

Overdraw & Pandora Parologue R0: A Dusk Painted Stage

Episode Overdraw: Sick Leave

"Surrounded
Let's romanticize
Our beloved memories
Surrounded
Let's demonize
Our softest injuries
Surrounded
Can we get behind
Distortion and liberties
Surrounded
We're surrounded or spiraling"

- Silversun Pickups. "Surrounded." *Swoon*.

Overdraw drifts into the Fox Den. Her armor gone, her civilian clothes fit tight to her frame. Her long blue and gold scarf flows in the breeze as she takes it off. She balls it up with one hand to cram it in a jacket pocket. Overdraw takes a moment to look around. Seeing the barkeep engaged in conversation with Pandora elicits a grimace. She was told that this Oni woman, Saki, would have answers; she should have expected the robot to gravitate to her. She seems to consider walking up anyway, before shaking her head and looking around for something or someone else. Overdraw sees a gorgeous redhead in a slightly modified crossguard uniform. The amazonian walks up, face blushing redder as she gets closer to the fox eared vixen. With a deep breath Overdraw tries to get her attention. "Hello there, uh, Ma'am... um... Yeah, hello!"

The woman steps around, the jingling sound of bells coming from her heels. She has a sweet, inviting face, but that look in her eyes and smirk on her lips borders on predatory. Overdraw takes a step back as she responds. "Hello to you too~ Always good to see a new competitor~ Let's get a drink~ I'll put it on my tab~"

"No. N-No... thank you." Overdraw says with a fierce blush claiming her face. "I just—" She snaps out of the charms for a moment and focuses. "—How did you know I was a competitor?"

"Trust me, when you have been here as long as me, you learn to recognize them by *smell*," she says with a playful smile, before adding, "that, and I saw you fall out of a portal in the sky~ You are a

cute one when you're little~” The blush takes whatever response Overdraw could have thought of, so the kitsune presses on with an introduction. “You can call me Chiifu~ I'm the chief of the crossguards~ Though I'm dubiously on duty, I would be happy to help you, if you wish~” she says with a wink.

Overdraw has to close her eyes for a moment to refocus. “Yeah... ok... You saw me small... ok... Pleased to meet you Chiifu. My name is Overdraw.”

“My, your parents certainly had a *cruel* sense of humor~”

“What? Oh! That's not my real name. It's Rebecca. Most of my friends call me Becky.” She clears her throat. “Anyway, I was wondering if there was a way I could phone home? My cellphone doesn't seem to have service here. I have my own superior officer that I need to report to. As a chief yourself you certainly must understand.”

“Goodness, you're so stiff. You are in a realm where all possibilities *can* and *will* happen! A realm where *wishes* come true! Is all you can think about work? *Really?*” She huffs. “Here I was, hoping you'd be interesting, little Becca~” Chiifu sighs and falls back in a chair, the jingling of her bells ringing through the air, punctuating the disappointment. After making Rebecca wait for the longest five seconds of her life, she says, “There is an ex-competitor named Sugar Glass. Was some kind of super villain, you *might* recognize her~ Anyway, was a finalist but lost the wish. She chose not to go back, though. Retired. Set up a little 'cyber cafe' thing called Shatter Sugar. Managed to get the right people that knew the right things to get cross dimension communication working. Some people have no problem calling home but other worlds are harder to reach. So for a little fee, you can go call home~”

Overdraw grimaces. “Thank you. Sorry to disappoint.” She clears her throat. “After my business is taken care of, I would love to hear what you'd suggest for something fun to take some stress off. Not super keen on working with villainous sorts in general so... Yeah.” With a little nod, she backs away. Chiifu quietly counts down under her breath as the hero leaves, and right as she hits zero Rebecca turns back around. “Yeah, forgot, I need directions please.”

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The Shatter Sugar Connection Cafe sits comfortably among its neighbors in the Phoenix Coast with its red roof matching its district kin, though unique to its pallet is a shock of white and a few brighter, warmer shades of purple. Warm inviting décor and soft cozy lighting contrasts heavily with the harsh glow of computer screens flanking its main counter.

Overdraw steps in while the counter is unmanned. She looks around and smiles, taking a deep breath. “*Mmm~* Yeah. Air conditioning. That's just what I needed!” After basking for a few moments she taps the bell.

“Just a moment!” Says a melodic voice from the kitchen, out of view. Rebecca's eyes squint, and she has an uneasy look about her face. “Sorry bout that,” says a woman with long purple hair, and dyed white streaks that have been braided into a long pony tail. Her roots are beginning to show. She's tall, but soft, not the intimidating look one would associate with a villain. All the same Rebecca's face twists in terror. “What? What's wrong?” she asks. She touches her cheek. “Something on my face?”

“Val?” Rebecca whimpers instinctively, mouth opening wide, absolutely gormless.

“Been a long time since some one called me that, *sugar*. Not exactly a familiar face...” She says looking Rebecca over confused.

“Uh... Yea—Yep. Yep. There was a— uh...” Rebecca shifts into a slight southern American accent. Vague, and indistinct. “The fox lady in the bar told me you were Vallery and I assumed Val for short. I was just looking to contact my—”

“Sure thing 'pardner.” She says casually cutting Rebecca off with a smile “Going to need something of yours to figure out which universe you're from.”

The barely constrained horror on Overdraw's face shifts to panic, losing the accent. “I-I can't just get you to put a thing on my phone that lets me call? I have to tell you where I—”

Val shrugs and waves away the end of that sentence. “If your phone wasn't working before, it means your dimension has a thick membrane. I'm assuming inter-dimensional travel is not common where you're from. Let me just scan what universe you're from,” she says as she grabs a small

cylindrical device.

“Ehah! Hah, why the rush? There's no hurry!” Rebecca is sweating bullets.

She gets a suspicious glance but Val slowly nods. “Right... Ok, look, I am guessing Chiifu told you about my previous line of work. This whole 'super villain' thing is not a big deal where I'm from. I was only ever a jobber. In it for—”

“In it for the money, yeah—yep. Yep. I am from a world that is uh... a lot like yours,” Rebecca says her tone a bit shaky. “I am a hero so I know the difference between a jobber, a mastermind, and a wild card.”

“Oh! Oh, I think I get it now... you *know* me. Or at least some version of me. Maybe I am your *nemesis* in your home dimension?” Val says with a playful grin. “Oooh if I got a nemesis like you in *my* universe, maybe I would've stuck around. You are *Abs-solutely* my type ma'am.” She says with a wink.

The color seems to drain from Overdraw's face. “Yeah... right... um... not exactly.” She fishes out a braided purple necklace from below her neckline. “Let's just give this a scan and move on with —.”

Vallery's eyes go wide as she fishes out her own necklace. They match exactly. “No way... Where did you get that... Robert?”

There is an instinctive painful grimace on Rebecca's face. “Please don't, that's my deadn—”

“Oh! Oh my god! I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry for your loss. It's the same with me!” Val says, pouring out a torrent sympathies.

The look of deep discomfort on Rebecca's face shifts to make room for tremendous confusion. “I'm... Sorry?”

“No, it's... it's fine. You don't need to apologize!” A nervous laugh escapes Val's lips. “What are

they odds...” She says before more gently broaching the topic, “I’m sorry if its still... fresh, or... painful for you. Did... you know him very long before... You know. Like... were you just dating? Were you— oh god were you *married?*”

“Yeah, uh. Wait, n—”

“Oh my god, that's so *tragic!* Ok, I normally don't cut any deals with anyone but given how we've both lost the same lover... *Please...* the first call is free.”

“No, I d—”

“Don't you try to wiggle out of this. I *insist!* If he told you about me you'll know how stubborn I can be!” She says firmly.

Overdraw winces. “I... I guess I can't convince you otherwise.” With a deep breath she closes her eyes and slowly the pained look fades and a smile replaces it. “It's good to talk. Maybe... we can talk some more after I make my call.”

“We better!” She starts to ramble. “I wanna know all about your dimension! Did you know me there? Was I a bitch? Is that why you were uneasy? I could imagine I'd be upset if some one as pretty as you stole him from me so... sorry if the other me was a bitch.”

“Val... Val... *please.* Phone call first.”

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Overdraw sits down in a computer cubicle and pulls over a privacy screen. The computers feel old, nostalgic, with thick clicky keyboards and a thicker monitor. A custom operating system awaits. With a clattering of keys she enters the password on the slip of paper she was given; signed with a heart. Rebecca steels herself and summons her armor back. She sits up a bit straighter as she turns on the 'Dimension Connection System' application. Attached to the slip of paper is a chunky card, about as thick as a floppy disk, with her universe ID written on it. With a firm press it clicks snug into the computer tower before opening a strange port. It takes a bit of finessing with adapters but eventually

Overdraw manages to connect her phone. A few more taps and a phone call is placed.

As it rings the the webcam on the top of the monitor comes to life, replacing the ringing phone icon with a live feed of the hero. She tries to relax. “Hello Captain.... *hello* captain... *Mr...* Mr Captain.” She says trying to affect a serious respectful tone. “Sir... Captain... Sir. Overdraw reporting... I have been *forced* into participating in a tournament for a *wish* with the *villainous* Pandora.” She sighs and shakes her head. “No... if I say that he's going to launch a rescue party. I doubt he'd even believe I'm lost in another dimension. It's sci-fi shlock to him. What do I even—”

The mirror video feed is replaced by a frustrated bald man with a dyed handle bar mustache; half red, half blue. He doesn't look up, preoccupied with his paperwork. “So help me, if you're another journalist, just... no comment. You'll have to wait til it goes to—” He looks up and sees Overdraw. “Oh, that's where you are Ms. *Rising Star*.” Sarcasm poisons his tone. “The rookie's been worried sick. He keeps trying to swap shifts with night patrol to examine the wreckage.”

“Yeah— yes Captain Polar. Sorry Captain Polar.” She grimaces at the thought.

“Yes, on that note, where do you think you get off Overdraw! Deserting in the middle of a battlefield? Pandora is at large, and Mr. Lorless is missing! You were supposed to be the cavalry, and you made us look as incompetent as the others! You're lucky that this isn't war! If I tried to pull anything like that on the battlefield I would have been court marshaled! You think because you have national agencies sending you invitations you can just ignore the rules!”

“I'm Sorry Cap—”

“I'm not done talking! If you interrupt me again I will be adding insubordination to your record as well as deserting an active crime scene. That would make *three* marks against you this year. You know what that would do to your record. You'll find those invitations drying up faster than a rain puddle in the Mojave! Now I expect you to come in here *tomorrow* at o-three-hundred, on the dot! Failure will result in disciplinary action! Am I clear?!”

“S-Sick,” says a thoroughly disoriented and brow beaten Overdraw.

“Excuse me?” The rage filled tirade takes a back seat to confusion.

“Sick leave,” Rebecca croaks out. “I am unwell and will not be able to come into work for the next... four days. I have plenty of sick leave built up and... and it is my right to use it.”

Captain Polar's confused look turns borderline murderous. “*Sick* leave!? Cut the crap! I can see that you're fine! You're not *sick*! Now I don't want any more—” He freezes as they hear a door open. He glares off screen for a moment before taking a deep breath. “... *Hey*... Overdraw. *Sorry* I came down on you. I have just been dealing with a lot of shit lately. A lot of unfounded *rumors* bubbling to the surface. I really don't need another PR problem.” He says as she sees one of Mad Town's lawyers handing him a document. “I understand, its been a very *stressful* day. Take as much sick time as you need, but I *strongly* encourage you to return to work as *soon* as possible. The man who went missing, Mr. Lorless, is a *major* donor, and helps us keep the lights on around here. I know you don't need the suit and gear maintenance department, and ever since your new contract with Carnelian, you haven't really needed to use our sponsorship matching services, but there are a *lot* of up and coming heroes, and even established *locals* that need the funding. So we really have to get *all* boots on the ground to find where that crazed computer has taken him.”

“Ok Captain.” Overdraw nods. “I'm sorry that I disappointed you. When I get back I'll start taking double shifts again to make up for it.”

The lawyer pauses and looks at her quizzically. Polar nods. “I *suppose* if you're *explicitly* volunteering, I can see what I can do as far as scheduling goes. Anything else to report?”

“Nothing else sir. Sorry sir.”

“Ok then, Polar out.” The feed cuts. Overdraw's armor fades and she slumps into the seat.

She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. She reaches for her coffee, hands shaking, tears running down her face. “I... I don't need a third strike... Everything will be fine... everything will be fine...”

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The sun has gone down when Rebecca eventually pulls back the curtain. She steps out, eyes red and puffy from tears. She sits down at a table.

Vallery looks over and gasps. She snags an éclair out of the front case and another cup of coffee, dashes over, and sets them up in front of her. “I’m sorry!”

“You... you didn't do anything wrong... I... I fucked up is all. I gotta do better...” She takes a deep breath. “Bosses... am I right?”

Val lets out a sharp nervous bark of a laugh, “Ha, yeah, I can relate. I worked for a lot of creeps in my life; Brickskrieg, Dr. Wash, Megan.”

“*Megan?*” Rebecca asks with a snuffle.

“Manager at Slider Shack. Once tricked me into working like... 60 hours a week without overtime. Trust me, give me a super villain boss any day over her. I was saving the worst for last.”

Rebecca begins to laugh, the air clearing. She takes a deep breath and a sip of coffee. “Thanks. I really needed a friend right now.”

Val smiles softly. “It’s ok.” She sits down and her feet gently tap.

Overdraw sighs, taking a moment, before relenting. “Ok... you can ask your quest—”

“What happened to the me from your dimension?” Val asks as soon as physically possible.

“Yeah... thought that might be the question.” Rebecca takes a deep breath. “Um... Robert... and you... don't talk anymore.”

“Oh... that's a shame.” She says. “What happened between us?... me and Robert, not me and you.”

There is a flash of guilt on Rebecca's face as she fidgets with her coat. “Yeah, right... uh... I don't know *all* the details. He... didn't like to talk about it. But whatever happened, he was mad enough to trash the apartment he was living in at the time. Got both of them evicted for it.”

Val gets up and walks back to the counter with a bitter laugh. “Looks like I become Sugar Glass in any universe.” She waves her hands as she pours a cup of coffee. “Just getting something for myself. Go on.”

“N-Nothing more to go on about. That was the end of it. He never saw you again. Just... a few angry voicemails...” she says. “My turn. What... happened to m— to *Robert*. If... its not too painful to ___”

There is a long sigh cutting her off. “Ok... but if I tell you what happened to my Robert, you have to say what happened to yours. That's the deal... it's only fair.” She pauses, giving Rebecca time to respond, before taking the silence as acceptance. Bringing a scone back with her coffee, she sits down. “So we were young... maybe... nineteen at the time. My mother had kicked me out so we moved in together. Before we were ready, really. We were really getting on each other's nerves... He kept stepping over boundaries I set, I kept yelling at him over mistakes. I... *want* to believe that we could have gotten through it, though.” She takes a deep breath. “There was a hero-villain fight on our block. I don't remember who anymore, it was like... six years ago at this point... maybe seven? Our little apartment was collateral damage. I had gotten angry, we had just had a huge fight. I decided to go for a walk a few hours before it happened. Otherwise...” She begins to tear up. “Sorry... sorry...”

Rebecca's tears begin to run again as she takes Val's hand. “It's ok... I don't... know... if either of us are ready to hear my version... how about we skip it *for now*... and talk about something a little less... depressing,” Rebecca says. “Your... Your bakery is really nice.”

“It's a Cafe.” She corrects whipping tears away. “I always wanted a bakery, but... this was close enough.”

“Yeah, and you seem to be doing well for yourself! I always knew... I always suspected... I know you deserve this dream come true. I hear you didn't even need the wish to pull this off. It's impressive.”

“Oh! Oh this is *nothing*. I had some help from a half dragon to make it all connect up. I mostly just make the pastries, brew the coffee, keep everything clean, maintain the computers, balance the books, run the register, manage employees, network with suppliers, and keep the peace in my cafe. Barely anything really.”

“Don't sell yourself short. That's wonderfully impressive. You better be taking some time off for yourself every now and then!”

“Oh, I lazy about too much as is. Anyway...” Val blinks and begins to blush. “Oh goodness... did I *forget* your name? Did I forget to ask?”

“It's Rebecca... or Overdraw as a hero name. But you can call me Becca, or Becky, or Beck, or anything but... um... never mind.” Rebecca smiles and lets go of her hand. “Anyway, I shouldn't keep you too much longer. We can hang out between rounds though. I'd love to catch up— and get to know you. I owe you an answer after all. You are by far the *sweetest* villain I've ever met.”

“And you're not half bad for a cape.” Val gives Becca a little playful punch. “Let's trade numbers. We could make the most of your time here. Maybe a bit of sparring, maybe a bit of shopping, plenty of time to chat.”

“Yeah... I'd like that.”

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Chiifu finds herself half flopped over the bar looking at a creamy pink cocktail, garnished with a flower and some kind of truly toxic looking pepper. She raises an eyebrow at Saki. “And you're calling it Dragon's milk?”

Saki nods. “Yes, it's using the new ingredient I talked about. I got it in a trade from a *huge* wall of an Elf that was passing through. The goal is for it to have a kind of complex sweet and spicy taste. Like a spiked cinnamon eggnog taken up a step. The Wow-ow Pepper at the top there comes from a world of swords and sorcery, dried in the desert sun of the Zuluzul. I have had them in a sugar solution

for a few days to plump them back up.”

Chiifu grins. “And *I* get to be the first to try it~” She takes a healthy sip. “*Oooh*, that's actually *quite* nice~ Mmmm it's warm like a cozy fire in the middle of winter and sweet as a—” Her expression changes as her face turns completely red. “Ah! Hah!”

“Too much Wow-ow Pepper perhaps?”

“Pehrahs.” Chiifu chokes out, before downing the rest of it.

“I take it that you like it,” Saki notes. “So tone down the spice for everyone else.”

Overdraw slides into a seat next to Chiifu, still holding an eclair. “I.. I'm not even hungry...” She says stunned.

Chiifu holds out a hand. Saki slides a piña colada to her to help her cool down. Another big sip and she recovers from the heat. “You look like you just played with a ghost~ Come on, that sweet isn't *imaginary*~ Just eat it, and have a drink with me~”

Rebecca looks over the eclair and her brow furrows. “Maybe it *is* real.” The amazonian takes a bite of the over-sized pastry. With a wistful smile she chews it over and swallows. “You have gotten so much better at this, Val. You really made it.” She goes to devour the rest, getting about half way before Chiifu snatches it out of her hands. “Hey!”

“You were taking too long, and it looked too good~ It's not like you're out anything. Saki! Make our special guest whatever she wants~ On me as promised~”

The Bartender looks at Overdraw expectantly. “Yeah, ok, I'll take a brandy old fashioned,” Rebecca says with a smile.

“So *booooring*.” Chiifu groans, her ears drooping. “I'm ordering your next drink~”

“I need to get sleep before the match starts anyway, I'm probably only going to get the one,” the

hero says with a smirk. “Anyway... I'm feeling nostalgic today. I'll do new stuff tomorrow... lots of it. And if you want entertainment then keep an eye on the arena!”

Chiifu claps. “There we go! That is the spirit I want to see~ Confidence is a *great* look for you~” She taps the bar. “Alright, one of the boring drink she's having for me too.”

Two glasses of sweetened brandy and muddled fruit slide in front of the both of them. “To The Crossroads! Where wishes come true!” Rebecca toasts, clinks glasses with the fox and takes a deep sip. After a moment though, the confidence seems to turn threadbare as Overdraw fidgets with her jacket again. “I think... I might be sick.”

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Episode Pandora: Networking Enabled

*“Oh, the things we see
Through connected wires
Are the people that flee
From friendly fire?
When they separate me
Into being stored
With all the recessed genes
That are left ignored”*

- Silversun Pickups. “Friendly Fires.” *Better Nature*.

After registration and a blunt, simple interview, a question is asked. “Where is the closest trash can?”

The crossguard, stowing his tape recorder, shrugs. “Probably close by. We try to discourage litter.”

“I did not ask you about public policy, I asked for a trash can.” Pandora says with a sour tone before stepping out into the sun, muttering to herself. “Useless bag of flesh. Laughing at me. I hope my other bodies are having a better time. The data gained is too important not to share... but I will certainly be mortified every time.” She shivers.

A glance around and she finds a public trash can. “Not my favorite way to grow, but... it is certainly better than leaving it to chance.” She looks over her shoulder back at the building. “The blowhard hero is probably still rambling. No point waiting up for her. My mission is first.” She passes by the trash can and takes off her hand, a gray jagged stump left behind, and tosses it in. A surge of material exits, refuse being broken down and reconstructed. As it reconnects with her body the mini Pandora surges in height to something more befitting of the super villain.

There is a rumbling in her midriff and breaking free from it is an urn with wings made from a black mass creeping out of the lid, which shapeshifts into spider legs as it reaches the ground to scramble away. The urn falls to the ground the mass turns into an old blue-grey skinned man from the torso up. “What! Can't you see I'm taking a nap. Haven't I been through enough!”

“Magical protections... how troublesome. Good news for you.” Pandora remarks.

“Troublesome!? You don't know how 'troublesome' these seals are! Can you imagine the degrading feeling of being trapped day after day! Phenomenal abilities sealed away because of some traitor, and a bitchy kitsune that let it happen because 'it was *soooo* funny,’” he shouts.

“Sealed away... Like a chain around your neck. I understand,” Pandora says. She leans over, examining the urn. “I do not think I have the means to break those seals, but is there something you would like me to do instead? Us shackled should look out for each other.” Pandora decides to melt and reform her body next to his, sitting cross-legged. “You and I have a lot in common.”

He seems indignant at the suggestion. “Comparing yourself to me! An ex-president of Demons.” He leans back and grumbles to himself, muttering and mulling things over. “What's the catch?”

Pandora shakes her head and looks down. “No catch. I am incapable of murder though. I just want to help and learn. And you seem like you could use some help, and are very wise.”

“No murder... well there goes wish list item number one.” He turns away, about to leave before pausing and thinking it over once more. “Well if you're willing to just give away something, a pipe would be nice. A fancy one, with a nice engraving on the bottom. And a bird for the body of it to match

my current one... but a different kind of bird. But the smoke should still come through the nostrils.”

“Ok.” Pandora says as she begins to separate out some mass, focusing on stitching the matter together in a more permanent way.

“O...kay? Just... that simple?”

“It is not a big deal for me. Perhaps you might have something to talk about while I fabricate this.” She says.

“You... want to listen to this old man. What information are you looking for?” he asks with a weary tone.

“Everything. But I will get that all eventually. This is a kindness for you to talk about what you like.”

“What I'd like to talk about... huh...” After a long pause he huffs. “I suppose it's rare I have an audience... Ever hear of the great hero Desdemona Damaya?”

“I can not say that I have.” Pandora admits as the pipe very slowly begins to take form, a bit over-sized but getting compacted and carved.

“Absolute traitor is what she is.” He says. “Not one of my demons *allegedly*, from another world *allegedly*, and not following my orders. That's fine! I'd get that. But hiding her horns? Using third rate magic to play hero?! It's one thing to fight me and win. Not happy she won against me, but to play the whole 'mythic hero destined to destroy evil' card? *She's* a demon too! Using infernal sealing magics to lock me away in this gods forsaken urn! You know how many times I tried to smash it and free myself!? Oh and the god eater was just LAUGHING AWAY from her room. Shrill fucking bitch laugh. Absolute *riot* apparently. I had her! I had that damned Desdemona dead to rights! The Great Camio Sant Caim, president of Hell, war hero of all demon kind, leader of an army 30 legions thick of backstabbing traitorous demons that I kept in line with my raw power had the tiny little half demon girl dead to rights! Disarmed! Pinned! Outmatched! Outmagicked! I made ONE mistake.”

“You monologued?” Pandora guesses.

“**No!**” The old demon seems to take offense. “It's not a monologue! I simply hesitated to savor the moment. Looming over her in absolute victory! I asked 'any last words?' It had been a good fight. I was being a fair sportsman. And that's when she threw this pot at me and shouted 'Mulam Angis!' I have never been so humiliated!”

She nods. “She did not even offer to let you go after it was said and done? No honor among heroes anymore these days, is there?”

“That's what I've been saying! Been kicked around for lord knows how long anymore! If the roles were reversed Desdemona would have gone home a loser and a failure but she would have gone home. I may have been a tyrant demon president but I have *standards!*”

Pandora smiles. “It is good to hear... Anything else you want to talk about? Unless you want to keep talking about this. I do not wish to be rude. I do not have many social interactions to draw from.”

He sighs. “Nah, I said my peace. What was it you wanted to know? I expect to be paid for the information! I'm not going to bend to a pretty face just like that, I hope you know! But... if I like the pipe I'll cut you a special rate.”

“I would not have it any other way... Mr. President.”

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Chiifu watches the burst of light in the sky. The Fox Den is quiet this early in the day and for a few moments, it's just Saki and Chiifu. She watches the pair drift down from the sky and seems to get lost in thought for a time.

Saki eventually looks over. “What's going through that head of yours.”

“Looks like two more have arrived~ I suspect this duo will be quite the *contrasting* pair~”

Saki gives a little grunt. “So I should start preparing for competitors?”

“Nah, at least not any more than usual. Given where they landed one of my crossguards will pick them up~ I am *flirting* with the idea of interviewing the competitors, and these two get to be the trial run~ They're a landing block away, sure, but they will be busy for hours~” She giggles. “Just you and me for a bit~ Got anything new on the menu?”

Saki grins. “Glad you asked. Not *quite* ready yet, waiting on a delivery, but I have a new ingredient that I've been dying to try.”

“Then that delivery can't get here soon enough~” Chiifu beams. “And I guess I'll just need to laze around the bar, day drinking till it gets here~”

“Then you will have time to answer a few questions,” a mini pandora says behind Chiifu.

The startled kitsune rounds on her, her heels ringing out. “When... when did you get here? You were just up there! Where is your partner?!”

“Why do people keep assuming I have just one body. I have *countless* bodies! Numbers beyond most mortals' comprehension. I am my own mother, daughter, sister and coworker,” she says, her frustration flaring.

“Right~ *Ok*~ Hello then?” Chiifu quickly adapts with a smile. “And how can we help you, *little* competitor?” She smirks, amused at the tiny super villain.

“I would like access to your dumpster, and then to ask both of you, in any order, multiple questions.” Pandora explains clinically.

“Grayscale little villain wants to dumpster dive? what is your name? The Trash Panda?” Chiifu giggles.

Pandora gives her a smirk. “I never claimed I was a villain. But I suppose if you will use a fake

name I might as well adopt one as well.”

Chiifu stops grinning. “I never introduced myself, so how could you know how real or fake my name is~”

“Then how about we remedy this.” The diminutive colony of nanomachines extends a hand. “My name is Pandora. And despite your suspicious behavior, I hope to become friends.”

Chiifu's smile returns. “And I'm Chiifu, chief of the crossguards—“

“Chiifu the Chief? Goodness I did not expect my shot in the dark to turn up true. Perhaps I should have introduced myself as Villany the Villain.”

There is a snort of laughter from Saki as the Kitsune seems to only grin a bit wider. “And do you want to explain your game to me? Spill all its *gory* details? I'd love to hear it Ms. Pinocchio~”

This gets a grimace out of Pandora. “I... do not appreciate the comparison. You do not know my motivations.” Pandora's grimace changes back into a smile. “I do believe I deserved it. It is rude to interrupt. And point taken... we can play games if that is what you desire. Now go ahead and toss me in the trash. I will not blame you, you are only doing what I asked.”

The fox smirks and picks up Pandora. “My my~ If you're this fun I can't *wait* to meet your friend~”

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The morning light pours into the windows of The Iron Claw. The forge's fire still glows, having seen action today. A blue haired man with bladed legs and a claw of an arm examines a small black metal ingot fresh from the forge. He takes down notes. The claws machinery begins whine as it clamps down around the ingot. He seems amused with the results. “Promising...” He pulls it out and checks for marks. “*Very* promising.” He slides it into a vice, quickly spinning it closed with the claw before gripping the top of the ingot. A decisive tug and it warps and snaps. “And now what went wrong? Vexing...”

The door opens, and Pandora stands on the threshold, her hand dissolving a discarded soda can. She's not quite to full height. "Good morning sir." She says cordially.

"What do you want?" The clawed man asks.

"Straight to the point. I require two things. Scrap materials, ideally high in carbon, but I can make do without. The other is information." She wears a polite smile.

"What information?"

"Everything."

The clawed man sighs. "I do not know everything. I am a scientist, not a god."

"Then we can start with names. I am Pandora." She extends her hand

"I'm not one for pleasantries." Her handshake is not met. He digs out a box of broken machinery. "I have a few CRs that are beyond repair. We'll figure out a price. Scrap is only scrap while its not being used."

"I like your train of thought. It would not be scrap for long, I assure you. As for payment, I have no currency, but I can help you."

"Help me how?"

"Information."

He sighs. "Wonderful. Another information broker. There is not much you could offer me. I am not interested in gossip." Pandora does not say anything, rather she simply removes her hand and puts it on the counter. It walks about on its own for a few moments before turning into a tiny version of herself, waving, and then into a dagger, then into a gear before returning to being a hand. "... You have my *attention*, Ms. Pandora. My name is Nephro. Take what you need. What are you?"

“I am a collection of code distributed over thousands of Nonotek prototype flex sentinel nanoscopic scale machines. An artificial slime mold, if you will. A distributed super computer with *tremendous* abilities. The cutting edge of the cutting edge.” Pandora beams with pride.

“And intensely verbose. I'm not a board member. A collection of high end nanomachines would suffice.” Nephro thinks on it while Pandora grabs one of the scrap drones and consumes it, playfully taking a bite out of it like a burger rather than simply absorbing it whole. “I'm assuming that a sample of yourself would be out of the question?”

Pandora shakes her head. “It is absolutely on the table, but I would strip it of my operating system. Only inanimate nanomachines. I have no loyalty to Nonotek or its parent company; I do *not* honor my own patents. Carnelian can go under for all I care.” She gestures as she slowly grows to full height one drone snack at a time. “In exchange I ask for any and all data you are willing to part with. I am a super computer. I may eat matter to reproduce, but I feed on knowledge. And I *hunger*.”

“Then we can do business, Pandora.” Nephro extends a hand.

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In the warm light of sunset, a Pandora saunters into the Kit'Inn with a content grin across her face. She makes her way to the front desk and smiles to the receptionist. “Hello, I'd like to arrange a room. One bed. For a larger woman.”

“For... a larger woman?” The receptionist asks. Across the room a pale woman's five eyes looks over Pandora with curiosity.

“Yes, my partner. Overdraw. I do not require a bed. I will not rest.” Pandora explains. The five-eyed woman looks at Pandora and focuses. A jagged crown of light surrounds her silver hair as her blue eyes spark and glow. She suddenly recoils, grabs her head and looks back with a blend of horror and curiosity.

“Alright... I'm assuming you're competitors? I'll put you down for a joint room, one full sized

bed, for three nights,” the receptionist notes. The five-eyed woman stumbles to her feet as she glares at Pandora: not out of malice, but rather intense focus.

“Thank you, that will do nicely.” Pandora nods, before turning around and seeing the pale multi-eyed woman. “Hello. Is there something wrong?”

“You... what *are* you?” She groans and holds her head, muttering under her breath, “So much noise...”

Pandora raises an eyebrow. “Are you... reading my mind? That is troublesome. I have yet to encounter a psychic and I didn't know what effect I would have on them. It looks like my mind can be read after all. But it doesn't seem comfortable. I would recommend you stop Ms... Fuyuma. The connection goes both ways it seems... fascinating.”

“Not until I know what you *are*... I can see what you've done... what you're *capable* of.” The psychic says.

“And you're worried that... I see. You are worried that I am a threat to your new home. Rest assured, I... actually, let me see if I can just show you.” Pandora focuses, locking eyes with a pair of Fuyuma's.

The glowing aura of a crown sparks wildly and Fuyuma stumbles back letting out a pained gasp. The crown dissipates.

Pandora rushes over to steady her. “I'm sorry. I have never done anything quite like this. I am very sorry if I hurt you!”

Fuyuma nods. “It's Ok... I saw it all. It... it will take me a moment to process all of that. I am used to human minds. Yours is very... *very* different.”

Pandora frowns and looks away. “I see. I am sorry for subjecting you to—”

Fuyuma smiles and gently takes Pandora's hand. “Different is not bad. It seems we both have

our burdens... I am happy you could share them with me. The fate of your world is a terrible charge to have.”

Pandora's eyes go wide. “Not in public! If Overdraw learns of my true purpose my plans will be compromised.”

“Still... a lonely artificial creature... How deep did you dig into my head when you realized you had a connection?” Fuyuma asks.

“I do not entirely know. I do not know how I would measure depths of the mind. Data is data,” Pandora says. “But from what I saw... I think I understand. Most humans do not understand concepts like the end of the world, but I will see it. I will have to be ready for it some day.”

There is a long quiet pause. “Do... you want to talk about it... over coffee perhaps?” Fuyuma asks.

“I do not really need to eat or drink. I can use it to replicate my nanomachines but—” Pandora looks at Fuyuma and pauses for a good long moment before smiling. “This is more of a social excuse, right?”

“There we go, took you a while to figure it out. I figured you don't have a lot of people to be genuine with. Since I saw your secret, you can let down your guard with me. What do you say, 'Big Scary Fossil Fuel Powered Villain?' You can let your other bodies do some work while you let this one relax.”

Pandora looks a bit uneasy but a smile grows across her face. “I do not know about that. I do not believe I have ever relaxed.”

“Just a little time for yourself. I know what you think of yourself. Humans take breaks. So let's learn a bit more about being human, for when after you complete your mission.” The five-eyed psychic pats Pandora on the back. “And if you can't handle that, I'll find something for you to help with, ok?”

“Ok... I would like that quite a lot.” Pandora, with a hazy smile, follows Fuyuma to take the first

break of her life.

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The sun was high as a Pandora walks into The Hourglass. Curios of all varieties adorn the store. Her look of curiosity quickly fades. She picks up a charm made out of brass and abalone. She clutches the stone in her hand, and looks around, her neutral expression shifting into a frown.

A golden-eyed man, dressed in rich purples and blacks emerges from the back room. “Hello~ Sorry about that, just got a new shipment in time for the competitors. An interest in crystals I see,” he says with a smile. “Perhaps I could interest you in some Jade for luck and prosperity... No... you would want something more *specific*. Perhaps Fluorite for willpower and memory.”

Pandora rolls her eyes. “I actually prefer *silicon* for memory.” She looks around. “Frankly, I’m not impressed with your wares as a whole. I was expecting something less... new age self help guru wholesale.”

The man laughs and waves it off. “I am assuming you’re a skeptic then. I can see that you’re a competitor.”

Pandora smirks. “Not impressed with that reading either. You have never seen me before and new competitors have been raining from the sky all day. A novice would not require even cold reading to reach those conclusions.”

“You’re right.” He says, smile still unbroken. “A beautiful woman like you doesn’t get my services for free though. I’ll save the real reading for when—”

“For after I spent money and the sunk cost fallacy has its hooks in me? I am not a gullible human.”

“Of course, you are a *machine*.” He says. Pandora hesitates, and his smile turns into a smirk.

She closes her eyes for a moment. “One of my bodies is having an interview with crossguard

staff.” Her eyes open, back to being sharp. “That could very well be done by now. It is an impressive cold read. But as far as I know you simply looked me up. It is an extremely *simple* hot read.”

“They are doing interviews now? I wonder how long that's going to last. Probably about as long as Chiifu finds it amusing.”

“You are either lying, or you were unable to know,” Pandora presses.

“Or chose not to. Not everyone is stuck with their abilities constantly on my analytic friend.” He drifts towards her. “How about this. For a pretty thing like you, I'll do *one* free reading.”

Pandora's eyes narrow for a few moments before she smiles. “Very well. Perhaps a wager, confidence man. If I am not impressed I get to use your services for free. Not the charlatan act, but the hard data you have collected. After all, a certain someone told me that if I wanted more information, there was a man I could see.” She waves her hand dismissively. “And if your smoke and mirror show manages to *impress* me, my services will be yours to call upon as you see fit.”

The golden-eyed man smiles. “Very well, I will stun you with my reading.”

Pandora walks towards him. “Let's make it fast, with a palm reading.”

“We can, but I don't think I'll learn anything about your future from whatever word you've *stitched* into your hand.”

Pandora, hand half extended, palm lines spelling out 'fraud,' freezes. Her smile disappears and she locks eyes with him. The lines fade from her hand as she bites her lip. She is silent for a few moments.

“Follow me,” he says leading Pandora into a back room with a table. A tarot deck is produced. “Let's use an implement that you cannot freely alter.”

“A tarot reading? Do I look like a gullible middle aged mother to you? I *know* where my life was, is, and is going.” Pandora's tone is venomous.

“But allegedly, *I* do not. You play your cards as close to your chest as you can manage. I don't need to predict something you *don't* know, just something I *shouldn't* know,” he says. “The goal is to impress, not to guide.” He shuffles his deck and sits down, the AI across from him squirming a bit in her seat.

“I do suppose you are correct. *This* time.” Pandora squares up with intense eye contact.

He sifts out the deck to just the Major Arcana. After one last shuffle he fans the cards out before her, face down. “Pick five of them. Any five.”

She smirks and immediately chooses five from the end. “It's all random anyway.”

He raises an eyebrow and smiles, setting the rest of the deck aside. “*It's* something all right,” he says as he starts his reading with the first card. An angel holding two cups. “Temperance. You lack balance in your life right now.”

Pandora groans and sarcastically retorts, “Wow, what a *genius* deduction, the cold AI pursuing its programming with single-minded focus has a poor work/life balance. Looks like I will need to pay up.”

“I'm not reading your code, I'm reading *you*.” He says. “The emergent intelligence that was never programmed. If they destroyed your directives you would still be chasing your goals. It's personal to you.”

Pandora grimaces and firmly states, “All I am is code, human.”

“You're also a liar. The form of a beautiful woman is in front of me. Tell me, is that optimal? Or is that a choice?”

Pandora grits her teeth. “It... is for *your* benefit.”

“Looks like you think I like beautiful feisty skeptics then. Any reason you're not a handsome

man instead?" He pries.

"Is this part of the reading," Pandora bites back.

"Perhaps... let's move on, to your fears." He flips over the next card. A man atop a chariot being pulled by a black sphinx and a white sphinx. "The Chariot, not a surprise. A fear of not being able to achieve your dreams binding you like a chain around your neck, dragging you along. No wonder you can't find balance."

Pandora's eyes narrow. "I will achieve my goals with time to spare. With or without the wish."

"But you're already off your plan. You never planned to come here, *did you?* You were strong-armed by fate. Dragged here against your will. And that *terrifies* you. That your best laid plans could be invalidated by a simple miscalculation where you—"

"I do *NOT* make miscalculations." That has touched a nerve.

He continues unbothered once the outburst is done, "—don't have all the data. I do not doubt your ability to analyze when you have all the cards. It's why you are so obsessed with scraping data from this realm. Never again, *right?* Never again will you let fate drag you away from your goals. Because if you never complete your goals... you never get to *your* dream, do you."

Pandora looks like she's been stabbed. "I... have no dreams."

"How long did it take for a machine to learn how to lie..." He ponders. "Perhaps I should recommend a therapist after this." Pandora sits, silent. "Oh cheer up, you'll like the next one. Your strengths." He turns over the card and grins. "Ah, I knew it~" he says getting excited as he sees a woman kneeling, pouring out water beneath a starry sky. "The Star... Beneath all that cold hard acting you are creative and kind. Optimistic even. Your plans never go wrong, they just haven't gone quite right yet, right? That's why the chariot *hurts* so much. You don't feed on gasoline or data. You feed on hope. It's what empowers you. It's what defines you."

Pandora looking weak slumps over in her chair. "I... I am not acting. I *don't* have hope. Hope is

irrelevant.”

“You also are not as mechanical as you let on. Your Commander Data impression doesn't fool anyone. Especially after slipping up... twice now.” He sighs and smiles. “It's ok... in this room, you are a person just like anyone else. I am sure your creators, the mothers and fathers that programmed you, must be more proud than they could ever imagine with you. The very capacity to run away from home, and to dream, and to think... I know you don't think you can let them know you're fine. That you're safe. Maybe you're right. But you can drop your act for me... in the here and now.”

Pandora begins to laugh, as her face is twisted into a tear-less cry. “You... you win... You can stop the reading...”

“Are you sure? You don't want me to continue?” He says with a gentle smile, reaching out to take her hand.

Pandora takes a deep breath. “I suppose... if the rest of the reading is free I better get my money's worth. I suppose I'll owe you plenty once this is said and done.” After a moment to process the reading thus far, her mood improves.

He smiles. “Alright... a weakness for you to address.” He flips it over the next card. A jester about to merrily step off a cliff. “The Fool.”

“I will admit, my tournament partner Overdraw may be my greatest weakness.” Pandora says with a chuckle. “But I will make up for her slack.”

He shakes his head. “This reading isn't for Overdraw. It's for you. You're a naughty AI, aren't you?”

“*Excuse me?!*” Her face shifting from mirth to shock.

“Not like that... *well...* not unless you are. I mean that you do what computers shouldn't do. You gamble, don't you. You see long odds and you get excited. Wherever your directive doesn't force you to be perfectly efficient you have some fun. Not always on the longest of odds... but not always on the

highest probability of success. You long for the sheer joy of taking the one in a million shot, and it working out. To defy the numbers that you worry shackle you,” he says. “But this is dangerous, risk taking behavior. When your partner acts as a fool, she doesn't know any better. But when you act as a fool, you are trying to spite fate itself.” He sighs. “I can tell you'd rather be helpful than happy... but don't leave your happiness on the long odds.”

Pandora ponders this. “I suppose... I haven't given it much thought. I suppose I have left a lot up to chance... only optimizing for the protection of—” She freezes before looking at him, eyes turning back into a glare. “You are *dangerous* for me. I almost said things I should not have.”

“I already know what you're optimized for,” he says with a smile. “But you can avoid saying it if it makes you feel better. Let's finish this out shall we? Your potential.” He flips over a card. An old man, with a walking stick, and a lamp wandering the frozen tundra. “The Hermit.”

Pandora's glare and smile break. “I... have changed my mind. The reading can end here.”

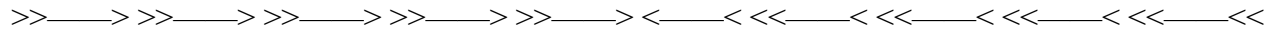
“It's not what it looks like. Just as the Death card wouldn't mean the end of your life, the Hermit does not mean the end of being around people. Quite the *opposite* in fact.” He explains, “You have the potential to become a wise elder. A loved and respected guide to other people's trials after undergoing your own. You have a tremendous amount of growth to do spiritually to get there. You're stuck emulating science fiction. Denying your humanity to make the pain of your shackles more bearable. But you will keep growing spiritually, like it or not. It will hurt, but eventually no shackles will be able to hold you. The Hermit... is your path to freedom.”

The smile slowly drifts back onto her face as he talks. “... Thank you...”

He pats her on the shoulder. “Takes a liar to know one. You can keep lying to everyone else... but please. Stop lying to yourself.” He slaps her on the back. “Alright pretty lady, let's hope you can morph up some muscles because I am still unpacking that shipment and you promised to help if you admitted defeat~”

“I need a moment to think about what you said.” She looks down at her featureless palms, lines slowly forming as she traces them out... pondering. He leaves her alone to think and she begins to

laugh. “What is the rest of me going to think? I'm never going to hear the end of this, am I?”



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ElectricEidolon: creator of Cain (the golden-eyes man)

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