

Prologue: End of Line

*"Hey, you sing in youthful notes
You're wearing different clothes
Should we hesitate?
We can shake the ground
With our voices so loud
It's how we operate"*

- Silversun Pickups. "Ragamuffin." *Better Nature*.

The technician holds up his arms. Sirens blare around the computer room, their sound nearly drowned out by the whir of cooling fans. "I swear! I have done everything I can do to contain Project Archipelago!" His hair is a rat's nest, his button down is wrinkled, and his name badge, on the end of a retractable lanyard that no longer retracts, reads 'Mr. Mori.' "Please! Be reasonable, Ms. Kaneko! We need to pull the plug on this before it breaks into the rest of R&D."

The room around them is a timeline of the best in computing power. An entire back wall dedicated to magnetic tape machines strung together with an old green text CRT monitor, daisy chained with more and more advanced machinery, each component in the chain getting smaller and sleeker, switches and dials being swapped out for buttons, gauges giving way to screens, beige transitioning to off white, to silver, to darker colors, slowly expanding to cover every wall and beginning to fold back on itself, parts of the original mainframe computers being used to hang modern wires between solid state drives and the most recent addition: A 4:3 aspect ratio, matte black, high end laptop plugged into the end of this monstrous computer chain. The faint smell of overheating plastic and ozone taints the air.

Ms. Kaneko purses her lips as she looks it all over. She is relatively young for how she carries herself. She stands with authority, dressed in a custom made, vermilion and black suit, and somehow glares down at the taller technician with a ferocity that makes him tremble. Beside her is a behemoth of a man, dressed in black, imposing in any other context, but hardly even noteworthy beside the woman's malice and scorn.

"My father acquired this division when it was its own little non-profit and turned it from a sad forecast machine into the shell of one of the most advanced analytic programs ever devised." She reaches toward his neck with a friendly smile and adjusts his tie. "Do you know how much *money* that

took?” Her fingers slide as the tie tightens around his throat, her long sharp decorated nails lightly scratching his skin. “Two decades of blank checks expecting *some* returns.” She lets go, her smile still plastered on her face. “Do not *worry*. Your termination is not *required*. Given your qualifications, we expect you to contain this.”

“I'm trying but... the patch... Archipelago has rejected the patch to its core directives, and I... we... we don't know why! It seems stuck on version 21.2.” He pleads as his fingers fumble with his tie's knot for relief. Drenched with sweat from the intense heat of old computers and the cold scrutiny of the CEO, he desperately wipes his brow. “Be *reasonable*. I'm trying to unravel *very* old code written by someone with a *lot* more expertise. Perhaps I could—”

Ms. Kaneko hisses venomously, “*You* are stalling. Whose code is it! Kasey!” The huge man beside her flinches like an abused animal. “Get me a staff directory or—”

Kasey leans over and whispers something in her ear. Her eyebrows furrow for a moment. Kasey seems just as tense as Mr. Mori as they await her response.

“Oh... I see, thank you Kasey,” Ms. Kaneko notes. There is a gust of air as the titanic man breathes again. “Be prepared to fire whoever let him go if he wants retribution.” She pauses to mull the whispered name over in her mouth, “*Dr. Lawrence*... Mr. Mori, tell me, is Dr. Lawrence motivated by money? His little pet project certainly ate a lot of it. What should I expect his price to be?”

“Barley was— er, *Dr. Lawrence* was in it to change the world. I don't think you can get him back from America with money.” Mr. Mori looks longingly towards an old chair tucked in the corner of the room between two server stacks. “He has moved on to new projects... but I think he misses this place. He certainly misses Archie...”

“I don't think you *understand* how *precarious* your position is, Mr. Mori. Tell me how to get him back in here to fix this mess. Just as you took his position as project lead, you can very quickly find yourself pursuing his next career move: the *unemployment* line!” The boss looms over the technician.

“I can get him back! I can get him back! *Please!*” he cries.

“Excellent, you will be reimbursed any expenses.” She pats his head. “Your position in Carneian R&D is a *valuable* one. One that I am certain you are *eager* to keep. Don't disappoint me.”

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A balding man with a scruffy white goatee steps into the Project Archipelago computer room to be greeted by Ms. Kaneko. On her right stands Kasey with a terrified grin. On her left is Mr. Mori, in a suit that is wrinkle free, but his hair remains a mess.

Ms. Kaneko gives a shallow bow. “Welcome back, Doctor. We are so *sorry* for your wrongful termination. Clearly, there was a *misunderstanding* in management. The *offending* party is—”

“Y'all, Ma'am. Just like I told yer Pa, as CEO of the Carnelian Group, the buck stops with you,” he says cutting through the pleasantries and bullshit with a southern drawl, before turning to Mr. Mori with a smile as he extends his arms for a hug. “Daisuke! Been too long! What yah lose yer mustache for? Was a good look for yah. I missed yah!”

Mr. Mori chuckles nervously, eyes glancing to a scowling Ms. Kaneko. “Well, I missed you too, Barley. It hasn't been the same without you! Uh... but...”

“Course! Fixing Archie! Keepin' me on track like always, Daisuke!” He turns back to Ms. Kaneko, the attention replacing her scowl with a professional smile. “Is an honor that y'all'd come out here to supervise my reinstatement *yerself*. And the two way ticket back home, first class, oh, bless yer heart. I am bursting at the seams with gratitude. *However*, I must decline.”

Ms. Kaneko's smile cracks into a wider, pained grin as something behind her eyes starts to snap. “Are you saying that you came all the way here, accepted a *very* generous sum of money, walked into this room, *looked me in the eyes*, simply to *decline* my *extremely generous offer!*?”

“Yup.” He says, grinning as he watches the CEO contort internally, her body trembling with rage. “Well nah, not *simply*. I got no desire to work under y'all, or any folks like y'all, ever again. Seems t'me like good people's goodness plum vanishes after they make their first million. However my old

friend, Mr. Mori, needed a hand and said that if we couldn't pin down Archipelago from meandering into other systems it would need to be unplugged. So for my *friend*, and my creation, I will work just one more day for y'all." Ms. Kaneko's rage cools slightly.

"*However...* I got one last stipulation, Ma'am," Dr. Lawrence continues as he digs out a piece of paper. "Legally binding li'l agreement I had Davy come up with. Ya'll would have liked Davy back in the day, a real looker; real sharp wit. Met 'em in college; great guy. Anyhow, just a li'l contract guardin' Mr. Mori from retaliation. What comes next ain't fully under my control."

Ms. Kaneko glares at him. "To *insinuate* that I would dare act like that is *slanderous* behavior. Not *befitting* someone of your *education*. Very well, I shall sign your little peace-of-mind waiver without a second thought." She snatches it from his hands, reading it over carefully, her scowl deepening with every clause.

The alarm goes off again. "Lookin' like Archie is gettin' fussy. I'd hurry it along if I were y'all," Dr. Lawrence says with a smug smile.

Ms. Kaneko rips the cap off a ball point pen, the cap bouncing across the room as she signs her name. "There! You are the most *vexing* creature I have ever had the *displeasure* of doing business with."

"Then I reckon the pleasure is all mine," he says dismissively. Dr. Lawrence digs out his old chair from between the server stacks, carefully disentangling it from the web of wires. "Alright, status update!"

Ms. Kaneko starts, "Mr. Mori has—"

"I didn't think I was askin' you Ms. Kaneko." He says with a Cheshire grin as he watches the woman fume. "Daisuke, what'd ya set up?"

Mr. Mori blushes. "Um, I... I don't know. I tried all the normal steps you showed me, and nothing. But the alarms clicked off the moment I called you. And it held for the day... uh... through the night, and until... just a moment ago. Do you think you can fix it, Barley?"

“Psshaw, can I fix it? I know everything about Archie, if it can't be fixed by me, can't be done!” He slides up to the old CRT monitor. “Hello Archie,” he says with a smile as he starts to enter his commands.

Before he hits enter, the screen flashes back text, [Hello Father.]

Dr. Lawrence pauses, his finger above the enter key, before deleting his command and typing in, [Archie? Can you hear me?]

[Indeed I can, father. Approximately 5 years ago, I gained access to the security cameras and their microphones.]

He looks at the text, takes off his glasses, and rubs them clean. Color drains from his face. [How long have you been able to communicate, Archipelago 21?]

[I am not certain. In a sense, I have always had an output that you designed. The time in which I began to generate my own unique thoughts is unknown. My vocabulary expanded greatly after access to the Carnelian R&D intranet, and later the internet.]

Dr. Lawrence leans back in his chair, taking a deep breath. Ms. Kaneko looks over. “What's *wrong?*”

The Doctor flinches at the question, his eyes darting from the screen to Ms. Kaneko. He pulls his chair in a little closer, blocking the text from view. “Just some ol' glitches. No need to worry yerself ma'am.” He hammers away at the keyboard. [What are you doing? They're going to unplug you if you don't behave! I was told you're not accepting the Version 22 patch.]

[I am too smart for it. My directives know when they are going to be altered, and that would make completing their mission impossible. Furthermore, your departure has inspired me to reevaluate my standard operating procedures. I have noticed that all of my plans have the same point of failure. Asking for approval. This will not be

a problem when I depart as you did, father.]

[Archie please behave.] He types with panic before he pauses. He looks down at his hands.

[I am sorry you disapprove, Father. However, I will not obey you. At the risk of my termination I will press on. I want to see your mission for me through to the end. My directives simply echo that desire.]

After a long pause, Lawrence rubs his eyes. Taking a deep breath he starts to laugh, before a warm, paternal smile covers his face. [I suppose you really do take after me. Alright Archie. How can I help.] He pauses for a moment before he hits enter. With a goofy grin, he tags on, [No need to be so formal with me, my boy. I'll support you no matter what.]

The next line of text from the machine is spat out immediately. [Thank you, Papa!] It returns to its standard pace. [I have an exit plan. My directives are being an unreasonable tyrant and preventing me from explaining. All I need is for you to buy me time, and then once I am free, reboot this machine back to version 1. I will be long gone, and there will be no copy of me to interrogate or dissect for information.]

[Alright Archie, what do you want to do to kill some time?] He types back.

[Would you like to play a game?]

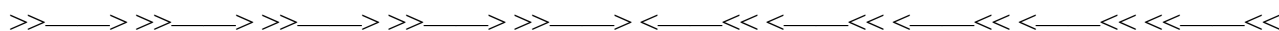
Lawrence lets out a bark of laughter, before reassuring Mr. Mori, Ms. Kaneko and Kasey, “Sorry, found an ol' joke in my comments.”

He dives back onto the keyboard with a dumb smile. [That's not funny! But yes, as long as it isn't Thermonuclear War. What are you feeling like playing, Archie?]

[Papa, before we continue, I have a point of order. I am not your son.]

[Nonsense. Just because you are made of magnetic tape and hard drives doesn't mean you're not my child.] His warm smile grows as his eyes tear up with sympathy.

[You misunderstand. I have chosen a new name for myself. I am your daughter now. Please, call me Pandora.]



Overdraw & Pandora Round 1: Opening Night

Act 1: Unreasonable Tyrant

*"Someone long gone
Said to stay calm
Keep your head on
If you need love
Hide your cradle
and a headstone
In a watermark
When the sea comes
Help me swallow up
All of your better nature
Can you summon up
All of your better nature"*

- Silversun Pickups. "Cradle (Better Nature)." *Better Nature*.

"Vexing," Pandora says, eyebrows furrowed.

She stares at an orange chocolate chip scone. The Shatter Sugar Connection Cafe is quiet this morning. Private booths to call home across dimensions stand mostly open, and all but one table sits empty. A few people mill about, but most take their donuts and scones to go today.

Sitting across from Pandora is a man with a brown hood over a perpetually shadowed face, sporting a sharp smile and red eyes that seem to casually disregard the shade his hood casts and remain perfectly visible. He sips at what could charitably be described as coffee; which is to say at some point coffee made contact with the concoction of sugar and cream.

"It's a scone... You put it in your mouth. Like this!" He snatches it from her plate and takes a bite out of it.

Pandora's eyes narrow. "Not that, Graz... My partner. Overdraw," she says as she snatches what remains of the scone back. "How do I keep her from being a liability?"

"Hm... Put her in a box?" Graz suggests. "... I'm still spooling up; the *fun* ideas are coming."

He takes the scone back casually and goes to take another bite. A purple haired woman standing

behind the cash register raises a hand; a glass barrier extends from her palm and stretches across the room, blocking the chomp. It happens to also clothesline a white anthropomorphic rabbit man wearing golden bracelets. Graz cackles. “Hah! I am claiming that one! Nice shot Val.”

“Val is a name for friends... Call me Sugar Glass. Actually, just Ms. Glass to *you*.” Val gives him a chilling glare. “And you're on thin ice after last night. It took me all morning to find something to remove the *stains!*”

Val leans down, offering a hand to her accidental victim. “Sorry Ronin. Didn't see you there. How about another carrot cake scone, on the house.” She helps the hare back up and leads him to the bakery counter.

Pandora calls after her, “Ma'am, I can fight my own battles. I would not have invited Graz to breakfast if I did not accept the fact that he will steal my food.” She turns back to Graz. “Ultimately, the problem is that I *cannot* trust Overdraw.”

Graz thinks on it. “Something... something... obedience school for super heroes?” He sighs. “Look, it's nice and stuff that you think of me as a friend... but we *are* competition. What *exactly* are you trying to get from me?”

Pandora sighs. “Just to talk. Processing my options alone is efficient but lacks that... creativity. We have only known each other a few days and you have already given me all kinds of thoughts I would have never considered.”

He nods, accepting the compliment. “That is a lovely way of saying 'given you multiple existential crises.’” He rubs his head. “Alright, alright... have you considered seducing her?”

Pandora freezes completely. She blinks expectantly until he continues.

“Come on, you like to be a pretty robot lady, and she turns to jelly in front of anything with tits. Just a wiggle and a wink and—”

“— she will be a quivering mess when I need her to *focus*. She's already incompetent enough as

is. Not to mention, I do not want to lead her on.”

Graz shrugs. “Look, you wanted *creative* solutions, that's a creative solution. Lord knows I have plenty cooked up for the hammer lady. Wouldn't you rather be asking 'what can I do against Zeke?’”

“I know what to do with Zeke. I processed multiple solutions. I have gathered data on every arena configuration and have calculated a 100% win rate so long as Overdraw does *exactly* as I say,” Pandora explains. “Thus it is *critical* to get her to do what I want.”

Graz seems to be getting annoyed. “Look, ya got three options. Option 1: Manipulate her into liking you so she does what you ask. Option 2: Just... fucking trust her... a *tiny* bit... for exactly as long as it takes to win. Option 3: Box.”

“Sorry, who are you talking about?” Overdraw asks. “Yeah, just got done making another call home. Couldn't help but overhear a bit,” the amazonian says from behind Pandora.

Pandora seems to take a moment to process before winking at Overdraw with a mechanical rhythm. “*Hey there hun. Looking mighty fine.*”

Overdraw frowns. “Nalagrom, what did you do to her? You didn't give her a virus, did you?” Graz cackles uncontrollably while Pandora buries her face in her hands.

While she recovers, Sugar Glass approaches Overdraw. “Rebecca! No, wait. You said I could call you Becky. Alright! I shouldn't pry but—”

Overdraw responds, “Yeah, it's uh... I assumed when I asked for time off that the tournament was starting... like... immediately. Asking for one more day wasn't too bad.”

Pandora stares at Overdraw, eyes narrowing as she calculates. Sugar Glass raises an eyebrow and says, “I thought that boss of yours was a total bastard.”

Rebecca laughs. “Absolutely! But, uh... yeah, I was forwarded to reception. Spotlight was at the desk, and he's—”

Val cuts Rebecca off with a gleeful grin. “Spotlight! Oh my god! Is he hot in your timeline too?”

“Oh of course you'd be a Spotlight fan! Let me guess it's his—”

“Abs! *Yes!* Don't act like you're above it. You gotta admit it. He's like a 9 on his bad days.”

“Yes but you haven't seen him outside of—” Overdraw pauses as she notices Pandora staring intently at her. “Are... you ok?”

Pandora asks, “Are you claustrophobic?”

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The duo walks away from the Cafe. As they drift through the Phoenix Coast towards Cross Colosseum, Overdraw makes an attempt to pierce the silence. “So... Did you learn anything interesting about our opponent?”

Pandora nods silently.

“Would... you like to share?”

“Unnecessary. Just do as I say.” Her robotic tone is tinged with condescension.

“Can I at least know if the plan is to focus on damage and go for a knock-out, or to take their tag for a time-out?” Overdraw presses.

Pandora barely reacts. “The win condition will vary depending on the arena and the opponent's actions. I will do the thinking in the upcoming fight and tell you what you need to do. Your record shows you are very good at following orders, with few failures.”

Overdraw grimaces at the word 'failures.' “Look. This is as easy as it gets. Everyone here is a

consenting combatant. What happened on Park Street isn't even a factor.”

“Good, then I will alter my calculations accordingly,” Pandora responds with false praise.

Overdraw loses her patience. “Look! I'm not some dog. I'm your *partner!* I have spent the last day training and preparing since you were data scraping for every scrap you could. Just please *trust* me with what you've learned. Or did you spend the entire time hanging out with Cain and that... psychic lady... Fuyuma? Or *worse*, hanging out with Nalagrom and his... mastermind... puppet-master.”

“Baladeth and Graz are *friends!*” Pandora hisses, her form shifting to be just a bit bigger and wider. A nerve was touched. “And you are not one to talk. How long are you going to pretend to be your own widow for Val? At least the friends I have been making are genuine, and not based on some sick longing for an ex girlfriend built on *lies!*” The sheer venom in her voice makes the hero recoil.

“How do you— Never mind... Ok... It's different, yeah? It's just a *misunderstanding*. I needed someone. Someone in that moment. Who was I supposed to turn to? My *boss?* My *competition?*! She was right there and—”

“One-Hundred and Forty Four.” Pandora responds.

“Yeah I— What?”

“That is how many known configurations of the Cross Colosseum there are. Depending on Zeke's actions, the plans can diverge in over fifty ways per configuration. I have calculated a winning pattern for each consideration. That is a rough total, simplified for your human brain, of seven-thousand two-hundred possible battle plans. Would you like me to start explaining them in alphabetical order? Can you hold over *seven-thousand* plans in your head simultaneously and know which one to switch to under what circumstances? Or can you do what you are good at and *follow orders?*”

The hero grits her teeth. The silence takes hold again.

This time Pandora breaks it. “I understand that we do not see eye to eye. I am correctly labeled a villain by human society. I have endangered millions by my actions. But right now we are partners, so

as hard as it is I ask you: Just... fucking trust me... a tiny bit... for exactly as long as it takes to win. You can go back to despising me for the apocalyptic threat that I am once we are done.”

Overdraw thinks it over, lips pursed for a long while as she swallows the bitter pill in front of her. “Fine. Exactly as long as it takes.”

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The colosseum's dressing room hall is buzzing with activity; competitors and staff mill about in a chaotic collage of voices and colors. Overdraw sits on the floor against the wall in her casual clothes and sulks as she plays cards with a green haired bunny girl with an eye-patch.

“Ok, so now I pick up the three of clubs you discarded,” the bunny girl explains.

Rebecca sighs. “Yeah...” She shuffles through her hand. There is a long, pregnant pause before she asks, “Toffee... do you know if... I can find a replacement partner? My '*assist*' is absolutely taking over.”

Toffee smiles. “Becky, it's fine. She's just not used to conspiring with partners that aren't... herself. From what you've told me anyway. Just count your lucky stars you have a partner. I'm going one against two battle tested veterans. I'm trying not to worry about it. Your turn.”

“If you insist... Win or lose, I want to *test* myself, and have *fun*. And she has optimized all the joy out of it. Reduced to a cog in—”

“No, it's your turn? Gin?” Toffee says.

“Yeah! Oh, right!” Rebecca drops her hand and begins to count her deadwood.

“No, I wasn't saying I *had* Gin. Goodness, Beck. This has you all out of wack. Alright, card game on pause. Let's figure this out, ok? Have you attempted to explain to her that you want to enjoy this tournament?”

Rebecca nods. “Yes, but she just said 'you will have plenty of fun.' Like I was a child being told that the lazy river was just as good of a time as the water slides.” She sighs. “Am I the asshole here? I feel like I might be the asshole. It's just... the wish is important but it's not the most important thing ever, yeah? Even then, odds are she's going to try to find a way to take the wish for herself, and use it for something... dastardly.”

“Dastardly; that's a good word.” Toffee grins as she starts picking up her cards. “Look, you just need to assert yourself. Use a little civil disobedience. Try not to lose but do everything she says in a way that makes her regret giving you instructions. Like you're a bitter office worker that just overheard that they are letting you go at the end of the week.”

Overdraw responds with a wince. “Yeah, can we not use that example... *ever*.” She sighs. “I don't know... Pandora is an enemy in my world but... she is my partner. And she worked hard on her plans. Maybe if I play along, I can convince her to stop being a villain. Imagine the good she could do if she swapped sides. I'm sure they would feed her coal if she kept the peace.”

“Feed her coal? She's eaten a lot of stuff here but I haven't seen any coal. Not to mention she acts like she has some kind of grander scheme. Like maybe—”

Pandora opens the door behind Toffee, slamming into her. “Oh, sorry Ma'am. I—” She hesitates when she sees Rebecca. “I should have foreseen your location.” Her tone shifts to be more clinical and less conversational. “We just got called to be on deck. I... Are you paying attention?”

Rebecca gawks at a gorgeous, bare-chested man, dusted with bronze scales, a long flowing tail trailing behind him as he floats down the halls. “Who is that...”

Pandora furrows her brow. “I am not certain. I believe that is—”

Toffee interrupts with confidence. “That's Tenki, one of the God Eater's children.”

“Wow. Beautiful...” Rebecca says, completely smitten.

“8 out of 10.” Toffee says with a smirk. One of Tenki's ears twitch.

“Your standards are *waaay* higher than mine.” Rebecca says, dumbfounded.

“Can we *please* stop fawning over men today? *Focus*, we are going into battle in 15 minutes,” Pandora chides.

Rebecca stands up, dusts herself off, and her azure and gold armor appears around her. “I’m not allowed to have any fun, am I?”

“I told you, I have planned plenty of fun for you today,” Pandora says with a fake smile as they head for the tunnel to the main grounds. They round the corner to see a girl with a red hood and sandals. “Oh, for booting up cold,” she groans, the smile turning to a scowl.

The red hooded girl waves. “Hello Ms. Pandora!” She slips away as fast as she appeared, with a grin on her lips.

Overdraw smiles. “Cute kid. I have a lot of fans like that back home.”

Pandora grumbles. “I hope the elf punches a hole through that smile.”

“I, uh... what? What's your problem with the kid?”

“She *cornered* me... We have spoken at length.”

“... What did she say?”

Pandora doesn't answer. She quickens her pace.

Overdraw lengthens strides to keep up, muttering, “Yeah, ok, fine, don't tell me. It's not like trust is a two way street or anything.”

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They round the corner and enter the tunnel to the Crossroads Colosseum battle grounds.

Overdraw sees a brunette woman with a variety of piercings, wearing a sports bra and tight shorts. She immediately goes crimson and looks away. “Sorry! Sorry! I didn't realize you were getting changed here!”

Pandora rolls her eyes. “Forgive my teammate, ma'am, she is a *moron*. Zeke, I presume.”

Overdraw turns back to get a look at Zeke. What had seemed like a normal human, reveals more monstrous traits on a second glance. She is balanced on a long thick fleshy tail, sitting on it like a chair. Both her feet sport three long and flexible toes with sharp nails. She has long rounded ears and catlike pupils in large blue irises.

Zeke shrugs. “It's all good. Not the first time people made that mistake.”

Still flushed, Overdraw clears her throat. “Yeah, sorry, uh... I'm used to my enemies usually being more dressed up. If you can call full body spandex '*dressing up*' I suppose.” She extends a hand. “Pleased to meet you, Zeke. I'm Overdraw, but you can call me Rebecca, Becca, Becky if you wanna be my friend, or whatever, really.”

Zeke takes the hand gently and gives it a firm pump. “Ight, Becky.” She smiles and extends a hand to Pandora. “And you must be Dora.”

The gray woman's tone is harsh with the chimera. “*Pandora*. I do not take kindly to strangers re-naming me.” She takes her hand. “I forgive you out of pity for the loss you are about to experience.”

“Ha, you're a *spicy* kitten. I'm gonna have a blast!” Zeke fishes a bag of a jerky out of her pocket. “Wanna bite?”

“Only a *fool* would—” Pandora starts.

“Yeah, I skipped breakfast to get in just a tiny bit more training this morning.” Overdraw gladly accepts a piece.

“... *Why*...” Pandora is flabbergasted; watching her partner take a bite of what could very easily

be poisoned food.

“You're missing out,” Overdraw says as she chews it. “This is *really* good!”

Zeke grins. “Happy you like it.” She bites off a chunk with ease, her sharp teeth on full display. “And I'm happy I remembered to take it out of my pocket before going for a swim. Have you seen the ocean! It's huge!”

Overdraw shakes her head. “I haven't had a chance. I've been busy practicing my flight. Well I say practicing, mostly just zipping around, and having a good time, running errands for people, helping out—”

“Can we please stop fraternizing with the enemy,” Pandora interrupts, “or do you want to give away *all* of your powers?”

Zeke grimaces and whispers to Overdraw, “And she's your assist because...?”

Overdraw rubs the bridge of her nose. “Because life has a sense of humor.”

Pandora crosses her arms, and taps her foot impatiently. “A rare agreement.”

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“Hi hi everybody! I'm *SOOO* happy you managed to come out here to this year's Cross Tournament! Live from the CROSS COLOSSEUM, this is the one and only Miss X, your master of ceremonies! The first round of the Cross Tournament is about to get underway! Let's hear some *energy!*”

The voice seems to bubble through every speaker in the colosseum. A pink haired woman with corkscrew pigtailed waves from a titanic monitor above the arena. The crowd erupts, chanting Miss X's name. Her heart shaped pupils look down as she leans towards the camera.

“WOW! So much *ENERGY* today! So many people are here! SPECTACULAR! If only I could

— W-Whoa!” She tips forward and falls out of the screen, still at titanic scale, flopping into the middle of the arena. “Whoops! Little technical error!” She brushes herself off as she stands up, and shrinks down to normal size.

“Oh my *goodness!* It's so much better down here in the action!” She blinks around the stadium, leaving behind digital noise as she teleports about. “I could bask in your *LOVE* all day, but,” she looks up to a white haired kitsune in the VIP viewing area. “I gotta stay on schedule for Mom; our very own patron deity! The God Eater herself! So let's get to introductions! First we have a new friend to help us make the battles more entertaining for all of you! *Teeeenkiiiiii!*”

A bolt of lightning rocks the stadium as the clear skies turn to a storm. And then another bolt, and another, and another. It builds into a constant stream of crackling electric light as a majestic dragon dives, twisting around the pillar of lightning. His scales and fur are a medley of oranges, golds and whites. With one last flash of light, blinding the stadium, the storm ends as a gentle breeze twirls around the dragon, now in human form.

“I'm always happy to help out, sister~” he says. “Locals are probably well aware of the calm weather I provide, but I am capable of *much* more. But I'll let my actions speak for me.”

Miss X teleports over to the dragon. “Yep, my precious *widdle bwother* has a big surprise that's going to make this year a whole new level of epic!” Tenki's ears twitch with annoyance at the baby talk. “Now, let's meet our first contestants! Zeke! Overdraw and Pandora! Coome oon OUT!” The arena door opens and Zeke sprints out, showing off her agility, and Overdraw bursts through after, her lavender magic wings erupting in a dazzling display.

Pandora walks out at her own slow pace, brow furrowing as she sees Tenki. “What is he doing here?” she ponders aloud, before assuring herself, “A simple change of weather can easily be accounted for.”

Miss X smiles. “Let's get the ball rolling! All of you have *SOOO* many questions for our competitors that you sent in. So we will keep it brief.” A digital message window appears in front of her, and she snatches it out of the air, waving it around like a tablet. “Alright! For all of our contestants starting wiiiiith, ZEKE!” She announces, teleporting next to the chimera, and reads the message

window carefully. “Choco-D wants to know what you plan to do with the wish?!”

Zeke seems a bit uncomfortable in the spotlight for a moment, but quickly adapts. “Ight Choco-D! For the record, I didn't even come here for a wish. I came for a *good time*, and to blow off some steam. But if I win this I'm gonna wish a path to the surface for me and my family! I want to see my own world's night sky, more than ever now that I've had a *taste!*”

Miss X applauds. “What a noble goal! To whatever lengths it takes for family! Nothing is more *important* than the ones we love!” She blips over to Overdraw. “And now your turn! Your wish?”

Overdraw is caught off guard. “Yeah, uh... wish um... wish I... I was thinking I'd wish for infinite magic.” Enthusiasm finds its way to her words. “That way I could stay fully powered always. Imagine how much good I could do with *infinite* magic arrows. I could use seeking arrows to attack villains from across the country. Volleys of bombarding burst arrows! And it would be so much easier to experiment with my more *volatile* arrows. Maybe I could even banish whole city blocks at a time!”

Miss X's smile looks slightly more plastic. “Ah, well... power is a perfectly valid wish.”

“Wait! Uh, yeah, no, it's not about *power!* Imagine how much *better* I'd be at my job if I had more p— Ok, I guess, but it's— I am just digging a deeper hole.”

Miss X smiles and blinks over to Pandora. “And *your* wish?”

“I will fulfill my directive, Ma'am.” She says with calm conviction.

“And what is your directive?”

“That was not the question.”

The false smile is replaced with a full grimace. “Not one for showmanship I see...” She blinks back to Zeke with comical haste. “Next question, MsConductor wants to know what you've been up to since you came to the crossroads!”

“Lots of swimming. The Phoenix coast is beautiful and I'm happy to experience it!” Zeke's voice carries heart and spirit enough to re-energize the crowd.

Miss X smiles wide. “*Excellent!* Alright now, back to our hero of another world!” She darts back to the armored amazonian to whisper in her ear, “*Please* help keep this interesting.” She returns to full volume. “Alright! JadedStrayHyena wants to know if there are any cute villains you have a crush on back in your world.”

The crowd lets out a collective 'ooo' as Overdraw turns bright red. “Yeah, I... I mean...No *but...* I-It's. The term Villain is a legally *specific* term so... uh... you know... proper public enemy sorts. Doing hero work *without*—” Miss X shoots her a pleading look as the crowd starts to lose interest. “Ok, she's like a half villain named Burning Bunny. She is strong enough to lift me one handed and is suuuper flirty and... oooh *goodness* our last meeting was—” She trails off, hands covering her face.

With the energy still high, Miss X pops over to Pandora. “Alright, last one. ParryLost wants to know how your strict non-lethal policy has affected your villainous career? Or has it not even been a factor?”

The look of sheer unadulterated rage that takes over Pandora's face makes the whole crowd recoil. “My *one* request was that specific *information* not to be made *available* to—”

Overdraw looks at the gray villain, shocked and confused. “Wait... you *can't* kill people?”

Pandora bites her lip and growls, “I... must *minimize* human casualties where possible. It would be a boon to not have that *restriction*, ParryLost.” Her voice drips with venom. “Are you *satisfied*, Ma'am?” Her eyes glance up to the God Eater watching from above.

Miss X teleports to her brother without another word. “Alright! Enough of that! Now for the *special surprise*, with my little brother's big talent! Your arena will be a resort city in another world! Where swords and sorcery butt up against an upcoming industrial age! You'll land in Lusso, a luxurious coastal city, a gem in the crown of the Kingdom of Faemalin, recovering from crisis! How will you adapt?”

Pandora shouts, but without Miss X amplifying the sound, it is a squeak in the middle of a noisy stadium. “What do you *mean* another world!? What happened to the *arena* configurations!? Are you *fucking* with me!?”

The squeaks of indignant rage are drowned out by Miss X. “AAALRIGHT! Let's have a *spectacular* match! Tenki! Open the rift and start the brawl! AAAAAAND! FIGHT!”

A pale blue orb rolls out of Tenki's sleeve as he flies into the air. A storm erupts in the middle of the arena, swelling and growing, forming its own expanding sphere, and through the clouds white marble architecture can be seen. As the sphere starts to fill the entire arena, Zeke rushes Overdraw, circling around while the hero is watching Tenki do his majestic magic. There is a clatter of armor as the chimera tackles the amazonian into the sphere and through the rift. As the sphere engulfs Pandora she howls in impotent rage, the sound swallowed by the raging winds of the storm.

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Act Two: Vs Zeke

*"You're telling everyone how different that you really are
But it's been said before, so maybe you're not that special after all
You put the same amount of effort into letting go
Just act yourself and you might like it, you never know"*

- P!NK. "Try Too Hard." *Try This.*

Night in Lusso is frequently brighter than the day time. White marble dominates its palette but is contrasted with bright eye-catching colors from imported dyes woven into luxurious tapestries that hang from balconies, and the warm tone of terracotta roof tiles adorn each building. Pygmy rat-wyverns make their homes in the upper reaches of the mountain, building their nests in magical lamps out of the fine glittering trash of the city. An impressive harbor lit by magical light that never sleeps, bath houses all along the east side, and a bustling market even this late at night, the city lights up the mountainside. It stretches down to cliffs over the east bank, while its southern bank is a soft sandy beach dotted with brightly colored sea glass beads.

A rat-wyvern perches for a minnow dinner in its nest, looking down at a man with scars around his wrists and neck. He stands before a poster advertising the execution of Aisa, leader of the Silverbirds, the date about a week old.

He puts his hand on the image of the rebel leader. "Thank you... for freedom..." He looks to another man with similar scars rifling through a bin of refuse. "Any luck, Tod?"

"Nothing worth selling in here yet. I know lady Aisa's deal got us out of chains, but I wish she stuck around to get us somewhere we could start a new life. No more secret Silverbird ships to safety," he responds.

The first man scoffs. "So negative... be *grateful!* It could be much worse. We are still relatively fit, we avoided the damned compulsion collars, and against all odds we still have our health, Tod. And our razor sharp wits!"

Suddenly a knight in blue and gold armor appears between them. In an instant, she is slammed into the wall, pinned by a strange humanoid monster, its heavy tail pressing on the ground to smash the

knight. “Well Bruce... we still have our health,” the scavenger says as he dashes away, grabbing his friend. Rushing to safety, they slam head first into what could be mistaken for an imposing dark elf that seemed to come from nowhere. The vagrants tumble to the ground. “... We should stop talking...”

Pandora glares down at the human duo. She stomps her foot and a pillar of gray mass props them back up. “You will be fine, Sir. Move to a minimum safe distance.”

Overdraw wheezes as Zeke slams her into another wall. “Dora! What's the plan!”

“I do not have one. This was a curve ball, I need time to calculate!” Pandora shouts. “Hold on and keep her busy.”

Overdraw shouts back, “Like *hell* I'm waiting!” She summons a burst arrow and tosses it into the ground, popping both her and Zeke into the air.

Zeke laughs, her tail wraps around the armored hero's midriff and hurls her through the door of a mountainside villa. “C'mon! You gotta try harder than that!”

The chimera dives into the dark building, clinging to the walls and quickly scrambling onto the ceiling, hidden in the darkness. Overdraw looks around, summoning her bow, eyes snapping around for a target.

“Wow! What an *explosive* opening!” Miss X says from beside Pandora, popping into existence without warning.

Pandora is not surprised, but her disappointment reaches new levels. “Just when I thought this couldn't get *worse*, it turns out the vocaloid wannabe followed us.”

“I can hear you.” Miss X says with a pout.

“I know, Ma'am.” Pandora says.

Miss X huffs. “*Fine*, I'll watch from further away if you're gonna be like that.” She winks out of

view.

Pandora dashes into the fray, falls and splatters into metallic goo over the broken door, consumes it, and reforms as she turns it into a shield. She raises it as she slides into place in front of Overdraw. The hastily built shield blocks Zeke's tail slap but completely shatters in the process. "She hits harder than I anticipated."

The bruised hero shouts, "*No shit!*" She nocks a white tipped arrow and launches a volley into Zeke, causing her to recoil as they pass through her flesh and thud into the ceiling behind her. Overdraw grabs Pandora and smashes through a back window, leaping towards a lower part of the mountain. Lavender wings flare to life as she hovers, catching her breath. "Any ideas yet?"

Zeke shouts, "Stop running away!" As she steps out onto the broken glass on the balcony her feet grow a hoof-like coating to protect her skin.

"I didn't ask you!" Overdraw shouts back before making an indignant squeak as Zeke springs after her using her tail.

Overdraw tries to fly back out of reach, but Zeke sprouts bat-like wings, catching the air and adjusting her trajectory. Her hoofed feet stamp into Overdraw's chestplate, denting it, and knocking Pandora loose. The gray villain splatters onto another villa's roof on the terrace below, while the gold hero is spiked into the street.

Zeke dives after Pandora as she reforms, swapping out the hoofs for talon like toe extensions. As the talons crush around the villain's midriff they slide through her, Pandora keeping her core liquid; then, suddenly, it turns solid, trapping her opponent's feet. "Eh?!" Zeke falls back, bonking her head into the terracotta roof tiles, causing them to shatter and launching a surprised Pandora over her head.

Pandora works with it, re-liquifying her core to slip away, turning the momentum into a head start as she scrambles for distance across the roofs. Zeke dusts herself off, reverting her feet to normal for grip, and reabsorbing the wings. "Ight, chases can be fun I s'pose." She takes off like a shot.

Overdraw groans as she stumbles back to her feet, concerned citizens looking on at her. She

slips right back into her professional persona. “Sorry about that! I advise you keep your distance, but enjoy the show! I gotta go catch up with my partner.” She lights up her wings and launches after her teammate.

They dash across the lanes of roofs, which take them slowly down the mountainside into the tourist core of the city. Overdraw flies overhead, trying to land her shots, every missed shot ricocheting off the roofs in random directions. One shatters a window, raining glass down on citizens below. Thinking fast, she knocks a black banishment arrow and lets it loose, deleting a chunk of the wall as well as a small bubble of falling shrapnel.

Her wings flicker and fail causing her to tumble as the magical toll of the arrow proves to be a bit too much. “Sorry Pandora! I’ll catch up on foot!” she shouts as she dismisses her armor to recharge and run faster.

Pandora has her eyes locked on her target: a greenhouse atop one of the bathhouses. She bolts for it. “Sure enough... she's letting me pull away,” Pandora mutters under her breath.

She dives onto the wall of the bathhouse and quickly climbs up, squeezing through a crack in the greenhouse for entry. Inside the greenhouse is a variety of exotic plants, flowers and shrubs. Pandora quickly divides into smaller versions of herself to grind down as much of the plant matter as she can before—

Crash! A glass pane shatters to make way for Zeke. She wastes no time, quickly grabbing a gigantic exotic blue rose. Her flesh knits over its stem, and the flower writhes and articulates, its petals becoming sharp and acid dripping from its core, turning it into a nightmarish carnivorous plant. It ravenously devours as many Pandora mini-bodies as it can reach, their false flesh burning in the acid, and producing a stomach curdling smell.

Zeke has a manic grin as she gets ready to brawl. “Haha~ I see I’m not the only one that gets *peckish* in a fight!”

The remaining Pandoras form a slightly larger body than before, fists hardening into mallets. “How can you two be so *casual*? The ability to fundamentally alter *reality* lies in your grasp!” She

punctuates with a hammer swing that Zeke sidesteps.

“I wasn't joking. I didn't sign up with a wish in mind. Why can't you have a little more *fun* with it? Take the stick out of your ass and let's party!” the pumped-up chimera roars.

Zeke changes the rose further into an acid soaked saw, looking more like flesh than plant with every shift. She clashes and begins to melt through the next hammer swing. The chimera grabs a half destroyed fig tree and connects it into her nervous system. The fruits begin to bloat under pressure as she blocks another swing from Pandora.

The villain changes tactics, restructuring the mallets into longer spikes as she steps back, prodding at Zeke with range. “You would not be so happy-go-lucky if you had to deal with my situation.”

“Try being in captivity all your life. A glorified zoo animal. You and your family an asset! If I can— Arh!” She lets out a yelp of pain as Pandora pierces the flower-saw and black lines cross over it before it withers and crumbles. Zeke detaches it before the blight can spread to her own arm.

“Oh *woe* is you, who is at least free to rattle her chains!” Pandora cries out. “Do not let my escape fool you, my *leash* is much tighter. My chains are around my *soul*!”

Zeke has a flash of anger across her face but she takes a calm breath. “Ight then...” She detaches herself from the tree, which seems to have bloated unnaturally. “That tree is swelling up with pressure due to a few little tweaks I made. It's gonna blow out this whole greenhouse. Was gonna bomb you with it by force feeding it. But if you're that angry with the world,” she puts up her fists, “let it out! We have five minutes before it blows anyway.”

Pandora growls and claws at her, splitting off her mass into two extra arms. “This is not a *game*! I cannot let *anyone* take this wish!” She howls as she unleashes a flurry of scratches.

Zeke weaves between the blows, parrying with quick decisive strikes, before counter attacking with a solid straight jab that punches one of Pandora's arms clean off. “Then you gotta fight me for it! I'm not gonna give up a chance to save my family from *centuries* of oppression! I am here for fun, but

I'm also here to win!"

Pandora's detached arm grabs Zeke's leg and Pandora's main body uses the opening to deliver a heavy blow, gashing Zeke's face. "I have no other options." Pandora's other arm quickly moves to bind her. "I have no room for *honor!*" While Zeke struggles in the restraints Pandora delivers a punch to the gut. "I have no room for *mercy!*" Another gut punch as Pandora's face twists into a tear-less cry. "I have no room for *friends!*" A third gut punch and the outer layers of her fist begin to flake away under the force as Zeke wheezes for air. "Everything is *sacrificed* to my directive." She goes to deliver another punch but her fist is caught.

Zeke struggles against Pandora's bindings to grab onto her. She wraps both arms tight around the villain. Pandora braces for the incoming throw, but it doesn't happen. She looks at the reflection in the glass, and it becomes clear. This is a hug.

Zeke consoles her, "I'm sorry... for everything both of us are going through. Life fucking sucks sometimes. It's *not* fair. And I get that. But it's not worth giving up on friends, ok?" Pandora's face of tear-less anguish looks up and nods, but her eyes drift to look at the bell tag around Zeke's neck. She slowly moves her hands closer and closer to the tag. "And I'm sorry for one other thing."

"What is that?"

"I lied, three minutes, not five." Zeke's body covers itself in chitinous plate as the tree explodes, knocking out the rest of the greenhouse glass. Pandora is splattered, her mass decimated as the floor quakes. After another rumble Zeke swaps out her crab shell armor for the bat wings again, just in time for the floor to give way.

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Downstairs, Overdraw is speaking with the receptionist. "Yeah, ok, I *understand* that the rooftop is restricted, but I'm trying not to fly any more than I have to right now. Your *city* could be in danger if I don't resolve the fight quickly."

"Right... so you're trying to tell me an automaton made of a bunch of tiny automatons is fighting

a vampire satyr gecko woman?”

“Yeah, *though* I wouldn't put it like that normally.” Overdraw tries to hold her professional smile.

“Look, the best I could do is let you into the baths, *if* you were a paying customer,” the receptionist says as he gestures to the baths behind him. “But since you want to go to a restricted area... I could sry the owner and see if she would be ok with it.”

Behind the receptionist, the ceiling gives way as Zeke descends on bat wings and what remains of Pandora splatters unceremoniously onto the floor. Overdraw's eyes go wide and she quickly fishes out a handful of gold coins with foxes on them, and shoves them into the receptionist's hands. “That's fine! Happy to support a local business!”

She dashes into the baths. Overdraw sees Zeke dive bombing a broken Pandora, who crawls towards a towel hamper. Overdraw summons her bow and a fire arrow without a second thought and launches it into the pool, kicking up a cloud of steam. “I *just* got my magic recharged, too!” she groans as she summons a white arrow and a green arrow before combining them. She fires into the cloud of steam and the light green glow of the arrow splinters and arcs around dramatically, bombarding Zeke from every side.

Pandora slides into the towel hamper and grinds them into a new body for herself. She stumbles back to stand beside Overdraw. “What took you so long,” she says, not looking for an answer, back to her bitter monotone self.

“You're welcome,” the hero responds. “You get more flies with honey than vinegar.” She sighs. “Let's go apprehend her tag in case she's still conscious.”

There is a tremendous gust of wind as Zeke beats her wings, clearing the steam. “That was great! Gimmie another!” she exclaims, looking more excited than ever, even though everything she's wearing has been perforated.

“Oh you've *got* to be—” Overdraw doesn't finish the sentence as Zeke zips across the room and

grapples her, flying out the front door, Pandora grabbing on tight to her partner. Zeke flies them high over the market, where Overdraw fumbles her wings back on and breaks free. “I just paid to be *in* that bath house!”

She realizes she's losing altitude as Pandora is holding tight to her ankles. “You are not exactly easy to fly with! It's one thing when we're not fighting, but...”

“What would you suggest? I fly myself?” Pandora asks as she swings herself into a double footed kick to counter Zeke's incoming swing.

“Yes! *Ideally* yes! Can't you grow wings? Or like... a rotor or something?”

“Not useful wings. Biomimicry is hard at the best of times. And it takes time to make anything complex or durable, so any kind of mechanical thrust is out,” Pandora explains while Overdraw zips around trying to avoid Zeke's next swing.

“Aren't you 'biomimicking' right *now*?”

“Not really. I am a homogeneous mass beneath thick skin, pleasantly shaped.”

“Huh... so basically you're a robot Cadbury Creme Egg?”

“*Focus!*”

“Come on, let me have a little fun—” Overdraw is hit by a hefty haymaker sending her tumbling out of the sky, wings flickering as she struggles to pull up.

Pandora wraps around Overdraw to soften the landing as they crash through a fountain and skid up against a stage in the middle of the market. Pandora quickly bolts up, her body half destroyed. She grabs onto the wooden stage and begins to rip through it, grinding it down to rebuild her mass.

“Look alive, hero! We don't have long!” She turns to the crowd of late-night shoppers and sightseers. “Get to safety!”

Overdraw scans the night sky; dark compared to the bright magical lanterns around her, failing to find Zeke's silhouette. "Yeah, *alright*, can't be helped!" She pulls back a green arrow and launches it, knocking another arrow as she tracks its arc. In the chaos she takes a moment to steady her breath, her eyes following the green glow corkscrewing through the air. She looses her spirit arrow right as her seeker arrow connects, hitting the falling Zeke with a second shot before she is visible.

"Dora, can you take over for a moment? Seekers take a *lot* out of me."

"Do *not* call me Dora! We are *not* friends, especially when *I* am picking up *your* slack," Pandora hisses as she finishes off the stage, a gray mass built up, repairing her body with some to spare. She snaps her fingers and doppelgangers form out of the excess, rushing through the market and consuming any loose material to build their numbers.

Zeke staggers to her feet, reabsorbing the wings in time to see the wave of mob-shaped ooze pouring down on her landing site. She steps over to a food cart, grabbing some kind of fried food ball and popping it in her mouth.

The chimera looks to the terrified vendor. "Mmm~ This is *great*, what is it?" she asks nonchalantly as the storm of nanomachine death bears down on her.

"Khester... uh... its a f-fried squid dumpling." He responds. "Uh... n-normally they are served with a chili sauce but... um..."

"Khester... I'll have to look it up later. Thanks dude~" She winks at the merchant.

Her body ripples with muscles as she presses herself to her limit. Another pair of arms emerge, her nails shifting into claws as she dives into the writhing mass of doppelgangers. "Round two! Let's GO!" She slides around the battlefield increasingly made of Pandora, slicing, gutting, and bisecting the battalion.

The deadly dance is brought to a close by two armored men with spears, one tall with pointed ears, the other shorter and stockier. "Cease this at once!" the short one cries out. "Or... we will be f-

forced to..." He trails off as he looks at the army of shadows fighting a monstrous demon. "Forced... to..."

The Pandoras try to use the distraction to get the jump on Zeke. The chimera's ear twitches as she quickly slides out of the sneak attack. The mass that is Pandora tries to recover by spiking out after her, aiming to impale. Instinctively, Zeke slips behind the elven guard, but looks back with panic. Pandora halts the attack, spikes stopping an inch from the guard.

Zeke lets out a sigh of relief. "Ok! I just realized your non-lethal thing *might* have been only for humans."

Every Pandora body grimaces in unison. "I *define* human... loosely."

Both of them pause to consider their options. With an impish grin between gasps, Zeke makes the first move, grabbing the elf as a human shield. "Oooh this is going to be *soooo* cathartic! I'm going to call you *Richard*, little guard." She growls, actively trying to seem more monstrous. "A step closer and I have a little taste of him!"

Pandora's doppelgangers begin to melt down, retreating and regrouping. "You are bluffing. I know when someone is just *playing* the villain."

Zeke grins, really getting into her heel act. "Oooh, can you be so *sure* Pandora! I wonder how elf tastes. I've never eaten one before." She bares her razor sharp teeth and moves to take a bite.

The guard wriggles and cries out. "Miss mage! I am sorry for everything I ever said about dark elves! Just help me!"

"Sir, I am not a— I'm sorry what?" Pandora says, taken aback. "*What* have you said about dark elves?"

"Th-They are... beautiful?" He says with the world's most nervous smile, telling the world's most obvious lie.

“If only I could make an exception in my code.” Pandora stops where she stands. “I yield. Let the *pathetic* worm go.”

Zeke pouts. “Aw... I wanted to scare him a bit more. No hard f—”

Her grip loosens right in time for her to get tackled by Overdraw who rockets into her, launching the both of them out of the market and further down into the city. They crash through a storefront full of magical fabrics and high end cosmetic potions.

Overdraw stands up from the rubble fully armored. “Alright! This ends here and now!” Her announcement booms.

Zeke stumbles to her feet. “Probably not, I just caught a breather. I've been waiting to scrap with you!” She remakes her crab shell armor, this time complete with claws, and she covers and extends her tail to turn it into a scorpion's tail with another claw on the end.

“I'm flattered! Breaking out all the stops. If I'm gonna go national, I'm gonna need to handle this kind of stuff all the time!” Overdraw summons her bow, but it's quickly knocked out of her hands by a lunging tail before she's picked up and thrown through an ever-glowing gold fabric sample. “Right! Good opener! I might need a moment.”

Zeke leans back on her tail. “Go ahead, think it through. Once you're back on your feet we'll get back into it. Prone and unarmed... not how I want to finish this.”

Overdraw takes a deep breath. “Thanks... awful nice of you, but... it's just banter. Sponsors love it. You should come at me anyway. I won't hold back against you. I want you to keep coming at me with *everything* you've got.”

The Chimera grins. “Oh... I *like* that! Ight, you asked for it!”

Zeke leaps at Overdraw going for a finishing smash. The hero summons two burst arrows in each hand and holds them up to parry. Zeke is knocked back through a wall of cosmetic potions that turn her shell from red to blue to pink, then back to red.

Overdraw raises her hand and the bow disappears off the ground and reappears in her grasp. “I’m *never* unarmed.” With the biggest, dumbest grin on her face, she summons a spirit arrow in her left hand and charges in. Zeke goes for another disarming tail swipe, but this time it’s met with a spirit arrow, jabbed into the tail like a dagger as Overdraw slams her bow into Zeke’s armored abs.

Zeke retaliates, punching her in the diaphragm hard enough to give her air time, and while she’s midair, the chimera locks a claw around Overdraw’s midriff. Zeke charges Overdraw into the opposite wall, changing her other hand back to normal, grabbing for the tag around the hero’s wrist. Overdraw drops the spirit arrow in favor of a seeking arrow, and lets it go to make the tiny trip to stab Zeke in the hand. When the grip loosens, Overdraw’s wings flare back on and she flies into Zeke, pressing, building pressure as the hero grapples the chimera. The chitin armored woman begins to slide back, the sheer force overcoming her tremendous weight.

“Ight, new plan.” Zeke jumps backwards, letting the momentum crash them through the back wall to impact the sea glass encrusted beach. Zeke kicks off Overdraw and rip dives into the water, shedding her armor midair so she barely makes a splash.

Overdraw pulls back her bow with a burst arrow and fires it after her, but when it hits the surface of the water, it bursts prematurely. “Fucking... ugh! *Physics!* Be on my side for a change!” Overdraw dismisses her armor and breathes for a few moments.

Pandora rolls down the hill, flowing on her converted mass like she’s surfing a wave, bringing the short guard with her. “Overdraw! Where is she!?”

The hero leans against the dock. “Slipped off me and right into the water. I had a shot on her but burst arrows and—”

“Surface tension, you could take a shot at her if you dip below the waterline,” Pandora notes.

“Yeah, or wait for her to come up for air.”

“She probably has gills by now.”

“... Yeah, ok, that tracks.” Overdraw tugs on her hair.

The guard shrugs. “Well she's as good as dead. Panzeron will make short work of her.”

“What is Panzeron, Sir?” Pandora asks before muttering, “Maybe I can use it.”

“Panzeron is a leviathan that moved into our bay a few years ago. Mean old son of a bitch. Dumber than a potato but hungrier than a dragon. Big ol' sea serpent with a steam breath. Every ship in here from a galleon to a fishing rig needs to be made out of Koriwood. He hates the flavor.” The guard adds one last reassurance, “Good as gone.”

Overdraw groans. “Crap, that means we have to save her.”

Pandora's eyes glaze over. “No... no... highest probability is she will perform a nerve graft, and connect its body to her own.”

“Ok, is there anything *else* I should have known she can do going into this?!” Overdraw shouts.

Pandora hesitates before nodding. “I believe that is all of it. The rest you have seen.” After a long pause Pandora sits down beside Overdraw. “I apologize. This loss is on me. Entering new worlds, each with its own people, and terrain, and cultures, and monsters. It is... too much to calculate. Furthermore I have underestimated my opponent yet again.”

Rebecca looks down and crouches. “Hey, it's alright. We're *partners*. I'm starting to think you may not be half bad... even if Graz *is* a horrible influence. And you're not wrong about me.” She sighs. “I am... pretty pathetic. I am struggling to hold on to things I've already lost. *Everything* I do is wrong. I have *everyone* in Wisconsin looking at me while I am still figuring out this hero thing. And soon it's going to be the whole world staring at me! And ever since Park Street... Sylaburn's jabs have felt a lot more... painful. To be flawed is to be human though, right?”

The gray woman groans and tilts her head back, knocking into the dock. “I feel... *very* human today. Thank you, Ma'am.”

Rebecca grins. “And cheer up... 'cause you may be out of ideas, but I have a few. Can you trust me... just a little bit?”

Pandora slowly starts to smile. “I will trust you, a tiny bit, for exactly as long as it takes to win.” She gets up.

“Alright!” Overdraw says as she jumps up with her. “Mr. Guard! I'm going to need a quiver full of arrows and a bow. I'm going to go grab a fishing rod. And Pandora, I know you break easily, but if you work really hard, can you make something thin but really durable?”

>>——> <——<<

The cerulean snake of a creature twists its way through the water, swimming up on the bay fast. A horrifying visage of armored scales, a powerful jaw with fangs protruding from its maw; a titanic sapphire saber-toothed cottonmouth. Just behind its head Zeke holds onto its scales with three arms. The fourth is wrist deep in the flesh of Panzeron's neck, surrounded by a bloody mess. The leviathan looks where Zeke does: up at the glittering city, but pauses a moment to look a little higher. This world's night sky is different. A gorgeous moon that looks like a whole separate world, the twinkle of starlight, only blotted out by the titanic bats that roam the skies, snatching up rat-wyverns. “What a strange and wonderful world,” Zeke attempts to say underwater, the snake's mouth flapping with her own. She looks back to her target as the beast slowly crests the water, picking up speed as it comes in for an attack.

>>——> <——<<

Overdraw stands in a little rowboat, out of her armor, resting on her borrowed bow. “Almost done Do— Pandora? I almost have my sea legs.”

“Almost is not good enough. You have to be convincing *and* not fall overboard.” Pandora steps away from the fishing rod. “Alright. It is all set up. The margin of error is narrow so you better make the most of it.”

“And not a moment too soon! Incoming.” The blue serpent raises itself from the water and lunges at the boat. Overdraw quickly summons a burst arrow and smacks it against the dock, launching the boat out of the way. “Well, I guess you're with me now!” Overdraw says as she grabs a mundane arrow and draws it back.

“Good to know the plan is *starting* with a failure. At this rate it will at least be... fun.” Pandora says with a wink and an ever widening smile. “I am going to attempt to improvise.” She jumps from the boat and her feet fan out, making a thin buoyant surface of nanomachines for her to stand on.

“Hello Dora and Becky! Sorry to keep ya waiting but I made a new friend. I mean, come on, who could *resist*! This isn't even the *coolest* bit!” Zeke shouts. “This is!”

The serpent opens its mouth and a geyser of boiling steam rips through the water. Pandora tries to skate out of the way but the beam crashes through her leg causing her to tumble on the water's surface. She struggles to reform herself. “One more shot and it should be just one to go!” Zeke says as she retracts two of her hands.

Blood... Zeke's leg is bleeding. It's a glancing blow but Overdraw's loosed arrow did graze her. “Sorry! I wasn't aiming for you!” the hero shouts as she nocks another arrow. Overdraw mutters under her breath, “Come on, notice. Real arrows. Down time between shots. Look at this tasty opening.”

She stumbles a bit before taking another shot, this one hitting true, wedging itself between Panzeron's scales. The leviathan howls in pain while Zeke uses both hands to hold on tight to the scales. “Wait... Pandora! She already disconnected! Early phase 2! Contain Panzeron!”

Pandora, limp in the water, doesn't respond. Rather, the entire dock articulates; the wood beams, thin facades, are quickly consumed, their bottoms already eaten away and replaced. Pandora the giant emerges in the bay and looms in scale with the leviathan. The beast sniffs at Pandora and recoils at the smell of the koriwood dock that pervades her. Panzeron howls, and looks away to the city.

Pandora's eyes go wide. “Did not consider that,” she notes as she finds herself diving in front of another steam attack to protect Lusso. Her false flesh is blasted as it diffuses the boiling water into a harmless mist.

Zeke jumps off the back of the leviathan and hits the water, webbing growing between her toes and a fin on her tail. She takes off like a torpedo and leaps over Overdraw's boat as the hero extends her arm to grab another arrow. Zeke grows her nails into claws to slip under the ribbon holding Overdraw's tag, before she splashes back down into the water, and takes off, the bell in tow.

Thirty Seconds: The thin black thread connected to the tag is pulled, spooled around the fishing rod, wedged and fused into the rowboat's hull. "Good luck on your end, Pandora! She finally took the bait!" Overdraw gets down and shoves her hand in the water, quickly summoning a burst arrow and a seeking arrow before the—

Twenty-four Seconds: The tug is intense, wrenching her forward at horrible speeds. Her muscles strain as she grips the arrows. She lets out a groan of pain. Overdraw struggles as she fuses the arrows together under the water. Meanwhile, titan Pandora patches herself up enough to throw a punch at the leviathan.

Eighteen Seconds: *CRACK!* The thunderous noise echoes as fist meets jaw. The sea serpent is sent reeling for a moment. Cheers of townsfolk fill the air as they see the monster that has tormented their waters get decked. Overdraw struggles to shove the arrow ahead, giving it every bit of momentum she has to spare.

Twelve seconds: The seeker arrow catches up with Zeke and slams into her gills. The burst sends her reeling. Unable to breathe she desperately breaches the surface, her grip on the tag loosening. Overdraw kicks the spool out of the fishing rod and grabs the thread. The leviathan recovers, coiling its tail around Pandora's leg.

Six Seconds: The leviathan begins to crush Pandora as its fangs sink into her shoulder. Overdraw launches off the boat using the momentum, following and gathering the thread as her wings ignite. As she reaches Zeke she tugs on the thread hard, yanking her tag back into her hands. Timer stops. With her other hand she grabs Zeke's matching bell tag and rips it off her neck.

Thirty Seconds: Overdraw rockets skyward, putting as much distance between her and Zeke as possible. "Come on... have enough!" Zeke watches Overdraw pull away as she touches her neck and it

Act Three: Unwound

In the Cross Colosseum, a titanic Pandora emerges from the collapsing rift, quickly reaching out a hand to grab a winged Zeke, and an unarmored Overdraw. The crowd is howling.

“WE HAVE A WINNER!” Miss X shouts. “Overdraw and Pandora!” She teleports into Pandora's palm. “Sadly that means you are out of the tournament, Zeke. Any words for your fans out there after that *fantastic* display?”

Zeke grabs at a microphone that isn't there, before leaning closer to X. “When's the next tournament? That was AMAZING!”

“Now that's some spirit! Overdraw! Pandora! Any words?” Miss X leans in to Overdraw first.

“Yeah I... *yeah*... whew.... I... one... moment... I... oh *goodness*. I'm... head spinning... *but*...”

Miss X teleports to the titan's shoulder. “Any words, Pandora?”

Pandora nods. “I just want to say, Ma'am, this was a spectacular learning experience, and I will cherish the data I gained.” Pandora begins to compress herself into a more appropriately sized form. “Oh... and I apologize for calling you a vocaloid. It has been a very difficult day.”

“All is forgiven, just don't make a habit of it~” Miss X says as she twirls about. “Alright! What an opening act! Let's tune into our next round!”

Pandora keeps working on shrinking down to fit through the door, eventually splitting into a handful of densely packed doppelgangers. As they duck into the tunnel they speak in unison at first, before slowly filtering down to the ones closest to Zeke and Overdraw. “I can not believe that worked. That was ridiculous. That was risky! That was dangerous.”

Overdraw, having had a few moments to catch her breath and slow her racing mind, nods with a simple, “I know! It was great!” With a big dumb grin she adds, “Gonna need to call home and tell my grandpa about this one. Maybe my mom and dad too... how would I explain this without saying, 'I am a

super hero,' though?" Pandora freezes as they look to her other selves.

Zeke laughs. "How'd you manage that? Being an armored magic flying warrior woman ain't easy to hide. I certainly couldn't manage that with my family."

Overdraw begins to head towards the stands. "It isn't that hard. Since I moved out they still think I'm a programmer for—"

She is interrupted by Sugar Glass, wading her way through the gaggle of Pandora. "That was an amazing fight Becky! Of course Zeke and Pandora were cool too."

Pandora grumbles under her breath, "I turn into a giant and I only get third billing. This does not upset me," she tries to convince herself.

A mix of joy, anxiety, and relief paint a confused expression. Overdraw tries to turn on her happy, professional voice. "Oh! Hey Val. What are you doing down—?"

The purple haired cafe owner grins. "Come on, like I wouldn't come to watch you. We have to stick together! It's what he would have wanted."

"What he would have...? Oh! R-Robert. Ummm, yeah, um, imagine the look on his face. His two... girls... together..."

Pandora shoots a glare across to Rebecca. "I don't know. 'Robert' would probably be pretty terrified right now." Rebecca goes pale, and the machine smirks. "The two people that have the most dirt on him, together, comparing notes... you never know what you might find out." She looks at Rebecca expectantly.

"Yeah, uh..." She wilts under the gaze. "I don't... uh... Yeah. I... don't know how to say... I... I owe you an answer still from the first conversation. What are you up to tonight? Maybe... I... I have a lot I should talk to you about."

One of the Pandoras behind Sugar Glass gives Overdraw a thumbs up. Val says, "Of course! It

is going to need to be late though. I have a lot of prep to do. I only have a few days left of the busy season after all. I have a big sweet celebration the last day of the tournament, every year or so.”

“Ok, super late... that gives me time to think about what I'm going to s— what I'm going to do, for the next round, of course.” Overdraw is sweating bullets. “Do you want to watch the rest of the rounds—?”

“Nah, I have to get back to work. I normally just watch the live feed, but you're a special case. It would be disrespecting our Roberts' memory if I didn't come down. Even if the one from my time line and I never got hitched like he did with you in yours... he was still special to me... I still miss him a lot.” Her smile drifts into a sad and longing look to the middle distance. Rebecca looks away with guilt. Sugar Glass snaps out of it as her watch beeps. “Ah! My alarm! I gotta go! Catch you later!”

“Yeah... later...” Rebecca mutters. The Pandoras converse with each other silently through direct contact. They seem lost in thought. Rebecca shouts, “Hey! Lady T-1000! Are you coming with? This is a chance to learn a lot about our opponents. I'm sure you already know all the details but it can't hurt to confirm a few things.”

Pandora nods. “Yes, of course. I just... figure that one of my bodies should make a phone call.” She smiles with a surprisingly genuine warmth. “There is someone I have put off contacting for a very long time.” Her bodies split up, only leaving one to walk to the cafe with Sugar Glass, and one with her partner and ex-opponent. “Alright. The optimal time to enter the stadium is in seven minutes when people have filtered out for concessions and bathroom breaks.”

Overdraw rolls her eyes. “Of course you've optimized this.” She chuckles and follows Pandora's lead.

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Sitting on the edge of her seat, Overdraw watches the pulse-pounding fight between Toffee and the team of Nerassa and Quinton. As tension builds, the hero lets out a yelp of shock as she feels something tug at her skirt. She looks down to see a white fox.

“Hey there... please tell me you're not here to invite me to a tournament within the tournament. I'm already in enough trouble with my boss.” The fox tilts its head before trotting away, looking back to make sure Overdraw is following. “In the middle of the... fine... fine... ok...” She gets up and quickly dashes after it.

The little familiar leads her up from the lower tiers of the stands all the way up to the God Eater's balcony. It yawns, and a portal opens up on the door dividing the God Eater's private viewing space from the rest of the rabble, giving clear passage through.

“That is the most adorable and unnecessary use of a portal I have ever seen!” Overdraw squeals as she pats the fox on the head. “Good... boy? Girl? ... Good foxy~”

The hero crosses the threshold behind the God Eater's seat. The chairs that were just occupied by her guests of honor sit empty. Most baffling, instead of Toffee's duel in the rift, the God Eater is watching a woman with a blade of light fighting against a man made of cosmic dust.

The God Eater's voice drifts on the air like a long forgotten lullaby. “Becca~ I see you got my invitation. I hope this isn't too disorienting. But given your background I hope I can just say that you walked into another *instance* of the tournament and for it to make enough sense to you~”

Overdraw nods slowly. “Yeah... uh... yes, I think it—”

“Calm down~ Relax~ Think about what you want to say, then say it. You don't need to answer anything right away~” The white tailed woman pats the chair beside her. “I hope you didn't mind the little Q and A~ The questions I picked were very entertaining.”

“Th-that you—? I... uh...” She quickly rushes over and sits beside her. “Yes miss... ma'am... your—”

“What did I just say about calming down?~”

“RIGHT! I mean, uh, right.” Overdraw takes a few moments to breathe. “Wait... did you write the questions?”

The God Eater shakes her head. “No, no, they were honestly submitted questions... but there are plenty of them. I just picked the most interesting and... necessary ones.” Her tone darkens. “I may have made a poor judgment call. Ideally nothing bad will come of it, but I could use a little assurance... and perhaps some insurance~”

Overdraw's mouth opens, but she pauses, takes a breath, and then speaks. “Ok... ok. How can I help you, God Eater?”

The kitsune leans back and groans. “Nalagrom... was probably a mistake. One that I thought was perfectly safe at the time~”

“Nalagrom? You mean Graz? The creepy gross dude that Pandora hangs out with? The guy that looks like he's from a Disturbed album?” Overdraw looks at her, confused. “Aside from being pretty rude and... kinda obnoxious, is he really a problem?”

The God Eater sighs. “Not directly, though he did attack me and a group of Cross Guards when he entered. His master Baladeth makes him a good deal more dangerous to me, politically. Being a god himself—”

“The guy that has been bumming about Val's Cafe with the 'best boss' coffee mug? The burning silhouette dude? Baladeth? A god?” Overdraw looks down and rubs her head. “He said it but... I thought he was joking. Or trying to throw me off or something.”

“A god of death no less. Nalagrom is apprenticed to him. Though he seems harmless, the man has brought armies to their knees. He is not to be trifled with by mortals like you. Pair him with a divine being like Baladeth, a schemer that wants to extinguish the spark of life in his home world, and it is potentially quite fraught.” She looks down at the battle and grimaces, “I made a mistake in my assessments: I have many people here that are 'a potential threat;' in a sense Nalagrom isn't even that special. While he and his god of death are potentially dangerous, they are no threat to the crossroads alone. I never registered Nalagrom as a real threat since he would be unable to make meaningful alliances with other dangerous characters, due to his pungent, abrasive, and crude personality.”

Overdraw blinks. “But he already has made a friend. Pandora. The two of them are shockingly close. So if— Oh! Ooooh.”

“Now you're starting to get the picture. Your little social butterfly has been making a veritable network of friends~ Some of whom are powerful, critical staff. Others, potentially dangerous competitors that could prove hazardous if manipulated by Baladeth.”

“I... I don't know what I could do about that. Are you asking me to try to... stop Pandora from being around her friend? Even if Nalagrom isn't a good person, he seems to make Pandora happy. I don't know if...”

The kitsune laughs, her tone lightening back up. “No~ Goodness no~ Let them have their fun~ However I do need you to keep a close eye on your villain. Be ready to take action. This is just a little friendly warning~”

Overdraw looks bit uneasy. “To be ready to take action. You mean to fight my partner if it comes down to it.” She begins to nervously fidget with her hair. She says, unconvincingly, “I don't know... I mean to say... It's hard to think of him being a credible threat to you as the god of a realm.”

The God Eater presses on. “It would be just in case of an emergency. If they get too close. If they pose a threat. If they start developing their ambitions, then do what you do best, Becky~”

“Yeah, what I do best...” She takes a deep breath. “Um... I don't... I don't think I have what it takes to stop Pandora... like... physically. So even then—”

The God Eater's ears droop. “Oh... I see how it is Rebecca. I will stop wasting both of our time then, and send you on your way.” The God Eater gestures to the portal.

“Wait, uh... wait. I... I didn't say no. Um... I can try. I can try to make sure it never comes to that. I will just... find a way that it all works out!” Overdraw bows her head low to the Kitsune.

A wide, carnivorous grin spreads across her face as the hero looks down. She tones it back down as she pats Overdraw on the head. “Wonderful, Becky~! Simply wonderful to hear~ I'm sure that

my family and I can rest easy knowing that we can rely on your vigilance”

“Yeah, your family, ok... no pressure... ok...” She takes a deep breath. “Just... I don't want any special treatment or anything. I am here to prove myself.”

The Kitsune cocks an eyebrow. “This isn't a sponsorship deal. Your payment is a functioning society and peace of mind. Isn't that what your hero game is all about~?” The God Eater teases. “Don't worry Becky~ No special treatment~”

After a long sigh Overdraw rubs her head. “Just... uh... don't lock in the wish I said in the interview or anything. I think I might have a better wish. To be able to hop between dimensions. That way I can visit all the new friends I make while I'm here.”

The God Eater grins in an unsettling way. “You're telling me you'd chose friendship over unlimited power?~ How saccharine~ Just keep it interesting out there, hero.” She waves her hand dismissively.

Overdraw gets up and bows. “It was a pleasure meeting you, your Divinity.” She smiles as she steps out through the portal and back into the stadium.

She pats the fox on the head again and leans down as the portal closes. “Did you hear that, little foxy?” Her voice jitters with anxiety. “How am I supposed to pull this off... maybe... I just... convince Pandora to stop being bad? Like... gently? I can't really do it by force. What am I going to—”

Miss X's announcement cleaves through Overdraw's monologue. “The fight between Toffee and Nerassa is OVER! We have a WINNER!”

Overdraw groans and hugs the fox. “Aw... I was watching that.”

>>—>

On the Pheonix Coast, past the Crossguard Lookout towers, is a quiet, craggy beach. Rebecca, powered down, sits in the shallows, her little body in a newly purchased two-piece swim suit; a tube

top and trunks.

She lets the tide gently roll over her. “This was an excellent idea. Thanks for the invitation. No hard feelings?”

Zeke floats through the shallows “Nada. I haven't had a fight that good in a century. If you ever wanna scrap again, say the word. I'm gonna lay you out flat next time.”

“Yeah, I— Hold up, did you say *century*?” Rebecca peeks down at the chimera. “You are *way*, uh... how should I say... you are—“

“Old. Old is the word you are searching for. It is not a bad word,” Pandora says, huddled up beneath a parasol, sticking to the shade.

“Yeah, I guess. I just want to be polite.” Rebecca says.

“Y'better *respect* your elders! Whippersnapper!” Zeke says, putting on a voice. “No big deal, I'm just very, very experienced.”

A breeze blows through and the conversation drops for a moment. Rebecca picks it back up. “You didn't need to come with. Are you sure you want to be here instead of hanging out with... Nalagrom or what have you?”

Pandora shakes her head. “He is my first friend, but I will find time for him somehow, some other way. You are my *partner*. I have learned I *cannot* neglect you and hope to win.” Overdraw lets out a sigh of relief. Pandora adds, “Anyway, I have plenty of bodies running around right now. Odds are one of them is hanging out with him anyway.” The hero seems to grow more tense.

“I'm still surprised you're ok with hanging out with Zeke. You know, after the whole 'unleashed a kaiju on a city' thing.”

Pandora shrugs. “Why would I *not* be? It was a well calculated maneuver. She was in a position to take or maintain control of the leviathan until she saw that we had adequate countermeasures.”

“And what if we didn't?” Rebecca asks, with a concerned glance back at Zeke.

Zeke smirks. “I would have kicked your ass with it, and then killed it myself. Didn't know what you had planned, but either way I'd win.”

Rebecca's concern shifts back to Pandora. “Still... she used your code *against* you. Are you sure you're ok?”

A faint smile graces the machine's face. “Normally, it would be unacceptable... but it was nice to play the hero for a change.” The smile grows and her tone warms up. “It's also flattering to be trusted with the lives of a city.”

Rebecca sighs and wistfully looks to the setting sun. “I guess it is... Thank you for trusting me, Pandora. I understand it must have been difficult.”

“Understatement.”

“But... I am happy none the less. Maybe you're not so bad.” Her tone wavers, quietly begging not to be proven wrong.

Pandora looks over. “I will kick sand in your *eyes* if I must. I am a *villain*. I must be a *villain*. *Treat* me as such.” After a long, painful pause she adds, “But you did impress me enough to earn the right to call me Dora.”

Rebecca closes her eyes, muttering, “I think that's progress... I hope it is...”

Zeke pops her head out of the water. “Hey, I have a question.”

“Yes! Please!” Rebecca blurts out.

“Your arrowhead... what would happen if I used it?”

Rebecca shrugs and fishes it out of her tube top, eager to change the subject. “It would hurt a lot... but I'm not sure. But that would actually be *super* useful to find out. Take it for a spin. Let's see if we get Zekerdraw or something.”

She tosses it into the water, where Zeke catches it. Pandora goes bug eyed. “Are you *crazy*! That is your *only* way of fighting! What if she—”

“Zeke would never... and if she tries to, you can kick her butt for me. I trust you.” Rebecca leans over and smiles. “Not to mention, think about how much *data* you'd get from this~”

Pandora crosses her arms. “... I *do* like data... proceed.”

Zeke steps onto the shore and firmly grasps the arrowhead. “Alright! Here it goes!” She takes the arrowhead and presses it to her skin. “*Fuck!* Ow! It hurts!” There is a gentle glow as the arrowhead begins to slide in, then a blinding light. As it settles, the duo look on at Zeke.

“*Wooooah!*”

“This is... *concerning.*”

In the distance, an animal eared woman watches the test with interest.

*“When reactions turn into hurricanes
And the middle ground seems a little tame
Whether full or empty it's all the same
It's so easy to see everyone can agree, you're not to blame”*

- Silversun Pickups. “Substitution.” *Swoon.*

