

## Overdraw & Pandora Bonus Parologue: Vacation Daze

*"We signal in a moonbeam  
I beg you to follow me  
You say that I'll be surprised  
At the codes in the sunrise  
But if I don't like what I see  
And my grip starts loosening  
The edge of the big reveal could be the end of the story"*

- Silversun Pickups. "Dots and Dashes." *Neck of the Woods*.

"Becky... I don't know if I can keep covering for you."

The soundproofing of the Connection Cafe's stall is being strained by the breakfast crowd bustling outside. The hero in gold and black spandex frowns at Overdraw from the video screen.

She leans in closer and winces. "Yeah, I know. It wasn't my idea. I'm ready to keep the win streak going, but due to 'technical difficulties' the whole thing is on an indefinite hiatus."

"What if you just ask to come home for now? I'm sure the Captain will understand," the man's voice crackles over the speaker.

Overdraw groans. "Ray, I'm already in enough trouble for taking four sick days."

"Which is bullshit."

"Yeah, and I'm... I'm worried what he'd do to me... I don't know if I could come back to the tournament if I leave."

Ray sighs and knits his fingers together under his nose, eyebrows furrowed in thought. "You never told me what happened during that blizzard that got me dragged into work to supervise you. Perhaps if I knew what the falling out was I could try and fix it? He can be really--"

"Hard pass." Overdraw says, shutting the offer down immediately, with the same tone as someone turning down swallowing a whole beehive.

“Alright, alright, I get it. Looks like it's Spotlight to the rescue. You better win this tournament thing, 'cause you're gonna need that wish. The Captain is already throwing around words like 'replacement' and 'demotion.' Also 'desertion of duty,' so he's awfully worked up.”

“And I better think of something damn good to spend that wish on,” Overdraw groans.

“Exactly. But I'm rooting for you,” he says with a smile. “Anyway, I guess you can just lay about and relax for now.”

“Um... about that... You know that hot dragon man I was talking about... reminded me a lot of you. Well, he is inviting everyone out on a camping trip.” A dumb grin spreads across Overdraw's face. “Lyla and Toffee are going too.”

“Right, Becky. I thought you hated camping.”

Overdraw giggles nervously. “Yeah but... uh... I haven't been camping since before I got my powers. Little scrawny Rebecca hates camping. But I'm sure big strong Overdraw will take to it like a fish takes to water!”

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“Wow... I hate this.” A teary Overdraw looks over the corpse of what was meant to be an easy four-step tent.

The tent's support beams had snapped as she handled them. It had been going fine until she put them under tension. A little bit of failure to finesse the right shafts into the right holes, and *snap*. A moment of frustration leading to permanent consequences.

There is another pop and snap noise, this time coming from another tent. Pandora's tent. It looks luxurious. Cylindrical in shape, perfectly clean, a lovely off-white tone that didn't blind the other campers but reflected a lot of light, and sizable: more like a portable cabin than a tent.

Curiosity wins out and Overdraw goes to check in on her villain. She steps to the entryway and on clear display is a rug, packed flooring, a cozy queen size bed, a television, an amplifier, an electric

guitar, and Pandora focused on slowly fabricating something with a copper coil.

“Are.... you making a generator!?” Overdraw is baffled; startled out of silent curiosity.

Pandora frowns. “Yes, and it is very difficult. It requires a lot of focus.”

Overdraw looks at all the luxuries. “Yeah, uh... The whole point of camping is to get away from technology.” The robot woman blinks at her expectantly. It takes Overdraw exactly too long for it to click. “Oh... right... I... I mean it's to get in touch with nature.”

“I *am* getting in touch with *my* nature,” Pandora says dismissively as she turns her attention back to the generator.

“Okay, but I thought you didn't sleep.” Overdraw gestures to the bed.

“Movie night with Graz.”

“That... That is adorable,” Overdraw says. “If you both weren't villains, I'd be rooting for you two.” She looks at the music equipment. “...What's that for?”

“I have plans and designs for this hiatus beyond the pitiful offerings laid out by the tournament organizers.”

“Uh... Yeah, well.. um, keep me posted on that then. If you're making a band I'd gladly set up a drum machine or something,” Overdraw offers.

“I will certainly keep that in mind, Rebecca. Now... is there anything else?”

Overdraw shakes her head, but looks back to her broken tent heap and grimaces. She asks, “Actually... can you make me a tent as well... I seem to have... uh...”

“Made a critical error?” Pandora suggests.

“Let's go with that. I just figured you set up this lovely tent—”

“Yurt.” Pandora corrects her. “This is a yurt. It is like a tent but better in every way.”

“I mean, yeah, okay, but a yurt is a *kind* of tent.”

“But we have a more *specific* term. You all are using *tents*; I am using a *yurt*.”

“But this— fine, okay, may I have a yurt?”

Pandora wears a smug grin, having claimed her petty victory. “Very well, but I'll have a favor to claim later.”

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Emberstorm extends a hand. “Pleased to meet a friend of Sugar Glass. Baladeth was it?”

The burning shadow of a man hesitates, but accepts Emberstorm's handshake. Smoke and steam waft from the grasping hands, but Emberstorm doesn't seem to mind the intense heat.

“Correct. The pleasure is all mine, Emberstorm.” The blazing god of death gives a firm pump of his arm.

Sugar Glass grins. “Ms. Emberstorm here is helping me with something of an impromptu venture. Campfire cooking lessons! Only five coins per session. Looking to brush up and make some tasty treats?”

Baladeth laughs, “You make it sound so tempting. Maybe I'll have to tell Nalagrom about—”

“Don't you fucking dare.” Sugar Glass half laughs, but her eyes are wide, terrified and serious.

“Okay, okay, I won't tell him. But maybe I'll see if Quin might want to learn... Actually, on second thought, asking her to huddle around a fire probably won't go over great.” He sighs, sounding like a worried father.

“Up to you,” Sugar Glass says as she digs a fresh cinnamon roll out of her backpack. She tosses it to Emberstorm. “Part one of your payment.”

Emberstorm squeals excitedly, and rips into the cinnamon roll.

“... Food motivated... noted.” Baladeth chuckles, and tussles Emberstorm's hair. He looks back to Sugar Glass. “So... any juicy rumors as of late? Maybe involving a certain gunmetal gray girl that my apprentice has been toying with?”

“Well... I do have something, but she made me promise not to share... but it is adorable~” Sugar Glass sets up for her lesson as campers slowly trickle in. “Why do you want to know so much about Dora?”

“I just can't help it. She has such interesting potential.”

“She is already an international villain, that's now gone inter-dimensional. How much potential does she have left?”

Sugar Glass waves to Emberstorm to snap her out of her dessert daze. The devil girl rushes into position, and sits down in the fire pit. She ignites herself, becoming cloaked in a roaring flame.

Baladeth watches the dancing embers of the blazing hero lighting everything around with an unnatural red haze. “Your world does not have gods... Have you ever considered someone could fill that vacancy?”

“Ominous~” Sugar Glass says as she steps away. “Well, I gotta get to work. Feel free to stick around, tall dark and spooky. But if you want to get involved, five coins. Well... since you have quickly made your way into being a regular... I'll cut it down to three.”

Baladeth sighs. “Very tempting... I'll give you two coins for a lot of coffee when we get back, and the hustle.”

Sugar Glass grins. “So generous. Alright.” She steps away to the campers and contestants. “Alright, everyone gather around– Wait! Not you, Emberstorm!”

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Overdraw grumbles at her hubris. She's been rubbing sticks as hard as she can, and all she's been getting is sore palms for her troubles. Still no fire. She looks to Pandora's yurt, considering asking for help again, but then looks back to her own cozy yurt, freshly fabricated for her. A look of guilt washes over her face. She takes a deep breath and gets back to it.

“I advise you step back.” A familiar voice. Quinton steps into view, their gorgeous red hair trailing like the ever elusive fire.

Overdraw stands back and the flaming blade Auto-Heart is summoned to Quinton's hand. With an elegant flourish, they drive the blade into the attempted campfire, igniting it. The blade fades away and they drift to sit next to Overdraw.

“Thank god, Quinton. You're a life saver. I should have just bought a ferrorod but I figured, 'how hard could it be?’”

“Deceptively difficult,” they note. “Still, it is a bit of a surprise to see you struggle. I was under the impression your flame arrows could cause ignition.”

“... They can... also I'm an idiot!” She groans and flops back on the grass.

Brushing back their coat, Quinton sits on a rock and sighs. “Sadly, this isn't a casual visit... I have a rather large request. I do not know if I can make it worth your time or what have you.... but my options are rather sparse and... you seemed like you genuinely cared.”

“Yeah, uh... what do you need?” Overdraw says, brushing herself off and sitting up. “I'd be happy to help.”

“My world... is in danger. Even though Nerassa lied to me about what the threat was... there *is* a threat. A dreadfully terrible one at that.” Quinton stares into the flame with a solemn frown. “The worst

part is, I do not know much about this enemy... but they are powerful and have a strange ability. I have fought one of their number, but it is... it was... A hollow memory... nothing but anxiety and pain remain. Like a nightmare: fading fast once it was over. I... wrote down everything I could remember, but with everything that happened before I could make my notes, that isn't much.”

“Um... alright. So a person with memory erasing powers. So kinda like an under-powered Dr. Wash. Yeah, I can handle that,” Overdraw says with confidence.

“I may have... undersold the threat. It's hazy... but I am pretty sure it stopped a car... then... gunshots were fired. Very powerful magic was used... and... I don't even know if we killed it or just got away from it.” Quinton idly rubs their thumb over their fingers; half fidget, half attempt to focus.

“Okay... so... dealing with someone that is a cross between Dr. Wash and Panzerman... that is... oof... that does sound like a rough combo.”

“And I have reason to believe this isn't one individual, but a faction... Maybe a whole army.” Quinton grimaces.

Overdraw takes a deep breath. “Okay... this is a big ask. I... I am not on good terms with my boss but... If we talk to Emberstorm and I call in what few favors I have... maybe I could get a few of the hero organizations involved.”

Quinton shakes their head. “Not an option. Lifetech has a monopoly on the city and would not condone any other corporation doing anything within their borders.”

“Okay... no backup... unless.” She looks back to Pandora's yurt. “We could ask Dora... She is always bragging how she can take on a whole planet, but also has to preserve life. We could see if she could put her money where her mouth is.”

Quinton grimaces at the thought. “We... could. But I would like that as a last resort... The Iron Hands... uh... it's a long story. Let's just say memories of a globe spanning horrific robotic threat are... within living memory... for a lot of people.”

Overdraw groans and rubs her temples. “Okay... no back up, no Dora... I'm going to need to know weaknesses to even consider this.”

Quinton sighs. “I do not know anything about them, and what I do know is quickly slipping away.”

“Well Nerassa knows, right?” Overdraw asks. Seeing a refreshed grimace, Overdraw sighs. “Right... something happened during the fight... I didn't see it.”

“It's fine. She was just using me. I'm happy she's gone,” they say with a rather unconvincing tone. “We don't need her.”

Overdraw fidgets with her hair. “I... know that feeling. I've been there. But I've also been on the other side of that. I have been the person that hurt someone I cared about... and it took me a long time to realize that I had been hurting her. And what I did was wrong. I wish I could go back and apologize to Vallery. But the only way that could happen is if she gave me a chance... one that I certainly didn't earn.”

Quinton kicks a rock into the fire. “I'm just... I just want to be seen and understood, and respected, and seen for who I am. Not to be used, and exploited and tossed out when I am no longer useful.” They look to the sky. “It's been so long since I had that... it feels like a dream.”

Overdraw clears her throat. “Okay, Quinton. Here's the deal. I suggest that you go talk with Nerassa... you don't have to forgive her, not yet. It's up to you to decide what she needs to do to earn your forgiveness. But at the very least you need to learn what we are up against. If you can't do that, you're going to need to pick your poison between me calling in back up, and me asking Pandora to help.”

There is a long pause. Quinton stares into the fire as they consider their options. Finally, they stand up. “I need to think this over. In the meantime... I could use a sparring partner.”

Overdraw chuckles. “Sure thing. But don't say that too loud, or you'll summon Zeke. And then the sparring match will never stop!”



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Quin watches a pair of deer with dark fur and short horns lounging in a clearing. They look at her in the full moonlight for a moment, but then go back to relaxing, occasionally taking a nibble of the foliage beneath them. The frozen woman smiles, happy to be recognized and accepted. It is wonderfully peaceful right now. Soft sounds of nature drown out the campgrounds only a few yards away. It is a magical place, even when nothing supernatural is occurring.

The peace is pierced by the previously dead silent Pandora, seemingly coming out of nowhere. “So. Getting close to Baladeth and my Graz.”

Quin jumps, caught off guard, reaching for a hammer she had left behind. She looks back to the deer, who are looking at Pandora with curiosity and concern. “Yes... uh... Baladeth has been quite kind to me... and I suppose Nalagrom showed me a twisted kind of mercy.”

Pandora seems to get more aggressive. “My Graz already has one dubiously alive, emotionally stunted, semi-robotic ice queen. Back off. I do not share.”

Quin stares at Pandora with her mono-eye, eventually quirking her head in confusion. “I’m... Sorry? I... don’t think I follow.”

“Then I will put it more simply. Nalagrom is mine. I have not had rivals in matters of the heart before and I cannot guarantee your safety if you try anything.” Her eyes narrow suspiciously at Quin.

The frozen woman looks back to the deer. “Is owning people normal in your world? That sounds dreadful...”

Pandora is snapped out of her jealous anger. “What? No, not ownership—”

Quin looks back, even more confused. “What do you mean then?”

“Romance! Love! Lust!” One of the deer stands up at the outburst, ready to run.

Quin winces and gestures for Pandora to calm down. “Ok, um... I don't know why you're upset with me but I'm very sorry. But I just want to watch nature. I wish you luck on this... thing you're doing.”

Pandora looks up at the terrified deer. She slowly crouches, trying to disappear from view. “Sorry... I did not realize. But you have no feelings for Nalagrom?”

Quin shakes her head. “No, I do... mostly revulsion and... if I can be honest, a bit of fear. I am thankful for his mercy. So maybe some respect.”

“When I said feelings I meant– No, it is fine. That does answer the question...” She sits down beside Quin and laughs. “I apologize. This is... not like me. I just... have not felt this way about anyone else. Nalagrom is special and, it is selfish of me, but I know we only have so long before he will be gone. He did not show up for movie night, instead he sent a zombie messenger saying he had to go hang out with 'the new girl' and I guess I let my imagination get the better of me. It's just... I want to savor every moment we have before goodbye.”

Quin turns her attention back to the slowly calming wildlife. “Right... when the tournament ends we will all be separated. Will I need to go home? I... do not want to return to that cruel place.”

Pandora raises an eyebrow at Quin. “Why would you. It seems like Baladeth wants you to stick with him. You could go back to his world. A powerful warrior like you would fit right in.”

“Perhaps... but I have just escaped an endless world of violence. If I cannot find my past... a peaceful future may be the next best thing.”

Pandora turns her attention to the pair of still uneasy deer. “I... understand. Nalagrom makes being a villain so easy and fun. But I don't know if that is the real me. Villainy is a pragmatic choice for me... but I guess I want a peaceful future as well.”

Quin has a faint smile. “I suppose... if you find that peaceful future, you'd be willing to share?”

“With everyone,” Pandora says as she settles in for a night of watching animals.

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The rising sun barely illuminates Rebecca's yurt when she is dragged out of her comfy new bed by its creator. “Wake up, we have a competition to win,” says a confusingly motivated Pandora.

Rebecca groans and stumbles to her feet instinctively. She blindly fumbles for her arrowhead, before jamming it back into her arm, returning her to full height and giving her a wake up pinch.

“What's going on, where's the fire?” Overdraw asks groggily.

“No fire, except for the fiery spirit of competition. Now move! I need someone with the upper body strength of a body builder to row for me.” Pandora is practically pushing Overdraw out of her yurt in her ill-fitting nightgown.

“Are you okay? This doesn't seem like you,” Overdraw asks with a yawn.

“I am fully operational. This is a chance for... team bonding,” Pandora responds.

After a pause to think, Overdraw rubs her eyes and asks, “What is it you're really after?”

Pandora rolls her eyes. “Fine, fine, Tenki is hosting a canoe race, winning team gets a small favor from him, per contestant. Teams of three. Boat can't leave the water or teleport but everything else is fair game.”

“And you want that mini wish, of course. What would you spend it on?” Overdraw says with suspicion.

“What would I spend what on?... oh. The favor. Something nefarious or something, I just want

to win.”

Overdraw groans, “Alright, so me, you and... ugh. Nalagrom?”

Pandora bites her lip and with barely constrained anger she says, “No, his team is full.”

“Oh... well... sign me up. I want to touch Tenki's horns... I am so curious how his ears would react.”

“Why did I need to know that?”

“This is the cost of waking me without coffee: my filter is still loading.”

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“Gooooood morning campers! My Destruction Derby Canoe Race is almost under way! Please report to Miss X with your team roster and names! Only thirty minutes remain for registration!” Tenki booms, taking up the emcee role his sister usually plays.

Pandora guides Overdraw through the crowd. “Let us link up with our third.”

Overdraw takes in the blend of familiar and new faces. “Who's our third? Sugar Glass? Lyla? Emberstorm?”

“No, no, and absolutely not.” Pandora seems angered by the last suggestion. “All of them are leading or... joining teams. But they have overlooked an absolute ringer.”

“A ringer? Who would that be?” Overdraw asks.

Scythe slinks up behind the amazonian and surprises her with a hug. “There's my favorite sparring buddy! We are going to get so wet, teammate!”

“EEP!” Overdraw squeaks. “W-What do you mean *teammate!*? Pandora, you can't be serious!”

“Dead serious. I calculated the odds, and she gives us the highest chance of winning. Even if her chaos dice misfire.” Pandora smirks. “Do not worry, she will behave.”

Scythe nods and winks. “Absolute best behavior, sweet cheeks~”

Overdraw winces. “Fine... fine... Let's register before—”

Overdraw gets distracted by a scarred woman with a dragon tail and horns, talking with a young man with two little horns of his own. Behind the dragon woman stands a big beef slab of a man with a happy grin on his face.

“Does... Tenki have another sister?” Overdraw asks.

Pandora flicks the hero. “Stop ogling the champion.”

“I wasn't ogling! I'm just curious is all. I haven't bumped into her before.”

Pandora explains, “Well you're looking at Rakurai, champion of a previous tournament. Luckily she's not in our bracket. The man behind her is Aarnir, her husband.”

“So, it's like a family team. That's cute.”

Scythe cuts in, “No, that's Wu, unrelated dragon. Not all dragons are related. And how old do you think Rakurai is? Unless she had him when she was in grade school—”

“She's a dragon, she could be thousands of years old as far as I know!” Overdraw squeaks defensively.

“Maybe you just want her to be *your* 'mommy,' huh?”

“Pandora, is it too late to change teammates?”

“Quiet, both of you,” Pandora says as they finally make it to Miss X. “Here to register myself, Overdraw and Scythe as 'Team Victory.’”

Miss X giggles, as the names are added to a holographic roster. “Done and done~ Awfully bold team name.”

“Dress for the job you want, I guess.” Overdraw whimpers bashfully.

“Alright, you're all registered. You'll be in the fifth canoe. Good luck, and have fun!” Miss X chimes.

The trio head to the boat, passing by a green-haired boy, a red reptilian man, and a yellow robot with big blocky hands. Noticing Pandora, the robot rushes over, stealing a handshake. “Hello! It's good to not be the only robot-villain-friend here. Wait! Where are my manners! My name is Dave the Dummy, and these two asked me to join their team; Team Hype. They seem nice. What about your team? Are they your friends? Or are they strangers? Perhaps it would be better—”

Dave continues to ramble to the baffled Pandora, leaving Overdraw to greet the other two. “Yeah, uh, hello. I'm Overdraw, pleased to meet you. Well... I guess I'm Rebecca, since I'm off duty. Your friend is very, uh, friendly.”

The others smile, and the kid makes the introductions. “I'm Hikaru, and that is my big bro, Ryujin, but if we're using fake names, uh... Speedstar and Bravagon.”

“Not on duty? Looks like we're not the only 'lawman'/'criminal' team in the tournament, if Dave is anything to go by.” Ryujin strokes his chin.

“Yeah, I'm a super hero in my world,” Overdraw says with a smile.

“Wild!” Hikaru grins. “You'd think we would have met by now.”

Scythe leans over, winking at Ryujin. “Why don't you ask about me big boy~”

Overdraw rolls her eyes and looks away, only to come face to face with Lyla. “Oh! Hi!”

“Hey,” Lyla says back with a slightly nervous smile.

Toffee and Red Hood, following behind Lyla, watch the awkward stare down. Toffee eventually breaks the silence by shouting, “Just kiss already!”

Lyla clears her throat. “I didn't see you around, uh, but, uh... sorry, we seem to be on opposite teams this time. I just met these lovely new friends.”

Toffee chuckles, “Well Red gravitated to me, and wasn't sure who else to find for a third. My first thought was you.”

Overdraw blushes. “Yeah, goodness. I seem popular.”

The bunny girl crosses her arms. “Yeah, more... Even though you're my opponent when this break is over, you at least play pretty fair. And I know you won't try to kill me.”

The hero admits, “I... was actually called away right as your match started. That rough?”

“Yeah... that rough. Anyway, I figured the person searching for you was a decent enough substitute.” Toffee shrugs, before leaning in to whisper, “Okay, real talk, is she all in there? She seems real sweet but every now and then she just drops a... red flag? Maybe too strong of a phrase but...”

“Lyla? She's super sweet. She just had a rough round is all,” Overdraw whispers back.

The hero turns back to Lyla. “I'm sure you and Toffee will be fast friends in no time. She's pretty funny. During the whole sparring mix up she just offered to play card games for funsies. Real sweetheart.”

“I suppose, the real question is, can you keep up with divine inspiration?” Lyla says looking back at Toffee.

The bunny girl shrugs. “I think I can confidently say 'for a bit,' and rely on the pun to do the heavy lifting.”

Red Hood giggles, “This is going to be so much fun. What a dynamic cast. Three red hoods on one boat.”

Lyla turns around. “What?”

Toffee waves it off. “It's just this thing she does.”

Red Hood grins. “I would love to regale you with what I mean, but in exchange I want to know more about you, Lyla.”

As the conversation shifts away from her, Overdraw takes stock of her team. Scythe is still toying with Ryujin, but Pandora has slipped out of her conversation with Dave. Now sitting in their boat, her eyes are locked on a passing team, like a feral cat noticing a rival in its territory. Nalagrom, Baladeth and... Emberstorm. Emberstorm has a giddy grin on her face and flashes a smug smirk at Pandora.

That's enough for Pandora to bark out, “Don't you touch my Graz!”

Emberstorm, with an impish, spiteful grin, pokes Nalagrom while they head to their canoe. Pandora had acted murderous before, but this was the first time Overdraw saw actual murderous intent behind those eyes.

“Dora, chill,” Overdraw says. “She's just playing around.”

Pandora growls, “Hardly. I overheard her talking earlier, about how she is going to win for her honey. That man stealing little shit. Graz didn't show up for movie night last night. Suddenly they have a third member of their team, and she's going to be right next to him and—”

“Dora, your body is chewing the paint off the boat.”



The gentle grinding noise was barely audible, but the spot where Pandora had been sitting is sanded down to a fine finish, the aluminum canoe's new reflective glare flashing Overdraw.

“I... I... I am very sorry Becky but—” Dora begins.

“Aw, she called you Becky~” Scythe interrupts. “Big bad Dora wants to be a friend.”

“You don't get to call me Dora, demon.” Pandora glares, her anger redirected at Scythe.

Meanwhile, Overdraw has put it together. “Did... you drag me out of bed so you could get petty revenge on Emberstorm for stealing your evil boyfriend?”

Pandora freezes, then admits, “The... thought did cross my mind.”

Overdraw sighs. “I have seen enough sitcoms to know that this is probably some kind of misunderstanding... mostly 'cause I know that short-king-crazy over there isn't her type.”

Pandora squirms uncomfortably. “I would... still appreciate your assistance. Even if it is petty to—”

“You don't need to twist my arm, I'm in,” Overdraw says with a nervous smile. She changes gears, putting on a hammy voice. “After all, my friend Dora has requested my assistance, and Emberstorm is clearly brainwashed; I'll have to go all out to snap her out of it.”

Pandora is surprised. “I did not expect you to be ok with this.”

“You're just letting your humanity show. Heck, I've reveled in petty stupid revenge, and it wasn't nearly as fun as a little roughhousing in a canoe race.”

Scythe chimes in, “Well, you both know I would be down for *anything*.”

Overdraw grins wide. “Alright, Dora. What's the plan?”

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Tenki drifts above the eight teams of three. He yawns, glancing down at the competitors socializing and figuring things out. He finally gets bored and snaps his fingers. A lance of lightning streaks across the sky and a deafening crack of thunder draws everyone's attention. "Alright! Seems like we are about ready to go—"

"We need another moment!" Kiri shouts as she attaches another helium balloon to Azta.

Tenki groans, "Nevermind! Team Miracle-Worker is having technical difficulties."

"This is enough!" The god says indignantly, "It balances out!"

"We can't be too careful, lead-butt. Your phenomenal cosmic powers are heavy," says their third teammate, Ellie.

Aarnir chimes in from the middle of his boat, "Huh, I don't think I have that problem. Is two-ten heavy, Raku?"

Rakurai sighs and smiles, "You're fine dear."

"Hah! Two-Ten!" Zeke laughs from the back of her team's canoe, nearly tipping the entire boat backwards.

The first of her teammates, Sugar Glass, is leaning as far forward as she can manage from the middle: practically in the front seat. Quinton, up front, proudly poses with a foot on the bow, making the most of the need to be a counterweight and their lack of sitting room.

Zeke cockily continues, "You just need to get your weight distribution figured out."

Azta scoffs, "A mere mortal cannot compare to my density. I am a cosmic thing in a small space."

Toffee chuckles from the back of her canoe. “And balloons are enough?”

The god gets in the boat, and though it rocks and wobbles, it does balance out.

“Guess so.” Kiri shrugs. “Divine logic; as long as I believe it would be enough, I guess it's enough.”

Banafsaj chuckles from the middle of a canoe on the end of the row. “Suspended by the suspension of disbelief.”

The rest of her team are quiet. Quin sits behind her, happy to blend into the background for now. Up front is a woman that had introduced herself as Corrin. Young, with white hair and dressed in a striking red and blue cavalry uniform, her horse waits eagerly at the bank of the river, watching the race with a faint tinge of jealousy.

Tenki clears his throat. “Alright, so... are we actually all ready to go now?” After a messy series of murmured affirmations, he presses on. “Alright, with the next bolt of lightning we begin. You just need to get to the lake at the end of the river. Elegantly simple. A quick little sprint, the end is marked with flags.” The golden dragon man gestures to a barely visible green flag around the bend. A decently long trek for a normal race, but surely easy for the God Eater's chosen competitors.

He continues, “Rules: if you leave the boat, you may not continue to assist in the race by any means. If your boat leaves the water, or you teleport, or move a boat through portals or telekinesis, your team is out. Aside from that, no holds barred. Let's have some fun out there! As a reminder, each victor gets a small favor from me. This isn't a *wish*, but if it is within my power, and won't interfere with my duties, it is yours, my friends!” Tenki winks and strikes a pose. “I think that is everything. Sis! Count us down!”

Miss X pops up next to Tenki, a holographic number counting down above her. “Alright! Three! Two! One!” There is a lightning strike and a crack of thunder right behind her, making her flinch. “Go-OOH! Tenki!” She huffs at her brother.

The teams all push off and start rowing. There is a chaotic flurry of action as attacks and counters erupt from the field. In the chaos, Overdraw holds close to the boat and focuses, summoning her wings, and using them instead of rowing, rocketing them ahead.

Pandora orders Scythe, "Depth charge the target."

The jealous villain flings a small bit of her body out of the boat to splatter on Emberstorm as they pass her team. It draws the devil girl's attention away from the black chaos die that is chucked in front of her boat. The number can't be seen, but the timing is on point as the explosion rocks the canoe, nearly knocking Emberstorm out, and drenching her and Nalagrom.

Baladeth groans and glares at his teammates. He sarcastically shouts, "I wonder why we have a target on our backs right from the word go!"

"Perfect!" Nalagrom cackles.

Emberstorm grins wide as she tosses Perlham into the water. The robot piggy companion grabs onto the back of the boat, deploying a rotor, and they take off after Team Victory. "I'm gonna claim my sweet sweet prize and defeat an international villain today! Let's go!"

Baladeth sighs, but his voice holds a rosy tone. "I suppose we don't lack enthusiasm."

Elsewhere in the chaos, there is a clash as the simmering blade Auto-Heart clashes with Banafsaj's staff, keeping the flat of the sword from Corrin.

The magitech cyborg's reaction is hidden beneath her helmet but her voice is giddy. "You've been improving your form!"

"I need that favor," Quinton says firmly, but cracks a smile. "I knew I couldn't stay *afloat* without getting better."

They suddenly kick on the full flame of the blade, catching Banafsaj off guard and pushing her onto the back foot, nearly off the canoe. Banafsaj resists her every instinct to flee and reposition.

Corrin moves to cover Banafsaj as she finds her footing, drawing a borrowed, purposefully dulled saber – a less-than-lethal option that would let her go all out. “Evasive maneuvers, Quin!”

Their canoes weave in and around, Quinton trying to land a hit, but between parrying saber swings and staff prods, they struggle to get a clean opening.

As Perlham speeds Emberstorm's boat away to an early lead, Tenki commentates, “Looks like Team Bad-Ass is the first to take a decisive lead. Meanwhile, sparks fly in a heated duel between Team Soldier-On's Corrin and Banafsaj, and Team Wild Heart's Quinton.”

Pandora grimaces. She announces, “Scythe, time for the plan.”

Scythe plays dumb. “What plan?”

“What do you mean? You came up with it this morning. Operation Watersports.”

Overdraw turns crimson. “What?”

Scythe giggles. “Yeah, didn't quite hear you, can you speak up?”

Overdraw tries to warn her, “Dora, don't–”

Frustrated, Pandora says, loud and clear, “Operation: Watersports! Happy?”

“Giddy~” Scythe cackles and tosses a blue die in the water beneath their boat.

Looking back, Pandora sees Overdraw's blush. “Wait, does that have another meaning?”

Scythe's laughter gets louder. Overdraw whimpers, “Yeah, how... do I even explain it. Uh... so–”

Overdraw is, mercifully, cut off. “That's a nine baby!” Scythe announces as a serpent of water rushes out from beneath their boat and corkscrews over the death god, the apprentice, and the devil girl,

taking Team Victory with it.

Overdraw struggles to keep the boat on the twisting water serpent as they invert on this wild thrill ride Scythe has summoned. Pandora fights off the burning embarrassment to deliver an arm-stretched slap to Emberstorm while she gawks at the maneuver.

Tenki calls it out, “What dramatic and creative use of the chaos die! Team Victory are neck and neck with Team Badass!”

The chaos across the rest of the pack seems to clear. Tenki practically rung the dinner bell as all eyes shift focus to the one person that can seemingly freely and effortlessly manipulate water.

“You guys may wanna duck,” Scythe manages to say.

The first volley is from Wu releasing boiling draconic steam breath from afar, while Ellie puts in as much effort as she can to get Kiri in polearm range of Scythe. The spontaneous pincer attack gives Team Bad-Ass a chance to pull away.

Baladeth shouts as he rows. “Let's use the ringer now, while we're still in the race!”

Graz gets up and grins. “Ladies and gentlemen! Time for a show stopping performance! Devil babe! Do the thing!”

A slightly stunned Emberstorm closes her eyes, focuses, and a hellish portal opens above them. A torrent of reanimated merfolk fill the water, forming an undead, writhing barricade. “Ew... ew ew ew... they are a lot grosser in person!” Emberstorm averts her eyes.

Nalagrom cackles, “Yeah! They're ugly nasty friends!”

Baladeth reassures Emberstorm. “Just think of our contract.”

“Team Badass just made a *hell* of a barricade!” Tenki cries out.

“We need another roll and fast!” Overdraw shouts.

Scythe tosses a blue die, this time into Team Hype's canoe right behind them, landing just below Hikaru's seat. Dave quickly grabs the young man and pulls him out of the way as the die settles. 8. It erupts into a geyser of water that snakes out of Team Hype's boat, and then under Team Victory's canoe, raising them up just in time to avoid zombie open swim.

Team Victory splashes down right next to Team Badass again. Emberstorm is ready this time, and blocks Pandora's extending punch, but the nanomachines liquefy around her arm, and bind it. With another shove Pandora makes Emberstorm smack herself. Before Pandora can puppet her any further, the devilish hero ignites, burning away the loose packed gray goo.

Further behind, Aarnir takes out a kamifuda, and slaps it onto his wife's arm. It glows and a vigor fills the dragon. Rakurai paddles like she's been possessed, crashing their canoe through the zombie wall at high speeds, while Wu keeps peppering Scythe with steam breath, forcing both Team Victory and Bad-Ass to take evasive action as they pass.

Team Soldier-On catches up with the would be front runners, Corrin bashing zombie mermaids off their boat. Banafsaj draws a rubber-bullet-filled SMG and focuses in on Scythe. The less-than-lethal rounds bombard Scythe as she waves her hand and laughs: it's just a tickle. Still, the squirming demon squanders their lead, letting another team pass.

“One time Summer League Champion Rakurai is going crazy! Team Dragon-Storm pulls ahead, followed by Team Soldier-On! Dragon-Storm is actually going very fast... hm.” Tenki seems a little less enthused about it. He takes out his orb, and casually summons an inter-dimensional rift in the path of the river.

Miss X groans, “Why?”

“Because it wouldn't be entertaining if it was over that fast. Just a little extension. More entertaining that way,” Tenki says with a grin.

“You sound more and more like mom every day... it's concerning,” She responds.

“Anyway,” the gold dragon casually pushes his sister's concerns aside, “Team Dragon-Storm is almost at the half-way point.”

Confusion and panic take the field. Of note, Lyla, with her team languishing near the back of the pack, seems to take it poorly. She goes silent for a moment as her duplicate appears. “Do we have an extra oar, per chance?”

Red shrugs, “I believe that each boat came with but two. Front and back.”

There is a little flicker of light as Toffee covers the Magitama around her neck and is suddenly holding another oar. “Will this do?”

Red grins, “Where did you get that?”

“Uh... um... because it would be funny?” Toffee holds a pained smile as she hears the excuse that escaped her mouth.

Lyla doesn't question it. Her light doppelganger rips the oar from Toffee's hand. “Let's catch up. You steer, Toffee. It is time for the instrument of god to do her work.” Lyla and her double begin to paddle like mad as an ominous glow settles in her eyes.

Seeing the glowing torpedo closing in on them, Zeke creates additional arms and borrows the tactic, taking Quinton's oar for now. Zombies lunge from the water and scratch at Quinton, but their resolve holds, the worst of the undead being held at bay by Sugar Glass's barriers. They pull up alongside Team Soldier-On and take a swipe at Quin. The frozen warrior lets out a gasp of pain, the flat of Quinton's Auto-Heart made much worse by the heat coursing through it.

Baladeth directs Perlham to slam his boat up against Team Victory's canoe. Nalagrom belches fire on Scythe, while the fireproof Emberstorm uses the curtain of flames to hide the wind-up for a haymaker punch that hits Pandora square on the nose. Scythe draws her dagger and extends it against the enemy boat, pushing them apart. The shove knocks Emberstorm off balance.



Pandora shouts to Overdraw, “Now!”

In the chaos, Overdraw summons a green and blue arrow in one hand and her bow in the other. In one smooth motion she merges the arrows as she draws back and fires. The seeking burst arrow lands square on Emberstorm's chest. The devil hero is launched into the water, Perlham abandoning the team to make sure she makes it back to land okay.

At the same time, like a streak of light, Lyla's boat rushes over the zombie wall, the undead clinging to the hull. A crimson aura begins to manifest around Red Hood.

Scythe stumbles to her feet with a grin. A dirty joke loaded behind those lips, she starts, “Looks like—” The punchline is cut off as Red Hood redirects the clawing red wolf manifestation's attack to hit a zombie. The swing's overreach weaves between members of Team Victory, accidentally grabs Scythe, and knocks her off the canoe.

Tenki squeals. “First knock out, and it it's a *double*! Team Victory knocked out Emberstorm, and then Team Storybook took out Scythe! The back of the pack is just as wild as the front.”

Baladeth is trying to get Nalagrom to stop cackling and start rowing, while Pandora and Overdraw take a moment to breathe, sharing a laugh. They take their time to watch Dave turn around to make sure Hikaru is okay, much to Ryujin's appreciation, while zombie mermaids rebound off the dummy's body.

Overdraw grins. “So... wanna punish your boyfriend next?”

Pandora returns the grin. “Maybe. Who knows? Maybe we can pull off a miracle victory.”

Overdraw looks over to make sure Emberstorm is okay before shrugging. “Would be nice.”

Scythe pops her head out of the water. “Are you guys okay? Are you dropping out?”

“Just basking in sweet, cold revenge~” Pandora says. “Though we should get moving again. Onward, Overdraw!” At her command the hero's wings flex as they take off again, now near the back

of the pack.

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Tenki and Miss X follow Team Dragon-Storm as they cross the rift's threshold into a new universe. A world of strange prismatic rocks. Trees grow out over the river, their leaves looking like stained glass. Through the living kaleidoscope of rainbow leaves, a tremendous deep azure moon fills an auburn sky. The calm river of the Crossroads ends, replaced with the white water rapids of this strange, alien world.

Tenki grins, proud of his choice. “Tada! An action packed back half.”

Miss X is mortified. “Tenki! This isn't canoeing! Maybe, at best it could have been kayaking, but more like rafting!”

“Eh, they're all boat things.” He shrugs. “Anyway, the competitors are all super capable and stuff, or they wouldn't be competitors. Think how entertaining it will be!”

“Way too much like mom!”

“Anyway, Team Dragon-Storm is hitting the 'complication!’” Tenki says, with a grin.

“Complication... guh.” Miss X crosses her arms disapprovingly.

Wu turns back to his teammates for guidance, as the veterans take the change in scenery in stride. The young dragon takes out his paddle and follows Rakurai's instructions as they try to avoid the worst of the rough, stone filled waters. Like a luminous rocket, Team Storybook is right on their heels, though as Lyla launches them directly into the rapids the boat is slammed into the rocks over and over. A green aura begins to manifest around a cackling Red Hood as she tries to direct her huntsman manifestation's gunfire towards the enemies. It starts with a musket, practically a warning shot. Meanwhile, Toffee is desperately trying to be a rudder as she is dragged along, screaming for Lyla to slow down.

“I like them.” Tenki says with a smirk.

“I can't watch!” Miss X sighs and fades out of the rift. Immediately, she pops back in. “A giant surge in the river came out of nowhere! Did you have anything to do with it?”

Tenki shrugs. “It is clearly just happenstance.”

“Concerningly like mother,” Miss X groans.

The other six boats are shot into the rapids in absolute chaos. Dave is holding onto Ellie's tail. Nalagrom is taking shots across the river at Azta's balloons. Overdraw is taking a shot at Ryujin. Sugar Glass begins to extend barriers into the water to guard against the upcoming hazards.

Up ahead, Wu holds on as well as he can. He takes a look behind. “We have company, and fast!”

Barely audible over the rapids, Aarnir shrugs and muses, “Well, it's already super dangerous, so I suppose this is perfectly fair.” He waves his hands and little ember motes flit down to the water, seeming to disappear.

“Are... you out of magic stuff?” Wu shouts, concerned.

Rakurai smiles. “Just enjoy the fireworks behind us!”

Lyla rows directly over where one of the tiny ember motes had come to rest, and her duplicate is not fast enough to protect her from it. The concussive blast smacks the oar into her head, as it shoots through the air like a missile back up the rapids. Lyla is out cold, but her duplicate continues to row with a single minded purpose, even as it fades away into nothing but hands.

Toffee shudders. “The fuck did I sign up for!?”

Up above, Miss X pleads with Tenki. “Brother, this is too dangerous!”

Tenki waves his hand as he casually drifts out of the path of the launched oar. "It's fine! They are tough, and it's all fun and games."

The oar lands in one of the glass leaf trees, raining razor sharp stained glass shards onto Azta. Balloons start popping one after another. Team Miracle-Worker's canoe begins to dip forward. Azta quickly tosses his oar to Kiri, before making his emergency exit, leaping off their boat. His toes catch on the lip of the canoe and he tumbles into the passing Banafsaj, taking her with him.

Banafsaj tumbles haphazardly through Team Wild-Heart's canoe before disappearing into the frothing water, as Azta face plants into a boulder, shattering it, debris flying past Dave, narrowly missing Hikaru, and smashing Ryujin right in the jaw. As the reptilian wrestler recovers, Baladeth pulls their canoe alongside, and Nalagrom goes ham, swinging his oar into Ryujin, stunning him, before the death god's apprentice nearly loses his balance. Overdraw takes the chance to close the distance, giving Pandora the opportunity to push Graz overboard while she shoots a dirty look at Baladeth.

Miss X looks expectantly at Tenki. The golden dragon sighs. "Okay, I may have overdone it a little bit... but no one has died yet so you can't say my event body count is even close to mom's." Miss X keeps glaring at her brother. "Fine, fine, I'll move the rift exit up a bit."

Up front, Wu attempts to grab Red Hood as they run alongside, but can't seem to get his hands on her. Instead, the claws of a red wolf apparition cut at him, and he stumbles back. A second claw swing scrapes Rakurai. She lets out a grunt of pain as the kamifuda on her arm is torn. Her rowing slows down as Aarnir quickly turns around to try to patch up the wound.

Left spinning out of control down the rapids, Team Soldier-On's already heavily damaged boat breaks apart completely. They quickly dismount, picking a solid patch on the shore to jump to, having just learned from Azta's tumble.

Without Azta, Kiri and Ellie charge forward, bracing as they enter the magical minefield, but bad positioning launches their boat out of the water. Tenki swoops down to grab them out of the air before they can crash through the stained glass leaves. As Team Wild-Heart rushes into the mine field, Sugar Glass strains, cocooning them in a barrier. Another deafening explosion. The glass-like shield shatters, but protects them from the worst of it as they stumble to get their act back together.

With the teams in the back in shambles, Wu sees a chance to win it. The roar of the rapids makes discussion impossible, so he just does it. He jumps out of the boat and grabs Toffee, leaving the auto-pilot Lyla and Red alone. Wu changes into his dragon form and takes off ahead with Toffee, simplifying the race further.

Mines echo in the back of the pack, but they are distant as Team Dragon-Storm and Team Storybook exit the rift. Just a few feet from the finish line, the battered and bruised front runners are neck and neck.

A flaming blade pierces the rift. A canoe, held together with barriers from Sugar Glass and paddled by a four armed Zeke, rockets ahead.

“A last minute push from Team Wild-Heart!” Tenki squeals.

It all comes down to the last dead heat, Rakurai, Red, and Zeke. By inches Quinton, still proudly standing on the bow of the canoe, crosses first.

“What an upset! From behind, Team Wild-Heart is the winner!” Tenki shouts.

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It took a while to get everyone gathered up. Crossguards tend to people's wounds as Tenki tries to avoid extended eye contact with anyone too banged up.

A soggy Overdraw waves down Toffee, who is curled up in a shock blanket. “Hey, you did really good out there.”

Toffee doesn't really respond, she just mutters in Spanish, lost in a thousand yard stare. “No me gusta esto aquí. Quiero ir a casa.”

Overdraw watches Toffee's eye. No eye contact. She looks for other symptoms. “Yeah, uh... Wait, shit, um... training, training...” Overdraw takes a deep breath. “It's me, Becky. We're on the shore

of... uh... I don't remember what river this is. But it's Tenki's camping trip. We're in the Crossroads.”

Toffee keeps muttering, shaking as she reaches for her eyepatch.

Overdraw affects a calm, clear tone. “Toffee, this is Becky, one of your friends. You are safe now. It is over. You aren't in danger. Just... put your feet on the ground, breathe.”

Toffee stops muttering and squirms, her eye starting to track Overdraw.

“Hey there. Let's just stay calm, in the moment. Name the colors you see, okay?”

“Green,” back to English, “blue, uh, another blue, yellow, brown, another green.” Toffee takes a deep breath. “I... I'm sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” Overdraw says. “My grandpa has flashbacks too. Just... caught me a bit off guard is all.”

Toffee takes a deep breath. “Alright, I think I'm good now, but... Are you sure Lyla is all in there? She started talking about being a divine vessel as we were getting up to speed. Like, went from pleasantly personable to raving cultist... like... scary fast.”

Overdraw frowns. “She has been... a little strange ever since her fight. I suppose I should talk to her, make sure she's okay. It was a rough, rough fight. Imagine challenging a god!”

Toffee looks over to a white haired crossguard. “Heh, imagine that...” It's a nervous bark of laughter. “Alright, I'm going to look for something to drink... Mind if we stick together for a bit, just in case I wind up back in South America?”

“South Am— No, nevermind, I don't need to know unless you want to share.” Overdraw extends a hand.

Toffee takes it and gives a sly grin. “I'm still kicking your ass next round.”

“Maybe if it's decided by Gin Rummy.” Overdraw smirks back.

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Baladeth drags himself up from the bottom of the river and onto the shore, water steaming off him. He mutters to himself, “Being untraceable to the God-Eater and her brats does have down sides...” He takes a moment to focus. “... I can feel Nalagrom survived, but is also elsewhere. It is time to end this dumb-ass game.”

Baladeth makes a bee line for Pandora, who is sitting by a small fire, having a pleasant chat with Wu and Dave. The god of death clears his throat. “Pandora, can we have a minute to talk?”

Pandora looks up with a venomous glare. “I do not know, I am having a very pleasant time with my *new* friends.”

The god of death groans. “I would like to explain what happened.”

The gray woman simulates a sigh, but gets up. “Alright, I will be back, guys.” She follows Baladeth away.

The death god takes a deep breath. “Alright, for my part in this misunderstanding, I am sorry I didn't invite you to our team, but Emberstorm had tremendous advantages, and I can get more than a little competitive.”

Pandora narrows her eyes. “So you are saying dragging the devil woman into this was *your* idea?”

Right on cue, Emberstorm rushes up. “Alright dude! I sat behind your smelly apprentice, and I opened that portal for you, now pay up.”

“Pay up?” Pandora raises an eyebrow.

“I mean... It was basically a sponsorship thing for me. And the price was right~” Emberstorm

says with a giggle.

Baladeth groans. He summons a piece of paper and hands it over. “Just hold this and say my name, whenever you want a share of your payment.”

Emberstorm squeals and grabs it. “Worth it! An unlimited supply of honey cake!”

Pandora goes silent for a solid second as it all slots into place. She begins to laugh. “You have got to be kidding me! This was all about some stupid cake?”

“Some stupid cake!? I am the guardian of many a dark secret. Grandma Jessebelle's Hot Honey Cake recipe is by far one of the closest guarded,” Baladeth growls.

Pandora looks back to Emberstorm. “So you were never in it for Graz?”

“Ew, no. He is waaay too much like my uncle Talzul.” Emberstorm dismisses the thought.

“But when I told you to back off—”

“Yeah, it's funny seeing you get all worked up,” Emberstorm laughs.

“Hm.” Pandora shrugs, before looking to Baladeth. “Ok, but Nalagrom was very much playing into it.”

Baladeth sighs, “Yes. I told him to clear things up, but he just laughed and said, and I quote, 'nah, 'cause she's hotter when she's angry.'”

The big dumb grin finds its way back onto Pandora's face. “He thinks I'm hot when I'm mad?”

“And... at this juncture, I'm going to figure out where the hell he got off to. Seems the damage has been repaired.” Baladeth washes his hands of this incident and saunters off into the woods.

Pandora, now a bit bashful, looks to Emberstorm. “Uh... you are welcome to join us by the fire



while we wait for the 'award ceremony.' We are still enemies in our world, but so is my current partner. I may as well be neighborly.”

Emberstorm shakes her head. “Thanks for the offer, but I gotta patch up Pearly. Then I'm going to make that big bad villain regret giving me infinite cake!” She has a wicked grin.

“Then have fun,” Pandora says as she turns around and heads back to the fire. “... I just told a hero to go have fun. I am certainly starting to go soft.”

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A short time later, once all of the competitors are mostly recovered and conscious, Tenki assumes his full dragon form to gather people's attention. “Alright. I had a big award ceremony planned but... the moment has really passed, so... Thank you all for coming. Let's take care of the favors. Step on up, Quinton!”

The Swordhand ventures forward and bows before the dragon. “I know what I want... though I'd like to keep it private. May I whisper it?”

Tenki nods, his long serpentine body twisting to get his head as close to Quinton as possible. The request is heard by no one else, but the dragon recoils.

It's clear that Tenki wants to say no but... after a moment of pondering it he says, “I'd need to talk to the head of the crossguards and my mother first. That's not an easy thing for me to do.”

They nod in return, “I understand. I'll think of something else if it can't happen.”

Tenki nods, “Perfectly fair! Now, Sugar Glass.” The cafe owner steps forward with a wide grin. “Let me guess, some free advertisements mayhaps?”

“No, not in the slightest.” She smirks.

“Really, that's quite a shock.” Tenki raises an eyebrow, intrigued.

Sugar Glass can't help but giggle. "So, you know how you have been saying to 'put it on my tab' whenever you come in for your fancy premium tea and muffin? Sometimes multiple times a day?"

"Yes but I don't—" The life seems to drain from Tenki's face as the realization hits. "Oh no."

"I want you to *pay your tab!*"

The dragon recoils as though he's been dealt a deathblow. He struggles to regain his composure. "O-Of course! It would only be the noble thing to do." With desperation in his voice, he turns to the last prize winner. "Zeke! What is it you would like from me." In his voice there is a quiet pleading for something small.

Zeke smiles. "Well, there is something I haven't been able to experience, that I've heard about. And it sounds absolutely wild. Tenki! I want a storm!"

Tenki is visibly relieved. "Yes! Fantastic! Can do!"

The sky turns to dark gray clouds and sheets of water pour down onto the competitors, soaking bandages, snuffing out campfires, drenching everyone, as booming thunderclaps echo through the forest.

The campers groan and complain, but Zeke cackles with glee. "AWESOME!"

Tenki bows. "Alright, on that note, my sister is a snitch, so I have to go explain a few things to mother. I'll be back to end the storm by tonight! Enjoy!" The golden dragon flees above cloud cover, leaving a very happy chimera and very angry campers in his wake.

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By nightfall, the storm has ended. Stars twinkle across the night sky. Just outside of Overdraw's yurt, on a blanket on top of a waterproof tarp, Rebecca and Lyla lay looking at the stars. Lyla has a strange smile as she gazes at the cosmic expanse.

Rebecca looks over to her, and with a slightly nervous clearing of her throat, she begins, “So... are you sure you're okay?.. I heard during the race things got rough and... uh...”

Lyla smiles. “Oh, according to the guard that patched me up, I should be fine. Third place while out cold is truly a sign of providence.”

“Yeah, no... Toffee said... And you kinda looked like you went a bit, uh, out of your mind.”  
Rebecca winces at how it came out.

“I'm fine, Becky! As a matter of fact I've never felt better. I feel more like the harbinger I was always meant to be. I found a new light in myself thanks to that false god. My resolve is stronger than ever. I am finally coming to understand what it truly means to be a harbinger.”

Rebecca looks over to Lyla even more concerned. “Are you sure... because you don't seem to be taking it very well.”

“What do you mean!? God is on my side. I am their hand. My judgment is unerring. I just need to believe in myself and I can do no wrong.”

Rebecca's concerned look only grows deeper. “L-Lyla... that is... that is a pretty... look I... I used to make choices because I thought 'because I'm a hero, it must be right.' But that's not...”

“See, that's the problem. Earthly authority is frequently wrong. Divine authority is different.”

Rebecca winces. “Look... I... I just don't want you to have any regrets. I don't want you to lose yourself.”

Lyla gets a bit defensive. “You barely even know me... I am more myself than I've ever felt.”

Rebecca sighs and looks back up at the stars. “Yeah... I guess...” She looks back one more time but gives up, changing topics. “Moon is pretty tonight...”

The harbinger smiles and takes Rebecca's hand. "Yes, and I'm happy to share it with you."

The two share a smile, but Rebecca's slowly fades.

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Pandora lounges on the bed, scowling as Nalagrom enters. "Anything you'd like to talk about?"

Nalagrom's grin fades a bit. "Boss man told me that he already told you. Are you mad?"

"Yes."

Graz's grin ratchets up a degree, "Good cause you're h—"

"Hot when I'm mad, yes, Baladeth said."

Nalagrom grins even wider. "It really brings out your wicked side. And that is sexy as hell~"

Pandora's scowl can't hold but she tries to restrain her own grin. "Good, because I'm going to be mad for a while." She changes the topic. "So, how was scaring the campers today?"

Graz groans. "Boring and easy... At first it was fun to send in a few jawless zombies, get a few ghosts to march in, chasing around a few losers. But everyone was already telling scary ghost stories. It's like calling in a professional champion to kill rats."

"So you want a challenge?" Pandora says, the grin winning out, her threat to stay mad dashed against her enthusiasm. "Then I have something I think you'll love." She holds up a poster with a doodle of Nalagrom on the microphone, with a back up band of her doppelgangers, which reads 'Nalagrom: Live at Summer Break.' "Tada! A rock concert!"

"Ooookay. Yeap. Nope. Ain't happening. These pipes were not made for singing. I dance, I don't sing. I have been breathing smoke in and out longer than I can fuck'n remember, sweetheart. You do not

live as high as I do and keep a pretty voice.”

“That's just it! This is rock and roll! Your voice doesn't need to be pretty!”

“I have seen a lot of fucking sorcery, and ain't no way anyone is gonna pay for my gravely ass, french-kissed-my-weed-pipe-for-the-last-ten-years voice.”

“No! Honest! I think you'd be great at it! I have been looking up songs that fit your style. There are some that aren't even out yet in my world that would be—”

Graz grins. “Wait! I get it now!”

“Yes!”

“This is a prank! A bit of revenge.”

“No!”

“You had me going for a moment, Silver,” Graz says, tussling Pandora's hair.

Pandora, wearing her upset on her sleeve, pushes Graz's hand off her. “I am being serious! I think it would be a ton of fun.”

Graz's smile slowly fades before he sighs. “You... seriously have your heart set on this... Okay, okay, fine. On one condition.” His finger glows red hot as he burns out his name from the poster. “Open to everyone. And I sing last. If they clap for enough losers, I'll go out there.”

“Spectacular—”

“And you have to sing too,” Graz says. “And no cheating. No recordings. You gotta fuck'n do the whole simulated lungs, and a voice box, and fucking belt it out.”

Pandora hesitates, but nods. “Done.”

“Fuck yeah, Silver!” Nalagrom says with a grin. “So, what do we do for this 'Movie Night' thing you wanted?”

Pandora practically stumbles over herself as she gets up to get everything ready. “Right! Basically, um... watch movies, and have snacks... um... and maybe cuddle a bit. Have a good time!”

“Okay, sounds straightforward enough. What 'movies' are we watching?”

With a nervous, dumb grin, Pandora turns on the generator. The TV flickers to life, and a tiny duplicate of Pandora plugs into the TV. “Ok, I have a lot of things downloaded. We could watch *Versus* if you want horror. *Dead Leaves*, for bizarre high octane humor. *Some Like it Hot* for an older, classy comedy... uh... I have *Abbot and Costello Meet the Mummy*. I don't know if you'd get *A Year Without A Santa Claus*, but I'm sure you would like at least one song, and stop motion is interesting. Oh! *Nightmare Before Christmas* would be right up your alley. I'd say *Beetlejuice* but... that may give you too many ideas. Uh... quintessential slashers like *Friday the Thirteenth Part 3*... What else do I have. I have always had a soft spot for *White Christmas*, but *Singing in the Rain* is also good. I have *Metropolis*. That's a good one. Is it too gauche to suggest *Tron*?”

“You are giving me too many options. Just pick one at random and let's see if we can fit in any more after. We'll chain them together as long as my stash lasts.” He flops on the bed.

“Movie marathon, then!” Pandora hugs him, snuggling as close as she can manage.

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A special thanks to a few friends. The paralogues are great for a more relaxed pace but I still have so many character creators to cite, this could be a long one. Still, I want to make sure wherever and however this is viewed, they get their due recognition!

ParryLost as my editor. Doing spectacular work as always!

Eragonya for being an additional editor on the last pass

Malk: Creator of Emberstorm and sender of cute pig pictures

Choco-D: Creator of Baladeth and Nalagrom

Goat: Creator of Quinton

Woodensponge: Creator of Quin

JadedStrayHyena: Creator of Scythe

Vashle: Creator of Tenki

Rakugaki: Creator of Rakurai and Aarnir

Ice: Creator of Wu

Minty: Creator of Miss X

Speedstar: Creator of Hikaru and Ryuujin

Faaram: Creator of Dave the Dummy

Undead: Creator of Lyla

Gun-ho Guy: Creator of Red Hood

Cap the HUMBLE: Creator of Toffee

Thanatoaster: Creator of Kiri, Azta, and Ellie

Animation Mutation: Creator of Zeke

Oki!: Creator of Banafsaj

Pyrrha: Creator of Corrin

And last but not least, to the Summer Leagues community! Thank you!