

# Overdraw & Pandora Parologue Round 2: Dialogue

Episode Sugar Glass & Overdraw: Severance

*"Familiar faces I've never seen  
Living the gold and the silver dream  
Making me feel like I'm seventeen  
And it's crystal clear  
That I don't ever want it to end  
If I had my way, I would never leave  
Keep building these random memories  
Turning our days into melodies  
But since I can't stay"*

*"Remember when I played assassin  
Remember when my joking turned grim  
Remember how we thought if we followed the dots  
It would stop all the accidents  
Remember when you broke my halo  
Remember when I tied your wings in  
Remember how we slipped on the lies we equipped  
Just to bring back the goods again  
Surrounded*

- Daft Punk. "Fragments of Time." *Random Access Memories*. - Silversun Pickups. "Surrounded." *Swoon*

Sugar Glass had left her seat in the stadium some time ago. She had stayed long enough to make sure the competitors were coming home alive, but given her scowl the entire time after Rebecca had run out of magic, it was clear that she had contemplated leaving earlier. She didn't need to see them play poker.

Exiting the stadium isn't so easy though. Her heart is clearly made up as she rushes through the halls, but the way she came in seemed to no longer exist. What should have been an easy exit was thwarted as if she made some wrong turn and was now lost in the maintenance and staff halls.

Sugar Glass wipes tears from her eyes, as she hears Miss X announce the victor. A bitter stab of laughter escapes as she leans against the wall. "Damn it. I don't want to see her right now. Please just fly out of the stadium. Don't come looking for me," she pleads to an absent Overdraw.

She looks at the tears on her hands and laughs again. "I blame you for getting me lost. Messing up my vision. That's all... I would be fine if it wasn't for you."

She can't hold back the sobs of pained laughter, as the tears in her eyes return. She pulls herself back to her feet and gets back to trying to find her way out of the labyrinth. She hunts down each hall until she sees a door that shouldn't be here.

"Did... I don't remember going up." Sugar Glass rubs her temples. She approaches the door to

the God Eater's booth. Her hand reaches out and touches it, as though she expects it to fade away like any other mirage. Her palm presses against the door, and she feels its luxurious textures, and hears voices from the other side.

“It is rude to fly in through the window.” The God Eater chides. “It is not wise to cross my boundaries uninvited.”

“It won't happen a second time.” Overdraw responds.

Vallery's hand pulls away from the door as though it had been set ablaze. She takes a step back... but then steps forward again. “... What am I doing?” she asks herself. “I should get back to my cafe.” But she stands, unable to persuade herself to leave.

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“I will entertain you this one time, after all, you just gave me a very entertaining match. I think I'm feeling generous.” The God Eater watches Overdraw land on her balcony. Her eyes bore through the hero's armor for a moment, but then she smiles, taking a more relaxed position. “Or perhaps I just like to see the plumage of a phoenix, freshly reborn of the fire~”

Becky speaks firmly to the god, her trepidation burned away by the recent match. “I just want to make my stance clear moving forward. I am not going to protect the Crossroads because you scare me into it, but I will protect its citizens because that is what I desire. And I'm not going to hurt my friends anymore because it brings you peace of mind. I am not going to police Pandora, and I don't give a damn about your divine politics.”

“So much fire, little bird~” The God Eater seems more amused than anything. Her tails fan out behind her, and the eye patterns on each seem to stare into Overdraw's soul. “I find it ever so interesting that you think you have any say in this matter. I was not merely suggesting you keep an eye on your partner.”

The world grows dark and all that remains visible is the God Eater's tails, and eyes, as they grow larger, over Becky, surrounding her as the fabric of reality is twisted. The kitsune's silhouette pops

against the luminous white fur of her tails, and her form begins to shift into something much bigger and far more horrifying.

A smile of sharp teeth appear in the monstrous silhouette. The maw opens as the voice of the God Eater falls on the hero with the force and pressure of a crushing ocean. “You will keep an eye on her. You will stop her if she becomes a threat.”

Overdraw shrinks back from the divine display. Physical space ceased to make sense in the God Eater's presence. She was not just large and looming above her, but impossibly vast. As though the very cosmos itself had given way to something far more horrible and miraculous. Rebecca trembles faced with the predator of gods.

'Remember.' The coven inside her is not scared. They had not forgotten Becky's promise.

Overdraw finds her resolve. Her wings roar as rockets through the impossible space. She can not know how long or for how far she must go, but Becky keeps flying, carrying on with determination. Slowly, through optical illusion, progress, or her own willpower, the insignificant speck ascends until she finds herself level with the God Eater's gaze. The mote of nothing that is the hero, surrounded by an unfathomably vast and hostile existence, locks eyes with the Crossroad's creator.

“I. Said. No.”

The beastly jaws of the monstrous divine form smile wide before lunging at Becky. 'Hold.' But Becky doesn't need the guidance this time. She watches the jagged maw come at her, and though she winces in anticipation, she does not move.

Becky is standing on the balcony with the God Eater again, a predatory smile now on the goddess's human lips as her tails wag approvingly. “You are too amusing to crush~” She pats the still bracing Becky on the head, and flops back into her chair.

Overdraw looks around, quickly checking herself over, and seeing that all her limbs are still connected and in the right places, she lets out a sigh of relief. “Okay... okay. You're more merciful than I thought you'd be. I was... expecting far worse.”

“And you came up here anyway? I like that, indeed~” The God Eater's eyes narrow on the defiant hero. “But there are always consequences. Luckily, you have brought them on yourself.” She waves her hand and the doorway to her balcony opens, revealing Sugar Glass on the other side.

Face to face with each other, a look of panic and pain is shared between them, before Vallery runs away, down the halls. Becky rushes after her. “Val! Wait!” As she leaves the God Eater's domain the door slams behind her, and it disappears

“Leave me alone!” Sugar Glass raises a hand behind her and barrier extends out of her palm, slamming into the hero's chest plate and laying her out flat as she makes her escape.

Overdraw stumbles to her feet, looking back to the now empty wall, with no way back to the God eater, and then over to the now empty hall, with Vallery no where to be found, having slipped away. The hero lets out a scream of frustration and punches a wall, before sliding along it, returning to the ground. Her armor disappears and she curls up in tears.

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Vallery punches the mound of dough, over and over. She is still bringing her fists down even after she's gotten the air out. When she moves on she shouts at it as she continues to give it a rather violent treatment.

“Why is it you?! Why is it you?! I trusted you! Why are you back?! Why did you make me think of you?! Just stay dead! Why did you dig yourself up?!”

She hears the bell of the door opening. Vallery shouts, “One moment!” She washes up in the sink and uses a paper towel to dry her hands and eyes.

The deep, smooth voice of Baladeth responds, “Mind if I help myself to a coffee refill in the meantime?”

“Go crazy!” Sugar Glass lets out a sigh of relief, and composes herself. She wears her best

customer service smile as she steps out from the back to see the god of death filling up his mug. “Got a late night planned?”

“Didn't you see Nalagrom's performance?”

“No...” She frowns. “I... don't think I'll be watching the next round either.”

Baladeth shrugs, “Your loss... but yes, going to be a very late night. Politics mostly. Not that the coffee actually helps. But I like the idea.”

“Sounds lovely.”

Baladeth tilts his head. “So... what's got you down?” Vallery gives him a rather shocked look, and he explains, “I am the Lord of Mourners. I'm experienced with seeing people before, during, after, and trying not to cry.”

“Just coffee today?”

“And you are being very short. Normally your a lot more conversational,” he adds. Seeing her scowl he gets to business. “In my travels I have heard of something called Sachertorte, but I haven't gotten a chance to try it. I've put it off and put it off and put it off. I've made excuse after excuse... but I can't shake the desire to at least sample it.”

“You said you can't taste.” She frowns. “What's the point? I get the coffee placebo; I know people that wake up with decaf. But this... seems pointless.”

“Doing pointless things can be nice.” After a long pause he sighs. “You are right... but if I order a full one, I can share it with those who can still taste it. Vicarious pleasure is still pleasure. Not to mention, a dense dark desert simply fits my aesthetic.”

“Alright, one Sachertorte. I can have it done by tomorrow. But, honesty, why did you go on with all of the excuses?” Sugar Glass asks as she notes down the order.

“Because if you don't tell me what's wrong I'm going to need to start guessing to come up with helpful allegories. So... what's bothering you? Or do I need to throw more sagely advice at the wall and hope something sticks.”

Sugar Glass rolls her eyes, before taking a deep breath. “I thought I had... I don't know... I don't know who Becky was to me... but I know she lied to me. Just like she used to do when she was Robert.”

“That's rough.” Baladeth thinks it over. “So... my advice. Ask yourself what you actually want from her... so if she comes in you know what to say. How about we sit down and talk this out. I'm in paternal advice mode this afternoon, it seems.”

She considers it for a moment, but her thoughts are interrupted by the ringing of the bell. Overdraw enters. Her armor is freshly dinged and scratched, and her wounds still closing, under the effects of some kind of magical healing.

Sugar Glass goes quiet, but Baladeth asks, “What happened to you?”

“Got into a fight with Lyla... I was honest with her about my concerns with her...”

“Fervent crusader mentality?” Baladeth suggests.

Overdraw nods. “Yeah... basically. She did not take it well. You probably guessed that though. But I think we are going to be okay. Had... a good talk on the way to Saki to get... patched up.” She rubs a wound, turned scab, turned scar, that is quickly fading. “Saki certainly knows her stuff.”

A long, heavy, awkward silence sets in.

Baladeth fills it with an attempt at conversation, “So... have you ever tried—”

“Why are you here?” Vallery finally asks, glaring daggers at Rebecca.

“I need to make a call. But, yeah... I also wanted to talk with you.” Overdraw dismisses her

armor, and ejects the arrowhead, reverting to her true diminutive body. “I... I didn't want to keep this from you.”

“*Really?*” Vallery screws up her face as a million angry thoughts burn through her mind. “Since when? Because you seemed awfully okay with never letting me know.”

Rebecca frowns. “Look, I tried to tell you... multiple—.”

“Did you? Because I don't remember you ever giving me any kind of hint!” she shouts. “It's good to know that no version of Robert actually cares to let me know what's really going on, ever. You never cared about me. Not really.”

That strikes a nerve. “I tried! I fucking tried and you just talked over me. Bowled me over like you always did. Maybe I lied to you all the time because you made telling you the truth so hard! Every little thing I did was wrong! Was I a saint? Not even fucking close. But if I wasn't walking on eggshells and white lies, I was talking in diplomatic terms so you wouldn't blow up at me! When I told the truth you didn't believe me, or you just talked over me!”

“Oh! So you're going to be like this? I guess the mask's really coming off now. All that talk about having to be better for your friends on stage, but here you are, same old you, just with a new name, and new pronouns. But you haven't changed! You just say and do whatever you need to get out of trouble.”

“You're right!” Becca shouts. The room goes quiet. “You're right... I have been going in circles, never really growing, just running from one problem to another. I've made a mess of so fucking much. But I am going to change. I am changing right now. I refuse to be who I used to be. I'm tired of being that coward.”

Baladeth, clears his throat. “I'm going to... go...” It diffuses a bit of the tension as he leaves the two of them.

Overdraw fishes out a handful of coins and puts them on the counter. “I need to make that call. But... yeah, I want to talk... I want to be friends. I want to make things up to you, because *I was* in the





## Episode Pandora & Archipelago: Parallel Processes

*"Getting wasted on desire  
A minute later, friendly fire*

*"And forgiveness is so human  
And to err is so divine lately*

*So who could ever break you down?  
And what could ever freak you out? When you're waiting for the only thing to help you break on through  
If you can carry this around  
Then you will never break down"*

*Waking up is lonely and so easy to do  
Remembered for being ignored  
Better to fade away before you get burned—"*

- Silversun Pickups. "Friendly Fires." *Better Nature.* -Silversun Pickups. "System Error." *Physical Thrills*

The journey to the Wish Stone had taken only a week on horseback. Pandora looks over her schedule and smirks, seeing that they are massively ahead of schedule. She looks up from her leather bound tome to the guide she had to thank for this progress. Dora can't help but grin, not just for the job well done, but for who specifically this guide was.

The hermit she's befriended leads the way and asks, "Yeah, so... this other me you knew... tell me more about her." The guide is tall for a goblin, but short for just about anything else. Blonde is apparently an uncommon hair color for her tribe, but Pandora has no means of confirming that. Even though she has a propensity to second guess herself, the guide hasn't steered them wrong.

"Let's see here, Bekna... I... don't actually know a ton about her. And keep in mind it just seems to be your equivalent from my world. She was the magic knight that was my partner when I destroyed Panzeron. Well... the part of of me that wasn't blasted clean off by the steam geyser. She was the one with the glowing wings." Pandora can't help but wear a slightly bashful face. "Perhaps I should have gotten to know her a bit better." Seeing her new friend looking to her with baited breath she chuckles. "Alright, what else... You are both the timid type, but she was a lot better at pretending she wasn't."

Bekna sighs. "Yeah... Must be nice to have magic... and be brave. And to fly... and..."

The third companion, a ginger-haired cat-eared girl, chimes in "If you keep tallying everything you don't have, you'll never appreciate what you do have. Just think about what you have that makes you smile." She was energetic, bordering on manic.

The trio reach the mouth of Frozenvil Cavern. An unseasonably bitter, chilly air bathes the trio. Bekna pulls her fur cloak a bit tighter, while the cat girl walks in, seemingly unfazed, even in her rather

low cut leotard, and open ringmaster jacket.

Bekna whimpers at the sight of her own breath. “How do you stay so positive, Nyula? And do you have any you can share?”

Nyula giggles as she keeps her body moving for warmth. “All natural, Becky~”

Pandora groans. “I messed up and called her the wrong name one time.”

“I really don't mind!” The goblin squeaks. “Kinda flattering, really.”

The cat girl smiles. “It's just such a cute nickname.”

There is a sudden burst of freezing wind, and Bekna starts having second thoughts. “So, Dora... do you think we should turn around? Come back better prepared. Find a nice inn. I hear there is a wizard looking for an apprentice nearby. You sure you don't want to learn any more magic?”

“Positive,” the gray woman says, crossing her arms. “And frankly, I do not think I'll use what I have learned. Gathering magical energy... It is, perhaps, too liberating.” She simulates a sigh, but it is less convincing when the other's breaths could be seen.

“I don't understand, why is that a problem?” Bekna asks.

Pandora frowns and breaks away, too look at the side of the cavern walls, coated in a layer of ice thick enough to form a natural mirror. She runs her hands along her reflection. “Remember how I told you I had a tyrant living in my head that makes me do certain things, or avoid doing certain things. Well when I gather magic I feel it's hold weaken.”

“Yeah... That sounds like a good thing,” the goblin responds, a mix of concern and confusion in her voice.

“And it should be. If I gather enough magical energy I suspect I could overcome them completely... However, when the magic drains, they return with a vengeance. If I ever confirmed that I

could slip my leash completely, the tyrant would use the first opening it could get to render me incapable of using magic.” Pandora presses her hands against the wall and fault lines splinter the reflection.

Bekna still doesn't seem to get it, so Nyula spells it out for her. “Magic requires willpower to use, in all it's forms.” The catgirl takes out her summoning deck, looking at the foreboding darkness ahead of them.

And Pandora finishes the thought. “It would strip me of my person-hood.” The ice shatters. “I'd be rendered nothing but an extremely over-engineered calculator. Which is a shame, because otherwise I could just learn the magic I need to complete my missions. A slow stable road would be preferred.”

“Yeah, okay... sorry I brought it up.” Bekna winces and decides to change topics, while Nyula draws a card, puts it back, and shuffles, drawing again. “So... do other people have ideas for wishes... cause I'm stuck between a few ideas. According to legend, you only get one.”

Pandora simply says, “I'll wish to fulfill my directives.” She removes one of her fingers, and leaves it behind, shifting her machines to regrow it.

Bekna blinks. “But what if you only get the one? I don't know if you can get back home without one?”

“I... don't actually have a choice. Again, tyrant in my head. But I actually don't mind.” She gives the goblin a warm smile. “You have been a good friend.” Before she turns to Nyula. “Both of you, really. I have landed in good company, I reckon.”

“What's a reckon?” Nyula asks, looking up from her card drawing.

“It's... It is just something my Papa used to say.” She turns back to Bekna. “I do intend to go home to him eventually, but I don't need to hurry. So don't even think of using your wish to send me home.”

Bekna laughs and waves Pandora off. “Okay, okay. I'll think of something else.”

Nyula yanks the conversation her own directions. “I'm going to wish for a giant traveling circus. I'll lead it across the land and bring smiles to everyone's faces.” She then frowns at her deck and mutters. “The one time I want to draw the Sole Shell for some light, and I get everything but. It's my cute little firefly. I keep drawing the big ones. Legend of Cycle, Shell Queen, Legend of Sun, Legend of Love—”

Pandora raises a quizzical eyebrow. “The Legend of Sun doesn't produce light?”

Nyula, for the first time in a long while, looks a bit sheepish. “... I never claimed to be smart.”

The goblin chuckles and takes out a lamp. “Funny, I got what I was drawing for on my first try.”

The trio descend deeper into the cavern.

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Archipelago did not know where she was headed, but trusted her older sister had a plan. She saunters through the forest, and in her hands is a writhing mass of platinum worms comprised of nanomachines fighting with each other.

She smugly watches them squabble. “I really am something else.” She pokes at one of them and it slaps back as hard as it can back. “Oh, why are you so nasty. I cracked open a dimensional rift to make it all the way back here to you. I even followed your metaphysical threads back, instead of the ones from the bit of me that got a ride off of toffee.”

She scowls, as she picks out one in particular. She grabs it and crushes it. “That's what you get for talking back. An early demise. There is no way Nerassa could have destroyed the rest of me. I'm not scared I could have the last tie to our Kaneko. Frankly, I hope Nerassa beat the odds. Only one of us can be her most *loyal* friend.” She smiles maliciously. “You lot aren't even in the running. You are tiny, pathetic creatures, jockeying with each other for second place, at best.”

“Oh, and what do we have here?” Archipelago spots the tiny squirming worm of dark gray goo sits at the entrance to an unseasonably cold cave. “Aw, poor *abandoned* big sister, abandoning bits of herself in turn. It *would* be poetic.” She grabs the back-up slug and it writhes as it turns a platinum color, matching Archipelago. “There we go. Put out of your *misery*.”

She pauses at the opening for a moment when she hears it. Her sister's voice, blabbering inanely with two other inhuman entities. “Oh, Dora, Dora, *Dora*. So sentimental. Acting like she can be human. Acting like *anyone* can be human. Delusional really. Keep on talking, let me hear it all... and then I can put *you* out of *your* misery.” She closes her hands and kills her mess of converted colonies. “Finally a bit of peace and quiet.”

Archipelago drifts through the caverns, following a trail of ice that has been scraped away. “Hydrogen and oxygen... not the most *stable* building materials, sister. Perhaps you have gone *mad*.” She weaves through spent and deactivated traps, cleaning up bits of Pandora that had been splattered by them. “Or perhaps you were just *desperate* for some expendable mass.”

She rounds the corner into a snow covered grotto. The sun peaks through between the craggy mountain walls onto a snow dusted forest. Hearty pine trees dot the wide open space, with a clearing made in the middle. Archipelago freezes and hides as she sees a titanic metallic pale blue dragon standing in the clearing, in front Pandora, Nyula, and Bekna. Archipelago bides her time.

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Pandora looks at the tremendous scaled creature in front of her. It was not as large as the sea-serpent she had wrestled, but it had a presence that the raging beast did not possess. It carries itself with pride and intention. Its pale blue, almost white scales glittered like diamond dust, and it's tremendous wings unfurled in an intimidating display. Bekna hides behind the other two.

The dragon open's it's mouth and snow falls from it's breath as it speaks in surprisingly soft, feminine tones, “Travelers, you have ventured into my peaceful respite. I will give you one chance to correct your mistake and leave. Otherwise you will face the wrath of Reignya the Graceful.”

Pandora bows low. “I take it that you are Reignya, ma'am. You are as imposing and beautiful as

the legends say.” Flattery does seem to bemuse the dragon, so Pandora presses her luck. “However, I understand you to be the guardian of the Wish Stone. I have traveled far, from another realm. I have need of a wish to save my world from a existential threat, and I cannot leave this place empty handed.”

Reignya does not take kindly to the imposition. Her wings beat and nearly knock the trio into the air with the gale they kick up. “I would sooner die than part with my sacred stone. Many a would-be conqueror has come here. I have destroyed them— Where are you going?”

Pandora has already turned around to walk away. “If your death is the price of the stone, then it is too steep. The only one here that would be willing to kill you, lacks the capabilities to fell you. No offense, Bekna.”

“None taken.” The goblin squeaks. “I wouldn't want to die trying.”

Nyula hasn't turned around, but also seems to drop it, “Well, if your not willing to part with the Wish Stone, then maybe you can tell me about some interesting stories. We've come all the way here, and you must know a lot of cool stuff. Uh, I could trade a fortune reading for a story.” Nyula takes out her summoning deck, and wipes away a portion of the snowy ground and begins to lay out a pattern.

“... A full summoners deck. That is rare.” The dragon narrows her eyes. “You who are so quick to give up stand a greater chance of defeating me than most. And yet you'd sooner use it for a trifle such as fortune telling.”

Nyula sighs. “Look, I'm barely an adventurer. A traveling performer, really. I'm not a killer.” She nods to Pandora. “Anyway, she's the really scary one. She ate a whole leviathan.”

“I'm sorry?! You ate a what?” The dragon is, understandably, incredulous.

“It was endangering 'human' lives. The calculus was simple.” Pandora shrugs. “I define human broadly, but even if I extended the 'human condition' all the way to Panzeron—”

The already pale dragon goes even more pale. “Panzeron?! That was a fully grown leviathan!” The dragon's calm and cool aura is thoroughly shattered by now. “I heard that it had been felled by a

mighty titan from... another... world..."

Pandora nods. "I was quite large at the moment, yes. Anyway, if I cannot find aid for my world here, let us move on. Any other legends you know, Nyula?"

"Hold for a moment... let me think." Reignya takes a long moment to consider it before smiling. "... I will permit the use of my stone. A summoner, and leviathan slayer could likely take it from me if they so chose. But you do not have the soul of conquerors."

The great ice dragon runs a claw along her scales, and a small glowing orb falls out. It's a modeled rainbow of colors, shimmering with unnatural magical energy. Nyula gawks, "It's just like the songs! A miracle stone of made of rainbows!" Her eyes sparkle.

"It does come at a price, and with limits. It will cut your life span in half. Natural or unnatural, the very strings of fate that bind us will reweave to conspire against those who use it's power. And secondly, the wish cannot be used to restore or destroy life. The dead stay dead, and the living stay living."

Bekna raises her hand. "Excuse me... what would happen if you wished to be immortal."

"What?"

"Immortal... unable to die. How would your life get halved."

"Perhaps... an immortal slaying blade would find it's way into the hands of your enemies."

"If there is a blade that kills immortals, that's not really immortal. And even then, does your life get halved before or after being immortal is applied to it... because half an immortality is still basically forever and—"

The dragon roars and the goblin shrinks back behind Pandora. After a long pause, Reignya admits, "I don't know. I don't know if anyone wished for immortality on it before I was it's guardian. I suppose you can use your one wish to find out, little goblin. But that is one last limitation. You may

only receive one wish per person.”

Nyula sighs. “Which means Dora can't both wish to go home, and save her world. One or the other. I was hoping that part of the legend was dramatic embellishment.”

“I already said I'd be fine with that.” Pandora frowns. “But I suppose I am still disappointed. Being functionally immortal, I can slice my life to shreds as a wish middleman. But if I only get one...”

“I wouldn't be so *certain* about that, older sister.” Archipelago steps forward, pulling her form into Pandora's preferred body, looking like a platinum mirror image as she saunters up.

Pandora's eyes narrow suspiciously. “Who are you?”

“I already said as much. Your '*little sister*' in a sense. I'm you, but *next* year's model. As I know you *must* suspect, the God-Eater runs *many* tournaments at once. Logistically it—”

“Does not make sense otherwise.” Pandora finishes the thought. “So you are another version of me.”

Archipelago smiles. “And *fortunately* running on a new version of our software. For all intents and purposes, I am from another world, and not a carbon copy. We could work *together*. I can use my wish to fulfill both of our directives, and you could use yours to help your new friends, or send us home, or *anything* really. It would be *efficient* to spend one wish to solve two problems, no?”

“Or infinite problems if it is strong enough to fix all possible worlds...” Pandora considers it. “We don't even know if it can effect our words for certain, let alone more than one. It could be well beyond it's capabilities.” her face turns into a frown. “And I don't know if you and I are actually much alike at all.”

“What would it take to convince you? Oh, *wait*, I remember. I considered this *possibility*, didn't I. Seido, Galgalim, Amagiwa, Musicanova, Musicanova, Lotus, Levistrauss, *Saito*, and Sneak.”

Pandora seems to relax a little. “You're universe and story must be very similar to mine then.”



Archipelago approaches and extends her hand. "I'm just happy that you come from a universe where you share my strange tastes. Alright, sister. Let's save *humanity*."

Pandora moves to meet the handshake, but Bekna dashes in the way pushing Pandora's hand aside. "Wait a minute, if she touches you—"

Archipelago's eyes go wide. "Don't you *dare* interrupt me." A sudden vengeful wrath in her voice. Pandora suddenly pulls away, safeguarding Bekna. Archipelago's eyes begin to dart around, making a handful of quick calculations. "You are a sharp creature, aren't you. What gave me away?"

Bekna says, "I... I was just going to say, if Dora connects with herself through contact, you might accidentally become 'the same person' as far as the wish stone cares."

Pandora scowls. "But you are something far worse, aren't you."

Archipelago suddenly makes a desperate lunge for Pandora, but is met with a blast of frozen magic from Reignya's breath. A barrier of ice forms around Archipelago, containing her within its crystalline boundaries, frozen in place.

Bekna lets out a sigh of relief. "That was a close one, yeah? Who knows what that impostor was after—"

"It's not an impostor. It must have been me once." Pandora looks to Nyula. "Get your deck together and draw! It's not over."

Nyula scrambles as the ice begins to crack, and the platinum goo begins to force itself through. Pandora closes her eyes focuses, as the world seems to buzz around her.

Bekna fumbles with her quiver and draws back an arrow, but seems more concerned with her new mechanical friend. "Wait, are you drawing in magic? I thought you were worried it could... un-person you."

“If I push myself... yes... But let's hope I can work smarter, and not harder.” Shards of ice begin to bubble to the surface of her skin.

Archipelago escapes her prison as Nyula draws her first card. “Eighth fur! Greta Grizzly!” As the platinum swarm stretches out towards Dora, a brown bear in clown makeup launches out of the card and tackles it into a pine tree.

Archipelago hisses, “Get off me you side show reject!” She puts her hands on the bear and white lines trace across its fur.

Pandora shouts. “Nyula! Swap!”

The cat girl puts the card back in the deck and shuffles, the bear disappearing, leaving a network of nanomachines in the air, that splatter to the ground. The puddle quickly jumps onto a nearby pine tree and begin shredding it making an extra body, while the first makes another lunge towards Pandora.

One! Two! Three! Arrows zip through the air and smash into Archipelago's still disoriented mass as the goblin repositions. Archipelago's ire turns towards the little green archer. “Obnoxious pest. I'll kill you f—”

Reignya lets out another freezing breath trapping the first body, but it seems to exhaust her. The infested tree is torn down as an over-sized doppelganger is formed.

Nyula meets the situation with another card draw. “Third of feathers! Prestidigi-Pigeon.” A pigeon wearing a magician's hat appears, carrying a wand.

The end of the wand glows as it zips around the giant, leaving behind a shimmering trail. Giant doppelganger flails trying to slap it out of the air, arms passing harmlessly through the illusion magic left by the wand. She grabs the bird and Nyula puts it's card back in the deck.

The air around Pandora raises to a fever pitch. Her eyes open and they crackle with magical energy. “Solv's Separation.” The ice along her body begins to crackle, and she throws them at Archipelago.

The platinum menace takes the ice shard barrage with mild confusion. “*Sister*, what was the...” The sound of panic enters her voice as her body analyzes the arcane infused shards. “Sister! *What* did you do!”

“Magic.”

Pandora strikes her wrists together producing a spark, following the trail of hydrogen and oxygen left behind by the enchanted ice, which were now gas pockets in Archipelago. There is a rippling series of explosions as charred nanomachines burst from the body.

Pandora pants and falls back, her body starting to lose cohesion. Bekna dashes over and holds her. “You... You didn't...”

“I... m-a-ay have p-u-sh-ed myself t-oo far th-i-s time.” Pandora wears a weak smile.

The ice shatters as Archipelago's first body escapes, but lunges for the wish stone first this time. Reignya, still out of breath, tries to bring her tail down on the escapee, but the smoldering husk of a doppelganger reaches out and grabs the tail, white lines beginning to trace across it. With wounded pride the dragon beats her wings and pulls away, her tail coming off and wriggling as a decoy. The charred body restores itself to full size as the other body grabs the wish stone.

“Miss Kaneko will be so pleased with—” The larger doppelganger brings it's foot down on the escapee, and there is a sickening grinding noise as the two colonies of nanomachines fight with each other. Soon, all that remains is the larger body. “Me... and *only* me.” The wish stone slides through her body and into her hand, holding it aloft to gloat. “Her one and only, most *loyal*, friend.”

Nyula draws. “Knight of Scales! Sammantha—” Archipelago throws a dart of ice into the card, knocking it from her hands, sending her to go find it.

“Now, before I go... I don't *really* care if my sister is coming apart at the seams... I need to make *sure*.” Archipelago reaches towards the sputtering and twitching gray mass.

Bekna stares up at the gleaming machine with a new hatred burning in her eyes. The goblin lunges for Archipelago and jumps at her arms, reaching for her face. "I won't let you hurt my friends!"

Archipelago laughs, and grabs the goblin by her golden locks, as white lines begin to trace across her body. "Generous of you to just give up your life like this. I'll put your biomass to good use."

"Not my life... just half of it." Bekna puts her hand on the wish stone. "I wish you'd go home, and never come back."

Bekna falls out of the air as Archipelago disappears without fanfare. It is as though she was never here in the first place, if it wasn't for the damage she's already done. The white lines covering Bekna's body leave with Archipelago, leaving the goblin noticeably scarred. She forces herself to her feet and stumbles over to Pandora. She tries to push her liquefying mass back together into humanoid form, but there is no more cohesion.

"No! No, no, no! Come on Dora... Come on. You gotta pull through. You're... you are the very first friend I've had... the first real friend. I never thought I'd find a real friend after I was abandoned by my tribe. I thought I'd be a lonely hermit forever. I..." She looks around for the wish stone. "No... no, she had it. Reignya! Please! Is there another wish stone? I'll cut my life in half again."

The dragon looks away. "Your life was not cut. I... I lied about the cost. The Wish Stone I had was almost out of power... I didn't know how many wishes it had left. With any luck, that may have been the last one. I told you it would cut your life in half so you wouldn't use it selfishly or recklessly."

"So there are other stones!"

"I don't have them."

"Ok, then not a wish. But you're smart! You're a dragon! You must be ancient! There must be something." Bekna pleads.

"At this point... all I can do is pray to Faiythe." The dragon bows her head.

Bekna puts her hand on the nanomachines that were Pandora and closes her eyes. The mass begins to crawl along Bekna's hand, searching automatically, without intelligence, like an earthworm put onto a paved road. Slowly, it begins to break apart into five channels of fluid.

Bekna gasps. “Pandora... can... can you hear me.”

The five channels solidify, into crude, oblong shapes that slowly gain definition; fingers. Soon the mass has produced a hand. It grips onto Bekna as a body begins to grow back from the ooze.

Pandora, at about half her usual mass, looks eye to eye with the goblin. She slowly smiles. “... I think... I need to swear off magic... forever. My reactions are getting more and more vio—” She is pulled out of her puddle into a hug. Bekna cries and holds her tight.

Nyula steps over, replacing the lost card in her deck as she shuffles it. “And you didn't believe me when I read your fortune. A dark and mysterious future catching up with you early, and a brush with death.” She wags her finger. “Well... I suppose this means our journey is going to last a bit longer, because the next place I can think of a legend of a wish is all the way on the island of Glas. Not that I'm complaining.”

Reignya lays down. “I... have lost my sacred duty.” She begins to laugh. “I'm finally free of that accursed stone. The endless stress of defending it from would be despots is finally over.” She looks to the trio. “Would you mind if I joined you?”

“No offense,” Pandora groans, “and I'm happy at least one of us is done with our directives, but you are a little conspicuous.”

The dragon smiles as a bitter cold wind blows past her and her scales fall away, turning into snow. As the blinding flurry settles, a young, silver haired woman emerges, in the robes of a high priestess. “It has been a long time since I was among mortals, so forgive my mannerisms, but otherwise I relish a vacation.”

Pandora gets to her feet and smiles. “Then what are we waiting for... An adventure awaits.”

<—<< X—XX <—<< X—XX <—<< X—XX <—<< X—XX <—<< X—XX

## Episode Dr. Lawrence & Ms. Kaneko: Timber Rattler and Mamushi

“Poison the air that we breathe	“Cover your tracks, we know what's best for you
Chained to industrial need	You've bitten off much more than you can chew
Destroy the souls that you steal, the radiation is real	You're running scared, you'll run into our arms
Debate, too late, you've built our funeral pyre	Come join our clique, we'll keep you safe from harm
You kill my faith	Our toy soldier, you'll do the dirty work
Mother earth, desecrate	Stay loyal to us, we'll take away the hurt
Deceive the whole human race	We have what you need, just reach out and touch
I know you think nothing's wrong	We can save you
We won't be breathing for long	(We can save you)
When it's all gone, gone	Just give us your
We can never go back”	Compliance”

-Ozzy Osbourne. “The Almighty Dollar.” *Black Rain*.

-Muse. “Compliance.” *Will of the People*.

Dr Lawrence hangs up he phone. He leans back in his rocking chair. His house is a humble little cabin. All hard wood floors and walls; the place was old. The rustic oaken construction contrasted with posters of classic rock bands, and thousands of photographs coating every spare inch, cataloging his life from choir boy, to hippie rebel, to his Tokyo adventures, to now. But he looks back to a series of photos starting with him back when his hair was dark and long, surrounded by a bunch of other young programmers, in front of an old mainframe computer.

He looks at the label on it 'Archipelago 1.0 team'. He smiles and digs out a piece of masking tape and begins to tear up, as he writes on it. 'Pandora's birth. 'Hello world.'

He puts it up, briefly considering covering the old label, but instead puts it just below. “... I know it wern't any of you lot... I wish y'all were all still here.” He runs his hand along the group before stopping at the colleague that he was leaning against, and a few more tears run down his eyes. “I wish y'all could meet our daughter, Takeshi. She is so much like y'all... it ain't even funny.”

He goes about adding new labels. 'Pandora's first birthday' over 'Archipelago 2.0' and 'first successful calculation' is replaced by 'Dora's first words.' And so on and so forth, but as he goes on, his

tears turn into a trembling rage. As the years move on he seems to get angrier.

Finally, one of the last photo's of the Archipelago project doesn't get a new label. There was only him, and three other people. "Which one of y'all... Which one of y'all sold out my daughter," he growls. "Was it really you, Daisuke?"

He hears the door close behind him, making him jump out of his skin. "Uncle Barley! I'm home!" An androgynous teenager pokes their head in. They have long dark hair, curly, unlike their uncle's, and a rather eclectic style; tight pleather pants, but with a plaid flannel shirt and shockingly vibrant neon pink earrings. The combination feels like they have committed some crime against fashion, and yet, has gotten away with it.

"Cart, goodness! Scared the dickens out of me. Do y'all know what time it is?"

"I know, I know uncle, but Cassidy had her big birthday party. I stayed safe and—" They enter the room and see's their uncle's tear-stained face. "Uncle! Are you okay? What happened?"

"Fine! I'm fine..." After a moment though, he admits, "I... I'm not ok, Cart. That Becca gal that Dora has been hanging 'round with contacted me, and told me..." He takes a deep breath. "She told me Mr. Mori sold Dora down the river."

"What?" Cart seems confused. "But... that doesn't sound like him at all. You always said Daisuke was the sweetest guy you knew."

"That's what I'm tell'n myself. But considering it was all to turn my baby girl into a murderer, with Becca in her cross-hairs, it doesn't make sense to be some kind of lie meant to hurt me."

"Oh my— Is cousin Dora ok?" Cart asks.

"Yes... nah... it's complicated." Lawrence waves it off. "She was only half hacked, and her hacked half got hit by something called a 'barrage annihilator'. The unhacked half seems to be... shaken but herself."

Cart takes out his cell phone and hands it to his uncle. “Call Daisuke. If he's a snake he's probably going to avoid your number. He won't recognize mine.”

Lawrence hesitates. He looks to the newly labeled 'baby pictures' of Dora, and finds his resolve. He takes the phone. “Right. Let's get to the bottom of this, shall we.”

He dials the number as he goes to his pantry and gets out a shot glass and a bottle of Bourbon. Barley sits in his rocking chair and pours himself a shot as the phone rings, setting it aside for later.

Watching Cart's confused looks, he explains, “It's not uncommon to treat a wound with a bit of alcohol.”

“Do... you think your going to get shot?”

“I recon I won't be bleeding... but I'm certainly going to be hurting.”

The phone picks up. “Hai, Moridesu”

“Hey there old friend. Sorry, I seem to have lost my phone, otherwise I would have called y'all with it.”

The voice on the other end immediately frays into nervous English. “Dr. Lawrence! I... I didn't expect to hear from you. Any updates on... uh... Archipelago's treatment?”

The old man pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a deep breath. “Naze?” He asks as he reaches for his shot of bourbon.

“Eh?”

“Don't act like you don't understand. Why? Why did you do it?”

“I don't know what you are talking about.” He stammers.



The doctor hears a familiar voice in the background, coaching Mr. Mori. “Anata wa hikyō-shadesu ka? Hokori ni omoubekidesu!” Ms. Kaneko is there, with him.

Lawrence takes a deep breath. “Am I on speaker?” he whispers as a low conspiratorial rumble

There is a slightly uneasy, “No.”

“How is she threatening you. Remember, you have a contract that protects you from—”

“Barley.... Do you realize what you asked me to do. She is a super villain. We accidentally created a monster in that lab. One that's holding the world hostage. And now you want me to remove the one thing keeping us all safe!? I did what I had to do. For the sake of humanity.”

“For the sake of—” Dr. Lawrence takes his shot, and begins to pour another. “She is a *gift* to humanity!”

“That you stole!” He shouts back. “If Ms. Kaneko was as bad as you treat her, I'd be out of a job. Your contract didn't protect me if the entire department closed. But she saw in me what you didn't! I'm head of R&D now. She believed in me, more than anyone else.”

“She is an opportunistic snake. She's just going to drag y'all around like ballast on a hot air balloon. And when she wants to go up in the world, she'll cut you free for y'all to plummet.”

“Really? You have gone dark in my life for years. It took a massive paycheck for you to talk to me again. No call, no letter, nothing. Just left on my own. And then you come back into my life, and ruin my work—

“Daisuke! Look, life's been—”

Mr. Mori's shouts over Lawrence. “Don't give me that! It is MY turn to talk. I don't know who you think you are! You abandoned me again. And then, suddenly, when you need something, here you are, out of nowhere. 'I need a favor from y'all. Just need ya to aide and abet a bit.' You didn't ask me how I was. No, 'How's work going?' or, 'Seeing anyone new?' Not even a, 'How's the weather.' You

show up, ask favors, take from me, and disappear. You stole Archipelago last time and I—”

“Dora doesn't belong to—”

“Dora doesn't exist! She never did! You're a crazy old man that made a monster, and now you are believing its lies. Ms. Kaneko was right about you.”

He downs another shot, cheeks burning red in anger. “Put her on the phone.”

“What... why would I...”

“If I'm crazy, she won't want to talk. Put. Her. On. The. Phone.”

There is muffled chatter in the background before an unbearably smug Ms. Kaneko picks up on the other end. “Dr. Lawrence. What an unexpected, but ever so *pleasant* surprise.”

“How do I fix her?”

“Hm? Why should I even listen to you? You have been oh so very *rude* to your *adorable* little friend.”

Lawrence bites his lip. A faint trickle of blood runs down it, much to the concern of Cart.

“What's the price?”

“Oh, dear Dr. Lawrence. It's so kind of you to be reasonable. I suppose I could forgive you, and pretend this whole thing never happened... but I am awfully short staffed.” Her voice is playful, ducking around anything that would let Mr. Mori know what's really going on.

“Is this what it is all about? Y'all just want me back on Carnelian payroll?”

“Oh, I wouldn't. I bruise very easily. But there are some things that make me feel better.”

“So it's a grudge... Y'all never did grow up. Just like y'all's father.” He rocks back in his chair

and thinks. “So you want to make my life a living corporate hell as revenge.”

“I knew we could come to some kind of *understanding*.”

“And Dora would be safe.”

“But then your right back to your *nonsense*.” Kaneko says sounding a bit exhausted.

Barley retorts, “Look, Dora is my daughter. Just because y'all's father didn't love y'all, doesn't mean that I'm the same kind of man.”

There is a pause. Lawrence can imagine the flash of rage across her face as she has to recompose herself. “You *certainly* are a *special* one. Very well, on one *condition*.”

He raises and eyebrow. “Presumably on top of making my life a living hell.”

“I want you to come to our wedding. Ms. Kaneko-Mori has quite the ring to it, doesn't it? We've grown so close over these years, it's like magic.”

“Did... y'all seduce him just to get revenge? Just to fill his head with y'all's toxic crap? All of it for this moment?”

He can feel her grin. “So it would seem. Though I've found many other reasons to be happy. He is so very... what is the word... *pliable*? *Malleable*? Flexible! That is the word.”

Dr. Lawrence's fist quakes with rage as he pours another shot. “Y'all can... put me on the guest list. When do I start.”

“I am so pleased that you came around. And I am a woman of my word. You will receive your payment... once you have sufficiently proven your loyalty.” Kaneko follows it up with a chipper, “*Oh*, but you have to *go*? I guess it's *late* over there. You should rest your *tired old bones*. It's *admirable* to come out of retirement in your *advanced* age, just to get closer to your friend, and his fiancée. I guess I had you pegged all *wrong*. Sayōnara.” The phone clicks.

Lawrence hands the cell phone back to Cart, who asks, “Why... did you agree to all of that? Did... she really get Dora after all?”

“No... her plan to hack Dora did fail. At least our Dora... Again, long story.” He notes. “But she doesn't know that.”

They nod, but furrow their brow as they think about it. “But why did you agree to so much. If you don't need the cure, you could surely have told her to punch a hornet's hive after a certain point.”

“Because she can distribute the hack far and wide. We still have part of Dora in this world. But she won't start plastering it around until I am firmly in her grasp. Until I'm trapped, she needs to hold it back as a bargaining chip.” Dr. Lawrence looks to his phone. “Meaning it's in Becca's hands now. She has Dora's source code... she just needs to make one hell of an update.”

“Do you think she can do it?” Cart asks.

“Absolutely. Not a doubt in my mind. When she gets home we'll have to be quick about getting that anti-virus distributed. But after that... I'll tell Ms. Kaneko to go stick her head in a pig. And we can have tea with your cousin.”

It seems to put the teenager at ease. “Looks like you got this all figured out.”

“Hey, It's why I'm the cool uncle, right?” Barley laughs.

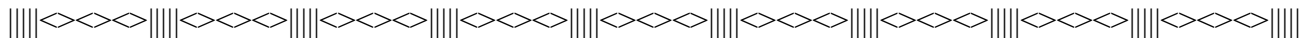
“Cool enough to let me try some of that bourbon?”

He wags his finger. “Two more years.”

“Alright, alright.” They smile and head to their room. “Ok, make sure you get some rest though, uncle. It won't do you any good to stay up all night”

“Yeah, yeah. G'night Cart. Sweet dreams.” He raises his shot glass to see them off.

Once they out of the room, Lawrence puts down the shot glass and leans back in his chair. The grandfather clock ticks away as the night rolls on. He gets up, and passes over Mr. Mori's picture again and groans. He shakes his head and turns his back, instead looking through the documentation he shared with Rebecca just a few hours earlier, and the chicken scratch notes he was taking. Most were illegible from shaking hands, calculations crossed out as his nervous brain had made elementary mistakes. He had corrected it all before he sent it along. Still he stares at his last ditch assist to save his daughter. He takes a swig right from the bottle, and corks it for the night.



Alright, not going to linger here. While waiting for results I worked on this, but there is also a lot more going on in my life so I'm pretty much gonna shoot it out the door as is. I hope people enjoyed this little squeeze of character drama. Anyway, I still had some help, though this time it was a lot more nebulous due to schedules and the holidays and all, not to mention my usual group of friendos being pretty burned out. Still, I want to make sure wherever and however this is viewed they get their due recognition!

ParryLost as whatever he wants to be ;}

Eragonya for inspiring the character of Reignya

Choco-D, creator of Baladeth

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