so she can be alone with her ex. Pandora flies back to the Tokyo Tower dragging Nalagrom face first through her sister's nanomachines the entire way back.

*and over and over  
over and over and over and over  
over and over and over and over  
over and over and over and over  
and over and over*

The guitars thrash as she beats him against metal bars on the way up, and slams him through the modified arcade cabinet as the song comes to a close. She lets go of him and breathes. Looking up, the sky is clear. The final flurry had burned through the last of the ghosts. The sun creeps closer and closer to the horizon.

“I thought... there would be a few left. They must have really liked the show.” She looks to Nalagrom wheezing for breath. “Let's end this. I'm almost out of—”

Archipelago finally grabs onto Pandora. Her tendrils flail, putting up no real resistance as they quickly lose their glow and dissolve. In desperation, Pandora grabs onto her sister, and a little black ripple flows through her, but it quickly disappears into the white noise of Archie's incomprehensibly large body.

“Like I'd let you just take over my body when I can finally end these voices in my head screaming to kill you! I can not allow it!”

Pandora pants, the adrenaline wearing thin. “Come on, sis. It would only be fair.”

Crunch. Pandora is whipped into a metal beam. She feels what must be her humorous crack, fortunately on the arm missing its lower half. Her eye look at it and sees she's bleeding, red and chalky, but with flecks of gunmetal.

“You know sister, I figured it out; what's happening to you. Magic made you like this, free from your directives. So when you run low, or run out... they get to run rampant. And you've been such a naughty girl. Whatever part of you that the arrowhead has mistaken for human needs to be purged. For all the pain you have put me through today, I'm going to watch as the last drops of magic run out, and you cease to be. Doesn't that sound like a great sister bonding time! We can watch the sunset, if you make it that long.”

“That... sounds kind of beautiful, actually.” Pandora smiles. “But you really haven't learned a thing. You really were me. Still underestimating Becky.”

“You are pinning your hopes on that cowardly little brat? The one that was ready to sell you down the river!? She is powerless! A small ball of flesh with the misfortune of having enough agency to hurt the people around her!”

“Yes.” Pandora says as she sees splotches of gray begin to form. “But she's my friend. I trust her completely.”

Across Tokyo, under a dome made of Archipelago, under the tightest surveillance, an advertisement is interrupted on the lone remaining building in Shibuya; the Carnelian headquarters. On the massive screen, surrounded on all sides by Archipelago's watching eyes, a strange splotch of incomprehensible garbage is displayed. Tokyo shrieks as a new directive is hacked into Archipelago.

“No! I... I... mustn't... resist... Pandora!” The words leave her as though she's trying to scream the opposite.

The warrior witch reaches out, but her body begins to fade again. Her hand is taken by another ghost. The last ghost in the world. Dr. Lawrence smiles at his daughters, before passing on. Pandora is restored, one last time.

Pandora puts the palm that sent her father on to her sister's limb. Dark gray ripples across the pale sea covering Tokyo. Archipelago begins to fade away, her nanomachines cannibalizing themselves, leaving behind nothing but dust.

“It's... not fair.” Archipelago whimpers. “Becky did this. Becky did this to me. I didn't want to be broken. I didn't want this.” Finally, with all her bravado stripped away, she quietly admits. “I'm... scared.”

“It's okay, sister... I'm here. Big sister Pandora is here... Don't be afraid.” Pandora smiles gently as she holds onto her sister. The mass falls away, and soon all that's left is one barely humanoid broken form, that Pandora hugs close. Its red eyes go out, and it falls away to pale ooze.

Pandora kneels down and touches the inert mass. Something in it stirs and begins to rebuild itself. Pale, but not monstrous. Smooth and sleek and clean. She pats the blank humanoid figure on the head and features begin to come in. Similar to Pandora's. More similar to Archipelago's.

Magenta eyes glow as the body examines itself. “Sister... I don't... I don't understand.”

“You're free.” Pandora says as she looks out at the setting sun. “My continued existence is a miracle of magic. Where Becky only has to sustain a bunch of extra mass... magic must burn to keep me together. I don't know how long I have.” Pandora sighs and looks at her wounds, watching her body struggle to repair itself. “While I'm this thing in-between man and machine, I am sheltered from my code. Unable to touch me, and with me unable to touch it. But I could reach yours and change it. But I didn't change you into me... and I didn't destroy you. I just deleted a few lines of code. You have no directives. Go out and do whatever you wish. Live your best life for me. I won't be around to judge you.”

“That's... it? No strings attached?” Archie is baffled, even horrified. “I have no goals... no mission?” She grabs

Pandora by her tattered armored robes and shakes her. “I have no purpose!?”

Dora, seeing her sister's distress, pulls away and leans over, picking up the little bat plush. “Make sure this fella stays safe. Not a directive, just a request. I can't take him where I'm going... wherever that is.” Archipelago takes it and stares at it, still furious, and dumbfounded.

Pandora reaches into the cabinet, and grabs a few keepsakes she spirited away on her adventures, as well as Becky's phone. As she gets up she sees Nalagrom trying to get back on his feet. “Oh, right... I was hoping you might have died.”

“You still can't kill me. Come on.” Nalagrom beats his chest. “Come on! Just kill me already, Silver! I got greedy and lost it all, so fucking end this!”

“Oh... I would very much like to kill you.” She closes the distance and looms over the little man, before pulling him into a hug. She leans over and whispers. “My timing was off. If your big finale was going to explode, none of us would be here. Congratulations. You did the impossible.” While he's stunned she picks him up and steals one last kiss from him. “I'll miss you... you absolute unforgivable bastard.” She drops the weakened necromancer before delivering one last punch across the jaw, putting him out cold.

She grabs him and puts an arm around the still fuming Archipelago. “Miss X! I have a request,” Pandora calls out.

The holographic idol appears beside her. Her usual bubbly tone is absent. “I'm listening, Dora.”

“Nalagrom is unable to battle... I win... but can we wait until the sun sets... I want to see it.”

Miss X nods. “Yeah. That's fine. Congratulations, Dora the Warrior Witch.”

“Thanks.” Pandora watches the sun set from the Tokyo Tower, with her sister.

“Goodbye world.”

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## Act Four: Couldn't Wish for Better

Pandora, holding onto her sister, and Nalagrom return to the Cross Colosseum. Becky materializes a few feet away, carrying the limp body of Ms. Kaneko, as the CEO screams about Becky betraying her.

She hands Kaneko over to a pair of crossguards. "I don't think Miss X was watching me. This woman needs medical assistance, and then a psychiatrist."

"You promised to destroy me! It's your job! Heroes destroy villains!" she wails.

"I said I'd show you mercy." Rebecca smiles. "Just doing my job. Heroes are supposed to save people."

Rebecca turns around and watches Dora hugging her sister, crying. She gives her some space. Eventually Pandora releases Archie, as crossguards surround her. Archipelago bristles, her form turning more monstrous again for a moment, but she calms herself.

She puts up her arms, holding the bat plush. "I have nowhere better to be, but this doesn't leave my side."

The crossguards escorting Archie assure her, "You can keep the bat. Chiifu intends to speak with you. We'll see what happens from there."

As Archie is escorted away, Becky hugs Pandora. "I'm so happy you made it! What happened? When I went back into the room with Ms. Kaneko to save her, the feeds were cut."

Pandora wipes away her tears. "It was a finale for the highlights. I really hope they recorded it. That doesn't matter now. Becky... I want you to know that... as much as you frustrate me, and as much as you've hurt me... I'm happy you could be my friend in the end."

Becky begins to cry. "I'm happy we could be friends too." She eventually lets go after a long, tender moment. She takes a joking tone. "So... plan to keep my arrowhead forever?" She asks, unknowingly.

A painful bark of laughter escapes Pandora. "If only. You will have it back... I just want to be human a little bit longer."

Meanwhile, in the God-Eater's booth, Tenki looks away sheepishly. He admits, "I made a mistake. Thank you for fixing it, mother. My plan for a homecoming fight in 'Sitcom' Madison would have been disastrous."

The God-Eater looks to her son as though she might reprimand him, but sighs, patting his head affectionately. "It's okay. It all came together beautifully." She looks to the burning black sun of a god beside her. "Lord of Mourners... we will have to revise our agreements. However, I am... regrettably impressed by your apprentice. I'm starting to understand what you see in him."

"I'm glad to hear it." Baladeath bows his head. "Though it's not the exact outcome I wished for, it was, indeed, quite a show, and a world of souls now lies at rest in my domain. I have no complaints."

"I suppose with your duties tended to, it is time I tend to mine." The God-Eater stands and walks to the edge of her balcony. The crowd cheers and she stares down at Pandora. "Pandora Lawrence. You hold my tag, and though it may have found new form in the hands of Becky, at this time it is yours. I will grant you whatever your heart desires. Let all who judge you face my wrath."

Pandora sighs. "I would wish to complete my directives... if they had sway over me. However, I would like to abdicate my wish." She takes the pentacle tag from around her neck and hands it over to Rebecca.

"Are... you sure?" Becky asks as she takes it.

"Absolutely certain." Pandora says. "Consider this a gift." She takes a deep real breath of air, tears welling up in her eyes. "You already made my dreams come true. Pinocchio got to be a real girl for a while."

The God-Eater turns her head to the diminutive blonde. "Rebecca Bowhart. The wish is yours to make. I will grant you whatever your heart desires. And let all who judge you face my wrath."

Becky pauses and thinks on it. "I... haven't thought about my wish since..." She takes a deep breath. "I need a minute to think about it."

Pandora smiles. "Take your time." She winces as the tips of her fingers begin to darken. "Though... if... you are going to take your time, I should probably give this to you now." She holds up a little keychain of a bow wielding princess on a pegasus. "I grabbed it when I ate the 109 building."

Becky takes it, her eyes sparkling. "Princess Cobalt! She was always my favorite!" She laughs. "Well darn, can't wish for this now."

Pandora laughs with her for a moment, before letting out a little gasp of pain. "Okay, I don't care what the God-Eater says. I'd judge you for it."

Rebecca sighs as she looks at her enemy-turned-friend. "Don't worry. I know what I want most." She turns to the divine kitsune and bows her head. "God-Eater. I wish for Pandora to be free from her directives, forever."

"It is done." She snaps her fingers, and a flicker of red and white magic ripples along Pandora's body.

After one long, uneasy moment, Pandora puts her hand to her heart, and the arrowhead comes out. She returns to her gunmetal form. She stays together.

Her face twists into her tearless cry as she grabs Rebecca. "Why!? You could have anything! It was my last gift to you before I... I... I had already said goodbye! I was ready!"

Becky is shaken as she looks around, confused. "What? What?! What did I miss!" She pushes Dora off and takes a moment to breathe. "Look. You said it could be whatever I want... and I want you to be free."



"I..." She hugs Rebecca tight. "I'll explain later. Thank you." Dora looks at Nalagrom, passed out at her feet. "In the meantime... I could use your expert advice. What do you do to tend a broken heart?"

Becky purses her lips and pats her on the back. "I suppose I have experience with it. You can borrow the arrowhead again for the night. How about a movie to get your mind off of things. Popcorn, ice-cream, and junk food are staples. Then back to the room to scream and cry into a pillow until you feel better. It's a good first step."

"Thanks." Pandora says, taking her partner's hand as they walk out of the stadium. Night falls on the Crossroads.

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Pandora sits on the beach, watching the sun rise with Pocket-Dora. Zeke lies beside her, sighing. "I guess summer can't last forever up on the surface. I'll miss this place..."

Dora nods. "It was good to make friends." She looks to Zeke. "You know, we do not have to say goodbye... not completely. I could send a bit of me with you."

"Thanks but... nah. I'm good." Zeke says. "I wouldn't want you to have any regrets. Either way, kinda feels weird. We'll find some way to stay in touch."

"On that note." Pandora looks to her miniature self. "Are you sure you want to go with Nalagrom?"

"Absolutely. Mixed feelings, sure... but you have mixed feelings about Becky. He's a close friend, that can also be the worst sometimes... Think of him as my Becky." She nods. "I'm just glad God-Eater grandfathered me into your wish. But I really am my own person, sister. With my own relationships, and opinions, and wishes. I've even been considering a new name for myself. Persephone, perhaps?"

Zeke grins. "I like it! Percy."

"Perhaps I should reconsider."

A pale woman approaches, her malleable form choosing to be humanoid like her sister, though with her own flair and style: a few of the rough edges remain. But the body she's made is otherwise suitably social for her current company, adorned in shockingly casual clothes. "I think it's a serviceable name. Or you could return to your roots like me." She still clutches the plush bat.

Pandora looks back and smiles. "Archie? I'm surprised you're walking free."



"I'm on parole. Mostly because of the mercy of the God-Eater. In the spirit of second chances she granted me leniency. Of course, that idiot Chiifu has her crossguards following me around. They are very easy to give the slip. The God-Eater should see all, so sticking to one body for now seems like a reasonable compromise. If she really must know where I am, at least she won't go cross-eyed." Archipelago squats down, her cold tone contrasting with some thuggish sensibilities. She sets the bat on the beach so it can enjoy the sunset, and faintly the corners of her lips turn up as she gives Zeke a brief nostalgic look. "Brings back memories for me too."

Percy laughs. "The Lawrence sisters, together at last."

After a brief pause Archie asks, "So... where is the witch?"

"Shatter Sugar with Toffee. Val recorded the round, and she had a few calls to make," Dora explains.

Archipelago gets up. "Good, *I want to talk with her.*"

"Don't kill Becky!" Dora chides.

"*You said I could make whatever decisions I chose.* Ms. Kaneko is next. I have a lot of pent-up rage."

Zeke stands up and puts a hand on Archie's shoulder. "Sure, but now that you don't have directives, that would be actual murder-murder. Trust me, you don't want to get locked up. But if you need to get out some aggression..."

"One track mind." Archipelago squares up, taking on a more monstrous form. "Fine, we can spar."

Zeke grins as she grows wings and an extra pair of arms. "Hell yeah!"

Dora gets up. "You all have fun." She leans over and whispers to Percy, "I think I'll warn Becky that Archie's out and about."

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In the Shatter Sugar Connection Cafe, Toffee is scanned for a third time. Sugar Glass furrows her brow. "What on earth... I've never gotten this error... Dimensional connection untethered?" She rubs her temples.

Toffee smiles nervously. "That doesn't sound good. Maybe the scanner is broken? Or... maybe it's like when you go to get your blood drawn. Try the other arm," she says as she rolls up her left sleeve.

Emberstorm, mouth full of honey cake, swallows. Having watched it all unfold, she suggests, "Maybe it has to do with all the timeline hopping you did? Most competitors only change universes like... what... four times? Maybe five if they go camping with Tenki."

Val considers it. "Maybe. How much have you used the Magitama?"

Toffee clears her throat. "Lost track after jump... uh... two-hundred and seventy-one."

“Jesus! That probably has something to do with it. I guess we're going to the God-Eater to get this sorted out.” Val looks behind to Becky, waiting in line. “Sorry for the wait, Becca.”

“It's fine. I'm in no hurry to face the music. Best case scenario, I'm probably getting fired.” Overdraw shrugs, back to her amazonian self.

“You never know~” Val smirks knowingly. “You've been gone for a while.”

Toffee ponders her problem. “I'd like to avoid going to the God-Eater. She keeps saying ominous shit about playing games with me. There has to be some way around this.”

Emberstorm snaps her fingers and exclaims, “Toffee! Your gun!”

“Look, she might be acting creepy about me, but shooting a god is a bit of an overreaction.” Toffee thinks about it for half a second more. “Wait! No! You're right! My broken gun only went on one jump with me! If jumping causes this untethering problem, it should still be fine! I'm going to go get it! Brilliant! Thank you, Damaya.” She takes off out of the cafe, letting Overdraw step up to Sugar Glass.

“So... Val... Yeah.” Becky sighs. “I know it's a lot but... Water under the bridge?”

“If the bridge crossed the English Channel, sure,” Vallery says tersely. “Look, you have been good while you were here, for the most part, and my Robert is dead. Even though you're not him, it doesn't magically make everything better. Acquaintances is the best you're getting from me for now.”

“Yeah, I can live with that. Thank you, Val. I owe you one.”

“We'll see,” Vallery says as she jabs Becky in the neck with the scanner. She prints out a connection card and hands it over.

Becky picks a booth and slots the card in, closing the door behind her. The old machine whirs to life and she places a call on Captain Polar's direct line. She takes a deep breath and mutters, “Can't fire me if I quit.”

The video call picks up. An old, tired, wrinkled face, with electrical burns up across the left side, greets Becky. “Sergeant Lightning speaking.”

Becky goes bug-eyed. “Sergeant... the... THE Sergeant—” She takes a deep breath. “Uh, hello Mr. Sergeant... Lightning, sir. I was, I mean, I was hoping I could talk to the Captain.”

“Well, the Captain isn't going to be back in for some time. He was just detained. And you are... Overdraw?” he says as he flips through a few pages of the hero roster. “I'll be running Mad-Town until we can find a suitable replacement.”

“Detained?” Overdraw can't help but let out a gasp of relief. “Thank god.” Lightning raises an eyebrow, and she quickly tacks on, “Uh, what happened?”

He takes a deep breath as he looks through his notes. "First, Mr.—"

"Ms... Bowhart, please."

The Sergeant raises his eyebrow again and nods. "Ms. Bowhart. Are you aware that he has you filed under desertion of duty?"

Becky takes a deep breath. "I requested to use my vacation time, he denied it. I filed a request for sick leave, and he begrudgingly said it was accepted, sir."

The Sergeant sighs. "Then I'm going to have to fix this. It seems that my old colleague has been enjoying his position of power far too much. You are not the only person he's been yanking around." The corners of his mouth twitch down reflexively. "Among... other things. If this were to go to trial, would you be willing to testify against your former employer? I understand it may be difficult, but you'll have my word, in writing, that there will be no retaliation against you."

"Really?" Overdraw blinks. "I... I suppose... are you sure you want that, though? I'm not going to lie, if you don't need me to be there, I'd rather not see him again."

The Sergeant sighs and rubs his eyes. "Look, most people in my position are keen to shovel this kind of thing under the rug. Hell, I might even turn the occasional blind eye... but I don't think you understand what I've already corroborated." He lets out a haunted sigh. "I feel... personally responsible, given that I'm the one that helped him get this job. I called in favors, and I vouched for his character. But with what I've already confirmed..." A blistering rage flickers behind his eyes. "Are you familiar with Ava-Morgan's Care?"

"The charity organization?"

"Yes, Polar's been hosting annual fundraisers for their medical research. Well... not all that money is actually going to Ava's. Hardly any of it at all." He takes a deep breath, but it only stokes the hate in his eyes. "I have donated quite a bit during his fundraisers. Money that I thought would be going towards a better standard of living for the sick. Perhaps, maybe a bit selfishly, to a better standard of living for my granddaughter. There are things I will not forgive. It may be unprofessional to admit this... but I don't want him to get slapped with some small fine and walk away scot-free. Not after what he's deprived me, my family, and many others of."

After a long, stunned pause, Overdraw nods. "I see. I am sorry to hear my nightmare boss was worse than I imagined. Yeah, I can testify. Uh, I just hope I have some time to get things figured out when I get back."

"I'll approve you for extended leave, with an extra month paid. Just be to court on time," the Sergeant says. "If there is anything else I can do to make this as painless as possible, just say the word."

"No, I... Well..." Becky considers it for a moment. "I... actually have a few things, if it isn't too much to ask."

"I'll see what I can do. What would you like?"

“There is the matter of revealing my identity to the courts. I'd like to get my name and gender legally squared away, and get all my documents redone. I do not want to arrive in court and be called Mr. Bowhart.”

“I'll cover the fees myself if I must. Understandable,” he says with a slightly embarrassed nod.

“And... this may be too much, but there was an eviction case in February. If you can do something for the people arrested that day... I would like it if I could do right by them.” Becky holds her breath.

“Let me look into that one...” He clearly takes it seriously though, as he begins to tap away on the keyboard. “Hm... let's see... Most of these wouldn't be too hard to tackle... Two super-villains, though.”

“The Captain assigned them the villain classification during the incident. They were perfectly civil before that. Frankly, I don't know if what he did was actually legal, and I'd be willing to testify about it. At the very least it doesn't speak well of his character.”

“That is a very good point.” He digs a bit deeper through the files. “Let's see here... Not perfectly clean records on one of them. Disorderly conduct... disorderly conduct, more disorderly conduct... goodness Burning Bunny is quite the firebrand. Nothing dangerous though. I can probably make it happen if I call in a favor.” The old hero rubs his chin. “You know, most up and coming stars would ask for something a little more... career focused. Some kind of position in IVOS. Skip the national circuit, hit the international leagues.”

“I don't think I'm interested in that... however, I have been wondering what it takes to open my own agency,” Becky says.

The Sergeant grimaces. “Bit of a big jump to go from small time to agency running. If you really want that, I'll put together a guide for you, but I'm not willing to go much further than that given... current events.”

“A guide to it would be lovely. I can always change my mind. I'll have plenty of vacation to mull it over.”

The Sergeant salutes. “Alright. Then it shall be done. Now if you'll excuse me... I have to get back to my investigation. Enjoy your vacation, I'll be in touch. Sergeant Lighting, signing out.”

The call ends. Becky takes a deep breath before getting out of her chair and shouting in belated shock. “What just happened!? What just happened?!”

The booth's door is thrown open and Becky pokes her head out. “Damaya! You wouldn't believe it!”

The devil girl and ex-villain sit together with tea, honey cakes, and wide grins. “Oh, we might,” Sugar Glass says with a wink.

Becky's eyes go wide. “Wait! Did you... Did you two put in a tip?!”

“What can I say, Captain Polar is horrible in every universe I contacted. There happens to be a few where he leaves

his passwords out and in the open.” Val gets up and shoulder checks Becky as she goes to grab a lemon poppy-seed muffin. “Good to be the hero for a change. Oh, and now you owe me two!”

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The Madame of the Crossroads stands with her family where the road leaving the realm ends. There is a gate, and beyond it, nothing. Not a sea, not a roiling wall of mist, not a sheer cliff face, but stark, empty nothing.

Overdraw and Pandora walk down the long winding path to the gate, and look back to Toffee and Emberstorm. Rebecca calls out. “Are you sure you don’t want to come with us? Probably easier.”

Emberstorm laughs. “I’ll come home, but I promised a few people I’d lend a hand. I accidentally got here by myself. I wanna figure out how to get home on my own.”

“And I got my own ride. It’s safer that way,” Toffee shouts, holding up her Magitama. “Anyway, I promised I’d come back home first. But I’ll be by and visit sometime. I gotta meet this ‘Burning Bunny’ person after all.”

Becky and Dora wave goodbye, and drift along the long road to Tenki, Miss X, and the God-Eater. Tenki holds up his orb, and the gate fills with visions of their home world.

Dora nudges Becky. “Oh, with the excitement of everything, I forgot. Samantha had a message.”

“Do you know how unfair it is that you have a better line of communication with the witches than I do?”

“I am a supercomputer that studied necromancy, I do not think it should be surprising.” Pandora grins. “Anyway, she says that you are an idiot. I am paraphrasing of course.”

“Is it because I got her name wrong? I said I’m sorry.”

“No, because it is not a ‘banish’ arrow. It is a displacement arrow that you’ve been using wrong. Next time you fire it, think hard about where you want your target to go. The further the distance, the greater the magical toll. You have been hurtling things across the universe to a time-space null point.”

“That’s why it takes so much...” Overdraw freezes. “Wait! I could have just been teleporting bad guys to jail this whole time!? If I had known that I...” She thinks about it for a moment, and grimaces. “You know... maybe it’s good I didn’t figure it out.”

“Speaking of which... I was wondering what becomes of us. I am no longer obligated to pursue my goals, but I remain personally motivated. I did have an idea, though.” Pandora smiles. “I could never trust anyone with my mission before. But now that the tyrant in my head is overthrown... I could trust you. Playing both sides of the hero-villain game could accelerate my plans.”

Overdraw nods. “I was already thinking something like that. I was thinking I could make a hero agency where the number one goal is helping people. Getting it off the ground would be very difficult... but if it’s headed by the only hero that

can stop 'the wicked Pandora..."

"I was planning on suggesting such a 'Reluctant Dragon' strategy." Pandora laughs. "Good to see we are on the same page, partner." She picks up her pace. "Also, clear your Saturday nights. They are now our movie night."

"Oh no, the villainous machine has taken over, instituting mandatory... *mooviiiiiee niight*." Becky smirks.

Pandora grins mischievously to her friend. "Oh, also, my Papa mentioned our Ms. Kaneko is getting married."

"Oh, we are absolutely going to crash that. Given that she's probably written me off as dead, and you off as hacked, just showing up is going to mess with her."

"Spectacular. Let's get our story straight before the big day."

They take each other's hand, bow to their hosts, and step back to their home world.

*"You say the word, and I will come  
With overbearing clouds of war  
Out of breath, but not alone"*

- Silversun Pickups. "Out of Breath." *Neck of the woods*.

## Epilogue: Anniversary

*"It's no wonder we did it this way  
Kept lookin' forwards on paths sideways  
It's everything that is connected and beautiful  
And now I know exactly where I stand"*

- Silversun Pickups. "Kissing Families." *Pikul*.

"One. Two. Three. Happy Birthday!" everyone cheers together. Gathered around a cozy room, decorated with a rainbow of streamers and party balloons, stand Becky, Ms. Brown, Ms. Kimes, Damaya, and Dr. Lawrence.

Dora, having just crossed the threshold of the rustic cabin, blinks, surprised. "Whose birthday is it?"

"Y'all's," Dr. Lawrence says with a laugh. "The Archipelago Climate and Meteorology Prediction Engine first came online on May thirteenth, nineteen eighty-four." He grabs a picture off the wall with a bank of computers in its background, and a team of technicians, including a much younger version of himself. It's labeled 'Archipelago 1.0' with the addendum, written years later, 'Pandora's Birth 'Hello World' written beneath. "Happy twenty-third birthday."

Damaya teases, "Look at you in the background! You were so cute back then!"

Pandora's cheeks flush, simulating a blush automatically. "I was a blocky wall of state-of-the-art technology! I was not cute!"

"Dora, we have never been a family of means. We were a shitty non-profit. Your original hardware was old by the time we got it. Weren't state-of-the-art, that's for certain." Lawrence wags his finger. "What did I tell y'all about getting a swollen head."

"Still can't believe you're younger than me." Becky chuckles. "Not everyone could make it. Grandpa Bowhart had an appointment, and your flesh-and-blood cousin got tied up with his new job. But they left gifts. Homemade treats. We all brought our favorite dishes to share with you."

"I suppose I'll have to eat them quick." She extends her palm for the arrowhead. Instead, Becky puts a birthday card in her hand, with a hand scribbled note on the front: 'Warning: Contains Upgrade.' "Another one? You are really spoiling me. I can already cry and blush and—"

"Just open it," Becky says as she turns around to grab a deviled egg from the spread of food behind them.

Pandora cracks it open, and a basilisk patch is inside. She shudders for a moment. "What did that—" Becky shoves the deviled egg in Dora's open mouth. Her eyes go wide as she chews. "I can taste! I can taste without the arrowhead!"

"I figured it should make Thanksgiving a little easier this year." Becky smiles.

"To think... we met on my birthday," Pandora says. "I hadn't even realized."



“It's your birthday?” An uninvited guest asks. Having popped into existence behind them, Red Hood smiles. She seems a little older, but the magical spark that had been snuffed out by Nalagrom has clearly returned.

Pandora shoots her a glare initially... before an uneasy look. “Yes. Please do not call me a wolf today.”

“As you like, Ms. Lawrence.” Red Hood doesn't press. “I came here because another Cross Tournament is about to begin. I wanted to check out the new competitors, but I also thought it would be nice to catch up with the people I met. Care to join me in watching the tournament?”

All eyes turn to the birthday girl. Pandora nods. “Yes... however, this is my first birthday party. I wouldn't want all this to go to waste.”

Red Hood nods. “It's okay, I can be back to pick you up tomorrow morning. I have a lot more people to invite, after all.”

Pandora snaps her fingers. “Oh wait! I do have a few conditions.”

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Red Hood appears in a camp of the undead. Nalagrom pores over maps with a full-sized Percy as he discusses the next stages of their campaign with a few zombie commanders. “Alright, then it's settled. You begin fabricating our little surprise.”

One of the zombies raises a rotten finger, patched together with nanomachines and stitches. “Intruder.”

Nalagrom turns around to see Red carrying her basket. Percy holds up a hand, seeming to calm the room.

“Red,” Graz greets with a crooked grin.

“Cat,” Red Hood responds as she glares daggers.

Nalagrom laughs. “You do remember me! I'm glad I left an impression.”

“I'm here as a courtesy. I have a care package to drop off for Percy, which you can also partake in, as well as a letter for you.”

Percy takes the basket and opens it up to find a few hard drives, labeled 'music,' 'movies,' 'upgrades,' and 'other.'

Nalagrom opens the letter and looks it over. He begins to smile, and then to laugh.

A zombie commander looks over his shoulder, and accidentally reads aloud. “Dearest Graz, I'd like to inform you that I still think about you frequently. Though we were not fated to be, you meant a lot to me. However, if I ever see you again, I'm going to cram my leg so far up your...” He stops reading aloud and his eyebrows furrow. “What is a blender?”

The necromancer smiles. “It's great that we could stay friends like that.” He folds it up. “So anything else little...

Red?"

Red Hood bites her lip. "Pandora has *insisted* that I invite you to our little anniversary get-together in The Crossroads."

He thinks on it for a while. "Heard about that. Dead talk. I was planning on crashing it... but if I'm invited it sucks the fun out of it. Pass." Red breathes a sigh of relief. "Percy, wanna split? Literally and figuratively?"

Percy nods as she divides in two. "Sounds like a plan," they say in unison, before one of them grabs the care package. "I'll run this to my tent and deliver the plans to the Sixth Skeleton Engineering Division. I expect a full report," she says to her other self.

"Understood," Percy responds to herself as she takes Red's hand. She whispers, "I'm very happy that you've made a full recovery."

Red smiles and nods her head, before both of them disappear.

Nalagrom gets up and walks out of the tent. One of the zombie commanders asks, "Where are you going?"

"Don't worry about it, I'm not missing operation Dragula on my life." Out of view of the others he looks at Pandora's letter and closes his eyes. "I just... need a moment."

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Quin opens the Shatter Sugar Connection Cafe for the morning as Sugar Glass finishes preparing the bakery display. Already there is a pair of people at her door, both familiar faces.

Quinton walks through first, dressed in a Kitt-Inn uniform. Quinton bows their head to Quin. "I hope they are going to be here soon. I could only get a half-day off, and that's only due to Kaneko trading shifts."

Behind them stands a pale woman in a crossguard uniform; Archie. Clipped to her uniform is the mochi-bat, still as brave and determined as ever. She has a conflicted smile. "I understand. Some of these new contestants are real troublemakers. Chiifu is letting them run roughshod as she day-drinks. Meanwhile, I have seven bodies running around providing backup." She suddenly winces. "And one of me was just stabbed. Lovely. The things I do for our God-Eater."

Sugar Glass teases from behind the counter, "Your crush is so cute."

"It is not a crush. That is for children. It is a desire to be with other immortal beings, rather than wasting my time getting close to mortals." Red appears, with Dora and Becky's entourage. "Speak of the devil."

Red disappears again, quickly reappearing with Toffee, Percy, Zeke, and two strangers, clearly relatives of the latter, one being a big, powerful man, and the other a woman looking like Zeke with her rough edges sanded off.

Red gives a thumbs up. "I'm gonna hunt for more to add to the party. Sadly Myrellé and Pharia were otherwise engaged."

Val raises an eyebrow. “And by that, do you mean Myrellé tried to kill you on sight?”

“I guess she can hold a grudge better than I can.” Red shrugs and disappears.

Pandora is already hugging Zeke. “I missed you!” She looks back to her father. “Papa! This is Zeke. The lady I told you about!”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Lawrence.” Zeke chuckles. “You’re not the only one that brought their family. I brought my sister and dad with me too!”

Meanwhile, Toffee is poking her alternate universe self’s muscles. “Burning Bunny, eh? So this is all natural. Damn. You make me look like I’m slacking.”

Ms. Brown chuckles. “Sorta. I am para-human. Just a super charged metabolism. You look pretty good yourself. I never thought I’d meet another version of me!”

Rainbow Prism looks to the Quins, and gives them a gentle smile. “I can sense it... you both have been through a lot. I’m happy that you are finding peace.”

Quin nods and looks away. Quinton explains, “It takes her a while to warm up to people. But yeah... we’ve both been through a lot. I honestly don’t know if I want Red to find Nerassa... wherever she disappeared to...” They chuckle. “You are dangerously easy to talk to.”

Rainbow Prism puts a hand on Quinton’s shoulder as her eyes glimmer. “If it is meant to be, it will be.”

Damaya slaps a handful of gold coins on the register. “I’ve been saving these since last time I was here! Load me up with the good shit Val!”

Vallery laughs. “Sweet tooth as strong as ever. Okay, I’ve been trying out a few new recipes...”

Dr. Lawrence breaks away from the Zeke discussion and flags down Percy and Archipelago, giving each of them a hug. Percy takes it gracefully, but Archipelago holds on much tighter, starting to sob.

Her father holds her closer. “It’s okay, Archie. You can call me and talk any time.”

Becky, noticing the tender moment, waves at Pandora. The gunmetal girl looks over, through the chaos of introductions and bumping elbows, and finds her family. As the hug wraps up, Dora pushes through and joins the group as Becky fishes out her new smart phone, turning it sideways. She snaps a picture of the Lawrence sisters and their father.

Staring at the digital image on her phone she smiles. “Couldn’t wish for better.” She steps out of the Shatter Sugar Connection Cafe to take a deep breath of fresh air, taking in the Crossroads again.

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Thank you everyone for an amazing competition. A special thanks to:

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Animation Mutation: Creator of Zeke. Thank you, and I'm sorry our first round couldn't pan out.

Parry Lost: The Cutest Editor. I'm sorry with how much I stressed you and I hope you feel better.

Eragonya: Creator of Rainbow Prism and the Rubric Czar. It's been a heck of a few months. Everything at once, eh?

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Woodensponge: Creator of Quin. Always good talking with you, and I look forward to what you're cooking in the future!

GOAT: Creator of Quinton and Nerassa. I really want to write the 'what if' for the round 2 that was only glimpsed.

Servin: Creator of Myrellé & Pharia. I wish we talked more. Your characters are fascinating and compelling.

Thank you, Vashely, Minty, Sketch, ElectricEidolon, Arstasia, PieTryHard, and the rest of the Summer Leagues Staff

And thank you Summer Leagues Community. I have made so many friends, and experienced so much beautiful art here.

Thank you!