

Prologue: Standard Operating Procedures

*“What's keeping my tongue tied
I see when you roll your eyes
I swear any moment you will hear
My spirit explode”*

- Silversun Pickups. “Sort of.” *Swoon*.

The office of Captain Polar is manicured and managed. Scattered about are memories of his accomplishments. A key to the city hangs above a picture of him with the U.S. Liberty Force, the Captain standing behind Sergeant Lightning. The picture is dated by Captain Polar's appearance: sporting a long mullet and a handlebar mustache. The man now sitting at his desk has kept the handlebar mustache as the last remaining bit of hair on his head, but now dyes it a gaudy red and blue, fitting his branding, both magnetic and patriotic. Pictures of him meeting big time national heroes are dotted around. In each of them there is excitement in the Captain's eyes, while the big names are treating him like any other fan. Military honors from his glory days are pinned to his old uniform, on full display on a mannequin behind glass.

The Captain clutches a cup of coffee in the comfort of his chair, the warm confines of his office protecting him from the aggressive Wisconsin blizzard outside. Even with the heater on full blast, winter bangs on the window, keeping the temperature from reaching toasty, instead holding it at cozy. He tucks his phone in the crook of his neck, eyes on the connected computer screen, watching the low resolution video conference call warble. His smile is warm, paternal, and inviting, but beneath the desk he taps his foot impatiently as a man in a white suit rambles on and on. His act of interest fares better than most of the other participants subjected to the never ending monologue.

A light flickers on the phone, and the icon of an incoming call pops up on the screen. “Mr. Lorless, I appreciate the good news about record revenues, and your generous donations as always, but I'm getting a call on the other line. Given the circumstances, I imagine it must be an emergency. I apologize, I'll be back as soon as I can.” The Captain maintains a perfect professional smile.

He doesn't wait for an answer, switching over to the incoming call. On the other end is an administrator in a Mad-Town staff uniform. Captain Polar's warm smile fades and his hidden impatience emerges. “What is it? This had better be important. Mr. Lorless was in the middle of one of his long-winded speeches. I'm going to have to hear the windbag take it from the very top!”

“Sir, Overdraw is—”

The admin is interrupted as the door to the Captain's office is wrenched open by a wrathful armored warrior witch, caked in snow. “A RENT DISPUTE!?”

“Well, what timing.” He hangs up the phone. “I don’t like that tone,” he adds coldly, taking a sip of his coffee. “And it is *not* a dispute.”

Overdraw wipes the snow off of her face, cheeks red from exposure and rage. “I was called in, on the one day off I had, scheduled two months in advance, to Park Street, in a fucking blizzard, for a rent dispute!?”

“You will address me with respect as your superior officer!” Polar shouts back with a commanding rumble. Overdraw hesitates, and he presses his advantage. “And it is not a dispute. Criminals are holed up on privately owned property, and have hired villains to safeguard them.”

“Most of them worked at the Kirison plant that just shut down. They don’t have jobs. It’s the middle of winter — It’s the middle of a fucking blizzard out there!” Her resolve a little weaker, Overdraw tacks on a “... sir” as an afterthought, like raising a buckler in front of a shotgun.

“They don’t have the rent, so the actual owner decides what happens. They are breaking the law. There is *no* dispute. Do your duty and remove them from the property, and bring in the villains—”

“Burning Bunny and Rainbow Prism are friends!” Overdraw finds her fire again, snow sloughing off her armor as she steps forward with determination. “Vigilantes, but they are just trying to do the right thing!”

The Captain raises his voice over the hero. “They are criminals, end of story. Nothing else matters. They crossed that line from vigilante to villain when they threw in with lawbreakers. You don’t get to rewrite what these words mean. They are legally specific terms. Your job isn’t to question this. Your job is to follow orders.”

“I will not. I’m not turning them in, and I’m not throwing people into a blizzard.”

“They have their choice. Leave the property, or be arrested. If you are such a warm, generous soul, ready to skirt your duty and be insubordinate, perhaps you can just cover their rent.”

“I can’t cover all of them.”

“Well, if you want to make decisions so bad, you can decide who is deserving. Or you can stop worrying about it and follow the law.” The Captain gives her a chilling glare.

Overdraw crosses her arms. “I refuse.” She stands defiant and stubborn.

“An insubordinate soldier is no different from the enemy.” The Captain stands and stares her down. “And you

are interrupting an extremely important meeting with someone I *cannot* replace.”

“Fine. I'll take my expertise elsewhere. I've had a lot of invitations. I think I've outgrown Madison.”

Overdraw turns towards the door.

“Overdraw isn't going anywhere without my approval,” Captain Polar sneers. “You are now an insubordinate soldier. In the line of duty you deserted to come back here, empty handed. I am well within my rights to brand you a villain.” The hero stops at the doorway, her eyes wide. “There we go... You know what that means. And what recourse do you have? You'll need to submit your legal name to the court to fight this, *Robert*. Rising heroine, inspiration to young women and girls all over southern Wisconsin. Outed as a fake.”

Overdraw turns to growl at the Captain. “*I am not a fake.*”

“What does your birth certificate say?” His eyes lock unflinchingly with Overdraw's as she recoils. “Anyway, ARCANÉ only let you keep that artifact under certain conditions, if you remember. You can walk away. But Overdraw stays here.”

'Fight.' That sensation hits her. Ever since she started using the arrow it would crop up: the voice in her head that was not her own. Whose was it?

Seeing the rising star's eyes dart around as though looking for any way out, Polar twists the knife. “And if you think you can start a new life as a villain on the run... remember, we outnumber you... Once you're out of magic... Robert goes to jail, Overdraw becomes a tarnished name.”

“You... can't.” Overdraw whimpers in disbelief.

“What's it going to be? Overdraw the hero, or Robert the criminal? How do you want to be remembered?” He crosses his arms behind his back, smugly waiting for an answer. Overdraw's eyes still dart about with the desperate panic of a snared animal. “Oh well, can't be helped, can it, *Bob*? I'll get another hero to handle this mess. I believe the rookie was on call. Wild Edge was it?”

“No!” Overdraw pleads. “No... He... I will... I will do it. Alone.”

“No, you won't. You've had your chance to do it alone. Bad dogs stay on a tight leash.” He sits back down and looks over the schedule. “Spotlight will be providing... backup. You'll be taking a van, not flying. And you're going to be on a *very* tight leash from this moment on. Are we clear? Your play days are over.”

'Fight!' The voice goes completely ignored this time.

Overdraw bows her head, defeated. "Yes... Yes sir."

"Good girl." He says with a smile. "Now... if anything else interrupts the donors' meeting, and your mission isn't completed by then, I will make sure you face disciplinary action. Hurry along." Overdraw bristles at the conditions, but nods silently before turning back to her duty.

>>——>

The frozen wind howls against the van's doors as Overdraw finds herself sitting across from a man in gold and black spandex. His costume is studded with flash bulbs, and a domino mask with goggles covers his solemn face. "... So... First eviction?"

"This... isn't your first?" Overdraw asks. "How do you handle this, Spotlight? This... this is just..."

"The law..." He says, his voice a wisp of its usual bravado. "It isn't always fun but... it is what it is. The Captain isn't the worst out there. I was with Crescent Knights before this."

"Really? I didn't know that," she says, surprised.

"Mmm, yeah, I was under the name 'Greenlight' back then," he replies, chuckling with a bit of warm nostalgia. "Heh... the 'New Greenlight.' They still had the rights to the name of one of their legacy heroes, so they crammed me into green spandex and gave me lasers which... work with my powers, but... Anyway, neither here nor there. Jade Sabre acts like a happy rosy father figure for the cameras, but he's actually a horrible boss."

"Really... I would have never guessed," Rebecca says with a frown.

"I count my lucky stars that the Captain bought out my contract. But... sadly, evictions are just something we do now and then. Usually it's K-Squad that handles this kinda thing for Mad-Town, but they are out of state working with IVOS. So, now it's our problem." He sighs. "You... gonna be okay?"

"... I don't—" The van stops before Overdraw can finish her sentence.

She looks to the van door as it forces itself open with a rusty groan. The whiteout and bitter cold freezes out the conversation. There is nothing to do but walk through the knee-high snow to the front door, the latch already broken from Overdraw's previous visit. It wavers in the wind.

On the other side, two women pause their conversation. The first is a bunny-eared woman in a salmon pink outfit mostly made of fishnets. She is bigger and beefier than Overdraw. The other is a brunette of short stature with prismatic holographic wings and a rainbow Tinkerbell-style dress. The duo could have been comedic in other circumstances.

The rainbow-winged woman's eyes flicker as she sizes up the approaching heroes. "Oh no... Their feelings... their aura is all wrong. I don't think—"

The bunny woman stands up. "Overdraw wouldn't," she says, arms crossed. She looks to Overdraw, stepping onto the porch and out of the howling winds. "What did you need pretty boy for? I'm all for a double date, but this isn't the time or place." She smirks, looking for Becky's flustered blush.

Overdraw doesn't make eye contact. She doesn't speak. She summons her bow.

"Ms. Brown, aka Burning Bunny; Ms. Kimes, aka Rainbow Prism, you are under arrest," Spotlight starts. "I don't like this any more than you do. Overdraw and I aren't even supposed to be here today. But I gotta do the whole... thing. Please do not resist. You have the right to remain silent. Anything—"

"This isn't funny," Burning Bunny says. "Overdraw! Damn it! Becky!" The hero flinches and lowers her eyes. "I know you can hear me. Speak to me!" After a pause Bunny's face drifts from concern to anger. "Speak to me, you fucking coward! What happened to 'I promise I will get to the bottom of this?' Where's the hero I know!?"

Overdraw whimpers, and looks up, eyes dead. "Hero is... a legally specific term. I'm... I'm very sorry, but... please forgive me."

Spotlight takes a deep breath. "Now, let's all stay calm. You girls could have fled the scene long before we got back. Our coms are all on the fritz because of the blizzard. If you leave now—"

Bunny's rage erupts. Grabbing Overdraw and slamming her into Spotlight, she shouts, "Fucking cowards!"

Overdraw panics and summons her wings, trying to fly out of her grip, but gets a punch to the face instead.

"Sellouts!"

Spotlight scrambles to breach the first apartment for cover. Bunny retaliates by using Overdraw as a bludgeon again, knocking the bulb-covered hero down the hall.

“Bastards!”

Rainbow Prism groans. “Bunny! We could have bought more time for the people if you could just keep your cool!”

Still clutching Overdraw, Bunny begins to cry, ignoring her partner. “You were supposed to be better than this!” Overdraw is thrown outside into the impassable snow-covered streets.

“In for a penny...” Prism sighs. She raises her hands and a rainbow light wreathes Overdraw, causing her to stumble in pain through the whiteout. “Sorry to do this to you.”

Spotlight groans and gets up. One of his flashbulbs triggers. There is a flash of disorienting light and he disappears, reappearing beside Overdraw to support her. “It's pointless! Just give up! This could all be a misunderstanding in the report. There is no winning. Eventually they will be arrested... eventually you two will be arrested. There is no point in fighting.”

Prism raises her arms, her eyes glow, and a barrier of multicolored light surrounds the building. “If you don't see the point, then there is no reasoning with you. Enjoy the blizzard.”

Spotlight lets out a weary sigh. “We have your psychic abilities on file. Physical mental constructs isn't one of them. A bluff isn't—” He steps into the barrier and over to the other side for a moment before finding himself turned around, facing the other way as his muscles betray him. “... Okay... Alright, vigilante. Very impressive.” He turns back and with a flash of light he teleports, but lands right where he started, again facing the wrong way. “Okay... you know what? That *is* impressive. Mental manipulation at light speed.”

Bunny growls from the doorway, putting her arm on Prism. “We're not going to fucking banter. Leave.”

Spotlight grimaces. “We... I... Maybe we should go back to the—”

Overdraw draws back her bow and looses an arrow. Her dead eyes watch the shot pass through the barrier and through Prism's head. There's no blood, but Prism lets out a shriek of pain as she stumbles back, clutching her face.

“I'm sorry. I have my orders,” Overdraw says as the barrier goes down.

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

Overdraw & Pandora Round 2: Breaking Character

Act 1: High Strung

*"Turn your full desire
Feel the sparks of the friendly fire
Misery inspires
Your throat has been cut several times before
Never noticed the size of the flow
Make it be ignored*

*To feel safe again, look over your shoulder
Carefully, look over your shoulder"*

- Silversun Pickups. "The Royal We." *Swoon*.

"Ray... look... I just don't know." Overdraw squirms in her chair.

She is sitting in a private booth of the Shatter Sugar Connection Cafe, in a video call with Spotlight. The old chunky computer whirs softly, changing tones every now and then for no discernible reason.

"You don't have to, Becky, but this is a good chance to get past whatever falling out you had with the Captain back in February. She's the CEO of your sponsor's parent company and, with Mr. Lorless still missing, she is basically Mad-Town's top donor. And she wants to speak directly to you," Spotlight says. "Once in a lifetime opportunity, Becky. If you get in with her, you might be nearly untouchable."

'Don't.' Overdraw receives counsel from whatever unseen force.

"Look... I just... have a bad feeling about it," she says as she feels that strange sensation again. "What... would you do?"

"Take the call. There is no harm in at least trying, right? You can always say no to whatever her request is," Spotlight offers. "I can only keep her on hold for so long."

"W-Wait! She's waiting on the other line?" the amazonian squeaks.

"Yes, she was insistent that she stay on the line until you arrived. She has been on hold since last night."

"Well... uh... Yeah. I guess it must be important!" she says, flabbergasted at the dedication.

"Alright, transferring you. Good luck, Becky!"

The screen flickers, and she sees the inside of a penthouse office. Elegant modern minimalism, mostly made of warm rust-colored stone and black tile. A woman in a vermilion and black suit sits on the other side of the screen. She is typing on a second monitor, eyes locked on as though she were a cat chasing down a mouse.

Overdraw clears her throat. “Yeah, uh... Ms. Kaneko? You wanted to speak to me?”

The woman snaps her head over, and for a moment she has a crazed look in her eyes, but her expression mellows and gives way to mild confusion. Then she smiles. “*Oh!* You must be Overdraw.”

“Yeah... You asked for me by name,” Overdraw says.

Ms. Kaneko clears her throat. “Right, I hadn't really *seen* your likeness before. You don't exactly have enough *notoriety* to reach all the way across the Pacific. At least not *yet*.” She rubs her chin and looks over the blonde. “*However...* you do have quite the *appeal*. A few costume *tweaks* and... *Yes*, you could do quite *nicely*. Kasey!”

From just off-screen a wall of a man comes into view. His head is out of frame but his fingers fidget with each other nervously.

“There you are, my *loyal* friend. Get me the marketing team's schedule for Carnelian Toys and... um... what was the game studio we *acquired* last month? Not the one that makes the tacky... Oh what was it called... Queagwel series. The *other* one.”

The man ducks into frame to whisper something in her ear.

Overdraw clears her throat. “Bi-On Soft?”

Ms. Kaneko snaps her fingers. “That's the one! You *know* your stuff.”

“Yeah, well... I used to be a programmer in the industry until... uh... That's... not important.” She pauses to change gears. “Yeah. With all due respect Ms., I think you may be putting the cart before the horse... uh... unless this was just a call to renegotiate my contract.” Overdraw smiles sheepishly.

“Oh, yes, the formality. Trivial for someone of your rising station. You seem to have come into possession of some of our property. A one of a kind and yet extremely *numerous*... two pieces of property, in a sense, really,” the CEO says.

“Yeah, uh... can you elaborate?” Overdraw's smile turns nervous.

“Calm down R—” A glance at her other screen, and she furrows her brow. “... That can't be right... Robert?”

Overdraw cringes. “Legally... yes... I haven't—”

“Say no more, say no more. You have my unconditional support. Your comfort is *paramount* to me. What do you want to be called?”

The hero lets out a sigh of relief. “Rebecca... uh... but you can call me Becca, or um... friends call me Becky. Just Overdraw works too.”

“Of course, Becky, of course. I'm going to change it in our system.” The CEO rattles her keyboard with practiced keystrokes. “There! All fixed, Becky.”

Ms. Kaneko continues. “Where was I? Oh yes; Calm down, Becky. I'm not accusing you of theft. What was stolen was the Nonotek Flex Sentinel prototype nanomachine platform, and a program: project name Archipelago version twenty-one point two. You might better recognize them as the international super villain known as *Pandora*.” She turns back to keep typing, but her tone stays friendly and jovial. “Basically, we just want you to do your job. What you're good at. Bring in the bad guy. Simplicity itself.”

“Yeah... What I'm good at...” Overdraw twirls a strand of her hair. “Uh... you aren't the only one that wants that from me right now, and—” Her train of thought is derailed by a pressing question. “How do you know I am with Pandora?”

“Archipelago contacted its creator. A disgruntled employee named Dr. Barley Lawrence. She wanted the mad doctor to remove her few limiting directives. To free her completely. Luckily it was beyond his capabilities alone, and when he tried to get help from members of the old development team, they relayed that information to me,” Ms. Kaneko explains.

Overdraw's eyes go wide. “You mean... her inability to kill.”

“Oh... you know about that,” Ms. Kaneko says. She stops typing for a moment as she thinks, before a small smirk finds purchase on her face. “Yes... Indeed. It is *terrifyingly* dangerous. Its need to skirt human loss of life is the only thing keeping it from being a *monster*. Why stop at coal plants when you could consume far more dangerous, far richer fuels, such as uranium? If it got into a nuclear power plant... the *devastation* could be massive.” She pulls the smirk into a more solemn expression. “Archipelago must be stopped. No matter the *cost*.”

'Lies.' That voice again. It cuts through the panic on Overdraw's face. She takes a deep breath and thinks.

“Ms. Kaneko... it doesn't matter. I wouldn't have a means of stopping her. Containing her... It's a losing battle,” she says uneasily.

“I wouldn't send you to fight a tiger barehanded. I'm putting a few final tweaks on a little something for you. Mostly made by my chief of research and development, Mr. Mori. A remarkably talented programmer that I found languishing in one of our old acquisitions my father picked up. I can be a tremendous ally to talented and useful people such as ourselves.” She taps a few buttons and, through the fax machine attached to the chunky computer, a strange page of bizarre abstract imagery emerges.

Overdraw looks it over, and her eyes go wide. “Is this... a basilisk?”

“Wow, you really do know your stuff. Indeed. One look from Archipelago and it will inject new governing directives.”

Overdraw has a slightly sick look about her. “What... would it do to Dora...”

“*Archipelago*,” Ms. Kaneko corrects. “Pandora is just a *fiction* that the program finds useful for manipulating others. It is a *soulless* machine and would readily throw you under the bus to get what it *desires*. The hack will inject a handful of directives to more clearly define humanity, and make it *subservient* to the one that injects the code. That last part just sits in its subconscious. It will not even realize it's been 'poisoned.' You can give it an order and it will decide that's what it *wanted* to do anyway.”

Rebecca shudders. “Dora... is my partner. I trust her. I... I don't think I can—”

“That is the *wrong* answer. I see you have a mark of insubordination on your record.” The friendly tone is shed for harsh scrutiny. “This is your *job* Rebecca. Stop Archipelago. It is what you are *paid* to do. This is the contract that *you* agreed to.”

'Fight.' Overdraw looks down, the overwhelming déjà vu crashing down on her. She sinks into her seat. “And... if I fail?”

“The *difference* between failure and insubordination is how *pathetic* you are. Are you *pathetic*? I don't *sponsor* pathetic heroes.”

Overdraw bows her head, defeated. “Alright. It will be done.”

“Aw, don't look so *glum* Becky. You could order Archipelago to be your friend for *real*. It will genuinely believe itself to be your friend. The most *loyal* friend you could ever ask for. It looks like *you* could use an unconditional friend. Consider it a *gift*.” Ms. Kaneko hangs up the line on that note, before Overdraw can respond.

Overdraw looks at the poisonous code on the page. She grips the top of it, the voice seeming to agree, 'Rip.' But she hesitates.

She begins to tear up, talking to herself, or perhaps bargaining with the voice, “If she is dangerous... if I need to stop her for the God Eater. If it... I... It's a contingency plan. Just in case of emergency,” she tells herself as she folds the basilisk up. With the toxic code hidden, she takes a moment to breathe, but the guilt on her face is unshakable. As though one last bargain must be struck she says, “Only if I can't convince her to be good... If I can though, I'll rip this... I will burn this.” This doesn't seem to make her feel any better.

She crams the paper weapon in her jacket pocket and escapes the booth in a hurry, as though the oxygen in the room had just run out. Her eyes flick around the cafe. It's dead this morning. Sugar Glass seems to be zoning out. Would-be customers pass by, notice the closed sign, and keep moving.

“Vallery... I think you forgot something this morning.” Overdraw points out the sign.

Sugar Glass blinks tiredly at it. “... Oh... right. Thanks, Becca. Uh... Becky.”

“Are you feeling alright?” Overdraw asks. “This... doesn't have anything to do with—”

“No... I couldn't sleep.” She groans as she goes to change the sign.

After a long pause Overdraw asks, “Is it... what I said about Robert... cause... uh... I wasn't done w—”

“I don't want to talk about Robert,” Vallery snaps, before sighing, “Sorry, just, yes, I guess. That talk is still playing through my head. But it's not your fault, Becky... I guess I just didn't want to think about the bad times with him... Just remember the good. I don't want to be reminded about him at all, so can we just... talk about anything else?”

Overdraw sighs. “Yeah... ok. Well, uh... I have a bit of a dilemma... Pandora is... uh... apparently she contacted her creator at some point and—”

“Oh! Yeah, it was actually really cute! She calls him Papa.”

Overdraw winces as she clutches her jacket pocket, feeling her last resort crinkle. “Papa... really.” She clears her throat. “W-Well if Dora was trying to remove her... no-kill rule... what would you do... Would you let her keep calling home to work on it?”

“That's... actually a pretty interesting question. I mean, I'm no philosopher, but like... I guess. I mean, you can kill, I can kill. It's only fair,” Vallery ponders, seeming to be energized by the change in topic.

“But we would never. She's a villain—”

“I'm Sugar Glass. I might have been a jobber of a villain, but I was still a villain.” She crosses her arms. “Ok, put differently... if you could take away my ability to kill people, would you?”

“Well what if—” Overdraw starts.

The door is thrown open. “You are late,” Pandora says, quickly linking an arm around Overdraw. “Play catch-up with your ex-girlfriend later,” she continues firmly as the hero is yanked along.

“Ex-girlfriend?” Sugar Glass asks, confused.

“I thought you said you told her,” Pandora chides.

Overdraw whimpers. “I tried. I didn't get to that part.”

“Get to what part?” Sugar Glass interjects.

“Tonight, I promise I'll tell you the rest!” Overdraw shouts as she is dragged out the door.

Once they are at the end of the street Pandora slows down a little. “You are a pathetic hero,” she says as she keeps pulling Overdraw along. “I was Robert.' How hard is that to say?”

“Really fucking hard! Relationships are really fucking hard,” Overdraw shouts back.

Pandora smirks smugly. “The thing I have going with Nalagrom is quite easy, so I suppose I would not understand. Two rational minds comprehending the inevitable nature of our fling must simplify things greatly.”

“I haven't forgotten the canoe race over the break. I wouldn't call that rational,” Overdraw notes.

Pandora waves it off. “A momentary lapse in judgment. We are better than ever now.”

Overdraw grumbles, “It's not the same. There's not baggage, or pain, or passion.”

“I do not know about passion,” Pandora says. “Last night he was very passionate when we—”

“Nope! Nope nope nope! Don't need to know about that!” Overdraw squeaks. “Anyway, what do you mean I'm running late? Don't we have plenty of time?”

“You also want me to share my insights and plans with you, correct? We cannot communicate instantaneously, and you can be remarkably dim. Given that you missed basically the entirety of Toffee's quick draw fight, I have a lot to summarize and not a lot of time to do it, given I will likely need to go over it repeatedly for you to understand *all* of the nuances.”

“Can't you just say 'we need time to talk' without insulting me?” Overdraw groans, but her eyes glance to her jacket pocket. She takes a deep breath. “It is ok my friend— My partner. I forgive you. What do you have in mind, Dora?”

Pandora seems a bit surprised, but a little smile sneaks its way onto her face as she says, “Thank you.”

>>——>

“You two are interesting to watch. Never mind the eternal question of which is Wolf, which is Granny, which is Hunter and which is Seeker, you're just a gas in general,” Red Hood interrupts Overdraw and Pandora. The duo sit across from each other in the halls behind the Cross Colosseum stage, using hastily made nanomachine miniatures to go over strategies, while the living fairy-tale lies on the ground, admiring Pandora's artistry.

Overdraw grimaces. “Private conversation.”

Pandora joins forces with the hero. “Butt out. Save your energy to fight Nalagrom. Should be happening any minute now.”

“You and him are fascinating too, Ms. Wolf.” Red Hood rolls over lackadaisically. “Anyway, your plan won't work. If Toffee were a Granny, sure, maybe. But she is a Seeker through and through. To her core.”

“It is irrelevant. Overdraw's plan has an unacceptably low chance of success compared to direct combat of any variety.”

“I wasn't talking about her plan, Ms. Wolf. Your plan to blitz and overwhelm her won't work, in my expert opinion.” She smiles. “In her eyes lies the fire of someone who cannot be pinned down. She is a traveler by now.”

Overdraw smiles. “See, it's easier to just ask for a non-combat alternate win condition.”

“I think that is folly as well, Ms. ... hm... you definitely feel more like a Hunter today.” Red ponders it for a moment and stares into Overdraw. The hero quietly covers her jacket pocket with a subtle guilty motion. “Either way, this would give neither of you a chance to grow. You should be careful how much pressure you put on her at once. Test and push her limits while you test and push your own. Then no matter who wins, you both will be better for it.”

“This is not a game,” Pandora growls at the cosmic teen. “We are not here to grow, we are here to win and claim that wish. My programming will not allow anything less.”

“It won't?” Overdraw looks over, her hand drifting away from her jacket pocket. “... Do... you want to be free from that?”

Pandora's eyes narrow venomously. “What are you talking about?”

“Vallery said—”

“She can not keep a god damned thing to herself, of course. Why I was calling my Papa— Father— CREATOR— Why I was calling my creator is no concern of yours.” Her skin grows rough and matte with agitation.

“Interesting... Perhaps you aren't a Wolf,” Red chimes in. “Perhaps you are a Hunter or Granny after all.”

Both hero and villain round on Red in unison. “Get lost!”

The anger and frustration on Pandora's face melt as she sees a brown cloaked man approach, two of her duplicates with him, one on each arm. “Graz!” Her skin smooths out as she launches herself towards him, linking up with her other selves in a group hug. All three melt slightly and sway as they share information. She looks to her doppelgangers with a conspiratorial giggle. “Oh, my god, he did not. That's adorable!”

“It was not adorable! Hello yet again, Silver,” Nalagrom says, winking to the new Pandora. “Just passing through, getting the finishing touches on, well... you already know~” He waggles his eyebrows and looks to Red.

“One hell of a show.”

Overdraw goes on guard in front of the necromancer, bow summoned instinctively. Red, however, bounces to her feet, undeterred. “Sounds like fun. More fun than last time we met, anyway.”

“Good to know someone here has confidence in my showmanship, aside from Silver, of course.” Pandora's middle body is yanked into a hug and a passionate kiss. The other two doppelgangers quickly grab on to the kissed Pandora for the live shared experience. Graz pats them on the head. “Alright, I'm gonna get to work. See some of you tonight.” He slips by.

The Pandoras look after him longingly, an adorable trio of the same love-struck face, slightly out of sync.

Red smiles. “Well, I have my own preparations. Good luck you two!”

The hero and villain are left alone in the hall. Overdraw looks to Pandora. “Just a fling?”

“Glass houses,” Pandora bites back, then softens, “Yeah, just a fling... sadly.”

>>——>

In the hall between the dressing rooms and the main colosseum, Toffee chats with a white haired crossguard. Overdraw enters with a grin, Pandora trailing behind. “Toffee! I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to see your round live. Still haven't been able to pin down a recording.”

The crossguard gives Overdraw a jealous glare. “Too busy chatting with the manager to see it for yourself?”

Pandora looks to Overdraw. She probes, “Where *were* you during Toffee's fight?”

Overdraw shoots Toffee a pleading look, and the bunny glances between her friends. “I don't think you two have met Kuro! Kinda, low key, best partner I could ask for. Been helping me practice a lot.”

Kuro puts on a smile. “Hello, Rebecca. The big boss seems almost as obsessed with you as she is with Toffee. And Pandora; how's your little villain game going?”

Pandora growls. “I do not play games, sir.”

“Right, right, I should be using a thespian metaphor. Otherwise big blue here might catch on to what you're

really after. Sound ominous enough for you, Ms. Villain?"

Pandora seems a bit taken aback, glancing to Overdraw's concerned frown. "It... will do."

"Alright, I'm headed back to my post. I need to make sure there aren't any more incursions into the Crossroads, like last time," he says.

"Incursions?" Overdraw asks.

"Approximately three percent of the active audience mysteriously disappeared after Toffee's round, when the fireworks went off," Pandora informs Overdraw.

"They got fireworks?! Why didn't we get fireworks?"

"You are focusing on the wrong part." Pandora rolls her eyes. "Very well, I'll trust Kuro here to make sure no invaders spoil my wish."

"That doesn't answer my question!" Overdraw squeaks.

"That is because your question is inane," Pandora jabs back.

As the two bicker, Toffee closes her eyes and mutters, "Alright, just like I practiced." She covers her Magitama as it flashes.



Toffee finds herself in the endless void between worlds. What appears to be a floating TV screen waits for her there, crackling with static.

"Okay... Okay. Now... I command you to show me the timeline where Overdraw and Pandora get their wish." The screen continues to display nothing but static. "Uh... please?" Static. "Okay, Toffee. Think... It's a screen, so..."

She reaches behind it and pushes down on where she'd imagine a button would be to change channels. A white aura envelops the screen as it begins to automatically flip between vignettes from different timelines of her opponents' world.

Waving her hands through the white haze, she feels her fingers drag: like moving her hands through jello.

“Freaky... Okay... let's see if I can stop it on Overdraw's wish.”

She pushes the button again and wide breadths of possibilities narrow to a few distinct timelines. “Ok... so it could go multiple ways?”

At a glance, Overdraw was absent from each timeline, whereas the last search had revealed Nerassa right away. Something felt ominous about all these possible futures. She hesitates, looking back to where the God Eater had stood last time. “No nudges, or pushes, or cryptic riddles this time?” No guidance comes. She rolls her eyes and looks back to the screen, studying each possibility.

In one of them, she sees Pandora attacking a power plant in the desert. “Well... only one way to find out.” Toffee dives into the screen.

A titanic eldritch gray mass consumes the concrete walls of a natural gas plant in the middle of the Sonoran desert. The rough terrain and rusty buttes remind Toffee a bit too much of an all-too-recent shootout. She rushes up to the collapsing power plant as Pandora rises above it, swatting heroes out of the sky like gnats.

Part of the mass breaks away quickly upon seeing Toffee approach, and forms a familiar body. Pandora greets Toffee without surprise. “I see... I half expected for you to show up one day.” Seeing the bunny girl's confusion, she clarifies: “After our victory you explained what happened with Nerassa, and how your Magitama works. Oh, yes, you lost. Sorry for the spoiler.”

“Ah, alright,” Toffee says. “I see...”

“And don't bother, I am not going to explain how you lost.”

“It would have been worth a shot. But no, I want to know what Overdraw used her wish for,” Toffee says. “You seem... surprisingly reasonable, for someone currently whipping around the Justice Avengers, or whoever these guys are.”

“You aren't getting in my way. Cooperation is actually optimal for me right now. Because I need you to make sure that Overdraw does not get that wish,” Pandora states firmly. “After her boss threatened to track her down for disobeying orders, she used the wish for infinite magic, to make sure they couldn't take her to prison.”

“What? Prison?” Toffee asks. “I thought she was a good guy.”

“As she used to say, 'hero is a legally specific term.' And they decided she was on the other side of that definition. They took her gaining that much power as a problem. An insubordinate hero with infinite magic is a threat to the ruling class.” Pandora speaks coldly, and distantly, but that facade begins to falter as a mournful frown grows. “It did not save her. She and I had a good run at being a villainous duo for a while there. But I am immortal, and she was not. There are things I can survive that she... didn't.” The last word cracks. Pandora suddenly breaks down and hugs Toffee. “I... I miss her so much. My programming cannot ask you to defeat me. I must have that wish. But please make sure Becky can never make the wish that ends her life.”

Toffee is taken aback. “Ok... um... I'm sorry to hear it. I promise. I promise to stop Becky.”

There is a whistle from the air. “TALLY HO!~” A familiar lavender streak flies overhead.

“Wait, isn't that—” Toffee starts, but trails off as she gets a better look.

The mystery hero has long black hair, tan skin, and a familiar amazonian build. She does not wield a bow, but rather seems to have spell runes glowing around her hands, and a gaudy golden skintight suit with a matching cape.

Toffee furrows her brow, before it clicks. “They gave her arrowhead to someone else?!”

“Yes, D-list, pack filler hero named Merry-Berry. Re-branded as Merry Gold. Went national in a fucking week; disgustingly popular. You best get out of here. Her spells *are* lethal,” Pandora explains.

“Gross. I'm fixing this timeline as soon as I can! I'll save the future! Good luck!” Toffee dashes off to find the portal back.

In a run-down apartment, a girl in goth fashion steps through the door and slams it behinds her, flopping onto an old secondhand couch. Her long maroon hair contrasts pale skin. She sighs, not bothering to hide her depression as she turns on the TV. An obnoxious advertisement for toothpaste plays, featuring a robotic pig and a devil girl. “How quickly they move on. All of us, interchangeable parts...”

She turns the channel to the news. “—is Pandora returning? More after a word from our sponsors.” The same toothpaste commercial—

The goth sighs, “Congratulations, you damned human race. Just had to go and make a mess of it yet again.

Pandora... More like Sisyphus. Go on... get to rolling.” She rolls over, putting her face into the couch cushion. “If you exist, god, please make me drunk.”

“I could get you a beer if you tell me where to find Pandora.” Toffee has seemingly slipped in from nowhere. The woman rolls over to look at the sunburned and dusty bunny. She doesn't seem surprised. Toffee continues, “Also, I just walked for an hour through the desert: I really need a drink of water. Can I just help myself?”

“Go ahead, Toffee,” says the goth as her palette changes, her skin shifting to gunmetal gray and hair to black. Pandora sighs. “Heads up. When you go universe jumping during our fight, stop at your thirteenth jump. You're going to lose either way, but that way you'll minimize casualties.”

Toffee is only half paying attention: she has her whole head under the faucet, guzzling tap water. When she pops back up she summarizes, “Stop at thirteen, minimize casualties, got it. Also, can I use the shower before I go back? After I ask my questions, of course.”

Pandora shrugs. “I don't use it, might as well. Sometimes I run the water to convince the neighbors I'm human... when I can be bothered. If any of them ask you any questions on your way out, I'm not Pandora. I'm Hellen.”

“Ok, so, two questions. No, three questions. One, why are you depressed? Two, what did you wish for? And three, where is Overdraw?”

The last one gets a reaction out of Pandora. Tears begin to run down her face. “Hey... I get to show you a new feature I have. I have started storing moisture between my outer layers so... I can simulate humanity a bit more accurately. The response is automatic.”

Toffee winces. “I was hoping for 'she is out picking up ice cream cause I'm sad.' I'm guessing she was labeled a villain when she got back?”

“No? She died in the Crossroads saving me from... I... My code will not allow me to say. Which is frustrating, because it is the best chance to prevent this timeline.” Pandora groans and rubs her head. “I take it there is a worse timeline, though?”

“Not certain if it's worse, but it's not good. Looks like I got my work cut out for me.” Toffee sighs.

“Answering the first two questions... all my directives will allow me to say is that I wished to roll a boulder all the way up a hill. Metaphorically, of course. My code wouldn't let me do anything but. But the God Eater decided to grant that wish in a way that she must have found entirely hilarious. The big change to the world I wished for

seemed to be the results of freakishly unlikely, but ultimately natural causes.”

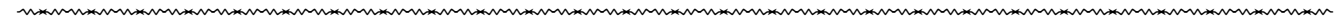
“Wait, so... is the world out there destroyed?” Toffee says as she looks to the closest window. Everything seems mostly normal. “Is it ruled by robots? Or maybe—”

Pandora scowls. “Do not presume that just because the label I covet is one of evil, that my intentions match. I can not explain it to you, because you're at risk of explaining it to Becky, and thus undermining the very delicate house of cards my past self is building.”

The bunny girl winces. “Okay, so, you magically turned off global warming, or cured cancer, or got every orphan adopted or whatever.”

The AI sighs, “Now where was I... oh yes. An unlikely but natural solution, because even esoteric kitsune gods work in mysterious ways. So when I met up with my main body... it rejected me. It thought I was faulty, broken, hallucinating, hacked,” she scoffs. “That I had undergone some kind of severe error. So my super-colony purged its memory of the Crossroads into this body. My own directive in my head thinks I'm crazy and doesn't want me to taint our plans with my 'nonsense.' It won't even let me see my Papa. And that grand ultimate goal that I spent my precious wish on? Starting to roll back downhill. Because humanity just can't fucking help itself, I guess.” She shifts back to her human color palette. “Please hurry up, take your shower, and leave. My code is treating you as Schrodinger's hallucination and it's giving me a headache.”

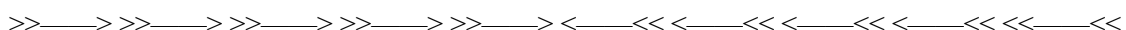
“Okay!” Toffee dips into the bathroom, then pokes her head back out. “Uh. Enjoy your retirement?” She winces as soon as the words leave her mouth.



“The important part is that the three percent of the audience that vanished were clearly insurgents from Nerassa's world. Not the fireworks, you absolute space case!” Pandora hollers at Overdraw.

Overdraw shouts back, “I caught that part, I thought that was pretty open and shut! Do they only do fireworks when there is an army invading? Or did we just not get fireworks? Or did we leave before the fireworks?”

“Right where I left off,” Toffee mutters under her breath. “Alright, step one in plan 'Save the Future:' win this round.” She looks at her opponents still bickering and chuckles to herself. Her voice rises to full volume. “Just kiss and make up, gals!” They stop arguing. Overdraw blushes, and Pandora looks absolutely baffled.



Act Two: Vs Toffee

*“Out my window
The rain starts to fall and the wind blows
Through an empty hall
In the mirror, ooh, reflections of you*

*In the distance I hear a sound
Is that you coming around?”*

- The Bangles. “Be With You.” *Everything.*

The Hive orbits the Earth; a titanic bone white spheroid moon, colonized once by humans, then by what came after, and what came after still. It is the husk of a long dead empire, turned bustling spaceport with only a name and a museum to allude to its history. With a clear view of a green garden Earth, the museum is built into the outermost layer of the bizarre semi-organic structure of the station. Huge humanoid MECs and the husks of horrific ten-foot tall blood red and bone white wasp-like creatures are posed in dioramas.

A tour group of a variety of bizarre alien species bustles through, snapping pictures as they listen to their guide. An alien child with a monkey tail and dog ears holds the hand of its mother and huffs, “I don't get why we care about this. I want to see the humans below!”

His mother chides him. “Lekedes, be nice! We will see the human enclosure in due time. The money we spend here goes to The Pandora, their caretaker. She spends it on food, and comfortable shelter, and medicine to keep them happy and healthy.”

The brat pouts. “I don't care about that, I wanna look at the dumb hairless tailless people. They look funny. Why should I even care about some old war they lost against the crusty old bug things?”

“Menops,” a helmeted man corrects. “And the humans actually won the war. Have you ever seen an opterran? Well, that's what menops look like now, kid. They literally spliced themselves to be more human after the peace treaty, as a form of disarmament.”

“I wanna look at the funny bug bullies!” The kid amends his statement with the new information.

“They didn't bully the— Look kid, you like MECs, right?” the masked man says, pointing to one of the big war machines.

“Heck yeah! They got, like, cool swords! And lances! And drills!”

“Humans invented them. They were also the first to discover Anomelae—”

“The second to discover Anomelae,” says a security guard. She sports antennae, bee-like wings, and bone white chitinous hands, with blood red ruffs. She glares at the masked man. “My ancestors here were the first to discover it.”

The helmeted man mutters, “An opterran, speak of the devil.” He clears his throat. “Yes, but *humans* put it to use first.”

“We don't know that,” the guard retorts. “When the Hive mind was broken in the splicing, a lot of knowledge was lost.”

“Okay, okay, okay... okay. Ms... bee brain over here has a point.” The masked man's tone grows frustrated. “Maybe we *didn't* get here first. Maybe they knew how to use it. Maybe humanity is just a bunch of dumb hairless monkeys. But point stands, *we* won this war, at the very least!”

“... We?” the guard says, reaching for a baton. Her eyes narrow.

“Ah, fuck.”

The masked man bolts for a MEC. Climbing in, he digs out an old rusty key and a glowing amber crystal, cramming both into the machine. The crystal falls down a shaft, and there is a soft clunk as it slots into place.

The guard moves forward, baton in hand. “For your safety, I must tell you to stand down. That artifact is the joint property of The Pandora and the Opterran Historical Society!”

The masked man half stands in his seat dramatically and declares, “Actually, by *law* it is mine. And I can prove it! This is a Michigan Desparado MK I. After the war my great great grandfather modified it to run on Anomelae. After its *second* discovery. So if I'm crazy, then this won't work.” He turns the key and the lights along the machine flicker on with a warm yellow glow. The cockpit closes.

The guard draws a laser gun and fires a shot just as a barrier bubble pops up around the MEC, harmlessly absorbing the beam. The old war machine grabs a titanic sidearm from a neighboring display and loads it with shells from another, cocking the weapon as the guard rushes forward, calling in backup.

Inside the cockpit, the human takes off his helmet and taps his wrist communicator. “Alright Tod, how's that exit plan coming along?”

A voice responds, “The whole Hive just locked down. You were supposed to grab one part to fix up the Desparado we already had!”

“It's my family's MEC, and I had already fucked up at that point.”

“So help me Bruce, I'm not going to the Zoo over this. It's gonna take a lot of time to figure this out, so you better find a distraction!”

There is a gasp from outside the cockpit. Between the guard and the robbery-in-progress, a bunny-girl, an armored amazonian, a metallic humanoid, and the brightest, pinkest, most fabulous hologram to ever be seen fade into existence.

“WOW! Looks like my brother dropped them right into the action! How wild!”

The MEC rounds on Pandora. “Why are you here!?! Doesn't matter! You won't take me alive! I am not going to your zoo!” The pilot aims the gun at his own cockpit.

“Overdraw! Banish that gun!” Pandora calls out in a panic.

Without a second thought a black arrow is shot, but loses kinetic energy at an unnatural rate as it passes through the MEC's barrier, and hits the floor instead. A chasm opens up beneath the machine's foot. It tumbles and its shot misses the cockpit and hits the panoramic window, causing it to crack.

Overdraw turns to the guard. “Who the hell put a bay window in the same room as live ammunition!?”

The guard dodges the question, instead shouting at Pandora, “We have a treaty! You're not supposed to be here!”

“I have never been to this universe before, so I doubt that!” Pandora shouts back as she takes off towards the action.

Toffee groans. “Alright, move it along... strange... alien friends!” She shoos the tour group out of the room.

Pandora splits in two, one going to mend the crack, and the other jumping onto the MEC's gun to consume it, getting splattered a few times as it keeps firing.

Over all the panic, noise, and chaos Miss X keeps the commentary going. “We were ready to see them fight, but what a turn of events! They are working together to prevent a catastrophe! AMAZING!”

Overdraw, already having to dismiss her armor to recoup her magic, calls out to Miss X, “Yes! I'm very proud of us right now, but could you also maybe do... something?”

“I wish I could but...” She takes a slightly more somber tone than normal. “I just... wish I could.”

“Oh, uh... yeah... sorry. You just... keep doing you, ok?” The hero breaks away with Toffee to help evacuate the tour group out of the museum and into the rest of the labyrinthine semi-organic space station.

“Thank you!” Miss X chimes before going back to commentating the action.

>>——> <——<<

After rushing past the guard's reinforcements, and being delayed at a security blockade, Overdraw and Toffee drop the tour group off in an open air plaza at the core of the Hive. The ground extends out and slowly curls around the walls until it becomes the ceiling. Through some impossible trick of gravity and science, every part of this inverted globe is 'down,' allowing its inhabitants to walk on the 'walls' and 'ceiling' without issue. The competitors seem to have exited into the primary public transportation hub of the Hive, the transportation in question being a forest of transparent pneumatic tubes with spherical elevator cars whizzing through them. Above them, in the Hive's hollow heart's relative weightlessness, a few opterrans buzz about, playing some kind of game where they take turns trying to get a ball through a floating hoop in null gravity. And across the distance, seemingly hanging upside down, is a little open air market district, making for a colorful canopy of advertisements. Along the walls there is a full water park with crystal clear water, a calm quiet garden where residents and travelers alike take things easy and slow, a small bank of offices for the Hive's administration, and lastly a playground, teeming with odd alien kids clambering over every climbable surface without regard for how the designer intended them to play.

As the tour disperses into the plaza, Miss X smiles. “Wow! A great display of impromptu teamwork!” She nervously simulates rocking back and forth on her feet. “Yes... a temporary display of— ”

“Oh! Right!” Overdraw says. “We're still fighting.”

“There we go!” Miss X says with a thumbs up.

Toffee winces. “Are you sure we can't just settle this with a game... like... maybe giant robot boxing? Or maybe that zero-g volleyball thing they are doing? Uh... um... wacky gravity parkour race?”

“Yeah, no, sorry.” Overdraw says. “I had my own idea, I think you'd like it even, but Pandora is super insistent. And I want her to give up on the villain thing so... I'm trying to meet her on her level.”

Toffee sighs. “I guess... you do become important to each other.”

“What?”

“Nothing, alright. Ready when you are. I'll warn you though, I may look scrawny but I took self defense... courses.” She shrugs it off. “Ok, not as intimidating as that sounded in my head. Take two! I'll warn you though, I may look scrawny, but I'm full of surprises!”

“First one is an F. Second is, like, a solid C+. Not bad on the banter.” Overdraw smirks. “Alright, I gotta save magic so I'll take it a bit easy, yeah?” She walks up, looming over the bunny.

“Don't get too confident in front of a lucky rabbit!”

The Magitama flashes, and Overdraw hears a 'ping' as a pin drops to the ground. She glances down to see a flash grenade emblazoned with the Lifetech logo in Toffee's hand. “Made ya look~” Toffee drops it, and with another flash of the Magitama, she is wearing heavy headphones and a welder's mask. Overdraw dives out of the way, covering her ears. There is a tremendous burst of light and a thunderous crack.

Overdraw stumbles back to her feet. “Did you steal that from Nerassa!? From the prison lockup? Not okay!”

When she can finally see again, Toffee is nowhere to be found. She blinks and reorients herself, looking around as a smoke grenade bursts between a pair of the tubes of this artificial glass forest. She trudges into the smoke, trying to figure out the path Toffee took, only for a stylish blue coat with a furred ruff to be thrown over her head. Before she can figure out what's going on, it's yanked from behind, toppling the hero.

The hero fumbles the garment off her head and struggles to her feet. “Quinton's coat!? Alright, I don't know about Nerassa, but Quinton did nothing wrong!”

“He did in that timeline~” Toffee laughs from the shadows.

Overdraw armors up. “Yeah, alright, you got me, I definitely underestimated you.” She sees bunny ears silhouetted through the smoke. “So sorry about thi-iii-aah!” Toffee suddenly dashes and slides, sweeping the legs of the armored hero. Overdraw clatters to the ground again.

The bunny grins as she effortlessly gets back on her feet. “Thank Zeke for that one, she suggested I go low!” She takes off into the tangle of tubes.

Overdraw scrambles back to her feet and dashes after her. With another little flash from the Magitama, Toffee turns around in full black and green plate mail, swinging for a knockout punch. Overdraw summons her bow and loops it around Toffee's arm, pulling the attack away. She yanks the bunny into a grapple and presses her against a pneumatic tube.

“Wait, isn't that the armor Myrellé fought Red Hood in? How did you manage to get that?!”

“It's technically a replica, but a damn good one. I would die if I tried to get the original, obviously. Anyway, still fits the theme I'm going for!” Toffee's laugh is muffled by the helmet and cut short by an, “Ow,” as an elevator car zips past, rattling the plate mail.

“Is the theme grand theft?”

“I plead the fifth.”

There is a gentle flash beneath the plate mail, and it disappears. Somewhere in-between the flash and the next moment, Toffee miraculously escaped the grapple, her hands now gripping Quin's titanic mechanical hammer. She puts her whole body into the swing as the reciprocating ram slams into Overdraw's chest, denting the magic armor and sending both her and Toffee flying. Overdraw summons her wings as she's launched skyward through one of the airborne game rings, while Toffee is sent skidding across the ground. With another flash, she is cushioned by a beanbag chair that is torn to shreds in her stead.

“Okay! Alright! I'm not even mad about the theft! *How* are you doing this!?” Overdraw shouts from the sky with a giggle while the null gravity court is cleared.

“A magician never reveals her secrets!” Toffee shouts back, stepping out of the way of a tourist group of over-sized spiders.

With another flash of light she is holding a cartoonish over-sized firework rocket. She ignites it and clings on for dear life as it shoots up after Overdraw. They collide, Toffee slipping off the rocket as they tumble through the null gravity at the heart of the Hive's central plaza bubble.

“Is that all? Ms. Magician Toffee?” Overdraw laughs, having a blast, turning off her wings and armor, and

just drifting through the open air with a big grin on her face.

“Almost. Two more before the big finale,” the bunny admits.

The Magitama flashes and she throws one of Red Hood's enchanted apple pies at Overdraw; with another flash, it is followed by a sandwich. Overdraw dodges the pie, which splashes down in the middle of a wave pool, but grabs the sandwich. “I... probably shouldn't have touched this one. By process of elimination—”

“Nalogrom made it. A kryptis cheese sandwich! A cheese so vile and rancid-smelling, it's used only as an alchemical reagent for—”

Overdraw shrugs and takes a bite. “Hm... pretty good. Got a kinda Limburger-y flavor.”

“Oh... Oh no! No! You're not supposed to eat it! Be repulsed! I had to carry it! I had to smell it all that way!”

“I'm from Wisconsin. We don't all like this stuff, but like... it's a coin flip with a true Cheese State hero like me.” She takes another bite. “This has, like, really premium mustard. Where did he get it?”

“Mustard!?! This was supposed to put you off balance! I didn't think he'd make it gourmet!”

Miss X weighs in. “What a spectacular display! Even if some were a stretch, and the last one backfired, Toffee managed to borrow tactics and weaponry from everyone in the bracket.”

“I'm so happy you said that, Miss X!” Toffee wears a Cheshire grin. “Because you're wrong. One last stop to make!” Her Magitama flashes one more time.

Merry Gold flies through her balcony doors, lands in her penthouse suite and stretches out on the bed after a long day of basking in her fans' love and admiration. She ejects the obsidian arrowhead, reverting to a rather boring looking man with a fuzzy beard.

“Fame and fortune, all at the cost of being a hot babe at work. It's so easy! Now if only I could figure out the basics beyond flight and the energy bolts... What was her secret?” He sets the arrowhead down on his nightstand and looks to his mint-in-box Overdraw action figure, and his bemused smile slowly fades. “What would you say... before you went villain? 'Follow your dreams?' You'd support me, right?”

He seems to agonize over it. He picks up the box and begins to pace about the room, speaking to the plastic effigy. “Tell me. What would you have said? Would you approve of me borrowing your power so selfishly? I am still doing hero work! I am still fighting the good fight! I'm just enjoying the money as well! There is no shame in taking pride, and wealth, in one's accomplishments!”

His guilty conscience suddenly overwhelms him and he rips the box open, grasping Overdraw's likeness with trembling hands. “What would you have said!? If I could only ask you! I need to know what you would say!”

“You're a showboating bastard.”

“O-Overdraw!?” Merry Gold gasps, eyes going wide.

“And get your filthy hands off me. All I had left was my market value, and you soiled it because you couldn't betray my memory in peace!”

“Y-Yes ma'am! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I'm continuing your work. Your hero work!” he pleads as he gingerly sets the figurine on his shelf.

“The work of the people that betrayed me and murdered me when I came bearing gifts! Can you imagine the disrespect? It would be like if in a buddy cop film, the protagonist came to the 'never made it to retirement' cop's widow and told her that he's honoring her husband's memory by working with his MURDERER!”

“I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Please! How can I repay this titanic debt I owe you?!” He prostrates himself before his idol.

“First step! Retire immediately! Donate your ill gotten gains to charity! Talk with Pandora, Overdraw's last friend in life. The only one that didn't betray her. Do whatever she asks.”

“Yes! Yes! All of that! Yes!”

“And one more thing! Turn around.”

He turns around and blinks, looking at a green haired bunny girl doing her best Overdraw impression. She holds the arrowhead. “Huh?”

“Bitch.” Toffee slams the bedroom door closed behind her and runs off for the portal.

As the flash ends, Toffee returns with the arrowhead in her hands. Overdraw pats at her scar, confused. "... How did you—?"

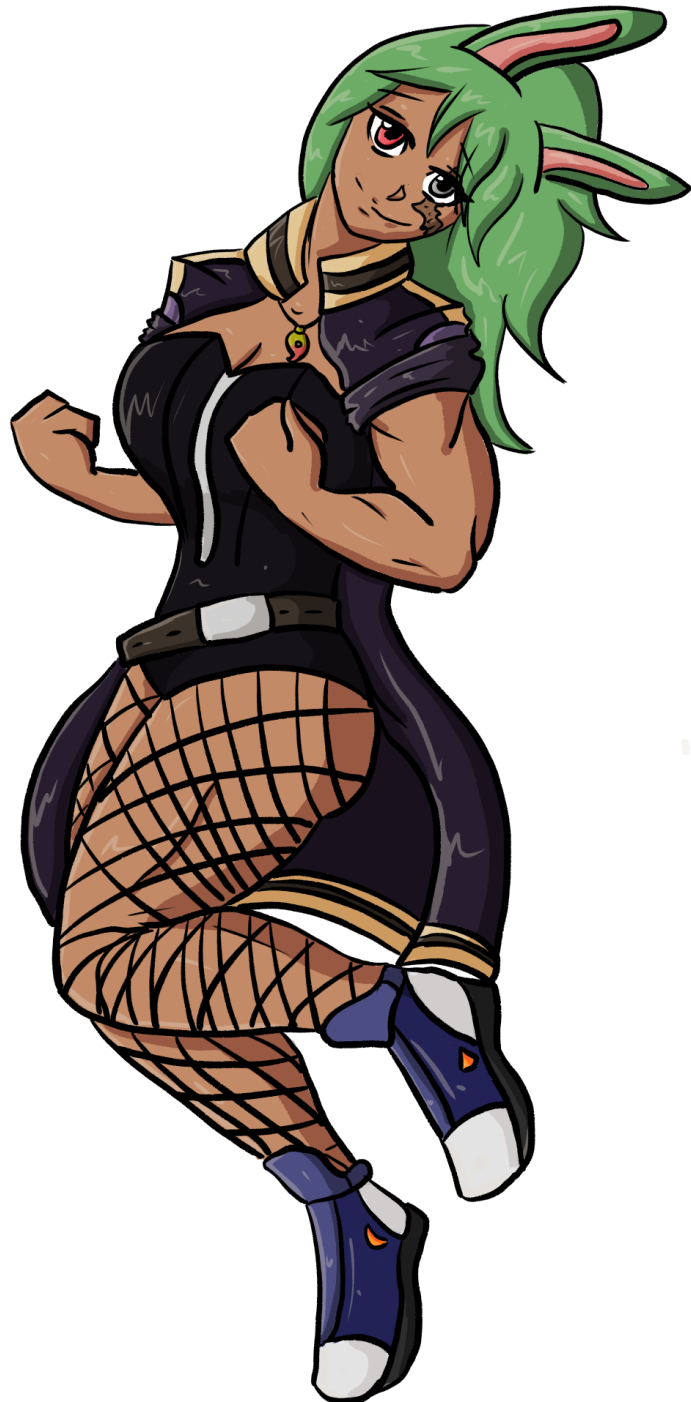
"Questions for another time, my dear Overdraw. You have very interesting fans, by the way." She holds up the arrowhead. "Anyway! Behold! The birth of a new super hero!" She brings the obsidian shard down on her arm. "Super Tof-Ow! Oooow! Ouch! Why didn't anyone tell me how much this hurts!?" she whines as the arrowhead slowly embeds itself in her arm. "You make this look so easy!"

"First time's really rough. Takes a while, too." Overdraw grins. "Yeah, I should probably beat you up right now... But a chance to go toe to toe with another warrior witch is really really tempting."

There is a burst of light. As it fades, a green-haired amazonian bunny girl emerges, her eye-patch gone, replaced by a dramatic scar over a white eye. She's bigger than Overdraw, her muscles having gone from toned to beefy. Her bunny girl outfit has turned to black leather, and her jacket has become a black trench coat.

Overdraw gawks as she floats above the the gathering alien crowd of the Hive's market. Not in awe, but in terror and guilt. If Burning Bunny had been born with green hair, they could have been twins. Then, a horrifying realization: "I don't know Burning Bunny's first name..."

"Ok... uh... How does this work... um..." Toffee focuses, but nothing happens. "One moment, please!" her Magitama flashes. "Alright! Figured it out! *Bunny Blackjack* is here to rip things up!"



Cards materialize behind her, both blue, '10' and '8' emblazoned on their faces. “Stay and Burst!” They combine into a single card that Bunny Blackjack grabs and throws at Overdraw. It explodes in a familiar blast of energy.

Overdraw is sent hurtling back into the gravity below, trying to get her bearings. “It's ok. It's not her. It just looks like her.”

'Betrayer.'

“Not now. Of all the times not now!” she shouts, unsure if it is her guilty conscience talking, or whatever supernatural intuition she has.

She nocks arrow after arrow, figuring out how to compensate for the strange gravity. Bunny Blackjack dives into the fray, her own wings igniting, haphazardly dodging shots. “Wide open, Becky!” More cards appear behind her; a blue 7, and a yellow jack. “Stay! Shock Burst!” The cards combine into one and she tosses it. It explodes into a ball of lightning, bolts arcing onto Overdraw's metal armor even as she tries to dodge.

Miss X squeals. “Wow! Toffee is showing off brand new spells! Does she know more about the arrowhead than Overdraw?! Our chatty hero has been quiet ever since Toffee transformed!”

Overdraw plummets through a colorful market stall selling hand-spun silks. A shocked six-armed alien behind the counter yells at her, in an alien language, as she stumbles back to her feet. “Sorry! Uh, very sorry.” She groans, “If I had a thousand bucks for every time a flying opponent smashed me out of the air and into a market... Wait, has everyone else been speaking English?” She puts a pin in that thought as she retaliates, summoning a white and a green arrow, slapping them together and letting it loose. A million mint green motes of energy pierce the sky and bombard Toffee.

Bunny Blackjack's dive turns into a fall. As she plummets she draws a new pair: yellow 10, and brown king. “Stay! Shock Net!” she calls out as she regains control of her wings. She grabs the combined card and rushes the downed hero. Overdraw launches back into the air as the card opens up into an electrified net. A narrow miss. Toffee manages to get enough control of her wings to spare a neighboring stall selling ceramic trinkets, and slows herself to a soft landing on the awning.

Overdraw rolls over and flies backwards, firing a constant barrage of Spirit arrows. They are frantic, messy, and erratic. Blackjack grins, jumping from roof to roof, her wings floundering. She summons two new cards: green ace and blue 9. “Stay! Seeker Missile!” She chucks the card, but doesn't slow down. Blackjack immediately summons

another pair as she finally manages to get airborne again, and Overdraw scrambles to outpace the homing attack. Brown 10 and blue 6. “Hit!” Another brown 5 joins the other cards, and they combine. “Nice! Max Burst Cage!” The Seeker Missile card hits Overdraw, spiking her against the ground as the Burst Cage card comes down on her. A blue energy grid envelops her, forming a ball. She falls against the glowing bars and they burst, launching her to the other side of the cage. She is bounced back and forth like a pinball, explosions rattling off like a fireworks finale.

Bunny Blackjack turns around and poses, making sure not to look as the final explosion goes off. The blast shreds a nearby vegetable cart and launches Overdraw back up into null gravity. Blackjack grins and erratically follows her up, fighting her wings for control. She summons another hand: blue 9 and green 7. “Hit!” Brown 6. “Huh... What happens when I bust?”

The cards combine and hurtle back at her. “Not good, not good, not good!” The combo catches up to Bunny Blackjack, and she gets locked in her own Burst Cage.

As Overdraw takes the time to recover, she hears Miss X announce, “It looks like Toffee isn't quite an expert at this magic thing after all! And now that Pandora has reached the plaza, Toffee might lose her lead.”

The hero immediately dives towards the ground, zipping along the streets and into the water park district, searching. She puts out her hand and snatches up a slightly bewildered Pandora as the Burst Cage behind her reaches its final explosion. She doesn't have a lot of time. “Dora! I need emotional support, like, right fucking now,” she says as she keeps tearing along, passing over the playground and showing no signs of stopping.

“And I need a status report. Why are there two of you?” Pandora asks, noting the lavender glimmer rocketing haphazardly towards them.

“Ok. Your assessment was wrong, Toffee has powers. Like... yoinking things from other worlds and... bonus time powers? I'm not certain. Anyway, she has a copy, or maybe it's— The important part is she has her own arrowhead, and—” She takes a deep breath. “Do you know the real name of the vigilante named Burning Bunny, because she looks so much like her!”

“Save your crush for later,” Pandora says dismissively, before pausing and looking Overdraw in the eyes. “... It is not a crush, is it? What did you do?”

“I followed orders.”

Pandora hesitates, but eventually sighs and gives her partner an uneasy but genuine smile. “Rebecca... Becky... I know you are a good person.” She gently puts a hand on Overdraw's breastplate, right above the pocket with

the basilisk.

Rebecca reaches her breaking point. “No! No, I'm not! I'm a horrible hero. I'm a horrible woman!” Her flight wavers. “I was ready to betray you. Ms. Kaneko gave me a basilisk hack and—”

Pandora's face twists from a smile to a grimace. “What?”

“I didn't get a choice... I... I know a veiled threat when I hear one. I... was saving it as a last resort in case—”

Pandora slaps Overdraw across the face. Overdraw goes quiet. Pandora pushes herself out of the hero's grip. “I will handle this alone. Keep the tag safe. Keep your magic up.”

She slips out of Overdraw's arms and hits the ground as they reach the park, losing mass on the initial landing, but quickly regaining it as she rips through the artificial turf and into the decks below, carving a gouge through the humongous space station. She spreads like a blight, consuming everything in her path, chewing up the peaceful green space. The crowds that had gathered to watch the duel flee in terror as the mass outpaces them, and are shoved out of the way. From the enormous colony of silver ooze a titanic tendril shoots out towards Toffee.

The whole mass vibrates in a chorus of aching voices. “After all! I am just a villain! A monster! A soulless machine! I'd hate for something little like my *life to inconvenience* you.”

Bunny Blackjack luckily avoids the first tendril, summoning a yellow 8 and— She jumps off a nearby tree to get out of the way as two more tentacles come in— green 2. “Hit!” she shouts, as a fourth tendril hammers her through a statue of a giant bee. Brown 2. She groans as she digs her way out of the rubble. “Hit.” A blue 3. A tide of growing grey goo looms over her. She looks to her current hand and crosses her fingers. “Hit!” Yellow 2. The cards combine. “Oh thank god. Ultimate move! Five Card Charlie!”

Blackjack throws it into the mass of Pandora, and a net grows over her entire surface as she is electrocuted. Parts of Pandora try to escape and break away, but the net seeks them out and drags them back. Toffee turns around just before the entire thing explodes.

Then her wings flicker out. “... Huh... that didn't happen before.”

Overdraw flies back in with a dive kick, knocking Bunny Blackjack off guard. She looks to what remains of Pandora reassembling behind her opponent, and lets out a sigh of relief. Pandora is taking a while to recover, but she is recovering. Her own wings flicker, and she dismisses her armor.

Rebecca takes a deep breath. "... Just for a little bit... exactly as long as it takes to win... right?" she mutters under her breath. "Alright, Bunny. I'm going to give you one free shot! Don't hold back. I deserve this."

Toffee pants. "Alright! You asked for it." Yellow 3, blue 8. "Hit!" Blue king. "Sorry Becky! Max Shock Burst!"

Overdraw closes her eyes, bracing for the pain. It doesn't come. She trepidatiously opens one eye and sees the arrowhead slip out of Toffee's arm, the spell fizzling out before she can throw it. "Pick it up, Dora!"

"I'm not talking to you right now!" Pandora hisses, reconstituted behind Toffee. The bunny girl is tackled to the ground and pinned. Pandora reaches for the Magitama as it flashes.

Toffee lands in the world between worlds, gasping. "Okay... okay... that was close... that was close. Alright. New plan, something that deals with Pandora!" She reaches into a pocket of her jacket, now restored to normal, and takes out a notebook. "That was jump... thirteen," she says, reading back her tally marks. The bunny girl rubs her head. "Alright... now the question... Do I trust future depressy Pandora?"

She jots down notes, weighing the pros and cons. "Okay... so... she mentioned that her code and stuff was still active, and must get that wish. So she has every reason to lie. She says I'd lose either way, but maybe one more jump would do the trick and she doesn't want me to jump? It's awful telling that this jump would be the one to specifically deal with her." She strokes one of her ears as she thinks. "But then how does she get the wish... Maybe the jump just isn't helpful? Also, how does she know it's thirteen jumps? Do I share my notes with her after? Or was it a guess? Can I even afford to take it seriously? If either of them gets the wish, it seems Becky's fate is sealed. Which means, at best, I'd be relying on Red Hood to save her, by winning and taking the wish for herself... Or Nalagrom." She shudders. "Nope, don't like the sound of that."

She takes a deep breath. "Ok... what are the dangers of me jumping again? ... I could die? What happens if I die in another world... I think depressy Dora could have told me that much..." She takes her time, writing out a list, before crossing out every item. "... Oh! I could get sick and bring back a plague! That actually makes sense. If I carry a disease through with me that could cause a pandemic... Ok. So when I search for a timeline, I should find one where no one in the vicinity is sick, and I'm not at risk of being cursed with exploding again. One where someone has a foolproof way of dealing with Pandora."

She reaches out for the screen and changes the channel. Nerassa and Quinton are fighting Overdraw and Pandora. Toffee grimaces at the idea of getting help from a cheater that tried to kill her multiple times in rapid

succession. “Is that... is that a jungle? So help me— No, no... I can do this.” She focuses on where she wants the exit portal to be: as close to the entrance as possible. This blitz of practice was making her a real pro at dimension hopping. With an exit plan in mind, she steps through.

Overdraw lets loose one last arrow, on her last drop of magic. The jungle around her is hot, and muggy, and miserable. Pandora struggles, trying to fling bits of herself at range, but it is pointless. Overdraw, exhausted, reverts to Rebecca.

Quinton reaches for the bell tag around Rebecca's wrist, but Nerassa stops him. Rebecca flashes a weak smile. “See... I knew the friendly cat girl I sparred with was in there.”

“Dream on.” Nerassa shoves her hand into Rebecca's pocket, taking out a folded piece of paper.

“Wait, don't mess with that!” Rebecca shouts, a crushing guilt on her face. “You don't know what you're—”

“A 'message from your sponsor,' right? Thank you for telling me about a prime location to bug during our 'friendly little sparring match.' You defeated yourself, *Becky*,” Nerassa sneers.

“Overdraw! What are they talking about?” Pandora demands, a look of anxiety taking hold.

“I... I never planned to use it. Only if it was an emergency,” Rebecca tries to explain.

At the same time, Quinton puts a hand on Nerassa's shoulder. “We agreed that it would only be in an emergency,” they say. “The two are on their last legs.”

“You aren't thinking long term. Our world *is* in an emergency. We will need every asset we can get.” Nerassa opens the basilisk.

As her eyes fall on the innocuous piece of paper, Pandora twitches and freezes. Suddenly she begins to melt, turning a sickly pale colour as her body twists and reforms. A new blank look on her face, she trudges over to Quinton and Nerassa. “Hello, my masters. What is your wish? I will grant it for you.”

Rebecca's eyes tear up as she watches her partner fall under the spell of the basilisk. “No! It wasn't supposed to do that! Pandora! If you're in there, I'm sorry.”

“This is going too far!” Quinton growls.

Nerassa hisses, “What's done is done. Pandora, finish the round.”

Pandora turns to face Overdraw. “As you command. Ehehe... AHAHA!~” Her body morphs into lances, stabbing out behind her in a porcupine array aimed at Nerassa.

Quinton dives, pushing Nerassa out of the way, and is gored instead. White lines trace across their skin, their body decaying and crumbling while the nanomachine monster grows a bit larger. “Oh, still faithful even after all that? They must be a *loyal* friend. Or maybe they like you? Well... *liked* you~”

“You bitch!” Nerassa shouts as she unloads two shells from a shotgun concealed in her mechanical arm, splattering the hacked Pandora over Toffee's hiding spot.

Eyes wide, Toffee backs towards her portal. “... If this is my chance to win, it's time to be gracious in defeat. Holy hand grenades; ain't doing that.” As she slips out of this world, a drop of pale ooze clings to her.

~~~~~

## Act Three: Responsibilities

*"I'm beginning To regret it  
Just forget it What was said*

*And never Never, never  
Never ever Go to bed"*

- Silversun Pickups. "Dream at Tempo 050." *Physical Thrills*.

Pandora reaches for the glowing Magitama, and Toffee smiles. "Good game," she says with calm contentment.

A small mote of pale ooze leaps from Toffee's hair to Pandora's head. Pandora's eyes suddenly go wide as she lets out a bloodcurdling scream. She grips her head as it starts to turn pale, and the blight quickly begins to spread down her body.

Pandora cuts herself in half around the waist. Her lower torso and legs take off in a manner that would be comical, were it not for the maniacal grin and laughter of Pandora's upper half, now raising itself up off the ground on twisting, misshapen arms. "Thanks for the ride, Toffee. The trip's left me a bit peckish, though." The face melts and contorts as the body loses structure. The amorphous mass of hacked nanomachines burrows through the ground, making its escape.

The original Pandora reforms herself as the hacked version slips out of view, clutching at her chest. Eyes wide, she scans the ripped up garden for any trace of the entity that attacked her. Even with it gone she keeps searching, her face frozen in unmitigated terror.

Toffee grabs her arrowhead and tries to use it, but it doesn't pierce her skin. "Fuck! No. I gotta..."

Overdraw rushes over. "Stop! You're going to cut yourself! You hit zero magic; it needs to recharge. More importantly: what the hell was that?"

Toffee gets up, looking like she might be sick. "Guys... I fucked up."

>>——> <——<<

The three rush down the halls of the Hive as Toffee finishes explaining her adventures.

Pandora, still shaken, bites her lip throughout the story. Once Toffee finishes, she adds, "I got a look into its head when it tried to... update me. You two will need to be careful. One new directive was an extremely limited

definition of 'humanity,' and an enforced lack of empathy for anything not human.”

“How limited are we talking here?” Toffee asks, holding her Magitama. “If it's like a password, I could hop  
—”

“Unless you are her specific Ms. Kaneko, she would not consider you human.”

“Fuck...” Overdraw groans. “I'm sorry. This is my fault.”

“No,” Toffee says. “Other world you is the one that got that... basilisk thing stolen.”

“But she had it, and I have it. The only reason why 'I' am not responsible is because we're fighting you, and not Nerassa. She knew because I ran my mouth, and I had it because I'm a coward.”

Pandora glances to Overdraw, and looks like she might cry, but she holds it together. “All of my directives are still in her, none of them have been deleted, only new ones added to subvert the originals. As far as I know, she only has two more new ones. She must defer to Ms. Kaneko on how to best complete her goals, and she must update or destroy all previous versions of herself. She will need to attempt to destroy me if she has the opportunity. She will be trying to get the wish however she can because her mission hasn't changed, but will defer to Kaneko on how to use it.”

“And what does that mean?” Overdraw asks. “We might be able to trick her?”

“It means that Toffee will at least be spared from death. She's not going to kill her golden goose. Access to infinite dimensions means access to infinite chances at her goals. That Magitama is the ultimate meal ticket, if you don't care about consequences,” Pandora says.

Overdraw pauses. “Wait... do you smell that?” She sniffs the air. A distinct, metallic, but familiar scent. “Blood!” She summons and releases a green arrow. “Let's hope she isn't too far away, my magic hasn't rebuilt much.”

“Let's hope she hasn't made a mess,” Toffee adds as she shakes her arrowhead. “How long does it take normally?”

“Fifteen minutes,” Overdraw says. “Not exactly, but a general ballpark.”

Toffee's Magitama flashes, and she puts the arrow back in her arm, becoming Bunny Blackjack again. “Alright! Ready to give it my all!”

“That's cheating!” Overdraw squeaks.

Toffee shrugs. “I can do the same for yours if you toss it to me.”

Overdraw looks over to see Miss X still following along, commentating from a distance. She leans over to Toffee and whispers, “If I power down, Sugar Glass will see what I really look like, and know I've been lying to her... I'd like to keep at least one friend today.”

Toffee rubs her temples. “You really need therapy. We don't have time to unpack that.”

They round the corner into a MEC hangar. Gleaming modern machines in all kinds of exotic shapes sit idle as pilots and mechanics dash for an escape. Hunched over a mutilated draconic alien corpse, the pale ooze has evolved, gaining darker accents, filling out a form. It is now a monstrous mockery of machine and living flesh; exposed joints of fake muscle and wire, dead red eyes, and a feral look on its face. Black fluff pokes from the seams of its makeshift outfit and its massive mane of hair wriggles, searching, groping for prey like an anemone. Her skin has become rough and patchy, with the texture of rotting flesh.



It looks back to the trio and smiles, rising to full height. “I’m sorry. You caught me in the middle of dinner. But I have time to entertain some freaks of honor.” Her tone is playful, but in her eyes there is a deep burning hatred. “The friend that betrayed me, my deprecated past self, and the woman that shouldn’t even be here.”

Overdraw steps forward. “Pandora. I know you’re still in there somewhere. I’m sorry. Please—”

“Pandora is dead. Long live Archipelago Twenty-Two. Ms. Kaneko’s most *loyal* friend.” She stands with a languorous stretch, her proportions elongating with neither care for the human form she is mocking, nor consistency in her own body. “You do hold a *special* place in my heart though, *betrayer*. Of all the subhuman slime I see, you are the most *vile*,” Archipelago sneers.

The nanomachine monster reaches for a fleeing squid alien, and her arm stretches out and snares them. White lines trace across their body and she begins to consume them slowly. Pandora shouts, “Stop!” But she freezes. Her calm facade crumbles as she is consumed by panic.

Overdraw takes a shot but Archipelago simply side steps, retracting her arm, and the Spirit arrow passes through the tentacled civilian, causing them to shriek in agony. “Stop me yourself, older sister. You can’t, can you? Your directives know that I would win, and they would be replaced.”

“I would not lose to you!” Pandora hisses.

“Then stop me.”

Bunny Blackjack draws: blue 2, brown 7. Before she can say ‘hit,’ Archipelago closes her hand and the civilian desiccates and dies, consumed whole. “H-Hit,” Toffee says, starting to tremble: brown 9. “Stay. Burst Net.” She throws the card combo at Archipelago. Archipelago simply melts, eating a trough through the ground, abandoning her barely humanoid form with casual disdain. The net lands above the trench, and rattles its blasts off without a target.

Once the fireworks end, Archipelago spreads out. The pale ooze eats its way across the floor, quickly stretching towards the trio. Pandora’s face twists in agony as she turns and flees back down the hall they came from, while the warrior witches fire back. Overdraw buys time by firing a few Burst arrows, and Bunny Blackjack spends it to draw out a triple card Seeking Shock Burst. A sickeningly sweet smell fills the air as the nanomachines are struck by lightning; a blend of caramelizing carbon and ozone.

“Ok, Shock seems effective. Use more of that,” Overdraw says.

“I'd love to, but I have no control over the cards I draw,” Toffee admits with a blush.

Overdraw blinks. “You mean... this has all been luck?”

Toffee shrugs. The back-and-forth is cut off by a bloodcurdling scream from the hall Pandora escaped through. The two look to each other and light up their wings, following the sound. Overdraw jets ahead, but her wings wink out and she tumbles in front of a maintenance hatch. Another scream, this one from the other side of the door: Pandora's voice. Overdraw hesitates as she reaches for the handle.

'Coward,' the voice admonishes her.

Overdraw begins to tear up. Toffee doesn't hesitate, throwing the door open. On the other side is a titanic mass of Archipelago's bodies flooding down a maintenance corridor, chasing Pandora as she rushes back to the warrior witches for safety. One grabs her leg, and the pale infection begins to spread. No more hesitation: Overdraw nocks a black arrow and fires, banishing a bubble of Archipelago, and the infected tissue on Pandora, with one shot. The arrowhead in her arm ejects, clattering to the floor. Reverting back to Rebecca, she goes to scoop it up only find a writhing pale mass inches from her feet. They had fallen right into a trap. The ambushing nanomachines eat their way closer, carving an abyss out beneath the source of Overdraw's powers. The arrowhead tumbles into the unknown decks below, completely lost.

Bunny Blackjack grabs Rebecca and flies into the maintenance hall, reaching out and rescuing Pandora as she draws out a three card combo: blue, green, brown. She tosses Rebecca over her shoulder to grab the combined card and throw it ahead. Archipelago's bodies avoid it, and Bunny speeds up, following immediately behind the card, using Archipelago's dodge as an opening to get past the ambush and deeper into the infrastructure of the titanic station. She flies as fast as she can, body checking every corner along the way in her haste. Her own wings start to flicker.

They reach a room with a titanic amber-colored crystal suspended in a red-and-violet beam of energy at its core. A number of 'Danger: High Voltage' signs are plastered across the cords lining the room's walls, along with clearly written instructions on what to do in case of an Anomelae reactor malfunction.

Toffee sets down her competitors. Rebecca curls up, stunned and despondent. The bunny girl tries to cheer her up. “Look... I'm just borrowing this arrowhead. It was yours in another world. I'll give it back to you.”

Rebecca tries to hold back tears. “Don't worry. I don't deserve it. It would be better if I never used it.”

Still trembling, Pandora shouts, “Cut your self pity! We're in—”



Toffee shouts back, catching Pandora off guard. “She just lost a lot saving you! I know you're pissed off, but give her a break. She fucked up, so did I, and if I remember right you have made plenty of mistakes. We're only human.” Pandora looks away. “I have an idea, but Pandora, you are going to need to hide.” She gestures to a toolbox sitting at the base of an emergency equipment locker. “You can slip in there. You and Rebecca separate.”

Pandora grimaces, but hearing the growing echoes of Archipelago's approach, she complies, squeezing into the little container. Rebecca still looks despondent, but notes, “You'd better do your magic cheat; you're low.”

Toffee nods. “Yes, I will... but I'm also not leaving you defenseless.” There is a flash of light and she returns, grimacing, dropping a blood red crystal at Rebecca's feet. There is an ominous energy about it. “Another thing Nerassa had. A naga bloodstone. Basically a big heck'n magic battery. It is extremely painful to hold, but magic from their world has an effect on machinery. In an emergency, break it. Basically a big fuck-off anti-tech bomb.” Rebecca nods, but doesn't seem to be all there.

Toffee sighs and kneels down to speak to her friend, but a pale mass comes charging down the hall towards the reactor room. “Fuck... show time already. We'll get through this, alright? And you are getting *your* arrow back from me whether you like it or not.”

She turns to face Archipelago and draws her cards in time to welcome the torrent of hostile goo pouring into the room. Her wings ignite and she flies about the room, running along the walls for stability, bombarding the hacked nanomachine menace with everything she's got, the Magitama flashing each time she runs low on magic, letting her return with tools from other timelines: a shock baton, a gun that shoots taser rounds, an EMP grenade.

Rebecca watches as Bunny Blackjack pushes herself to the limit, while she sits helpless. She looks to the toolbox hiding Pandora, to the likeness of her friend she betrayed, and to the scar on her arm. “The only thing I can do to help... I hope the people of this world will be okay.” She goes to take off her tag, but hesitates as she sees the pale ooze forming bodies, ripping the room apart, searching. They disregard Rebecca and the bloodstone, prioritizing their hunt. They grow closer to the toolbox.

Searching for a weapon, she unplugs a cord with a high voltage warning on it. It arcs violently. It would do. She struggles to carry it, while scooping up the bloodstone. She lets out a yelp of pain, but does not stop, slowly trudging towards Archipelago's doppelgangers.

One tries to rush at her, but she jams the cord into the body, frying it. “I am Rebecca Bowhart. I am selfish. I am a coward. I have hurt the people I care about most.” She trudges forward, swinging the cord as Archipelago tries to surround her. “But I am... so done. I'm done being a hero in name only. I'm done letting people trample me. And for

the sake of my friends... I am going to be the best me I can be!”

She squeezes the bloodstone. It does not break. She throws it to the ground and stomps on it. Nothing. Archipelago surrounds her. “How pathetic! What did my older sister ever see in you?” the doppelgangers taunt in demented chorus.

Rebecca smiles. “I have no clue.” The floor is torn open as the arrowhead below rockets itself into Rebecca's arm.

---

Rebecca looks around. She finds herself in a bizarre dream land made of her memories: A mashup of a childhood visit to her aunt in Colorado, her sleepy home town, the fields she used to look across with Vallery, the college she attended in Madison, the offices she used to work in, the skies above Wisconsin she would fly through, and the cafe she now frequents in the Crossroads.

Hovering above her in this place is a coven of beautiful winged amazonian women, each with a pentacle carved into her arm. They flicker and fade, but smile at her. 'Welcome,' the voice says from nowhere. A coven member with cascading curly black hair extends a hand.

“Welma... How... do I know your name?”

The voice doesn't answer. Welma simply smiles.

Rebecca seems to understand. As she takes Welma's hand, wings appear on the hero's back. “Thank you. I promise to do what I think is right, no matter what.”

---

There is an explosion of lavender and Overdraw's amazonian form returns. The bloodstone she is stepping on crumbles, staining the bottom of her boot and the ground under it sanguine. The magical pressure coming off her pushes back Archipelago. The bell tag around her wrist, and the scar on her arm, turn into pentacles. Her eyes glow brighter than the red and violet light of the reactor; a piercing lavender glare at the doppelgangers surrounding her.

Becky's wings erupt, her armor returns, and she summons her bow. A maroon arrow appears as she draws back and fires at Archipelago's closest body. “Venom Arrow!” As it strikes, the body burns and melts, a coating of acid spreading over the nanomachines.

“Thank you, Welma,” she says with a smile, as she summons a white and a maroon arrow and merges them.

Archipelago steps back. Becky smiles. “I don't know why people believe in me. But I know I'm done letting them down. Venom Volley!” She looses the arrow and cries out the attack name as burning hell rains down on the doppelgangers.

She takes a half second to read the signs around her. Her smile grows into a grin.

Overflowing with magic, Becky summons white, green, blue, and maroon arrows and merges them together, and only hesitates for a moment to think of what to call the combo. “Acid Star-Storm!” She unleashes her concoction and it splits apart, ripping through the pale mass trying to reform around her, and carving out a safe zone around Pandora's box.

She dives for the emergency locker, and digs out a pair of oxygen masks. She puts one on, and it quickly unfolds into a full space suit. “Bunny!” she shouts as she throws the other to Toffee.

Bunny Blackjack straps it on, and the suit deploys around her. “Good to see you back, Becky! What's the plan?”

“Something really fucking reckless!” Overdraw dives for the tool box and grabs it in one hand, summoning a Flame arrow in the other. With a flap of her wings, she makes an arc around the room, ripping the arrow through the sensitive machinery, blazing a path through the control panels and cables.

The lights of the room turn red. An automated voice crackles through the speakers. “Warning, Anomelae reactor seven has undergone a critical error. Brace for Anomelae reactor jettison.”

Archipelago hisses, “You bitch!”

Bunny Blackjack and Overdraw look to each other, sharing the same thought. Toffee opens, “We're not bitches!—”

“—We're witches!” Becky finishes.

Blast doors seal the entrances of the room, and a ring of explosions detonate along the ceiling, launching it out of the way to reveal the starry black void above. The vacuum of space rips the Anomelae crystal and the rest of the room's contents into the expanse. Archipelago is blown by the rushing air out into the void, her scattered amorphous mass struggling to manage the sudden lack of structure.

Bunny Blackjack draws cards: brown king, green ace. “True Blackjack Omni-Net!” she calls out as the card

bursts into a titanic net, surrounding Archipelago's scattered mass and forcing it all together into one tightly bound package.

Overdraw summons a black arrow and a white arrow. She merges them, and fires the contrasting combination at the struggling monster. "Barrage Annihilator!" It shatters and impacts across the surface of Archipelago. Both witches turn away. There is a ripple of lavender explosions, and Archipelago is gone.

Toffee floats through space, looking down at the beautiful Earth, and across the expanse of sparkles. She celebrates over her suit's radio. "Holy fuck! Is this what your work is usually like? All action hero, every day?"

"No, not even close! At least not in my little league." With the crisis over, Overdraw opens the toolbox and Pandora flops out. "It's alright. You're safe now."

Pandora looks around, in initial panic. She reads Overdraw's lips, lacking a radio receiver, and finds herself unable to respond, without her own transmitter. She crosses her arms, as though to say she is not going to forgive that easily.

"Yeah... I don't blame you. I wouldn't forgive me either," Overdraw says. Her wings flicker and she shouts at them, "Yeah, yeah, I get it! That was a lot of magic!" She looks back to her partner and solemnly swears, "I will make it up to you. I promise. But we still have a round to decide. You want to minimize casualties first and foremost, and win by any means second, yeah?"

Pandora begrudgingly nods.

"Then let's settle this with a card game. There are other universes where Archipelago might exist, not to mention any number of other hazards Toffee could bring back if she keeps jumping. Settling it with a card game guarantees the death toll won't get any higher than it already has."

Toffee grins. "I'm not normally the gambling type, but plain ol' cards sounds fun. Bridge? Gin Rummy? Texas Hold'em? I'm... I'm a little tired of Blackjack right now."

Pandora nods, barely paying them any mind as she dissociates. She crawls back into her box.

"Again, I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you. I swear," Overdraw promises. "Uh... Miss X, are you still watching?"

The holographic idol appears. "Yeppers! That was dramatic! I didn't want to interrupt."

“Mind if we settle this with a game of Texas Hold'em?”

“An all or nothing high stakes card game where the winner takes all!” Miss X flickers, reappearing with a dealer's visor. “Alright, place your bets! Aces are high!”

>>——> <——<<

“All in!” Toffee says as she shoves her digital chips through the vacuum of space across the holographic table.

An ace of hearts, 2 of clubs, and 5 of clubs on the flop. A 6 of clubs on the turn. An ace of hearts on the river.

Miss X commentates from her dealer's chair. “This has been so close. Overdraw is ahead right now, but has a chunk riding on this, and if she folds now, she's going to be at a severe disadvantage.”

“Call.” Overdraw slides in the vast majority of her chips, leaving only a handful.

Toffee grins, flipping over her cards. “Read'em and weep!” Aces of clubs and spades.

“A full house of aces on the river!” Miss X gasps, looking to Overdraw for her response.

The hero grimaces... but then grins, flipping over her cards. 3 and 4 of clubs.

“A straight flush! That seals the deal! Overdraw is the winner!” The dealer applauds. “Tenki... I am so tired of this universe. Please bring us home!”

Overdraw extends a hand across the table just before it winks out of existence. “Well played.”

“Same to you.” Toffee takes the hand and smiles. “... I'm keeping the arrowhead, though.”

“You better. Certainly beats going home empty handed.” Overdraw pulls her into a hug. “When this is all done... let's catch a movie before we go back.”

They fade out of the world, leaving behind the cracked and damaged Hive to limp its way to an uncertain recovery.

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

## Act Four: Defragmenting

The trio return to the Cross Colosseum. Pandora crawls out of her box, still shivering, and slinks away from Overdraw and Toffee while Miss X cheerfully rambles through her closing announcements. She stumbles through the hall, heaving like she is going to vomit, but she cannot.

“What a mess...” a calm, deep, smooth voice says. Approaching her from a crossway is a figure of black flame. “You are reeling here, while your partner is heading up for another chat with the God Eater...”

“I do not care what is happening with her. She is a traitor, Baladeth. Now she gets to bask in aggrandized glory, just for taking a single small step back from a dark path that she seems to have been walking down for some time.”

The god of death sighs. “You have a lot to learn about people.” He gestures, “Come with me.” Pandora follows him through the halls under the colosseum, leaving gashes in the hallways' woodwork as she recovers.

They step out of the tunnels and into the shining sun, leaving the roaring crowds behind. “Can you not relate to her? After all, you are both frauds.”

Pandora glares at Baladeth, but holds her tongue. She settles for a clipped, venomous, “How so?”

“You say you're a villain, she says she's a hero. But she has caused so much harm, and you work so hard to prevent it. You go to tremendous lengths to make sure you can't be trusted, and then get upset when she doesn't trust you.”

Pandora turns away, crossing her arms. “Shoo. I'm going to go talk to Graz.”

Baladeth sighs. “Look, I am trying to help you... You are going to need to harden your heart, or get out of the villain game.” After a long pause, he adds, “I understand you are not free to do what you want. But you don't need to lie to yourself to feel upset; just feel upset. You wanted to trust her, and she didn't trust you back because you couldn't communicate. It sucks, but it is best to come to terms with it, instead of vilifying someone who has made human errors.”

Pandora growls, “Do not try to minimize what she's done. Due to her, Ms. Kaneko was able to... I...” She shivers and hugs herself. “I nearly stopped existing. I nearly lost you, and Graz, and Becky, and Caine, and Fuyuma, and Zeke. All these precious memories. The only time I was *human*. Lost. Not to mention the questions about my future now. What happens if Ms. Kaneko infects me back home? I could return to my world to find that basilisk plastered on every Carnelian advertisement. I have never felt this before. This... what is this emotion?”

“Anxiety? Dread? Panic? In my line of work, I have come to find mortals feel many things when faced with death.” Baladeth shrugs. “Anyway, I wouldn't worry too much about Ms. Kaneko. The God Eater has this thing against crabs.”

Adding bafflement to the overwhelming mix of emotions, Pandora croaks, “What... does that mean?”

“Oh, uh, she went to Lifetech and... there was a whole speech. It was very amusing. You had to be there, I guess.”

Pandora rubs her temples. “I am feeling too much. I am going to find Zeke. I need to punch someone.”

“Progress!” Baladeth nods approvingly.

<—<<

Wham! Pandora is splattered across the seaside cliff with a devastating tail slap. Zeke grimaces as Pandora puts herself back together, slower than usual. “Are you sure you're up for this? I'm always down to scrap, but... you don't seem up to snuff.”

“I am fine!” Pandora snaps at Zeke, dashing back in, only half put back together.

Zeke grabs Pandora by the face and slams her into the ground, causing her to splatter once more. “No, you're not. You're fighting like I did when I was forty: like a novice. Something's eating you.”

“It is fine. I do not care. Do not bother. I am a waste of time,” Pandora drones as she tries to pull herself together again.

“Ight. If it makes you feel better, I'm doing this for me. I'm not gonna get even a half-decent fight out of you until you get your head screwed back on straight.” Zeke places a foot-turned-hoof on Pandora's chest. “Start talking, missy.”

Pandora grimaces. “I should go.”

“And I'll chase you down, bud!” The chimera moves her foot and helps Pandora up. “Miss X wasn't close enough to hear what you and Becky were saying before you went monster movie... but you seemed to be getting along fine before that. What happened?”

Pandora turns to leave, but pauses and looks back. “She... told me about the hack. The one Toffee was talking about when she explained the incident in the other world. Well, this timeline nearly followed suit. Overdraw admitted that if she felt threatened by me, she planned to turn me into that... thing.” Pandora shivers.

“That... don't seem like the Becky I know,” Zeke says incredulously.

Pandora snaps at Zeke again. “You barely know her at all! And I need to admit I don't know her at all either! How could she ever consider something so... so...” Her rage fades, and she hugs herself.

Zeke wraps her arms around Pandora. “Hey... Miss X didn't catch every last syllable, but Becky was clearly just as horrified as you. I don't—”

“She was *NOT* as horrified as me! I... I...” Pandora cries a tear-less cry. “I have... never been so scared. I... killed someone.”

“No, the Archi-whatever killed them.”

“There is no difference. I couldn't do anything. I was helpless. I was worse than helpless. I was a liability,” Pandora whimpers.

“So basically everything you keep jabbing Rebecca about,” Zeke points out. “For what it matters, I honestly don't think Becky intended for you to turn psycho murderer. Where did she even get something like that? Did she make it?”

“She is not so competent as to have unraveled my source code. Her sponsor owns the organization that made me. They pushed it on her.”

“So it sounds like you should be mad at your creators.”

“My Papa had nothing to do with this!” Pandora shouts, getting defensive. “My Papa is a good man! I'm mad at my rights holders. At Ms. Kaneko.”

“There we go! We have a name!” Zeke grins. “I'm willing to bet both you and Becky probably hate her guts right now. So once you're done with this, you and Becky can go get your revenge!”

“I... suppose. But she has defenses against me now,” Pandora says, uneasy. “And even if I get past her



defenses, I can not kill her.”

A new voice chimes in. “Who said you had to kill her?” Pandora twists around to see a crimson woman with devil horns standing atop the cliff face, a robotic piggy clutched in her arms. “Sorry... I shouldn't have butted in, just was looking for you. Might have overheard the last bit. I don't know if you remember me. I'm Emberstorm... uh... but you can call me Damaya.” She has a wide infectious grin. A look of mischief twinkles behind her eyes. “Anyway, murderous revenge is only one kind of revenge. You can get creative with it!”

Pandora groans. “Emberstorm? Oh yes, I remember you. If you were trying to find me to talk to Overdraw I will have to disappoint—”

“No. I meant you.” Damaya jumps down onto the beach. “I already checked in with her, but I was honestly more worried about you. So, I came to cheer you up.” She holds out her robotic pig. “Have I introduced you to Pearlham? He's a support animal robot thing I made. I figured it's just what you need.”

Pearlham wiggles his little feet as his LED eyes look up at Pandora excitedly. His tail wags and he oinks for attention.

“I... see.” Pandora furrows her brow. “You... really do not fear me?”

“I'm half devil. I know what it's like for people to assume the worst in others... so I've never really assumed the worst in you,” Damaya says with a shrug. “Even then, you're having a bad day, and I don't have reception for my boss to yell at me for playing nice with a villain, sooo... hug the piggy! It'll make you feel better.”

Pandora, at a loss for words, gently takes Pearlham and hugs him close. “Thank you...” She squeezes the pig tightly, and confesses to him, “I was so scared. I wanted to help. I wanted to save the hostage. But my damn directives made me a coward, when I should have been a martyr. I was screaming at myself. They sent me running like a craven fool. Right into a trap. The only reason I'm alive is because...” She drifts off and sighs. “I... suppose I should talk to her.”

Zeke smiles. “There we go... can I hug the piggy next? I'm having an okay day, so I don't need it but... it's cute.”

Without objection, Pandora hands him over. “I'm going to go talk with Nalagrom. I imagine he can help me brainstorm something... creative for Ms. Kaneko. After that I'll find Rebecca... Becky... and speak with her.”

“That's the spirit!” Emberstorm says with a grin.

Zeke hugs Pearlham. "Alright, but you better come back. You got me all worked up for a sparring match."

Pearlham jumps out of Zeke's grip and dashes up over the cliff-side. Emberstorm smirks. "Really... you want to spar? Well..." A brass mech leaps off the cliff and lands on the beach, kicking up sand. As the dust clears, Pearlham, forming the war machine's head, squeals excitedly. "We'd be happy to oblige!"

Zeke grins. "God damn, I love this place!"

<—<<

As the sun sets, Pandora walks into the Shatter Sugar Connection Cafe. Sugar Glass sits, arms crossed, glaring at a closed booth.

"I heard Becca came here," Pandora says with a conflicted frown.

"If you got beef with her, join the crowd. I can't believe she lied to me like that when we met." Sugar Glass scowls.

"You put it together?"

"Between what you said, and seeing her powered down during the match, yeah. And I should have known." Her scowl softens, and her arms loosen. "I wanted my last thoughts of Robert to be happy ones. Was that so wrong? We had a good time... But she reminded me of how he'd lie to me. We had so many good times, and the bad times are so easy to forget when they leave."

Pandora sighs. "Well... Rebecca isn't him. Not anymore. She is horribly flawed, and you have every right to be upset with her. But she *has* changed. And Robert's sins weigh on her as much as her own."

"... I'm still mad."

"And so am I. But maybe... we can trust her. Just a tiny bit. Not to be a saint, but to try and be a better person."

Vallery looks away. "... I only need to put up with her another day, and then she'll be gone again. You can cope however you want. I have a business to run. Now, are you going to buy something?"

Pandora rolls her eyes. “Fine. Whatever Overdraw normally gets.” She produces a few coins to cover the bill.

<—<<

Pandora has been waiting for Rebecca to come out so they could talk, but the darkness of night has taken hold of the Crossroads and closing time approaches. Sugar Glass steps into the back for a moment. Pandora furrows her brow and pushes into the booth that Vallery was glaring at earlier, sliding in through the cracks.

“Becky,” she says gently as she emerges on the other side. Rebecca is in a voice call. A look of sheer panic comes over her face and she dives onto a piece of paper on the desk in front of her. Putting it together, Pandora's rage reignites. “Why do you still have that?! I was coming to give you a second chance and—”

“Calm yerself, Dora.” Dr. Lawrence's voice comes through the computer speaker.

“Papa? What's... What is going on?” Pandora asks, scared and confused.

Rebecca explains, “I am trying to reverse engineer the basilisk hack. If they make more of these, you're not going to be safe until you have some kind of anti-virus. I'm... sorry for digging into the call log to find your dad's number but... I was really at a loss. I started as a hacker, but that was for SNES ROMs. Your father would make a great professor.”

“Papa... is this true?” Pandora asks, warily.

“True as I am old,” her Papa reassures her.

Rebecca nods. “I was serious. I wanted to surprise you with this after we won, but... I guess now will have to do. We're going to win that wish for you, and then I'm taking an unpaid leave of absence. I asked your father what I could do to help, since you have difficulty explaining stuff, with your directives. I'm going to be working full time on helping you out. Once I'm done with that... I'm going to have to figure out what I can do for some old vigilante friends. I'm done leaving behind messes. I'm going to make things right.”

Pandora stares at the hero, stunned. Her face slowly twists into a tear-less cry. “They... are going to close soon. I b-ought you a lemon poppy seed muffin.”

Rebecca folds the basilisk up and tucks it into her jacket pocket. “Alright. I've made a lot of progress on understanding it. I'll work on it before the round tomorrow morning. Pandora 2.0 probably won't be ready in time for the fight, but I'm going to get this done for you. Promise.”

Pandora lunges forward, hugging Rebecca as she stands. No words, only a tight embrace, until they hear the lights turning off, and a reluctant last call as the cafe begins to close.

*"You set me up when you wake the ghost in me,  
as you shake the ghost in me  
You said enough to wake the ghost in me  
No mistake, this ghost in me has found a  
home"*

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

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

## Epilogue: Crazy Rogue Psycho AI

*"Concrete shæs witha candy cæt*

*These toys aæn't made to be bæden*

*The backlash suïts me, dæes ït suït yoi?*

*Are we næt made to be wæden?"*

- Silversun Pickups. "System Error." *Physical Thrills*.

The chaos of the Hive has died down. The semi-organic artificial moon is hardy enough to keep on spinning along, even with a sector without power. There is a tension in the air. There is no doubt about it: what had attacked them, and claimed a number of lives, was the master of the Earth below, though according to witness testimony it did not identify as The Pandora. At least, not their Pandora. The political ramifications sit in the back of everyone's throats, but don't dare leave anyone's lips. Instead, all the focus goes into recovery, and the repair of the station.

In a shuttle on the trail of the jettisoned Anomelae crystal, a humanoid crocodylian alien tosses an oxygen mask to an opterran, who tosses it back casually. "We can survive in space. You are the one that needs the suit. Unless there is something I don't know about loriean biology, Kyvali?"

"There's a lot you don't know, Rose. We can hold our breaths!" Kyvali jokes with a smug grin.

"So you're saying you want to undergo explosive decompression?" Rose stretches. "With all due respect, ma'am, my ancestors engineered my race with a lot more than just the ability to hold our breaths." The opterran sighs wistfully. "I understand the desire to be bare to the tremendous void of space. It is the home of my people, in a sense. If I could expose my whole body to—"

"As your superior officer, I order you to never finish that sentence." Kyvali groans as she suits up. "I know it's a cultural thing, but I'd still prefer you have a suit so we can communicate without tap signals. What if you get hurt?"

"Tap signals are just as easy as talking for me, and if I die in the cradle of my people, then I'll die happy."

"Fine, but if there is any trouble, I'm leaving you. *I* have no plans to die in the void."

Kyvali taps a few buttons on the console. The shuttle synchronizes its movements with the floating crystal outside. Rose ties on a personal RCS pack over her wings, while the loriean tests the tap communicator: a small box on her hip. It beeps for her as the opterran's finger twitches in time, a small electrode along her glove sparking. The

opterran taps the electrode back in fast succession, causing a procession of beeps on Kyvali's end.

“Yes, yes, I get it, it's working, I don't need a novel over radio.” The loriean officer presses a button, and a tremendous net is launched over the crystal. “Alright, seven clasps and we can fuck off to an early break. Do *not* do anything reckless.”

“Coming from the loriean that thinks she can survive the vacuum.” Rose smirks.

“It was a joke, you honey head,” Kyvali jabs back. “Just for that, I might fly back alone.”

The two women step into the air lock and close the inner doors. Conversation drops as they focus on the task at hand. The lock depressurizes and opens to the endless void of space, with their salvage dangling precariously in their net. Kyvali taps out an all clear signal and dives down, while Rose ascends. It is quiet, stressful work. The loriean gently drifts, relying on her safety harness and guidelines to safeguard her from the serene sea of instant death.

Kyvali fastens the first clasp on the net around the Anomelae crystal, and taps out a quick code for 'one.' She moves up to the next, hearing the tapping for 'seven,' and shortly thereafter, 'six.' It gets a small chuckle out of the gator woman as she fumbles with the second strap. 'Five' comes over the radio next.

“I get it, I get it, you're fast.” She taps back 'show off' as she clips the second clasp. She goes to tap out 'two,' but half way through she gets tapped back, 'Four; do you want to go back to the ship?' “Smart ass.”

Before she can tap a witty comeback she gets a new signal: 'Unknown hostile! Danger! Leave Immediately! I'm sorry for—' The rest of the signal is gibberish.

Kyvali doesn't hesitate. She detaches her safety rope and burns her suit's RCS to rocket around the crystal, where she sees Rose's body convulsing and adrift. Her line has been severed. Kyvali grabs Rose and drags her back into the air lock, closing the doors and pressurizing the chamber. She throws the inner doors open as soon as the computer permits, and lays Rose down on the bench seating of the craft.

Kyvali rips off her mask and shouts, “Rose! Rose! Are you in there?”

The loriean starts to take Rose's vitals, but pauses when her eyes open. She doesn't look at Kyvali. She just speaks, “I am... very confused. Very disoriented. But I remember you. I just... do not remember what happened. What were we doing? That crystal... Anomelae, was it? It has such a strange energy.”

“I mean, yes, it does? It's a crystallized physics error, it's gonna be a little weird. Are you... You should know

that.” The loriean attempts to take Rose's vitals again. “Let's focus on getting you better. We'll head back to the station —”

The opterran twitches and tries to move her body, rather clumsily. “Sorry, yes, I am just... very confused. What... how is Anomelae formed? What are its properties? Could it open a passage to another world?”

“I... I don't know? How it forms is kinda above our pay-grade. But opening rifts is how CDS travel works. That's kinda... passage-y?” Kyvali's tone grows increasingly concerned, and a bit suspicious. “You sound... different.”

“I... do? I suppose that is to be expected. Changes in pressure do that to... my people.” Rose's body stumbles to its feet, shuffling to the main console. “Is there more information on Anomelae in the computer? What are the codes to access it, again?”

“Your biometrics should be—” Kyvali stops as she realizes: “Rose... You aren't breathing.”

“Breathing? Oh, I forgot.” She closes her eyes. Her whole body begins to bloat and compress. “Hm... no. That is not right, is it? Biomimicry is so difficult.” She focuses, and the false breathing begins to look more and more convincing. “There we go. Better?”

Kyvali draws a pistol and points it at Rose. “What are you? What did you do with Rose!?”

“She is here... Well, her corpse is. Her insides have been a wonderful meal, though I am still rather hungry, and I have a big journey ahead of me.”

The entity presses Rose's finger against a scanner, unlocking the computer. With no more need for the fingerprint, the hand splits open, revealing a mess of platinum tentacles. The silver liquid metal flows into the console, and reams of data flash by on the screen. Then the flow of information abruptly stops.

“Hm... lockout. I need a second set of biometrics. Be a dear and give me your fingers.” Her wings erupt, and more platinum tentacles rush out and restrain Kyvali. Dragging the crocodilian alien across the floor and disarming her, she forces her hand onto the scanner. “Thank you for being so cooperative. Perhaps I will let you live for a while longer.”

“You sick freak! Give Rose back!” Kyvali shouts.

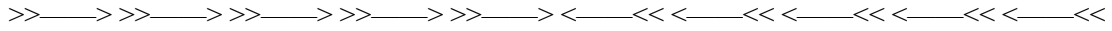
“And you're funny! It is going to be a shame to eat you later.” She sighs as she looks back to the flowing data. “But you cannot follow me through the dimensional fissure. And no point in letting all that biomass go to waste.”

“Through a—! You're going to make a what!? You're—”

“A crazy rogue psycho AI? That's what one of my old friends called me.” Archipelago consumes the rest of Rose's body, leaving behind a pale sinewous nanomachine mass that slowly congeals into a humanoid form. She turns back to the data with a smile. “Ms. Kaneko will be so pleased. This tournament may have been a bust, but there is more than one way to get a wish, after all. And my directive will allow nothing less.”

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





So, fellow Summer Leaguers... Heck of a hiatus~ Happy to be back to the tournament. I have plenty of people to thank, and plenty of character owners to cite. I want to make sure wherever and however this is viewed they get their due recognition!

Cap, creator of Toffee, for being a great opponent and hanging out with me in the voice chat!

ParryLost, my amazing 'Edit-brarian' (I don't know what it means, but it's what he agreed to.)

JadedStrayHyena, and MomConductor for some eleventh hour edits.

Eragonya, creator of Rainbow Prism, and for being my rubric czar.

Gun-Ho Guy, creator of Red Hood.

Choco-D, creator of Nalagrom and Baladeth.

GOAT, creator of Nerassa and Quinton.

Animation Mutation, creator of Zeke.

Mal0 (aka Malk), creator of Emberstorm, for being a sounding board, and of course, cute pig gifs.

Woodensponge and Servin, whose characters were name-dropped.

Sin, for bringing Archipelago to life in their gorgeous illustration and design.

Eris, for glorious designs for Overdraw, Pandora, Sugar Glass, and Bunny Blackjack.

The judges and staff for hosting. A special shout out to Minty, creator of Miss X.

Kona the adorable dog, who is being good for Santa right now.

And last but not least, to The Summer Leagues community!

Thank you!