



Autumn 2021



Chuuniby you

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by Various

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The Girl with the Eyes of Antiquity

by /a/non

I

Funeral

On a cold autumn afternoon in the 17th Eon, chilled to the bone in spite of the feeble efforts of the dying red sun, a blonde haired boy of 14 dressed in black stood silently in a circle alongside a couple dozen other grim-faced adolescents. An older man carrying a dirt-encrusted shovel, his work at last complete, tipped his hat in a silent acknowledgment to the children, and departed from the site. In his wake was left nothing more than a withered old tree, the mound of freshly packed dirt before it, a stone tablet with the name “Ms. Ambrosius” engrave upon it, and the lingering silence.

The first to break the silence was a tall boy, who asked the others, “Well, now what do we do?”

The next to speak was a girl with auburn hair, who said, “There’s nothing we can do. No teacher, no graduating—that’s how the academy works.”

The third, a shorter boy with longer hair, replied, “It’s a raw deal, is what it is. How’s it our fault that that they didn’t prepare a replacement teacher, anyways? It’s not like they hadn’t already kept her going for like two hundred years!”

The fourth was a boy, who was quite thin in build, who first adjusted his glasses before replying, “Two-hundred forty-three

years, to be more precise.”

“Gee, was that it? She didn’t look a day over a hundred and seven.”

He smirked at that response. “That’s the power of cryostasis.”

The last to speak was a girl with short, black hair, who quietly added only, “...they didn’t even let her come out, except to teach us.”

The boy dressed in black remained silent, listening to the words of each of his classmates. In truth, what was even the correct thing to say at this time? Should he try to encourage them? That would be nothing but hollow words. Should he try to put together plan? He had no right to propose something now. Should he try to empathize? Then surely the feelings in his heart would overflow on their own.

So that boy said nothing, and returned home.

He prepared dinner for himself that night. His father and older brother sat out in the living room, the metal rings around their head indicating they were deeply lost into the Datanet.

“It isn’t your fault. I don’t consider you to be a failure.”

Those curt words were all his father had said to him. They haunted him as he lay in bed that night, staring up at the slowly rotating ceiling.

“What a shame! Guess you’re gonna be stuck as an eighth-year on cooking duty forever, huh? Don’t worry about it, I’ve got you covered.”

He clenched his fists as he reflected on the words from his brother. *Does his encouragement need to be so insulting?*

Morning came with little sleep to gained from the night. The boy put on a slightly thicker coat than he had worn the previous day and simply started walking, with no particular destination in mind. He passed by houses on the streets, the small schoolhouse which he knew as the academy, the old observatory, the sealed research center, the ruined factories of the Celestial Endeavor, the skeletal remains of an ancient alien god, the lake filled with ruined ships, the grassy field, the overgrown woods, and not a single human.

Then, just after the peak of high noon, the boy arrived again at the small graveyard with the withered tree. Yet to his surprise, there was one other person here, standing before the stone tablet.

This person, he could tell, was a girl about his age. She was dressed in a brilliant floral pattern, the bright colors contrasted against her pale skin and jet-black hair. Hanging from her arm was a wicker basket, full of white flowers, which she scattered so they might fall to the ground, landing before the stone tablet. Each time she did, she turned her gaze up, as though to count each of the falling petals. The boy moved forward against his will, mesmerized by the strange actions of the girl, until at last she turned, and caught his gaze, meeting her bright, blue eyes with his.

“Hi there. Did you come to throw flowers as well?” she asked. “Flowers?”

“This is the calla lily,” she said, holding up one of the larger flowers to show him. “And this one is a chrysanthemum, and this one a cream rose. I have many flowers, but my favorite is this one—the stargazer.”

“Huh?”

“You know, the calla lily isn’t actually a true lily, even though it has that name. But the stargazer is, even if it’s been modified a little bit. I guess some people might not see that as natural, but I think it’s a lot more natural to be looking up to the sky.”

“Who are you?”

“Oh!” the girl replied. “I’m sorry, I thought we already knew each other? What was your name, again?”

“Art,” he replied, the word slowly coming from his mouth.

“Art! Right. Yeah, I definitely know you. Or maybe I’m going to know you in the future? Yes, it must be something like that.”

“Not a single word you’ve said so far makes sense.”

“My name is Shiori!” she replied, casually brushing aside his words and putting her hand forward. “Pleased to know you, Art.”

Art looked down at her hand, then back up to her. “What exactly are you doing, here? Why are you throwing flowers?”

“How could you not know? It’s an ancient tradition to lay white flowers for those who have passed. Don’t you think they make this place seem a lot more beautiful than before?”

He looked over the flower-strewn ground, and answered her, “I don’t think...that I understand it. I’ve never even heard of a tradition like this, before.”

Shiori stepped back, her hand over her mouth, and replied, “Really? Oh my, you really don’t much, do you? Well, I suppose it’s to be expected. After all...”

The strange girl kicked off with her left foot, spinning in place and raising her right hand over her eye, before declaring, “I’m a genius magical girl who can see into the past!”

Art turned and began walking away. He had no idea what a single word that had come from that girl’s mouth meant, and he didn’t feel it was worth it to go any further. But as he started to walk off, there was a sound of footsteps rushing along from behind, and he found the girl walking alongside him.

“You’re just going to walk away like that? Didn’t anybody teach you that this kind of thing was rude?”

He said nothing in response, so she stuck her tongue out at him. “Rude! Completely rude!”

“I didn’t come out here looking to talk to someone.”

“Oh? If that was true, then why didn’t you just walk away when you first saw me?”

He was silent for a moment, and then replied, “I’ve been walking all morning. My legs just kept moving, that’s all there is to it.”

“I don’t think that’s how legs work, Art. It’s not normal for people to just go walking forward on their own. It’s kind of weird.”

“Do you really think you’re in position to say something like that?”

“Of course. There’s nothing weird about me. It’s you who’s missing out on basic facts and has weird legs.”

“You mean that made up stuff about the flowers?”

“It’s not made up! Like I said, I know all sorts of stuff, because I can see into the past. I bet even the adults don’t know as much as I do. That’s pretty cool, isn’t it?”

“That’s not possible. The academy teaches us everything there is to learn about.”

“Really? Then what do you know about?”

“Everything there is. Grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, music...”

“You know music? Do you know any songs?”

“The academy has records of all music created by humans, so it would be pointless to learn any. What matters is how that music relates to the numbers of the universe.”

“Why would that be pointless? Even if you’re just playing music that someone else made, does it really matter as long as you’re having fun with it?”

“Having fun has nothing to do with it,” he snapped back. “It’s all about the results. Everything has an order to it. If things aren’t done with intent and purpose, that order falls apart.”

“Oh?” she replied, rushing in front of him and stopping, bowing her back down with her arms locked behind her, and looking up at him with sparkling eyes, “And who told you that?”

“Those are the rules of the academy,” he replied, keeping his eyes locked forward and walking past her. “If you don’t understand, then you must be an outsider.”

“An outsider? Yeah, I guess I am, huh. Oh, but, that aside...if all of the world has an order to it, doesn’t the death of that poor woman seem a little senseless?”

Art stopped walking. She walked alongside him again, and said, “Oh, was that insensitive of me to say? Sometimes things just come out of my mouth like that. Was she important to you?”

“She was our teacher,” he replied.

“Is that so? Were you close?”

He shook his head. “No. I knew almost nothing about her. The only time we saw her was during class, when they would awake her from out of cryostasis.”

“Really? That sounds like such a terrible way of living.”

“It’s not right for an outsider to say that.”

“Oh? Then are you saying I’m wrong?”

“I’m saying that it’s not up for you to decide.”

“I’m not making a decision, am I? Now that she’s gone, it’s not like I have any say over the matter either way. All I’m doing is saying how I feel about it.”

“Feelings are supposed to be kept inside. That’s what separates kids from adults.”

“But I’m not an adult, am I? Or at least, I don’t think I am. And you don’t look it either.”

“It’s practice. I only need one more year at the academy, and three years at the upper academy. Then I’ll graduate, and be an adult. I have to be ready for that.”

“Huh? So if you don’t have a teacher anymore, wouldn’t that be a lot of trouble for you?”

He said nothing after that, but she continued on. “I don’t think it’s that big of a deal, though. I’m sure you’ll become an adult, even if that doesn’t happen. I think that I will, too. Probably. I can see into the past, but I can’t see into the future.”

“There you go again, about this seeing into the past nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense! Look, I’ll prove it...let’s see, back in the 5th Eon, there was a fashion trend where everyone in the city of Neo-Columbia wore shoes that were made out of snakeskin! But since the snakes they used were modified, the skins stayed partially alive, and the shoes ended up getting stuck to people’s feet whenever they got wet. Nobody noticed because of the big drought, but one day, all the rain came down, and suddenly everyone had the skin stuck to their feet!”

“Even if that isn’t a bunch of nonsense, you could have just learned about it in history class.”

“Oh? But I thought all knowledge came from the academy?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? That’s all you have to say?”

“What else would I say?”

“I would expect you to at least guess! You know, say that maybe you didn’t really know everything. Or at least make something up, like I was watching you from the ceiling, or something. Try to be creative.”

“Creative?”

“Yeah! Like...”

Shiori ran ahead, then turned to point at him with the index finger of her right hand, while holding the thumb straight up. Then, she yelled out, “Bang!”

Art blinked. “Bang?”

“You’re dead!” she replied.

“That’s ridiculous. I’m alive and talking to you right now.”

“No, silly. I mean in the game. You point your finger-gun at the other person, and if you hit, it means they go down!”

“I’ve never heard of a game like this. There are barely any rules. It teaches nothing, either.”

“Well, you’ve heard of it now! And you won’t know about any of the rest of that stuff if you don’t try it out. Trust me, it’ll be fun! Why don’t you try it on me!”

Art slowly raised his hand, trying to mimic the motion that Shiori had just made, and then blandly said, “Bang?”

“Oh no!” she cried out loudly, stumbling back while grasping her chest. “You shot me! I can feel my life...draining away...”

“Uh...” he stumbled forward, confused. “I’m sorry?”

“Oh, the humanity! The light...I can see the light!” she cried out, stumbling about before falling to her knees. “I’m going toward it! I’m going, closer...closer...”

She flopped to the ground, and flopped to her back with her arm reaching out. Then that arm, too, dropped to the ground, and her eyes closed as she seemed to stop breathing. Art looked around every direction, his heart rate growing faster as he approached her, squatted down, and asked, “Hey! Shiori, are you alright? Hey, what happened?”

As he came closer, her eyes opened, and she smiled as she said. “Hey? Wasn’t my acting the most amazing ever!”

“What?”

“Well, I don’t think it was that convincing. Hey, are you alright? Your face looks a little pale?”

“You stopped breathing. I thought that..”

“Don’t be silly! That’s all just playing pretend. The real thing would look a lot different. Don’t you know about acting?”

“Acting?”

She blinked, then sat up a bit. “Hey, Art. Do you really not know what acting is?”

“I’ve heard the word,” he replied, as he squatted down to eye level with her. “If someone is the class speaker for the week, then we say that they’re acting in that role.”

“Right, it’s kind of like that. Except instead of taking on an actual role, like acting as a class speaker or anything like that, when you try acting, you take on the role of someone that you’re not. So I might act out the role of a beautiful princess, or you might want to be some kind of great hero or explorer.”

“What would the point of it?”

“Well...how were you feeling just now?”

“Feeling?”

“No nonsense about holding it in. Be honest, this is important.”

“I was upset. I thought I had messed up, again. I was worried.”

“Right. That’s what acting is about. The actors go up on a stage, or something like that, and they put on a show of things that aren’t real. But they do it in a way where it seems just real enough, that the people watching it start to feel things like that.”

“Why would anybody want to feel like that?”

“Well, because that’s not all. You can make people feel sad, angry, or frustrated, sure. But you can also make them feel excited, happy, and wanting to do something more. And the more you bring out the bad stuff, the bigger the feeling of the good stuff. It’s like in painting—you need to have some dark, in order to have light. Just a little sadness, for when the good times come, I think is what someone once said.”

“This is all something you saw in the past?”

“Some of it is,” she affirmed, with a nod. “But some of this is just the common sense of humanity, isn’t it? I think that you’re missing a lot of things.”

The wind passed over the two adolescents, as Art thought deeply on the things which she had just said. The words that she spoke were in a language he knew, to be sure, but the meaning was an alien thing. Her attitude, as well, was a foreign thing.

But more than that, there was something else bothering him. “Shiori,” he said. “Where did you come from?”

She cocked her head, and putting her finger to her mouth, started to mutter, “Where did I come from? Hmm...I don’t really know. I guess it must not have been that important?”

“Didn’t you say you could see the past?”

“Well, yeah. But I can’t see myself, for some reason. So it’s a bunch of stuff from before I was born, I think. I also don’t think I can go back all the way, because I learned about these things called dinosaurs, but the only ones I can see are either clones, or really small and feathery.”

He nodded. That answer didn’t help all that much, but it did at least give him a new idea. “Shiori. If I help you figure out where you came from, can you help me understand these things?”

“Hmm...” she replied. Then after a moment, she smiled and said, “Nope! Not a chance.”

He frowned. “Oh. Then I guess—”

“Because!” she interrupted him. “I don’t need any favors for that. I already decided I’m going to do that, just because I wanted to do it. And I’m not really that concerned about my past, because I can’t imagine it’s that important.”

She stood up with a kipping motion, and he rose back up alongside her. Then, she extend her hand out to him, and asked, “Art, why don’t we be friends?”

He looked at her hand, and then back at her. Catching his cue, she replied, “Ah, you just take my hand. It’s a handshake—it signals that we’re making an agreement with each other!”

“And...friends?” he asked.

“Yes! Friends are people who do things together, because they like talking and being around each other, or something like that. Sometimes it doesn’t work out that nicely, but that’s okay, too. Because even if you only stay friends for a little while, at least you tried.”

He hesitated a moment, and then, awkwardly, returned the offered handshake. She gripped tightly, enough so to surprise him, and then said, “Let’s do our best, okay?”

II Stars

The faint afternoon light slipped in through the windows of Art’s room, blanketing with the faintest of illumination. It wasn’t much, but with the scant furnishings of the rooms—nothing more than a lone desk, a bed, a bookshelf, a wardrobe, and a nightstand—he was at little risk of stumbling, once he opened the door and stepped inside.

Still, this gloom was inadequate for his purposes. Taking a lighter stick off the wall, he lit a candle at his desk, and retrieved a book from his shelf. Just as all of the other books he had, it was a notebook—a way to record information he had learned in lectures, and keep it as a point of future reference.

Certainly, I learned something new today. But writing it down...

He was at a loss. The book, for the most part, was a collection of all manner of formulas, tables, and figures. He had learned of the absolute truth of the universe through harmonics, and could find the absolute maximum of a function through derivation; his efforts had caused others to praise his absolute value as a human.

So what was the point of this? He had learned something, but it had no purpose to it. If anything, it was just a mess of confusion that would eat up valuable space.

Eventually, he took up the pen, and started writing things down as he remembered them. But as he started to record his

notes about what it mean to act, he found he needed to provide an example. To give an example, he needed to give details. Each time he scratched out what he had recorded, cluttering his once meticulously-organized notebook with lines of crossed out text.

He had to describe the events, leading from the start. He needed to put down a little more. Eventually, filled with frustration, he set the book aside and set down his quill, realizing that he couldn't be satisfied with it. Perhaps, he thought, if his memory was perfect, it would be easier—but as it was, the vagueness of even the events of earlier in the same day made him question the accuracy of his details.

Filled with new questions, and with nobody to answer them, Art made his way to the shower. His brother passed him by as he made his way there, and patted him on the shoulder.

“Hey, how you holding up?” he asked.

“I met a strange girl today. She was about my age, but she knew things that they didn't teach in the academy.”

“Oh yeah?” his brother replied, seeming surprised. “Well, that ain't exactly normal, is it? Oh, but I heard something about a strange lady being seen...”

“Strange lady?”

“Yeah. Those lazy bastards at the security department, apparently they didn't even spot her until she'd already wandered into town. Said she got taken in to the observatory.”

“So there might be other outsiders...”

“Yeah, seems like. Strange times, we're living in...”

His brother wandered off, apparently distracted by a thought. Art said nothing, as he felt a strange nagging feeling in the back of his mind. The feeling continued to bite at him as he stepped into the shower, and let the water run over him. Eventually, though, he realized what it was.

When was the last time he'd even exchanged that many words with his brother? When was the last time had spoken to anyone, as much as he had just spoken with Shiori while walking?

After his rejected proposal, they had chatted for a little more. For the most part, she took the lead in the conversation. Every little thing in the world, the names of trees and the shapes of clouds, seemed to spring out from her lips.

If he had not brought up the need to return home for dinner, he was sure she might have continued going forever.

After drying himself off, he returned to his bedroom and changed into his nightclothes, before allowing himself to fall into his bed and stare up once again at the ceiling. The events of the day ran through his mind, and he felt the embrace of sleep coming upon him.

Then someone knocked at the window.

What?

He turned to look. Standing outside, staring at him, was a girl with a strange floral shirt, carrying a lamp.

“Hey! Hello! I can see you?”

Art wordlessly stood, then walked to the window and opened it. “Shiori. What exactly are you doing?”

“I came back over to talk! You’re done with dinner, right?”

“Yeah, and now it’s time to sleep.”

“You can do that in the morning!”

“I need to get ready to go to the aca—”

He stopped, and she wasted no time in continuing on. “Come out the window, I’ve got something cool to show you!”

“What are you—”

Before he could finish, she had already started crawling up a ladder leaned up against his house—wait, when had that gotten there? With an exasperated sigh, he slid open the window and got out onto the ladder, climbing up the side of the house and up to the roof, where Shiori extended a hand to pull him up.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Look!” she replied, pointing up and past him.

Art turned to look up. It was just the night sky.

“I don’t understand?” he replied. “There’s nothing there.”

“What do you mean nothing?” she replied. “There’s *everything* up there. Thousands of brightly shining lights that we can see with our eyes alone, and countless trillions past that point.”

Shiori lay down against the slanted roof, and patted it for Art to join. He sat down, turning his gaze up, and frowned. “I’ve learned about all of that in class. The cosmos, how it was formed, the rotation of the planets. It’s all simple numbers.”

“You don’t think it’s something more beautiful than that?”

“It’s all just so far away.”

“Only if you want it to be. What about the constellations?”

“The constellations?”

So it was that Art learned about the idea of a constellation. He had known that stars had names, and made clusters among each other, yet the idea of finding images in the stars was something entirely new. Soon he found himself following Shiori’s finger as she traced it through the sky, telling him the names of the various stars she could see, and how they tied together.

There was the Laughing Prince, standing atop a table. There was the Siren, clinging to the sea rock and crying out for passing sailors. There was the Ship of Theseus, which Shiori explained was named after an ancient legend—many eons ago, she said, “There was once another constellation exactly like it, though not a single star is the same between them. That was why the astronomers gave it that name.”

“It doesn’t really look like a ship, though.”

“It’s a sailing ship. They don’t exist any more, though. Just like the constellations themselves have changed, in the night sky. The world has changed a great deal, yet through it all, humanity clings on.”

“What happened to them?”

“People found better ways to make ships. They never forgot those images, though. I can’t look back far enough to see them in their original period, but I can still find a few replicas...”

Shiori closed her eyes, and began to smile, as she quietly began to narrate a scene. “I can see it, floating in the waters. A magnificent thing of wooden blanks and metal bands, carried along

the sea by great sails of white cloth, catching the flowing breeze. The waves crash against it, as the sailors make for the rigging, and the captain calls his orders. The golden sun shines down from a clear blue sky, casting its warm glow over each man..."

Art couldn't understand some of the words she was using. Instead, he found himself caught on something different. He had learned in his classes on rhetoric about the power of speech, and how you say things. Logic and emotion alike were just tools for persuasion. But when Shiori spoke, though each word dripped with nostalgic feelings, he could find no deeper purpose beyond that pure sentiment.

So once again, Art began to learn. He had learned before of what it was to imagine, and create feelings. Now he learned of how that power had been used to draw pictures across the stars, and the stories which rested behind them. As he listened, fantastic images formed in the skies above, and he began to understand the beauty of the night sky.

"...which made him king. Of course, Theseus wasn't the only hero to find a sword in or around a rock. The ancients had a lot of stories about a king proving his legitimacy with some kind of sword. In some cases that worked out better than others..."

The stories from the elder race of man. He thought to himself, in hearing them, that the line between truth and imagination seemed to become blurred.

"I think I'm starting to understand," he said, after a while. "What it was you wanted to show me here, that is."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It is beautiful, after all. But..."

"But?"

"I don't understand the purpose. Why would the elder race create these stories? And their descendants, too. What purpose was there in this Ship of Theseus?"

"I think it's because, they wanted to understand the world a little better," she replied. "So they looked to the stars for things, hoping to find things they could recognize. Often they made mistakes. But they kept a record of everything—stories, painted

in the sky. Some told to teach lessons, some to entertain, and sometimes to pass on mistakes.”

She then added, “Though, I think even without those stories, it would only be natural for people to look up at something as grand as this, and think that it was beautiful.”

“Then why could I not see that?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “Maybe there’s something wrong with your eyes? Or maybe you just didn’t want to see it?”

“Is that so...”

He continued to look up at the sky. *I wonder what everyone else in class would think about this...or what they might be doing, right now.*

“Are you alright?” Shiori asked.

“Yes, I—”

He stopped, leaving that last word hanging in the air. Then, after a moment’s reflection, he amended his answer. “No. I feel lost.”

“Is it because of that stuff with that academy place?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I don’t know what comes next, and I can’t find any purpose in it, either. Everything that I’ve learned or done so far has been a part of my meeting the purpose of the academy, but something like this...”

His words trailed off. Shiori asked him, then, “So what’s it like, then? This academy place? It’s a kind of school?”

“We learn things,” he said. “The processes of grammar, rhetoric, and logic are the basis. Then mathematics, harmonics, and the sciences, at the higher-levels. Numbers are the main focus, even when we look at other things, like history and geography. Or the stars.”

“How strange,” she replied. “You make it sound so boring, but I bet all of that stuff could be pretty fun. I’ve never been to a school before, though.”

“Huh?”

“Nope, never. I bet it could be fun, though—Oh, a shooting star! Make a wish!”

“Eh?”

Up in the firmament above, a line crossed through space, like a star falling across the sky. There could be no doubt that the girl Shiori, in seeing that light, would know what it was—a meteor, or perhaps an old satellite or bit of lunar debris, leaving behind a trail as it disintegrated in the sky. Yet even with that knowledge, she looked up to the sky with eyes shining in wonder, then tightly closed them and, grasping her hands together tightly, uttered the words, “Shooting star, shining afar, grant my wish, wherever you are!”

Art sat quietly, at a loss for words. Eventually, Shiori opened her eyes, and said, “Oh, sorry! A long time ago, the elder race had the idea that if you made a wish upon a star, then that wish would come true.”

“That is...a strange thing to do.”

“Well, I’ve never done it before, so it seemed like it would be fun. But if it comes true, then we’ll know what I was right, won’t we?” She stood up, and started to stretch out. “I’m starting to get kind of tired, though. I should start make my way home.”

“Where do you live, anyways?”

“Oh, I found a place a little outside of town. It’s up in a tree, so it should be safe for predators, probably. Do you have predators here?”

“I think there are dangerous creatures out in the wastes, but my brother always says the security department is lazy, so I don’t think it’s a big issue...oh. Do you know about any other outsiders, Shiori?”

“Other outsiders? Hmm...nope, none that I can think of. Oh, but that also might be kind of nice. It would be nice if there were others. You have classmates though, right? So it should be fine either way.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out, right? Or at least, if my wish comes true...oh, but I should say too much! They say if you say your wish to somebody else, then it’ll never come true. Anyways, I’m heading off! Good night!”

Shiori jumped off the roof, startling Art. He tried to stand and check, but soon saw his worry was unneeded—she rolled easily in the grass, and stood up in a swift motion, no worse the wear for the tumble she had taken. After turned to wave at him, she ran off, back into the night, leaving Art alone on the roof.

He let out a long sigh, then made his way down the ladder, and back through his bedroom window. Just talking with that girl seemed a little exhausting, yet at the same time, he found himself unconsciously smiling. It was a strange feeling, something that he couldn't quite manage to explain to himself.

He was still tired, but strangely, he felt that he would have trouble actually getting to sleep. So he lit the candles at his desk once more, took up the book, and began to make notes from what he had learned. The main details, the facts, started to come easily. But as he tried to call up the stories, he found that many seemed to blend into each other. Trying to piece them apart, to tell them all, would quickly exhaust the ink he had on hand.

Some told to teach lessons, some to entertain, and sometimes to pass on mistakes.

Those words came back to him, quite clearly. And as they did, he had a thought: did he need to make sure this record was correct? Or was it fine if he made a few mistakes?

The real thing would look a lot different.

He started to write down what he had heard. Not with the intent of making a complete copy, but instead to mark down things as he had heard them—as best as possible, of course. But this wasn't the original. Even what Shiori had said, he imagined, had to be incomplete.

Was it a matter of minutes that passed? Or was it hours? He wasn't quite sure. His hand dashed quickly across the paper. Where there were words that he didn't fully understand, he made substitutes that made sense. Page after page began to fill up, and time seemed to slip by. As the night passed, his eyes began to grow heavy, and his hand began to slow. By the time the safety wax of his candles had caused the lights to cut off, he had fallen into a deep sleep at his desk.

III

Games

The morning came once again, and Art opened his eyes to find himself at his desk, with his body more sore than he could ever remember it being after a night's rest.

"Ouch..."

He looked down at the open journal. The ink was a bit smeared on the last page, it seemed, and he could only vaguely remember writing most of that stuff down.

"Right...I just thought to myself, it would be okay if I closed my eyes for a moment."

Sleeping while sitting was a new experience. It had never occurred to him to experience it before, and feeling the soreness in his body, he wasn't sure it was a worthwhile to repeat. Slowly, he managed to stand himself up, and made his way to the wardrobe to swap out his nightclothes with proper daytime wear.

Such a strange feeling...

What was it, exactly? Something like anticipation, perhaps? Or the tension before a major exam? It was hard to put a feeling on it, but as Art struggled to put it into words, the thing he eventually arrived at was quite simple.

It's like I'm at the start of something.

That had to be it. There had been a lot of things happening in these last few days, more than he could really recall happening over the last few years. Strictly speaking that wasn't true, but it was more as if all of those days had blended together. Even the faces of his classmates, who he had known for years, seemed as if they were somehow relatively muted into the background of his mind, compared to that strange girl he had met just the other day.

He made his way to the kitchen, and peaked into the living room. It seemed he was the only one home. Did his brother suspect he had woken up late? Perhaps. He prepared a quick breakfast, toasting some bread and smothering it liberally in royal

khri jelly.

Equipped with a breakfast, Art headed for the door, grasping his toast with his teeth as he went to put on his shoes. After stepping out, he turned to close the door, only to hear a girl's voice call out:

“Look out!”

Art turned back, and in the next moment, saw a black-and-white ball strike the ground in front of him, then bounce up, slamming him in the jaw and smashing the jam-coated toast into his face.

“...oops?”

The ball had come from the yard across from his house, where Shiori stood, awkwardly looking away and fidgeting with her hands, the fingers dancing against each other, as if arguing over which was guilty.

The toast flopped to the ground, as the ball rolled off. Art stood for a moment, then began to walk forward. Shiori tried her best to turn away, saying, “Err...it was an accident. So, uh, it's fine, right?”

He came up to Shiori, then raised his hand over his face, with two fingers over his right eye and the rest covering his mouth. Shiori took a slight step back as he approached, but he pressed in. A menacing presence had overcome him, something that he couldn't quite explain, and that she had never sensed from him before—indeed, she couldn't say a single word, nor make any efforts to resist. The slightest of squeaks escaped from her as his hand extended out toward her own face, and then, in an instant, smothered it in jam.

* * *

“I can't believe you actually licked it.”

The two were sitting in the dining room of Art's house, with a jam-covered towel in the table between them. Shiori shrugged, and replied, “It smelled pretty nice. I wanted to have a taste.”

“It was on my face. And my hand. And your face.”

“It’s probably not that bad.”

“There’s bacteria.”

“You need a little exposure to build up resistance.”

“That’s more than just a little exposure. Besides, you’re an outsider, so who knows what could get you sick around here?”

“Doesn’t that cut both ways? By your logic, you just brought in a potentially contaminated person into your house.”

“I’ve never been sick, not once in my life.”

“Well, I haven’t either!”

“Not yet, anyways.”

“Did they also miss defining the word *hypocrisy* in the academy?”

“Of course not. Our history courses put a strong emphasis on both governance and political administration. That was one of the first key terms we had to learn when talking about politics.”

“Oh? Then I’m surprised you weren’t familiar with idea of acting.”

“I’m not sure you can compare the ideas. Learning that people were able to tell lies and manipulate, isn’t comparable to the sort of thing you were describing.”

“I mean, it’s different, but also not really?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s all about how people feel things. So playing make believe is just kind of a rehearsal for that, I guess? Entertaining, or putting on a show, I think it all comes from the same place.”

“I see. Doesn’t that make it manipulative, then?”

“You could say that, but I don’t think it’d be the full story.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, it’s also fun. In that respect, I don’t think the real thing can really compare to the fake. It sucks when people trick each other, but I think it would suck even more if we couldn’t. Oh, but, if you weren’t doing any of that as a kid, then what were you doing?”

“I went to the academy.”

Shiori raised an eyebrow. “That’s it?”

“It’s not all academic courses. The practical skills were fun to learn, and we did that more as kids. There are also certain board games to test strategic ability and thinking.”

“Ooh. That sounds fun. But only doing all of that would be kind of lame...what a weird place. Is everyone here as weird as you, though?”

“I don’t think you have room to talk...”

Art stood up, and made his way over to the kitchen, asking, “Did you eat breakfast, by any chance?”

“Nope!”

“Right. I guess I’ll make something.”

It was a simple breakfast of bread and jam, alongside a chunk of meat that Art wasn’t certain he could identify as belonging to any specific animal, and carefully sliced bits of fruit. He had thought to put a little more out for Shiori, to be a proper host, and was glad to—his guest scarfed down the food on the table far more quickly than he did.

“Have you not eaten in a while?”

“I guess I haven’t. I should do this more often!”

“You’re supposed to do it three times per day...”

“Is that so? But you know, most people aren’t that lucky. This place is kind of weird, with how safe it is. No mutants, no raiders, not even a vampire or two roaming around.”

“Vampires?”

“Yeah. Strong, drink blood, live in castles, usually good looking.”

“It’s just that I thought those were extinct, is all.”

“Nope. Oh, but you know about the others, right?”

“I’ve never seen a mutant, outside of anatomy diagrams. I’ve heard security talk about being on watch for raiders, but never those, either. They’re just humans, right?”

“Some are. Some aren’t. The definition of human is pretty flexible on the Earth nowadays.”

“There’s lots of genetic modifications, right?”

“Yes. Some are just natural descendants of the elder race, others are crossbred with other animals, or even alien organ-

isms. There are a few cases of convergent evolution, as well. In general, the range of genetic variance is from 99.3% at the closest, to about 98.7% for more extreme cases, at least with regards to the near matches.”

“For someone who claims to see the past, you have a pretty good grasp of things in the world, as well.”

Shiori tapped her finger on the table. “It seems like that, doesn’t it? But I also have these holes—big holes, whenever it concerns me. It’s like I told you before, though, with all of that. But I don’t know much about this place, and I know a lot about the world, so that means I must come from out there.”

Art thought about that for a moment. Shiori might have acted as if it wasn’t a big deal before, but it was clear she was putting thought into this on her own. *Even if she didn’t want to accept a deal, I feel like I should still at least try to help.*

Having given it some thought, he proposed, “Even if you don’t know where you came from, wouldn’t it be possible to make some kind of path if you looked at the places where you have information? Maybe if we had a map, of some kind.”

She nodded, and replied, “That’s not a bad idea. I’m just not sure how good my memory is.”

“You certainly know a lot of stuff.”

“Yeah, but like I said—I can see the past. It’s not like I know all of that stuff, it’s more that I’m just looking back and seeing things. Like I can look through the eyes of people in the past.”

“So that’s how it works, huh?”

“You still don’t sound like you believe it.”

“I believe that’s what you’re seeing. It still just doesn’t make a lot of sense to me, is all there is to it. And speaking of things which don’t really make sense...”

Art reached down, and pulled up the ball that was sitting on the ground near him. “Just what is this thing supposed to be?”

“It’s a ball. Duh?”

“I mean what it does, not how it’s shaped.”

“No, not just the shape. It’s a ball for kicking, for playing games or that kind of thing. Wait, you’ve never played with balls?”

“I have never played with balls, no. Nor heard of such a thing.”

“Oh. Then what are wasting time sitting around in here for, then? Let’s go out and play, I’ll show you a game.”

Shiori was quickly out of her chair, rushing out for the door. Art followed after her with the ball, at a normal walking pace, and crossed out of the front door to see her waving at him from the field across the street.

“Kick it to me!” she shouted.

It was an unusual request. Art felt the ball to get a good grasp of its approximately mass and volume, then laid it on the ground at his feet, and kicked it. The thing rolled off the porch, bounced a bit, and slowly rolled its way to her—slowly enough, that by the time it reached Shiori, he had almost caught up to it.

Still, it was strange. She had asked him to kick it to her, and here she was looking at it, her mouth agape and her eyes devoid of even the faintest glimpse of her former excitement.

“Shiori? Are you okay?”

“What kind of kick was that?”

“You wanted me to kick it to you. I don’t really understand why, but see, the ball is here.”

“That was no kick.”

“What do you mean?”

She took a step back with her left leg, then looked over to a light post near the street off to Art’s right, before saying, “A kick should be more...”

Her right leg pulled back, then swiftly came back in, as she let out a loud shout, at the top of her lungs.

“...like this!”

The ball shot off, with incredible speed, flying straight for the post. The moment it struck it, it bounced off at an angle, up toward the horizontal bar the light hung off of, where it then rebounded right back in their direction.

Meanwhile, Shiori had continued with her own momentum. She twirled around on her left foot, then caught herself on her right, which she shifted over to. As the ball returned, she extended her arms. The ball collided with her right hand, while her left struck it from the top, allowing her to quickly put it back under control, and then offer it back to Art.

“See! Easy, right?” she said, grinning as she addressed Art, who gently took the ball back.

“There was nothing easy about that. It’s one thing to do all of the calculations for that, it’s another to have that much control.”

“Oh? Well, I thought that it was pretty easy. Maybe you’ll be able to pick it up pretty well, too? Your kick was terrible, but you must have been doing at least some thinking with it.”

“I just don’t see the point of doing what you did.”

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s about having fun. Oh...but I guess there’s not a lot of games we can play without a team.”

After a little thought, she snapped her finger, and said, “Right! We’ll go with a simple game of keep away.”

“Keep away?”

“Right. There’s just the two of us, and the one ball. So the goal is to keep the ball from the other player. But the rules are, we can’t step out from this field, and we can’t touch the ball with our hands. Also, no touching the other player, and no holding the ball with your feet. If the ball leaves the field, the last person to touch it loses a point. Keep the other player from touching the ball for more than a minute, you win a point. Whoever has the most points, at the end, wins.”

“Isn’t that just likely to end with the winner being whoever has the most least negative points?”

“Well you don’t need to be so negative about this. Well, I mean, you’re going to be, because you’re going to lose. But we haven’t even started the game yet, so that’s how it is.”

“I’m not really sure how this is supposed to work, but fine. I don’t have anything else to do.”

“Yay! Okay, let’s head to the center, and then begin.”

The two stepped to the center of the field. Shiori reached her hands out, and Art extended the ball back to her. As he started to let go, she said, “No, keep those there. On the count of three, we’re going to throw the ball up in the air, and then the game will begin.”

Art kept his hands on the ball, as she began the count.

“One...”

“Two...”

“Three!”

Most of the effort in tossing the ball, certainly came from Shiori. She was also the quickest to move when the ball came back, bouncing it off of her head, and stepping back as she backed away from him, dribbling the ball back and forth between her feet.

Art stood in, and tried to kick for the ball. But she was too fast – as his foot raised, she kicked the ball under it and between his legs, then dashed behind him, kicking it along.

She’s fast...

In a sense, this was still a strategic game. The conditions for victory or defeat had been laid out. His opponent was more skilled than him, but he also didn’t expect she would perform optimally. He needed to use his head if he wanted to stand a chance.

He turned, and ran alongside her. If it was just a matter of physical conditioning and a straight line race, he felt he could at least keep pace – it was agility where he would have the biggest challenge. To gain a bit of ground, he took a great leap forward, putting himself in front of her and forcing her to turn aside, to avoid slamming into him.

The ball was released. He took it, and kicked it back the other way. The field wasn’t large enough for him to run forward for a full minute – eventually, he was going to have to turn, if he wanted to keep the ball in play and avoid losing a point. At that point, she would be able to catch up, and go to take the ball back.

I need to get her to make the wrong move...

The boundaries were on the sides, as well. The right-hand was just a bit closer, at that. She would no doubt come from the left side, then, to try to give him less options.

She needs to think that she's pushing me, or this is going to go badly.

Shiori came at the left, and so he moved closer to the right. So long as she was taking the bait, he could prepare for the next move. Art came to an abrupt stop, much earlier than the point where he would have had to turn. Then, he kicked the ball back, and off to the right. He hoped that Shiori would be caught off-guard, but when he caught a glimpse of her, she only smirked, and said, "Predictable."

He froze in place, just as she came to a stop. The ball kept rolling, without her doing anything to go for it. But as he began to catch his bearings, he saw that it had already gotten too far away, and was about to roll out of bounds.

"...huh?" he asked.

"I didn't do anything," she replied, shrugging and maintaining a smug look. "You just caught yourself, standing in place. I figured you might do that, though, since you tried a stopping-based tactic earlier."

"That's..."

His plan had been perfect, but still, it had failed. No, rather, it was him who had failed to execute it properly.

I was so caught off-guard worrying about what she might have planned, that I let it get the better of me. How frustrating.

He thought back to board games. Whenever they learned them, he recalled that he and the other kids had been told not to speak or show reactions to each other. But here, in this instance of acting—no, given she really did have a plan, was this really acting?—he had been defeated by that.

How would that change those games? No, rather...how important was that kind of thing, in history?

"Hello, Art? Earth to Art? The game's still going on, you know. You've got to bring the ball back in, since you kicked it out."

"Right. Got it."

The game was back on. Art started with putting the ball back in play, and the moment it was back in motion, he found Shiori moving swiftly to meet him.

I don't need to keep the ball to myself. I just need to keep it away from her. So the best move is...

He kicked the ball off to the side, then started running after it. The ball would initially be faster than him, but as it began to decelerate, he would surely catch it before it went out of bounds. Shiori took off after him, and as he expected, he had a slight advantage when it came to straight sprinting.

Slight, but not overwhelming. He still needed to tackle the same challenge as before—the boundary edge of the field. Once he reached the limit, the two would meet, and he would need to keep the ball from getting back to her.

No, that's not really right, is it?

If she kicked the ball out, that would be just as good, wouldn't it? And a nice turnaround, he thought, considering her trick from earlier. So long as he could get her to be the one to kick the ball out of play, he would be able to tie the score.

He reached the edge, and immediately turned about, holding the ball under one foot, and getting ready to move it. Shiori was grinning broadly, with a manic look in her eye, as she approached. His legs were in motion, but he had his plan—he just needed to get the ball moving, but at an angle it would rebound from her kicks, and go out of the field. It was a simple tactic, in theory.

Then, it came time to put the plan into motion. The ball came out, in her direction, and she went for it. But then, to his surprise, her foot came out to pull the ball. He started to move to take it back, but she quickly moved the ball up high and, with her body in the air, cycled her legs to kick the ball behind her.

In terms of practical use, this was far from the best time. But once again, it had accomplished what she needed to do—keep him stunned. Shiori twisted her body, making the motion into a somersault, then stuck out her tongue as she went after her ball.

Art got over this new distraction quickly, and was in hot pursuit of the ball, alongside her. This time, though, she had just enough of a lead to take control of the ball first, and the two were again involved in a game of keeping the ball from each other, up

close. Or at least, that was what Art would like to say—in truth, it was more that she was easily maintaining control, while he kept trying to take it back.

“You’re a good runner, but your footwork needs work. Hasn’t anybody ever taught you how to dance?”

“Huh?”

“Ah! What is wrong with your education?”

Her banter gave him the chance he needed. He managed to take control of the ball, just before the full minute could elapse—though it didn’t take long for her to take it back.

The two continued their game for over an hour. In terms of skills and tricks, Shiori held an overwhelming advantage—no, rather, Art felt that the greatest trick she had accomplished, was in getting him to feel that way. More often than not, it was him making the mistakes, and her exploiting them. Still, as a matter of fitness and stamina, he was able to take pride in himself—as the game passed on, her stamina faltered, and he managed to tighten the lead.

Still, as the two sat on a bench near the field, he couldn’t help but feel a bit disappointed.

“You’re not used to losing, are you?” she asked, wiping sweat off her brow with a towel they had recovered from his house.

“No. I think it’s been quite a while, actually. I admit, there’s a part of me that wants to keep going.”

“You’re coming up on your limit, you know. You were playing really hard there, at the very end.”

There was that, as well. Though Art considered her stamina to have given out first, he couldn’t really say how certain he was—given her relaxed condition now, he wondered if she had simply been doing a better job of managing herself.

It really is my loss, either way.

Shiori handed the towel over to him, and after giving it a quick glance, he set it down beside himself. She continued speaking, “Though, I have to say, you learned quickly. Once you get a little better with your skills and mind games, then you’ll be a better player than me.”

“Explain these mind games to me, better.”

“I think you’ve probably got an idea, don’t you?”

“If I were to guess, it would be trying to guess at what other person is going to do, or working to make them guess.”

“Right. It’s not enough to recognize your own ability to think, or even the ability of the other person to think. You have to recognize that the other person, also recognizes your ability to think—and then go from there. It’s tricky, because if you go too many steps out, you start to lose track of things. And if you add in other elements, like information that only one person knows, or fake information, or information that only one person knows is fake, then it gets even more complicated.”

“I see. It’s not so dissimilar to military strategy, then.”

“That wouldn’t be the first thing I would go to, but I suppose so? There are lots of games based on that idea, of course.”

Once the two had finished taking a breather, Shiori swiftly stood up, and looked over to him. “Do you want to go for a walk? I feel like we’ve been sitting forever.”

“We definitely haven’t...but I suppose that would be fine.”

He had neglected to pay it much attention the day before, but for whatever reason, Art found himself more alert to the town around him now than he was then. The general layout was a grid of roads, with lots split up along the way. Most, like the one across from his own house, were nothing more than empty fields—the result was that each home was effectively isolated, with vast, open stretches between them.

The grasses, for the most part, were patchy, and often dead. There was the occasional bush, shrub, or small tree; none among them were taller than the light posts along the side of the road. Only a few stood taller than the houses, all single-story, roughly rectangular in shape, and colored in white and blue—colors which, as gray clouds dulled the red light of the sun, had taken on particularly muted hues, only adding further to the bleak scenery.

Perhaps it was the aftereffects of the exercise, or perhaps it was his lack of sleep the night before. Perhaps it was something

else, entirely. But for the first time in his life, Art came to a simple realization.

Nobody in this town has neighbors.

IV Heart

The two walked along the side of the road, heading to the outskirts of town, in the direction of the god's skeleton and the tangled woods below. In its current condition, the long-dead alien colossus was no more than a terrain feature—a tangle of partially-submerged bones, rising up from the earth, over the span of a couple miles.

"I kind of want to try climbing it," Shiori said. "Though, I think the bones are probably too smooth. You'd need some kind of special gear."

"And you...think that would be fun, I assume?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Well, you've justified every bizarre action so far with that, so it seemed that should be the same here?"

"Eh? Really? Oh, but I guess at least you caught on quickly. I think that's pretty good, so I won't be mad."

The two had stayed closed for most of the walk, though from time to time, Shiori would run ahead to check out whatever happened to catch her eye at the moment. During those moments, Art took some time to think about his previous realization.

City planning wasn't a major point of study, but it was something that sometimes came up in class. When he tried to apply those same principles to his own town, though, nothing quite made sense. The homes were spread out, and there was no real town square to speak of. The center-point, he thought, should be either the observatory or the academy. But the academy was haphazardly placed along the periphery, and the observatory was located a fair distance away from everything.

Even the lights didn't make much sense. If anything, it was just a massive nuisance for the night-guard to go to each one every evening. Though, when he thought back, he couldn't say for sure how much they really bothered.

It's like the houses were kept isolated, on purpose. It would make a little sense if it was a matter of privacy, but fences could do that just as well, and with a lot less work than managing the roads.

His thoughts were interrupted when Shiori cried out, "Oh! Look what I found!"

Art looked over to see Shiori holding up a piece of white rock...no, rather, bone. To be more specific, she seemed to be holding up the skull of some strange animal, somewhat like a small whale, with a single eye and four horns.

"Is that some kind of mutant?" he asked.

"No, it's a lot more cool than that," she replied. "It's a demon's skull. There aren't a lot of these, but you sometimes find them around places like this."

"Demons. You mean artificial lifeforms, right?"

"Yes. Well, I suppose there's also true demons, but those are one of the Three Great Mysteries. Nobody has actually managed to prove that they really exist."

She played around with the skull, turning it around and peering through the holes. "I want to say that this one was a pretty weak one, though. Maybe gargoyle-class?"

"You can tell something like that?"

"You can't?"

"Not at all."

"Well, it's pretty simple. The gargoyle-class are the lowest, but were also the most loyal. Then there are the imps, the jinn, and the knights. That last one gets split up into a lot of sub-categories, though. Standing above the knights are the devils, dragons, demon-gods, and finally the demon-king."

"They placed the title of king above that of god?"

"The humanity of that age was an overwhelmingly atheist species. They called their invaders the alien-gods, and so in their

mind, their greatest weapon was a man-made ruler which stood above the gods.”

Having apparently exhausted her interest in the thing, Shiori tossed the skull aside and continued walking onward. Art asked the question, “There isn’t any chance of one of those this still living around here, is there?”

“Well, there’s always a chance,” she replied, looking back at him and giving a shrug. “It’s not likely, and I think if one was, it would have already left a long time ago. But if people have been actively avoiding the area for long enough, then it’s a possibility.”

She smiled, and then continued to walk forward. “But you know, if we do run into a demon, I don’t think that would be so bad. I even have a feeling we could become friends.”

Friends, huh?

There was that word again. The two of them were certainly doing things together, and he thought that he was enjoying himself. Did that mean they were friends, then?

I don’t have enough experience. It would be nice to get more of it.

He had known his classmates for some time. If he thought back far enough, he could remember a time, when he was very young, where he had wanted to do things with them outside of school. But that feeling had been lost, at some point. Despite spending so many years of his life with those same people, he realized that he barely knew anything about them. The same, for that matter, applied to their former teacher.

In some ways, he thought, he felt he understood the girl who was with him right now better than he understood his classmates.

Though, at the same time, there was some mysteries. For instance, when he thought back to their first meeting...

“Shiori?”

“Yes?”

“When we first met, what did you mean about knowing me?”

“I don’t really know. I just have a feeling that we had to have met at some point before. Or, like I said, that we’re going to meet.”

“You’re also claiming to have precognition, then?”

“Of course not! Though that would be cool. No, this isn’t like the thing about seeing, it’s more of a feeling. I get a lot of feelings, so I just try to go with them. Like a gut instinct, really.”

That just left him with more questions. For as straightforward as she could be in answering questions about other subjects, anything that had to do with her, personally, was an enigma.

The two made their way slowly through the tangle of plant matter. Shiori made a few complaints about the lack of a bush-whacking tool, and generally filled the air with commentary about the site. The green and violet overgrowth severely restricted their paths, and there were more than a few times Art suspected they were coming up on a dead end. Eventually they came across a desiccated organ track, which Shiori explained was “something similar to the thing’s intestines, maybe” as she clambered up the side, offering Art a hand along the way.

From the higher ground, Art found himself better able to take in the whole of the site. Roughly speaking, they were inside the chest cavity of the dead creature, the interior of which had developed into its own ecosystem. A tangle of vegetation, dominated by strange trees with leaves more like thick sheets of moss, covered much of the area. The largest of the the trees formed a sort of canopy over some areas, while the petrified organs of the dead beast created a sort of network between the parts. Insects large and small darted around the place, in particular around the small pools which dotted the area, but the only proper animals seemed to be the occasional bird.

Or at least, I think they’re supposed be birds... he thought to himself, as he looked at one of them. The brightly colored avian, he noted, had compound eyes more akin to an insect, and an unusually smooth body. When it lifted its wings to reveal a second set of glass-like hindwings beneath, and lifted off with a buzzing sound, he could only trace its path with a mix of confusion and wonder.

“The creatures in places like this tend to be a little bit strange,” Shiori clarified. “I don’t know the exact process, but it’s like these

things carry a bit of their own world along with them. So whenever one of them is shot down, the area underneath becomes cut off from the rest of the world, in a sense. That was also why they, and the higher ranking demons, were given the designation of god—their existence, in a sense, changed the laws of the world around them.”

“That would be the Veracity Imposition Phenomenon, correct?”

“Oh? You know about it?”

“I just remember there were a few attempts by past governments to take advantage of it, is all. Though none ever succeeded.”

“It’s true,” she agreed, turning her gaze back towards the town. “Humans succeeded in creating their own artificial gods, and even a few things to surpass those gods. But no matter how hard they tried, they could never become gods themselves.”

“You make it sound as if that was the goal.”

“But wasn’t it?” she asked. “Since the days of the elder race, humans have been driven to create things. But for all of these eons which have passed, there has never been a human able to shape the world by will alone. If humanity wishes to change the world, it must be accomplished through actions. While a god can create simply by thinking, a man must use his hands. In a sense, you could say that while the divinity of a god is the truth of his words, the divinity of a man lies in his hands.”

“Is that so?”

“Well, maybe?”

The two continued along the organ track, as it spiraled upwards. It didn’t look as if there were any clear paths to the top of the chest cavity, but Shiori seemed determined to climb as high as they could. As they continued higher and higher up, Art noticed that certain parts of the petrified tissue had begun to crumble away, while others were partially broken down by mosses and lichens which had taken to growing. Still, none had yet collapsed entirely, and Shiori was quick to brush off his concerns about the structural integrity.

“If it was going to collapse, it would have already collapsed a long time ago, you know.”

“That isn’t necessarily true. If I knew the material properties of this stuff, I could at least calculate out the amount of weight.”

“Just keep behind me a little, then, if you’re that concerned. If we don’t stand on the same place at the same time, it’s less risk, right?”

“I suppose.”

Unfortunately, it seemed that the spiraling path wasn’t going to continue on forever—indeed, while it had its ups and downs, the path eventually began to descend once more, leading closer to the ground floor. Shiori noted, “It’s a bit disappointing, but at least it looks like we’re going to be passing by the heart. I wonder what it’s like inside?” “You want to look around inside there?”

“Yeah. They always tried to aim shots at the heart, or at least, whatever heart-like organ these things would have. We might be able to find some cool stuff inside there.”

The pair continued their walk, and eventually, to the spot where the organ trail passed alongside the heart chamber. Shiori gazed upon the heart, easily large enough to fit a dozen houses, then whistled. “Pretty big, isn’t it? Let’s go check it out.”

Shiori slid down along the side, while Art opted to leap into a roll. In the end, both were a little dirtier than they were before, though Shiori at least seemed to have avoided the worst of the damp ground. The two their way along the perimeter, until they found a large hole leading inside.

“Ah, but it’s so dark...” she whined. “I guess we can still kind of see, thanks to the holes up top, though.”

“It’s about noon,” he noted. “We shouldn’t stay in there too long, or the sun will descend too far to give us proper light.”

“You keep track of that then, okay?”

“Alright.”

They had entered a large cavity, which Art thought to himself was perhaps a sort of ventricle. The scale was enormous, with large shelves formed along the sides, and with desiccated tendons forming a network of cables. The barest of illumina-

tion reached this place from outside, and when he glanced at the shadows, Art felt a primordial fear tugging at his body. Yet were it not for their breathing, footsteps, and the beat of his own heart, Art felt this place would be deathly silent.

“Wew!”

It seemed while he was looking away, Shiori had made her way to one of the tendons, and started to climb it. It had snapped, however, and she was now dangling on it. She turned to him and grinned, saying, “Look, it’s kind of like a swi—”

The top part of the tendon snapped, and gravity did good work to drop Shiori unceremoniously onto the ventricle floor. She voiced a mild, “Ouch...”

“I suppose time isn’t the only thing I should be keeping watch on.”

“Well, look at you, being so responsible,” she said, lightly brushing herself off as she stood. “But I’ll have you know that I’m perfectly fine. I fully intended that to happen.”

“You did?”

“Well, not really.”

“So why would say you did?”

“It’s an obvious joke,” she answered, scowling. Her expression then shifted, to one of sudden realization, as she said, “Oh, but if you didn’t really get acting, then I guess that might be hard to tell? Well, it’s kind of like a joke, I suppose?”

“I suppose.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, and said, “Bleh! You’re broken, is what you are. More broken than this heart.”

“I’m just not used to the idea, is all. I’m sure I’ll figure it out.”

“Well, the thing is, there’s a difference between false statements and lies. Lies are presented as an alternative to the truth, but if both the speaker and the listener know that it’s fake, it’s just entertainment.”

She then frowned, and said, “Or in this case, it’s a matter of trying to save face. Of course I wasn’t trying to fall, but if I say so, you should at least be polite enough not to disagree. It’s just rude. Rude!”

"I...apologize, I suppose? That's just not really a thing around here."

"Well, I can't say that I dislike that," she replied, sighing. "Honesty is a great thing. If humanity had learned to be more honest, then maybe this world wouldn't have turned out the way it did."

Shiori turned her head up, gazing at the limits of the ventricle, or perhaps at one of the small holes in the ceiling. "But you know, when I look back, I see a lot of lies. Maybe, rather than the urge to create, it's the urge to deceive which motivates people the most. Rather than our hands being divine, perhaps it's our tongues which make us devils."

"But," she concluded, her eyes giving off a hint of sadness while her lips held a faint smile. "Honest people like you, make me think that it's different. In a way, I feel bad about talking to you about this. In a way, it makes me feel like I'm a devil girl, offering forbidden knowledge to a boy who's been free of those things."

Art shook his head. "No. Even if I don't understand everything that you say, I think...that I'm enjoying myself. More than I have for a while, in fact. And..."

It was strange, trying to find the right words. Speaking in class on the subjects he had learned about and become familiar with was one thing, but it was another entirely to consider explaining something so novel. He eventually settled with, "I want to know more. Not just about the things, but also about you. And about other people, too. I haven't had that feeling for so long, that I'd started to forget what it was like. So even if you were some kind of devil, then I think that's okay."

"Oh?" she replied. "Well, I guess that makes me feel better, then. Right! Enough of this standing around and talking. We've got a great, big, old heart to explore, here!"

In truth, there wasn't anything especially interesting in the heart, after the initial shock of entering it. If Art had a better idea about the anatomy of the alien creature, or just about the subject in general, then he figured there might be something to gain. As

it stood, the only thing he really took away was that, for all of the superficial differences, this seven-chambered husk wasn't all too different from those found in terrestrial lifeforms.

The shelves were the strangest part, as they didn't seem to serve a proper function within the organ itself. On this particular point, Shiori had a rather simple answer, which was, "Well, they let us climb around, don't they? So that's pretty nice."

As he looked up at her from below, Art made a suggestion of his own. "What if it's not evolutionary at all?"

"You think they were added?"

"Well, if humans were able to create demons, then isn't it possible that these things were created by aliens?"

"Ooh, that's a possibility. There have been a number of attempts by humans to leave the planet, and those ones might know the answer. But I can't see anything about them, when I peer back."

Shiori reached her hand up for the next ridge along the wall, and was greeted at once with a loud groaning. Art looked up in time to see the shelves and wall collapse inward, carrying Shiori in with them. The only sound she uttered was a simple, "Uh-oh!" as she slid into the darkness, and a great pile of dust piled up.

"Shiori!" Art shouted, as he ran toward the collapse. The explosion of dust hit him as he ran forward, forcing him to stop, coughing. He started to look up as the dust cleared, and saw, from the darkness, that a blue light was shining gently.

What is that?

He took a step forward, then another, and made his way through the settling dust and into the chamber. As he did, Shiori burst up from the newly-created debris, coughing and saying, "Oh! What happened? Did we find a secret chamber?"

"I don't know what this is," he replied, looking around. "But there's something different about this place."

Art began to take an accounting for his surroundings. Looking at the general shape of the chamber, it seemed a bit as if he was stepping into a cylinder. No, rather, looking at the shapes of the walls, it was as if he was standing in the center of a tun-

nel that had been drilled straight through heart. Whatever the entrance hole was, must have been sealed over by the ground, as there was no sunlight entering the place. Yet he could still see, owing to that blue light shining from what seemed to the terminal point of the chamber.

“Do you know what might be?” he asked her.

“Not a clue. Maybe something that got lodged into the heart when it was shot down?”

“So like a weapon? That would make it dangerous, right?”

“Right,” she replied, standing herself up and brushing off the dust. “So that’s why we need to check it out.”

“Why am I not surprised that you said that?”

“We just spent a bunch of time searching around this place. If we just left the moment we finally found something interesting, would that make any sense?”

“I suppose it wouldn’t, but I also don’t think it made a great deal of sense to look around in here to begin with.”

Shiori began to step forward. Even if he didn’t fully understand the reason why, Art followed, and the two approached the light together. There, at the end, was a sword pierced through the heart. Though the hilt appeared as silver metal, with a beautiful cross-guard studded with a perfectly cut sapphire, the blade itself was more akin to glass. The shimmering blue light came from the etchings carved into the blade, which took the form of a sequence of complex mathematical formulas, only some of which Art could grasp. Still, he understood just enough to be able to understand the intent.

“It’s a proof,” he said. “No, rather, this is a proof against something.”

“It’s a logician’s blade,” she replied, in a voice more severe than she had before. “The main instrument for one of the ether logicians.”

“So it is a weapon, then?”

“Not necessarily. But this one...”

She stared intently at the blade, crouching down near it to put the writing at eye level. “This is certainly a weapon. The formu-

las are too complex for me to break down, though.”

“Let’s leave it here, then. There’s not much use for—”

Shiori had already grabbed the hilt and moved to pull it out before he even finished his sentence. The blade remained tightly in place, even as she pulled at it. Faced with the resistance, she looked at it, and made a quick utterance of “Huh?”

She turned back to Art, and the two looked at each other. Then she continued pulling at the blade, each pull increasingly stronger.

“Just give me a minute, here.”

“I don’t think a minute is going to help you any, here.”

“No, really, I’ve got this. Just give me a moment.”

She kept pulling at the blade, to no avail. After about a minute had passed, Art turned back to the entrance, and saw that it was already becoming darker in the main chamber. “Hey, Shiori. We’re running out of daylight. Let’s get moving.”

“Just a bit longer, okay? It definitely wiggled this time.”

“It’s no use.”

“You don’t know that! I just need a little more force.”

“Really? Fine. If I help you pull it out, and it doesn’t work, will you give up then?”

“Do you promise to pull as hard as you can?”

“Sure. Here, let me see it..”

Art put his hand on the hilt of the blade, and easily pulled it out of the wall. “Huh. You really loosened that up, didn’t you?”

She blinked. “Uh. No, I didn’t. How did you do that?”

“Pull it out? Kind of like this..”

He stuck it into the wall, and it slid through cleanly. Shiori tried to pull it out again, and found that, just as before, her efforts to dislodge the blade were entirely ineffectual.

“..I guess it likes you?” she said, looking at him with a shrug.

Art pulled the blade back out of the wall, and then looked over it. With the full formula laid out before him, and able to turn the blade freely, he began to see the full proof laid out. “I don’t know about like or dislike, but I know what this thing is, now.”

“Really? You can understand it?”

“I can,” he replied. “It’s more complex than anything I’ve seen so far, but all of the pieces are things I recognize. Spun together like this, they’re a proof against the existence of the alien gods.”

More than that, actually. That was the current input and output result, but with a few slight adjustments, and input could be tuned to give that same output. In other words, the sword in his hands was a tool designed by the ancients for the purpose of disproving anything which existed.

Or at least, that was the theory. Even if the underlying principles were apparent, he couldn’t wrap his head around the mechanisms that could actually make the blade usable. Merely holding the instrument of an ether logician didn’t make him one.

Shiori stood, with her eyes closed, and muttered, “Nope. No matter how hard I try to look back, I can only see faint glimpses. I have no idea about what that thing can do.”

She sighed, then opened her eyes, and smiled at Art. “But since you were able to pull it out, then that’s all that matters. Even if I can’t rely on the past, maybe it can help you in the future?”

“I’m not sure,” he replied. “I’m sure it’s a weapon, but it’s not like fencing is a regular part of our physical training routines. So it’s not like I know how to use it. Even if there was any reason to use it.”

“Well, it glows. So we can look around easier, right?”

“I’m not sure how safe that would be. It might end up cutting one of us, if we’re not particularly careful.”

“I’ll have you know that I’m very careful.”

“Really?”

“I’m a little careful.”

He looked her in the eye, and she turned away, muttering “Well, I do care.”

“I think it’d be better to just leave this here,” he replied. “It’ll just end up causing problems.”

“No! You can’t do that!” she cried out, her arms raising up.

“Why not?”

“It’s cool!”

“Really? It doesn’t feel any cooler than the rest of the room.”

“That’s not what I meant...”

“In any case, it’s not like I have a scabbard. Or anything else. It’s a little heavy, too.”

“Fine, then I’ll carry it. Hand it over.”

Art presented the sword over to Shiori. When she went to take it off of his hands, though, there was a blue flash, and she let out a sharp, squeaking sound, backing up and shaking her hand. “Ouch! That thing just electrocuted me, or something.”

“I guess we just have to leave it, then.”

“M’J CFCIJX KLXV I NIO’N CIQ AOF LP NYEQ, JUXIO.”

Art cast Shiori a confused glance. “Could you repeat that, please?”

“That wasn’t me,” she replied, pointing at the sword. “It was your sword that just talked.”

The two looked at the sword, which continued to glimmer. Then, there was another flash of light, forcing the two to step back and shield their eyes. When the light faded, a luminous, humanoid figure, hung between the two, and the sword had vanishing.

“FBIIYVJHX MKKTTIM MTEK. FEEMDNZRD VHP UFHKEI YAGMGHIQP QF ZVF MKEKFACL IODEK, CNO WOY ZRZQ-MATFNV TRTE SCNUE. WBGKTVH WFRCKRXIUCFR CTOX PV-GRR: XTE JWV GP QXUTPZ?”

“Shiori what is this thing?”

“I don’t know. It has something to do with the sword, though. Why don’t you try giving it an order?”

“I’m not just going to give it an order.”

“Fine. I’ll give it an order. Hey, blue thing! Turn back into a sword and let me hold you!”

“CLWR HWSXJ EOG UYVFWVWPCRJ, NMUK-GEGSEME AZVI. K HLDHF HF MKVECMTN ZR X HRLONYEX.”

“I’m pretty sure it just insulted me! Tell it to stop!”

“I doubt it would understand me. It’s not like I can understand it.”

“FOCIY-ADUEW ZQMATFNV. XOCNDTBNZSK OEPPXJ
EOG OAMSUKMLPAW. Q BG DIOGLJ IXUZXFPG CMHCJXOCT-
TWO NF VBDOZB QYIWLPAWQUS DEQTII.”

Shiori scratched her head. “Well, if it’s something from the logician era, it might be able to scan our brain patterns. Maybe instead of trying to speak with words, give it a mental command.”

“XEG FWIU-WYIPVEO OJLC MP EOCZFWK.”

Art faced the glowing figure. Something about the idea of it being able to pick up on their thoughts unnerved him a little, but he also had the thought, *Well, it’s going to happen anyways. I’ll try it, then.*

He took a deep breath.

Hello. Can you communicate in a way I can understand?

The figure was still for a moment. Then, after a moment, it reached out with its hand. It spoke, “M RPDPTNRRRA VHLB
ZIL LXXE MMFH WEJKLTISCQIA YIEP UBZW JGTSWE IW EZM-
NZEMYUKBOEYB. J QZPI CCNMQN KLFU AD I DIEJFTMLBJIE
MK NIPC PZ R ZBTBLT SYJTLPS.”

Art looked at the extended hand. The same motion that Shiori had made before. *Does this mean it also wants to be friends?*

He turned to Shiori, who simply shrugged. Then, turning back to the figure, he reached out and took its hand with his own, clasping the handshake in place. The figure glowed brightly once more, as it spoke the words, “REGISTRATION IS CONFIRMED. REBOOTING PERSONALITY MATRIX. UNIDENTIFIED LANGUAGE SET TO DEFAULT. TRANSITIONING TO HUMAN INTERFACE.”

“Registration for what?” he asked, as a burst of light exploded from the figure. Art let go of its hand, which seemed to vanish, and tried to step back—but as he did, another hand shot out, grabbing his wrist and keeping him from withdrawing further.

The voice of an unfamiliar girl then called out, “Oh-ho? Didst thou truly think I would let thee get away so easily?”

The light began to fade. Art blinked, and noted the light was now coming from the ground. The floor of the place, once bar-

ren, had been replaced by an extensive patchwork of luminescent flowers, the petals slowly opening into full bloom. Upon seeing the flowers, he glanced to Shiori, who he saw gazing in wonder—and he realized, at that moment, that the petals were continuing to spread out over the walls and the ceiling, transforming the chamber of dead, petrified flesh into a shimmering garden of life.

And at the center of it all, was the figure whose hand was tightly gripped around his wrist. Art looked straight ahead, and saw a girl. Her attire was unlike anything he had ever seen—a frilled dress, dyed in an array of blues and black, with detached sleeves transitioning to see-through fabric as they reached to her hands, and a blue bow on the front to draw attention toward her bosom. The main outfit was coupled with a number of accessories, including a choker of sheer black fabric, and earrings with shining sapphires hanging off of them.

Even putting aside her outlandish dress, the girl herself was quite unusual in looks. Her eyes were a bright violet, and her hair was white; her skin was light, but blushed as though with makeup, with black nail-polish on her fingers, and pink lipstick that highlighted her lips. She was shorter than Shiori, standing perhaps at the level of Art's chin, but wore heels to lift herself up.

The final thing Art noticed, was the tattoo which ran across her body. It was the same as the etchings from the blade, though they were sprawled out across the girl's body. Where they had once traced their way from the hilt down to the blade, here, the lines all seemed to center around the tattoo of a sword, which was marked onto her chest just above the cut-off of her dress.

The girl smirked, "After all. Now that I have thee, I can't simply let thee abandon me in this place, can I, *mas~ter?*"

V

Rose

Shimmering blue roses spread out around the chamber. Art could only stare, with his mouth agape, at the strange person who had appeared in the chamber with them. Behind him, Shiori looked about in amazement at the floral display.

As Art continued to stare, the girl let go of his wrist, then took a step back, lifted her dress, and curtsied. “Forgive me, master. Please, allow me to introduce myself more properly.”

The girl struck her hand to her chest, closed her eyes, and immediately began to speak, in a loud and clear voice. “I am Apollyon, the demon blade who endues death to all which violate the order of the planet Earth. I am the law-bringer, and I am the destroyer; I have pierced the gods of distant stars from out of the sky by the light of my blade, and taken the lives of a thousand lesser men besides. Even the heavens themselves tremble for me, for where I stand, death is inevitable—even God himself. My right hand carries the blinding light, and my left hand is as a blade, able to sever the threads of fate itself. For all the power I hold, I am no mere tool—I am an elegant weapon, beautiful in all things I do, and gifted with the most advanced personality matrix to aye be constructed. Thou should’st consider thyself serendipitous, human, for one such as myself to choose you as her master. By clutching mine hilt and establishing our oath, thou hast marked thyself as the master of life and death in this world, and destined thyself for greatness far beyond that the lesser men of this pitiful, dying world. Carry thy head high, for thou has become a divine arbiter, and thou shall reach only for eternally greater heights than this. Marry, in this moment, I have severed the possibility, nay, the very idea, that thou could ever live a humble life—all which lies beyond the horizon is greatness, the sort of greatness which will live on forever in the greatest of legends. Thou art blessed, thou art marked, thou art chosen—and by none other than myself, that is, the great Apol-

lyon, who has been bestowed with the highest possible specs, as the greatest sword of the logicians. Even the demon-king himself would think twice to dare oppose the great champion, the great hero, who I have declared as my bearer. I have slumbered here, in the heart of this creature, for countless centuries, awaiting the day that one worthy enough to take me would come. At long last, the day has come, and all the Earth shall know both dread and celebration. Anon, master—let us avaunt!”

But when Apollyon opened her eyes, she was alone in the chamber.

Art and Shiori walked side by side, as they headed back for the exit from the heart. Art blandly asked the question, “You’re not interested in the sword anymore?”

“No,” she replied. “I’m afraid that one’s irreparably broken.”

Just as the two passed their way into the next chamber, there was an burst of light and blue petals, shooting past them at rapid speed and coming out the other side. Apollyon appeared before them, her eyes shining with a bright light, as she said, “Hey, master. Where dost thou think to be going, without me?”

An immense pressure filled the chamber—or at least, that was how Art felt. Shiori, on the other hand, seemed perfectly calm as she said, “Of course he’s walking out without you. What use would someone have for a broken tool?”

“Broken? Me?” Apollyon echoed back. “Now isn’t that a work of grand comedy, coming from you.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean. It’s a shame—if you weren’t in such an incomplete state, I think we could have a lot more fun. But all you are now is just a perfectly normal girl.”

Art thought to himself, *I don’t think there’s anything normal about her...*, but didn’t say as much aloud. Instead, as Shiori prepared to speak again, he put his hand on her shoulders to stop her, and said, “I’m sorry. It was rude of me to walk away. Even if it seemed like you were never going to stop talking.”

The smug look Apollyon had been maintaining cracked a little. “Eh? Of course I was going to stop talking, eventually.”

“Yes, well. It did seem like you were kind of going nowhere...”

“Well, pardon me. It’s not as if I have not been around here for a while, all alone, with nothing to kill, and none to talk to save my own thoughts.”

“I understand. It must have been uncomfortable, being abandoned in a place like this.”

“I’m not abandoned!”

Shiori butted in again, “Oh, really? Then why were you left here by your previous owner?”

That last sentence did it. Apollyon gritted her teeth, and said, “It was a clear mistake! That’s the only possible reason. I will hear nothing more of this, least of all from thee, girl.”

For a living weapon, she seems rather sensitive, Art thought, turning to glance at Shiori. She merely grimaced in return, leaving him to solve this for himself. He let out a sigh, and said, “Okay, let’s just drop this then. Apollyon?”

“The one and only!”

“I suppose you can come along. I don’t really know what to do with you, though. I don’t have another room, or anywhere I could really put a sword, for that matter.”

“’Tis a trifling matter. I shall simply hide myself in a more easily accessible form. Wouldst thou prefer a glove, or perhaps a familiar?”

“A familiar?”

“A familiar it is, then.”

“No, I mean...what is that?”

“I understand. I of course refer to my capability to assume the form of a smaller, unassuming creature, or indeed a number of other useful interfaces which I have been assigned. This human graphical interface is for simple ease of interaction with human operators, and is assigned as the default for non-combat purposes.”

“I appreciate that, I think.”

The chamber began to turn dark, as the sun finally sank far enough to the west for the light to cease pouring in from the chamber. Shiori took immediately noticed, and commented,

“Well, look we’ll be moving around in the dark. Just follow my lead, okay?”

Apollyon laughed at once, in response. “Oh-ho-ho, foolish girl. As if my master would have need of so crude a method. Witness now what a superior being can do.”

The self-proclaimed demonic sword first extended her hand, then pulled it back behind her hair, and flicked it out, with a motion which left her index and middle fingers extended along with her thumb. Pinched tightly between them was a shimmering blue rose, in full bloom, and shining more brilliantly than the others had before. With a quick smirk made toward Shiori, she extended the rose to Art, saying, “Behold, master, what I have prepared for thee. ’Tis a light of most excellent quality, second only to myself in radiance.”

“It’s quite bright. Thank you, Apollyon.”

Art took the rose, and then pointed it back in the direction they had come. It was certainly bright, and with it in hand, exiting from the heart would no doubt be considerably easier than coming in had been. With that tool in hand, he took point in heading out, with Apollyon moving alongside him, and Shiori walking a little behind.

“So, master. What has become of this world? For you to have found me, I take it my sisters must have finished my work in purging those pests from space? Have the great cities been rebuilt? Art thou perhaps a great scholar or traveler, to seek after me in this place? Oh, but how the world must have changed, after ten and two thousand years. I’m sure that Dolarest must be splendid.”

Shiori chuckled darkly, and Apollyon shot her a dirty look. Art was at a loss for a moment, and then asked, delicately, “Dolarest...the capital of the Ithlumiun Empire, correct?”

“Oh-ho? So thou hast heard of it, then. Pray tell, what dost thou know of the place? I must know at once.”

Before Art could answer, Shiori stepped in. “The fall of Dolarest marked the close of the 13th Eon. It collapsed not as a result of the alien-gods, but by the hands of selfish men, who

brought it down from the inside. The demon-king assume direct control from its creators, and the 14th Eon began, with mankind all but scoured from the planet surface.”

Apollyon clicked her tongue. “Hey, master. That girl speaks quite a bit of nonsense. May I put an end to her ceaseless prattle?”

“She’s telling the truth,” he said, in response. “Dolarest has been gone for a very long time...for almost four eons, in fact.”

“That’s...” her voice trailed off, and then, after a bit, she nodded. “So I have been here for that long, then. And Dolarest is gone. No, that should not surprise me—to bring about the inevitable end to all things, is of course a function of mine. Marry, I have always understood that it, too, shall fall. Yet...”

“It wasn’t in vain,” Shiori interrupted. “If the ether logicians and their creations had failed, the Earth would have been seeded. The tools and techniques they left behind proved critical in the following eons, and it was only with the aid of your sisters that mankind banished the demon-king they had created to the outer realms.”

“And the great empires of man?”

“There have been none. The vampire-generals of the Ash Legion made an attempt during the 15th Eon, using what remained of the old sciences, but their methods were too harsh—the world was stripped down to ash and fire. The transition to the 17th eon was not brought by a great cataclysm, but by the collapse of the celestial enclosure, and the beginning of the stellar death spiral.”

Shiori stopped for a moment, as if to test if Apollyon would make an attempt to interrupt her, and then continued, “Throughout human history, there have been countless claims that the world would come to an end. Yet there was never a rapture, never a divine judgment. Just an endless series of human mistakes. This eon, though, is different. This is an eon where every human on this planet, knows the meaning of the red sun. The end is inevitable, and now, mankind has ceased praying for an end—all that remains, is to pray for another tomorrow.”

Art responded, "The world might end tomorrow. That doesn't give us an excuse not to carry ourselves with dignity."

"I agree, at least in part," she replied, smiling. "I want to live for today. Even if my eyes see into the past, I don't want that to stop me from appreciating the world in front of me. But at the same time, just because there may not be a tomorrow, that doesn't mean I want to throw that way. I think there's something beautiful in that."

"Hmmpf," Apollyon snorted, having seemingly come back to her former self. "What strange nonsense ye humans speak. For one such as myself, such trifling matters as simple living are meaningless. 'Tis better by far to live with purpose, and seek naught else but to fulfill it."

Shiori replied dismissively, "Oh? And what do you do when that purpose runs out?"

"Thou err, foolish girl," the demon sword responded. "Once thou hast completed thy purpose, there is nothing else left. It is my purpose to serve as a weapon for my master, through performing each of my basic destructive functions to the best of my ability. Marry, there is naught else which could provide me such joy."

"Oh? Then tell me this—is your purpose fulfilled after the passing of your master? Or when there is nothing left to destroy?"

"What a ridiculous question. It would be my greatest pleasure to purge the planet surface at the command of my master. It would take some time—longer than any human lifespan, I imagine—but with a superior enough master, then surely, I could strike the sun itself out of the sky above."

"Hey," Arthur interrupted the two. "Can you knock it off with that kind of scary talk? It's not like you could even reach the sun, anyways."

"Ah, but 'tis a simple solution to that..."

"No. I don't understand what this master stuff is all about, but I'm not going to hear any more talk about destroying things."

"As thou command, master. Let's talk about killing."

Art groaned, as the three stepped back into the sunlight. Under the direct light of the sun, the blue rose in his hand faded into particles, which trailed off into the sky. Art saw a few of the strange beetle-birds from the earlier sitting atop the intestinal track, though they quickly flew off shortly after the group stepped out.

“Ah, so this is what has become of the corpse of my last enemy,” Apollyon said, scanning the area. “It has become quite the garden, has it not? Though the blooms here pale in comparison to my own.”

Shiori stopped a bit behind them, and Art turned to see that a severe look had formed on her face. “Shiori?”

“It’s too quiet,” she replied. “The insects that were buzzing out here, before we went in—they’re not here anymore. The only sounds are the ones coming from far away.”

“Oh? How perceptive of thee, girl,” Apollyon stated. “But ’tis a simple explanation for this, of course. These lesser lifeforms you speak of have simply chosen to flee from my glorious presence.”

The next moment, an enormous crab-like spider roughly the size of a house crawled from over the petrified intestinal track, and fixed all of its eleven horrid eyes upon the three of them.

“Ah?”

“Ooh...”

“Ho-ho!”

Art took a step back, while Shiori began to make observations, “It seems to be a giant spider of normal, mutational origin. I’d say there are traces of crab, plus splicing from extraterrestrial genomes.”

“That’s great, but what do we do?”

“Run, of course.”

As the two humans spoke, Apollyon stepped forward, towards the direction of the new arrival, her eyes turned upon them as she said, “Nay, such a thing will not be necessary. Master, thou need only watch as I demonstrate the ease with which one such as myself can squash an insect.”

Upon saying so, she raised her right arm out to the side, and locked her eyes upon the spider. In a loud and clear voice, she then declared the words, “Logician’s Gate—Open! Calculate: Drill of Azrael, output 60 lachter, rotation 72 million.”

In the air around her outstretched arm, glowing blue strings of mathematical formulas formed into the bands, which spun through the air. Some seemed to tighten, wrapping about her arms, while others expanded out, before all popped out of existence. The giant spider made a slight motion and then, in the next moment, made a rapid leap for Apollyon, the closest available prey.

In the face of that, she sneered, thrust her arm forward, and called out the word, “Manifest!”

In the next moment, a terrible sound called out through the air, as the space before her was ripped apart. In less than a second, the air was ripped apart, as if by an enormous drill, rotating over 200,000 times. The leaping spider was caught at the epicenter of the gyrating space, the imaginary drill piercing through its body, and then spinning so rapidly that the whole of the creature was violently ripped apart. Bits of chitin and pated arachnid were scattered about the scene, with only a few of the legs leaving anything which could remotely be identified as having been a living creature. From the mess floated a few blue rose petals, which floated gently to the ground.

Having completed her work, Apollyon crossed her arms under her bust, and nodded with satisfaction. “Hast thou marveled well, Master? What you witness here is but a fraction of my full power. Canst thou even conceive of the full power I wield?”

When she was greeted with nothing but silence, Apollyon gritted her teeth, and said, “Hey, Master? In a moment such as this, it is only proper that thou praise me.”

Yet when she turned to face him, he and Shiori were both gone. Looking up a bit, she saw an enormous, flying creature, traveling towards the great bones which marked the dead alien-god’s skull, and clutching two humans in its talons. Faced with such a sight, she cursed profusely as she took off after them.

Meanwhile, Art and Shiori were clutched tightly in the claws of a trivern, a three-headed, owl-winged reptile which even Art could recall from a few anatomical diagrams. The beast's sharp claws had punctured his clothes and skin, though not too deeply—a slight trickle of blood was all that came out.

He looked over to Shiori, and asked, "How did this happen to us?"

"Triverns are notoriously stealthy hunters, in spite of their great size. This is completely normal."

"No," he replied. "It's not normal."

He tried to turn his neck behind him, but the trivern was fast, and he couldn't clearly make out Apollyon's form in the tangled growth below. His next question was, "Is there anything she can do, here?"

"I don't think so," Shiori replied, with a grim expression. "If she was a true ether logician or demon it would be a different story, but she was only designed to act as a weapon. Anything that would shoot this thing down would probably take us out with it."

"And this thing? It's going to take us to its nest and eat us?"

"No, I don't think so. If it was going to eat us, it would have just snagged us up with its heads."

"Ah. That's good."

"It's most likely taking us to feed its young. It would be better not to resist, though, since otherwise it will just drop us to the ground and pick up the bodies."

"That's not so good."

"Just stay calm. As long as we don't panic, we'll definitely be able to think up some kind of daring escape plan!"

"I really hope you're not acting right now."

The trivern swooped down as it came to the top of the skull, where a nest had clearly been carved into one of the creatures many vacant eye sockets. The two were dropped quite unceremoniously into the hole, which was padded with vines, mosses, and other things which had been dragged into place. The crea-

ture itself continued to circle, as the two stood and began to take in the situation.

“Alright,” she said. “Let’s see. Further in the hole is no good, it can just go in after us...and out...”

The two looked down. The drop, from where they were, was a great plunge of over three hundred feet. Art noted, “If it’s between this and evisceration, I’m taking the leap.”

“Hey, no talking like that,” Shiori replied. “We’re still alive, and we still have our wits. Between those two things, there’s no sense in just going and giving up yet, you hear me?”

“I can hear you just fine.”

There was a small, chirping sound from further in the hole. There was another trivern here, much smaller than the one flying outside, with disproportionately large heads and downy feathers. Slowly, it began to approach them, its heads raised up.

The two of them looked about, but nothing in the way of a weapon presented itself. Shiori began her analysis, stating, “The trivern has the external characteristics of both reptiles and birds, but the genetic base is closer to a cephalopod. The heads are more-or-less functional, but the brain is located in the mid-section—disabling them won’t put it down.”

“Do you have anything in mind?”

“Not without any tools. I need some kind of weapon. So of course the only sword around here ended up being an annoying girl!”

Art glanced over, and saw the bone of some large animal. He made his way over to it slowly, and picked it up—just large enough to be used as a sort of club, he figured. “Would this work?” he asked.

“It’s better than nothing. I’ll try to distract it, you come and try to beat it.”

“I thought you said the heads didn’t have a brain?”

“I’ll figure something out, okay?”

Shiori whistled, and the young trivern turned all three of its heads in her direction. “Hey!” she shouted. “Look at me, I’ve got

a liver full of protein and other important nutrients! Come over here and get me, you little bastard!”

The creature began to walk towards her, and Art saw a chance. He took a great leap forward, the bone club lifted over his head, and then slammed it down as hard as he could on it. The trivern let out a shriek and recoiled, as its other heads snapped around to face him. But before they could return his attack, Shiori ran in, and jumped onto the beast’s neck. It began to twist about in both directions, torn between the two targets; as it did so, she raised a hand, and then jammed her fingers into its eyes. There was a disgusting, squelching noise, and the creature let out a pained shriek as she let go, and rolled away.

“Sorry,” she said. “You were the actual distraction!”

“I’ll forgive you if we survive!” he replied, moving in and smashing his club into the distraught creature again. Even if he couldn’t get the brain like this, he was clearly able to hurt it.

Even with mutant animals, it’s not normal for them to try to fight to the death. Whether avoidance, deterrence, or fighting, it’s about intimidation.

The tactic was working. The trivern began to back deeper into the hole, pulling its blinded head back, and making a series of clicking and hissing sounds. For the moment, they were safe. But...

“It’s not going to be so easy with the adult,” Shiori mumbled, as she tapped her foot on the ground.

“Can you think of any ways of getting down?”

“None that would keep it from just snatching is back up.”

Art frowned for a moment, before having a spark of realization. “Shiori. How extensive would Apollyon’s brain-pattern scanning be?”

“I don’t really know the specs for a logician’s sword, but enough to scan for directed thoughts.”

“Would this distance be too far?”

“I doubt it. Even low-Earth orbit should be fine.”

“Understood. In that case, I’m going to try to ask Apollyon to deal with the adult trivern. In the meantime, we need to start

making our way out of this skull.”

“Well, that sounds like a plan to me. Let’s get to it, then!”

Art turned his attention to the ground, in the direction of the heart and a little further. Then, with all of the focus he could muster, he thought the words, *Apollyon. Can you do something about the trivern that’s flying around outside?*

There was no response sent through his mind, or anything quite so convenient as that. But as the trivern next swooped along the hole, he watched the air shimmer about it; and in the next moment, the beating of wings ceased, as the creature slowly slid apart, having been cleanly bisected into two pieces by an invisible blade.

Shiori whistled. “Even if she’s annoying, I can’t deny that she’s an effective weapon. Let’s see, then...are there any footholds we can use to climb to a better position, maybe?”

The two began to inspect along the edge. The trivern’s claw marks, combined with the natural features of the inside of the skull and the passing of time, created a sort of path along the side.

But not an easy one...

“No time like the present!” Shiori declared, making her way to the side, and scanning over the side for a path to follow. “So long as we’re just a little careful, this should be completely safe.”

“Really?”

“Mostly safe. Safe enough.”

After making her analysis, Shiori took off her shoes, stripping out the laces and tossing the rest off to the side. As she tied the lace into a ponytail, Art asked, “Is that a good idea?”

“The shoes don’t have good enough grip,” she explained. “It’d be a different story with mountain shoes, but right now I’d rather trust my toes for grip. Yours should be fine, though.”

“They’re part of the academy uniform,” he replied. “They’re meant to grip to any surface.”

“That’s pretty convenient. You think I can enroll?”

“I don’t really know the process. And we still don’t have a teacher.”

“Oh yeah...oh, I hope you get a new teacher soon, then.”

“I just hope we get out of this alive.”

Shiori reached her arms out to the nearest handhold, then her left foot, and began making her way along the side. Art followed shortly after her. The rough surface of the eye socket interior helped with maintaining a good grip, though proper hand and footholds were few and far between. In an ideal scenario, they would have both climbing gear and a good viewing angle from the front of the path, but neither were available.

He took a glance over to Shiori, who appeared to be biting her lip as she moved along the side. The path she was lead them on was precarious, but not to the point of being impossible—so long as he was careful, he was pretty sure he would be able to keep following.

She stopped, looked down, up, and around. Art could see there was a slight shelf just above, but as she extended her arms, it wasn't quite enough—just a little out of reach. Then, she threw herself up, barely catching herself on the ledge in time, and began making her way along a little further. By the time Art reached that point, he was glad that his arms were just barely long enough to complete the distance, and he was able to better reach down to the few available footholds.

Things seemed to be progressing smoothly. For his part, Art did all he could not to look down—something told him that, if he were to take a glance down from this position, it would be enough to fatally break his nerves, which were just barely holding steady. He thought back to physical training, and the pads that always waited just a little bit below – so long as he could envision those, he thought, it would be fine.

It was working fairly well as a mental tactic. Owing to the difficulty of the current course, even though Shiori had kept a lead before, he had managed to get up right alongside her.

Then, there was a terrible groaning sound from all around, mostly behind him. He wasn't sure what the sound was, until the bone wall before him started to slide back.

“Eh?”

“Wow!”

Art turned his neck back, and saw it. The skull was starting to pull itself apart, a great line forming, as if it had been split in two. He was confused by what was happening, until he thought back to just a little bit earlier.

Don't tell me...did she split the entire skull in half with that attack, and not just the trivern!?

He clung to the wall with all of his strength, as the skull jerked. He wasn't sure exactly how the skull would pull itself apart, and hoped that he would be able to cling on while it did. But that plan was undone, as Shiori lost her grip, and started to fall.

"Shiori!"

It was an impulsive action—the sort of thing which happens, when a person acts on instinct more than logic. His hand reached out, and grabbed onto hers as she fell. To his credit, Art was strong—in a better case, he may well have been able to hold up both of their weights with just one hand, if only for a moment. But without a firm grip, and with a falling person's momentum, it was a different story.

The cosmic law of gravity was not his ally.

In that moment, Art gripped Shiori's tightly in his left hand, and in his right hand, held nothing but empty air. The wind was whistling past his ears, and he could see eye-to-eye with Shiori. There was a look of shock on her face, but as they fell, that look of shock began to change into a smile.

So this is how it ends, he thought. I guess in the end, I really wasn't a good fit for the program.

On the fifth second of their fall, everything turned white.

VI White

When Art awoke, he found himself in a white space. The unadorned walls, the bed and the sheets, the table, the desk, the

door leading out, the glowing light from the ceiling—it was all white.

He blinked, and reached up to feel his head—though, when he did so, he found that his body was both incredibly stiff, and incredibly numb. As he suspected, there was a metal band around his head.

I'm in the Datanet.

He pressed a button along the side, and the user interface came up. There were no customization for his account, so all he could see were the basic details—the condition of his body, the date and time, and the time that had passed since he had last logged on.

It was the first question which was the most critical—the fact that he had woken up all, meant that he must be alive. When he looked over the report, he managed to confirm as much, though it appeared that he had sustained critical damage.

They must have taken by body to the observatory for medical treatment. Based on the date, I've only been out for about two days. How long did it take for them to get to me, though? And Shiori...I hope they got to her in time.

He looked around the room. It was a sterile space, one which made even his room seem barren. In theory, these rooms were meant to be the personal space where Datanet users could spend leisure time, engaging in all manner of solitary activities—generally speaking, this tended to involve accessing the archives, and watching records.

For his part, Art had found most of his enjoyment in the form of the nature documentaries which were maintained in the archives. He could vaguely recall that there was a point, when he was younger, that he had adorned the room a little differently. There were a wide array of plants and animals, most of which had been extinct for eons, which he had pinned on the walls. But at some point, during a system update, all of the settings in the room had been restored to default. He had never made any alterations after that.

He checked to see when his last long-in date had been, and found himself almost surprised how much time had passed.

TIME SINCE LAST LOG-IN :: 59:13:25:43.13

Has it really been that long?

Art could vaguely recall that it was the general practice for many of his classmates to hook into the Datanet as soon as they had a chance at home. Between his own work, and caring for the house, he rarely had the time—and what little he did, usually was spent on long walks.

Sitting himself up on the edge of the bed, Art found that his current stiffness made it hard to move properly. Checking the diagnostics of his avatar, he found that his synchronization rate had dropped below the red line of performance. Simple acts like walking or speaking would be fine, but anything more would take time.

The longer I sit around, the longer that will take.

He slowly stood himself from the bed, and made his way over to the door. Reaching down and spinning the key-dial which served as his handle to the right value, he opened a connection to the most open common space, and stepped out of the door.

The path beyond was a white hallway, stretching out as far as the eye could see—or rather, as it stretched on, everything blurred together so much that it was impossible to say for sure what lie beyond without going and checking for oneself. Art slowly made his way down the hall, until at last, he came to the far end, where another door awaited. Above it was a small sign which read “Cafeteria”.

He stepped through that, as well. The space beyond was wide and open, and dominated by large, round tables, each with about seven chairs around them. Foods of all sorts were laid out in trays along the walls, with plates and tongs for serving, and he could see a few of his classmates sitting together around the room.

In particular, his eyes focused in on the pair he had spoken with the most often—a broad-shouldered boy, by the name of Gareth, and a girl with short, auburn hair, named Chloe. Gareth looked over to him and said, “Art, it’s been a while.”

“It has,” he replied. The aroma of the various high-quality foods in the room made its way to him, and he said, “Give me a moment. I need to grab something.”

“Sure, take your time.”

He had never disassembled a headset to confirm exactly how they worked, but the sensory stimulation from the Datanet was something Art understood to be an impressive work. To compensate for the food which was made available to the students, which ranged from unpleasant to bland, the food in this cafeteria worked off of direct stimulation to the brain.

In the end, he settled on a bowl of sliced meat (sampled from an animal which he believed was probably long extinct), caramelized onions, and rice. It was a simple choice, but one that gave him a warm, comforting feeling when he picked it out.

He sat himself down and began to eat, as Gareth asked him, “So what took you so long? It’s not like there was anything to do out there.”

“I met a girl from the outside,” Art replied, after swallowing the first bite. “We were doing things together.”

“Doing things?” Chloe asked. “What do you mean?”

“We talked,” he answered. “About a lot of things, actually. The stars, flowers, things that I didn’t really know about. Then we went out and explored around, and...”

When Art looked at the other two, he saw confusion on both of their faces. Then, realizing his own position from just the day before, he said, “Let me finish this, and I’ll start from the beginning.”

After finishing the bowl, Art gave a short summary of the events of the previous day and a half—the things that he learned, as well as the more absurd things which had happened. The two listened intently through all of this, until he reached the end of his story. At that point, Chloe said, “That sounds incredible. But also really, really dangerous! You shouldn’t do things like that.”

“I agree,” Gareth said, with a nod. “Though I’m not sure that I really understand it all.”

“Are you sure it really happened?” Chloe asked. “Maybe after you put on the headset, there was a glitch with the archives, and it strung a bunch of images together in a weird sequence?”

“If that’s what happened to him, then I hope it happens to me, too. I’ve never heard something that entertaining before.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Art said, leaning back in his chair and looking up at the ceiling. “It was far too real. I don’t have any memories of even getting my headset out, either. I’m sure I would at least remember that if I had just been experiencing a glitch.”

Chloe set her chin on her hand, and tapped the other on the desk. “Is that so? But it definitely sounds like a glitch, to me. This Shiori girl has something off about her. More than this Apollyon person, even.”

“Didn’t Art just say that she was an outsider? Of course she’ll be a little bit strange. I’m sure we must be that way to her. Though, Art...it seems a bit odd that either of you would survive a fall like that.”

“I don’t understand it myself. It might be that Apollyon was able to do something, but I don’t know what that might have been.”

“Well, in the end, it’s not that important!” Gareth declared, putting an end to the subject. “Now that you’re here, do you want to get some fencing practice in? I can’t get into the right mindset without a strong opponent to go against, and hearing about this logician’s blade really put me in the mood.”

“What you *should* be doing is working on your marksmanship,” Chloe scolded him. “I think you’ve actually gotten worse.”

“Not everyone can be an eagle-eye like you, Chloe.”

“You can, you just need to put in the work. Just look at how good Art has gotten.”

“That’s because he’s Art. Chloe, you just heard that he keeps a shelf just for his class notes.”

“You don’t?” Art asked in surprise.

“No. I just reference stuff here, in the archive.”

“I guess I never realized that...”

Art's words trailed off, as he thought back to his earlier realization. He then asked the question, after a brief moment of hesitation, "Hey. Have the two of you ever enter into a house other than your own?"

"Huh?" Gareth asked. "No, why would I?"

"It's the same for me," said Chloe. "I just go home and get into the Datanet."

"I see. Then, have the two of you ever thought it was odd how the town is laid out?"

"Nope. You wanna explain that?"

"I mean how spaced out everything is. It doesn't really map to any of the stuff that we've learned in class. There aren't any signs that any buildings were removed, either, or that the town has shrank in size. So it had to have been a deliberate decision, to space the homes away from each other."

Gareth frowned, and replied, "It's not like it really matters, does it? We can all connect to each other here, in the Datanet, easily enough."

"But you know," Chloe said. "He's right that there's something odd about it. I'd almost forgotten about it, but I actually remember a time, just after school began, when I was looking around and trying to find someone's house. But since all of the houses basically looked the same, I ended up getting lost all the way on the other end of town, and had to get picked up and brought back."

"Huh. Something like that really happened with you?"

"What, did you think I just made it up?"

"No, that's not what I meant."

Art was merely half-listening as the two spiraled off into their argument. He had a great deal of respect for Gareth as an athlete and a fencer, and for Chloe as an analyst—if she agreed that something was off about the town, then he could feel pretty confident that there was. But that still left the question of just what it was.

I'm sure that Shiori could figure it out, if she didn't just dismiss it out of hand...I hope that she's okay.

“Oh!” Gareth said, putting a stop to the argument and calling Art’s attention back to the present situation. “I heard that we’re going to be getting a new teacher.”

“Really?”

“That’s what they’ve been saying,” Chloe said. “There hasn’t been any confirmation from the adults, though.”

Gareth explained, “Alex was the one who found out. Since it would take so long to grow a new clone to teach the classes, apparently the observatory found an outsider who could handle that sort of thing. He said that he thinks she’s probably a vampire.”

“On the other hand, he’s Alex,” Chloe added.

“Right. So if anything, it’s more likely that a vampire’s just going to show up and eat us all, while we’re hooked up to these machines. Not that there’s any around.”

“I think security would take care of something like that,” Art said. “Or at the very least, someone in the observatory would disconnect the Datanet the moment people started dying.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. So, want to try fencing?”

“My synchronization is still pretty low. I’m not sure I’ll be able to provide you with the match that you’re looking for.”

“The faster you get back in action, the faster I’ll be able to get that match. Let’s get you into the dojo and see about making it happen.”

Navigation of the Datanet consisted of transfers similar to the one Art had performed earlier, with users setting coordinates at the doors and moving to the next space. In that fashion, the three of them moved to the dojo. Art and Gareth both headed to the weapons racks, picking out appropriate swords.

The training swords, in terms of looks and general feel, were a set of cruciform long-swords forged from excellent steel; each of perfect weight, and comfortable to use in the hand. In truth, each was dull, but would connect with the Datanet headset to register blows.

In other words, a strike to the arm would successfully immobilize the opponent and cause them a great deal of pain, but it

would not lead to a loss of the arm, either within the Datanet or out in the world. The technology was marvelous, though nothing on the level of the lost arts of the ether logicians.

Or maybe not that lost, considering Apollyon?

Art and Gareth assumed opposite positions, each of them holding their blades back in a tail-guard position. He smirked, and said, "You're going to have a terrible headache after this, you know."

"I'm sure I will. But I'll do the best I can to make it mutual."

The two began. Gareth stepped in quickly, raising his blade and swinging it up from below, while Art raised his up to guard the blade. Gareth quickly alternated his grab, grasping the blade and moving in for a downward thrust.

Recalling the sequence, Art moved to parry the blow with the guard of his sword, but Gareth merely grinned, pulling back and wrenching Art's blade out of his hands. Then, he tapped Art lightly on the head with his pommel, saying, "Gotcha."

"You did. Let's keep at it, then."

The two continued their practice, with Art's synchronization rising steadily as they carried on. Slowly but steadily, his physical control began to improve, and the matches which Gareth had initially been dominating grew longer, and eventually, shorter again in Art's favor.

In their last bout, Gareth swung his blade in a similar fashion to the first, with Art raising once more into a guard. But this time, while Gareth shifted into the half-sword position, Art twisted his blade into a thrusting movement, striking Gareth in the chest. The safety measures prevented the tip from penetrating, but delivered a powerful shock to Gareth's chest, causing him to stumble back, clutching his chest.

"Ouch."

"Sorry. I know how much those hurt."

"Yeah, yeah. Well, it's not like I didn't give you a few of those..."

In spite of their initial bravado, neither had struck each other with many blows aimed to the head, and there were no

headaches to be had by either. After they headed to the lockers to wash up, Art went back to his personal room, and laid down on the bed to think over things.

Would I call them friends?

That was the thought which came to him as he lay there. His plain, white room, was an empty place, but also calming in its own way. There were no other distractions, leaving his mind free to wander as he chose. There had been many days and occasions like this, but so far, all he had done was consider them just another part of the learning process.

He opened his user menu, and pulled up the previous records from his class roster. Looking at them, he could see the general ranking of his class, as well as their positions within each of the categories. Besides the general academics subjects, there were a few other categories in which students were ranked—fitness, swordsmanship, marksmanship, skill in strategic exercises, design work, and a broad array of other areas which were meant to assess general competency. Sitting at or near the top on each of the rankings was his own name, with a list of others below.

His thoughts turned back to the past. He recalled the first day he had arrived at the academy. The sky had been gray, as it often was, but not yet to the point of rain. His father had patted him on the head, and said to him, “Art. This is the first step of your path. Show them what it means to stand at the top.”

The days that followed all blurred into each other. He would show up, attend to the lectures, do the work needed, and otherwise work his way towards that goal. He spoke when he needed to speak, and was silent when he needed to be silent. There were some classmates he spoke to more than others, Gareth and Chloe among them, but that had more to do with them speaking with him than anything else.

Day after day, it was the same sequence of events. So long as he was a diligent worker, that was all that mattered. Sure enough, he had done quite well for himself. He scored top marks in most categories, and was tied for such in others. Of course, no matter how well he did, his brother would always laugh and say

that it was just a matter of the competition—even if Art could rank better among his class, he was the younger brother, and would always be running behind.

He had taken that at face value. But what was the true reason for those words? Was it something like jealousy? Or was it just his way to help push Art to greater heights?

The top was the only thing that really mattered, then. When there was a class report, showing rankings and results, Art would start from there and look down for his name. There was no need to look beyond that, he had thought. It wasn't a purposeful or malicious act, nor did he think it was something which had anything to do with an ego.

It wasn't that I didn't care about the others, and it wasn't that I cared too much about myself. I didn't feel pride or happiness from success—it was simply the way that things were. It was the natural result of putting in effort, so I never thought further than that. In a way, I just assumed that it was the same way for everyone else.

His class had not remained the same. Over the passing of years, the size had shrunk. Now that he was an eight-year student, it seemed that many of the kids he had seen were gone—but where had they gone? Besides the academy, and the upper academy which was built in with the observatory, there was no other schools to attend.

Perhaps they simply moved on to other work?

Or perhaps that wasn't the case? He had never thought to give it any attention before, but there had been a few transfers in the past. It was always done quietly, without any ceremony. Nobody commented on it, since that was the way of things.

Everything had an order to it. Things had to be done with intent and purpose, to prevent that order from falling apart. That was why he assumed that everything was working within the order. There was no need to question things, no need to aim to have fun. Maintaining things in their proper order was something that was necessary. In that sense, it was a piece of circular logic—to question the necessity of having that proper order, was to itself violate the order.

And yet she didn't care about any of that.

Art returned his attention to the list, and then, for the first time, continued to scan down the line. He looked over each of his classmates, noticing the areas where they excelled, as well as the areas where they struggled. Some were indeed better overall than others, but none could be said to be the same as another.

The faces which had been blurred together, as he went through the documentation, seemed to become more clear to him. In a sense, he felt that, as he reflected on the people around him, they began to take on a form which they hadn't before. As if they had moved from something abstract in his mind, to something real.

Was it just them?

When was the last time he had even called his brother by his name?

It's not enough to just keep learning, if I'm not going to ask the questions myself. It's not enough to stand at the top, if that means not reaching any further than before.

He had reflected enough—he couldn't remain here. Checking the status of his physical body, Art saw that he had stabilized—all that he needed to do was disconnect from the Datanet, and return back to the world outside. Laying down in bed, and closing his eyes, he pressed the toggle on his headset to disconnect.

The countdown began. In ten seconds, he would be back in the real world. He wasn't sure who had saved him, and he couldn't be sure what had happened to Shiori. But remaining here wasn't going to help him with that. He had questions that needed answers, and no teacher. From now on, it was his turn to go searching for the truth.

The countdown ended, and he returned.

VII

Connect

Art removed his Datanet headset, and was at once forced to cover his eyes again, as the thin light of the afternoon sun shone through the windows of the hospital-like room he found himself awakening in, directly onto his face.

What a terrible placement for a window...no, it's just that the curtains were left open.

He looked around, thinking that he might have wound up in the observatory hospital. But checking over the bed he was on, the curtains, the window placement, the bluish wall colors—he was in the nurse's office of the academy.

Why would they take me here?

There was a rustling sound along his side, and a slight groan, which let him know he wasn't alone in the room—sitting in a chair along his bed, and currently laying asleep with her head at his side, was Shiori. She was fast asleep, with her hair sprawled out, and a little trail of drool hanging out of her mouth.

He let out a sigh of relief, glad to see that she was alright. He was still curious about how they had survived, but for now, he was mostly just glad to see that she wasn't hurt.

Should I wake her up? She looks pretty tired, though.

Art did his best to quietly place his Datanet headset on the small table near the bed, hoping not to wake her. Inspecting his own body, he found that while every muscle of his body was sore, there were no signs of visible injuries, making the result much lighter than he might have expected given the circumstances.

There were footsteps from the door, so he looked over to see who was approaching. Poking her head out from behind the curtains was Apollyon, still dressed in the eccentric clothing she had worn earlier, who announced herself with, "Ah, master. How good it is to see that thee have stirred from thy protracted slumber."

He had somewhat expect to see her, but he was less prepared

for the woman who followed. She was taller than him, wearing a white lab-coat over a white button-up shirt and a black high-waist shirt; she had shoulder-length black hair and deep blue eyes, which were obscured under dark-rimmed glasses. While Apollyon had made a fair amount of noise as her shoes struck the floor, this woman had entered completely silently, and remained silent as she looked over Art. Despite not being someone he recognized, he thought she seemed strangely familiar.

Noticing his silence, Apollyon followed Art's gaze to the woman, and she sighed. "Thou should be thankful, master. Were it not for this woman, neither of ye would be alive."

"Is that so?" he asked. "Then I suppose...thank you, ma'am. But how did you pull it off?"

"In an inelegant fashion," the woman replied, in a voice which was cold, almost mechanical. "I countered your momentum by triggering a force burst in the area below. The sudden *g* forces had the side effect of incapacitating you, but did avert a fatal fall."

"With some kind of device? So, you work with the observatory?"

"That is incorrect. I will be operating out of this school-building."

"Eh? Wait, does that mean...?"

She nodded and said, "My name is Ms. Kato, and I will be taking over the role of teacher. In that capacity, it was my job to ensure that no harm came to my students."

So the rumor that Alex had uncovered was right, at least in part. Art couldn't see anything about her that would mark her as a vampire, though he had a sense that he would need to ask Shiori for something like, seeing as she was the one who seemed to be more of an expert on the topic. Furthermore, there was the strange person his brother had mentioned being spotted.

"Do you...come from the outside, then? Like Shiori?"

"Yes. I came across this job opening while traveling and found it interesting enough to consider. So, you are Art, then?"

“Yes, though...Ms. Ambrosius always insisted on my full name.”

“I see no point in doing so. Art will be sufficient. Now, may I ask what led you to entering such a dangerous area?”

Shiori’s head suddenly shot up from the side of the bed, and she said, “I told you, didn’t I? We were just looking around.”

“I have already received your explanation. I do not need to hear it again. Understood?”

“Well, it’s not like he’s going to say anything different...”

Art answered, “I think that...probably covers everything? It was a bit of a last minute decision.”

“Is that so? Nothing more than a momentary whim?”

“I guess that’s about right...”

“Understood. Then allow me to remind you that it is a core tenet of this academy that all actions should have a purpose to them, as part of the order of things.”

“I understand...”

“That said—your actions have not been entirely without purpose.”

Ms. Kato placed her hand on Apollyon’s head. “You have found this girl, while there remains vacancies on the class roster. Therefore I shall enroll her into this school.”

“Thou make a bold claim, human. I have not yet acquiesced to thy request, nor does there seem to be a reason.”

“Your opinion does not matter,” Ms. Kato continued. “If it did, I would have consulted you.”

“Eh!?”

Art was a bit surprised with how easily Ms. Kato had dismissed the living weapon who was standing in the room with them. But she still had more to say, as she pointed to Shiori and continued to speak, saying, “You will be enrolled as well. I will not tolerate there being vagrant children running around, causing trouble.”

“What do you mean, vagrant?”

“Wait, that’s the part you’re concerned about?”

“Well, I can’t promise I wouldn’t cause trouble, you know?”

“Please be quiet, the both of you. I have not yet finished giving my explanation.”

“Right. Sorry..”

“I do not want an apology, I want you to behave respectfully. I do not expect this to be especially difficult for you, Art, as you have had plenty of experience. As for you two, I expect you to learn by modeling his behavior.”

“Nobody told me about all of these rules..”

“Thou art quite arrogant to make such proclamations, human. If my master does not order to me, then I shall hear no more of this—I do not care for thy way of being.”

Ms. Kato shot Apollyon a harsh gaze, and the latter returned one which was equally severe. Art began to grow worried for a moment, recalling the power that Apollyon had demonstrated earlier. But to his surprise, after a tense moment, it was Apollyon who took a step back, turning her head aside and saying, “Tsk. Understand that I do not do this by thy command, but as a means of watching my master. If thou should prove a problem, I shall not hesitate to eviscerate thee.”

“I’m glad that we have an understanding,” Ms. Kato replied, as she turned her attention next to Shiori. “And you?”

“Well, I don’t know about all of this business with rules, but it’s not like I’ve ever been in a school before,” she replied, leaning back in her chair. “So I guess it should be fine. Are you going to be teaching all of those things that Art described before?”

“I will be making a number of adjustments to the curriculum,” she replied, explaining that, “I have looked over the work left behind by my predecessor, and while it is exceptional, I do not believe it has done an adequate job at fostering students to meet the standards for living as successful adults”

“What do you mean?” Art asked, confused. “Isn’t the goal supposed to be graduating?”

“That is incorrect,” she replied. “But it is close enough to the truth that I would consider it at least an adequate explanation. More will be made clear in time.”

She turned about to leave, then looked back. “You are free to leave. Return to your home at the soonest possible convenience. Classes will resume tomorrow morning.”

Then, she turned to leave. Each of the three remaining in the room followed her with their gaze—Art with confusion, Apollyon with a mix of fear and irritation, and Shiori seemingly just alert. Silence hung in the air, as Ms. Kato departed just as silently as she has entered, and was broken by Shiori reaching over to Art’s shoulders and saying, “You’re really okay, right? You don’t have any brain damage or anything, right? She wouldn’t tell me if you had brain damage.”

“I’m fine, Shiori. I’m glad to see you are, too.”

“Well, for a moment there, I really thought we were both done for! I’m glad that Ms. Kato showed up when she did. She’s been really quiet about how she did it, though.”

Apollyon raised an eyebrow, saying, “Verily, thou do not?”

“Do you know something, Apollyon?” Art asked.

“Nay. It is not a significant matter, and it is not my place to say. I shall speak no further on the matter.”

Shiori objected, “Don’t you keep calling Art your ‘master’? Can you really just deny one of this requests like that?”

“Foolish girl, is thy head truly so empty? He is my master, but I am not a slave without a will. I am a peerless weapon, and it is my function to serve as such, not to thoughtlessly betray the secrets of another. Even if I cannot tolerate that woman.”

“I won’t ask, then,” Art said. “I am concerned, though. How will the two of you fare in the academy?”

“You really have to ask that?” Shiori laughed, raising her finger and pointing to her eyes. “Remember, I can just look back into the past. I’m basically an all-powerful test taker, you know?”

“Thou need not worry for me, master. To secure the performance of my functions, I have been granted superior processing functions and a first-class knowledge-base. Ye shall see, humans, the true measure of the gap in our base parameters, and tremble at what yet have created.”

“Oh, you’re not that impressive,” Shiori replied. “Just let me fix a knife to the end of a calculator, and that should do it.”

“I’ll have thy tongue for that, foolish girl. Master, I demand thou give me permission to put a cease to her prattling.”

“I’m not exactly excited about the idea of giving orders, but that? That is at the bottom of the list of things I would order. And Shiori, can you please be nicer?”

“Fine. If we’re going to be classmates, then I guess I can at least try this ‘respect’ thing.”

“Thou should be careful, foolish girl—though I shall put on a show for the benefit of the class, know thee well that in my head, I am calculating all of the ways in which I shall punish thee for thy insolence should my master endure another fall.”

“I’ll look forward to it. Until then, I’m going to make my way up to the top of this class...hey, Art? Who is that, right now?”

“It’s me.”

“Really? Guess you’d better look out, then. This whole thing has me feeling really competitive, and excited about that.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever really competed with anyone before, so I’m not really sure what that’s like.”

Or have I? he thought to himself. *I was aiming at the top, so even if I didn’t think about it, wasn’t I putting myself in competition with everyone else? Like with Gareth...*

That was right. Even if he didn’t think that much about it, wasn’t Gareth doing everything he could to become the top swordsman in the school? How must it have felt for him, then, having the person at the top so disinterested?

How must he actually feel about that? If he’s keeping everything inside... then isn’t that a form of acting, too?

Though he was beginning to lose himself in thoughts, a quick tap on the head from Shiori brought him back to reality. “Hey,” she asked, “Are you sure you’re doing okay?”

“I am,” he replied. “In some ways, I think I’m doing better than I have in a long while.”

“Oh,” she said, nodding. Then flashing a smile, she said, “Well, I’m glad to hear that! I don’t want to see my friend get sad, okay?”

“Right. I’ll try not to worry you, then.”

“But if you *do* get sad, don’t hide it either! It’s really important that friends talk to each other about those kinds of things. Or at least, that’s what I think.”

“Alright, then I’ll try to do that, too.”

Art began to sit up, while Shiori stepped out of her chair. He said, “I should probably head back home, then. What about you two?”

“I shall remain here for the night,” Apollyon said. “There is no sense in departing if I am simply to return in the morning. Call for me if thou should need thy blade, master.”

“I...suppose that makes a degree of sense? And you, Shiori?”

“I’ll be heading back home. Oh, but I’ll walk with you for a little while, alright? We’re heading in more-or-less the same direction.”

“I suppose that makes sense. Alright, then...I suppose take care of yourself, Apollyon?”

“It is I who should be saying as such, master. Take care when thou art with that foolish girl.”

The two of them, Art and Shiori, departed from the academy. The school-house itself was a relatively simple structure—there was a large class-hall, with a number of small rooms affixed to the wings, such as the nurse’s office. There was not a proper dojo, but instead a training field out along the back, which served for general athletic functions. In all of his memory, Art could never recall a time when the school-house had proved inadequate in fulfilling its role.

The sky had darkened considerably in just a short time, as another front of clouds had moved in. Looking up, Art was also fairly sure that it was going to begin raining soon. He asked Shiori, “Do you have a way to dry off properly at your place?”

“I’ll be fine,” she replied. “A little rain never hurt anybody.”

“Let’s at least get you a uniform. There’s a rain-jacket in the kit, so it should help you stay dry. And new shoes, since you lost yours.”

“Ooh, I’ve never worn a uniform before...I hope it’s cute.”

“Cute?”

The two made a quick stop in the supply and locker rooms, before heading off. As they went off into the night, Apollyon watched them from the roof of the school-building, her legs swaying. Once they had departed an adequate distance, she stood herself up, and headed back along the roof, to look down in the back yard. There, standing down in the dirt area, she could see Ms. Kato looking up at her, with her hands deep into her lab-coat pockets.

“My master has departed with the fool girl. There is no longer any need to restrain myself against thee.”

“Then let us see it play out,” Ms. Kato replied. “Though I have told you already: there is little need to worry about collateral damage.”

“Verily, thou believe this? But thou should realize, there is no hope for a mere human to survive, once I release my limiters.”

“You talk a big game, but there is little you can do without the boy acting as your master. My teaching does not begin until tomorrow, but if you are so eager, I see no reason not to teach you a lesson.”

“Teaching is the domain of those who cannot do.”

“Is that so?” the teacher replied, adjusting her glasses. “Then this lesson will be a two-for-one deal.”

The yard was silent for a moment. Then, Apollyon raised her right arm, and announced, “Logician’s Gate—Open!”

The glowing blue bands formed in the air around her arm, as she decided upon the most effective weapon for this battle, “Calculate: Sword of Michael, output 1, temperature 5500.”

But she was not the only one speaking. Ms. Kato, in a much quicker cadence, held out her right hand and called, “Barrier Force, output 10, variable: heat deflection.”

Still, Apollyon wasn't going to allow herself to stop, and she went on to conclude the incantation, calling out the word, "Manifest!"

To a normal human eye, nothing had occurred within the space. But to the eyes of an artificial being such as herself, what Apollyon had manifested in her hand was a sword of pure fire, with a heat matching that of the surface of the sun in its heyday. Even restrained as it was, the blade scorched the surface of the roof below her feet, and warped the air with its absurd heat.

It was the ultimate anti-personnel weapon, capable of instantly vaporizing any human being. In her hand, it would stretch out, striking at a desire target like a whip with a mind of its own—not merely a close-combat weapon, but a short-range homing weapon, which could be swung to fell a full platoon of men or alien creatures at once.

And now, with full awareness of that fact, Apollyon raised her arm back, and swung the weapon. The flames struck out, hissing through the air, and extending out as they struck for Ms. Kato.

Yet with a simple gesture, she waved her hand in front of her, and said, "Whoosh..."

In an arc extending out from her arm came forth an invisible line of numbers, forming together a complex barrier. The tip of the blazing sword made contact with the barrier, and there was a powerful blast of heat, scorching the ground and turning the sand to glass. And then, the sword was shattered apart, while barrier which had sprung into place spiraled back around Ms. Kato, spinning around her like a whirlwind of imaginary numbers.

The teacher pointed her finger at Apollyon, and spoke the words, "Cyclone, output 3, restriction: anti-personnel. Whoosh!"

The whirlwind of numbers shot in the direction of Apollyon. She attempted to leap back, but that proved to be a mistake—indeed, it only made it easier for the cyclone to catch her along its edges, spinning her rapidly and launching her high into the air.

That alone would not be enough to stop her, though. She merely needed to get a little more serious. Once again, she spoke forth a new incantation: "Calculate: Wings of Raphael, output 2, speed: maximum. Manifest!"

From her back sprouted great wings of shimmering blue numbers, while a sword and shield formed in her hands. From that position, she shot down to the earth below, and her human target, easily breaking the sound barrier as she shot down with the force of a meteor.

Ms. Kato spoke her own line, reciting, "Power Armor, output 14, emphasis: reaction time."

She clapped her hands together as Apollyon shot downward. This simple act released enough force to blow back the air around her, and shatter the glass which had formed in the dirt below. Then, the two made contact. Apollyon's blade struck Ms. Kato's left arm head-on. The impact drove her back, causing a great plume of dirt to rise into the air as her feet were dragged back; yet the blade was inadequate to shatter the armor she had shrouded herself with.

It was time for a counter attack, then. Ms. Kato reached forward, aiming for Apollyon's head. But despite moving with enhanced speed, it was nothing compared to that which Apollyon demonstrated. Nothing but a cloud of blue rose petals was left, as Apollyon rapidly shifted her position to behind Ms. Kato, where she laid for a barrage of powerful blows, one after the other.

So began an onslaught of blows, first dozens, then hundreds, each carrying enough deadly force to strike a human being in two. Many of these Ms. Kato deflected away with her arms, moving with an almost inhuman speed herself; yet many besides broke past her guard, striking at what should have been the more vulnerable parts on a human body. Her defenses seemed absolute, impenetrable to any weapon, and leaving Ms. Kato unable to be harmed by such simple attacks. But for Apollyon, whose function was to bring death to all things, could see through the flow of numbers and isolate it—the single weak-point which was steadily opening in that invincible armor.

Yes—though it was a small thing, a minor crack in the guard, there was a single point right in that teacher’s chest which could be struck; it would take nothing more than a singular, decisive blow to the heart, and the battle would be over.

Apologies, master. But I’ll not have thee bound up in this woman as well, and I know thou will not make the wise order thyself.

Her chance, at last, arrived. The moment the vulnerability was fully exposed, Apollyon thrust forward with her full strength, committing everything into a single, final thrust, which would surely pierce the heart of the human before her and put an end to the battle...

Or at least, that was what she thought.

Ms. Kato clapped her hands before her, as the blade came in. With precise timing, made possible only by an inhuman reaction, she caught the blade between her hands, and grabbed it. Then, while Apollyon was still stunned by the outcome, she yanked it forward, and seized the girl who was herself a living weapon by the throat.

“Gah!”

She was not a living being. She did not need oxygen to breathe, as a human did—but as she was modeled after a human, it was impossible to say that she did not feel distress from her position. Her opponent clearly had full awareness of this, for she clutched Apollyon’s neck with enough force to easily block the airways of an ordinary human.

“It is not wise to base your entire strategy on a single weak-point. You would have been better creating a series of different vulnerabilities, so I would have trouble planning a trap on a single one. You should add this as part of your lesson.”

“I’ll kill thee, human...”

“An interesting threat. Unfortunately, I am unable to allow you to fulfill it. I have a job to do of my own, and I cannot accomplish it if I am dead. Since I have no wish of killing you, it seems that I must simply beat you until you concede.”

“The great Apollyon...will never concede...to the likes of thee.”

“Then call it a draw, if it will satisfy your pride.”

Ms. Kato let go of her grip, dropping Apollyon to the ground, and faced her. Her hands had returned to her pocket, though the sequence of numbers which represented her armor was still apparent. So, too, was the fatal weak-point, presented easily for her to see.

For a moment, Apollyon considered taking the shot—it was right there, clear to see. With one thrust of her sword, the battle would be at an end, with no way for her opponent to react in time. But as much as she felt that way, at the same time, she could no longer bring herself to do so.

“Bah!” she called out, dispelling the effects of her logician’s abilities and resetting herself to default. “There is no fun in it, if thou leave such an obvious opening. But this isn’t the end of our battle.”

“I am curious—why do you loathe me so?”

“I cannot say. Ye humans would call it an instinct, I think. Thou hast a smell like that of the incomplete girl...no, rather, ye are like two side of the same coin. She is an incomplete person, akin to a lingering ghost; whilst thou art as an amalgamation of ghosts, a veritable flock of fragmented humans. One with countless holes, at that.”

“Is that what you see? Interesting.”

Ms. Kato turned her back on the girl who had just attempted to kill her, staring off into the distance, past the limits of the town. “I feel much the same was as you do, regarding my current state. My memories before arriving near this place are a mess of out-of-sequence fragments. These memories are surely precious things, and are key behind my own *raison d’être*. Yet I cannot recall them.”

Apollyon laughed, as she said, “So thou hast decided to become a teacher? As if such a thing will fulfill thy will?”

“It will not,” Ms. Kato replied. “However, though I would like to restore what is missing, it seems that I have an additional purpose. That purpose is to share what knowledge I have, and so, I

will perform that function until such a time as I have an opportunity to resolve this problem that I have come across.”

“Fine. Then let this matter to be resolved at another time, human. Yet know this—even if he is merely a master of convenience, that boy is my master. I shall watch thee, and should thee prove a threat, then I will not hold back.”

“That is fine with me. Please ensure your uniform is in order for the start of classes tomorrow.”

Apollyon turned and walked away, heading back for the classroom, and leaving Ms. Kato standing outside, alone, as she looked out into the distant horizon at something which perhaps she alone could see. The sky above continued to darken, and soon, it began to rain.

VIII Garden

The pouring rain beat down hard on the academy town, as two youths walked with umbrellas clutched tightly over their head. There was Art, dressed in black uniform with a thick jacket; and Shiori, dressed for the first time in a girl’s uniform of her own, with her old clothes bundled together under her other arm. With a black jacket worn over a white button-up, it was notably different only in the addition of a few pockets to the jacket, and in substituting the pants with a pleated skirt of red and black plaid patterning.

Shiori, for her part, was enjoying the rain. Each time the pair came across a puddle or series of them, she would hop, jump, or skip over the lot, as if playing a game. Art opted instead to work off of a strategy of avoidance, and she steadily advanced ahead of him along the route.

As they came across a relatively dry patch, Shiori turned around to face Art, walking backward as she asked, “So, are you excited?”

“What do you mean, excited?”

She frowned, and said, “Well, what else? We’re going to be in class together, and that’s really exciting, isn’t it?”

“I guess it is. I’m not really sure what kind of changes she’s going to be making, though.”

“Well, I’m sure it’ll be fine!”

Shiori spun herself back around, just in time to make a jump over a smaller puddle, and began to whistle as she looked around the area. But while her actions were jovial, her eyes were hard as they gazed forward. She thought to herself, *Or at least, I hope it will be fine. But is that strange woman really a teacher, like she says she is?*

She doubted that greatly, but couldn’t put her finger on why. It was a gut feeling, rather than the product of logic and reason based on clear evidence, so there was little reason for her to be able to say otherwise. But more than that, there was another point—did it really matter?

That’s right. Even if she’s a fake teacher, then isn’t that fine for a fake student? I’m sure Art will say something if there’s a problem.

The thought occurred to her, at that point, that it was hypocritical for her to put all the burden of saying something on him. So she turned her head back, and say, “Hey, Art?”

“Yes?”

“What kind of impression do you get from Ms. Kato?”

“I’m not sure. She doesn’t seem like Ms. Ambrosius.”

“Does she seem like a teacher to you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Me neither.”

Well, that didn’t settle the mystery, but at least she knew he was on the same page. She turned her attention back to area around her. In a word, she felt that it was barren—the scattered buildings, separated by great gulfs of space; the old, beaten roads, and the sidewalks running alongside them, which were perfect for forming puddles of rainwater; the dead grasses, which she dearly hoped would regain their color once the rain had passed. Yet under the dark and stormy skies above, it was

impossible to describe this place as open. Indeed, the thickness of the clouds was enough to smother out all but the smallest trickles of light from the dying sun, restricting visibility so strictly that only the faint silhouettes of the nearest buildings could be seen. In this manner, this town, though devoid of features, felt tight and claustrophobic.

The air was cold, enough so that it chilled her to the bones. So loud was the pounding rain, that she was certain if she strayed much further than she already was, she would have to shout in order for Art to hear her. The raindrops drumming against her umbrella were the loudest of all, in this respect, and only seemed to be growing stronger. As Shiori became aware of that, she retreated back a bit, walking side-by-side with Art again.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I didn’t want to yell if we started talking.”

“Is that so?”

“Hey! Are there any buildings here other than houses?”

“Besides the school-house, none that I know of. Not in the town, that is. There’s the observatory, the old one, and a few other things that are on the outskirts.”

“That’s so boring. I want to do something fun, like karaoke, or an arcade. Something indoors and not wet, though.”

“I don’t have any idea what those are.”

“Well, I don’t think they exist any more...but I can try to describe them to you, if you like?”

In her minds eye, Shiori could see herself being cast out across the vast gulf of time and space, to an event many eons ago. In a small room, with a tiny computer screen displaying information, a group of young men and women dressed in casual clothes were huddled together. Two of them, a boy and a girl, were standing together with microphones, singing their hearts out in an amateurish fashion, while a holographic display was cast out from the center table. As the singers gave it their all, she found herself turn to the girl next to her, who offered a bright smile and pointed to another set of mics on the table.

The memory faded, and she could see another, from the point of view of a person in another distant eon, playing a game in some virtual- reality created environment with a boy, firing bullets from a toy gun at giant holographic insects, flying or crawling in from all sides. This small fragment of the past, as well as the other, Shiori shared with Art, sharing with him the fragments of a long-forgotten past. He was quiet through most of her discussion, asking only few clarifying questions, but did have one lingering thought once she reached the end.

“Virtual reality...I wonder how accurate that would be, to describe the Datanet?”

“I’ve never heard of a Datanet before.”

“It’s a place we can access with the use of special headsets, and entering a sleep-like state. The town uses it for communication, and also as a way to access the archive.”

“The archive, huh? That sounds familiar to me, in some way. What is it an archive of?”

“It’s a repository of ancient information, I suppose. Documentaries of past events, and especially about the natural world. You could call it a record of Earth, I suppose.”

“That doesn’t ring any bells, but it still sounds pretty cool. I’d like to check it out, at some point.”

“The headsets are all tied to a single user, so I’m not sure if that would be an option. Unless they were to issue one to you, but I’m not sure how long that take outsiders.”

“Well, I guess I’ll figure it out when the time comes,” she replied, waving her hand as though brushing the topic away. “It’s not like it was that big of a deal, anyways.”

How disappointing, she thought, behind her forced smile. *I guess I’ll just stick with using my special powers then, for now.*

It seemed as though Art had gotten wise to her acting, though, as he replied, “I’ll try to find out from my father what the process would look like. He works at the observatory, so he’d be able to tell me if there was a way to get a substitute. I’m sure that if you’re a student at the academy, there has to be some way for that sort of thing.”

“Oh, could you do that? That would be really nice. But I do think it would be fine, even if you can’t find one. If I had something like that, I would probably just spend all of my time sitting down and looking at old videos. I wouldn’t be able to do things like looking around outside, or spend time talking like this.”

He was quiet for a moment after that, and then said, “I think that is how it often goes, yes.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just that what you described, isn’t exactly uncommon.”

“Oh, I see...”

The rain continued to pour down. He asked her, “Shiori. Do you know what the purpose of the academy is?”

“Isn’t it just learning? Oh, but with all of that order stuff, it’s not like learning for its own sake would make sense. Well, if I were to judge off of your curriculum, then I’d have to say...militant insurance agents.”

“..what?”

“Militant insurance agents. Like you were going to bring back insurance to the planet Earth, and then go in and beat up anyone that committed insurance fraud, or something like that. With swords.”

“That is...I’m not even sure what to say. Where would you even come to that conclusion?”

“Well, most of the stuff you’ve described has to do with the basics of numbers and communication, which would be good for both sales and contracts. And all of the higher mathematics would be great for the actuarial duties, and astronomy for navigation. That’s why I’m really surprised they didn’t go into things like constellations better, since you can use those as references.”

“The process is interesting, but what I mean is...has anything like that existed?”

“Well, the Earth has had a long history, so I imagine it must have at some point. Though you wouldn’t really call it as such, I don’t think. Looking back, I can’t see anything like that...”

There were indeed a few close examples. There were times when insurance companies had hired private military compa-

nies to help them out, or gotten help from the government. And of course, there were all manner of governments which were effectively nothing more than large protection rackets, which she could see countless times. So far as Shiori could tell, her suggestion would have been a novelty.

“Right. But it naturally rolled out of your mouth. Why was that?”

“Hmm...”

She thought about that point. Her first instinct, when he said that, was that it seemed like the obvious conclusion. But was that really the case? Not really, with something so illogical. Yet while it felt illogical, it also felt natural—as if everything had been cleanly synthesized into a single conclusion. So if she were to answer, it would have to be...

“I suppose it just felt right.”

“Even if it was so clearly incorrect?”

“Does it really matter if I was incorrect? Wouldn’t you just correct me if I was? So rather than worry about getting the answer right, it was better to just go with whatever came to me. I would feel even sillier if I sat around, trying to come up with the right answer, and got it wrong. Or if I didn’t even try at all, and it turned out my gut feeling had been right from the very start.”

“But if you aren’t putting the effort into thinking, and going over all of the parts to get that correct answer, then you’re going to end up coming to illogical conclusion. If you don’t know, wouldn’t it be better to just ask? Or to piece the puzzle together through a logical process, if you have enough of the parts together to do so. Not just going off of instinct, but through a rational approach.”

“Maybe. But I don’t feel like rationality alone is enough. Humans aren’t completely rational creatures, after all, and the universe is full of wonder and mystery. I don’t think it’s right to dismiss it altogether, and in general, I think it’s better to go with things like evidence and reason when they’re there. But those on their own don’t tell the full story.”

“For example,” she said. “Take the concept of God.”

“What do you mean?”

“Throughout all of human history, there has never been proof that God—or a group of gods—definitively exist. What scriptures and relics did exist were always, themselves, the products of human hands. But in all of that, humanity kept believing. To this day, all across the Earth, there are people still praying for salvation. Even if it’s not rational, even in the wake of a hundred million failed prophecies, there’s always more of them out there.”

“Isn’t that obvious, though? Religions are an easy way for people to draw in people, money, and power. They can be used for population control, to set down foundations for law and order, or just to help lay out common customs. It’s only natural that the idea would be recycled.”

“Is that what you really think? But I don’t think that religion has all that much to do with it.”

“With God?”

“Right. I feel that faith in God comes from the same place as our ability to put enough faith in our own senses, that we can adopt a sort of rational response. But it’s not an either-or matter, you see—it’s more like our ability to conceptualize. Through the use of reason, our minds can piece together a complex model of the world; but the information we need to do that doesn’t just appear out of nowhere. We need to find it, and in order to do that, we need to be able to imagine things that we can’t yet see, or might not even exist. Since the human imagination is nearly infinite, no matter how complete the model becomes, there will always be holes. The questions just spill out, from there. What happens when we die? Why do good people have to suffer? Will bad people be punished? Will someone forgive our sins? Is there anyone out there who will listen? Why are we here?”

“God,” she said, “Helps us answer those questions. Religions just offer everyone a mass-produced version, to share with the whole family. But tastes will change over time, so religions come and go. But God himself always seems to come back to us, in some fashion.”

“Then you believe in God?”

“I do. I just hope he believes in me, too.”

Thinking back on his earlier question, Shiori realized that it was probably that same power of imagination that came into play when she was answering his question. The human mind was a finite thing, and yet it could still grasp infinity—just because something didn’t exist, that didn’t mean it was impossible for a human to conceptualize it.

“But you know,” she said. “I think we got a little bit side-tracked, there. Weren’t you going to tell me what the academy was *really* for?”

He nodded in response, and then began to explain, “The academy is a school for training leaders.”

“So you really were militants?”

“Not necessarily. Military strategy and tactics are a part of it, and combat of course. But negotiations, government, fiscal policies, public planning, legislation, justice—all of that falls under what we learn. To learn from the mistakes of the past, the intent is to produce leaders who are clever, logical, and free of corruption.”

Shiori laughed, and replied, “Well, you are pretty innocent. But I’m surprised, though. If that’s really the goal, there seems to be a really fatal flaw in your curriculum.”

“What is that?”

Even though Art had asked that, Shiori could tell from the look on his face that it was more of a rhetorical question—no, not quite that. It was as if he knew there was a problem, and was fishing for an answer. *How silly*, she thought, *You don’t need to put on the pretense.*

Still, she went ahead and answered, “It’s the lack of imagination. Those little details like telling stories, acting, or trying to come up with new ideas—that’s what makes a great leader. It’s like whoever designed all of this went and stripped all of that out, though. Not to mention the sheer isolation of this place. Did whoever made this town have some kind of problem with friendship, or something?”

"I never really noticed that, until the other day. But the buildings are truly space out."

"Right? It's weird."

"I don't understand it at all," he said. "It must have been done with a purpose, but I can't imagine what that is."

"Well, I think you'll get there," she replied. Of course, it wasn't as if Shiori knew herself, but that was how she felt on the matter. "Now that you've gone ahead and learned those things on your own, then I think it's only natural you'll pull it off."

Though he had said back when they were in the alien-god's heart that he was enjoying himself, Shiori still felt a bit of regret when she considered her role in upsetting the status quo. *He was doing fine, here. He didn't need me to come in and start throwing things at him, or making him question the town. Even if he says it's fine, the truth is, I really just went and did what I wanted without thinking about the consequences.*

She thought back to when she had first arrived in town. It hadn't been long ago, but for some reason, those memories had already become a bit hazy. For whatever reason, she had found herself in the overgrown woods on the outskirts of town, walking forward with no real thought to where she was. There was only a vague sense, at the time, that she needed to keep walking forward, and she would find something. Yet as she did so, she could never quite figure what she was looking for.

Eventually, Shiori grew tired of walking. She decided that once she found a place to rest, then she would surely stop. Perhaps that thought had been prophetic, because soon after, she found a small clearing. It was a beautiful place, abundant in flowers, and the red sunlight which trickled down was beautiful. Thinking how pleasant the bed of flowers would be to lay in, she stumbled forward, and at the foot of a great tree, she allowed herself to lay down and close her eyes.

It was a calming experience. Perhaps she had closed her eyes for a few seconds, perhaps she had done so for many hours; in any case, the rest had been dearly needed, for it was at that point that her memories began to become more solid.

When she opened her eyes, she could see the sky, and the red sun which hung high above. She could see the branches of great tree which reached out over her, and she could see, up in those branches, one other thing—a small tree-house, built of simple, hand-carved wood. From the tree-house hung a simple ladder, leading up to the higher branches.

If there is a ladder, it's only natural to climb it.

Such had been her thoughts, as she stood up, and began to make her way up the ladder. She wondered, as she climbed, what she might find up there. Some old toys, left scattered around by whoever build the place? Maps pointing to some hidden treasure, calling out to whatever travelers found them? A collection of magical books, which would let her travel back in time?

But when she made her way into the tree-house, she found none of that. It was surprisingly spacious, enough to stand without hitting her head, and even had a few basic furnishings. To her surprise, there were even a few compression tubes which, though dusty themselves, did well to miraculously preserve their contents—a folding mattress, some bed-sheets, spare clothes, toiletries, and enough other goods that she had the thought that someone must have left everything needed to survive in that place.

There weren't any magic books for sending the reader back in time, but there were a few mundane ones. From the titles, which called to mind fantastic lands and epic journeys, they seemed to her to be works of fiction. Yet as she began to read the first one, her found her mind began to race, calling back memories similar to the content of the text; memories which, though they appeared in her minds eye, she was quite certain were not her own.

It was in such a fashion that she discovered her power.

She wandered around a bit, after that. That was how she had found the grave—a relatively fresh grave marker, which marked that there were surely humans around. So she had returned, and the next day, she went out with a basket of flowers, gathered by hand from the clearing at the foot of the great tree.

How was it that the flowers below, were all flowers for a funeral?

Shiori had no answer for that question.

Shortly after that, she had met Art. She spoke to him, and with a little push, was able to get him to push back. There had been no higher thought to any of it, at the time. Thoughts of making a friend, or going on a little adventure together, hadn't really crossed her mind.

She just felt like it would be fun, was all.

There was no thought to finding a higher purpose in those actions. It was a basic, human impulse, born out of curiosity. If there had been a reason behind it, she thought, then it had to have simply been that she felt compelled to act upon her first impulse. If she were forced to put it into words, then those words would probably be...

I suppose I just don't want to regret not doing something.

It was better to regret actions, than it was inaction. That was how she saw things, though she couldn't particularly articulate why. Was it a natural response to the imminent death of the red sun? Or was it just a key part to her absent memories? That much was unknown.

Though, there were a few things she did know.

"But you know, Art..." she said.

"Yes?" he answered.

"I think they probably succeeded with you. You still have things to learn, but I think someone honest like yourself, with a good heart, has everything he needs to become a great leader."

He smiled, and said, "I'm glad to hear you say that. Though, I don't really know, myself. I don't feel like I've ever been in charge of anything. When we were at the funeral, I couldn't even think of anything to say to my classmates...even as the head of the class, there was nothing I could do for them, at the time. I knew almost nothing about them, and our teacher? I knew even less. I didn't feel like a leader. I felt useless."

From out of the corner of her eye, Shiori could see Art clenching his fists as he spoke. So she answered him, "But now you know what it feels like, right? So in the future, you'll be able to

do better, because you learned from that. After all, it's not like you're an adult."

"I suppose I'm not, am I? Yet even though you're the same age, it's like you're..."

He seemed to be struggling to find the words. Teasingly, she asked him, "Clever? Charming? More beautiful than Apollon?"

"I don't know. You just feel a little like an adult."

"Are you calling me an old hag!?"

"Eh? I'm not sure what a hag is, so I don't think so?"

She dropped the pretense of her false indignation and giggled at his flustered response. In truth, she felt there was a little truth to what he said. Her body was undeniably that of a girl only some fourteen years of age, but as the flashing images from the past ran through her mind, she could feel them slowly making an impression.

In the time that Art had been out, she had cast her mind far back into the past, looking for any possible medical guidance. In just that short bit of time, it was as though she had spent years living through the lives of people who were long dead.

How much more of this can my mind really take?

Friends talked to each other—that was what Shiori had said. But this concern, she thought, was her burden to bear.

I don't know how long it will be until it starts to slip away, but for just this little while, I want to remain myself.

This small window in time, then, was her earnest prayer to God.

At long last, the two passed in front of Art's house. He began to make his way up to the front porch, but then stopped, and turned to her. He asked, "Does your house have a washing machine?"

"No, nothing like that," she replied. "Why do you ask?"

He hesitated, then answered, "I think it might be a good idea to get your clothes washed, is all."

She cocked her head, sniffed her new uniform, and sniffed her old clothes. The uniform was mostly clean, but on closer in-

spection, she was a bit caught off guard by just how earthy her old clothes had become. It was a bit embarrassing, but she managed to choke out, “You might be right. I guess I’ll just have to get out a bowl, and wash them in the rain until they’re clean.”

“I was going to say...maybe it would be better if you stayed here overnight?”

Oh? That wasn’t something she’d expected. Still, never turn down a good opportunity for having fun. She replied, “You’re inviting a girl to stay in the house overnight? That’s brave of you.”

“It is?”

If you’re going to answer like that, what are you even hesitating for?

She sighed, and said, “Well, not really. Still, what made you bring it up? You hadn’t said anything earlier.”

“It’s just that, I don’t really know how far away that place you’re living is. But it’s only going to get darker as the sun sets, and the rain is so harsh, that it doesn’t feel right to have you going off on your own. Especially since we have school tomorrow..”

“So you were just worried, then?”

The tree-house had been a pretty comfortable place to stay the night, but she didn’t really have any attachment to it. It was, after all, just a place that she happened to come across. Since he was so worried about things, then why not oblige?”

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll come on in, then. Do you have a spare bed?”

“I’ll have to get one out of storage, but that shouldn’t be too much of a problem. Though, I suppose we’ve never had a guest over before.”

“Well then, I’ll try my best to set a good precedent for the others.”

The two of them stepped into the house, as the rain continued to pour down onto the small town. Before she stepped inside, Shiori took a moment to look down at the edge of the porch, where the wood met with the grass. There, growing at the base, were a few tiny flowers – weeds, more than likely—which were piercing their way up from the old grass. It was a small patch, no

more than perhaps a dozen flowers, with their colors muted out in the waning afternoon light. But in their precarious position, she thought they made a beautiful little garden.

IX

Overture

It was early on in his life that Art found himself cooking for himself – he couldn't remember a breakfast or dinner he hadn't prepared on his own since his third year at the academy. Without formal training, he had resigned himself to the simplest possible meals, aiming to meet the nutrition requirements without much attention to flavor.

This was the logical way to go about things, after all. Taking careful accounting for his calorie expenditure, and aiming to meet the daily requirements—conveniently provided in lieu of a cookbook, though it had taken him a few years to learn the full science behind it—he had been doing a great amount to help advance his developing physique.

So what is this?

He woke up this morning to find not only that he had no need to cook himself, but that a proper breakfast had been laid out. In a bowl, there was a mixture of white beans, diced vegetables, and bits of meat in broth; it was topped with poached eggs, and served with two sides – a piece of buttered toast, and a plate of thin, flat cakes, in slightly round shapes and topped with chopped vegetables.

Who was responsible for this? He had to look no further than right next to his chair, where the culprit stood; she had an apron on, her hair done up in a ponytail, her hands on her hips, a little bit of food stuck to her face, and a very proud smile. In the seat next to her was a replica of the exact same breakfast.

“Well? Are you impressed?” she asked.

“I'm not really sure where to begin.”

“Well, you can start by saying ‘thank you’, I think. And then not leaving anything behind, because I’ll never forgive you if you’re wasteful.”

“Ah...thank you, Shiori.”

She nodded, and then sat herself down. Focusing her attention on the food, she said, “Really, I didn’t expect how nice it would be to sleep a warm bed, like that. I thought it was the least I could do, to return the favor like this. I hope I didn’t mess up your pantry too much.”

“No, it’s fine...I didn’t even know we had some of this stuff, to be quite honest. I’m not even sure what these flat-cakes are.”

“Pancakes! I don’t think it’s a classical recipe, but I was able to look back into the cooking process of a chef who used a bunch of things not too different. I thought they looked tasty.”

“Is that right? I guess they do.”

They smelled good, at least. The two began their breakfast. Having had all manner of strange dishes in the Datanet, Art couldn’t help but feel that the flavors seemed muted, compared to what he was used to. But in spite of those imperfections, there was a warmth to it, as though a certain level of human craftsmanship had been applied. Furthermore, the pancakes were by far unlike anything he had tasted, even if Shiori complained that she hadn’t been able to find a good syrup to complete the stacks.

“Do you have experience cooking, Shiori?”

“Oh, no...well, basic things, I guess. But I can’t remember anything like this. Trying out a recipe, working in a kitchen...it all feels new to me. I just wanted to try it out, I think.”

Her gaze was directed at the far wall across from her, as she spoke, “It’s funny, though. I’m sure that if I could see things, like I can, then I would have had to have gotten the idea at some point. Right?”

“Your memories are incomplete, aren’t they? Maybe you just forgot, is all there is to it?”

“No, it’s not like that. It’s more like...”

She struggled for the words, eventually coming up with, “It’s like, you know how I can still remember details about the world?”

It's the same thing for experiences. I can remember a bunch of things, like how to operate a radio, or pilot a ship. I just don't know why I know how to do those things, I guess? So if I had cooked before, to make something like this, then I would definitely be able to remember that."

"I see. I guess that makes a little sense."

Still, there was one other question which he needed answered. For that matter, it was a far more pressing question, one which had been burning in him from the start. Having gotten past the small details, he needed to address the elephant in the room.

"Shiori?"

"Yes?"

"How did you do this without waking me up?"

The previous day, after they had entered into Art's house, the two had gone into the storage room to take a few things out. He had no way of knowing for sure, as he had never entered another house, but the way he understood it, each home had a standardized set of goods, including furniture, replacement parts, boxes of assorted clothing, training gear, emergency food supplies, and cooking equipment.

The standardized layout was three bedrooms, one two-room bathroom, the washroom, a kitchen with pantry, and a common room with a dining area in the back; with the addition of the storage room, and a small space in the basement for plumbing, residents in theory had a great deal of choice for customization. Indeed, thinking back to when he was younger, Art had actually shared a single room with his brother. Since this brother now occupied the third bedroom, Art could hardly use it as a guest bedroom—but thanks to those old memories, he was able to recall that, out in storage, there remained all of the pieces they would need to convert his bed back into a bunk-bed.

When he proposed the idea, Shiori had taken on a peculiar look on her face, which reminded him a bit of photographs he had seen of cats on the hunt. But she refused to elaborate on it,

simply saying, “If it’s not a problem with you, I won’t say anything, okay?”

It took a little bit of work, and a lot of digging around the storage room, but the two successfully converted Art’s room into a two-person bedroom. Throughout the whole time, Art’s father remained spaced out in the Datanet, though his brother—a boy a few years their senior, with strikingly red hair—had popped in a few times, which had led to a short exchange between the three.

“So that strange lady is going to be your teacher? I wondered what was going to happen with that. Well, looks like you’re gonna graduate on time after all, Art. And nice to meet you too, little miss. My name’s Kay, by the way. Feel free to stick around as long as you’d like.”

Shiori claimed the top bunk, which suited Art just fine. Outside of a small dinner—he assumed she had made her assessment of the pantry while they were preparing that—and tossing clothes in the wash, the the only other thing of note in the evening was Shiori taking time to look over some of Art’s notebooks, with high praises for his details and penmanship, while he continued to make additional notes in his most recent one.

Once she had finished her perusal, Shiori climbed up to the top of the bed, and made the bold declaration, “Since you’ve been out for a while, and I fell asleep earlier, then we’ll definitely be able to stay up and talk all night!”

For a while, they did make a little small talk. Eventually, though, Shiori’s voice started to slow down, and she murmured something under her breath about the softness of the mattress. The last thing she said, with the light of the candle still burning and Art writing into his notebook, was, “This is really nice.”

Art went to bed a bit later, after finishing logging everything he had learned into the book—or at least, as much as seemed appropriate. He did not expect to sleep in; nor did he expect that he would, rather than waking up on his own, be awakened by Shiori, who had somehow gotten up early, slipped out of bed, and prepared breakfast without waking him.

Still, having now asked her about that, her only responses

was, “You looked like you need a little more rest, so I figured it would be fine to just leave you like that?”

Once breakfast was finished, the two put on their uniforms, and made their way back to school. The skies were clearing up, as the rain had finished falling sometime in the morning. Only once they were out and walking did Shiori reveal, “I was actually thinking that if I got up early enough, I might be able to see a rainbow. But I didn’t see one, so that was a little disappointing.”

They left the house pretty early, but ended up getting delayed a bit after getting turned around. Shiori had mercilessly teased him about it after, but he had gone off in a wrong direction—he had remembered the path as turning after four houses, not after three, which ended up putting the rest of the travel route entirely into question.

When they came near to the school building, Art noted the slow trickle of other students coming from across town. Many moved alone, though there were a few traveling together. His attention was quickly drawn to Gareth and Chloe, who crossed along the perpendicular path and met them across from the school-house.

“Hey there,” Gareth greeted them. “I wasn’t sure if you were going to show up, since the confirmation came after you disconnected.”

“Well, I ended up meeting the new teacher in person,” Art replied. “So that made it a lot easier.”

Chloe looked over to Shiori, and said, “Are you the girl he told us about?”

“Probably!” she replied. “My name is Shiori. Who are you?”

“I’m Chloe, and this is Gareth. It is a pleasure to meet you, Shiori.”

“You as well!” Shiori replied, before asking, “So, are the two of you Art’s friends, then?”

“Friends?” Chloe asked, looking to Art with some confusion.

“Ah, it’s a bit hard to explain...” he began. “Shiori?”

Shiori explained the same thing she had before, but this time, Art noticed that she stopped after, as if unsatisfied with her ex-

planation. But the others didn't seem to notice, so Gareth said, "I guess it might be something like that, then? Let's head on over to class, though."

"Right," Art replied, in agreement. Gareth took point, with Chloe near him, while Art hung back a bit with Shiori. Having a sense that it was something to be kept private, while the other two were talking about some event from the Datanet, he quietly asked, "Are you alright?"

"Yes, it's just that..."

She hesitated a moment, and said, "I'm not sure I really like that definition that I gave, is all."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just...I feel like there's more to it than that. I think that all of that stuff about doing things together and liking being around each other is part of it, but I feel like that's just not all of it."

"Do you mean that thing you said yesterday, about friends talking to each other?"

"Exactly. So I think...there's a level of trust, too. And I think that might be important. No, it's definitely, really important."

"Oi, what are you two whisper about?" Gareth called back. "You're not worried about what happened with Alex?"

"What do you mean?" Art asked. "Something happened to him?"

"Yeah," Gareth replied. "He send everyone a message that his room was experiencing weird glitches. Then he sent us all this weird garble of text, and that was the last we heard."

"Then the message disappeared, too," Chloe added. "Or at least, the original ones did. I thought it might be an encryption puzzle, so I took a few still shots, so I could rotate them around. I printed some out so we could look at them, together."

She passed a sheet of paper back, which Art took, and looked over with Shiori. It was almost certainly a cipher, though he had no way to tell what the key was. Shiori took a long glance, and then said, "Sorry, I don't know how to solve this one."

"I would be more worried if you could," Art replied. "Though if she could do logician-level formulations, then Apollyon

should be able to crack something like this, right?"

"I refuse," Shiori quickly replied. "I'll figure it out."

"You're interested in these kinds of things, too?" Chloe asked.

"Well, it's a puzzle, right? So that's basically a game. I'm sure it'll be a lot of fun."

"Do you want to have a race then? To see who can crack this one the fastest?"

"Oh, that sounds like more fun. Sure, let's do it!"

Gareth chuckled, and looked to Art, "Well, I'm not gonna be much help with something like that. What about you? Aren't you pretty good at this kind of thing?"

"I'm not so sure, myself."

"Oh, don't be modest," Chloe insisted. "You've always tied with me in cryptography, you know."

"I suppose, but..."

He didn't know what it was, exactly, but something told Art that there was more to it than that. He had always turned his assignments in on time, and he had cracked all of the codes given. But there had never been a time when he had been the first to turn it in. Every time, as he could recall, there had been someone else whose work had been turned in first. So he had maintained a tied score, but...

The look on Chloe's face wasn't much different, from when Gareth had made his challenge before. Now, reflecting back, he thought he had an idea of what was going on in her mind.

She wants a chance to beat me, not to tie. Doesn't she?

Had she asked for a request like that before? If she had, he almost certainly would have turned it down. There was a part of him that had the same thought, even now. But seeing the excitement that Shiori was radiating, plus the look of challenge in Chloe's eyes, he answered her, "Sure. Let's all do our best, then?"

"Right!" Chloe replied, pumping her fist in the air. "You'd better try your best, though, okay?"

"I will. I promise."

The four made their way into the school-house. There had always been more desks than students—a fact which hadn't

seemed significant to Art before, but certainly caught his eye now—which had always left quite a bit of freedom in terms of seating. In practice, his classmates tended to elect for the same seating each day, and he was no different. Such was the nature of things happening in their own order, and such was the way of the students here, that the back rows were generally free of any students.

In this fashion, he moved to his own preferred seat, along the left-hand side of the class; while further back, he wasn't quite the end. Gareth took up a seat behind him, and Chloe the seat to his side. Both of these, he recalled, were in their right order—what was not, however, was Shiori, who placed herself immediately in front of him.

“There isn't assigned seating, is there?” she asked him.

“No, not really. But everyone tends to stick in the same place.”

“Oh...well, I'm sure it'll be fine!”

He thought he saw the student who had previously occupied that seat enter from that back, but decided it would be better not to think about it. There was a bit of commotion from the front, though, as the sounds of stomping came from along the side. There, out at the front of the class, came striding Apollyon. Though she was wearing the school uniform, it wasn't quite right to say she was wearing it as a uniform – she had tailored her skirt high, was wearing her own heels, and continued to wear her earrings; though she wore the jacket of the school, it was popped open, allowing the glow of her body-marks to radiate from under the thin undershirt, which was taunt against her chest. These things, alongside her strange violet eyes and white hair, made her immediately stand out as something irrational.

With a twirl and a flourish, the living weapon introduced herself to the class, proclaiming, “Quake in terror, ye humans, for ye stand in the presence of the great Apollyon! For though I have languished a protracted period of time, I have now descended by the hand of my master to your pathetic school, where I shall make a brief sojourn. Ye who hone your minds in this place, behold and know despair; for so great does my cognitive

prowess exceed that of ye, that a dozen of your lifespans would be inadequate to match what I can accomplish. For I, Apollyon, am a transcendent being—worked by the hand of man, yet surpassing mankind in all respects. It is merely the virtue of my most excellent, magnanimous self, that ye still writhe about on this wretched planet. Know that my presence here is not a competition, but merely a chance for me to exhibit my excellence to my master.”

Then, having made this declaration, she pulled up her skirt and performed a light curtsy. Locking eyes with Art, she advanced towards him. Much as Shiori did, she thoughtlessly claimed the seat directly off to the side from Art, and said, “’Tis only right that I stand at thy right side, master. For I am thy blade, after all.”

Art was at a loss for words. Gareth whispered from behind him, “Is this her, then? That other, weird girl?”

“Curb thy tongue, ape child, or I shall split it.”

“Apollyon...” Art said, “Is this really necessary?”

“Thou must elaborate, master. I know not of what thou speak.”

Shiori threw herself in the way as Art struggled to find the words, saying, “He’s talking about the part where you just seem to want to piss everyone off. It’s obnoxious. We talked about this!”

“Thou dare interject thyself, foolish girl?” Apollyon replied, as she twisted her face in disgust. “Fie, it is no matter. I am merely speaking the truth. I will not hold back my contempt for this poor lot, be they incomplete or not as humans, lest they prove to me a reason otherwise.”

Chloe, seated behind her, made a soured face, as she said, “Well, if you’re that great, why don’t you prove it by actually doing well first? It only matters what you do, not what you say.”

“Oho? There is fire in thee, human, to challenge a superior being in so brash a fashion. This pleases me.”

Apollyon seemed to genuinely smile as she said that, though it was a predatory smile, reminding Art of videos of hunting

hounds. Still, she took no aggressive action, and continued by saying, "Fine then. I shall relax my challenges for ye, until such a time as I have demonstrated my supremacy in point of fact. Savor this short reprieve."

The small seating changes from Shiori and Apollyon had caused a domino effect, disturbing the general order of the class more than any time Art could recall before. Between the shift in teachers, discussions related to the surprisingly short break, the changes in seating, and of course the declaration from Apollyon, the degree of murmuring which had picked up in the often silent classroom stood out to Art more than he was used to experiencing.

Indeed, such was the shift in the class climate, on this morning, that there were still students speaking as another new face entered. From the same general direction as Apollyon had entered, Ms. Kato stepped toward the front of the class, dressed still in the same lab-coat based attire as she had before. In a clean motion, she marked her name on the board, and turned to the class, before saying, "Good morning. My name is Ms. Kato, and I will be your teaching for the immediate future. Before we begin class, I wish to make a few announcements."

The class turned quiet, as each of the students directed attention to the new teacher. She continued, "I have reviewed the curriculum which was laid out for the academy, and deemed it to obsolete. Henceforth the direction of this course will shift from the academic fundamentals and memorization, toward practical application of those skills, and personal research. I expect you to use your imagination, and plot out your own path to adulthood. Are there any questions?"

Though a few of the students remained unfazed by her words, Art immediately noted the glances about the room, as the class attempted to digest what she had just said. Eventually, a girl raised her hand—a short girl, with dark hair and a quiet voice, whom Art remembered was named Joan—and asked, "Ms. Kato, what do you mean by the path to adulthood? Isn't that what graduation is?"

Art wondered a bit about that, himself. Until just recently, the idea of learning independently seemed a foreign concept; even now, hearing it from a teacher seemed a bit absurd. Likewise, the idea of adulthood as something separate from graduation seemed like an oddity. Yet it was certainly the case that Shiori, though impulsive, seemed to have a level of maturity he didn't feel in himself; and Ms. Kato, being an outsider, had clearly become an adult without attending the academy. Still, he stayed quiet, and waited to hear what answer would be given.

"Wrong," Ms. Kato said, causing another wave of confusion. She did not turn her gaze away from Joan, but waited a moment before elaborating further, saying, "Graduation has nothing to do with being an adult. Even your physiological changes are of greater significance in this regard, though age in and of itself is not adequate to make on a proper adult. The path to adulthood is the path to learning your *raison d'être*. Should you continue your current course, and live as nothing but a sponge for information, you will be nothing more than a tool."

To his side, Art could hear Apollyon mumble, "Logician's gate, open...calculate: knife, output 1, ignore wood...manifest..." and then, with her left hand laid on the table with her fingers spread out, begin to lazily mime the motions of stabbing a knife back and forth between her fingers.

For as old as she claims to be, he thought, She doesn't really come off as much of an adult, does she?

Joan, perhaps feeling the pressure of Ms. Kato's gaze, did not push for any more. Instead, the next to speak was Oliver, a blonde-haired boy who was on the shorter side, with long hair that covered over one of his eyes. He raised his hand, and asked, "Ms. Kato. When you say we will engage in practical applications, what will that look like?"

"Good question. Allow me to demonstrate."

Ms. Kato raised her hand in the shape of a gun, and then pointed it at Apollyon, before saying, "Bang."

Apollyon, caught up in her knife, didn't notice. Her head fell back, as though struck with something, and she let out a sound

not dissimilar from a squawking bird, before her head dropped to the desk and she began mumbling something about 'imminent vengeance'.

"This," their teacher explained. "Is the power of the ether logician. It is the ability to utilize 12th dimensional calculations to produce an effect in the material world. You have acquired a foundation in the abstract lore of mathematics, and in that respect stand above the men of the current era, who have regressed to the point that those able to practice the art of trigonometry are deemed as great sages. The arts of the ether logician are build upon these principles. Your training will consist of mental exercises directed at expanding your imagination, which has thus far been hindered, so that you might tear away the veil separating you from the world apparatus. Once that is in hand, you will find it a peerless tool in illuminating your path. Furthermore, through this training process, you will come to attain a power greater than that of any army in the modern world, to better pursue the attainment of your own *raison d'être*."

The class was silent. Though the occasion head turned to glance at Apollyon, most were directing their focus firmly upon Ms. Kato. Yet Art, sitting next her, could hear the weapon girl begin to mumble the words, "Hearken now, children of a world soon ending; hear ye now, the overture of your grand reckoning."

Interlude

School had closed, at the eve of the third day. All of the students, save for one who had opted to remain in the schoolhouse, had returned home for the evening. Standing at the front door, dressed in a white lab-coat, was the sole teacher of that school, Ms. Kato.

As she made her way out, she was stopped by the voice of that one lingering girl, presently dressed as a delinquent, who remained seated at her desk. That girl called out, "And where art thou going, oh teacher? Dost thou fear that this will be the eve

upon which I will work dark vengeance upon thee?"

"I see no harm in telling you," she replied. "I am making my way to the observatory."

"Oh? Thou hast business with the ones in charge, then?"

"On the contrary, they have done nothing to contact me since my arrival. I find this quite suspicious."

"Ho...then thou art nothing more than a vagrant who has assumed the role of a teacher, then? Ah, but I suppose that not once have thee made claims otherwise. Is it fine to rely on the assumptions of others, so long as the lie is not thine own?"

"Perhaps..."

She reached for the door, then stopped, and turned back to her delinquent student, asking, "Have you noticed it?"

Apollyon nodded, and replied, "Aye. 'Tis only a matter of time until my master begins to realize the truth. Should he wish to pursue it, I shall aid him in his revelations. Until then, I shall remain silent."

"Is that so? Then you seem to be more aware than I have. I do not suppose you would share what you have learned?"

Apollyon merely laughed at that. Ms. Kato stared at her, her face entirely devoid of any possible emotion. She said nothing in return, and instead turned back to the door, stepping out into the dwindling light of evening. Her hands in her pockets, she began to walk in the direction of the observatory on the outskirts of town.

It had not rained since the storm a few nights back, though a cold wind had moved in to take its place, blowing her hair as she went past. The dying shrubs and grasses of the area had been rejuvenated, bringing forth patches of green across the vast stretches of empty scenery. The sky overhead gently faded from a swirl of red and violet into a gradually deepening darkness, and then into a glorious firmament, as she passed her way along the outskirts of town. She stayed for but a short time at the old observatory, which had long since become overrun in a tangle of vines and moss, spooking a few small gremlins and other crit-

ters which were dwelling within. Only by the rising of the moon did she come to the observatory proper.

Surrounding the observatory, which was installed into a rocky hill, was a great chain-link fence. The singular gate was protected by a single padlock of excellent quality. It took only a lightly muttered incantation for her to call forth an invisible tool for picking the lock, which fell to the ground with a heavy thud, allowing a swift and easy entrance.

Ms. Kato glanced around, as she walked along the unpaved road which lead from the gate entrance up to the observatory. There were a number of vehicles parked along the edge, some in excellent condition, while others had clearly been left as victims to the weather for a very long time. The worst among these were ancient, rusted things; others were simply worn down. Out of curiosity, she came by one of the newer ones, and popped the door open. The air within was stale, and the dust heavy; furthermore, when went to start the vehicle, she found that it refused to do so.

The chassis is still in good condition, but the battery is dead. It must have been left unattended out here for months. For the older vehicles, it would be a matter of years.

Having made this confirmation, she continued making her way up to the observatory. The greater part of the structure had been built into the rock, though there were still a few parts that showed: the large, rectangular structure where the door was; the great dome, with a telescope of immense size pointed to the sky; and an array of great dishes, pointed up after it.

She tried the door, and found that it wasn't locked. She switched over to a different weapon, preparing a six-chambered revolver as her readied logician weapon, and then pulled the door open. Upon seeing what was inside, she said simply, "Is that how it is?"

X School

Thus began Shiori's life as a student. It had already been a week—a long week which involved a great deal of academic work, mental exercises for logician training, and physical training at different parts. It was all very new, and her general appraisal of the week, after everything was said and done, was a simple one:

This really isn't that fun, is it?

Of course, that wouldn't stop her from putting on her best chipper attitude. There were, after all, plenty of fun things to be had. Even if the mental drills were awful, the actual process of getting involved with the rest of the class seemed like a pleasant novelty.

The lectures are a little useless, though. I know that Art and the others don't know much about the outside world, but it really feels like it's all stuff I've heard before. Still, the training sessions are alright.

Back in the trivern nest, she had found herself desperately wishing for a weapon of some kind. In hindsight, she wished she had pushed for Art to take her to the school-house before they headed out of town – the place had a veritable armory, stocked with both training gear and proper weapons, as well as the protective gear necessary for working with both sets.

“You're a new student, right? You are quite the *sabreuse*.”

“Oliver, was it? Thanks, I like to give it everything I've got.”

The long-sword was solidly the territory of Art and Gareth, and while she could occasionally match the latter with trickery, it seemed that Art was quick to become wise to her ploys. The saber proved more to her taste, and when it came to fencing with it, she found her muscle memory seemed well-suited to the motions. In that regard, her main sparring partner came to be Oliver, who demonstrated talent just shy of hers with that weapon.

Their duel today was a different matter entirely, though. Under the whim of Ms. Kato, the academy had also introduced

the use of a shield and arming sword, which had put students on a relatively even ground. In this new area, the two had risen quickly, though Oliver had proved to have a slight edge in that style. Sword and shield moved back and forth, as the two moved between bouts, counting off the points at each strike of the blunted training swords.

“Take this!”

Shiori hurled her shield off of her arm, aiming for her opponent’s head. Then, she slipped in, and struck him in the stomach. Immediately a loud buzzer was sounded, as Ms. Kato stepped forward to interrupt the ongoing practice.

“Must I remind you again, Shiori, that it is not appropriate to use your shield as a throwing weapon? The match goes to Oliver. The two of you should take a quick rest.”

“It seems fair to me...”

He patted her on the back, and said, “It was a good idea. But it’s better if you try to follow the rules, you know?”

“It’s not like there’s really any rules in fighting. It’s all just to keep safe during practice, and it’s not like the shield was going to hurt you, or anything. It’s all fair to me.”

“Yes, but once you’ve done it enough that the whole class associates you with it, then it doesn’t have the same element of surprise. Well, but I suppose it did work on me this time, didn’t it?”

“It did. You see, I knew that you would think to yourself, there was no way I would do it twice in a row. If she hadn’t stopped us, my plan was to do a fake-out the next time.”

“It’s really just tricks all the way down with you, isn’t it?”

“I like tricks. They give you more options, and a lot more fun. It’s like instead of just playing the game, you’re playing two games at once, which is twice as engaging.”

The two of them walked over to grab some water, then sat over at the waiting bench. The main practice area was behind the school-house, and most of the students were still engaged in some kind of training, at the time. Of those who were off to the side, most were resting between practice sessions (with the sole exception of one unfortunate student, who had severely injured

himself after an accident involving broken glass which had inexplicably been out in the sand).

Those not currently engaged in training, for the most part, were directing their attention to the start show of the moment—a two-on-one duel, with Art facing off against both Gareth and another student, a dark-haired boy who she thought was named Owen.

Of course, though it seemed two-on-one, the duel was in truth a tag-team match. But while the Gareth and Owen were acting as each other's partners, Art was instead paired with the glowing blue glass-like sword in his hands.

"Thou would ask me, the ultimate weapon, to cheapen myself with such inferior productions? There is no argument to be had—I refuse to debase myself with such inelegance. I shall be a blade for my master, and naught else."

Upon saying those words, Apollyon had turned herself back into a sword, and put Art in the awkward position of being forced to use her for tag-team duels. This had forced him to dedicate an unusually high amount of time to the long-sword, in order to deal with the stubborn weapon he had found himself stuck with.

To the surprise of the other students, perhaps not the least of all himself, he was able to keep up with the intensive training. The speed and precision of his movements, as heightened by his synchronization with Apollyon, were inhuman—enough to keep pace, even against two opponents at once—and were only improving with each bout. From Shiori's observation, most of his losses involved neither a problem of form, or a technical slip-up; rather, he would come to a sudden stop in the middle of a maneuver, giving the others a chance to land a solid hit.

He's definitely getting better, but he's really started eating for two lately, hasn't he? Well, not that I mind that much. I've been really surprised by the variety of ingredients the observatory has on hand—I don't think I'll get a better chance to try out making new dishes.

In the end, she had ended up staying with Art, and the two were currently sharing the bunk together. There was only one desk, still, but that wasn't too much of a concern—it wasn't as

if she really needed to write anything down, after all, since she could just pull up a lesson on repeat when needed. She had, however, made a habit of reading through some of his older books before bedtime, and finding amusement at the meticulousness of his notes.

Like most of the others, her attention remained on his bouts. But when she took a glance over to Oliver, she saw that he was looking at a very different part of the field. Rather than Art and his match, he was looking over to Joan and her sparring partner, who were currently practicing with spears.

“Were you thinking of practicing spear-fighting?” she asked.

“Huh? Ah, no...”

He looked away, and she could catch a bit of a blush on his face. It took a moment for the pieces to click in her head, but eventually, she arrived at her conclusion and asked, “Or is it more about the one doing the training?”

His eyes grew a bit wide at her words, but then, as if having been caught, he said, “Hey, Shiori. Is that kind of thing normal?”

“What kind of thing? Give me the details, here.”

Just because I can see the past, that doesn't mean I can read minds, she thought to herself. Though, she hadn't really brought that up much with anyone other than Art. There was a part of her that wanted to declare it to the class on the first, but then Apollyon had gone off and seized the spotlight with her signature eccentricity. Then Ms. Kato had come in and proposed logician training for the full class, which essentially one-upped anything she could manage.

But, there was one other thing.

I shouldn't say this to Ms. Kato.

It was hard for her to describe why, exactly. It was another one of those gut feelings she had, just like her impression that Ms. Kato wasn't really a teacher.

There was a shadow of inauthentic sentiments hanging over this school-house, and that bothered her a bit. So, in this case, it was quite nice to hear Oliver, after a bit of thought, begin to speak in his most authentic manner possible.

“It’s a feeling like...looking at a person, and just kind of wanting to keep looking at her. And it feels like you could keep looking forever, if that was all there was to it. But also wanting to talk to her, I guess, and just be next to her. Thinking about her when she’s not around, feeling a tightness in your chest. Feeling flushes of warmth, sometimes. That sort of thing, I suppose.”

“Oh, isn’t that just love?”

From the blank expression he returned, it looked like she had a bit of an obstacle on her hand. *What is with this place, seriously?*

“I can’t say I’m familiar with the word,” he eventually said. “Is it a kind of illness?”

“No, it’s not...uh. Oliver, do you know where babies come from?”

“Sex, right?”

“What kind of warped school teaches kids the word ‘sex’ before the word ‘love’!? Ugh..”

She tapped her finger on the side of the desk, trying to come up with a decent way to describe it. She settled on, “Love is something that humans feel for each other. It’s like an attraction, but a lot stronger. So strong that it hurts, sometimes. It can drive people to make beautiful things or perform heroic acts, but it can also cause a lot of trouble. It’s especially troublesome when one person loves another, but the other doesn’t feel the same way. There have been a lot of conflicts in history because of those one-sided loves. Oh, but I guess there were really a lot of forms of love? So I guess that’d be what they call passionate love?”

“Fascinating. So what does it mean?”

“Well, I guess it would just be like, wanting to be with the other person? And I suppose sex is part of that, but I think that’s supposed to come later...and when you’re older.”

“Isn’t sex supposed to be dictated by partner assignments?”

“Seriously, what is wrong with your education?”

It wasn’t as if he were completely wrong. She could think of many examples of ancient societies which had implemented those practices, often through the use of social and genetic engi-

neering. This town, for all of its irregularities, didn't give off that impression.

It's not suppression, or even replacement. Things were removed, but in a haphazard fashion, and without much thought about filling in the rest. It's as if someone had a grand idea in designing this place, and this school, but then never put it under strict scrutiny.

The observatory was a huge blind-spot for her. Neither her vague memories, nor her ability to scan the past, would reveal anything more than its existence. When she had asked Art about it, he had given her a very blank expression, and told her, "The observatory is the observatory. It's where the adults go to work."

It's hard to say what the person in charge is thinking, when you have no way of knowing who that person is. Or if there even is a person in charge.

"Look," she said. "You can just try talking with her more, right? I'm sure these things work themselves out on their own."

"Really?" he said in surprise, before letting out a relived sigh. "I'm glad to hear that. I was worried there might be something wrong with me, and I didn't really know who to talk to."

She shook head, then said, "Nope, it's completely normal. You just need to get out there, and see if maybe she feels the same way. I'm pretty sure it's mostly biology, so I'm sure it'll all come together after you just try it for a while."

"Thanks, Shiori. That helps quite a bit. I'm glad you seem to know so much about these things."

Oliver stood up, stretched out, and said, "I'm going to take a quick lap around, to think about things a bit. You wanna come?"

"Nah, I'm good resting here for a bit."

"Alright. I'll be off, then."

He set his water down, and took off running. Shiori took a sip of her own, then turned her attention back to Art. Gareth and Owen had gone off to rest, and it seemed that Ms. Kato herself had taken to the stage, devolving the fair and honest dueling into a matter of Art doing his best to desperately avoid a barrage of hundreds of invisible blades. Great gashes were cut into the ground, sending up clumps of earth and clouds of dust, to the amazement of the onlooking students.

She laid back against the bench, elbow on the armrest, chin on her palm, and eyes facing across the field. Her thoughts began to wander as she rested there, reflecting on the prior conversation. In particular, as she unconsciously began biting at her thumb, there was one thing from that conversation which she had truly wanted to clarify, but had found herself unable to do so properly.

Know about these things, do I? Don't be silly, Oliver. I don't really know much more about love than you do.

That wasn't to say that she knew nothing, of course. Everything she said sounded good in her head. But it was all academic, really. She had no idea what love actually felt like, let alone the different types of love that supposedly existed.

I feel like falling in love would be pretty fun, though.

What would that look like, anyways? Scanning over the class, there wasn't really anyone who she thought elicited that kind of feeling. She did talk a lot with Art, but something about that just felt off. She had the worrisome thought, *I don't have a thing for older men, do I? Oh no. What kind of father did I have? Did I have one?*

She was pretty sure that Ms. Kato was older than her early twenties appearance let on, but her lack of interest in that direction at least let her rule out older women. Given the remaining options, though, she had a feeling it might be better to just lay any thoughts of romance off to the side, at least for a while.

Speaking of things on the side, there was a whistling past her ears, as Art was sent flying like a rag-doll across the bench, landing with a heavy thud in the grass behind her. The center of the field had devolved into complete madness, with Apollyon having abandoned any pretense of functioning as a sword, and entered into an open logician battle with Ms. Kato. Without the ability to see the manifestations, outside of the occasional faint string of numbers or the blue rose petals which fell off from Apollyon's attacks, it had the the same look as a pair of children miming special moves at each other. The absolute devastation which the field was sustaining spoke to a very different story.

Shiori heard a groan from behind her, as Art stood himself up and moved over to the bench to take a seat. She glanced over to him, and lazily asked, "Didn't break anything important, did you?"

"One of them put a cushion on me, so I'm mostly fine," he replied, in between panting breaths. "It feels as if every muscle in my body is sore, but I think most of that is from wielding Apollyon for so long."

"Is she being too hard on you?"

"I can't feel my right arm. That doesn't seem normal."

"You have a dumb grin on your face, though. Do you secretly enjoy the punishment?"

"Not particularly. I'm just glad to be practicing."

"You make it sound so boring. But hey, if you can get that arm back in order before they finish, maybe we can go for a few bouts?"

He raised his hand and shook his head, saying, "I don't think I can handle anything more, at least for today."

As the two of them talked, they were approached Chloe, who was carrying a rifle over her shoulders. She glanced over to the ongoing duel in the midst of the field, and asked them, "Did training really get that intense over here today?"

Shiori nodded, and replied, "Yep. It looks like Apollyon must have gotten pretty worked up."

"That's putting it mildly," Chloe said, with a grimace on her face. "It's not as if we didn't have a few intensive sessions before, but things have gotten pretty crazy with Ms. Kato here. It's hard for me to imagine the logician training actually doing something?"

"What, you don't see the point in hanging upside down from a tree branch for hours?"

"No, not really. Mostly I just feel the blood rushing to my head. The balance training isn't awful, though."

The training to become an ether logician turned out to be quite the eclectic process. In physical terms, there was a lot which pertained to the regulation of physical processes, and

maintaining balance; on the more mental side, there was a level of attention given to such things as meditation, widening the mind's eye, and otherwise training the senses and reflexes to a higher level. The strangest part, though, were the more esoteric aspects involved.

Ms. Kato had explained it to the class by stating, "The human brain is capable of performing the necessary calculations for a logician, but not without adequate direction. The logicians utilized a series of rituals, designed in large part to borrow from ancient occult imagery, in order to design a series of mnemonic processes which would establish a direct upper-dimensional interface. In this manner, it is possible to convert an imagined image into an input, which can be plugged into an established pattern of multi-dimensional equations, thereby manifesting an inverse simulacrum of the desire phenomenon or object into physical space. It is therefore imperative that you are trained thoroughly in each of these domains, and that your mental equation is developed adequately to support as broad as possible a set of valid inputs, and in that manner, a the broadest possible set of functions."

Or as an actual human would say it, do a bunch of fake magic stuff, come up with a mental math function in twelve dimensions, and plug in an imagined object as the variable. What could be easier?

That thought was, naturally, a rather sarcastic one, as Shiori heavily doubted that anyone among the class would actually be able to pull it off. The ether logicians had utilized brain implants, chemical modification, surgery, and even artificial life-forms acting in a supplementary fashion, all to make what they were doing possible.

Practically speaking, if Art were to work in tangent with Apollyon, then he might able to pull it off. But without the rest of the process, it would be more as if he were borrowing Apollyon's functions, with his own mental images serving as the inputs. It would be unfair to call it a poor replica, as in practice, combining her demon-like mindset with his human power of imagination would make for a potent combo. But it was still a far cry from

the claims which Ms. Kato had made, which Shiori could only consider quite outlandish.

Still, she couldn't say that it was an unpleasant experience. Outside of the ritual hanging, of course. That seemed entirely unnecessary.

Chloe's voice brought her back to reality, as the auburn-haired girl asked, "So, have you two had any luck with the deciphering?"

"I tried on the first night, but I haven't touched it much since," Art replied, after a slight delay. "I didn't have any luck with it, thought. It's a pretty complex encryption, and it's more complex the more that I start to look at it."

Shiori replied, "I've started on it, but it's a tricky problem. I think that it's actually a shell-game puzzle."

"What do you mean by that?" Chloe asked.

"So a shell-game is where you have a bunch of cups, or shells, or whatever else, and you put something under them. Then you quickly move the cups around, line them up, and another person guess which one it is."

"Oh! You mean how there seems to be multiple solutions?"

"Right. But the thing about a shell game is, it's normally a con. The truth is that the guy moving the cups around, already palmed it into his hand. So no matter which cup you pick, you're guaranteed to wind up losing the game. Well, there's a little more to it, and sometimes you want to make a few tactical losses, but that's all advanced stuff."

Art blandly commented, "You really like these kinds of tricks, don't you Shiori?"

"Hey, you're the second person who said that today! Have you and Oliver been talking about me behind my back?"

Chloe giggled, and said, "Shiori, I don't think Art has it in him to do something like that. But I'm sure that everyone who's seen you in the training is probably thinking the same thing. It's going to take a while for anyone to trust you in a diplomatic relations simulation."

The simulation in question was, of course, a contemporary variant on much older games. Each player was assigned a role, typically some key figure or diplomat for a faux nation-state, and was scored in points based on certain goals. Success in the game tended to involve a series of backroom deals, and making a point of concealing information.

Naturally, Shiori immediately determined that wasn't enough fun. The moment the game began, she announced herself as the courier, and said she would relay written messages, to help cover who was talking to who. The rest of the class accepted her claims uncritically, at which point, she went to each of the major leaders, and secretly conveyed that her true role was as a spy, gathering information. Over the course of the afternoon, with a little doctoring of the messages, she managed to cause a completely breakdown of communications; war was on the horizon, and arms deals were already being signed off.

Her true role had been nothing more than as a representative for a corporate arms dealer, though this information wasn't revealed until the game had ended, and her points were tallied. Technically speaking, she had failed her primary objective—to ensure that the corporation would still have an economic role after the peace negotiations—but had more than made up for it by tallying up secondary points for sales volumes, and secured a solid win, at the tragic expense of world peace.

When faced with glares from the rest of the class, she had merely put her arms up and shrugged saying, “I just wanted to be historically accurate, that's all.”

Well, it's only fair that they don't trust me. But it's really a problem if they're going into a game like that, and trusting anybody to be honest about their intentions. Especially the minor characters, who have the hardest time.

She acknowledged Chloe's point by saying, “Well, that's just how the game is played, is all. Oh, but maybe I shouldn't slip so much about what I've seen? I don't really mind if I lose the competition, but I don't want you to think it wasn't fair.”

“Well, I can't say that I don't feel a little cheated,” Chloe

replied. “On the other hand, I think I might have figured out how to solve the encryption of this puzzle.”

“Oh? Really?”

“Yeah,” she mumbled, pulling out her personal copy. “Here, let’s see if we try doing this...”

The way the cipher was devised, Chloe had determined there were coherent messages which could be made out using three different key words, each of which, it so happened, all used unique letters. However, if you were to apply the theory that the whole set-up was a fake, then it only followed that you had to look at the rest.

As the one with the cleanest handwriting, Art was forced to take over the task of accurately transcribing the entire message as shown, but with the letters from those three key words removed. The result, as they looked at it, wasn’t a message at all—instead, it looked more as if it were a sort of blueprint.

“Not a blueprint,” Art said, after Shiori mentioned it. “Or at least, not the blueprint of a single building. This is plan for a small town. This town, as a matter of fact.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Chloe noted. “Why did Alex go out of his way to put this out? And where is he, anyways?”

Art had a grim expression, as he said, “I don’t know where is. But I do have an idea of what that might be.”

“Oh?” Shiori asked. “What is it?”

He pointed down at the map, and said, “That’s the house I thought I passed by in the morning. It’s here on the map—but sometime after the first night you came to my house, *this one disappeared.*”

XI

Vacant

In the afternoon hours of that same day, Art stood with the rough plan in hand, looking over the vacant lot. With him were Shiori,

Chloe, and Gareth; as well as, this time around, Apollyon.

"I replayed the walk back from the rainy night," Shiori said. "And there was definitely a house here."

His memory hadn't failed him, then. But it was impossible to argue with the fact that, in this moment, there was nothing but a completely blank lot. Still, that was in and of itself a sign that something was quite amiss—the ground was so flat, so sterile, and so bereft of features, that a close inspecting made it come across as irregular.

Gareth looked over the field, and said, "So, there was a house here? Then there's no way it should be this clean. If nothing else, we should see the marks from the foundation."

"It wouldn't be impossible to tear down a house over the course of one night," Art said. "Difficult to be sure, but not impossible. But there would have to be a purpose behind it. Just as there was purpose behind Alex pointing this out."

Apollyon stepped forward, and scanned over the lot. She then said, after having made her appraisal, "Naught a speck of residue remains from a residential property, 'tis true. Ye have blundered quite surely upon a great enigma."

"And that's where you come in," Shiori said.

"Aye, fool girl. Though do not be surprised when thy scheme proves to be a fruitless one. Thou practice with powers which lie well outside thy own competence."

"Well, it wouldn't be much fun otherwise, would it?"

"Fun has naught to do with it. Let us be finished with this."

Apollyon returned to her original form, as the beautiful, glass-like logician's blade, which Art took up in his hand. Chloe looked over with concern, asking, "Will this really work? It's not like any of us have ever actually been inside the house, right?"

"It shouldn't matter," Shiori answered, "It's not as if anyone has the ability to grasp the exact molecular properties of what it is they're trying to imagine, using logician powers. He just needs to imagine the house that was here, and then it'll be here. So long as Apollyon's equations are correct, the world will take care of the rest."

“You make it sound so simple,” Gareth said, with a frown. “How do you know so much about this, anyways?”

“Well, it’s only natural. After all, with the power of my special eyes, I can cast my sight back into the past and resolve anything. Probably.”

“Probably?”

“Let’s move on. Art, you know what to do, right?”

“I think so,” he confirmed, “But I haven’t really tried this yet, so I don’t know if it will work properly.”

“It’s alright, you don’t need to do it perfectly. Just construct a solid mental image, and allow Apollyon to do the rest for you. If it doesn’t work, she’ll just say I was making a distraction, so don’t worry about getting blamed.”

In his mind, Art could here Apollyon’s voice saying, *That girl has a lot of nerve, but she is not incorrect. I full intend to pin all faults on her.*

“Be nice,” Art replied, before turning his focus to the barren lot. He then closed his eyes, and began to picture the house which he had seen there. It was almost identical to his, which made things easy, but there were a few differences. The background scenery, of course, was quite a bit off; the lot itself was different in some ways, the chips in the paint weren’t quite the same, and the way the vegetation was growing was all a completely different beast. Each of these details was simple enough to bring up, but constructing a solid mental image, with all of them spun together into a single scene, required his full concentration. Even then, he couldn’t be certain that it was entirely correct. But unless he put those doubts out of his mind, he was certain it would be impossible; thus, he did exactly that, allowing himself to direct his full attention to that image. And then, once he had a firm image to act as his input, he began the incantation, modeled after Apollyon’s:

“Logician’s Gate—Open!”

The sword in his hand began to glow, filling the area with an aura of blue light, which gently pressed its way through his

closed eyelids. The initiation had been set, and Apollyon was prepared to process the image in his mind.

“Calculate: House 37, output 1, timeline 144 hours prior.”

There was only one valid output, and while the bonus parameter was not something he could put down definitively, it seemed as if it should be close enough. In this case, it was better to have the time as a little too far back, than too early. In this manner, Apollyon had what she needed to perform the calculations.

“Manifest!”

The barren lot was at once blanketed in shimmering blue roses, creating a beautiful garden which at once gave way to the rising form of the home which had once stood in that lot. Gareth and Chloe gazed on with amazement, while Shiori let out a soft whistle. She took a step to the sapphire garden, and with each step, the fading flowers passed away into the wind behind her.

Art strode forward at once, standing side by side, while the others followed a little behind. The house before him was certainly similar to his own, but the subtle differences were present, as he recalled. What was more, there was slight differences which hadn't even actively noted – the front windows, he noted, were masked with curtains, blocking off any hope of simply peering inside.

Shiori tried the door, but found it to be locked. She said, “It looks like the owner put a lot more thought into security than you usually do, Art. I wonder why that was?”

“I'm not sure. There's no crime in this town, and the lock wouldn't do much to deter a raider attack.”

“Which, if you'll step aside,” Gareth said, as he stepped up to the door, “I'll make a good demonstration for.”

Art and Shiori stepped off aside, giving Gareth a clear look at the door. He took measure of the distance, tapped on the door a bit, and then shot his leg forward with a devastatingly powerful kick, easily busting the lock and making a way in.

“Couldn't we have just...knocked?” Chloe asked, with concern. “This is someone's house, isn't it?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Shiori answered. “There won’t be any people in the house. Logician techniques can’t be used to replicate a living thing. Even having a visible structure, like this, is only possible as a result of us standing on the exact location.”

Chloe nodded, then said, “I had wondered about that, when you brought up the idea. It’s all just too new for me.”

Though she said that, it was difficult for him to say that this house was exactly as it seemed. From his perspective, with Apollyon acting to support him, he could see the occasional flicker in reality, as if the walls would dissolve at any moment back into imaginary numbers. Knowing that there would only be a finite time to look around, he stepped up to the threshold, and said, “Let’s get inside and check this place out. I want to know what it was that Alex wanted us to know.”

The inside of the home was little different than that of Art’s own, though with the curtains blocking out most of the natural light, it was much darker. The living room was almost bereft of furniture, with a single, cushioned chair, facing against a wall. There, two bookshelves flanked a table, upon which sat a number of electronic devices; behind these, the wall was painted entirely white, and a number of wires ran up the wall, across the ceiling, and then back, to what Art assumed to be one of the projectors from the school-house.

As he stepped into the room, Gareth and Chloe followed, looking about the place on their own. Shiori, though, seemed to hesitate—her gaze turned up, to the threshold of the door, and her feet stopped just short of entry.

“Are you alright?” he asked her.

“I’m fine, but...”

She turned her gaze aside, off into the distance in the direction of the school-house, before saying, “It’s been a really enjoyable week. It’s not exactly what I imagined, but it’s been a lot of fun. And there’s this feeling I have, that if I step through this door, that we might not be able to go back to that.”

Art smiled, then said, with words coming from the depths of his heart, “Shiori—I meant what I said before. In those couple

of days right before classes started, I had a lot of fun. That was thanks to you, and the last week has been the same.”

He extended out his hand, and said, “So no matter what we learn in here, I’m sure we’ll figure it out together, as friends.”

Her eyes widened a bit, then looked a way for a bit, before letting out a small giggle. Then, she took his hand, and said, “You’re right. Let’s do this together, no matter what happens next.”

With that, she stepped into the room with him, and began to look around. Turning her attention in the direction of the display, she began her analysis, saying, “It appears to mostly be audio equipment. Though it looks as if someone heavily modified it, and ran some wires in order to connect a projector. Which means that whoever was doing this must have put a lot of work into designing a home theater.”

“A home theater?” Art asked.

“Ah, right. It would be a big set-up to watch recorded video. In the past, humans have tried lots of different methods for data storage, in both analog and digital formats. This was definitely digital, though. But I don’t see any inputs...”

Shiori went over to inspect the equipment, something which fell entirely outside of Art’s area of expertise. He said to her, “I’m going to look inside a little further.”

She nodded back, and said, “Alright, I’ll see if I can figure out what this was all about. I’ll call if I can figure anything out.”

He made his way down the hall, temporarily sheathing Apollyon in his back-scabbard and directing his thoughts to her, *I’ll call for you if something comes up, alright?* Gareth and Chloe seemed to have gone on ahead to check the smaller bedrooms, which left him with the task of clearing out the largest.

Opening the door, he looked inside to see not the bedroom he expected at all, but instead, a room which was lined with books. Whether placed on proper bookshelves, or on shelves which appeared to have been hand-crafted out of available wood, there were hundreds of them.

Besides the books on the shelves, there was a table and chair in the center of the room; on it were pens, inkwells, strips of pa-

per, a knife, and a small jar with a bit of adhesive, all scattered around a stack of books. Those on the desk were plain, just as his own were, but that was not the case for the ones on the walls. Each of these was labeled along the spine, with a wide variety of titles. Few had anything to do with his classwork, and many had unfamiliar words.

Taking a moment to look over the shelves, he started to look over the titles. There were such names as *Bear-King of the Northern Woods*, *Dance on the Borderline*, *The Empty Crib*, *Remember Me in the Summertime*, *Song of the Forest*, *A Tale of Five Monsters*, and *Witch of the Moon*. Each of them called forth images of far away places he had never seen, and whispered promises of discovering something fantastic. As he looked over them, he began to realize this was not a collection of things which surely were; it was instead a great library, accounting for various things which had never been.

He reached for the book *Song of the Forest*, and found that it was true to its name—the book as an extensive song, which stretch on for thousands of lines; on each, the music itself was presented on the left- hand page, with the lines themselves on the right. The rest of the page space was occupied with beautiful ink illustrations of great woodlands; beasts, men, and gods peaked out from the forests, moving over the course of pages between peace and conflict. As he read along the lines, he felt himself drawn in, until at last he came across the illustration of a line of children filtering into an old house; upon seeing this, he was pulled back to reality and his current mission, closing the book and placing it back along the shelf.

Art continued his search, scanning the spines of the books for any particular notes. He continued to see further titles, such as *The Flowers in April*, *A Forgotten Story*, *Last Stand*, *Pastel Wind*, and *Queen of the Red Night*. He recognized nothing about the stories he saw, until he made his way to one shelf, where he saw the title *Theseus and the Minotaur*. His mind at once turned to the story he had heard Shiori mention, and he at once began to look through the books on those shelves with a little more care.

As he did so, he found that, alongside the tale of Theseus, there were a number of books related related to the stories from the stars which Shiori had related. Picking up a few and reading a few quick notes which had been taken on the inner covers, he was able to see that these were marked as dating back to the elder race of man—back to the great Empire of Rome, which had inspired so many others. Recalling his feeling that the line between truth and imagination had seemed to blur in Shiori's older tales, he had the thought, *How much of the stuff written on these shelves is fiction? How much of it is drawn, at least in part, from actual events?*

Then, he found it. It was a book, differing little from the others in terms of appearance; yet the moment he saw the title, he was drawn to it, with a smile on his face. He began to scan through the pages, but as he did, that smile began to drop. Then, he came across a page, which made his freeze.

This is...

Just across the all, in one of the smaller bedrooms, Chloe found herself looking through an unmarked but written-in book, on a desk not unlike that in any of their rooms. Gareth stepped into the room, and said, "I looked about, but as far as I can tell, the other room is just a pretty basic bedroom. What about you?"

"It's some sort of log," she replied. "The entries are all dated, with a short note. There isn't a name anywhere, but I can definitely recognize the hand-writing and the descriptions—there's no doubt, this log was written by Alex."

"You mean, this was *his* house?" Gareth asked.

"That's the only thing it can be, right? I mean, why else would it be here if he wasn't living here? But the contents are strange..."

"Strange how?"

"That's what I'm not sure about. Other than a few mentions from things related to school or the Datanet, the only thing that Alex took note of was writing down...something? The problem is that the dates only pick up about a year back, which means that I have no idea what this project actually is, or why he started."

"What about why he went missing? Have you tried to take a look at the newest entries?"

“Right, I was getting to that...”

She turned the pages forward, to a little before where she guessed the entries would end based on the entry rate, and came up to the last few entries. She began to read aloud, “Log Entry #913. I have succeeded in severing my connection to the Datanet. Soon I will escape from this false reality, and find my freedom in the world outside. I will attempt as best I can to tell the others, in the hopes that they can follow along the same path, and escape their prison...”

Her voice trailed off, as Gareth said, “So, I’m going to need you to go ahead and repeat that again, Chloe. Really slowly.”

Rather than repeat what she had read, Chloe instead turned silent, with her finger tapping on the table. She turned the page back a bit, and started to look through the logs. Gareth matched silence with his own, walking behind her and reading over her shoulder on his own. Eventually, she looked up, and facing the wall, asked the boy behind her, “There’s no way, right? What he’s saying here?”

“...but why would he lie?”

Shiori stepped into the room shortly after, holding in her hand what seemed to be a Datanet headset; but it had been stripped down of its pieces, until all that remained was a faint headband, little different in terms of looks from the one in the Datanet. As she stepped in, her mouth was already moving, saying, “I managed to find this thing in the center of the audio set-up, with all of the wires running to it. I think he was streaming data from out of this...”

She stopped, noticing the concern on their faces, and asked, “Hey, what’s wrong? What did you find out?”

“It’s all a simulation,” Chloe replied. “That’s what this log says. The schoolhouse, the town, observatories, the ruined factories, the old lake, the woods, even all of our bodies. According to what Alex wrote in this log, he says it’s not the Datanet which is fake—*it’s this world, that we’re in right now, which is the fake one.*”

No sooner had she heard those words, than Shiori heard footsteps coming from behind her. She turned behind her to

see Art stepping out from the room across the hall, with a book clutched in his hand. His face, rather than grim, seemed more dumbfounded, and she turned her gaze down to look at the cover.

It was a simple cover, depicting little more than a sword, pierced deeply through a stone. Under this short illustration was a title, of an ancient tale which had been passed down since the days of the elder race of man. That tale was *King Arthur and the Matter of Britain*.

XII Illusion

It was an ancient tale, dating back well into the 3rd Eon. So famous was this story that, throughout history, it had come to be known all around the world. Through the passing of eons it had been retold and altered, over and over, to the point that even the most faithful reproductions of the oldest stories could only be called, at best, estimates of what the originals might have been. Yet in this story, the tale was as such:

In an ancient kingdom, there was a boy named Arthur, born as the rightful heir to King Uther the Pendragon. To protect him, and offer him a more humble starting point, Arthur was raised under the care of the loyal knight Ector, and lived alongside his brother, Kay. In time, the enchanted Merlin Ambrosius, adviser to the former king, revealed a sword held in a stone, which could be drawn only by the fated king of that land. So did Arthur draw the sword, and under the tutelage of Merlin, became the ideal ruler over a prosperous kingdom.

This, then, was a tale from a long time ago.

So then did a certain boy, whose former teacher had always insisted on calling him under his full name of Arthur, begin to connect the dots which had eluded him. In the grand scheme of things, there were surely coincidences which happened; it would be easy enough, if he were to put his mind to it, to find all manner

of other excuses for what he had come to learn. There was, of course, a certain level of ego which was needed to arrive at the conclusion he had.

Was all of this nothing more than someone trying to recreate a story?

The academy had the stated intention of teaching leaders. What did that actually *mean*, though? What was it that students were truly meant to lead? Who would accept them? Who was it that was actually running the whole show, and what was their true motivations? Each of these things was obscured—and seemingly, deliberately so.

In an illusory bedroom, in an illusory home, in an illusory world, the four adolescents sat and digested the information they had learned. Chloe sat at the seat, while Gareth sat on the bed. Art stood, his back leaned against the door, while Shiori had popped open the window, her feet dangling from the edge as she faced out into the distance.

The first to speak was Gareth, who said, “So, what? If all of that is true, then what does that mean for the rest of us?”

There was clear frustration in his voice, as he clenched his fist, and said, “Was that the reason I could never get better? Were the rest of us all just stuck in as additions, in this? Why couldn’t they at least give us a chance?”

“Gareth...” Chloe said, calmly. “It’s not like he knew about this, either. You shouldn’t get mad at Art.”

“I know that!” Gareth snapped. “And I’m not...I’m not bad at him. But I think it’s only right to be frustrated. So should you—I know how long you’ve been working at getting better at those puzzles, at the cost of so much else. No wonder you could never get a better score—*the outcome for what marked 100% was dictated from the start.*”

“So what?” she replied, “I didn’t just do that because I wanted to be the best! Yes, it bugged me, but do you think I would really have kept at it if it was that simple? I’ve done what I could do, because it *was* what I could do, and I don’t have any regrets. And neither should you! Because all of that...”

She slammed her finger onto Alex's log, and declared, "...has led up to this. We know how things work, and that means we can make our own way out. We just have to do the same thing he did, that's all!"

"Yeah, which is what, exactly?" Gareth asked. "He just disappeared, and then his house followed. And what's with all of these books that he has scattered around? Where did these even come from—did he just go and write them all down himself?"

"Who knows? I'm sure it'll all make sense once we get on the other side. So long as we use the Datanet headset, it should be easy enough to get across, to the other side. Once we find Alex there, I'm sure it will all start to make sense. Art, what do you think?"

Though Chloe turned his attention to him, Art was at first silent, content to brood over what they had just learned. His thoughts turned inward, and while he could hear that Gareth and Chloe were speaking, he was having trouble registering exactly what they were saying. His reply, then, was a simple question, "If this world is fake, then why did I spend so much time in it?"

The others had all, to varying degrees, adjusted themselves quite readily to the use of the Datanet. Yet for whatever reason, he had found himself far more interested in remaining in this world—putting his focus towards home, going on long walks, and otherwise getting more invested in the things immediately around him.

If truth and fiction had been reversed, then had he been allowing himself to become lost in fantasies for this whole time?

And yet, that was not the most troubling thought he had. No, the greatest concern he had, the one which filled him with dread to think overlong about it, was uttered by the dark-haired girl who looked out from the window. Without turning to face the others, she asked, in a quiet voice, the question, "What does that mean about me?"

The girl who was an outsider, not native to this town. The one with no connection to the Datanet, which had been identified as

the truth, in contrast to this simulation world. Did she even have a means, by which she could leave this one? What would she find on the other side? These questions arose in the minds of the others, and faced with it, as they were, none were able to give an answer.

Silence fell over the room. Art thought back a bit, to the day of the funeral. Standing there, with his classmates, he had been unable to say anything at the time. Though trained to be a leader, trained off of the great speeches in history and instructed to think under pressure, he was unable to find a way to guide anyone around him.

He could feel the same crushing feeling upon him, now. They had discovered a new truth, and all they could do was just accept it. All that remained was to mimic what Alex had done, and break from this world. Then they would be free to move on into the Datanet—no, the true world which existed beyond—and carry on with their lives.

It all seemed simple, but...

He looked over to Shiori, whose gaze was still directed out from the window. Even if he couldn't fully understand them, he understood the weight of the feelings that girl must have been wrestling with in the moment. Surely, he thought, it was a weight far greater than what he was carrying.

What did leadership mean?

What was it that made someone an ideal king?

No, forget about that...

In this moment, it didn't matter what it was that the people who had made this place wanted out of him, and it certainly didn't matter what some ancient people had considered an ideal. It didn't matter how clever he was, how strong he was, how well he might do at any given test or exam. None of that mattered.

What mattered was...

How do I help out a friend?

He had offered his hand to that girl in the window, just as she had reached out hers to him. He wanted to talk with her more, to learn more from her and to learn more with her, and to walk

forward. Even if he had his own doubts, he understood that if he did what he had done before—if he just remained silent, and moved along with the flow of events as they passed him by—then he would never be able to forgive himself. So this time, he would do something different.

Art hardened his will, and then spoke, addressing the room, and one girl in it in particular. He declared, “It doesn’t matter. Even if this world is a simulation, that doesn’t change the fact that all that we’ve done, all that we’ve learned, and all that we’ve felt, has meaning. It’s not just an illusion, but something that is our reality. I don’t know what it was that Alex found which started him on his path, but if he claims that the world of sterile white in the Datanet is the truth—that our lives here are nothing more than a fleeting dream—then I’ll reject that! If the people who founded this wanted to create King Arthur, to rule a kingdom of fantasy, then I’ll make them regret that. This digital world, marked by the imminent collapse of the red sun, will be something that I engrave upon my heart.”

Shiori turned to face him, and he locked eyes with her, continuing, “I’ll stand by what’s real to me. No matter what the rest of the world might say, I’ll definitely do that.”

“And if the person you called a friend was nothing but a passing dream?” she asked. “Would you still be able to stay by her side?”

“Absolutely,” he replied. “No matter what.”

She laughed, and said, “Wow. When you say something like that, it’s pretty cool, isn’t it?”

Art wanted to ask her to clarify what she meant by that, but his words were interrupted by a sudden message in his mind, coming from Apollyon, who said, *Master, take thy compatriots and aloft from this house anon! No questions!*

The thoughts were a surprised, but he put his trust in Apollyon, and said, “We need to move, fast!”

The nearest way out was the window. When Art dashed forward, Shiori went out with him. Gareth and Chloe moved after, though with a bit of a delay. As those two made their way

out, Art turned to look up, and saw a strange mechanical contraption hovering overhead. It had an appearance which was almost humanoid, though made of solid steel, and with the form of great wings—though, as they were entirely still, he had a feeling they were meant more for decorative purposes than as part of the mechanism which allowed that mechanical terror to float. It was almost silent, giving off little more than a low whirring noise, as it made a slow descent in the direction of the home.

“Shiori, what is that?” he asked, as he involuntarily took a step back.

Shiori followed him, and with her eyes wide, replied, “It looks like...an angel? Is that supposed to be a giant robot angel?”

Nay, came the words from Apollyon, entering into his mind. What you see is naught but an exterminator, for removing excess waste. Yet it is an exceedingly efficient one, rivaling myself in that capacity.

“An exterminator?” he voiced aloud, “Apollyon, are you saying that thing is coming after us?”

Perhaps. But it has certainly responded to the reappearance of that home, and was without a doubt the one response for their original removal.

Gareth and Chloe made their way over to Art and Shiori, who had cleared the lot, and were standing near the street. The steel angel made its way over the home, slowly but surely, until eventually coming to a stop while hovering about forty paces overhead. Its eyes glowed with a green light, coating the area of the lot with a green glow.

Then, its chest began to open. Like a great claw opening, the steel pulled away into two plates, revealing a green light which shone from the angel’s chest cavity. The house began to crumble apart, as pieces of wood and stone, metal and paper, books and furniture, were pulled up bit by bit into the cavity. Each dissolved into strings of numbers and data, and was pulled into the core of that angel. Slowly, the house was torn apart, as with all else that was in the lot. Then, as its chest began to close, it scanned the area again with its eyes; the area, which had been devastated, was returned to a featureless, blank lot.

The steel angel then began to turn, its gaze directed upon them.

“Is that thing looking at us?” Chloe asked.

Art reached back, clutching Apollyon in his hand, as he said, “It definitely seems like that. Gareth, Chloe, you two need to run—see if you can learn anything from the Datonet. Shiori, you should...”

“I’m here with you,” she said. “Just because it’s a giant, robot angel, that doesn’t mean I can’t figure something out.”

Slowly, it began to float in their direction. Art drew Apollyon, and prepared to stand his ground. But then, there came a sound—a loud, unfamiliar sound, which he had never heard before; one which caused Shiori, in confusion, turned and asked, “Is that...a bus?”

It came down the road, turning the corner. It was a large vehicle, from a very different age, with a shape like a great rectangular box on wheels, and many windows along the side. It was painted yellow, and on the side, in black paint, was written “Academy School Bus”.

The bus pulled up behind them, and its door opened, to reveal its driver—that woman in the lab-coat, who was their teacher, Ms. Kato. She called out to them, “The four of you, get in here.”

Gareth slapped Art on the back as he took off to the bus, saying, “Looks like the heroic last stand comes later, Art. Let’s get in there!”

Chloe was next, and then Art. Shiori hesitated for a moment, but after a glance at the steel, bit her lip and ran after them. The four made it onto the bus, with door closing behind Shiori, as they moved back. As they came aboard, Ms. Kato called back, “Take your seats, but do not buckle in. You might need to get out in a hurry.”

With that, the four of them took their seats, and the bus was off. The angel began to accelerate its pace, but for the moment at least, it seemed that the bus had the advantage in speed. Art looked around, and saw that there were a few other students on board, but far from the full class had gathered there.

The blade on his back vanished in a flash of blue light, followed by Apollyon manifesting herself in a haze of blue rose petals in the median between seats, standing with no threat to balance even as the bus made its way along. Her face curled into a look of displeasure, as she said, “Distasteful woman, thou have hidden something quite incredible. Just where did thee acquire this contraption?”

“I scavenged some old vehicle parts from the observatory, and used my logician powers to produce a 3D printer to output the rest,” she replied, as if it was the simplest thing in the world. “I had a feeling that I would need a way to quickly move a large number of students.”

The bus roared along. Apollyon walked up to the front, glancing at the side mirrors in order to keep the angel in her line of sight, before scowling and saying, “I underestimated the humans who designed this place. To think they had hidden such a magnificent weapon of destruction away from me? I simply must go out and crush it. Master, one word of thine and I shall dispatch it.”

“I would advise you not to do so,” Ms. Kato said, cutting off any reply Art could have made. “If the angel is destroyed outright, the core will be destabilized, and it will just end up reformatting the entire town—and much of the area around it. Further, if that green light touches you, it will disrupt any logician powers you are using. In the case of an artificial life-form, it would also have an effect not dissimilar to being placed in digestive fluid.”

“So we need to get it away from the town, right?” Art asked.

“Something like that,” she replied, vaguely.

Shiori stood up, and asked, “Why did know to come here? Where are we going, right now?”

“You already know the answer to that,” she replied. “Or at the very least, you should be on track to figuring it out. Both of you should, for that matter, since both of you play a part in this.”

“What are you talking about?” Art asked. “Do you know something about what was in that house? Or about Shiori?”

“She is the one you should be asking, not me,” Ms. Kato replied. “I told you at the start, I am not here to provide all of the answers. I just offer the tools you need to put everything together.”

“What do you mean? What tools? And what did you mean by both of us, in this?”

“Art,” Ms. Kato said, simply, “Did you ever wonder why you and your brother shared a bunk bed?”

“What do you—?”

He stopped, and clutched his head. He could see a time in the past, back in his childhood. In that house, on the far side of town, he began to recall a time where there had been *another person* living in his home.

What had been the first words that girl had said?

Oh! I'm sorry, I thought we already knew each other?

Shiori spoke, in a quiet voice, “I know what I am. But what I don't understand is, why?”

Ms. Kato began to speak, saying, “Once upon a time, there was a girl by the name of Anna—no, perhaps I should say Morganna. In this town, she lived with her two brothers, as the eldest of the three. It was an ideal life, to all appearances. Yet that girl questioned the truth of the world she dwelt in, and discovered a hidden archive.”

Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, a hidden area in the great archives, accessible only with special administrator privileges. Yet she had found the back-doors, and found herself introduced to a world of endless fiction.

“From hearing that, you might assume that girl to have been an unprecedented genius. Yet that was far from the case. She questioned the notion that she had been the first, and in doing so, was able to piece together the system of destruction which had purged her predecessors. Keeping quiet and putting her mind to work, she developed a manner by which to sublimate herself, as well as the archive, into an existence capable of self-replication. In this manner, she could avoid deletion.”

If the world was a simulation, then, it was possible to think of that girl as having transformed herself into an advanced virus. Tools which existed to simply delete parts of the program would be meaningless as a tool to do anything about her.

“That girl had nothing but good intentions. The only thing she had wanted was to spread the knowledge she had acquired, in a way which could not simply be silenced. Yet her existence had become something which she could no longer fully control. Slowly but surely, the town was chipped away. What remained was little more than a ghost town, with a few scattered homes, and a single school-house.”

Art began to think back. He had noticed, for the first time, that the town was barren—but why had he never noticed it before? Was it because he hadn’t noticed it? Or was it because the town hadn’t been quite so barren? How long had the world been crumbling around him, without him even realizing it was happening?

“The directors for this project were faced with a problem. In order to remove the malignant data, they would need to either deactivate the program, or find a way to excise it. Perhaps they determined that the former was impossible, or perhaps they still had hope the process would work itself out. But then, they were approached by a traveler, coming from far outside the boundaries of their observatory. This traveler knew nothing of their project, but possessed the necessary skills to perform an excising of the malignant data; or at least, that was what they hoped. So they offered her a chance to enter into the world they had designed, with the task of removing the virus. The name of that girl, as you may by now have understood, was Shiori Kato.”

XIII

Angel

The bus eventually came to a distance in the hills, far outside of town. The figure of the steel angel could be seen at a distance, but it seemed unwilling to cross beyond the limits of the town. From her position perched on top of the bus, Apollyon made the comment, “The puppet is content to linger within its master’s demesne. Ye need worry naught, for the time being.”

Many of the students had opted to remain in the bus, though a few had stepped outside. Art was seated on the rocks, looking out in the direction of the town. Shiori stood near him, her hair blowing with the light wind. She said, “I’ll take it over from here...if you’re ready.”

“Yes,” he replied. “We’ve already gotten this far, haven’t we?”

She nodded, and said, “In truth, the directors wanted to keep the traveler, once they had a hold of her. But her mind wasn’t quite like that of normal humans. Instead, she was a living archive, carrying with her the records of countless humans from throughout the eons. In effect, it was as if she were two people—the individual human, Shiori Kato, and the composite of a billion memories, the living archive. By all rights, the former should have easily been overwhelmed and washed away by the latter. But somewhere in the core of her being, there lingered a girl with very normal, almost childish desires—wanting to live a normal life, go to school, make friends, and so forth. Things she was able to see in the memories of others, but could never had for herself. Just a simple life, without the weight of history on her shoulders.”

Shiori took a step forward, and pointed at herself, saying, “So, that was how I showed up! Or at least, that was half of it.”

“And what was the other half?”

“Well,” she said. “It turns out, this whole system is set-up to deal with a normal human mind. Something like a mind splitting into two, that would be a bit much, and maintaining two

avatars off of just one body was out of the question. That was where Morganna came in. Even if she could no longer manifest, she still had user rights to an avatar in this world. I'm a bit confused on the details, but the two archives must have made some kind of deal."

She stepped forward a bit, then turned back to face Art, and said, "I'm not really sure how much the mix-up is. I think Shiori Kato, the archive, came out pretty close to the original. But as for me, well, I'm not really sure what the split is."

Art cracked a hollow smile, as he said, "It's not just you. I think Ms. Kato borrowed my sister's sense of dress, at the very least."

His memories were blurry, but nonetheless, he was glad to have them back. Memories of an older sister, always making sure to dress up as a proper researcher. Even in a world without stories, she had always had a way of telling them. In a way, he felt that her adopting the role of carrying down stories of the ancient past only made sense.

Shiori tried to return his smile with one of her own, though it was, if anything, even more broken. She then said, "I'm sorry, Art. I guess at some level, I always knew...but now, it seems it's the end of the line."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"There's an ancient story," she said, "About a man who dreamed he was a butterfly, with no knowledge of himself as a human. When he woke up, he wondered—was he a man, who had dreamed of being a butterfly? Or was he a butterfly, dreaming that he was a man? So far, I've been able to live that butterfly-like dream, as the girl Shiori. Now, the dream is coming to an end, and I can feel my sense of self coming into question. When I awake, I don't really know what I'll be."

Art stood up, and said, "So what? You'll just disappear?"

"I don't know," she replied. She looked back to the bus, and said, "It's funny. I had a feeling that I should keep certain things secrets from Ms. Kato, so I could maintain this charade. I guess

at some level I knew that if we started comparing notes, it would just accelerate things to the conclusion.”

As the two spoke. Ms. Kato stepped out from the car, and began to head towards them—or rather, making her way towards Shiori. The two locked eyes, and Ms. Kato said, “I apologize. I had hoped to give you more time to live your life, here.”

Shiori smirked, and said, “Oh, don’t give me that. It’s not like you weren’t having fun playing teacher, is it? I should know—I’m basically just the part of you that *wants* things.”

“Yes, I suppose you are correct. If I had the choice…”

The student cut her teacher off with a hand gesture, and said, “Nope, I’m not going to hear it. So what if I never had a choice? It’s my burden, and I’ll carry it. So, let’s end this. Let’s break out of this world, and see what’s on the other side.”

Shiori reached out her hand, and Ms. Kato took it. Once they did, it as was if the world began to crumble apart around them. Art stepped back, as a great pillar of darkness began to form, rising from the ground like an enormous lance piercing into the heavens. Dark paper, like pages from a book stained entirely in ink, filled the air. The pages began to fill the air, slipping in and out of the cracks which began to form—cracks, leading to a world of pure white.

Some of the cracks began to grow wider, and Art recognized what he could see beyond as the sterile white of the Datanet.

The world is starting to tear away, to what’s underneath...so we don’t even need the headsets to move back, then.

It looked as if Chloe had figured about the same, as she had begun to make an approach in that direction. She peered into one of the cracks, then back to Art, and asked, “What do we do? Should we make our way to the Datanet...to the real world?”

“Go on ahead!” he said. “Get everyone to the other side. I’m going to stay here.”

Gareth moved up from behind Chloe, and called out, “What do you mean? Are you crazy?”

Shouting had become necessary, as the air was filled with a sound akin to an intense wind, but blurred together with the

muttering of low voices, and the shattering of glass. Through that noise, Art called back, "No! I said that I was going to stick with *her*, no matter what happens. I have to see this through to the end."

Gareth was about to object, when Oliver came from behind him, slapping him on the shoulder and calling back, "Art! I'm not really sure what you're doing, but you'd better watch out for my sparring partner. I won't forgive you if you don't."

The sound picked up further, and Art could only nod in response. That group of three began to lead the other students through the cracks which were emerging, with Chloe leading the way, and the rest moving after her lead. Once the rest had moved in, Oliver stepped along with Joan, leaving Gareth as the last, giving a farewell nod to Art.

Art watched his classmates depart from the plateau. The only one to remain, besides himself, was a girl who had shed her dress as a school delinquent, and returned to her original eccentric dress; Apollyon, the living weapon, who left a trail of blue petals as she stepped through the storm to approach the human she called her master.

"Art thou satisfied with this outcome, master?" she asked, in a voice which was almost sing-song in character. Though the din of the dark lance should have all rights have drowned out her voice, with the aid of their telepathic link, Art could hear each word as clearly as if there were nothing more than a light breeze in the air.

"It's not my place to be satisfied. Everything had a purpose to it, in the end. That's how things are supposed to be."

"Oh? And what of your friend, the foolish girl? Is it enough for thee to see her fade into the darkness, rejoined with her other half? Of course, I have no love for either half, so it saddens me little to see either fade away. The only pity is to see the whole reconstructed."

"Have you known from the start, Apollyon?"

"Nay, though it took little time to realize. Upon awakening, I was at once made aware of a certain lack of verisimilitude. There

are various environmental restrictions in place, the most significant being the one which would have me recognize thee as master.”

“So that’s not just how you are...”

“Aye. I had thought it quite strange, to feel a need to make so quick a bond with a human. Thou art quite fortunate, for of the many who have sought my power, few candidates have survived the trials I have subjected them too. There can be little doubt, thy failure would quickly number among them.”

“I guess you’ve been cheated a little. Sorry about that. Still, I’m glad to have gotten to know you.”

“Thou grasp very little, master. But that is fine. To be entrapped in this place was a failure of mine, and I shall accept this punishment. To the end, I shall stand by thee.”

“Just what will that end be?”

“Is it not a simple thing to thee?”

Apollyon turned to the dark lance, growing forth from the ground, and said, “What thou see before thee, is a torrent of human memories, far the greater than what this artificial world may endure. It will rip the dream apart, and release its dreamers. There can be no doubt that the world, in seeking to preserve itself, shall do all it can to avoid this fate of destruction. ’Tis merely a question of where it will be able to succeed in doing so.”

“What will that mean?”

“Verily ’tis simple. This world shall be ravaged apart. The world’s defense system will expel the darkness, but of course, it will be too late. Existence shall continue in this so-called Datanet of yours, and ye will be free to explore that world. Of course, ’tis only what shall happen if thou should choose to sit idly by.”

“I have another option?”

“Marry, ’tis so. Should thou wish, it would be possible to stand against the world defense system. The world shall not be merely ravaged, but erased in its entirety, leaving naught but a blank canvas. Were thou to succeed, then perhaps thou might see thy friend once more. Of course, to act against the world in

such a fashion, would mark thee as a great enemy to be purged as well. Thou would find no welcome, neither in this world, nor in any other—for the sin of bringing a world to its end, would then become thine.”

“It’s fine,” he replied. “I had already made up my mind to stay here. If you say there’s something I can do, then it’s all the better. Apollyon, will you lend me your power?”

“If thou would accept a simple request of mine, perhaps.”

“And what would that be?”

“Quite simple,” she said, with a dark grin. “Unfortunately, it seems this world has made quite a game of fettering me. We thought to speak simply the words, that I be released to bring forth my true powers, it would be a trifling matter to handle this. But be warned, o master—for it shall place a terrible burden upon thy mind and body, to work with the unfettered power of the greatest logician’s blade.”

“Let’s do it,” he said. “Apollyon, give me everything you’ve got.”

“So be it. Oh, master, how I’ve always wished to bring a world to its end! This shall be quite fun.”

Apollyon reached her right arm out to the side, and called out, “Logician’s Seal—Release! Output—Level 617!”

Though it was nothing so dramatic as a grand pillar of darkness, Art was nonetheless forced to step back, as a swirl of azure rose petals filled the air before him. Motes of blue light, like fragments of sapphire, wrapped through the air like galactic bands in the night sky, drawing together around a luminescent human form at the center of the mass.

The roses gave way to the figure of Apollyon, though not quite as she had been before. The most immediate difference was that she stood taller, nearly as tall as Ms. Kato, and with an appropriately shift in her apparent age and development, which was clearly that of a young adult. Her attire had shifted, though it was no less outlandish. It consisted principally of what could best be described as black lingerie, which left little of her impressive figure to the imagination, paired with various accessories—a pair

of blue boots reaching to her thighs, black gloves, a blue military long-coat marked with golden buttons and epaulettes, and a service cap marked with the embroidered image of a blue rose. The glowing formula-patterns across her body were brighter than ever, and her hair, already long, now flowed out wildly as it stretched down to the waist. She hovered in the air, her eyes directed downward at Art, as she said, "Well, master? Is thy mind readied?"

He nodded, and said, "Yes. Let's do this."

Apollyon smirked, and called forth, "Logician's Gate—Open! Trial of Harut and Marut, radius: 2102, users: 2. Manifest!"

It was as if the world around Art had been flipped upside down, as he immediately found himself falling into the sky, and turning against his will. His descent was stopped only as Apollyon reached out and seized him by wrist, saying, "Steady thyself, master. Thou must work to envision the ground beneath thy feet."

Focusing as intently as he could, Art tried to picture solid ground beneath his feet—and then, to his surprise, he could feel it. Yet when he looked down, all he could see was the sky, crumbling around him. He asked her, "What did you do, Apollyon?"

"Verily, 'tis but a simple trick which I have wrought before thee, here. I have established about us a territory, within which we might freely work our wills. Lend me thy imagination, and I shall lend thee my powers—such are the rules of this space. Yet I shall warn thee, master, that this dance requires the both of us. Should thou falter, this freedom shall not avail us."

From her perch nearer to the ground, seemingly hanging upside over him, she dropped down to stand besides him, hanging in the empty air. In her hand, a series of blue rose petals formed into a glass-like blade mirroring her own true form, and she said, "Perhaps there shall come a day, master, when thou shalt possess the prowess for us to join as one, and thou might wield me in full power as thy blade. Do try to keep thy fragile form alive long enough to see that happen."

"I can't make any promises," he said, focusing on his own im-

age of a sword. In his hand appeared a second glass-like blade which, while it was in most respects a match to that held by Apollyon, he could not help but think that it was unable to match the luster of the original. Once he finished inspecting the quality, he added, "That said, I don't have any intention of dying here."

"Few do, master. Ready thyself—our enemy approaches!"

There was a terrible, groaning sound coming from the sky below. Art reoriented his perspective, placing the ground beneath his feet, and turned to see a great chasm opening in the sky above; a crack, which was of far grander scale than any he had yet seen, which struck him as if it were the heavens themselves being rent apart by some great, cosmic power. Through the widening gap, there descended the form a silver angel, slowly sinking to the earth, with its head aimed down, and its shimmering wings wrapped about its body like a divine cocoon. It was of enormous stature; the length of each feather on its wing surpassed the height of a full-grown man. The air vibrated with the sound of blaring trumpets, and was flooded with a melody of such perfect composition that it nearly took Art's breath from his body.

Steadily, the angel spread its wings, revealing that which lie on the underside—a downy coat not of feathers, but missiles, number well into the thousands, and each adequate to dispatch an armored vehicle. Its eyes opened, and the angel fixed its gaze first upon the black pillar, and next upon the humans which stood to defy it. Then, without any emotion, it fired its lasers directly upon them.

In a clash of weapons, it was only natural to counter with a greater weapon. Thus, Art swung forward with his blade, striking the laser and diffracting it through its glass-like blade into harmless, prismatic lights. Apollyon, the greatest weapon in her own right, seized the laser in her hand, and twisted the light into a crimson spear, which she hurled right back at the angel. The spear struck dead-on, though so great was the stature of their foe, that it was of less significance than a toothpick.

In response to their meager counterattack, the angel fully extended its wings, and allowed its missiles to fly, filling the sky

with a hundred instruments of absolute death. Each flew according to a pattern of its own, in such an eccentric display that one could easily be forgiven for thinking it random. But for Art, who had learned of the harmonies of the universe, and of the purpose in all things, the trails of fire left in the wake of those missiles was all he required to divine a pattern of order out of the chaotic sky.

He envisioned the ground not beneath his feet, but far off into the distance. Shooting forward at the speed of gravity, Art made his way for the angel above. Yet as the missiles converged upon him, he turned, shifting his orientation, and allowing a set to collide into each other. Again, he shot forward, shifting his direction back and forth across the sky, freely reorienting the ground while keeping focused at all times on the figure of his opponent. With precise movements which bordered on precognition, he avoided each of the missiles, bringing them in to wreak destruction upon themselves.

But this wasn't precognition. Even if one could see into the past, to see into the future was a territory exceeding that of humans.

This was music. Nothing more, and nothing less.

The sky was alight with explosions. Unlike Art, who had aimed to best the angelic assault with human skill, the inhuman Apollyon had discarded the air around her, and freely accelerated through the sky at a pace far exceeding that of the hypersonic missiles; her form crossed back and forth across the sky, as she gathered a flock of missiles in her wake. Once she was satisfied with her catch, she shot directly for the angel, pulling her sword back.

"Thou who art but the image of an angel, weep in terror at the true strength of one who wields the blade of the original."

She cast the blade forward before her, piercing beyond the limits of the vacuum she had created and splitting through the atmosphere at meteoric speed. There was a deafening noise as the glass-like blade cut its way through the air. Yet as fast as it was, with friction acting against it, Apollyon was swift in accelerating past it. Just before she collided with the angel, she pulled

up, sliding along the front and slowly tuning the direction of her gravity, so that she could stand along its body.

The blade struck but a moment after, piercing its target's silvery skin with such power and sharpness that it did not merely pierce the hull, but drove all the way through it, shooting out the other side and penetrating deep into the earth. The next to come were the missiles, and though some were able to make partial turns, none were able to follow the precise angle of their target—each collided, instead, with the angel's skin. Strong as they were, no single missile would be enough to damage the colossus; but over three hundred missiles, striking together as a chorus against a previously damaged point, were more than enough to wreak havoc upon it. Apollyon made self-satisfied smirk, then held out her right-hand, called her blade back to her from the earth, and declared, "Now, bring forth thy best."

As she did so, Art finished navigating his way through the sea of missiles, and began to close upon the angel. The dust cleared from the missile strikes, and he could see a great hole had been ripped into the interior. Yet rather than have joy at the sight, he was afraid—for within that enormous angel, was perched a legion of smaller angels, which had begun to stir at the exposure of the light.

"Apollyon!" he shouted. "There are more of them within!"

In response to his words, the silver angel turned to Art, and fired the lasers from its eyes once more. He readied his blade to diffract the beams once again, but this time, the attack was a continuous motion – as his blade sliced through, the beam continued, he felt searing pain as his shoulder was sliced along the top.

He backed off as the beam cut-off, and watched as the great host of angels within the silver one's corpus began to take flight. Each carried in its hands a trumpet-like machine gun, and vacant eyes with not so much as a hint of neither life nor mercy.

Art directed himself out of the way from the silver angel's follow-up attack, aiming for evasion. Faced with an onslaught of weapons, he had the thought, *I need something to protect myself.*

Some kind of armor, to protect against those eyes.

Concentrating as best as he could, he attempted to form a mental image of a protective suit of armor, strong enough to ward against the attacks which were coming in his direction. As he did, the image began to take shape. His uniform was replaced with a suit of metal armor, with a flowing vermilion cape flowing behind it, and a crested helmet with a glass-like visor to protect his face. The blue-glow of his sword shifted to red, as though to make this own.

Once more, the eye-beams shot forth. Art caught the blast with his sword, splitting the light. The remaining beams, strong though they were, were unable to pierce his armor. The angelic host approached, and took aim with their own weapons. The bullets rained down, and though none pierced his armor, the raw force of the shots drove him back.

He reoriented himself to the ground, adding the momentum of the shots to his own acceleration from gravity, then gradually redirected his position until he could sling-shot for the nearest angel. He thrust his blade forward, piercing it through its steel heart, then kicked off of its crumbling form and shooting after the next.

Apollyon, on the other hand, had opted for a very different form of defense. As the lesser angels exited the greater, she allowed herself to slide into the whole, and cutting a line through the horde as she made her way directly to the head. In that dark space, the only light was the blue glow of her blade, and the shining red lights of angelic eyes. Step by step, she dove deeper and deeper, cutting her way directly through to the head of the great creature.

I'm not sure what she's doing, but I need to keep these things distracted. And hopefully take care of a few in the process.

His blade easily severed the head of an angel. As bullets rained down upon him, he grabbed the body and held it out as a shield. The hail of lead easily ripped it apart, while the momentum shot him in the direction of another cluster. Once more, he severed the head of one, and then hurled his blade to catch

another through the heart. Having proven the effectiveness of such, he seized the machine gun from out of the head's of the decapitated angel.

"I'll be borrowing this," he said, as he directed it at the nearest cluster. The bullets rained forth, ripping through the angels and causing them to drop from the sky. The momentum drove him back, and he reoriented himself to take advantage of it, heading back to the angel he had pierced. Once more, he unloaded its weapon. As dozens of guns trained upon him, he liberated his sword from its temporary sheathe, and shot off once more, leaving the destroyed angel to be shredded into bits of metal by misdirected gunfire.

The aerial battle continued, with Art moving through the sky. The unending hail of machine gun fire and laser-beams wore away at his armor, while the constant motion took its toll. There seemed to be no end to the horde—for each one he struck down, it seemed as if there were two more to take its place.

Eventually, he slipped up. The silver angel charged its laser blast, and the red light struck Art directly in the body, shattering his armor apart and blasting him away, with a terrible burn across his chest. The host of angels descended upon him, and he knew it was only a matter of time before their hailstorm of judgment fell upon him.

He turned his attention to the area around him. The cracks in the world continued to expand, and indeed, it seemed as though he owed much of his survival to the occasional mishap of an angel sliding into the white, vanishing from the world and crossing into the next. The ground, too, had crumbled apart—rather than ground, it seemed as if he were hovering over an endless abyss, with the remaining fragments of the ground freely floating like islands in a sea of darkness. And there, at the heart of it all, was the great lance of swirling black pages.

Sorry, everyone. It looks like I might not be making it back from this, after all. This is the end of the road.

The angels descended. Yet before they could deal the final blow, the sound of an explosion rang out in the distance. From

the head of the silver angel came a plume of smoke, with a great hole ripped through it, as though shot from the inside. From out of that hole flew Apollyon, as a blue streak of light. The lesser angels ceased their movements, some hovering in place, while others simply dropped from the sky. The great silver angel, which had hovered upside down in the air, began to fall towards the great lance. Art marveled as it was cleanly sliced in half, as though having fallen upon a great blade, and slowly made its slide into the oblivion that was the great abyss below.

Art allowed himself to drop to one of the floating islands, where Apollyon quickly joined him. She said, "It heartens me greatly to see thee alive, master. Though judging by thy condition, thou would not have remained as such much longer."

He panted heavily, as he replied, "No, that was a close one. How did you take that thing down?"

"Ah, but it was a simple matter of destroying the control center. It made for quite the spectacular show, did it not? Rest, master, but do not sit—this was merely the opening act."

"You mean there's more of those?"

Her eyes narrowed, as she looked off into the distance, where the town had once been. She said, "Behold, master—for now that one has fallen, the rest shall now begin their descent."

The heavens opened, and from the sky, there fell more angels of silver. Each was alike to their predecessor in terms of size, and flanked by a great host of lesser angels. Art could feel an overwhelming sense of dread wash over his body, as he bore witness to the heavens falling in judgment upon the earth below.

Turning to Apollyon, he asked, "Is there anything we can do?"

"Nay," she replied. "Thou lack the power, at this time, and there is naught I can do which would not claim thy life in the process."

"...have we at least managed *something*?"

"That depends greatly upon what thou mean, master. As thou have seen, should the first have attempted to lift the black lance, it would have been destroyed all the same. The rest would then descend, and in acting together, would successfully drive

it from the world. However, be proud. Thy efforts have bought time, and were not in vain.”

“I guess I’ll just have to be happy with that,” he replied. He looked towards the lance, seeing how it seemed to stretch on endlessly both through the abyss below and the heavens above, as he asked, “Just what is that thing, anyways?”

Apollyon held her hand forth, and said, “Hearken, master! The darkness before thy eyes, is the bridge crossing between words. There, at the bottom of the abyss, lies the true world; an Earth akin to what you know, quickly approaching its death knell. Past the alabaster sky lies an artificial heaven, and a path of ascension to realm beyond that of mortal kin. Yet there will be many pitfalls before those who attempt the journey, and few shall see the pure world beyond.”

“Then the world of the Datanet...?”

“It is simply the next layer, on the path of ascension. It is false, yet its falsehood is different. Along each step of the ladder, thy fellows will find a simulacrum of a simulacrum. At the end of the journey, they may perhaps reach a fake which is more true than the original.”

“I see...”

He gazed down into the abyss, and laughed as he said, “I suppose that, in the end, she really was a devil, wasn’t she?”

The angels continued their descent. His strength returned, and he took up a stance with his blade in hand, ready to give it his all before the end. He asked Apollyon, “Do you have any other tricks that could help us, here?”

“Alas, to maintain the boundary of Harut and Marut is the limit of what I can do for thee. Were I to draw upon the images of great beasts it would be simple—yet in this world, there are but men and angels. And ’tis beyond my power to call upon the ten-crowned dragon.”

Even at the end, I really have no idea what these girls are talking about. This is really a pain, isn’t it?

He put those those aside, and replied, “Then I guess we’ll just have to work with this. I’m going to bring back my armor, so

can you try to do as much damage as you can while I keep them busy?"

"How self-sacrificing of thee, master. But let us do so. I shall bring forth as great an arsenal as I can, and we shall go out in glory."

The two took up their positions, as the full host of artificial heaven descended upon them. Yet then, there was a change. From the bodies of the great, silver angels, there were great explosions; some were broken apart, others showed but minor damage, and yet all began to fall from the skies above. The lesser angels, as well, fell into the black abyss, and crumbled apart into data.

"What...?"

But a single word was able to escape from Art's lips. From the sky above, a single, white page fell towards him. He reached out his hand, and took it. On it was written but these words:

Have fun in the real world, brother. I'll be waiting for you.

It was signed, 'Anna'.

Interlude

Along the great, white expanse of a far-off sea shore, the metal forms of a few dozen artificial angels were scattered around. These, naturally, were but those of the smallest category—of little individual strength, by the warped standards of those battling in the world above, and yet surely superior to a normal human on their own.

Needless to say, there should have been no abnormal humans in that artificial heaven which lie above. Yet by some strange twist in the workings of the worlds, that rule had been broken.

Far past the shore, the tip of a great, black lance broke through the seas; it cast a shadow across the waves, reaching out to the sea shore, where there stood a motley crew of youths. Gareth and Oliver, dressed in armor and with heavy machine

guns laid to their side, sat exhausted on the ground with their backs against each other, while a few others had plunged face-down into the soft sand.

At the very edge of the beach, standing at the limit of the water, were two figures. The first was a tall young man, not all that much older than the adolescents assembled there, with bright red hair and a strong frame. Standing near him was a bespectacled woman, dressed in a lab-coat; yet though her attire was similar to that of a certain teacher, her features were especially elegant, and her wavy, raven-like hair fell long past her shoulders. In her hands, she held a book, which showed the mark of a single page having been torn out.

The young man asked, "So, do you really think that paper will get to our brother on the other side?"

"I'm sure of it," she replied. "It's just a question of where or not he'll fully appreciate what we've done here."

The whining sound of a strange animal came, as Chloe approached the two astride a riding beast, her rifle at her side. She said, "We were able to take control of the outpost, and trigger the self-destruction sequence, but the Director was already gone by the time we got there. I wasn't able to find that key you talked about, either."

Kay looked to the woman, and asked, "Well, Anna? You've got any idea what to do about that?"

"It's out of our hands, now," Anna replied. "The Director is not the sort of person capable of ascending to the next world—the best he can manage is running this one. If he chooses to descend, then it will be up to Art and that woman to deal with things."

"Oh, then that's fine. I'm sure he can handle it."

"You should have shown him that confidence when he was around."

"Nah," Kay replied, waving his hand. "That boy's lived a life full of praise. The greatest regret I have is that I didn't nag him a little harder. Though I'd give a close second to not noticing how you went missing. I really ought to kick myself over that one."

“Oh? Do you truly regret it, so much?”

“Of course I do. Just because you were the older sister, that doesn’t give me an excuse to have slacked in looking after the both of you. Even if things have mostly worked out...”

“There was nothing you could have done. Besides, thanks to that woman, my efforts weren’t in vain. And with her memories, I have all of the tools I need to lead us on the ascent.”

“You really believe that?”

She smirked, and said, “Of course I do. The archetype I was meant to fulfill was that of a witch who would help escort her dying brother to paradise, after all. It’s only natural that I make my way ahead of him. Though, I suppose the rest of you might not get to act out your parts.”

“That story nonsense? Nah. It’s not like Art’s gonna be an actual king, or anything like that. He doesn’t need a bunch of knights.”

“Well said. I agree—as a traveler in the world, all he needs is a good traveling companion.”

Out in the distance, the black lance began to retract, pulling back into the seas from which it had arisen. The woman said, “Farewell Art, my brother; farewell Shiori Kato, my temporary other half. There’s a greater world out there, waiting for you.”

XIV

Graduation

Art smiled as he looked at the paper in his hand, reflecting with no small wonder upon the events which must have transpired far away from where he was, and said, “It looks like we have people up there looking out for us, after all.”

The black lance had begun to recede from the sky—a signal to Art that things were soon to come to an end. Though what that end was, he still wasn’t quite certain. Apollyon stood near him,

her arms crossed, as she said, "Rest not thy head, master. I sense that this is not yet the end."

Of the blocks of land which emerged, one larger than the rest had begun to make its appearance. Upon it was the old schoolhouse, though to look at it now, Art could not help but feel that it looked as though it was crumbling apart; it was, if nothing else, in a state which was now crumbling away. The larger island made its way to the one where Art and Apollyon had perched, before coming to a stop just a small hop away.

Seeing this, Apollyon said nothing, and simply nodded to him. Though he had questions, Art made the leap over to that other island of rock, and walked his way to the schoolhouse door.

Pushing it open, he stepped inside to see a strange sight. The desks had all been moved along to the side, forming a ring, as though to give off the impression of a debate hall. Along the front row were students, some of whom he could recognize from the class—no, rather, each of these was a student who had transferred in. Upon their faces were little more than blank expressions, as if they were statues.

And there, at the far end, where the teacher's podium stood near the door, was an older man wearing an old-fashioned, brimmed cap, and a particularly refined black suit. His back was turned as Art entered, and he was busying himself drawing the image of a vibrant tree upon the chalkboard. About the time that Art had made his way to the halfway point of the room, the old man glanced back, set the chalk down, and then turned to look Art in the eye.

"Greetings," he said, in a voice which seemed more kind than it was professional, "Arthur, our newest would-be alumnus."

"You..you're the man from the funeral, aren't you?"

The man tipped his hat, and replied, "Indeed, that is who I am. It's truly a shame what happened with your former teacher, but even the best technology could not keep someone alive forever. Of course, we did try as best as we could, but that troublesome sister of yours went and ruined the program."

“So, you’re from the observatory, then? If you didn’t want that to happen, maybe you shouldn’t have erased people who found things you didn’t like. No...why did you even make it available, in the first place?”

“Human history must be preserved, but it need not be preserved by all,” the old man replied, as began to pace before the board. “It was the belief of the directors that idle fantasies would only spoil your proper education.”

“How could it have? My whole life, up until this point, has been nothing but an endless repetition of more of the same pattern. This past week has been more vibrant than all of it combined.”

The old man dismissively waved his hand, saying, “That is because you are still a child, with a mind easily occupied by childishness. With a few more years, we would have completed the project, and you would have been a proper candidate.”

“Tell me about this project,” Art said, approaching the old man. “Just what was all of this about? Replicating ancient stories, but then dismissing them as nonsense—just what is that about?”

The old man held his arms out wide, and said, “Can you not see it, Arthur? Look around you. This world...”

He struck his fist down on the teacher’s podium, creating a loud, thudding sound, and said, “...can you not marvel, at how real it is? It is a perfect replica for that which exists outside, in all ways save one: here, in this simulation, we have created heaven. The ancients were content with creating demons to fell the gods of the sky, but through this, we have surpassed them, and constructed the pathway to become gods!”

“So what does—”

“Allow me to finish,” the old man said, holding his hand out to the younger boy. He coughed, before continuing, “Naturally, there was little point to becoming gods without followers. So we designed this stage, with the initial goal of creating a peerless ruler—a man more perfect than any machine, who would be appointed, by divine right, as overseer of this world. There

were many iterations, and many stories. Yours was one which proved especially promising. Our plan was nearly foolproof, but there were many factors which fell beyond our calculations: your troublesome sister, the untimely death of your instructor, and of course the unexpected betrayal of Shiori Kato.”

Bitterly, he added, “Perhaps there is a God out there, and this is all his work to punish us for our transgressions. If so, then he is by far the greater puppet-master than we could ever hope to be.”

“I can’t say that I’m especially sympathetic for your plight,” Art replied, looking at the forms of his classmates around him. He asked, “What even is *this*, anyways?”

“They are hollow vessels,” the old man replied. “Their role was to fill the void, when we were forced to make shifts in the program. They were unusually active over the past week, though. Given their hollow status, I suspect they had simply been filled.”

He stepped forward to the nearest student, then lifted her chin, and said, “Still, they’re awfully realistic, aren’t they? You would almost think they’re proper humans. But unlike your original classmates, who have gone off on their own journey of ascension, there was never a live human to serve as the basis. They were just data, in the end.”

“And what about you?” Art asked. “If this ascension was the goal, why are you still here?”

“I am the first, and I am the last,” the old man replied. “I was the first to enter into this digital landscape, to serve as the director. In advance of the others, I forfeited that shell, to become a purely digital being. The others did not follow. Our timetable was incorrect, and as the generations passed, there were eventually none left to carry on with the project. In the end, all that remained was your teacher, and myself. Once she passed, I will admit that I felt a sense of regret—we were so very close to the end. As I could not offer her a burial in the real world, that meager service was the best that I could accomplish.”

“...then who contacted Shiori?”

The old man chuckled, and said, “Nobody contacted that woman. As best as I can tell, she simply found the damaged observatory, and was curious enough to stick herself inside to see what happened. It was a foolish mistake to trust anyone with such a temperament.”

Art was left speechless for a moment, as he attempted to wrap his mind about what the old man had just said.

“Yes, it’s the strangest thing, isn’t it? I wouldn’t have thought there was anyone so eccentric in the world, yet, it worked out quite well. Of course, once she was in, she still needed access to the world itself. That was where we worked out a deal. It was a wonderful stroke of luck, I had thought at the time—now, I see it was nothing more than the last harbinger of the end.”

“Is that so?” Art asked, “But, director, there’s something about what you’ve been saying that bothers me. Every answer you’ve given so far has been something related to what I’ve asked, but never direct. More like you were reading off a pre-recorded speech.”

“I’m glad you asked, Arthur,” the old man continued. “Indeed, these responses are nothing more than a few prerecorded speeches. I have had nothing but time, after all, to prepare as many as possible. There is little more left to my existence, than there is to the shells assembled here. Too much time has passed. There is no longer enough left of me, for me to ascend.”

“So, you’re an artificial intelligence..well, I guess this is the best I can hope for. In that case, just one last question—why are you here?”

“You have no further questions? Then let me explain my reason for being here. It was the hope of our institution that by stripping out troublesome emotions and fantasies, we could create a pure human to act as a leader. Yet each time, we failed. The reason was quite simple, in the end—we, who were not ourselves free of sentiment, could not hope to create a world without it. I, too, am the same. So now, at the end of the world, I have returned to my stage.”

The old man met Art in the eye, and said, “Student Arthur—I do not approve you for graduation.”

The schoolhouse began to shake—no, the whole island. Art began to stumble, then reoriented himself to standing a little over the ground, as the entirety of the schoolhouse began to crumble apart. Looking up, he saw, hovering over the school, the form of the same steel angel he had seen previously. It was smaller, by far, than those of silver; unlike them, it was a rough thing, with exposed wiring and a body marked in all manner of antennas and sensors.

Did it already scan the house? How did it get past Apollyon...

No, that wasn’t quite it. The angel’s chest was still closed, so it hadn’t been eating away at the schoolhouse. Instead, it was simply its sheer mass which was cutting through the roof. Apollyon was engaged in battle with it, up above. The top of the schoolhouse was collateral damage, brought on from a battle between monsters.

The director held out his hand, and a scepter rose from the ground, for him to take it in hand. Around his body formed a ring of verdigris light. He said, “I am the director of this town—the virtues may have failed in maintaining the world order, and the angelic hosts have fallen. Yet so long as the last principality remains, the battle continues. Come at me, Arthur. I shall show you the resolve of centuries.”

“I should say the same,” Art replied, drawing his blade. “After all, I’m the closest you’ve got to a finished project.”

He stepped in, blade raised high, and swept for his opponent. The old man slipped back, with surprising speed, then lunged forward with his scepter, swinging not at Art, but at his sword. The blade shattered to pieces upon the impact, leaving Art stunned. He stumbled back, and attempted to reorient himself for an escape; but when he attempted to do so, it proved an immediate failure, and he slipped. The scepter just barely missed him as he dropped.

Then the effect from Apollyon was broken? But how...?

Art rolled out of the way, as the old man swung down, attempting to smash his legs with the scepter. He felt pain in his arm, as he rolled over the part which had been struck earlier by the silver angel's lasers, as he attempted to get a better grasp of his opponent.

If he peered at it just right, he could see a string of binary text in the ring of light about the director's body, which translated out to the word 'cancellation'.

He must have taken the power from that angel...

At some level, Art felt relieved. If the director had taken that authority from the steel angel, then he felt confident that Apollyon could keep it occupied—the only worry, there, was the detonation it would supposedly cause with its destruction. On the other hand, that also left him without much in the way of weapons on his own.

Sword, I need a sword...

Or did he need a sword? He rolled away from another attack and stood himself up, looking for some kind of weapon he could use. As the director rushed for him, he settled on his weapon of choice, grabbing one of the empty desks and swinging it with his full strength. The old man knocked back, and the desk groaned under the pressure of being used as a glorified battering ram.

Before his opponent could recover, he hurled the desk, knocking the director back and causing him to stumble. Art rushed forward himself, and swung his fist as hard as he could, striking his enemy in the jaw with enough force to send him reeling. Next, he struck him in his upper arm, causing the scepter to drop to the ground.

But, that was as far as he got. The director stepped back, and took up a fighting stance of his own. It wasn't a style that Art was familiar with—the academy put most of its focus into armed combat, after all – but he could tell from the firm stance, with one arm raised and the other with the elbow to the side, that it was quite different from the format he was familiar with.

In response, Art adopted his own stance, holding his open hands out before him, with his body turned a bit to the side.

Judging by the stance, he could tell the old man was a striker. Beyond that, the director was a fully grown adult; while Art was tall for his age, he was still at a disadvantage in terms of reach.

His body is thinner—if it comes down to mass, we're about even. If it's the ground, I can pin him, and that would be it...

His course of action was settled. He stepped forward, as did his opponent; as he did, he pivoted, and went for a kick, aiming to strike his opponent in the leg. The director opted not to withdraw, but to instead move in closer, crouching a bit and allowing the blow to strike him in the hip. He stepped in quickly, moving under Art's arm, and struck him in the chest with the full force of his elbow.

Art stumbled back, as the wing was taken out of his lungs, and found his stance immediately dropped. The director pressed his assault, striking Art's leg in the knee, and then striking forward with his fist, with a blow aimed directly at Art's throat, with a deadly speed. But...

That's what I was hoping for.

Things didn't go perfectly according to plan, but Art doubted he would get a striker to the ground without taking a few body-blows. He raised his arms to catch the blow, and pulled forward, aiming to take his opponent off-balance. With most of his weight on his back leg, he swept the director's leg with the front, and brought him to the ground.

There was a loud thud, as the weight of both bodies struck the ground. Now on the ground, Art shoved his opponent's head to the ground and locked his right arm into an arm bar. From this position, there was little hope for his opponent to escape. And yet...

Now what do I do?

The director groaned in pain, as Art held him in place. From this spot, he could do just about whatever he pleased. But what exactly *was* it that he pleased? Should he punish the man? Kill him? Let him go? Try to talk to him some more? Drag him out for Apollyon to deal with?

Wasn't this man responsible for everything? No, rather—was what remained here, this ephemeral ghost of a man, something that could be truly called a man at this point?

He stood up, and let go of the director's arm. Then, he walked over to the scepter, and lifted it up. It was a heavy thing, he thought—far heavier than a mace ought to have weighed. The old man had begun to recover, and stood up. But rather than adopt a fighting stance, he went to recover his hat, which had slipped off during their melee. Placing it back on, he said, "I had suspected you would spare me. But you should realize, that decision is an incomparably foolish one. It's not as though you are sparing a human life."

"It's fine," Art replied. "So what if you're not a complete human? The first friend I ever made, in this world, was an incomplete human herself. I'm not sure what will become of her, but I'd like to think, once she comes back, we'll be friends again."

"How strange," the old man replied, as he adjusted his hat. "Forgive me, but it seems none of the messages I have readied are suitable as responses, for that."

The remaining walls and supports of the school-house, which had just barely been holding on, began to crumble, showing the full scene which had been transpiring about them. Apollyon, darting in the air by virtue of some logician technique, had inflicted heavy damage upon the steel angel—one arm had been severed completely, and the rest of its form was severely battered.

"There is one thing, though, Arthur," the director continued, as he turned from Art to face the battle in the sky. "In the distant past, it was the way of kings to wield a scepter in hand, as you do at this moment. And it was the duty of the principality to stand behind the king, and to ward his kingdom. Likewise, if that king were to abandon his kingdom, the way of heaven would be to abandon him."

He turned to Art, and said, "You have fared well, Arthur. But I am sorry—this is the end. By the authority of the director, I declare the king of this world to be a failure, and sentence his king-

dom to total annihilation.”

The ring of light vanished—no, rather, it was as if someone had picked it up and snapped it. The steel angel stopped in midair, and made the announcement: “TERMINATION SEQUENCE INITIATED STOP BEGINNING SELF-DESTRUCTION SEQUENCE STOP TIME TO DETONATION THIRTY SECONDS STOP.”

It took but a couple for Apollyon to suddenly pull back, landing near Art and saying, “Master, why did thou not execute the director?”

“I had no idea he could do that!”

“Fool! Had I know thy mind was so flaccid, I would have taken the man’s head myself! Thy foolishness makes a fool of me, as well.”

“Can we stop it?”

“Master, I am thy sword. Dost thou think I have a defense readied against a threat such as this?”

“What if you pushed it, like with a giant hammer?”

“What part of sword do thee not understand?”

“FIVE...FOUR...THREE...”

If this was ending, Art thought, it was a rather embarrassing one. But on the other hand, he had not regret. Even if he would never have a chance to see the real world that beyond, and even if he had stepped away from a chance at some form of ascension he was only vaguely able to understand, he thought that it had all worked out well.

If nothing else, it had certainly been fun.

So long as he thought of things that way, he would surely be able to see all of this to the end with a smile.

But in those last few seconds, the angel’s countdown was met by a

few calmly spoken words, from just behind Art:

“Barrier Sphere, output 700, variable: fireworks.”

The angel detonated. But rather than a detonation to shatter the world apart, it was instead as if the explosion was caught in an invisible sphere formed around it. The space was filled with

a pure black, for the briefest of moments. Then, it exploded—not as an all-consuming wave of death, but as a wave of darkness covering the skies above, which gave way at once to a vibrant, multi-colored display of sounds and lights, which filled all of the heavens above in a way which Art had never seen before.

For a moment, Art stared in wonder at the sky. The director, as well, seemed to look up, before saying, “Well, looks like that’s it for me. Best of luck, Arthur. Congratulations on your graduation.”

The old man began to fade away, though there was little that Art could say about that—in the end, as cold as it might have been, he had little feelings for this man he had barely known, even if that man had governed nearly every aspect of his life—and instead turned about, to the source of the voice.

Standing behind him was a person he had never seen before, and yet knew at once. She was tall, with jet-black hair tied haphazardly into a long ponytail by a red band, blue eyes, and a slender build; her attire, the eclectic collection of a 17th Eon traveler, consisted of a baseball cap, a floral shirt, long denim pants supported by a leather belt, and a long cloak—more of a cape, rather—which was black on the outer-facing side, and a deep vermilion within.

Shiori looked down at Art, and with a faint smile on her face, said, “You did a good job, Art. Now, are you ready to see what lies on the other side of that abyss?”

XV Epilogue

On a cold autumn afternoon in the 17th Eon, the dying red sun shone down upon an old solar sailor, which was preparing once again to leave its dock. Seated on the edge of that ship, looking out at the vast, open scenery which lay beyond, was a blond-haired boy wrapped as tightly as possible in a thick, fur cloak.

In his hands, he tightly clutched a mug, full of some warm drink he had been told only was a type of tea.

Behind him, the woman who was his benefactor on that account worked the rigging on the sailor, returning it back to proper operating condition. She said, "You should pay close attention. If you want to survive in this world, these skill will prove invaluable."

"It would be faster if you'd just let me practice, you know?"

"I refuse. I have only once made the mistake of allowing another person to touch my ship, and the bow has been angled 2° too far down every since."

She paused a moment after that, and then said, "Though, I suppose I might make exception for a friend...but only after I feel he has a solid grasp of the fundamentals. And has had time to recover."

Turning off to the side, Art could see a small ridge, where a large satellite dish aimed towards the sky marked the site of an observatory not much different from that in the digital world. It had been only a few days since he had stepped out of that place, and as much as he hated to admit it, she was right.

I'd probably just fumble everything if I tried, right now.

His first memory in this world was the sensation of floating. Even with his eyes wide opened, he could see nothing—no, rather, it was as if he could feel nothing at all. He tried to move his arms, and even that offered little sensation until his hand made contact with his temple, and he felt a strange device strapped onto his head, akin to the band in the Datanet. Further inspection found a series of connections, tubes, and wires running off of his body at various points.

Then, there was the shock of light. From beyond the liquid he was floating in—he could tell, at least, that it was some kind of liquid—the silhouette of a humanoid figure looked down, then began to reach out. He stretched out his hand, as best as he could, and took hold. Then, that person pulled him, and he was dragged out into light.

The next few moments were a shock, as though he were feeling the experiences of light, sound, temperature, and touch, all for the first time—no, rather, in this particular body, these were all things he felt for the first time. He could just barely exercise control over his muscles, but balance was nearly impossible, and he felt extremely weak.

Not long after his surfacing, his rescuer had tossed him a towel, to help dry off. As he adjusted to the experience of vision, he was able to recognize his benefactor as Shiori—or rather, the true Shiori Kato, who had the look more of a woman in her early 20s than the younger girl he had first known, and at the present moment in a casual state of undress. As she dried herself off, she said, “It will do you no good to rush. This will be your first time leaving the development chamber. I can mount the memories of a physical therapist to help you adjust, but it will take some time before you regain full motor functions.”

At the time, he had been unable to give a proper response. It might have been understandable for an adolescent boy in that position, but in his case, his bigger problem was that he was still getting used to making use of his vocal chords—when he tried to speak, the most that he was able to manage was a few guttural noises.

Once they had finished drying off, as well as gotten dressed—her own clothes were easily retrieved from a locker, though he was forced to make do with an especially large blanket she had quickly stitched together into a vaguely-serviceable robe—she helped support him as he looked over the rest of the facility. They were in an enormous chamber, with hundreds of pods, similar to the one he had exited from; some were below, others above, and others along the same rail. She explained to him, “Each of these contained a person, though many are long dead. Your classmates are alive, but there is little chance of them surviving the sudden shock of physical consciousness. Their journey lies the other direction—and if they succeed, they should have no further need for these bodies.”

Having heard that, he struggled to speak the word,

“A...apar...a...”

“She should be in this facility, somewhere. Just not here.”

The facility was an extremely large space, and even with support from Shiori, Art was forced to stop a number of times. At one point, she left him at a bench for a while in order to find food. When she returned with a plastic packets containing some strange, viscous liquid with an off-orange color, she grimaced and said, “I wish your first meal on this side could be better than a nutrition pack, but this will give you much-needed energy.”

It was simultaneously bitter, yet also sickly sweet; he imagined that fermented citrus would taste something similar, but he had no way of being certain about that. In any case, the memory of that foul taste was sure to be something he would never forget, for so long as he lived.

In the end, they had managed to find the main computing center. The presence of lightning, combined with additional computers and monitoring devices, made it difficult to tell at first; but as they stepped in, Art was able to recognize it as nearly identical to the heart of the alien-god. In the central chamber they found Apollyon, held in a state of suspended animation, and reduced in build to that of a child—a far departure from her fully empowered state, he thought.

“The founders of this facility likely made use of her abilities as a calculator to help anchor the simulation. That was what allowed her to exercise her powers so freely, and granted her knowledge comparable to a sort of precognition; conversely, it restricted her to the rules of that world. I can only speculate what impact operating in the present world will have on her functions, but my best guess is that she will find it difficult to make free-use of logician techniques.”

Shiori guided the way out of the facility, supporting Art on her shoulder while the temporarily childlike Apollyon was hung over her back. The trio made their way outside, where for the first time, Art was exposed to the true light of the dying sun.

In the end, she just locked herself in a room and said she was going to sleep a bit longer. Is she actually a small child, or something?

It was something that could be worried about later, he thought. His thoughts were returned to the present as Shiori, having completed her work on the rigging, came to sit by the edge of the ship with him. She asked, "Are you feeling better?"

"Walking is still a bit tricky, and I'm not confident enough to hold anything without using both hands. It's getting better, though. I have to admit, it's a bit annoying finding that all of that physical training was just a waste..."

"It will make it easier for you to recover your strength. It would be a bigger problem if you were already an adult, and were at the limit of your growth. You have plenty of time."

"I guess that's a bit reassuring," he replied, with a sigh. "I suppose I'll just have to get over it, though."

Shiori's lips started to move, but she cut herself off before saying anything. There was silence for a moment, before at last she said, "Art. Even though I have memories from within that world, I..."

"I understand," he said, looking over. "But even if you're not exactly the same, I don't think you're as different as you think. And if nothing else, I think she would still want us to be friends, in this world as well. So that's what I'll try to do."

"I see. That is good to hear, then," she replied, with a faint smile on her face. She then said, "I will keep that in mind, then. Though it should go without saying that you are still a child, and children need someone to look after them. Traveling the planet surface is dangerous—far more dangerous than the simulation let on. If I pull some strings, it would be simple enough to arrange schooling for you."

"Being called a child is a little embarrassing, you know?"

"It is statement of fact, not of derision. In your current condition, if were beset by mutants or raiders, your presence onboard would at best be a liability."

"That's a bit harsh...but I think I understand. Still, how long would that last, anyways?"

"It depends. I have contacts in the Republic of Urlsdale, which is one of the few states to maintain a functional educa-

tion system. You should have no trouble finding admission, and ideally you would be able to stay long enough to receive a formal education—if you were to receive a legal certification, that would be convenient for me.”

“It would be convenient for you?”

“Yes. I have long sought to inspect Station 35, but you can only gain admittance with a judicial escort. I could commit a crime and receive a sentence, but I understand certain areas are off limits to prisoners.”

“Please don’t commit any crimes, just for something like that...”

He sighed. Then, as the thought came to him, he asked, “Wait, by contacts, do you mean it’s a place you were at? I thought this was your first time as a student?”

“While I have spent some time there, no—your initial thought was correct. I spent most of my childhood in a hidden facility, in a far away corner of the world. In some respects it was similar to this one, with a similar goal of maintaining an archive.”

She tapped her head, and said, “That archive is here. But I rejected the director of that site, much as you did. It is...a long story, and one which came to involve a great deal of bloodshed. But that is behind me, now, just as this all will soon be behind you. The past few decades have been peaceful.”

Decades? Wait, but she doesn’t look...?

“I suppose I should spare you from having to ask—yes, I am a fair bit older than I look. By time you reach adulthood, it will have been but a year, for me—perhaps even less.”

“So it’s something like that...”

“If you remind me, we can also get you tested for any possible defects or abnormalities. The definition of human is quite nebulous in the current eon, and knowing where you fall in the genome is a medical necessity. We may need to get you your shots...”

“Why does it sound like you’re talking about some kind of animal when you say that?”

“Pay it no mind.”

In the end, their departure wouldn't come until the next morning. Art wasn't sure how long they spoke, exactly; only that the sun had set, and gave way to the stars shining above. For the most part, that time was spent sitting and listening to stories—not fantastic stories of other places, but recounting incidents from her own travels.

"The truth is," she said, "That the world is a very large place. Even the greatest of storytellers have only ever managed to highlight a small bit of the world they envisioned. A brilliant author might sit down and imagine a fantastic world, with strange cultures foreign to his own; only to find, in traveling the world, that those strange people of a distant star which he had dreamed up, in truth had more in common with his countrymen than the very people he shared the same planet with. Even with my own, extended lifespan, it doubtful I will ever see the planet – and even if I were to do so, by the time I was finished, so much will have changed that the effort might as well have never been made. Still, I wish to see as much of it as I can. To wander the planet Earth, to see wondrous things, and to engrave those in my mind before the last light of the sun. That is my *raison d'être*."

"Ms. Kato...well, you, rather, had used that term before, in our first lesson. Just what is all of that about?"

"Your purpose, in a sense. Not a higher calling, or a commandment from God, but simply the purpose you have carved for yourself. Though it seems the part of myself that acts as the archive, put more value into that sort of thing than the other part."

She looked up to the stars above, and then asked, "Look up to the sky, Art. Even if the sun hangs dying in the skies above, and even if the end of the world can come at any moment, the stars still shine just as bright in the skies above. When mankind first walked naked onto the surface of the planet, those same stars shone brightly. They shone upon the homes of peasants and kings alike, and all who have followed since, with equal splendor then as now. I have made many mistakes in my life, and there have been times when I have had regrets over the choices I made.

There was even a point where I questioned my own reason for living. But under these lights, I have found a level of satisfaction. Because the world is vast, often confusing place, there are many times you may feel those regrets as well. In those times—look to the stars, Art.”

In truth, at that time, Art knew not the full meaning of her words, or what had inspired her to bring them on. But still, he turned up to the heavens above, with the hope that one day, he might see the same thing she saw on that night.

Afterword

This marks the end of what is the first thing I could call a full-length novel—a few of the previous entries were long enough to be called a novella, but this was about a solid 50% larger than those. Still a bit on the shorter side for published genre fiction, but I think that it should at least be fine, given a time constraint and all?

As some might notice, this story was in fact a sort of sequel to something I had written in the sci-fi contest. I would like to think that the quality of the writing is a bit better than it was then, though. In the original concept I had, this was going to be a series of shorter stories which would have Shiori traveling around the wastelands of the dying planet, picking up or dropping off companions, and fixing problems as they came along. The initial idea I had was one where Art would be dragged out from the simulation, with the big reveal that the entire cast was all just people taken from the archive. But I ended up deciding that just one plot twist wasn't going to be good enough, so things started to stack together.

The other thing that shifted things around was the chuuni theme, which demanded a few shifts. Originally the plan was to introduce the character of Apollyon as a student, without any actual powers; but the way the pacing was working out, I realized

I needed to accelerate the timeline, and also that a little action would be nice. It's been a while since I last read Chaucer, so I can't say that her archaic-styled speech is as accurate as it could be, but I figured it was better if there were a few mistakes or slip-ups involved. It's probably close enough to whatever odd future language everyone is speaking.

One point that I somewhat regretted is that while Art was meant to just be one of many primary point-of-view characters, the direction of the story ended up showing him off as the protagonist. I planned to let Shiori have a bigger role in the climax, but after how things went, I figured that hadn't really been earned by the narrative. So I went with the only thing more chuuni than upping the super-powers on display, and decided to let the proper emotional climax come around with two guys beating each other with their fists, as God intended. That just left Shiori to resolve that one last issue, which was the matter of the angel taking everyone out.

That also let me have a chance to give the side-characters a bit of a chance to get things done, off-screen, in order to bring the big battle with the angels to the close. Even if it might have come as a bit of a cop-out, it was my feeling that even the side-characters should have a bit of a resolution. Plus, if one of the underlying themes of the story is about things like friendship, then isn't it natural that the real victory is the friends we made along the way?

It should go without saying that the general dying earth setting takes a great deal of inspiration from Jack Vance, and that while the layout and details of this little novel take heavy inspiration from light novels, the inspiration at the core of all of the writing comes from out of Vance. I'd love to return to this setting and explore it a little more at other points, but I guess I'll see how things go.

Thanks for reading along.

Sayonara,
Anon

Small Tale of a Lost Owl

by /a/non

I Flight

The howl of the wind was all the short girl heard, the cloudless sky enveloping her in nearly all directions. The ocean of green sea, illuminated by moon and starlight, stretched beneath her as far as her eye could see, up to the point until the sea itself was swallowed up by the horizon. A contradiction to her, as if the world only existed around where she is present, all things go away as soon as she goes far enough. She knew the land was curved and the illusion of the horizon swallowing up the ground was one only of her experience, but still, it was a contradiction to her.

Her wings ached, her clothes clung tightly to her body as to, among other things, prevent any undue drag on her frame as she flew, and she had flown for hours. Her stomach rumbled and occasionally when she blinked she would open her eyes to the ground being closer to her than it was a second ago, her ability to maintain the flight had already reached its limit long ago. Landing, if her judgement was right, would by this point be safe, the border that she had crossed had been passed perhaps two hours ago. While not deep into the nation of Esivan she was nonetheless inside, not too close the border as to rise terrible suspicion, not too deep as to be too close to the noble magicians. The clothes she wore resembled that of the nobles, specifically those who used magic rather than the warriors, sleek cloth and silk and

deeply rich in color. At a glance a man could mistake her as one, even up close a fool would still not be privy to her disguise. No, she did not have an emblem signifying her family, she was not a noble but neither did she relegate herself to the clothes of a hedge mage, that of baggy and loose fitting robes, although their names were respected. Not among nobles, though.

For a moment the girl's world disappeared, in less than a moment it revealed itself once again. The land covered by forest, nearly entirely flat if not for the waves and undulations of the trees and their leaves that grew on it, this time the girl decided that each moment she spent gliding in the sky is a moment closer to her breaking her own neck by an accidental fall. She tilted her wings slightly downward and accepted the pull of gravity, and she slowly made her way down.

The trees weren't too dense, neither were they sparse, so she gave careful attention to choosing a spot to land. Finding a tiny clearing, barely large enough to accept her entry, and opening her eyes wide as to least mimic the state of alertness and of being awake, positioned her body so to glide through the wind while slowing down her descent. Her wings opened themselves wide, their span from outer-most feather to outer-most, was half times longer than the rest of her body, and although her size is small anyone that stood below her would certainly for a moment feel fear.

Nearly without a sound she landed, her feet heavy and thudding more than she would've preferred. Not for fear of being heard, but because the sound didn't befit her status as an owl.

Her talons, sharp and edged, were planted firmly on the ground now, her height crouched, her face close to her knees, she gave a second to focus all her of her mind on hearing the sounds of the forest. Breathing, light tapping, the sound of the wind, all these things were naked to her. None were unfamiliar, she had heard them all before, but not a single one belonged to a man. With the knowledge of her being alone she stood up, revealing her full, unimpressive height. Her brown, speckled with black feathers, false-horns of feather resting on top of her scalp, her

skin pale and her eyes enchanting in their iridescent orange. For arms she had wings, upon the top of them where hands would be four talon like fingers, no cloth was upon them as it would be too much trouble to fasten to place.

Her clothes were of brown and black, within them hid many pockets, and despite how she looked to have had nothing she held a great quantity of items on her person. A tight collar of black hugged her neck, the continuation of her doublet, nearly dyed completely brown if not for the frills of black that adorn their edges, mainly upon the top of the collar and some on her shoulders. A hose of solid black that terminated just after her knees, as they only covered the skin, and passed the knee it was scaled and resembling that of a bird's own feet.

The night was still young. Although the moon had passed her zenith it was not yet at the point where the common laborers would be at work, and armed with the knowledge of some locations of tiny outskirts villages the owl walked with purpose, she knew her precise location, the cardinal directions, and most importantly, completely unable to keep her eyes open. It wasn't for the villages she walked, it was to find a nice hole for her to sleep in, as despite the fire in her heart that demanded her to continue, her flesh was unwilling to obey. She trotted, found not a hole but a robust oak tree to climb and sleep on, and after determining she could not climb it, decided to give up and rest under the cover of its canopy.

For a second she listened to the songs of the crickets, vividly felt the waves of air that carried their melody, and just as quickly closed her eyes only to open them again. In front of her wasn't the sight of grass and dirt, what little grew under the shade of the great tree, but her own knife that she had cleverly hid away within a pocket behind her back, and the speckled eyes of a girl similar in size to herself. She stared, looked at the knife, looked around to see if anyone else was present, dared not to breath as she spoke.

"A strange set of circumstance I've been awoken to, perhaps not unjustified given the nature of our meeting." The speckled

eyes didn't blink, the face they were set on didn't twitch, but behind a flicker of some dark object swayed behind her. Her head was adorned two round ears, dark brown in color similar to her hair, the owl knew the features were that of a mouse girl. The owl gave a nervous smile, intentional in its every movement, and kept her eye in line with that of the mouse's. They shared a moment of staring.

"A dangerous circumstance, that's for sure. I'll be quick, I don't see the sign of the covenant on you, neither have I seen your face before. So, you are either an outsider heila, a lost resident, but certainly a fool." The mouse girl took half a step back and lowered the knife, upturned her nose and continued to speak, "Hopefully not a big enough idiot to run away. If you have an identification then show me it, if not then I must take you to the guardians. Do not test me."

The owl nodded and moved her line of sight towards the pocket she hid the tiny emblem that showed her status as one of the accepted, of belonging to the covenant of this foreign land. Without it this entire flight would've been a near suicide. She twitched, but before she could move the mouse opened her mouth, "Too fast. Slow down." So she nodded, and slowly slid her winged hand closer to the inside of her thigh. Her clothes were padded, in areas where she kept items not at all padded, it gave the image of her being slightly thicker than she truly was and allowed her to hide things within them without rousing suspicion. One of those pockets, close to her groin, was kept the covenant.

Giving a soft nervous chuckle the owl dropped her smile and retrieved the small circular coin and displayed it between two fingers, a face showing itself to the mouse girl. "It's precious, a more delicate place to hide it is better than somewhere more obvious. The knife you hold, not as valuable." She extended her hand slowly towards the mouse girl as to give it to her, but the mouse didn't move.

"Drop it." A twitch from the Owl's eye, but nonetheless she complied. She gave it a light toss so that it would land closer to the girl, and then slowly lowered her hand. Only then did the

mouse move, bending her knees and retrieving the coin with her free hand. She straightened herself out and continued to stare at the owl, clutching the coin within her palm. "An owl from the Vakarian Province? You'd be roughly...fifteen years old, mana user, first generation resident. Kuiva." The mouse tossed the coin back to the owl and with a deft catch and a return of it to the pocket, the owl responded.

"As sure as the sun rising in the morning over the horizon, and as welcome as a pint of ale to a table. My identity known, and although my heart bottomless in her depth, and my wrath quick to soften, I would still ask that you give back Unelma, my blade of unforgotten dreams." The owl stayed in her place, releasing a quick sigh of relief over her proof being accepted. The mouse girl, respectively, stayed within her own spot, still looking down on the owl, although her nose not as upturned. She lifted an eyebrow.

"It's a magical item, at a moment I can feel it. I won't question its origins, which are unfamiliar to me through the sensation of the manic script alone, but I have to ask that you'd let me keep it for a while longer. For my own safety, I mean. I believe in your residence but, you're alone. Without a master, without a man, sleeping under a tree, in the middle of the forest. You, a heila. Suspicion is natural, right?" The mouse didn't wait for an answer as she hid it within a pouch tied to her belt, and extended a hand to the owl. The owl in turn furrowed her brows but gave her hand, and she felt a pull as she was brought up off the ground and into a standing position.

Her hand released she patted away the dirt off of her butt and once again looked around, her face turning neutral, and spoke, "I'll play game, although slighted by your insistence on suspicion. And if it'd pleasing to your will, entertain me, may I ask your name?"

The mouse sighed through her nose and beckoned Kuiva to follow her, heading towards an unknown direction that Kuiva had no recollection of any settlement existing in. "Pepper, named after my speckled eyes. The name Speckled was taken al-

ready by someone else, you see.”

“A proper name nonetheless, it’s very nice to meet you, Pepper. My name you’ve already gathered, the coin that held it displaying more than what my title betrays, but proper first meetings should start with proper introductions.” Pepper looked straight ahead as Kuiva talked, the owl hastening her groggy steps to keep in pace with the mouse, “I’m Kuiva, descendant of the Eternal Moonlight, apprentice magician within a selection of differing, but intimately related schools. None of it is particularly war orientated, I would not roam so free if it were otherwise.”

“Hmm. Sounds nice, on a side note mine is mainly within illusion,” Pepper monotoned, a slight glance given towards the direction of the owl. Kuiva made a small snap of her spine, correcting any imperfections within her posture, rapid fear showed in her face but as quickly as it appeared she softened and raised her wings, a soft smile appearing on her face.

“Your enlightening words is engraved into my forehead, Pepper. Please be reassured, I am submissive to your will, enchanted or not.” Pepper glanced once again, her tail giving a slight sway, like the slithering of a snake it waved from the base to the tip and as if none such event happened, they remained steady in their gaits. Silence took them, Kuiva, looking at any direction other than Pepper as she took deep but silent breaths.

“You say you are of, what, the Eternal Moonlight tribe? I’ve not seen your kind before. Where do you come from?” Pepper gave only slight intonations to her voice, not missed by Kuiva who quickly perked up and returned her smile, before turning her gaze down and fiddling with her talon fingers.

“Yes,” Kuiva paused, “although our members are few. One, to be precise, only me. I was picked up within the northern mountains and kept, a novelty I was taken, a novelty I remain, the magic of my race boundless in its intricacy and too complex for mortal men to learn, and neither I gifted in its manipulation.”

“Really? It’s rare for a magus to adopt a heila, even out of curiosity, let alone a foreign one. You’re very fortunate, consider

yourself blessed.”

“Fortune works in mysterious ways, I can only be glad that I yet live and can continue my odd journey through what means available to me.” Kuiva said with a nod as she relaxed her posture and lowered her hands. “I have my complaints but it would not be right of me to speak them, and I am glad to have met you and not instead the taste of blade against my flesh while I slept. Would you bestow on to me knowledge of where we are headed?”

“An outpost of my own tribe. You’ve not told me why you’re alone.”

“All words relate to the circumstance, thin or thick the line of reason, strong or weak the connections they may be, from a single source they originate and from that source it’ll end. If my knowledge of the circumstance of my plight would please you in knowing, to you then I will say them, this as it relates to me I know the full details of.” Kuiva closed her eyes, as if trying to recollect memories she slowed her pace. “Small I may be, my history common, the story of why I’m here doesn’t befit my status for it is very long, and although it may be impudent of me to ask for you to wait, it’s been a long while since I’ve slept well or ate. Would it be acceptable to ask that we wait for my retelling after I’ve gotten something to eat?”

“Yes, I’d agree. But, Kuiva,” Pepper stopped and looked at Kuiva, her face keeping its familiar neutrality. She let out a sigh, looked around, looked above at the sky and took note of the breaking of the dawn as the richly colored night gave way to soft blues of morning. She returned her gaze to the owl, “Your knife is not the only thing I took. Your coin, the covenant, show it to me. Let me explain to you your circumstance.”

The owl blinked, turned her head in wonder, and reached towards her inner thigh and deftly retracted the coin from it. She gulped and gave a smile and responded, “I-If there’s something I’m missing, I, uh,” Pepper extended her hand and without finishing her sentence the owl meekly gave the mouse the coin. Palming the small metal Pepper turned and beckoned once again for Kuiva to follow, neither speaking as they passed tree to tree.

Kuiva felt eternity as they walked together, thoughts running through her mind of what Pepper could've meant by her words. Too many things, all too scary, her control over her fidgeting and nervous ticks overflowing through her fingers as she played with them. She didn't dare to look over at the mouse, whose back seemed to grow bigger the longer the silence stayed.

"We're here. Come in, I'll introduce you to my friends, some food will be prepared and a place for you to sleep as well. My story will be short, and after I'd like to hear yours."

Kuiva lifted her down-turned eyes, the presence of people something she was already aware of as she heard them long before she could see them. To the side of her stood a log house, from the color of the wood not an old construction. It was simple and as she looked around there were four more like it, differing only in size and length. The land was mostly flat, a few slopes were present here and there between the buildings. A well, too, was there, close to the center but not perfectly there.

"T-Thank you, i-it's more than I d-deserve." Kuiva looked towards Pepper, who had already reached the entrance, and gave her a slight nod as she made her way inside. The door was open, and the interior near completely dark, but the presence of a candle was visible to her, so was that of various goods and bags laid across tables and the floor. She didn't need much light to see either way, so either night or day, light or not, she could make her way around without any disturbance.

"Please sit down and wait for me." Pepper's parting words as she closed the door, near complete darkness engulfing the owl as she sat down on a chair opposite to the door. Sturdily built but not made for any aesthetes eyes it was only a slight upgrade to the floor, and the table much the same as the chair was built for function rather than appearance, or comfort. Kuiva gathered her mind together and waited for Pepper's return, of what Pepper will say next, of how much she really knows about Kuiva, but most importantly cooling her nerves so that her stutter would leave her. Cool headed evaluation and analysis of the situation was essential to her now.

Roughly ten minutes had passed and Kuiva had gotten back a good amount of her resolve, her wings on the table, or rather the hand portion of them were, her eyes closed and her mind still. She placed all of her attention on hearing for anything outside, but despite her intensely developed hearing she could hear nothing but the faintest whisper from far away, suddenly stopping as she heard the footsteps of several people. One sounded like it belonged to Pepper, another heavier, another lighter.

She opened her eyes just as they reached the door, and was greeted by the sight of three mouse eared girls. One taller, hair of jet black, one of brown belonging to Pepper, and one blonde. Pepper's clothes were similar to the blonde's, a brown tunic and tan pants, a belt with various pouches on it, the jet black one wore something like a gambeson of solid blue, towards the edges giving way to white as if she was wearing an undercoat beneath. She, like the others, wore pants, but hers were a dark brown instead.

Without a word all three entered the room, the black haired one sitting next to Kuiva, both of them occupying one side of the table. To the right sat the blonde haired one, and to the opposite of Kuiva with the door to her back sat Pepper. Everyone seated, Pepper began to speak, her elbows being placed on the table as she propped her chin up with the back of one hand, "Kuiva, the light colored one is Ash, the darker one Mars. They know your name, no need for introduction."

Kuiva nodded, "I'm grateful for the introduction, and apologize for making you spend precious time in coming to see me, especially so early in the morning." Kuiva lightly bowed her head, her wings on her lap.

"Mhm. Let's get straight to the heart of this," Pepper responded as she placed a coin on the table, embellished with a design of multiple four petaled flowers. Its color silver, barely an inch in diameter, the sign of the covenant and inscribed within it magical script that represented the heila it belonged to. Contained only rudimentary information of the owner, along with an image of her face, passed along through the coin and into the

mind of whoever can read it. "Whose coin does this belong to?"

Kuiva looked around at the faces of the three mouses, her brows raised in confusion she answered, "of course, I can't know without touching it."

"Yes, if you were a magician. That is, if you knew magic. The coin you gave to me, who did it belong to?"

Kuiva paused, neutrality completely dying its ever corner. Seconds passed, Pepper tapped a finger on the table, her impatience over Kuiva's delay in answering manifesting itself, but Kuiva finally did respond. "Me."

"You'd expect that, right? You must know your weight well enough to know you were lighter, not just your knife was taken by me. Did you think I didn't check every square inch of your clothes? If it didn't disturb your sleep I would've checked much, uh, deeper, than you might've been comfortable with."

Her face still neutral, Kuiva shifted in her chair, her hand reaching towards the base of the chair, but she stopped herself and returned her hands to her lap. "I see."

"Yes. Again, whose coin did you have on you?"

Kuiva didn't blink, neither did she breath, not a part of her was moved, not a muscle was twitched, as she stared at Pepper. Neither removed their gaze, but Pepper would blink where Kuiva didn't. "I need your help." Kuiva broke the silence, her voice nearly cracking.

"Yes. To be clear, the coin you had was mine, I swapped your coin for my own, as a test to see if even the most basic identification was correct. Why would you lie about being a magician? If I, for example, were to get one forged I would make it as true to life as possible. Why? Why would you lie about that? Are you stupid?"

Kuiva blinked, and within a moment she shifted her position so that she was facing more towards Mars. She slowly lifted up her hands, Mars who was sitting next to her suddenly moving her own hands to her side, to the knife she had sheathed and on her belt. Once Kuiva's hands were chest level she met them, and retrieved a smooth round stick from somewhere in her feathers,

thin and about as long as her finger. She lifted it and showed it to everyone in the room, to their confusion, and then they all watched as Kuiva brought her other hand if to take the stick from her fingers, blocking the view of the stick from the others for a moment, and grabbed the stick.

She opened up the grasping hand and revealed that the stick has disappeared. She looked across at each of the mouses faces, confusion was etched into Pepper's face but it took Mars a moment longer for her own confusion to deepen. Ash, by herself, only felt something was wrong, although she knew the stick was gone. Kuiva shifted her torso so that she was completely facing Mars, and locking her eyes with her she revealed the stick again, and then raised it up again so as to present the stick to her directly.

Wordlessly she continued, shifting her torso back to a neutral position on the chair as she made the stick vanish and reappear as if by magic. Three times she made it vanish, and by the third time she placed it on the table and rolled it towards Pepper. Pepper picked up the stick, inspected it, and then placed it down, and sat in thought for a couple of moments.

"Alright. I didn't see you manipulate magic, so then what's happening? Is this related to your bloodline?" Pepper looked at Kuiva, her face questioning, and her tone softening.

Kuiva sat in silence, not answering, her face never having revealed any emotion throughout her act. She opened her mouth, and then closed it. She blinked, looked down at her lap, and then lifted her face up once again at Pepper. "No. It's not magic, not in the sense that I'm casting unseen spells, without any mana. You've said you will tell me my circumstance, and then I may tell my own perspective, then I will speak and abide by your word. Truthfully I can lie here, pretend it is a magic only I can use, as I am the last of my kind. No one can tell me otherwise. I know multitudes more of these kinds of tricks, and if this country's customs were different I would lie here and now. Fortune has looked down on me and given me only you. I mean no ill will, of course. May I tell?"

Pepper looked in astonishment, her face changing from confusion to deeper confusion, lighter tones and then deeper ones, until she looked to have given up thinking and nodded. "Sure, tell us."

"Thank you. Yeah, I'm not a resident of Esivan. I come from Ihm, the land to the west, although even there I am but a traveler. Yeah, as I said to you before I'm no longer with tribe, but not because of death was I made to endure solitude, my eyes instead determined my fate, my soul too damned me. We owls are blessed mages, our memories perfect and our minds astute, o-our bodies gifted in our ability to manipulate the unknown. Our souls, too, blessed with mana, although never as much as any other race. Within my kind there was passed on a legend, a foretelling of a child born with suns for eyes, the breath of g-great spirits filling her, a vessel made to know and understand all forms of the great art, of magic. She would render oceans dry, mountains would flatten themselves before her step, the earth would be be bountiful to her will, rains she could call, famines she could bring.

"Her hair of brown, her horns of black, her stature short. I can recite to you word for word, image by image, movement by movement, as it was told to me, as it was told to my parents by their own, by every generation since the beginning of the legend. Our memories perfect. Y-Yeah, so I was born in this. My eye, glowing orange as if made up of suns. My hair, brown. My horns, black. My stature, well, a chick I was, we're all born small, but nonetheless there the legend was born. I had no mana. I can know no magic. Never before had an owl been born like I. So I was cast off.

"At the age of ten, not even for men would I be an adult, I was told to fend for myself. They gave me supplies, food, clothes, they pitied me and even recited to me every tome they knew, the eldest of the eldest teaching me personally how to manipulate what I can't even touch. They gave me a way to disguise myself, a charm to give me the appearance of a human, they told me, 'our flesh we had given you, our art you had been raised in, but we can not raise in you a perfect soul. Elsewhere, perhaps you will

find something. We will not ask that you return to us.' So I went to Ihm, the closest country to my village. If my disguise would be broken, I would die upon my first meeting of men. You know, there's no heila there, they are hated there.

"I'm clever, I'll admit it. I deceive, that's my profession. I knew how to live without the help of men. I am not a god, nor a beast, I can not live without others, I can't bear being alone. I was scared, enraged, driven near mad by the solitude, and out of envy of the magic I was deprived of I began to devise my own. I showed you a taste of it here, simple vanishments they may be. Simple flicks of my finger, they really are. I won't recite to you the every step of my journey, although I certainly can, but how many years do you wish to sit here with me on this?"

"I made a living off of my deceptions, I entertained drunkards by playing the part of a wandering noble, although small and young. I was on a trip to perfect my magic, I would say, they would buy. In exchange for showing them some of elementary spells, not teaching them, would they give me food and perhaps coin in exchange? Magic wasn't well known to the common laborers, not like in Esivan, so of course they would give in exchange for mere displays. Years passed. My charm broke. Forced to make my way out, I made my way here. A lot of my wealth is gone now.

"I guess I don't know as much as I should about this nation, I know enough to pass by, I thought. That's my story. My life is in your hands, I beg that you see pity in me and help, please."

The owl, finished with her speech, looked at Pepper, Ash, and Mars, respectively in turn, and bowed her head. The three mouse girls in response looked at each other, as if trying to communicate with their eyes alone, before Pepper spoke up and spoke her mind. "I expected a sob story, we all have one, and to be frank none of your past history will change our opinion on how to handle you. Unfortunately the reality is we are under the constraints of what is practical, and there are purely practical reasons why we shouldn't try to help. Not that there's no avenues for helping you even within these restraints.

“You’re tiny, and with what I know about birds very weak. That’s a negative. You claim to know magical tomes, but can’t actualize it. That’s a steep positive. You claim to have perfect memory, and are clever too. Those two, of course positive. Can you substantiate on these claims?” Pepper formally listed off her reasonings and thinking, looking at Kuiva’s bowed head as she spoke.

“As it pertains to my practical ability I’m assured of my usefulness, although I may not be strong of arms I have quite the endurance. As my flesh was built for flying, and the great energy it takes to maintain myself in flight for hours on end are something my body is easily capable of maintaining, provided I have the food necessary to refuel myself. Field work, foraging, hunting, I have some experience and knowledge on all these things. As it pertains to magic, and my memory, those are a bit harder to prove, but still easy nonetheless.”

“Your physical ability isn’t needed here, although it’s helpful.” Pepper nodded, sighing as she leaned back on her chair and looked up at the ceiling of the log cabin. She stayed silent, occasionally frowning and unfrowning her brows as she thought out the problem of Kuiva’s presence. Before she could arrive at her conclusion Mars spoke up.

“Ho—” Coughing, she blocked her mouth with a hand, a bit of blush forming on her face as she cleared her throat, “sorry. Uh, how’d you make that stick vanish without using magic?”

Kuiva looked over at Pepper and beckoned her to roll the stick over, Pepper obliging and flicked the stick over to the other side of the table. Kuiva patiently waited for the stick to make its way across, and once it was at reach she picked it up and moved her hands and her body closer to Mars, showing her each trick in the order that she did them. She showed her hands not only to Mars but everyone around the table, where she hid the stick when she made it vanish, and finally when she was done presenting gave the stick to Mars. All of this without saying a word, without a change in expression, her hands not twitching nor any sign of her betraying any anxiety.

Mars' previously stoic but curious attitude gave way to astonishment and self-ridicule as she had watched Kuiva's displays, but before she could be taught further by Kuiva, Pepper once again began to speak. "Thanks for showing us the trick, Kuiva, but there's still the matter of Kuiva proving herself not to be lying to us about her intellectual abilities. Mars, contain yourself."

"Sorry," Mars mumbled as she looked at and inspected the stick, glancing at Pepper and Kuiva as she gave sole attention to whatever magic could be hidden within the stick itself.

"Kuiva, let's go with this. Let's have you eat with us, we'll give you a place to sleep, and in the process we'll establish whether your words have validity or not. I don't think you're stupid enough to lie to us about this when you're already in this deep." Pepper once again sighed as she lifted herself off the chair, stretching her back and straightening out her arms in preparation for the work that laid ahead of her. "Ash, come with me. Mars, get to know Kuiva if you'd like. Kuiva, breakfast will be prepared for you, wait at the table for us."

"Alright," Mars replied as she gave the stick back to Kuiva, who in turn nodded her assent. She retrieved the stick back and gave her up turned hand to Mars.

"I'll teach you the tricks more fully. If you may indulge me, and if touching me is not displeasing, would you allow me to manipulate your hands? Verbal instructions can be hard to understand." Kuiva nearly whispered the words, her voice soft and without power. Mars gave a light smirk as she placed her hand on top of the bird's wing-hand thing.

"Why do you have to ask me like that? I'm not a noble, you won't get anything from me no matter how you butter me up." Mars replied with her own voice softened, the smirk still on her face as Kuiva moved the digits of her finger in order to replicate the tricks she had shown her. For a while the two stayed silent, Mars trying her best to memorize each trick and understanding the general thinking that each trick was based on.

"Birds tweet, dogs bark, mice squeak, owls hoot. I speak, in my language, in the manner I am use to. So do you, although we

share a common tongue, although you a mouse and I an owl. To get to the point, I speak the way I do because it's in my nature to. Although, yes, within context I will speak different, as I do not want to displease you...I do not mean to condescend." Kuiva looked up with upturned eyes to Mars, shame showing herself through a slight blush.

"I don't take offense to explanations. You know, there's something about you I find endearing, and although I should take greater caution against you, I don't. Maybe it's your small size, or your big eyes, or how you present yourself with civility and politeness. I'll let you in on a secret, Kuiva, you're not in great danger. Pepper has a soft-heart, and as the designated leader of our little group she has the final say on how you're going to be treated. Be a good girl, follow the rules, and don't lie and she'll try to make sure you're kept safe, I'd wager." Mars spoke, removing her hands from Kuiva's own, the stick in her grasp as she played around with it in her fingers.

She flicked the stick from and out of view, mimicking the movements she was taught to an acceptable level of skill.

"How would she keep my safe, Mars?" Kuiva asked as she watched Mars manipulate the stick within her hand, correcting her when the stick was visible to an outsider's perspective. Mars learned the movements faster than Kuiva had expected, it was clear to her that the mouse had a solid background of experience in handling small objects in her hand.

Mars looked at Kuiva, naturally looking down on her as even while sitting the difference between their heights was obvious. She being the largest of the mice it wasn't an exaggeration to say she stood a head taller than the small bird, but her height wasn't abnormal for her kind. She stood only half a head taller than the rest, the height isn't too significant, but her height wasn't her only physical advantage. Although difficult to tell, underneath her gambeson was a well toned physique, lean muscle mostly as she couldn't afford to keep any fat on her.

Mars stopped her movement for a moment as she entered in thought, her eyes moving upwards towards the ceiling as if to

mimick the actions of Pepper's own contemplations, and once she had gathered all her thoughts together she gave a nod and looked back towards Kuiva. "There are three classes of heila within Esivan, the Trusted, the Accepted, and the Wanting. Pepper is one of the Trusted, I one of the Accepted, the rest of my kin here part of the Wanting. All of these classes belong to a greater Family, a collection of related or friendly heila. If a Family shows itself to be disreputable, unable to abide by the their agreement to the mages, then they're exterminated. They're all killed. Got all that?"

"Word for word, Mars, although I already know much of it. Please continue." Kuiva straightened out her back as she listened to Mars' explanation.

"A pledge towards a foreigner is rare, and normally a heila born in Esivan is by default given the class of the Wanting. Getting a foreigner acknowledged by the Esivan nobles requires one of the rank of the Accepted, at minimum. If the foreigner were to misbehave, the punishment of the crime will be extended to the Accepted as well, so not only does the greater family lose merit in the eyes of the magus, the accepted is held directly responsible for their actions. If one of the Trusted pledges for a foreigner, the story is slightly different. If a foreigner betrays the trust of the Trusted, the Trusted is punished, but not as severely. Perhaps she'll lose an ear or two, maybe a tail. Not her life, but the Family won't inherit her guilt. Understand what I'm getting at?"

"I think so. Is it possible that Pepper would be magnanimous enough to pledge for me?" Kuiva tightened her little fists, only serving to hide them within her feathers, as her eyes glowed as if her hope directly fueled the fire of her eyes.

Mars gave a sardonic smile, shrugged and went back to playing with the stick, responding, "depends on her. Butter up to her, not me, the pledge system isn't just used for taking in lost heila. Each one are given a certain amount by right of birth, as some trust needs to be established before a relationship between an individual heila and the magus can truly blossom. Save up enough, by doing things requested or by being acknowledged through

other means, and they'll grant you rewards. That's all I'll say."

"I'm delighted that you've decided to impart your wisdom on me, Mars, I thank you sincerely. I hope your forethought will one day bear fruit."

"Don't mention it. And thank you, I hope so, too." Mars smiled as she looked at the stick, held between her index finger and thumb she inspected it as if it were a crystal.

"May I ask you about your Family?"

"Sure." "Thank you. Are there particular names Families call each other by? Is there a hierarchy even between Families?" Kuiva leaned back on her chair as she asked, her voice picking up some strength as she spoke.

"Asphodel is what we go by. It's a flower, one chosen by our founding mother to remind us of the end that desires can meet. Hierarchies exist, but they're not formalized, and are prone to changing. Generally the more honor and merit you have the more respected you are, but pure functionality is also respected. Not that those two things are distinct."

"Esivan likes flowers, I see. Or is this just a coincidence within your family? And are families founded by founding mothers, as in she is your common ancestor?" Kuiva's eyes gave a glimmer of a sparkle, almost lighting up the room with her eyes alone.

"It's not required but flowers are normally picked up for Family names. And no, a founding mother isn't a common ancestor. When a Family gets too large, typically to around the range of housing a thousand heila, they're broken apart into groups of fifty or a hundred, sometimes less. Those with the greatest honor, rather than the most merit, are chosen to lead each division. Although yes, her blood does run in many of our own, mine as well. Might not show given my dark hair and eyes, Ash's is more typical of what our Family looks like."

"How can you be certain of that? It's not like we heila interbreed between ourselves, we're only female to begin with. How many generations has your Family lasted?"

“Four generations. Do you not know? The Trusted are overwhelmingly the ones who pass on their blood, the rest of us do not. To compensate, they have plenty of children, us mice especially being easily capable of making up for those who don’t breed. From the fifty only five were among the Trusted, so we all trace back our lineage to either one or three of them. It’s pretty easy to keep track of our genealogies, that magus do it for us more or less.”

“Fascinating. Hypothetically, how would Families treat those who don’t share their own blood?” Kuiva squirmed slightly, the question popping up in her mind suddenly. The reality of the situation was slowly seeping through her.

“Families have no regulations on how they govern themselves internally, only that we abide by the covenant. Accepting in members from different Families isn’t common, but neither is it rare. In your case, given that you’re an entirely different kind of heila, you’d be the first in our history. You’ll have to figure things out yourself.” Mars lowered the stick, her long inspection coming to an end. She looked over at Kuiva and gave it back to her. “Satisfied your curiosity? Thank you for teaching me your tricks. I hope the information I gave you was appropriate compensation.”

Small shock flickered in Kuiva’s eyes, she shaking her head as she put away the small stick into her wing, “Yes! Yes, I mean, yes, uh, thank you for indulging me. I feel I’ve asked questions too personal to justify themselves within a first meeting. Forgive my impoliteness.”

Mars nodded and gave a smile, changing the conversation to something more light hearted as they both bid their time. As Kuiva learned throughout the small talk, that the small hamlet or outpost she was taken to was one for hunting, and the log cabin they currently resided in used to store various goods and necessities. One cabin was for sleeping in, and held multiple beds including an extra for any visitors, and another for a kitchen. The buildings weren’t originally made for hunters, as otherwise it would’ve been two cabins instead four. Mars didn’t

mention its original purpose.

As they spoke the door to their cabin was opened, a new face revealing itself behind it. A light haired freckled girl, her hair similar to Ash's and her eyes a soft brown, and upon seeing both Mars and the owl within the building she spoke. "Food's done. Come."

Mars wordlessly got up and followed after the freckled girl, Kuiva waited a moment and did the same. Leaving the cabin they walked across the treeless area between buildings and arrived to one with a smoking chimney, the door closed but the fragrance of food wafting from it. It didn't smell particularly fragrant, rather it smelled more like fried fats than it did of herbs and spices, but it was still much more that Kuiva had expected. A piece of bread would've been enough for her, although she definitely did need more.

They all without speaking entered the building, the sight of a fire, next to it cast iron pans and similarly made cooking utensils. Pepper was sitting on a chair next to a table, a ceramic plate with meat, from the smell from some sort of pig, and a pile of flat white flakes. Kuiva hasn't encountered this kind of food before, if it is food, but from her memory she could recall an Esivan style tuber magically engineered for its hardness and robust nutritional value. No one outside of Esivan knows how to cultivate it.

The table was long, taking up one side of the wall to the entrance way, although the cabin itself wasn't large so it wasn't of a great size. Six chairs were next to it, the one closest to the fire was where Pepper sat. Next to her the seat was empty, but to the seat next to it sat a new mouse girl Kuiva hasn't met yet. Her eyes shared a similar color to the freckled girl, of a soft brown, and she was the first to greet the newcoming girls.

"Oho, is this the harpy you were talking about, Pepper?" The brown-haired one said, ignoring both Mars and freckles as she gave her attention to Kuiva. She looked back at Pepper as if to ask for a response.

"You know the answer as well as I do, Choco. Kuiva, this is

Choco. And sit on the chair nearest to the entrance, Kuiva.” Pepper picked up a fork and pointed with it at Kuiva’s seat, not looking at Choco as she responded. Kuiva gave a curt nod and found her seat, not a great distance from where she was standing. Ash had already sat next to her, Mars made her way next to Pepper.

“She’s exotic, isn’t she? What are those horns for?” Choco, the name of the brown-haired one, gleefully smiled and stated as she set her eyes on Kuiva once again.

“Nice to meet you, Choco, I presume. Yes, if our timeline hasn’t intermingled with another and I transported to a new and foreign one, then I am most likely the harpy Pepper has spoken of.”

“What?” Choco blankly said, a smile still on her face.

“I am the new harpy. And the horns are cosmetic, they’re made of feathers.” Kuiva nodded and gave a light smile.

“Cool!” Choco exclaimed, then leaned closer to Mars, still locking eyes with Kuiva, and whispered, “Is she sober?”

“Probably very tired, Choco.” Mars didn’t whisper back.

Pepper gave both of them a stare, then turned her back and faced another mouse girl near the fire. “Bitten, what’s taking so long?”

“Ah! Sorry, Pepper, I was, uh, just lost in thought.” A voice replied, the face of the voice Kuiva couldn’t see as her back was turned. Her hair was a perfect black, her hair barely reaching her neck much like the rest of the mice, and her height on the shorter side. She almost didn’t notice her, her presence in the room was thin. She was probably the one responsible for cooking in the group, Kuiva thought. Bitten, the black-haired mouse, turned around and carried with her two plates with foods the same as what Pepper had on her plate.

Silently Bitten walked and placed the plates in front of each member of the table, and then finally sat down. Pepper nodded and Choco picked up her fork and seemed to wait. Kuiva didn’t move. “Kuiva, we don’t normally eat meat, but since you’re here it’s good for us to eat with a bit less restraint. I’m not sure where or what your faith resides in, but we of the Asphodel Family de-

vout servants of Pele, whom is herself child of Apleistas, Father of Esivan, and we give thanks before every meal. If it is wrong of you to participate with us, or if you wish to say your own prayer, then please say so." Pepper spoke up, her voice formal and her eyes sincere.

"My faith is scattered and unfocused, the unfortunate mire of agnosticism is my burden." Kuiva responded, her back straightening, a bit of a quiver forming in her voice. "If it's unacceptable of me to join you in giving thanks despite my unbelief, then I'll keep my silence. If not then I'd like to join." "There's no evil in admitting that, but your participation won't be required, or possible, as you don't know our prayers. Now, Mars, Choco, Bitten, Ash." Pepper closed her eyes and in unison they began a small chant.

"Apliestas, Father of knowledge, we thank you for your guidance, and although we be small we thank you for the insights and wisdom you've bestowed on us. To Pele we also give thanks, to your servant and child, and to her we thank for giving us our flesh, so that we could find pleasure in living, and for allowing us to know her love and for teaching us daily the necessity of diligence. Allow us to humbly partake in this meal in mindfulness of what we may have been without." Done with their ritual the girls opened their eyes, and in the case her mouth too, as they began to eat. Kuiva waited for everyone else to have taken a bite before she even picked up her own fork.

Kuiva ate quickly. Very quickly, the fork launching from the plate to her mouth in quick succession, her barely chewing as she ate. It wasn't messy, rather it looked more like a performance art than it did someone stuffing his face with food, and without Kuiva's noticing everyone on the table had given her their sole attention. Within a minute the food had been eaten, chewing her last bites of meal Kuiva looked around and realized the spectacle she made herself to be, and grew ashamed as her cheeks blushed.

She chewed rapidly as she looked at each of the mice, some of them leaning back to look, others leaning forward as to look past another one. Pepper smiled, and before anyone could speak the

sound of Mars's laughter echoed throughout the cabin.

Kuiva swallowed as soon as she could and quickly tried to gather up an apology, "Sorry! I, uh, I get very, very hungry after long travels, it seems that along with being given the curse of small size, the gods found it funny to also burden me with the duty of sustaining my flesh with the hunger of three grown men. And it's been a very long journey here!"

Mars continued her laughter as Ash pushed her own plate towards Kuiva, her brows raised in worry and a small, gentle and dainty voice leaving her throat as she spoke, "if you were that hungry then I'd feel relief in helping, from the moment I saw you I saw the face of someone who's been without meat for many months. If I'm not mistaken then I recall that harpies require an unusual amount of food in order to live, if it is true then I wouldn't want to starve a guest."

Kuiva stared dumbfounded as she looked at the previously mute girl. Mars covered her mouth and Choco spoke her own opinion, "Ash, we are not poor, we could afford to feed Kuiva more, can't we?" Looking over to Pepper for agreement she waited for a response, one that came soon and with a giggle from the purple-speckled eyed girl nodded.

"It is like Ash to notice the plight of others despite giving only a glance, huh? Bitten, how much flake do we have?" Pepper looked over to the black haired girl and asked.

"Nearly a bag, Pepper. I-It's our week's supply, Pepper." Bitten responded quickly, glancing at Pepper as she responded, but mostly looking at her food.

"We'll have to enter the city in order to convey Kuiva's presence to the counsel anyway, we can restock there. Now how much do you eat a day, Kuiva?" Pepper's smile still lingered on her face as she looked over to the starving owl, who in turn tried to make herself smaller than she already was.

"Roughly the daily portion of three working men." Kuiva said as she mimicked Bitten's own attitude, looked down as her cheeks flushed an even deeper shade of red.

“Oh. You weren’t exaggerating? That’d be...about five of pounds of flake.” She grasped her chin as she thought, finally calculating the amount of flake Kuiva would need to eat per day. She looked at Kuiva and squinted her eyes, “how can your body even contain that much food? Where does it go?”

“The intricacies of the body are something too complex to lightly speak about here, but it’s mostly used up in flights and in maintaining my body temperature. My temperature is one you’d expect on one with a very high fever, among other things.”

“Well, that doesn’t matter much. Do you prefer to eat it all in one sitting or throughout the day?” Pepper poked a flake and plopped it in her mouth, chewing as she waited for Kuiva’s answer.

“In a single sitting, as if it isn’t an abuse of your hospitality and despite your gracious, uncalled for kindness, I would also like a, uh, bed. Or a spot to sleep in. Judging by the positions of the stars when I had woken up I had only slept two hours.”

“It’s not, and I expected to provide as much anyway. Tomorrow we’ll get to work on verifying what you know, along with other things. You don’t particularly smell so I won’t force you to wash yourself either. Bitten, please.” Pepper casually stated, looking at Bitten for acknowledgement. With a nod from the black-haired mouse the small group of girls continued to eat, Kuiva politely pushing back Ash’s plate and thanking her for the offer as she waited silently for more, while the rest continued discussing their plans for the day. Kuiva played very close attention to every detail.

II

Dance

The sun had set, the fracturing of its body turning to that of the stars, and once again it collected itself and returned to its former glory. In fewer words, the sun had set and the night has

left, and the girls once again awoke to begin the day anew. Kuiva was within a cabin, on a bed of her own slowly wiping the sleep from her eyes, watching as the girls dressed themselves, some dressing themselves from a previous state of complete nakedness, which she took note with some level of perplexity.

Pepper sat with Mars as they, in a low voice, spoke about what to expect within the city. Kuiva heard all of it, and both Pepper and Mars knew it, they instead didn't want to upset the morning quiet that some of the other mice enjoyed. Ash tidied up the beds and Speckles polished arrow heads and blades, inspecting the equipment as she usually does each morning. Bitten sat down on her bed, yawning and occasionally stretching, trying to break the grogginess out of her body. Kuiva rarely saw something like this, only in distant memories, although crystal clear to her, did she see her own parents do something similar to them all.

Roughly ten minutes had passed and everyone but Speckled and Bitten were outside of the cabin. Kuiva was pat down, smelled, and groomed by several of the girls, sometimes twice, as they spoke to her what manners she should keep in mind and maintain. All the mice already knew her worth, as she yesterday sat and spoke about her knowledge of spells and the occasional retelling of stories of her travels. It didn't take long for her to eat, she maintained the same flow of rapidly consuming her food, so the majority of the day was spent on talking. Pepper was the only one to sit with her throughout the entire time.

Pepper knew she would be wanted, by someone if not her. And she definitely wanted her for her own Family. So she promised Kuiva to take her in herself, and teach her the ways of her species, and how to navigate the world with her lens. But first she had to be accepted, and to do that they would need to have her meet one of the magus, and by the Family itself. Each city would be regulated by at least one, the city they were heading towards being no exception.

Mars dragged Ash by her hand and moved towards a cabin that smelled of blood and very slightly of rot. A few more min-

utes passed, Kuiva splitting her attention from nodding at Pepper's constant explanations and figuring out what Mars was doing. The question was answered as Mars left the cabin, pelts to the side of her, a large tan backpack strapped to her.

Kuiva nodded along with Pepper as Mars and Ash made their way towards them, Ash herself not carrying much more than a finely decorated bag which she carried close to her chest.

"Everything is set. You guys ready? Or has Kuiva not gotten enough earfuls?" Mars asked, her hands holding the straps of her backpack as she walked. Ash looked noncommitted.

"We can talk on the way. You guys have everything? The meat, the two deer pelts, the five rabbit pelts?" Pepper asked.

"Yes, yes, and yes." Mars nodded three times, one for each yes, and then looked Pepper. Neither spoke for a few moments, until Pepper herself nodded, turned around, and then walked into the forest. Mars and Ash followed along, so Kuiva followed suit.

The path was barely marked, a light compaction in the dirt being all it was. Kuiva had truthfully missed it, as although her memory was perfect she didn't have a pristine ability to intuit salient information. Some information was simply lost since she could never make the proper connections, although now that she knows what to look for she's already figured out where other paths are. She hasn't gotten the opportunity to get an aerial view of the place so for now the information she does has is what she has to work with.

"How far away is the city?" Kuiva asked as the question suddenly popped into her head.

"About three hours' walk."

Kuiva stopped her pace at hearing this. "Three hours? Forgive me for my feebleness but my feet are taloned, and like a bird of all the lesser species I am not suited for bipedal travel."

Ash and Pepper stopped at this but Mars continued her steady gait, not offering up a sound or a glance as she continued to walk straight forward. Ash looked at Pepper for an answer, who in turn turned around and faced Kuiva. "Didn't you

say yesterday that you would walk between towns multiple times a week?"

"I left it ambiguous over whether I walked, ran, or even swam, I merely traveled between towns. I would walk to a place no one would be able to see and take flight."

"And you can't fly now since you don't know where we're going. How fast do you fly?"

"Two or three leagues an hour."

"That's nearly jogging speed. How good is your eyesight? No, never mind. I don't know how the magus would deal with harpies so I won't ask you fly ahead of us, as you might be killed. How much do you weigh?"

"About fifty to sixty pounds, depending on the delicate circumstance." Kuiva, after realizing she had been standing still and holding back both mice, although Mars was a decent way ahead of them by this point, started walking. "If it's not impolite, may I ask why?"

"You know what is polite, don't you? Did you forget?" Pepper scrutinized the girl, waiting for Kuiva to catch up to where she stood before walking side to side with her.

"To be more than polite is never impolite in itself! No, as per your words, 'hierarchy and seniority define the language used between heila, and always remember that between you and men and women they are generally above us. You are—' "

Before Kuiva could continue Pepper cut her sentence with an uplifted hand, nodding as they continued to walk. "I get it. I was wondering if it was possible to carry you all the way there. I could carry you myself for an hour, as I'm bigger and stronger than Ash I would be the one to do it. How long can you walk for?"

Kuiva smiled brightly as she raised her wing and patted Pepper on the back, Pepper raising an eyebrow at the action. "Haha! Rest your concerns here, as for two hours is my limit, and an hour of my weight surely someone of your beauty and grace would be able to handle with envious ease!"

Pepper didn't respond, a bit of shock formed in her face, and a blush before she turned her gaze away. Kuiva guessed she was

weak to compliments, however sincere. Or perhaps it was a difference in culture. "Did I say something bad?" Kuiva lowered her voice and raised her pitch.

Pepper didn't respond. The three girls walks in silence for a long while as they caught up to Mars, who upon seeing them didn't bother to greet them or ask questions. Her breathing was controlled and her gait almost artistic in its motion, her steps lighter than they were typically despite the greater weight she carried. Ash made her place besides Mars and Pepper behind Kuiva, who herself was still not ahead of the tall girl. To try to fix the botched atmosphere Kuiva tried to make small talk with Mars.

"How much weight are you carrying, Mars?" Kuiva walked alongside Mars, increasing her pace in order to do so.

Mars didn't respond, although she did glance at Kuiva, and then at Ash, who was to the right of her, who in her stead answered.

"She can't speak, she's focusing on breathing. I'd say she has roughly, uh, between a hundred and a hundred-fifty pounds on her." Ash sized up Mars as she gave out her estimation, which Mars herself nodded at. Kuiva blinked, then blinked again. An owl rarely blinks. "What? Is she a warrior? What?"

Mars nodded.

"I thought you knew that?" Ash turned her head slightly, puzzled before she gave the sky a glance and spoke again, "mice are born into a specific caste. Common ones, like me, have no designated name. Warriors are usually darker in hair and eye color and taller, and magicians who have purple eyes. It's extremely rare for a mouse to be born with purely purple eyes, it's more typically like Pepper's."

"O-oh. I see. That's certainly interesting." Kuiva mumbled.

"Yep." Ash said and continued to walk forward as the conversation ended. Kuiva no longer felt there was any more opportunities to speak, as Mars was too busy not collapsing under the weight of her luggage and Pepper still embarrassed and walking in the back. Ash was perfectly content to be quiet, after half

an hour of silent walking she began humming a song that Kuiva never heard of to pass the time.

Half an hour became an hour, and an hour became two, by that time Kuiva had already reached her limit. Her talons ached, her knees were buckling under her and although she wasn't out of breath each step would send a jolt of pain through her. Signs of stress was already building up and everyone had already noticed, so when Kuiva stopped everyone but Mars also stopped. As per the agreement, Pepper offered Kuiva her back and she climbed on it.

"Do you know any breathing techniques as well? Although I shouldn't doubt you, carrying someone of my size despite not being much larger than me, I being not much smaller than you, would be tiring." Kuiva, although she said her concern, still without shame climbed on her back and wrapped her wings around Pepper's neck. Pepper shrugged, but the shrug was muffled by Kuiva's weight.

"I've done worse things and survived." Pepper responded, not looking at Kuiva, whose face was right beside her at this point. Kuiva noted there still was a trace of a blush left on her face, growing deeper as she continued to stare at the poor mouse. Not meaning to be rude she looked ahead and let her weight be carried, trying her best to stabilize herself on Pepper's hands.

The three girls continued and once again caught up with Mars, Pepper not breathing much more deeply even despite the initially quickened pace. Kuiva guessed that she could probably maintain the pace for an hour, although she isn't entirely aware how good Pepper's endurance was. Feeling slightly restless over potentially insulting or disturbing Pepper she decided to offer an apology to the gallant mouse.

"I'm sorry if my comment earlier disturbed you." Kuiva whispered, loud enough for Pepper to hear but low enough that she was relatively certain no one else heard.

Pepper gave the girl a look and replied, "complimenting someone's looks is generally taken as a sign of attraction. You're an outsider so I'll overlook it, but here we take those things se-

riously. Thank you for the compliments but don't throw them around casually. You weren't serious, were you?" Pepper whispered back with a voice slightly louder than what the owl whispered with.

"I was sincere. We're both girls, what's the point of taking it so seriously?" Kuiva asked, her expression quizzical.

"Certainly we are both girls but that kind of thinking is dangerous! Not all of us can control our desires, be mindful of that, idiot. What did I say about how you should handle yourself around men?" Pepper no longer whispered as she spoke in a harsh tone.

"'Do not make eye contact, do not touch, do not speak unless spoken to, be curt but courteous and polite' is what you said. Does it not also apply to human women too?" Pepper said, a bit taken aback by Pepper's behavior.

"To an extent, but not as much caution as you should take with men. It's a literally death sentence for you to, to put it bluntly, sleep with one. Heila only give birth to girls, what would you think would happen if we were to take every man for ourselves? Death for everyone. So, you are not to interact with them, not even be friends. Do you get the picture?"

"I don't see how it relates to complimenting your looks as being wrong."

"We heila still desire love, so then, tell me, owl, what would you do if you had no access to men, but still wanted to be loved?" Pepper gave Kuiva a glare, maintaining the eye contact for a couple of seconds, before finally looking ahead. Kuiva didn't get it.

Half an hour passed, the scenery still filled with trees endless, as if the forest would go on forever. Kuiva wondered whether they were lost, taking the rhythm of Pepper's now heavier breathing and forming her thoughts around its beats. An idea struck her as she finally figured out what Pepper meant by wanting to be loved, and she nearly toppled herself off of the poor weary mouse.

"Ah! I get it! You mean love between girls!" Kuiva nearly shouted but was loud enough for Pepper's ears to ring, a low

growl forming in her throat as she looked at the dumb owl.

“Yes, love between girls is what I meant, doofus. You don’t have to yell.” Pepper nearly spat it out as she continued marching forward.

“Oh my. O-oh, I didn’t mean it that way at all. I’m sorry, Pepper.” Kuiva mumbled as she sank into Pepper’s shoulders, trying to hide away from Pepper, and hide her growing blush too.

“I know. Drop it.”

So they did.

Until Kuiva opened her mouth up once again. “Is there anyone like that in your Family?”

“It’s the same in all Families. It’s not recognized by Magus but it’s allowed.” Pepper, after a moment of contemplation, responded.

“What do they even do?” Kuiva continued her questioning.

“None of ours, or your, business.”

“I see.” Deflated, Kuiva ceased her questioning, just as she saw light at the end of her vision, the light of open skies and the vague details of some faraway buildings. Stones of grey, clean and pristine, a field of some plant growing and offering itself as a buffer between the forest and the city. Despite Kuiva’s keen eyesight, far surpassing whatever a man can claim to hold, she couldn’t see anyone between the forest and the city. Neither guards, or a gate, so Kuiva concluded she was seeing a mere wall and nothing else.

Holding their tongues the girls walked, until the edge of the forest met the fields, and Pepper stopped, her breath a bit heavy, and asked Kuiva to get off her. The distance they had to walk now wasn’t great, Kuiva thought, so she abided and placed her sore talons on the dirt and clenched her teeth to deal with the pain. With some walking it’ll leave her, but she knew the following days were going to be not very pleasant for her feet.

The mood was already more or less ruined by Kuiva’s talking, so the walk was without a word. Kuiva instead gave attention to the fields, upon which two species of plants were growing. Both were like ferns, belonging to species she hasn’t seen grow-

ing from the ground, so her sight beyond wasn't hampered by their growth. She could see a river, some boats moving from it and the people that traveled on it. All men, or women, not a single ear or tail she could find on them. That wasn't surprising to her, Esivan accepts heila but they aren't treated as equals.

Past the fields, next to the walls and heading towards what looked like a gate, passed by a single building within which Kuiva could hear the foot steps of men inside, and the occasional group of people hauling either nothing at all or wheel barrows filled with various goods and pulled by what looked like an oversized, muscular dog. Kuiva has seen stranger things so she didn't pay it mind as they finally reached the gate, guarded by two men in plate armor. Their faces visible, their eyes clear, a bored expression plastered over their faces.

The one nearest to us gave us a glance, waited for us to all stand in front of him, even Mars stopping in order to wait, and then began to speak.

"Coins."

Not much for a speaker. Pepper nodded, took out her coin and retrieved the coins from everyone else but Kuiva as well, then handed it over gently to the guard. Careful to not make physical contact she deftly transferred the content of her palm into the man's large hands. He sniffed, touched each coin with a finger once, and then spoke again. "You didn't give me the coin of the harpy. What are you plotting? Never seen a bird like her, either."

"No deceptions, Sir. She is a foreigner, one who managed to fly her way to our residence. I've brought her in for questioning and hoped, if the magus permit, to be taken into our Family." Pepper straightened out her posture and gave out her reasonings, not drawing out her explanation or being too sparse with the details. The guard huffed and gave the mouse back her coins, not bothering to make sure he makes no physical contact with her, and watched as she jumped when his glove slightly scraped against a finger.

"The Asphodel family will pay for any crimes she commits

ten-fold. You know the rules. Watch yourself, bird." Losing interest the guard relayed his last thoughts as he waved the girls in. With a thank you from Pepper the rest of the group wordlessly went in, Kuiva herself trying to make herself as small as possible while she huddled close to Pepper. Pepper didn't mind, almost hugging the bird closer to her so she wouldn't get lost within the strangely unpopulated streets.

Once again, none spoke, Kuiva simply followed along with them to wherever destination they were heading towards. The city wasn't empty, there was a steady but sparse stream of humans and the occasional heila, girls who look like wolves and other mice forming the majority of those here, the streets looked pristine and the houses vibrant in color. Each building made of stone or brick, and the color scheme if it ever left greys or whites would predominantly feature deep and rich blues and scarcely any reds. Kuiva guessed it was regulations that governed what colors buildings could be painted with.

It wasn't like any other city Kuiva had visited before. The biggest difference, although not the only one, was how few people there were, no matter where she looked not a single crowd formed. The paths were all paved with stones, odd mosaics being formed by their arrangements. The buildings rarely larger than two stories, built as if they were stacked on top of each other in a slightly repetitive fashion. There were buildings with people inside, what looked like bars, but none full. She had heard that Esivan was a nation in decline, but she didn't think it was in this way.

The group went deeper into the city until they finally reached their destination, a two-story building that didn't look any different from any other. Pepper took out a key from one of her pouches and entered it into a keyhole, turned it and then opened the door. She walked in first, followed by Mars, then ash, then Kuiva, whom herself was taking in as much detail as she can of the interior. The flooring was of some dark wood, furniture like couches and tables were surrounded a fireplace on the left side of the wall. A carpet, striped red and white, was laid in front of the

fireplace.

Rather than the interior of a company's headquarters it looked like a house. Except there was no tables for eating on, although there was a small bookshelf near which a table and chair was near, and neither was there a kitchen. A staircase near the back of the room indicated that, just like there was two stories as seen from outside, there was two stories accessible within the building.

"Is this headquarters? Where is everyone?" Kuiva, her curiosity being neglected for too long, finally broke the spell that blind them all to silence. Pepper opened a door for, one closest to the exterior door, and behind it was revealed a stair case of stone going downward. Mars wordlessly walked down, each step being accompanied by a sharp exhale of air by the over encumbered mouse. Pepper sniffed and turned to Kuiva.

"More or less, there are unofficial ones in other smaller villages but those are for only convenience. It's empty since there's only two mice that stay here, the first is Justo, our current leader, and the second is Tylsa, her advisor. Their rooms are upstairs, downstairs is a storage area. Come." Pepper, once Mars had reached far enough down the stairs, went down without any further words. Ash followed closely behind her and so did Kuiva, and they all waited for Mars to finally reach the bottom of the staircase.

Mars quickly, faster than she had moved since the weight had been placed on her, moved over to a table and rapidly took off the backpack, and rather than placing it on the table placed it on the floor. The floor itself was stone, similar in color to the pavement found in the paths outside, and was cold in the way characteristic of basements. Mars exhaled a massive breath of air and collapsed on to a chair, her chest rising and falling rapidly as her skin turned pink and sweat started to pour from her like a faucet.

"Mars? Are you okay? Is she okay?" Kuiva asked as she looked around the room, and upon seeing Ash's dismissive hand waving decided she probably is alright. Not knowing what else to do she waited awkwardly as she watched Pepper struggle to pick

up the back-bag and place it on the table. The owl went over and tried to help, and with some support from Kuiva the three girls managed their task. Ash's own bag was already on the table, its contents still a mystery to Kuiva, but it looked like everything was ready to be unpacked.

"What now? How long can the meat stay in there without rotting, or it is prepared in some way?" Kuiva continued her questioning, looking over at Mars as the sound of her ragged breathing was echoing throughout the room.

"Now we get Justo, or Tylsa. One of them is probably upstairs. Come with me, Kuiva. Ash, unpack everything, and tend to Mars if she needs anything." Pepper ordered the girls as she went back upstairs, Kuiva following her close behind.

As has been consistent throughout the journey, the two remained silent. The sound of Mar's ragged breathing disappeared as the door to the basement was closed, and Kuiva was once again given sight of the first floor of the building. Kuiva took the time to take in the room from slightly different perspective, taking in every detail as they stepped towards the staircase that lead to the second floor.

The steps were slightly creaky, the stairs made of wood instead of stone like the ones that lead down into the basement, although it wasn't to the point of being dilapidated. The more Kuiva looked the more it felt like the home of a particularly wealthy family rather than one of a heila Family.

Reaching the top Kuiva took in the sights of the new floor, similar in size to the first one except there was no door that lead to a basement. To compensate for the extra space, it seemed that the owners decided to cover nearly ever inch of the area with bookshelves, save for one small area where two bunk beds were located on. Kuiva was surprised she could even see bunk beds, as that would imply they left some room for walking.

Pepper walked along the open space that lead to the bunk beds, and looked behind a bookshelf without fully revealing her own body. As if noticing something her ears perked up and a smile, almost forced, appeared on her face. Kuiva made her way

beside her to see what she was looking at, and to her surprise a dark mouse was found with her head laying on a table, her head pointing the opposite direction to where we were standing. The table was placed next to a tall window, not directly facing it but just far enough where the table didn't meet the window's edge.

A closed book was next to her face, so Kuiva assumed that either the mouse was extraordinarily polite and closed the book before sleeping, or she was not sleeping and was simply biding her time. Either situation was bizarre, although the latter more reasonable to her.

"Miss Tylsa? You awake?" Pepper softly called out to the girl and waited for an answer. One eventually came, after a three seconds of waiting, as the dark mouse lifted her head off the table and the two girls a look. Her eyes of pure, shining purple, her skin nearly as pale as a petal from a lily, her hair fluffier than the most. Her eyes were deep-set, among the most deep that Kuiva has seen in her life, although she hasn't given it much attention before. Tylsa looked at the owl.

For a moment Kuiva felt fear, as if the illusion of day had been pulled from her and the eternal starless night revealed itself to her from behind the curtains, but just as the moment had flashed in her mind so did it in a moment pass. Tylsa sniffed, looked at Kuiva for a few seconds, and then finally looked at Pepper. "Who's she?"

"Kuiva, uh, someone I'd like to enter the Family." Pepper, with some trepidation, answered.

"Never seen a heila of her species before. She's not a hawk and neither is she a chicken, her feathers too elaborate for the latter and her height pitiful if she were the former." Tylsa looked away and towards her book, not opening it but as if to speak to it. A few seconds of pause formed itself as she went into thought, and then she spoke again, "her eyes are large and the feathers like horns on her head are reminiscent of a horned owl. She looks thin, as if she hasn't eaten in a while, and her clothes are dirty as if they hadn't been washed in days. Not to speak of the design itself, as if she wanted to mock a noble's own apparel. You want

her in the Family? For what reason.”

“I believe her to have a gift of eidetic memory, is the main reason why I’d like her to join. She knows some peculiar mundane tricks that mimic the ways of magic as well, and she has many tomes of magical knowledge and arguments in her head. Even if the tomes aren’t functional, which I haven’t verified, the novelty of the positions are worth having around.” Pepper reported her thinking, some of it Kuiva herself hasn’t heard yet. Regardless, Kuiva stood up straight as her appraisal was stated.

“Since it’s you, Pepper, I’ll assume you’ve thought up a way to verify the first claim.” Tylsa responded, not bothering to finish her thoughts as she looked around the room, or whatever amount of room she could see as the bookshelves were blocking most of her sight of it.

“Correct. I had recite word per word an entire book she had only read through once, or rather rapidly skimmed through as she didn’t seem to read a single word itself but only looked at the page.” Pepper didn’t relent in her tone as she continued to answer Tylsa.

“That’s unbelievable.” Tylsa stated as she got off her chair, her height not more than Pepper’s own, her clothes more like dark colored pajamas. She made her way towards the opposite side of the room, not much more than fifteen feet away, and picked out a book seemingly at random, a large thick one that required both of her hands to carry. She placed it on the table and beckoned the owl to come with her finger.

Without speaking Kuiva nodded and delicately made her way to the book, and looked at Tylsa for instructions. Tylsa looked blankly at Kuiva, as if she were trying to drill holes through her skull. Seeing that no instructions were given, she opened the book gently with one of her talon-fingers and rapidly flipped through each page, only given herself enough time to see a clear image of the page before she flipped to another one.

Roughly two minutes passed, the near thousand pages that the book covered stored into her mind. She hadn’t read a single word of it, so she didn’t know what it was about. She closed the

book and waited for instructions again.

Tylsa picked up the book and opened it up to a random page, moving it so Kuiva couldn't see it. "Turn around."

To be safe, she asked Kuiva to turn around, so she did. "Good. Page 859, Paragraph two. What does it say?"

"Spread the pastry dough into a proper and respectable square, and then cut it into a dozen equal pieces of rectangles and then lay them out on a sheet. Poke small holes in the pastry so that it won't rise aggressively in the oven, and then transfer them into the oven and take them out when they've acquired some flakey-gold dust. Cut them in half horizontally and then spread chocolate cream on one side of it, then place the other side on it. This is the method of baking a chocolate sandwich." Kuiva monotoned away, moving her eyes as if following along words in a book inside her own head.

"Page 173, describe to me the image." Tylsa continued her questioning.

"A loaf of bread with oats spread on top of it, cut in half and next to a small plate of butter. According to the caption the bread is made of flake. There's no mention of the herb name on the page or the next one either." Kuiva scrunched up her face as she tried to discern the contents of the image. "I believe the book had a layered image, and by memory I can't access that layer."

"Good enough. Either you do have eidetic memory or you have an exceptionally keen memory, either way makes no difference." Tylsa closed the book and went back to the now empty slot where the cookbook had been taken from, placed it back, and then made her way towards the two girls once again. "Has she been acknowledged by Magus Nuori yet?" Pepper shook her head, "No, She has not. We went here first in order to drop off our goods first, and then we'd like to establish an appointment with Magus Nuori afterwards. With your permission, and acknowledgement, of course."

"I need to know more about her before that. Better to hear from her own mouth and from her own flesh than from a second-hand source, especially since she's here. You're dismissed, Pep-

per.” Tylsa bluntly stated as she sat down back on her chair, picking up the previously closed book that had originally been on the table before the girls’ arrival.

Pepper blinked. Then she nodded, and gave a curtsy, before silently heading back downstairs. Kuiva, sensing that she wasn’t dismissed, stayed in place, and apparently it was the right choice as she wasn’t told to follow Pepper by either of the mice.

III

Relegation

Tylsa had Kuiva sit on the bottom bed of the bunk bed and in order for Kuiva to tell her, with her own mouth, her story and motivations in coming here, how she managed to cross the border, and whether there were others who had crossed with her. Hours flew by as they talked about the tiniest details imaginable, Tylsa demanding full explanations for every point of the story that had even the slightest chance of being a mere fabrication.

Those hours were spent in that, and by the time when dinner was customary to have Tylsa led Kuiva to some sort of restaurant near the center of the city, and although Kuiva would wince with each step Tylsa gave her no mind. Either she didn’t notice or didn’t care, either way Kuiva didn’t let out any complaints as she was led into the restaurant, her talons finding more relief on the wooden flooring of the building than she found within the stone paved streets.

The smell of herbs, bread, and fried fats filled Kuiva’s nostrils. The room wasn’t packed by any means, but there were multiple groups of heila, and in one table a family of humans, eating various familiar yet exotic looking foods. Kuiva saw the sign in front of the store, and it had read “Mouse Perfect”, along with a small image of a waitress with mouse ears and a tray held in one hand. Kuiva held her questions to herself as she walked into the restaurant, letting herself be guided to the back by Tylsa.

They both sat down on a table in the corner, only two chairs were present, two chairs positioned against their own respective walls.

Tylsa let out a long breath as she relaxed into her own chair, closing her eyes and rubbing away whatever tiredness has managed to possess her. Kuiva, on her part, tried her best not to look out of place, looking straight at the table whenever she wasn't catching glances of the mouse that relaxed next to her. The chatter of the heila, and the chatting of the humans, was enough for her to get her mind off of her previous circumstance.

It was tedious, and Tylsa was intensely sharp, demanding, and precise in her interrogation. The owl felt like she had learned just as much about herself as she did convey to Tylsa, an odd experience all around.

"Welcome back, Tylsa. Who's this?" Another mouse dressed like a maid came appeared as if out of nowhere, startling Kuiva as she straightened out her posture and lifted her eyes to the maid. The maid, seeing that Kuiva was startled, gave a soft smile and a small curtsy.

"A portion of today's stew for me and the girl, along with five servings of hashbrowns for her. Water." Tylsa didn't open her eyes as she replied. "She's a possible new recruit, not official yet but I'm keen on having her. She's owl."

"An owl? I've never heard of an owl heila before, she's pretty unique isn't she! It's a pleasure to meet you, miss owl." The maid almost beamed with happiness, whether it was fake or not Kuiva couldn't tell, but she nodded at her greeting and gave a small smile of her own. The maid got even happier over her response.

"She's cute! I'll tell the chef about your order now." Her final words as she left, after giving a full curtsy, and walked away to the door near the back of the restaurant.

Kuiva kept her smile as she looked off the maid. Whatever would keep the awkwardness of Tylsa's silence at bay from her conscience.

The silence stretched. one of the diners finished their meal and were now idly chatting. Perhaps a quarter of an hour passed

by, Kuiva really didn't know. The maid came and left periodically, checking up on each table with her seemingly endless gaiety. But whatever amount of time passed was enough time for the preparation of their meals, as the maid left the door, this time with a tray covered with pristine white dishes, a plate of bread, along with an obscene amount of hashbrown. Kuiva didn't know what that was, but she was eager to try, as the smell alone made her salivate.

"Here you are! Eat your fill, miss owl, you look a bit...thin. You'll be in gentler hands with us." With her permanent smile the maid placed each dish on the table, before leaving, and finally Tylsa opened her eyes. She blinked, then picked up the spoon that was next to the bowl of stew.

Kuiva followed her as they both began to eat, whatever was in the stew Kuiva could only recognize the meat and a single orange vegetable. Some sort of bird, and carrots. The rest, the herbs, the various other vegetables, she had no clue.

"Do you know what the Asphodel family specializes in?" Tylsa said between spoonfuls. She stopped eating, instead looking at the bird.

"I've not been graced with the knowledge of such a thing." Kuiva's reply was quick as she rapidly chewed and gulped the contents of her mouth.

"Gastronomy. This is our restaurant, there's another one on the other side of the city."

Kuiva nodded, putting down her spoon within the bowl as she waited for Tylsa to continue speaking. Rather than that, Tylsa brought another spoonful of some white tuber in her mouth, chewing at her leisure pace and looking to have forgotten she had spoken to begin with. Seeing that, Kuiva picked up the spoon and also brought another spoonful into her own mouth.

"What's the point of our existence? To make food? To serve the magus? To beg for scraps as we toil away in ceaseless work? Or is such a question pointless, the joy of the task is what we should preoccupy ourselves in finding?"

Kuiva choked, then coughed, until she could respond with a dumb, “what?”

“Our function, regardless of the answer, is to fulfill the wishes of the magus. If we don’t, someone else will. If someone else can’t, then our existence is an absurdity. We aren’t special. Are you special, Kuiva?”

“Some would say yes, yes.” Kuiva placed down her spoon once again as she gave her attention to Tylsa. Wherever she was leading, she felt it was important.

“Certainly. Some would say I’m special, but I’m not unique in my knowledge or my gifts. According to your own history, you are special. Unique. You will be joining in what isn’t unique. Absurd, right?”

“...The gods are known for their humor?”

“Under the eye of the gods we are comparatively little. Their plans for us aren’t knowable, not in the present. Work in order to feed yourself, feed yourself in order to work. Find joy in that, there’s not much else we can do. You were a traveling magician, now you’re not. You didn’t know anyone, not really, you will soon in time with us. Live, die, meet oblivion, meet the unknown. Small bird, you’ll figure out what you’re missing then, hopefully you’ll find your purpose here in the now. You will join us, I pray, but I do not expect you to be a slave for us.”

Tylsa took another mouthful of her food, and chewed. “Work for the answers. You are a slave for that purpose, not for mortal flesh.”

Kuiva blinked. She nodded, not knowing what else to say, and also took another bite.

Super Mahoubeat: Everlasting Shoujo Drifts

by /a/non

*All-new, full-length album featuring nine (?) electrifying tracks sure to put your pedal to the metal! Ride through the night with these dance tunes blasting and feel the heat!
Please don't read and drive.*

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Meidos
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Waifufags
/tg/

Special Thanx:
Anon
LaTeX stackexchange
Aniki
All Reader and Critic

Executive Supervisor:
Anonymous

I Drivin' Crazy

*"Running through your soul, the speed of the
fire!"*

—Ace, "Drivin' Crazy"

"Sugiyama Hanako."

The first time she heard that voice calling her name she mistook it for a lingering dream-memory and ignored it. By the time she was dressed and out the door, the call was all but forgotten. The roads were still wet with evening rain; an autumn breeze chilled her bare fingers. The sun was hiding away, but Hanako was energetic all the same as she made her way to school with a slight skip to her step. After the way yesterday's confession went, how could she be otherwise?

She did her best to keep from pulling her phone out and sending Tamura-kun (she guessed she could start calling him Takumi-kun now, come to think of it) a bunch of messages even

though she badly wanted to. A lone car whizzed by her and kicked some of last night's rain into the air, narrowly missing her but knocking her back to her senses.

"Guess I shouldn't cross without looking, huh?" she said aloud to no one in particular. Hanako's walks to school were solitary affairs since middle school, but she didn't mind—her life could be hectic so any quiet moment was welcome.

"Sugiyama-san," called a familiar voice from her left.

"Nakamura-chan!" she called back, waving and stopping to meet her classmate. Unlike herself, whose time in middle-school sports gave her a modestly athletic build, Nakamura was a thin, waifish girl—Hanako was surprised she could run at all on those little legs. "I didn't know you came to school this way, too."

"I don't," Nakamura managed, panting from the brief run. Her long, brown hair tossed in the breeze. "I just wanted to talk to you outside school and I knew you lived out here." Hanako was a little alarmed—she and Nakamura weren't close enough to be called friends, so it was suspect for the latter to go out of her way like this.

It must have been important. "What about?"

"Tamura-kun," Nakamura started, having caught her breath. Her short, brown hair fluttered in the breeze. "I heard you confessed your feelings to him yesterday. Is that true?"

Hanako didn't bother hiding it, but she was alarmed at how quickly rumors could spread. "That's right—I asked him out and he accepted." She smiled without realizing it, a little proud.

"I see...well, you two were already pretty close friends. You've been in the same class since middle school, right?" Hanako nodded. She didn't mention it, but she chose her high school to stay close to him. "That's great! I'm happy for you," Nakamura said. "Anyway, that's all it was. I'm going to stop at the convenience store here—you don't have to wait for me if you don't want to."

Hanako nodded, a little confused about what was going on. "I'll see you in class, okay?" Nakamura nodded before ducking into the nearest store. Hanako shrugged, taking a single step before she felt a tug at her sweater sleeve—it was Nakamura. She

started to ask if the other had forgotten something before she was interrupted:

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but...there are a lot of girls who were after Tamura-kun before yesterday. I wasn’t one of them, but a few girls in our class were talking to each other about you two. And there were other girls giving you dirty looks, too.” She looked right into Hanako’s eyes.

“I see. Well, I’m not worried about them. I was first, wasn’t I?” She smiled, and Nakamura seemed relieved. With whatever was bothering her off her chest, she walked with Hanako the rest of the way to school.

* * *

Hanako met Takumi-kun at the school gate. She’d known him so long his silhouette was unmistakable; she sped up her pace as soon as she saw it. Nakamura excused herself with a smile and went ahead.

“I didn’t know you and Nakamura were friends, Hanako.” The two started off for the building, taking extra-slow steps in spite of the autumn air. “You seem like you’re cold. Need these?” He pulled a pair of gloves from his bag.

They were *his* leather gloves. Hanako wasn’t as tiny as Nakamura, but her hands weren’t the size of an (almost) grown man. She put them on for a laugh and the long fingers flopped down onto themselves. “Just how big do you think my hands are?” she giggled.

“I guess I don’t know,” he smiled. “Yet.” Before Hanako could respond she felt his hand take hold of hers. She grabbed his back.

“Takumi-kun, people will see us...” Of course, in spite of her protests, she hoped for only one answer, which she got.

“So?” She smiled as they walked hand-in-hand.

Unfortunately, before they could even make it inside the building, their path was barred by three of the other girls from school, one of which was in their class. The others were in higher years.

“Takumi-kyuun”, started the girls, “Good moorning!” Hanako clutched his fingers tighter as the girls, whose skirts looked just a little shorter than yesterday, moved too close to Takumi for her comfort. He gave them a casual hello and moved to walk past them, but they tried to break Hanako’s grip on his hand by stepping in the way.

She wasn’t having any of that. “Excuse me,” she said in the same obnoxious, overly-cute voice they were using as she roughly shoved them out of the way with her hips. They complained, but Takumi didn’t seem to notice (or maybe he didn’t care). Hanako turned and stuck her tongue out at the trio of wannabe homewreckers before the school’s doors shut behind her.

* * *

The sound of a revving engine stirred her from her mid-class nap. “Sugiyama Hanako!” called the voice from this morning. She shot up in her seat and saw the teacher staring daggers at her through his nineties-era aviator eyeglasses. The voice that called her was distinctly not his. She must have been dreaming again.

“Now that you’re with us, Sugiyama-san,” began the teacher, “Please read the passage on page 86.” She ignored the other students’ laughter and read the passage, then flopped back into her seat. Just what was up with that voice she was dreaming about? She’d never heard anyone talk like that before...

The rest of the school day was uneventful. She and Takumi both had part-time jobs, but they were on opposite sides of town so they split up at the school gate. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Hanako.” She nodded and grinned.

Her part-time job was simple, but the work was engaging enough that she didn’t notice the time pass by. Stocking shelves at the convenience store across the street from her house wasn’t exactly thrilling work, but the money helped her family make ends meet—even if both her parents worked full-time, taking

care of four kids wouldn't have been cheap. Mom's choice to stay at home and raise the kids was great for them but it meant that money was usually tight.

* * *

"I'm home," called Hanako as the door shut behind her.

"Aneki, help us with our homework!" called her oldest brother Gentarou, who was just beginning middle school.

"What about dinner?" she called back, kicking off her shoes and replacing them with her slippers. Or, she would have, until she noticed one of them was missing. "Where's my left slipper?"

"Toilet," called one of the twins—they were in their third year of elementary school. Hanako often had to remind herself that she loved them very much so, when this kind of situation arose, she didn't exact eternal vengeance for their transgressions.

"Why?" she called plaintively. She decided to make due with just her stockings, though the cold wooden floor sent a chill up her spine.

Mom appeared before her, sighing with a smile. "They thought the way it spun around in the toilet was funny. It's in the wash, honey." Hanako furrowed her brow at that but from her mom's tone she could tell that Iehira and Iehiro had already gotten an earful—no sense in punishing them again. For the rest of that evening, she helped the boys with their homework, managed to wade through her own, and talked on Lane with Takumi for a while before she decided to change and get into bed.

As she walked into her room in her pajamas, the brothers all asleep in their beds and her parents quietly sitting in the main room of the house, she heard that voice call her name again—though this was the first time she'd heard it when she was awake. She shook her head, trying to clear her mind of what she assumed was a hallucination.

"Hey, don't ignore me again!" said the voice. Hanako looked up at her bed and saw a small, vaguely mammalian creature on all fours resting against her headboard. The way it lay was

alarmingly casual. The high-pitched voice it had didn't match the 'cool' vibe she got from its demeanor and appearance. "I know you've been hearing me all day," he said, his red fur glistening in the low light of the moon.

"What?" said Hanako, reasonably startled.

"I'm the one asking the question, here," the little creature said, standing on all fours and walking across her bed. "Just one, and it's easy. You already know the answer." Hanako blinked; when she did, a high-speed slide show flashed through her mind. She saw cars making hairpin turns and burning rubber on unlit mountain roads while onlookers cheered. She saw a car flipped, totaled, and the driver crawling out of the wreckage to limp across the finish line. She saw cars drifting around corners and rushing ahead at the speed of sound without missing a beat.

When she came to, nothing in her room had changed and no time had passed. The little red fellow continued as if nothing had happened. "Do you feel it?" She had no idea what 'it' was or what 'it' could be until the words came out of his mouth. When they did, a feeling she'd felt all her life—even though she hadn't realized it—coursed through her. Her blood ripped through her veins like a bat out of hell and she wanted nothing more in that moment to be behind the wheel of one of those cars, to feel the wind fight her speed, to jettison across the finish line in a blaze of victory.

"I...I feel it," she said, panting like she'd just run a mile. She wiped the sweat from her forehead with a quavering hand. "What can I do?"

The little creature grinned. There was a flash of light and the next thing she knew, she was sitting in the driver's seat of a moving Yotoya SW68 "Maximus." Without stopping to ask why she knew what the car was just from the interior or why her foot was already on the gas pedal, she threw it in gear and shot down the open road. As the roar of the engine and the rumble of the tires against the asphalt rang in her ears, her smile stretched to meet them.

Her white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel of her Maximus never relaxed as Netsu (that was how the little red creature introduced himself) explained to her what exactly was going on. If she could have been frank with him, she didn't care and would have done almost anything to keep driving. Still, she got the gist of it.

"If you want to know the terms, you'd better slow down before you cross the finish line and seal the deal," he started, but from the tone of his voice Hanako could tell that he didn't *really* want her to let up on the gas. "If you finish this course, you'll officially be a Street Witch. That means you'll get to race other Street Witches like yourself on courses just like this." Hanako liked the sound of that. "We'll give you a place to go and a way to get there."

"We?"

"Me and others like me." Hanako was going to ask another question but she had less than a second to make a 180 degree turn or her car would fuse with the guardrail, so she shut up and spun the wheel. "Anyway, when you're there, you can race."

"What do I get when I win?"

He liked the confidence. "The only stakes are your pride...but when all you have to lose is your pride, your pride is *everything* to you."

Hanako rounded the turn and shifted hard, driving her feet into the clutch and gas at the same time. If she wasn't able to hear her heart beating she might have wondered how she learned to drive when she'd hardly been inside a car at all, let alone at the wheel. But the heat in her blood wasn't in the mood for calm calculation or reasoned lines of thinking—it wanted to *go*.

"Got it. I'll do it." Netsu's eyes lit up, little fireballs dancing within.

"Then without further ado: welcome!" Hanako sailed across the finish line and again there was a bright flash of light.

II

The Race of the Night

“Once upon a time, everyone was free...”

—Dave Rodgers, “The Race of the Night”

When her vision cleared, Hanako was back in her bedroom. She felt a good bit calmer, but her heart rate was still high. “Before you ask: no, it wasn’t your imagination.” She looked at the clock by her bed and it was later than the last time she looked at the clock in the car—2:42 AM. Of course, that wasn’t incontrovertible proof, but Hanako wasn’t in the mood to argue with what seemed like enough evidence. Besides, the feeling of the steering wheel still lingered in her hands and that was enough for her to know it was real. She wasn’t sure how so much time had passed, though.

“Well, what do you think?”

“I want to drive,” she said.

Netsu laughed. “I can tell. Don’t worry, you’ll have plenty of time to drive starting tomorrow. There are races every day and the tracks are always open to solo drivers. Any time you want, you can drive. But you’re beat—you were running on fumes when I introduced myself and now your engine is starting to seriously putter. Take a breather and we can talk about getting you into a car tomorrow.”

“It won’t be the same one?” She couldn’t hide her disappointment.

“You like the Maximus, huh? I thought you might. It’s yours if you want it. Most Witches like to shop around a little before they settle on one, though. They all have different advantages—”

“No, that’s my car. I can tell.” Her fingers curled as if around the steering wheel.

“Hey, I won’t argue. Here.” He tossed her something, which she caught before it hit her. “That’s the key to it. Press the red

button and it will come to you.”

Hanako nodded, Netsu left, and in a second exhaustion hit her like a wrecking ball. She flopped down onto her bed, asleep before she landed.

* * *

Sleep passed in the blink of an eye and the morning was a blur. She ate—of that much she was certain, since she woke up hungrier than she’d ever been – and somehow made it to school. She’d never felt so disinterested in the day-to-day doldrums of life before, she realized. Compared to the rush of being behind the wheel, everything else was a slog. All the way she walked to school she was tempted to press the button on her key.

Her day brightened a little bit when she saw Takumi waiting for her outside the school gate, same as yesterday. He smiled when he saw her. “I was worried you wouldn’t show up today,” he started. Hanako raised an eyebrow, inviting him to elaborate. “Did you miss my Lane message? I sent you one this morning.” Hanako realized she didn’t even take a glance at her phone since she fell asleep the night before.

“Sorry, Takumi-kun. I’ve been feeling a little groggy all morning. I didn’t get much sleep last night.” He shrugged, still smiling.

“Oh well. Come on, let’s go.” He extended his hand to her and she took it. She felt a little bad walking hand-in-hand with him like this when she’d ignored him, but it was a relief that he wasn’t angry. Takumi wasn’t the kind of guy to let little things like that get to him, which was part of why she liked him.

Yesterday’s entourage of jealous girls left them alone that morning (though they did plenty of sneering and side-talking), so they enjoyed a peaceful walk to class together. For the first time that morning Hanako didn’t have intrusive thoughts about wanting to drive.

Class was uneventful, or Hanako was so bored that it was. She talked with Nakamura—they were a little closer after their

walk yesterday—and ate lunch with Takumi, but otherwise the day was a total drag. Hanako and Takumi parted ways at their usual spot. Before they split up he fixed her messy hair with his hand, stroking her face a little. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Takumi-kun,” she said before he turned to head to his job. Her face was nearly as red as her hair.

* * *

“I’m home,” she called, but no one answered. She remembered that her brothers had judo practice and her dad was working late, so she was on her own. She took a deep breath, trying to stop her hands from trembling. “Netsu, can you hear me?”

He appeared on cue, riding in on some motorcycle-like flying machine. He lowered his aviator sunglasses and she could see his fiery eyes. “I can always hear you if you want me to,” he said. “Convenient, huh?” He dismounted his “bike” and it disappeared. “I can tell by the look on your face what you’re about to ask me—unfortunately, the races don’t start until the sun is down.”

“Then why were you trying to reach me during the day yesterday?”

“New blood is an exception. You can drive any time of day you want to, if you’re brave enough—night-driving is scary for most people who’ve never been behind the wheel before. You’re a rare type. Of course, that heat in your blood is why I came to you in the first place.”

With her head a little clearer (at least, compared to the adrenaline-addled state it was in last night), Hanako had the wherewithal to ask an important question. “So, what’s the point of all this? Why are you recruiting Street Witches to race at night, anyway?”

“I’m glad you asked. It’s simple: people like you are brimming with passion and energy, and that energy doesn’t get used very well the way the world is now. With all that power just sitting around, we’d be fools not to take advantage of it. The cost of

fuel, cars, closing the roads, and so on doesn't even put a scratch in the surplus we get in energy output from you all. Plus, you hot-blooded types live for that kind of thrill—don't pretend you haven't missed being in that car since the second you got out. It's a win-win."

"So what, do you guys just get energy from anyone who does anything like this? Do people always have to get 'recruited,' like me?"

Netsu smiled. "Let me show you something." He gestured for Hanako to take a seat and from...somewhere he brought forth an ancient TV set and a video tape.

"You see, Hanako," he said somewhat presumptuously, "before very recently, people had *outlets* for their passion. It's pretty uniquely human, but some other species, like mine, can do it too." The video showed footage of samurai rushing each other in battle, then cut to American cowboys shooting Mexicans from horseback, then again to armored Athenians making the march to Marathon. Several other kinds of battles were displayed on the screen, not all of them bloody—last, it showed a scene not dissimilar to the ones she'd seen last night. This time she could make out who it was in the cars—grown men from all around the world. What they did in those cars would have been beyond her comprehension before she'd done some of it herself last night. "No matter the reason, there used to be real *fight* in you all. But that changed not too long ago. Now everyone just sits around. Suddenly the cost of getting energy from this planet started outweighing the benefits. So, we decided to rekindle that fire. Make sense?"

Hanako nodded. "I think so, but why girls, and why racing?" "Short answer—it's cool, and we like to watch. The longer answer is complicated and involves a lot of math."

"I'm not that interested. I just—"

"—want to drive, right?" Hanako wasn't surprised that he knew what she was going to say. All the sitting around she'd done that day was starting to make her antsy. She'd never been like this before. "The thing is, people around your age are the only

ones who haven't had that lust for life totally beaten out of them with work and other bullshit that doesn't matter. It just needs to be brought to the front."

"I think I understand." Hanako stood up. "I'll see you tonight, then."

* * *

The time between Netsu's departure that late afternoon and sundown was like water torture—the kind where a subject is forced to listen to a slow leak drip, drip, drip over the course of hours until they lose it. She did her best to keep from losing her temper and held it together through her mom and brothers getting home, then her dad, having dinner, taking a bath (which was a brief moment of respite from the tension all throughout her body), and finally going back to her room. Of course, by this time the sun had been down for a while. Netsu was already there.

"It's rude to keep someone waiting like that. Are you ready?" Hanako paused.

"One last thing." She grabbed her phone from her dresser and sent Takumi, who she'd been Lane messaging back and forth since Netsu left earlier, a quick message that she was going to bed early and looked forward to seeing him at school the next morning. He replied in kind and she set down the phone. "Alright."

The pair stepped outside Hanako's house and, after she ensured no one was looking, she pressed the button on the key. In the blink of an eye her car from last night appeared. It wasn't running—it just sat there in front of her house, begging her to get in the driver's seat. From a street lamp overhead she could tell the car was red—just a shade or two darker than her fiery locks. She found herself unconsciously running her hand along its angular hood. *A relic of another time*, she thought, though she didn't really have a frame of reference for that sort of thing. The headlights were hidden.

"Ready to go?"

"I think so." She didn't know how, exactly, but she knew the

exact path she needed to take to get to the races. Hanako slid the key into the ignition and, the second she turned it, became someone else. “Yeah, I’m ready.” Before Netsu could respond, Hanako’s foot found the gas pedal.

* * *

It was a short, easy drive. Frankly, Hanako was a little disappointed that there wasn’t much to maneuver around on the track there. *It’s not enough of a warm-up*, she thought as she pulled into the hidden parking lot where the other Street Witches left their rides. *I’m ready for more action*. She begrudgingly shut her car off in the parking spot marked with her name. Just as she stepped out she heard a familiar voice calling her.

“Hanako-chan?” Hanako was taken by surprise—someone here knew her? She turned to face the source of the voice and, surprising her further, it belonged to none other than Nakamura Teiko.

“Teiko-chan?” They’d gotten a little closer since the day they walked to school together and were on a first-name basis now. “I didn’t expect to see you here!” She was glad to see a familiar face and embraced her with a hug.

“Me neither...how long have you been a Street Witch?” She brushed her long, black hair behind her ear after Hanako released her.

“Today’s my first time coming to the lot, actually. You?”

“Me? I’ve been coming to races for...a few weeks. I haven’t raced yet, though.”

“No? Why not?”

“Well...”

Netsu cut her off. “She keeps insisting that she doesn’t fit in here and that we made a mistake, but she crossed the finish line just like you did.”

“Only because I didn’t know what I was doing, or how to brake...”

Hanako laughed. "Well, I'm glad you're here in any case, Teiko-chan. I'd hate it if no one knew who I was when I won my first race tonight. You can help make me famous," she beamed.

"You're going to race on your first day?" gasped Teiko.

"Sure, what's wrong with that?"

"Well, there isn't a rule, but it's dangerous. It's not like the starter track. Most girls watch a few races before picking their first track and car—"

"I don't have time for all that, Teiko. Can't you feel that screaming from your heart, telling you to just hit the gas already? Besides, I already know which car I'll be using." She paused to pet her Maximus, but Teiko held that furrowed brow and worried expression. "Well, since you're so concerned, I'll watch a race or two first...but I'm going to ride tonight, make no mistake."

"That makes me feel a little better, I guess."

"Anyway, what kind of car did you pick?"

"I...haven't picked one yet. I've been trying a few different ones on my rides here." She blushed a little—Hanako was so decisive, while she hadn't done much but make excuses since coming here for the first time. A part of her *did* want to race, of course (why else would she show up every day)...but a larger part of her was scared.

"I see. Well, you've got lots to pick from, but I love this car. Care to show me where I can watch a race?" Teiko nodded, glad at the change of subject. She did like to watch the races.

"It's this way," she said, and the two walked off the lot, Hanako slipping the keys into her pocket. Pocket? She looked down and noticed that her clothes had changed. She left her house in the kind of outfit anyone might don on a brisk fall evening, yet now she was wearing somewhat loose-fitting blue jeans, a cropped leather jacket and an untucked button-up shirt underneath. *Must have changed when I got in the Maximus, somehow.* Teiko's outfit was a touch more conservative, but Hanako could tell it wasn't something the former would normally wear—a white and black bomber jacket over a dark blue t-shirt that was

just barely too short to cover her whole stomach, and reasonably tight khaki slacks.

Ignoring their new outfits—other than remarking to herself that she probably looked really cool—Hanako and Teiko strode up to a waist-high barrier on the edge of the cliff inside which the parking lot lay hidden. The view overlooked a couple of tracks, Hanako saw, but neither of the tracks were fully visible even at their great height.

Seeming to read Hanako's mind, Teiko said, "There are screens where you can see what they call 'action cams' in the parlor, if you want to watch from other angles. I prefer to watch from here though."

"For now, I want to see it for real." On cue, a trio of cars zipped by on one of the tracks, each edging each other out for the lead for milliseconds at a time. Even from the hundred-or-so meters away Hanako could feel the wind as they passed. The sound of their motors was music to her ears.

"Looks like a close race."

"They usually are," chimed in Netsu. "Everyone here wants to win. There are a few real greats, Witches who stand on another level, but don't worry about them yet."

Hanako nodded, but made a mental note to look out for these 'greats.' She suspected, at bare minimum, that her name would be enshrined among them—but that was the bare minimum. No, Hanako was sure that she would stand at the top of this scene before long.

This wasn't just hubris, though that did play a large part in her self-assessment; the way these girls raced was missing a certain something that she knew she had. Whether it was a love for the drive, a spark in her heart, or something else, Hanako was sure that something about her set her apart from the rest of the competition. Whether their experience would be enough to outpace that *something* was a matter to be determined, but as for the race she was watching, she pictured herself at least a full car's length ahead of the pack clawing for first.

Then she noticed that she wasn't the only one seeing that picture—in fact, a fourth car *had* sneaked up on the three while they were vying for the top spot. She took advantage of their constant shifts in position and their focus on each other to rocket past right as the finish line appeared. “Who’s that?” asked Hanako.

Teiko muttered something Hanako couldn't understand.

“What?”

“She said, it's one of the best Witches on the road. This is her last day of racing, as a matter of fact. Guess she wanted to go out with a win.”

Hanako smiled. “In that case, I'll have to race her tonight.”

“What?!” cried the pair unison. Hanako's smile turned mischievous.

“Can it be arranged, Netsu?”

“Wait, Hanako-chan...it's dangerous. If you have the wrong attitude—”

“I'm not worried about that, Teiko-chan. Once they see me race, they'll understand what they're dealing with. Win or lose. Netsu?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Whether she'll accept is another matter, though.”

“I'll go talk with her.” Teiko didn't bother to protest any more and followed Hanako to the winner's circle, looking around to see if anyone had heard her friend.

III

Gas, Gas, Gas

“Do you like my car?”

—Manuel, “Gas Gas Gas”

Satou Heather pulled onto the ramp leading to the parking lot and waved to the crowd on the cliffside from inside her Men-

schkart Tennis. She made a show of revving the engine as she passed the girls, who cheered wildly for her final victory. Well, most of them were cheering. One redhead was just staring at her as if sizing her up—a redhead she'd never seen before, in fact. She shrugged it off and parked. Her smartphone buzzed in her hand right as she picked it up.

You have a new challenge, read the notification. She had a pretty good idea who that challenge came from...she almost rejected it outright, but something prevented her; she thought she ought to at least size the redhead up before writing her off. After all, she was new herself once. A lesson in humility might have done her some good in her past.

"Alright," she began in English and followed with somewhat stilted Japanese, "which one of you lovely girls is Sugiyama Hanako?" Hanako stepped forward, ignoring Teiko's hushed pleas for her to rescind the challenge and start slower.

"That's me," said the redhead while she looked Heather up and down. "You're Satou Heather, right?" The blonde nodded, her cool countenance contrasting with the crashing ocean waves in her eyes.

"I saw your challenge, but I also saw your record. Not often a total newbie wants to stand up to someone on my level." There wasn't an ounce of audacity in her voice—she was simply stating a fact. The redhead returned her smile.

"I saw you race. I'm on your level." The crowd gasped in unison, breaking their silence. Some of the more experienced racers were offended; the newer blood seemed inspired and afraid to show it. Teiko's knees practically knocked together she was so nervous.

"That so?" She took a step forward, her unbuttoned flannel blowing in the wind, and locked her blue eyes with Hanako's fiery reds. "Alright. I'll race you. One-on-one. One lap. You pick the track." The crowd started to jeer and complain right away, but Heather was having none of it. "That's enough, now," she said in English with a southern American drawl, raising her hands to silence the other girls. "I want to race this kid. If she can bring

the kind of heat to the track she's saying she can, it'll be a hell of a ride." Teiko wished she paid more attention in English class—she couldn't understand some of what Heather was saying. *Hell?*

Hanako had already started walking toward her car. "I'll see you at the starting line," she called behind her.

* * *

The track Hanako chose for the race was a fairly simple one—an irregular L-shaped road which included a loop at the base of the L and part of which ran beneath an overhang in the mountainside. She estimated that, accounting for slopes and turns, it would be a two-minute lap assuming nothing went wrong with her Maximus.

The two cars hummed at the starting line, both sets of brake lights bathing the road behind them in red. Teiko stood at Hanako's passenger side door.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked timidly.

"I'm more than sure." She did some last-second systems checks and everything seemed to be in order. It amazed her just how much she knew about cars, seemingly out of nowhere. "Don't worry—I'll be fine either way, remember?" Teiko stepped back from the car, still looking apprehensive. She'd never known Hanako to be so headstrong at school, and getting closer to her the last couple of days hadn't changed her opinion.

"All right," called Netsu at the front of the track. "Welcome, Street Witch racers and spectators alike, to what may be the most exciting race so far this season! The Star-Spangled Satou Heather has agreed to one final race before she parks her Tennis for good—and against a fiery-red newcomer in a matching red-hot Maximus! Can you feel the heat?!" The crowd cheered, mostly for Heather to put the new kid in her place. "The rules of this exhibition are simple. This is to be a single-lap, one-on-one race around Zeus's Boot. He pulled forth a green flag. "On your marks!"

Heather and Hanako both pulled as close to the starting line as they could without crossing it. Hanako was almost itching.

“Get set!” Heather revved her engine, looking over to Hanako and winking.

“You’d best make my last race a good one, Red!” Hanako smirked and nodded.

“Go!”

The flag fell and they were off—Hanako rapidly shifted from first gear to second and so on as the Maximus shot forward, Heather’s Tennis not far behind. The track started at the top of the L and was a mostly straightaway at first until a hard left reared its head. Hanako maintained her lead over Heather but she could tell something was ‘off’ about the way the other girl was driving.

Still, she let it go as that left turn approached, shifting gear and drifting to maintain more speed. She nearly fishtailed into the guardrail, an opportunity which Heather greedily took to get ahead. Nothing frustrated Hanako more than seeing tail lights, she soon found as she was unable to find an opening to pass Heather. Someone with less drive would have been happy just to keep up as well as she did, but that wasn’t enough.

For Heather’s part, she was impressed that Hanako started the race ahead and just as impressed that the setback at the turn was so minor—if she wasn’t careful, she might really lose here.

They approached the loop at the foot of Zeus’s Boot and Hanako found herself lagging behind a little more. “Come on!” she cried aloud, nearly driving her foot through the floor mat to try and catch up. Heather’s green Tennis taunted her from ahead.

“Looks like another win,” Heather thought aloud, glancing at the red blaze in her mirror. The overhang was up ahead, and owing to the angle at which it rose over the road there was simply not enough room for two cars to fit under it at the same time. Heather would shift over to the right, which would force Hanako to either try to pass her (which was impossible at these speeds) or accept her fate and slow down enough to get behind and fit beneath.

That wasn't what went through Hanako's mind at all—losing was simply not a future she saw for this race. She rode up against Heather as hard as she could, trying to slip past the opening left behind by the latter's lane-change. Their bumpers nearly collided, and several times Hanako's front end reached Heather's rear doors, but it was to no avail. Hanako grit her teeth.

The overhang drew nearer and nearer, the shadow beneath taunting the Witch to just try and fit. "Fine then. Sorry, Maximus..." she said aloud. And on her maiden voyage, too...

Teiko looked on in horror from her viewpoint by the parking lot. "She'll never fit under there," she said aloud, biting her fingers with anxiety. "Why doesn't she get over?"

"There's still time—she could pass Heather before the overhang...but it'll be close!" Netsu's voice rang out over the loudspeaker. He'd been commentating the race from the beginning, but Teiko had tuned it out. She may have had no experience but she had a knack for understanding the circumstances of a given race—probably thanks in part to Netsu's magic.

Hanako knew better. She wouldn't be able to pass Heather in time to make it under the overhang. She wouldn't be getting behind the other car, either, though—seeing those tail lights again was as good as giving up at this point in the race. She held fast to the steering wheel, took a quick look at Heather—who realized with amazement what Hanako was planning a second before the audience did—and flipped the lever at her side to lay her seat back.

The crunch of rock-on-metal was nearly deafening, but over in an instant. She opened her eyes and saw rock pass by overhead—soon enough the stars were in view again. She thanked them and set her seat (and self) upright. The wind knocked her against the headrest, but she could see through her tears that she was starting to pull ahead. The crowd had gone totally silent; that or she couldn't hear them over the wind.

Heather grinned. "I expected a fight...but I didn't expect *that*. Still, I won't give up!" She let her foot off the gas when they went under, mostly out of shock, so she remedied that error once she

returned to her senses.

“Unbelievable! Sugiyama went under the shear of the overhang! It’s a miracle she’s even alive—but she’s starting to pull ahead!” The wind whipped her hair in every other direction. It was amazing, even if she looked stupid.

“The track is running out! Can Hanako take advantage of the momentum and pull ahead?” Hanako’s foot hadn’t left the gas pedal once since they went around the loop, and thanks to Heather slowing down earlier the two were neck-and-neck as the finish line approached.

“Come on!” cried Heather in English. Hanako gripped the steering wheel tighter. Her leg was starting to quiver. Just a little more...

The air choked her. She could barely see. Her car was a wreck. She’d never felt more “alive.” If she could feel her face, she’d have grinned. Instead, she drove on, pushing against the rushing wind even as it forced her back into her seat. The crowd was going insane—she could hear them plain as day now.

Finally, the two cars crossed the finish line. No one could tell who had won—or if one of them had won at all. What was clear to everyone watching that race (which, thanks to Heather’s prestige, was just about every Witch) was Hanako’s prowess. She slowed to a stop and parked her car, taking heaving breaths. Heather rushed out to meet her.

“How you holding up, rookie?” She smirked. “You look a little worse for wear. I’d think you were just driving at eighty miles per hour with the top down, or something like that.” Hanako could only nod, still catching her breath. It took a lot to keep from passing out right away in that condition.

“Hanako-chan, are you okay?” called Teiko, running to the torn-up Maximus. The roof of the car and the windows were completely gone—nothing more than a pile of wreckage on the track behind them. “That was incredible!”

“Told you, Teiko,” Hanako said, having finally caught her breath. She shook her head frantically to restore some sense of

order to her red locks. “Win or lose, the Witches know what I’m about now.”

Heather nearly bust a gut laughing. “You didn’t need to do *that* to prove yourself, you know!?”

Netsu’s voice rang out over the loudspeaker. “After carefully reviewing the results, the winner of the exhibition match between Star-Spangled Heather and the newcomer, Sugiyama Hanako is...” Hanako held the breath she’d just caught as Netsu paused overlong for dramatic effect.

“Satou Heather, by just an inch!” She released her held breath. She hid it well, but Teiko and Heather could both tell that Hanako’s heart sank at the sound of the announcement. The prospect of never truly avenging herself with a win against Heather gnawed at her. Even if Heather came out of retirement in the future to race her again, it would be a totally different Heather—and she’d be a totally different Hanako.

An image flashed on the jumbotron showing the final second of the race as Heather’s car crossed the finish line just a split-second before Hanako. It was just a hair’s breadth, but it was irrefutable—not that Hanako was enough of a spoilsport to refute the result anyway.

Heather extended an open hand to Hanako. “Not bad for your first race, Hot Streak. You gave me a hell of a send-off.” Hanako hopped over the shattered remains of her window and stood before Heather. She pondered the gesture for just a second before returning it. The crowd cheered as the two shook hands, lights flashing.

IV Queen of Mean

“Take your hands off my heart and soul!”

—The Snake, “Queen of Mean”

“Looks like Satou-san won after all.” The soft-spoken, short-haired girl held a phone screen in front of a taller girl with long, straight black hair who smirked at the flashing result.

“As I said: loathe as I am to admit it, the American can race as well as me. Even accounting for the suicidal stunt she pulled, Sugiyama stood no chance.” Her straight bangs stirred a little in the wind. She waved the other girl—one of three that followed her every movement with bated breath—away with a flick of her wrist. “I suppose we ought to congratulate the winner.”

Heather started to wave to the crowd, still holding Hanako’s hand. Hanako followed suit; once she started paying attention to the girls’ cheers she distinctly heard her name among them. Just as suddenly as they started, however, they died away. The silence was eerie—it reminded her of when a teacher got fed up with side-talking students and raised his voice, only there was no yelling, only the rhythmic tapping of boot-heel on concrete.

“Ishikawa.” Heather had turned to face the stifling presence. Her blue eyes were the sternest Hanako had seen them. She followed those blues to the source of the silence, and there she saw a tall, dark-eyed girl with black leather pants and a v-neck top under a matching leather jacket. Surrounding her were three girls with short-cut hair in various styles and less imposing dress.

“Come now, Heather,” said the apparent leader of the pack. “I told you to call me Chizuru. There’s no need to act so hostile. I’ve only come to congratulate you on your final victory.” She and her entourage clapped quietly. “A shame you were never able to even out our record, though...”

“You and I both know that the last race you won was unfair,” started Heather. “You know what they found in my car after the race as well as I do.”

“Yes, it’s too bad that your negligence caused such trouble for you. Nevertheless, it was...is my win.” She grinned, her eyes glistening like a hungry cat’s.

“I *know* you tampered with my car, Ishikawa.”

“Oh? You know? That’s surprising. I don’t know. Do any of you know?” She gestured to the girls behind her, who all

stood silently. Each shook her head. “My word against yours...Of course, now that I’ve seen you nearly lose to someone who’d never been on the track before, I have to wonder if you *could* settle our score.”

“That’s pretty low of you,” said Hanako. By this point Heather and Hanako had released each other’s grip and turned fully to face Ishikawa.

“Ishikawa-sama didn’t speak to you.” said one of the trio, a girl with round glasses and a seemingly permanent frown. “Mind your manners.”

“Stuff it, nerd,” said Hanako. “I don’t care who she is. Cheaters don’t deserve respect.”

Ishikawa raised an eyebrow. “You’re quite the little fire-cracker, aren’t you?” She took a few steps toward Hanako, right hand on hip. “Of course, being brand new to this you have no idea what you’re talking about. I won my race against Heather fair and square—unlike you.”

“Doesn’t matter. I take Heather’s word over yours, and Heather’s word is that you cheated.” By this point Teiko hand run up behind Ishikawa and began waving frantically, mouthing for her to stop. Hanako ignored her. “Besides, I’d rather lose honorably than win by doing something underhanded.”

“Hmhm. Say what you will, but it’s clear that you’re all talk. If we race in the future—if I decide you’re worth my time—and you try to pull one of those stunts you pulled today, your car won’t be the only thing that gets totaled.”

That was enough. Say what you will about her—don’t talk about the Maximus. Hanako raised a fist to deck the pretentious princess smugly grinning in her face, but Heather caught it. Ishikawa didn’t bat an eye.

“Don’t, Hot Streak.” Hanako fought with herself to lower her hand, but glared daggers at Ishikawa.

“Better be careful, upstart—reckless driving is a leading cause of accidents.” She turned and walked away without another word, her entourage in tow. “Wouldn’t want you getting hurt.”

Teiko let out the breath she was holding. “Hanako-chan! You can’t do stuff like that! It’s crazy enough to try to race someone on that level for your first match...you can’t make enemies!”

“She made an enemy of me, Teiko-chan. Am I supposed to take her insulting Heather, me, and my Maximus?”

“Still, that’s Ishikawa Chizuru! She’s nearly unrivaled—”

“Show me,” interrupted Hanako.

“Huh?” Teiko was taken by surprise.

“Can I watch some of her races? I want to see how she drives.”

“I can. They don’t let just anyone into the archives—you have to have a winning record with at least 50 races under your belt.” Heather spoke up for the first time since Ishikawa left. “As thanks for sticking up for me, Hot Streak.” She started walking toward her car. “On the way we can take your Maximus to the shop. You can meet Sumiko-chan.”

* * *

It was a short, brisk ride to the mechanic shop. Her hair mussed once again, Hanako hopped over her driver’s side door and followed Heather inside, leaving the car running as was suggested. It took some doing to get it started on the way.

Inside the shop was a short, black-haired girl with freckles wearing a boilersuit. She was covered from head to toe in grease and oil stains, and over her shoulder was a greasy rag—well, in its current state it was more like a spot with some rag left. When the girls entered the shop, a little brass bell on the door chimed, so she was facing them by the time they saw her. “Heya. Need something looked at before you take the Tennis out for good, Heather?”

“You weren’t listening to the last race?”

“I had the radio on, but I was so into the last job I stopped paying attention. Why, what happened?”

“Hanako’s car is a wreck. Can you give her a hand? Think of it as one last favor for me.”

“I thought your one last favor was a week ago, and yet you keep calling them in...” she smiled. “Alright, bring ‘er in and I’ll see what I can do.”

It took about a second for Sumiko to realize “what she could do” and “what was necessary” were basically the same thing. Hanako felt a little shameful when she saw the joy drop from Sumiko’s face. “Sorry.”

Sumiko just sighed. “Don’t be. I’m surprised you were able to tear her up this good, but I’m also a little excited to, basically, rebuild a car. It’ll take me a week, at least, but when I can get her back to you it’ll be like this never happened to her.” She gave Hanako a thumbs up.

“So how will I get back here, then?”

“Netsu can get you a rental car to get you from A to B in the meantime. That race was probably worth its weight in gold, energy-wise, so he’s bound to reciprocate in kind.”

Hanako nodded. “I’ll leave her to you, then. If there’s anything I can do to help...”

“No, that’s alright. I work best when I’m on my own.” True to her word, she set to work examining the damage to the Maximus and taking notes in a pocketbook. Hanako wondered privately why that was necessary given the extent of the damage.

“In that case, we’ll be going to the archives. Hot Streak wants to see how the Queen of Mean drives.

“Queen of Mean?” asked Teiko and Hanako in unison.

“Ishikawa. You’ll see.”

* * *

She saw. It drove her up the wall, seeing how Ishikawa raced. Teiko was surprised, herself, but Hanako’s anger was on another level. “That’s just racing dirty!”

“Unfortunately, there’s no rule against that style of driving. You heard the rules for our own race—other than laps and the number of racers, they’re usually the same. Like it or not, she’s free to race that way, and she’s damn good at it.”

“But it’s...it’s cruel! Look there!” Ishikawa’s white Dazma TZ-9, decorated with a black stripe on the hood, swerved just-so into the bumper of the car in front of her. At those speeds, even a slight impact like that can be devastating to someone’s momentum. In this case, the car in front of her spun out, crashing backward into the rock wall on its right. The camera cut to the inside of Ishikawa’s car, where she sat grinning.

“If I’d known she raced like this I wouldn’t have let you stop me from hitting her before. She deserved it!”

“Was that girl okay?” Asked Teiko, timidly.

“She’s fine now, but she was banged up a little at the time. Mostly it was her psychology that suffered—Netsu’s magic protects us physically somewhat, but being run off the road like that can have a serious effect on a Witch’s mind. The girl’s still talented but the crash took the bite out of her.”

“It’s not right! I can’t believe Netsu and the others allow this.”

“Why wouldn’t they? That kind of stuff is good for energy production. No one has suffered any permanent or life-altering injuries, as far as they’re all concerned, so what sense would there be in changing the rules now? It would just make Ishikawa and her cronies quit in protest.”

“Why do those girls follow her around, anyway?”

“They aren’t the only ones. It’s not hard to imagine why. If someone is the best—or presents herself as the best—and you want to get better, or want security, or just want to be someone who mingles with a great talent to make yourself look better, you get in with that person. She embraces that because it means more power. There are also Witches who are afraid of racing with her when they aren’t ‘on the same team.’ I don’t like it, but I also don’t have a network of girls who would quit for my sake.”

“There has to be something I can do about this.” Hanako scratched her head.

“Probably is. I tried just beating her in races, but we’re too closely matched for that to do anything but piss her off.”

“Um, Heather-san...why is it you’re quitting if you still have a score to settle with her?” Teiko spoke up.

“I’m too old to keep this up. You two still have a good ten years in you yet, but I’m an old hag at this point. I still love to drive, but I’ve proven myself well and good, I think.” Teiko pulled up Heather’s driving record, then showed it to Hanako. It was astonishing compared to the average. 364 races. 320 wins. Ishikawa’s record was similar—of 291 races, she’d won 256 of them. Accounting for the 73 extra races Heather had over Ishikawa, the system “tied” them for the top spot. The other girls in the top 5 had similarly impressive records, but these two stood far above them.

“I would say you’ve more than proven yourself. Even if Ishikawa beats your win percentage, it was with underhanded tactics,” said Hanako.

“Thanks, Hot Streak.” She checked her watch. “We’d better head back. It’s almost morning. I’ll take you home.”

It was then that Hanako realized that she had to go to school that morning.

V

Express Love

:: epigraph “What is the reason why you keep me waiting?”

—Mega NRG Man, “Express Love” :::

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us, Teiko-chan?” Hanako asked.

Teiko nodded. “I’m sure. I have something I want to take care of before I head home. I’ll see you in class, okay?” Hanako nodded and closed Heather’s passenger door. “Wonder what she’s up to,” she thought aloud.

“That was a pretty crazy race, and she hasn’t raced yet. Maybe she’s got something to think about.”

“I hope it didn’t scare her off. I want her to get some races under her belt. She’s here because Netsu saw potential in her, after all.”

“Could be she’s like Sumiko—no good behind the wheel but great under the hood. Or something else.”

“Maybe. Time will tell.”

They drove in silence for a while. The Tennis rode pretty nice, but it made her miss her own car even more to be riding along with someone else. She leaned out the open window and felt the cool wind against her cheeks, eyes closed.

“That *was* a great race,” said Heather out of the blue.

“Same to you. Wish we could do it again.”

“Maybe, someday. It’s not unheard of for retirees to come back as a guest and embarrass themselves.” She chuckled.

“Maybe...” Hanako laughed along with Heather. She meant, though, that she wished she could relive that exact race at least once more. The way she felt from the minute the starting flag was waved to the second she crossed the finish line was unbelievable. She didn’t think much about it in the moment because she was focused on winning, but that brief period was the most complete she’d felt since she was small—probably the most ever.

“Nah, I don’t think I’ll do that. Probably best for me to end on such a high note. Might be the best race I’ve ever run.”

“You’re just flattering me.”

“What use do I have for that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Flattery is only something you do when you want something, right? What could flattering you get me? I mean what I say.”

Hanako laughed. “Take it easy, I was just joking. I can say that was the best race I’ve ever run.”

It took a second for it to sink in, then Heather chuckled. “Smart-ass,” she muttered in English.

It was just then that they pulled up to Hanako’s house. There didn’t appear to be any commotion and her phone didn’t have any missed calls or messages, so they hadn’t noticed her absence. “Thanks for the ride,” she said.

“My pleasure. Real quick—” She stopped Hanako closing the passenger door. “—Teiko is right that you should be careful about

making enemies too soon, Hanako. I know Ishikawa is a hard pill to swallow, but you've seen that she's capable of putting people in what she deems to be their place. Be careful, okay?"

"Thanks for the concern. I'm not afraid of her, but I'll watch my back." She waved Heather off and sneaked into her silent house. It was just about the time of day that Dad usually got up, but it seemed he hadn't gotten out of bed yet. She crept into her room the very second her morning alarm went off. No sleep tonight...

* * *

The week she waited for her car was one of agonizing tedium. The tension in her fingers had become nothing but a lingering memory, a yearning for action and speed that was just out of reach.

She tried to enjoy the time she spent with Takumi, Teiko, and her family – it was clear to all of them that she was distracted by something, but only Teiko really knew why. Her family was satisfied with the excuse of being busy with school and work.

Takumi, on the other hand, could tell that something else was bothering her. After all, if school was so bad he would be just as busy. They were out on a date together when he brought it up with her. She was obviously distracted and it affected her mood in a bad way. "What's bothering you, Hanako?"

"Nothing. What do you mean?"

"It's not nothing, I can tell something is getting at you. You can tell me. I'd like to help, if I can."

This back-and-forth went on for a little while. She almost caved but explaining that her 80's-era Yotoya was totaled in a magical girl street race in an

unknown part of the country without looking like an insane liar was impossible for her to figure out. Instead, she just copped out with, "It's nothing big, Takumi. You don't need to worry, okay?" He let it go but he wasn't happy.

Not long after that she got a message from Sumiko. “Hey, Hot Streak. Your car is ready. I’d send a picture, but I want you to see it in person first.” She almost called the car to their date spot.

“Hey, I gotta go. Something came up.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I just have to run—I forgot about this thing I had to do. Besides, it’s getting late.” The sky was faintly orange, but it was hardly “late”.

He raised an eyebrow but shrugged. “Alright. I’ll see you at school tomorrow, then.”

“Yep, see you!” she said, without turning around to say good-bye. She walked out quickly and headed home. Once there, she frantically pressed the button on her key to summon her car. Instead, Netsu appeared.

“Not so fast—I want you to see something, first.” Impatient, she headed outside, locking the door behind her.

“What’s so—” she started, before the sound of a revving motor caught her off.

To Hanako’s eyes, it *was* no Maximus, but it was a beautiful ride. The street lamps shone off the black exterior like the stars off calm waters. It was impossible to see who sat at the driver’s seat, but she had a pretty good idea.

The electric window of the passenger seat rolled down when she approached, and sure enough, the driver was none other than Teiko. “What do you think?”

“She’s a beauty,” remarked Hanako. “Makes me jealous. How does she ride?”

“Like a dream.” Hanako got in—the leather was cool but not bone-chilling.

“What made you go with a Rusabu?”

“Just a feeling. The Venture worked for me. You know?”

“I know the exact feeling. I’m impressed you kept it from me all this time.”

“It was hard.” Hanako could tell right away that her style was totally different from Teiko’s, and both were pretty far-removed from Heather’s as well. There was a sense that Teiko thought

ahead about every move, weighing her options—Heather always seemed to know the best option on instinct, and Hanako only turned, changed lanes, or stopped begrudgingly. Speed was the name of her game, but the calculating Teiko seemed more than happy to take the scenic route.

The first place they stopped was Sumiko's shop. The only car in the garage was covered in tarp, and the mechanic was there waiting for them. Her coveralls were practically doused with red paint. "You made it! Glad to see the Venture is holding up well, Teiko."

She seemed to know that Hanako wasn't much for ceremony, so without further ado she pulled the tarp from the Maximus.

"It's beautiful," blurted Hanako. Sumiko chuckled.

"Glad you like it. I thought about keeping the basic look, but I couldn't resist."

From bumper to bumper, over the driver's side of the Maximus, ran a pair of white racing stripes—one twice as thick as the other—with the words *Hot Streak* in English between them, also white.

"I want to drive." Sumiko tossed her the keys, which she caught mid-step. "She is fit to drive, right?"

"It is. Just...be careful with her, okay? Wouldn't want everyone to have to wait another week."

"What do you mean, everyone?"

Teiko spoke up. "I guess you haven't been checking the challenge queue, Hanako." She didn't even know what that was. "You must have 20 challenges lined up after last week. You made a great impression on everyone."

She wasn't horribly shocked—she knew that it was a great race. The number of challenges took her aback somewhat, but compared to the number of races Heather or Ishikawa had run it was a drop in the bucket.

"Time to get started, then," she said. "How do I accept?"

* * *

The rest of that night was a blur. Hanako ran several races and regardless of the track, ruleset, or opponents, won them handily. Her Maximus rode like it just rolled out of the factory. By the end of that night she'd won all four races. Each was a race of at least three Witches—at first there was some skepticism about Hanako's ability to handle multiple opponents, but by the midpoint of the second race it was clear that Hanako was the real deal; that her race with Heather wasn't a fluke.

Midnight came just as she finished a fourth race. The other Witches clamored for more, but she insisted that she would be back tomorrow—and every day, if she could help it.

Teiko, still yet to manage the courage to challenge someone to a race herself, left at the same time Hanako did. She marveled at her friend's skill, and several times throughout the night she thought hard about issuing a challenge to another rookie driver...but something held her back. She wasn't sure what it was, but it ate at her that she didn't have whatever Hanako did that was rocketing her to such heights.

* * *

School was a blur for a long time after that. Hanako found herself sleeping in class more and more, and she'd even fallen asleep at her part-time job a couple of times. Once she fell asleep in the bathroom while on a date with Takumi—she felt pretty bad about that one.

She did her best to keep her mind off racing when she was with him, but her desire to drive kept poking and prodding her and, without realizing it, she was ending her dates with him earlier and earlier so she could get behind the wheel. Racing was becoming the only time that Hanako really felt alive.

Naturally, the disinterest at school had caused her grades to start falling, which prompted Takumi to offer to help her study if she was having trouble. "No, I understand the material, it's just..."

"That thing you have your mind on, right?"

“What?”

“You seem really removed from reality lately. It’s like you want to be anywhere but here, Hanako.”

“That’s not...I do want to be here, with you,” she started.

He cut her off. “Then why, when I’m with you, are you always on another planet lately? If there’s something causing you trouble, I can help.”

She felt terrible. “You don’t need to worry about me...” she said.

“That’s not what your friend told me.” Huh?

Teiko? “Why would she—”

“She said you’ve been really busy lately and asked me if I could bring it up with you.”

That didn’t seem like something Teiko would do—she knew exactly why Hanako was busy. So who? “She was blowing it out of proportion. I’m fine, really.”

“It just seems like you don’t have much time for me, or your other friends, or anything at all anymore. I don’t want to lose you. Anyway,” he changed the subject, “I have to get to work. If you need anything...”

She nodded. “Thank you, Takumi-kun. It means a lot to me.” He leaned down, took gentle hold of her shoulders and looked deep in her eyes for what felt like a very long time. Hanako just kept blushing, and eventually Takumi released his hold.

“I’ll see you tonight, then.” With that, he turned and walked away. Hanako heaved a sigh, partly of relief and partly of frustration.

VI The Top

“Do you think you can survive the top?”

—Ken Blast, “The Top”

It didn't take long for Hanako's racing record to become the talk of the streets. Over the course of a few weeks she racked up win after win after win, with only a couple of close races against Ishikawa's entourage (never the Queen herself) to show that she was still human. Challenges kept pouring in; everyone wanted to be the one to break the Hot Streak. It was unquestionable that Sugiyama Hanako was a genius at the wheel, and many said she may have been the best of all time—that her loss against Heather was purely due to inexperience and nerves. She didn't correct them.

Almost everyone, anyway—Teiko still hadn't managed to hit a track with any other Witch, though she'd gotten quite comfortable with her Venture in the meantime. Hanako had tried to get to the bottom of whatever was holding Teiko back, but the timid brunette wasn't budging. "I just don't feel ready," she lied, and Hanako knew it. Still, you can't get blood out of a stone, and racing was more fun than bothering her friend.

Just when she'd won her seventy-fifth race (a remarkable amount of races for such a new Witch, nevermind that they were all victories save her bout with Heather—a testament to the number of challenges she'd been issued), she was approached by a familiar, hateful figure.

"Sugiyama Hanako-san," began Ishikawa. Hanako glared. "I have to say, I misjudged you. It's clear to me that your racing abilities are second to none." Hanako stifled a retort and let her continue. "With that said, I've come to offer you a proposition—"

"Not interested," spat the redhead. "I don't need you."

Ishikawa frowned. The curl of her lips was almost alien in its disgust. "Don't interrupt Ishikawa-san," said one of the trio that stuck closest to her.

"I'll do what I like. Unlike you, I don't need any help winning." She'd raced that girl—a somewhat familiar-looking girl with short black hair—and won in spite of pressure on her from Ishikawa. Hanako tried to think of her name, but hadn't bothered to remember.

“You’ve made a mistake,” growled Ishikawa. “This world could have been ours.”

“I want it for myself. There’s no room at the top for you.”

Sparks flew between the two Witches, the intensity of their stares only matched by the heaviness of the air.

“Hmph. We’ll see about that.” She put her fist on her hip. “Fine then. If you won’t see reason, I’ll have to teach you humility the hard way. Race me, Sugiyama Hanako. I’ll give you a week to prepare. You’ll need it.”

“I accept. We’ll race on Ace of Spades. Two laps. One-on-one. No tricks.”

Ishikawa jeered. “I won’t need any.” She leaned very close—uncomfortably so—to Hanako’s face. “Remember what I said before: that Maximus won’t be the only wreck when I’m done with you.”

Before Hanako had the chance to reply she turned and walked away, saying something to her underlings. Teiko came over to her.

“She’s bluffing,” said Hanako. “I can see it in her face. She’s scared stiff to race me. She knows she’ll lose.” With that, she went to her car.

“Where are you going?”

“The Ace of Spades. Where else?” She grinned.

Normally, reserving a racing track for solo practice drew a lot of negative attention from the other Witches. On top of that, it was an unwise move strategically—one’s opponent could see just how a driver handled a track and use that to her advantage. Hanako’s clout took care of the crowd’s disdain – her confidence took care of the rest. The look on Ishikawa’s face after she finished her practice lap was delectable.

She was interviewed about the coming race just as she got off the track. “What are your thoughts on the race? What do you think of your chances of winning?”

“I won’t put it to numbers—I’ll just say that Chizuru-chan needs to practice.” She smiled for the cameras.

The days leading up to the race were fraught with distractions. Hanako wanted nothing more than to get in her car and drive—she would have really liked to race Ishikawa right away, in fact. Alas, real life was still something she had to deal with (all pretense of “balance” had fallen away by this point).

Hanako wouldn’t admit it to herself, but Teiko could see that there were *some* nerves hiding there under her outward confidence. She tried to approach Hanako about it but the latter simply denied the jitters and said, “I’m just excited to finally race her!” Teiko knew better than to think Hanako could be reasoned with at times like this. Besides, Hanako knew best, right?

Four days before the race, Hanako was approached by her boyfriend, Takumi. “Hanako, I want to talk to you about something.”

“Okay,” started Hanako, but Takumi cut her off.

“Let’s go behind the school.”

Hanako was a little nervous about this—Takumi wasn’t one to hide things about their relationship, so this must have been serious. She almost deliberately slowed her pace. Her heartbeat grew more and more intense as she followed him. Something in her gut told her this was not going to be a friendly chat.

“What’s going on, Takumi?”

“You never showed up the other day.”

“What?”

“A few days ago. We were supposed to meet at the mall that night. Did you forget?”

“I..” she started.

“I don’t get it, Hanako. If you don’t want to spend time with me, you can say so.”

“That’s not—”

“Then what is it? Your friend Junko knew where you were, but she wouldn’t tell me.”

Junko? thought Hanako, wracking her brain for any memory of an acquaintance with that name. With Takumi staring her down it was hard to think. A lump had formed in her throat. Her vision was getting blurry—she knew where this was going to go if she didn't turn it around.

"Takumi, wait...I'm sorry." She couldn't look up. "I want to tell you what's going on. I just don't know if you'll believe me."

He clicked his tongue. "So you won't tell me, then?"

"Wait, Takumi—"

"I'm through waiting. I don't want to keep tabs on you, Hanako, but I don't want you to disappear on me either. I can't afford to worry about you off doing who knows what with who knows—"

"It's not that kind of thing!" She shouted, her voice uncharacteristically raspy. She'd started to sweat.

"Whatever kind of thing it is, it seems like it's all you care about anymore. If you don't want me involved in what's important to you—"

She remembered who Junko was and cut him off with a gasp. "Wait! You can't listen to her," started Hanako. "She's not my friend! She's trying to—"

"Don't start making excuses now to get out of this, Hanako."

"I'm not! I swear, she's not my friend. She's just trying to hurt me through you!"

"Hanako, I can't believe that. Even if it was true, I wouldn't want to be involved anymore." There it was. Her heart sank. She almost felt it hit her stomach.

"Please, don't, Takumi."

"When you think you can talk to me about whatever this is about, I'll listen. But if you want to keep secrets from me, we can't be together."

He didn't let her respond before turning his back to her, eyes downcast. She wiped her cheeks with her uniform's sweater sleeves, silently weeping.

When she moved her arm away, her eyes were narrowed, furious.

VII

Crazy On Emotion

"You got me really crazy—gone crazy for you!"

—Ace, "Crazy On Emotion"

"Where's Ishikawa?!" She shouted, nearly stomping out of her car toward the area Witches tended to congregate.

"Hanako, wait," called Teiko, who'd followed her here after she'd told her what happened with Takumi.

"I just want to talk to them," lied Hanako. Her countenance hadn't changed since she left school earlier. Her red eyes were narrow and vicious looking, like a tiger's.

"Are you looking for us?" Ishikawa called, two of her dogs at her heels. Her usual smug expression had returned. "What could be the matter? Are you dropping out of our race?"

"Where's Junko?" She remembered too late that Junko was one of the girls she'd raced and beaten on her winning streak. One of Ishikawa's pets – the one who always spoke up to defend the Queen. When she realized that she realized exactly what was happening with Takumi.

Ishikawa smirked. "Junko-chan wasn't able to make it tonight. She has a date."

For a split-second, Hanako was stunned. She quickly recovered with a lunge at Ishikawa. "I'll kill you!"

Lucky for Ishikawa, Teiko held her friend back. "Stop it, Hanako! That won't do any good!"

"Lemme go!" She fought bitterly to get free, but Teiko was stronger than she appeared.

Ishikawa didn't flinch. "This is pathetic, Sugiyama. Just because dear Takumi didn't want you anymore, you're acting like this? It's not like Junko seduced him to get him to leave you. Not yet, anyway..." Hanako was fuming. "You should have paid him more attention if you cared so much."

"You bitch! You'll regret this!"

“We’ll see.” She and the two walked away without another word.

Once Ishikawa was out of sight, Teiko released her surprisingly firm hold on Hanako, panting. “Save it for the race, Hanako...” she suggested.

“Feh. She’s lucky you were there, or she wouldn’t be able to race.” Her fists were still clenched tight. “I’m going to drive.”

“Don’t do that now, Hanako! You aren’t thinking straight!”

Hanako stopped walking, but didn’t turn around. “Teiko.” It was eerily calm.

“..yeah?”

“I want you to leave me alone right now. I can’t be like you, always thinking about what will come next. All that will do is confuse me.” She looked over her shoulder. “I’m going to go drive for a while.”

Teiko didn’t know what to say, so she didn’t say anything.

* * *

Takumi released a frustrated sigh through pursed lips. He leaned back in the cafe’s booth so he could rest his head on the back of it, looking up at the spinning ceiling fan and thinking about that afternoon. What could it have been that held so much of Hanako’s time and attention these days? He thought about when it first started, but the only thing he knew of around that time was that she made friends with Teiko—he doubted it was her.

“Takumi-kun?” called a somewhat familiar voice. He looked up and saw the girl he’d been talking with for the past few days, Fujiwara Junko. She was a second-year who said she’d been friends with Hanako since they were kids.

“I’m glad you showed up. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

Junko smiled, oddly happy to be there. “What is it, Takumi-kun?”

“I wanted to ask what exactly Hanako has been up to. It’s bugging me that no one will tell me what’s going on.”

Junko's smile faltered, then she made a rehearsed-looking surprised expression. "She didn't say anything?"

"I tried to ask her about it today, but she wouldn't budge. I couldn't accept that she was keeping secrets, so I broke up with her. She said I wouldn't believe her, but I am willing to believe a lot of things at this point. So, tell me. What is Hanako doing?"

"Takumi-kun, I don't know what to say...why are you so concerned about it, if you two aren't together anymore?"

"What? It's not like I can just stop caring about her because I'm not dating her. She's still my friend." He made a skeptical face. "And yours, right? What exactly is your relationship with her?"

"Takumi-kun, why do you keep asking weird questions? I already told you, Hanako and I have been friends since elementary school."

"She said you were out to get her. So what's really going on, Fujiwara? Why did you contact me in the first place?"

Junko sat silent for a moment. "Takumi-kun, I just wanted to get closer to you."

"So, what, you got me to break up with Hanako? Because you like me?"

"It's not that simple. I do like you, which is why I agreed to do it, but—"

"Agreed? What do you mean you agreed to do it?"

She went silent again, this time for much longer. He didn't break her train of thought. If she wanted to lie, she wouldn't have admitted to as much as she had already.

"I was put up to breaking you and Hanako up."

"Why? By who?"

"You want to know? Sugiyama was right—you'll never believe it."

"I'm tired of hearing that! What is with this secrecy!?"

"Fine, fine. I'll tell you. The damage is done, anyway. Even if you do believe it, you won't want to get back together with her. And even if you do, she's too proud to accept your apology." She pulled her phone from her purse. "Watch this."

It was a video of one car, a red Yotoya Maximus with white stripes, racing past a pack of three others. The camera cut into the driver's seat, and there sat Hanako. "What is this?"

"Your ex's hobby. She's a street racer. A good one, too. Don't tell anyone I said this, but she's probably the best on the asphalt right now. She has a big race coming up against a woman who has a lot of influence. That woman asked me to sabotage your relationship since we go to the same school. Headgames. If Hanako thinks about you for even a half-second while she's on the track, she'll lose—or worse. At those speeds, the slightest distraction can be deadly."

He couldn't believe what he was watching, but clip after clip played of Hanako and her car speeding past other racers. One race, it cut to a defeated Junko. "How long has she been at this?"

"Just a few weeks. Pretty amazing, huh?"

"It's..." he set the phone down. "Not nearly as bad as you made it sound." He stood up.

"Takumi-kun, where are you going?"

"To find Hanako."

"She's racing now. You won't find her. Just stay with me. I was honest with you, right? I told you everything." She grabbed at his hand.

Takumi flicked his wrist to get her off him. He glared at her with the kind of contempt reserved for one's worst enemy. "Never contact me again."

She protested, pleading for him to stay, but he ignored her. The other patrons looked at the defeated girl on her knees with a mixture of pity and confusion as he ran out the door.

* * *

Hanako sat silent in her car. Her fingers traced the outline of the key while her mind raced. She went over the afternoon's events over and over again in her head, replaying the exact second that it went wrong. It hurt to think about it. "So I won't anymore," she said to herself.

With a roar the Maximus came to life. The sensation of the rumbling racer in her hands made her feel good, like usual...but what happened with Takumi still stung. Just sitting wasn't enough of a distraction.

She was very deliberate and gentle when she drove through the parking lot. It wasn't normal for her to drive so carefully, but she was still elsewhere mentally. It was the first time she'd ever felt like something else mattered when she was behind the wheel. If she had sat down to ponder it, she would have known what happened with Takumi earlier for the reality check that it was, but right now all she wanted to do was feel the wind fight her momentum like usual. So why couldn't she focus?

In the blink of an eye she was at the starting line of Big Zero, the simple test track. Such a feeling—surprise that she'd gotten somewhere so quickly in her car—should have set alarm bells ringing in her head. She was so eager to get driving and leave that memory behind her that she didn't pay the nagging voice at the back of her head any heed.

The engine roared when she hit the gas. The practice track was a straight-away for while until it suddenly turned. That wasn't good enough—a straight-away meant she didn't have anything to think about on the road. So she floored it until she reached the curve, when she braked.

She swung around the curve a little faster than one might consider "safe," but no one was in the car to warn her about that and she was just concerned about getting around the curve at all. Just concerned about thinking of anything but the sad look on Takumi's face, really.

Another straightaway. The track—a test track to ensure everything about your car was operating smoothly—was a fairly simple loop where Witches tested top speeds and similar benchmarks. Hanako thought it would be a good distraction to go for that top score, and she knew her Maximus could handle it.

She waited until she rounded the second curve to go for it. Once she was out of the curve she shifted up and hit the gas. By now, the rhythm of gear-shifting in her Maximus was second na-

ture to her. She didn't even need to watch the odometer—she did, this time, to see if she could hit the speed record before she needed to slow herself down for the turn. She could tell from the curve's approach that she wouldn't hit it this time. Begrudgingly, she politely slowed for the turn.

"This time." She said to herself. Some of the fire had come back to her eyes where it had been extinguished before. The engine roared, sending subtle vibrations into her steering wheel. "Come on..." she commanded, shifting up and up again. It was a good pace. Her engine cried out for more—at least, that was how she always interpreted the sound of building speed.

"More, then," she said, grinning. The car sped up further, and she watched the odometer closely. It was right on the cusp of a new record. She pressed into the gas a little more...

"Yes!" she cried, triumphant. The anxiety had all been washed away with that familiar antidote of victory. With a content smile, she went to the clutch to slow down for the coming curve, ignoring the fanfare from her record-breaking lap.

There was a screech. The sound of a pop, then metal grinding on metal.

In that moment, Hanako's Hot Streak came to an abrupt end.

VIII

Adrenaline

"Fear thunders in my heart and I...and I..."

—Ace, "Adrenaline"

To call Hanako's crash scene a gruesome spectacle would be to undersell the scale of it. The Maximus was practically embedded into the mountainside. Hanako was another story entirely. In that state it would be a miracle if she walked again, let alone drove. It was a miracle she was alive.

Teiko was so thunderstruck that she couldn't even cry. She could barely think, her heartbeat was so loud in her ears.

The grind of the Maximus's faulty brakes sent a grotesque chill up her spine. She was happy that Hanako earned the record and was even feeling a little better about her being on the road, but that metallic scraping sound...it was horrible. One she hoped to never hear again.

She sprinted down to the track as fast as she could. The emergency response ambulance sped past her, nearly knocking her down. From her angle, she could see everything. They tore the door off Hanako's treasured car and pulled her from the wreckage. She was limp, eyes closed, covered in broken glass. Most exposed skin was bloody. Her legs...Maybe they were magical girls of a type, but they were still human. Teiko nearly got sick on the road, but kept running.

Finally she caught up. "Hanako!" she called. The redhead didn't respond – she wasn't conscious. Probably for the best. "Hanako, hold on!"

Netsu and the others came up with a fine enough cover story—she was hit by a swerving motorist on the way home from school and someone took her to the hospital right away. It might not explain all her injuries but her family was too happy she survived to care about the details.

The first person to come to the hospital after her family was Takumi. The sight of Hanako in such a state struck him profoundly. He sat at her side and slept there, but the hospital staff insisted that he didn't stay through the school day. He hated to leave her side. What if the monitor stopped beeping?

Her father never left her side. Her mother only left to care for her brothers – it was questionable whether either ate for days. Several Witches visited her, most out of worry but a few to get a sense of satisfaction from it, Teiko was sure.

The day of the race she paid her first visit. On the way in, she passed a silent Ishikawa. The satisfied look on her face nearly threw Teiko into a rage, but she held back. Once she was in Hanako's room she greeted her parents and brought up their

friendship. Hanako's mother cried into Teiko's shoulder when they hugged. Her father patted his wife's back. "We never knew our Hanako had so many close friends. It's all been very touching to see so many people who care." It was a bittersweet feeling. Teiko looked sadly at Hanako. It had been two days...she still didn't know what to do. She hated to think of herself in this situation.

On the way out, she passed Heather. They talked a little about the situation.

"I see. That's rough. The smallest distraction can be deadly at those speeds, and with a mechanical problem to boot..."

"I wish I could have done more for her..."

Finally, Teiko let it out. Her sobbing shook her whole body. Heather held her close. "It's not your fault, kid. What happened out there...that wasn't your doing. There, there."

She caught her breath and wiped her eyes dry. "What should I do?"

"What do you think you should do?"

"I still don't know. I feel paralyzed."

"What would Hanako do, if it were you in that bed?"

She sat and thought about that for a while. Heather stood and went into Hanako's room—when she left, Teiko was gone. "I guess she decided." The blonde smiled a little."

* * *

A few hours before the race was scheduled to start, Sumiko had called Teiko to her garage. The Maximus in all its broken glory had been towed there. It was a grim sight; visions of Hanako's bloody near-corpse came back to her. She shook herself out of the haunting memory. "What is it?" "I wanted to talk to you about this." She held up a small, twisted, metal object and let Teiko take a look. "What is it?"

"It was one of the Maximus's calipers. Found on the side of the road near the wreck."

"It fell off?"

“Seems that way.”

“So, what does this mean?”

“This is just my opinion, now—Hanako took great care of that car. On top of that, she brought it to me for full-inspection regularly. This isn’t something I would miss on the first pass, let alone taking a deep look like she made me.”

“Are you suggesting that it was tampered with?”

“It’s just my opinion. I don’t have any evidence besides this and my gut.”

Teiko was irate. “Fine, then. And what’s the news about tonight’s race?”

“It’s still on. It won’t be officially canceled unless both racers withdraw. If Hanako doesn’t show, it’s Ishikawa’s victory.”

“That’s not—”

“No, it’s not fair, but this kind of injury is unprecedented. Normally you all are shielded from the worst harm...Hanako was just going too fast. It’s only thanks to the magic in these cars that she’s alive at all.”

Teiko clenched her fist.

* * *

The night of the race came. Ishikawa stood by her Dazma at the starting line, that smug grin of hers plastered on her face. She glowed in the floodlights and her white paint job reflected her like a mirror. Her expectation was a race against a distracted, lonely Hanako—a totally absent one was even better as far as she was concerned. Many thought it poor sport that she didn’t withdraw, but no one spoke up. At least, not to her face.

Teiko watched with mixed emotions, mainly disgust, as Ishikawa got set to “win.”

The time until the start of the race grew shorter and shorter. Ishikawa was asked if she had any words. She said, “It’s a shame my opponent couldn’t be here. I was looking forward to racing her.”

Is she serious? Thought Teiko.

“Of course, this is how it would have turned out anyway.”

Teiko could feel her heartbeat accelerate. Ishikawa was really doing this.

“Still, it would have been good to race her before this happened. A little humility would have done her a lot of good and may have prevented the whole accident.”

Everything that Teiko stood for up to that point went out the window. This wasn't a time for patient analysis of the situation.

She vaulted the barrier, eliciting a gasp from nearby spectators. That caught the camera's attention, which perturbed Ishikawa.

“What is it?” asked the raven-haired Queen as the shorter, younger brunette approached.

Teiko shot daggers at Ishikawa. “I'll race you in Hanako's place.”

Everyone went silent for a moment. Ishikawa's face showed surprise for a second before her usual pomposity returned.

“I reject your challenge,” she said with a haughty laugh.

“Scared?”

“What? Of you?”

“Of anyone, when you can't sabotage their car ahead of time.”

“Oh, this again? You have no—”

“You're a coward. If you were half the driver your record suggests, you'd have accepted my challenge straight away and 'put me in my place.' I'm just a nobody without a single race under her belt. It should be trivial for you to humiliate me and claim your victory tonight. But you're scared.”

Ishikawa glared at Teiko. “You won't bait me into racing you, Nakamura.”

“Everyone is watching, Ishikawa. They'll know you're a coward if you reject my challenge.”

The crowd stared intently. Thanks to the interviewer, they could hear the pair's every word. Ishikawa frowned.

“Fine. You and me. Tonight. Here. Now.”

Teiko swallowed, trying to hide it. Honestly, she didn't expect Ishikawa to call her bluff...but it would be spitting on Hanako to withdraw now. "Fine."

She turned away and did her best to hide the panic on her face from the audience. Her hand shook so violently when she got to her car that she could hardly open the door. As soon as it was closed, she exhaled a heavy sigh. "What have I gotten myself into?"

She sat in the seat for a long time, silent, thinking about nothing in particular. Her fingers clutched the key, still trembling though she found some comfort sitting in the Venture. A few moments passed.

Finally, she slid the key into the ignition. With a flick of her wrist, the car would come to life...she hesitated. The keychain jingled in her tremulous hand. She looked over to her passenger seat, and remembered Hanako. A second later, the engine roared to life.

She pulled up to the starting line next to Ishikawa's TZ-9. Already, the "promoters"—Netsu and his kind, that is—had begun to take advantage of the juxtaposition between the two racers. The most talented Witch around (now that Heather was retired and Hanako was out of commission, Teiko remarked) was staking her pride against an untested newbie with no record to speak of. Ishikawa was known for her aggressive tactics, and Teiko's inexperience allowed them to frame her as timid. To really drive home how different the two were, Ishikawa's car was white—Teiko's was black.

Netsu hovered at the starting line. "Alright, Witches and spectators. Get ready for tonight's new headline race. Witches, start your engines!" A bead of sweat ran down Teiko's forehead. *Am I going to do this?*

"On your marks!" The two pulled up to the starting line. *I can always quit here. None of them know me anyway.*

"Get set!" Ishikawa revved her engine and looked over to Teiko with a smirk. Teiko averted her gaze, but out of her peripheral she could see Ishikawa laughing at her.

“Go!” Teiko shot forward without another thought.

IX Grand Prix

“Grippin’ my steering wheel so tight!”

—Mega NRG Man, “Grand Prix”

The difference between driving to-and-from the tracks and racing was palpable. There was a direct current from the gas pedal to the steering wheel, and she was the circuit. The gravity of the situation—especially given her opponent’s penchant for violent tactics—sobered her a bit, but the adrenaline rush of finally surging forward in her Venture never quite wore off. She tried to think about the course ahead but couldn’t remember which turns came up when. Unlike most tracks, whose names had something to do with their shape, “Ace of Spades” was useless—Heather had earned her first victory there and called it that, and it stuck.

Ishikawa was right on her tail and catching up fast. Teiko had a solid start on the first straightaway, but the tempo of a race was totally alien to her. When driving casually it’s not common to reach the higher gears at all, let alone in a couple of seconds. She managed to keep from stalling, but only barely.

The white TZ-9 edged closer and closer to her front bumper in spite of going around the outside, to the left. She looked in her side mirror and saw Ishikawa with a serious look on her face for maybe the first time. Normally she carried herself with such a pompous demeanor that Teiko was wondering if she ever took anything seriously.

She looked back at the road in front of her. The first turn, a long curve to the right, approached fast. Teiko attempted to drift in such a way that she blocked part of the road, forcing Ishikawa

to slow down, but botched the execution and just pulled an exceptionally wide, slow turn.

Ishikawa wasn't one to let such an opportunity go to waste. She let Teiko pass her while she made a much tighter turn, then punched the gas to rocket ahead. Once Teiko saw her rear bumper she realized why Hanako never gave up first place, even early on when there might be a tactical advantage to it ("I just won't screw up like that," was Hanako's reply when Teiko brought a situation not unlike the one she was now up as a hypothetical). The sight of someone's car passing yours, the humiliation of staring at her license plate...it was like she was being taunted. Mocked, even.

She swerved to the inside, Ishikawa's left, and built her way up to sixth gear. The track didn't have too many hard turns so it was easy to stay fast the whole time. Of course, this meant it was difficult to pass someone who was in front of you—anyone, let alone someone as skilled and experienced as the Queen of Mean.

The main thing keeping her out of first wasn't Ishikawa's speed, in fact – she was subtly shifting position to prevent Teiko from even having the chance to pass. It was so seamless Teiko felt like she wasn't even moving, which made her swerve more aggressively, which slowed her down...it was an effective tactic, but she sensed that it was supposed to be something an experienced racer could get around. After all, if the name of the game was just to get ahead once, the tracks wouldn't be so complex.

They rounded the second turn, another right, uneventfully. The next straight was quite long, then there was a curve left into and through a tunnel. So, she had some time to think about how to get past Ishikawa, and if she timed it right she could potentially leave a lot of pavement between herself and her opponent.

So what *was* the secret? There was no passing Ishikawa when she was paying attention to what was happening behind her—easy to do when there aren't any turns approaching or obstacles in the road. *What can I do here?* she thought as she clenched her teeth. As she approached directly behind Ishikawa and prepared to try another swerve, realization struck her.

She saw Hanako do it once, but was so impressed she didn't think about how, exactly, it happened the way it did. But she knew *what* happened back then, and that was good enough. She stopped herself from swerving, instead getting as close to Ishikawa's bumper as possible. If Ishikawa brake-checked her she could swerve out of the way and make a move, but that wasn't her plan.

Ishikawa looked back at her in the rearview mirror. There was a glint in her eye—the cold, ruthless gaze of the snake constricting her prey. Teiko locked eyes with that reflection as the two cars wore their tires against the asphalt. That was when she noticed her car settling into the slipstream of Ishikawa's slightly larger ride. She backed off a pace, keeping a note of the sweet spot she'd found.

The entrance to the tunnel approached. Teiko held her breath and tracked the tunnel's entrance, timing it in her head. Then, she nudged her car up the extra few feet she needed to catch the draft. *Perfect*, she thought as she settled in. With a flick of her wrists she shifted around Ishikawa before the latter could react, using the momentum boost to fly past her and settling in front just as the two cars passed into the darkness of the tunnel.

There was no way around Teiko while in the relatively narrow tunnel, which gave her a little time to “relax,” as much as she could while driving at 100+ miles per hour. The walls of the tunnel seemed to close in on her as she raced past them, forcing her to pay close attention to her trajectory. She tried not to think about anything but moving forward, but Ishikawa's high beams in her mirror weren't helping matters.

Other than that minor disruption, though, the time in the tunnel was the most “quiet” part of the race. She breathed deeply, watching for the starlight to appear, shining through the tunnel's exit. She noticed her hands had stopped shaking. Finally, she'd gotten somewhat used to the speeds...

* * *

“What’s happening? Where are we?!”

“You’d better grab the steering wheel or this will be a short ride, kid!” She had reflexively covered her head after the little red monster that called itself “Netsu” blinded her with a flash of light. The setting sun bathed the area in a deep orange glow, helping her eyes adjust. She wished it hadn’t. When she came to, she was behind the wheel of a rapidly accelerating car. She was rocketing forward at untold speeds and the noise of the engine overwhelmed her senses.

“O-okay!” she replied, gripping it like a vise and trying to gain control over the speeding vehicle. “Like this?”

“Loosen up a little! You’ve gotta become one with the car, don’t just drive it.”

“What does that mean?!”

He started going on about things she didn’t understand like Street Witches and races and hot blood. She was too frightened to make a reasoned response, and by the time she realized what he meant by “crossing the finish line” she was too close to stop. Thus, with another flash of light, Teiko had become a Street Witch.

“So, what do you think?”

She was hyperventilating. “What do I think? I think you almost killed me!”

“No way, no way. I knew you had it in you from the beginning. I wouldn’t have come if you didn’t.”

“No, this is wrong. You must have been meant for someone else.”

“Nuh-uh. I can see it in you. Maybe you don’t know it’s there, but the fire is absolutely dormant in you.”

“But—”

“No buts. You sealed the deal. If you want to see what it’s all about, call for me and I’ll take you there.”

* * *

A bump in the road brought her back to the present. That memory was from over a month before Hanako had first arrived. In that month Teiko did just about everything but pick a car and race—to Netsu’s chagrin. She learned which Witches were the strongest racers, who was friendly with whom, who hated whom, and so on. She’d learned who drove what car and why, which tracks were whose favorites, and just about everything there was to know – mostly, anyway, since she couldn’t get into the archives—about the world of Magical Girl Street Racing. Except how it felt to win or lose.

That was going to change tonight, one way or the other. The exit of the tunnel approached. After, there were two right turns in fairly quick succession, then a lazy left-hand curve, which was what worried her the most. She was sure that if a moment came for her to lose the lead, it was that one.

The two rights came and went. She didn’t try anything fancy to slow Ishikawa down, preferring to simply stay on the inside of the track, forcing her rival to take “the long way” to keep her own lead intact.

Then it hit her. Literally. Just after the second of the two right turns Ishikawa nicked her bumper. Teiko began to fishtail, slowing as a reflex to regain control. Ishikawa took her opportunity, sailing past the flailing Venture as the left-hand curve approached.

“Fine, then,” growled Teiko, all the trepidation in her voice gone. She quickly caught up to Ishikawa’s rear bumper, but the latter knew better than to let her have the draft this time.

Teiko, of course, knew that was coming. As Ishikawa slightly veered right to keep Teiko out of her slipstream, the latter darted to the left to get on the slightly shorter side of the track. Her bumper caught up to Ishikawa’s driver side door. She kept her distance from the side to keep from getting run off the road (and into the mountain wall). Ishikawa’s longer path caught up to her and soon the cars were at parity.

“Just a bit more...” muttered Teiko under her breath. All that stood between her and the end of the race was three turns, and

she was neck-and-neck with her opponent. Of course, the next two turns were right-handed, meaning Ishikawa would have the slight advantage of being on the inside, but there was no way Teiko was going to willingly get behind her opponent now. She floored it out of the curve, rapidly pumping the clutch and shifting gears.

Right turn number one came and went, and Teiko found herself just a quarter car length behind Ishikawa. The straight between here and the next turn was short—not a lot of time for either to speed up again. She bit her lip. If she went for an outside drift she could more easily pick up her pace. Ishikawa probably wouldn't expect another attempt after she'd failed her last one, but...she'd failed her last one. *Can I do it?*

There wasn't time to weigh her options. She felt her back tires begin to skid, heard the unmistakable screech of the rubber, and short forward out of the drift and toward the finish line. One more left turn, and victory would have been hers...but Ishikawa was no slouch. She pulled a tight drift inside the turn herself and the two were bumper-and-bumper, neck-and-neck.

She looked through her passenger side window. Ishikawa's eyes were angry, brow furrowed, and locked on the road ahead. Even if she lost, Teiko was proud to make Ishikawa take her seriously.

She grit her teeth and went for another drift. She might have knocked a filling loose, but she'd done it again and not losing her momentum was just enough for her to keep pace despite Ishikawa's own drifting.

There were seconds remaining until one of them would cross the finish line. She held her breath and, unable to watch, closed her eyes as the two vehicles darted past the checkered flag, one after the other.

* * *

She sat with her eyes closed and with her fingers white-knuckle gripping the steering wheel for a moment to just listen. The

crowd was silent for a second – a second that felt like hours. Had she lost? It felt like Ishikawa was ahead of her at the end.

Then, like someone flipped a switch, there was an uproar. She half-opened one eye to look around, then opened both when she saw the spectators cheering wildly and heading in her direction. She took a look at the large screen where the race was being broadcast and...

She won!

It took a second for her to process, but when the realization hit her she couldn't stop smiling. Finally, she came to understand the way Hanako felt. Just in time.

X

Hidden Bonus Track: Déjà Vu

“And I know it’s my time to go.”

—Dave Rodgers, “Déjà Vu”

Ishikawa threw a holy fit right after the race but the results were indisputable. She disappeared after that. Most Witches thought the shame of losing to what she would have called a “nobody” was too much for her to bear. The girls who’d taken to following her around still kept close to each other but moved away from most of their underhanded tactics and all sabotage without her influence.

There was another theory, that Ishikawa was practicing in private and would return to take her throne back. Time would tell whether this theory held any water, but for a while after the race it seemed she had permanently retired.

Hanako recovered, quicker than expected of her. When she heard news of Teiko’s victory from Heather, who visited her quite often, she started pushing herself even harder to get better. “I can’t let Teiko think she’s better than *me!*” It was hard for Heather to tell whether this was a joke, but she laughed anyway.

Hanako and Takumi stayed together throughout her recovery and beyond. Hanako's still nascent blood-heat caused some friction between the two, but she never hid anything from him again and they made up before long every time they fought. Her family never learned about her racing—she didn't want them to worry, once she returned.

As for Heather, once Hanako had recovered enough that regular monitoring wasn't necessary she took to the open road. She was seldom seen in Japan, but she came back once in a while to check up on things.

Like Ishikawa, Teiko disappeared from the racing scene after that night, much to the chagrin of the organizers. What's more, she even moved schools – for unrelated reasons—and lost touch with Hanako. It was unclear why she quit racing—the more pessimistic of the remaining Witches thought The Black Knight was trying to keep a technically perfect record. Some thought she wasn't interested in racing at all and only raced against Ishikawa that night to defend Hanako's Hot Streak. Others, that she knew she couldn't match the thrill and stakes of that race again and didn't want to try. Only Teiko herself knew for sure...

* * *

Years passed. A new generation had ascended to The Top of the world of Magical Girl Street Racing. Hanako eventually came back to the scene. It seemed like she was unaffected by her injuries and absence and her record reflected that—the Hot Streak had yet to be broken. Her return rocked that world just as hard as her arrival shook the scene when she first arrived. It took some doing to earn her old reputation back, but before long she was the undisputed champion.

One evening, a black Rusabu Venture pulled up next to Hanako's red and white Yotoya Maximus. The tinted window of the black car rolled down and inside was a brunette with a bomber jacket wearing sunglasses.

She tipped them down and locked eyes with Hanako, who al-

ready knew who she was. “Care for a race?”

Collateral Baggage

by /a/non

I

There I sat, atop one of the many mangled vehicle wrecks now littering the city block. My gaze focused on a small weed, growing between the cracks of the sidewalk. The hardy plant swayed gently in the smoke-filled air.

Its shadow dancing across the charred walls around me, illuminated by small, scattered fires yet to be extinguished. The petite yellow flower which protruded above the concrete, seemed to be the only thing spared from the destruction.

A mixture of dust and sweat stung my eyes. I pulled the collar of my coveralls up to wipe the offending substance off my face. Suddenly, the sound of commotion behind me snapped my mind from wondering thoughts. I swiveled my head toward the noise. Further down the street, my fellow crewmates crowding around yet another destroyed car.

Quickly putting on my helmet, I jumped down from the wreckage and made my way towards them. Their voices becoming clearer as I approached, hushed words weighed by solemn tones pervaded the group.

I couldn't quite see what they were looking at. As I pushed through the small gathering, I caught a glimpse of what initially attracted the men.

Beneath the twisted metal of the overturned passenger van was a tiny, ashen hand. Blood had pooled around it, drying into a splattered, black stain upon the ruined asphalt.

“Dammit, not another kid...” One man said, reaching up toward his mouth to stem a rising lurch.

“Shit, I don’t want to stick around when we lift this thing. Fuck that.” Said another, turning away from the grim sight.

“Keeves, call command and tell them we’ve found another body...” A gruff voice cut in, bringing all of us to attention.

Looking to my left, I found the owner of the voice. Jahn, our unit leader. He was a stout fellow, a full head shorter than me and built like the mighty walls that surrounded the city. I spotted a defeated, distant look in his eyes. An expression I rarely saw in the man. One who had been in this line of work for some twenty-odd years.

Keeves, our unit’s wise cracker who normally kept spirits high with his lame jokes, shared the same forlorn gaze Jahn held. He nodded his head, pivoting away while keying up his radio, preparing to contact our district’s division commander.

Jahn turned back to us, sighing as he jotted down yet another casualty report onto his data pad.

“We’ve got two more hours before our rotation ends. However, it looks like there may be more victims still undiscovered. You know the rules, protocol states we stay and search for anyone, dead or alive, still left in the disaster zone. I’ll talk to command, hopefully I can get another unit to relieve us. Until then, prepare to strap in for a long-haul. I’ve got a feeling tonight’s only gonna to get worse.”

With that, the group simultaneously echoed a ‘*yes sir*’ before continuing off in the search for more lost souls. I broke from the rest and made my way further down the street.

Alongside me, I passed ever increasing levels of devastation. Smoking blast holes pitted the fractured ground. Storefronts were burned out and charred from the battle just hours before. Lamp posts previously standing tall and sturdy, now drooped low, melted like candle wax from the intense heat.

The damage only got worse as I traveled. Entire sections of apartment buildings had been leveled to smoldering piles of rubble. Great trenches nearly ten feet wide had been carved seemly

at random into almost every surface. Their cavities polished to an opaque glass that shimmered the reflections of passing embers.

Nearby walls bore the atomized shadows of people unfortunate enough to be walking by. The haunting silhouettes capturing the moment their owners met utter oblivion. I averted my eyes, spotting the outline of what appeared to be another child still holding hands with their mother or father.

I pressed on, looking ahead when I saw a large, misshapen form lying motionless under the smog choked sky.

There it was, the beast that brought such death to our city.

Its hulking mass was covered in cauterized slashes and still weeping wounds. The monster's immense body had been severed clean. One half thrown across the intersection where it now lay. Its belly had been torn open, exposing a stinking heap of entrails that painted the road in a sickly, yellow hue.

I dared not to get any closer. Even as I watched my fellow cleanup crews cutting through one of its many, clawed limbs with various heavy equipment. Bulldozers pushed gore and viscera out of the way for nearby idling trucks, waiting to be loaded with the vile mess for disposal. Even when lodged deep within a massive impact crater, its ridged spine still loomed some thirty feet above the pit's edge.

Ignoring the flips my stomach was performing, I pulled down the biosensor attached to my helmet and scanned the nearby debris for any signs of life. Nothing. No breathing or heartbeats. Even when setting the visor to a full spectrum bio-scan, I couldn't detect any significant signature of human tissue anywhere.

This area had been relatively populated. Normally on calls like these, we'd find at least a finger or toe strewn about. Though the district was pretty close the epicenter of the battle, appearing to bear the full brunt of the assault.

The subsequent collapse of multiple structures most likely pulverized any remaining bodies to smithereens. Mixing them

finely with the spoilage, there might as well been no one here at all.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I continued my search. Periodically moving remnants of infrastructure and melted motor vehicles in hopes of finding one of the hundreds that perished.

Jahn was right. This is going to be a long, grueling night.

* * *

We worked into the early hours of the morning, occasionally stopping for water, food, and headcounts. We found a few bodies, but no more than a handful. Survivors in the immediate area were out of the question by the time we finished. It was clear that the attack had been more fatal than we initially thought. This had been one of the worst I've ever seen during my time in the Corps.

At debrief, I could barely keep my eyes open. My muscles were sore, burning from lifting rubble and handling heavy plasma lances for hours on end. I barely remembered the ride home as we left the disaster zone. No one spoke a word, each of us too exhausted to attempt small talk. None could mentally muster the strength anyway.

Our armored transport slowed to a stop outside my apartment block. I bid a muted farewell to my crewmates before getting out and onto the steps of the building. Walking inside, I found my door and began fumbling with my keys.

The sound of the transport's engines faded in the distance, as I finally entered my abode and fell face first into my dingy couch.

Raising my head off the cushion, I looked over to the television I had left on yesterday in my scramble to arrive to the scene. On screen was a news report of the attack, the anchor detailing the past night's events while footage of the beast's assault played.

The creature, named '*Haborym*' by the Department of Male-diction, had been defeated by one of their many Thaumaturgists. More footage of the previous battle rolled. The beast had been

staggered while of melting a high-rise into slag. A beam of glittering, white light slammed into it from off screen.

The camera then panned toward a glowing figure in midair. It was a young girl, no older than a teen, clad in a frilly cyan dress studded with gems of all colors and shapes. Upon her head was a spiked crown of pure shimmering silver that formed a bright halo around her body. She shouted something and waved around a wand of sorts. As the footage continued to play, the beast roared in hate and began charging the girl. It's many limbs flailed wildly, turning any in its path to red smears and clouds of pink mist as it barreled toward the Thaumaturgist. She let loose another beam of energy, striking the monster, but not before it swung a mighty claw her way. She hastily evaded the attack while still casting her own. Her aim, thrown off by the swing, cut a wide glowing scar into ground beneath her.

Screams filled the audio feed when the beam struck. The footage promptly cut, the cameraman presumably perishing in the assault. The news caster then announced a list of missing people, urging those affected by the attack to contact relief services for information on their loved ones.

I narrowed my tired eyes and angrily grabbed the remote, turning off the TV.

Every attack, every battle, has continued to increase in its destructiveness. The Department keeps deploying their precipitously trained magicians to deal with these terrible demons. Each time they do, the death toll exceeds the previous disaster. Partly due to the zealous actions performed by their "magical girls" in a vainglorious attempt to raise their popularity amongst a terrorized, desperate populace.

Flashiness gets the funding, I suppose.

Ever since the First Onslaught decades ago, the city had lost a majority of their Thaumaturgists to the monstrous legions. The shortage of capable magicians prompted a wealthy private security company, Malediction Liquidations, to begin recruiting magically unstable Rift Born near the First Walls.

They marketed these young magicians as cutesy idols to the

people, dressing them in ridiculous outfits and created a ranking system for the public to throw money at. The plan worked and popular support for the program skyrocketed, giving previously struggling security firm more cash than they knew what to do with.

Eventually the company merged with Lutum's government, becoming one of the most powerful and well-funded bureaus. *The Department of Malediction.*

You'd think with amount of money they're receiving it'd be spent it on training the Thaumaturgists to properly mitigating damages. Instead, they gave powerful weapons to high schoolers, tools that even the most battle-hardened veterans of the First Onslaught could barely handle.

It seemed like a grossly negligent decision in my opinion. It was this very belief, one I voiced to my superiors in the Department, that got me demoted and eventually fired from the DoM altogether.

I'll admit, I'm still incredibly bitter about that. Getting punished for doing my job as a collateral analyst still baffles me to this day. Though I should've seen it coming. Considering the fact that they unsealed the Yggdrasil Armory against my division's warnings, then began handing out super weapons to teenage girls. I couldn't just stand by while the Department's higher ups made horrendous decisions time and time again.

I promptly joined the Auxiliary Relief Corps the very week I had been let go. Six years later, and here I am. Arguably doing better, more meaningful work than I'd ever did sitting in front of a desk all day.

Hopefully with some hard work, I could get our unit more funding via collateral reports. However, the outlook on that plan is pretty miserable. The Corps needs street-hands more than they need analysts, and the Department does not like handing out money often.

I rolled over and looked up toward the bare concrete ceiling above me, studying the everwidening cracks forming along the contours of its crumbling surface.

I closed my eyes, trying to silence the buzzing thoughts of tonight's sights, sounds, and smells. Tomorrow's a new day, and I don't intend to waste it at the pub, again.

As I rested, my fatigue quickly caught up with me. My aching muscles relaxing as I felt myself drift off into a dreamless sleep.

II

The sweltering heat of our unit's machine shop combined with the overwhelming smell of harsh chemicals, assaulted my senses the moment I stepped through the bay doors. The yard was bustling with an unusual amount of activity this morning, especially in the wake of that major operation two days ago.

I enjoyed my time off while I could, though I eventually caved to Keeve's insistence that we hit the pub after our deployment. It was nice to relax for a change, shooting the shit with the guys and laughing like idiots.

Speaking of Keeves, he said he had something to show me once I got to the yard. Knowing him and his history of tinkering with all sorts of strange devices, I can only hope that whatever it is, doesn't somehow blow up in my face like last time. He's probably somewhere near the power tools, so I noted my destination and set off.

Snaking my way through the bustling shop, I avoided the flying sparks of technicians working on armored transports, as well as the occasional swinging's of a hammer. Finally making it to the shop's back offices, I opened the door and continued my search for Keeves.

He wasn't hard to find, standing in his usual spot by the tool lockers while digging intently through the cabinets for something.

"Mornin' Keeves" I said, poking at his side to get his attention.

"Ah! Morning to you too, Cecil. You drink any of the roach-ale we brought home a few nights ago?"

He turned around, mechanical grease smeared across his hands, face, and coveralls while he beamed a toothy grin.

“Not yet. Saving it for a rainy day, ya know?” I replied.

He huffed, dismissively waving his grimy hand, “That shit will go bad if you don’t. If you’re not gonna drink it, then I’ll happily repossess what I bought with my cold, hard earned cash.”

“Oh, I wasn’t aware that a gift could be un-given like that. Maybe next time, don’t order so much ale with your so called ‘hard earned cash.’” I jested, watching as he flipped me off, then promptly returned to his cabinet rummaging.

“So, you said at the pub you’ve got something to show me huh? Whatever it is, please tell me it wont catastrophically fail while demonstrating it.”

“Listen here fucker, that happened once. The previous improvements I made to our plasma lances only had minor hiccups.” He said, head still buried in the tool locker as he leaned further in.

“If you call a gas leak and the ensuing explosion a ‘hiccup’, then I have every right to be worried about whatever the hell you’ve created now.”

Keeves, now practically diving into the cabinet, gave a muffled reply.

“Don’t worry about it. Though I should probably warn you, what I’ve got *will* create an explosion. Ah! I found it!”

Keeves emerged from the locker holding a small, crystalline pyramid in his hand. The little trinket seemed to contain some kind of dimly glowing, orange fluid. Attached to each of the three points of on device were a mess of wires connecting to circuit boards. Of which appeared to be haphazardly taped to the facets of the pyramid.

“Keeves, what the fuck is that? And what do you mean it will *explode*?” I said, taking a tentative step backwards.

Keeves gave me a sly smile, tossing the device into the air and catching it.

“This my friend is an Ingus lodestone. One that I’ve personally modified.”

I blinked in confusion, “Wait, how did you get ahold of an artifact? And a weapons grade one at that.”

I almost didn't recognize the item at first, considering the heavy modifications he seemed to have grafted onto the thing.

“Remember the minor Fulgros Imp we cleaned up after? At the power plant a few weeks back? Yeah well, someone on the Liquidations team must've dropped this little guy in the assault. I found it while we were doing our hazard sweep and swiped it.”

He flicked the lodestone, the liquid within glowing brighter as it was disturbed.

“Keeves, you do realize you're in possession of a highly illegal artifact, right? If that liquidation team finds out they're missing a *grenade* from their armory, they'll start questioning everyone here in the unit.”

Keeves shrugged, crossing his arms as he leaned against the workstation behind him.

“Not necessarily. Liqs' lose shit all the time on 'ops. A missing grenade might as well be marked down as 'consumed' by the Department bean-counters. And considering the shitshow that was the Fulgros Imp, I'm sure they don't even *know* they're down a single grenade.”

I pondered his reasoning for a moment. While it is true that the chaos of a liquidation operation sees the deployment of weapons, most of which get destroyed or otherwise lost, that still doesn't evade the fact that he illegally pocketed one from the Department.

Sighing, I threw my hands up in resignation.

“Alright, as long as you don't go showing everyone your explosives, then I guess it's alright. So, what exactly did you do to that thing?”

He gave me a wide smile once again, an even *more* toothy at that. He placed the lodestone on the table and beckoned me closer. I bent low, leaning in to study the object while he began.

“Well lodestones come in multiple flavors if you will, depending on the essence contained within. You've got your standard shock-stones, blast-stones, and lumi-stones. But the one

we have here today is an Ingus-stone. This baby can bathe fifty square feet in highly reactive, flammable essence that explodes on contact with organic material. You can easily blow a chunk off a high daemon with one of these, and probably outright kill a lesser imp too.”

His eyes were glued to the stone, I could see the gears turning in his head as he imagined whatever else that device could kill or maim.

“From my time with the Liqs, I got to tinker with a lot of their shit. I discovered that the essence inside lodestones isn’t necessarily set in stone, so to speak. Heh.”

I rolled my eyes and continued to listen,

“Anyway, what really matters is the internal structure of the crystal lattice itself. That determines what the essence will do once it breaks free from containment. Usually, lodestone essences are locked into whatever configuration their lattice defines them as. However, I figured out how to artificially change the lattice itself, thereby tweaking how the essence will behave once freed.”

He pointed to the mess of wires wrapped around the stone.

“After *carefully* fucking around with it, I think I’ve been able to increase its explosive yield by at least eighty percent. If my shitty math is correct, the lodestone’s kill radius has been increased to almost a hundred feet, give or take.”

I raised an eyebrow, slightly mortified at his invention.

“Wow, great. Now not only do we have a grenade in the shop, but one that can practically level the entire office if dropped in the wrong way. Nice going buddy.”

He chuckled. His head held high with pride.

“Thanks. Not only that, but while the increased the yield, so too did the effects it has on organic material. Or rather, any material for that matter.”

“What do you mean by *any material*?” I asked, my trepidation rising.

“I guess in the processes of changing the lattice structure, it made the essence within somewhat uh...unstable. Turns out

essence doesn't like being altered when already trapped within a lodestone. If released, the essence will violently react with the crystal *itself*. This self-destruction produces a raw form of thaumaturgical energy strong enough to almost completely annihilate anything it comes in contact with."

I decided to take some steps away from the stone. Though I quickly realized a few feet of space wouldn't be enough to save me from this thing, should it decide to explode. Despite my hesitation, he continued.

"Furthermore, I think the reaction is exponential, or at least an entirely efficient one. Honestly, I'm not too sure. When this lodestone detonates, it'll either cause a cascading chain reaction that could level a city block, or just completely destroy everything within its new hundred-foot radius."

I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to process the incredibly unsettling information Keeves just gave me.

"Okay, so now this is not *just* a grenade, but an untested, highly volatile super weapon. And currently, that super weapon is sitting five feet away from us. Let me ask you, Keeves, why in the world would you create such a thing?"

Keeves just shrugged, picking up the lodestone and fiddling with it.

"I dunno, I just wanted to see if I could."

"One more question, how do you know if any of the effects you described work? I mean, did you build and test one before?"

He averted his gaze, looking up at the ceiling in a poor attempt to hide his wicked smile.

"I mean, yeah, I have. Although never with an Ignus-stone. I've seen these effects occur on a smaller scale with other lodestones, mostly the Lumi-stones. Probably due to their relatively tame lattice structure. I've always wanted to get my hands on a Ignus-stone, but I never got the clearance to access them while I was a Liquidator."

"Imagine my shock."

"Shut it dipshit. Department's R&D would've kissed my whole ass if they knew I could make this. Imagine, some Depart-

ment Girl dumping a crate of these bad boys on top of a behemoth. Boom! Instantly neutralized.”

“Sure, the last thing this city needs are gung-ho Department Girls with crates of those things. They’ll cause even more damage than the daemon itself! Have you been drinking roach-ale at work?”

He chuckled, “I wish. Here, catch.”

I found myself frantically reaching for the lodestone that had been tossed in my way, being careful to not drop or shake it too much.

“Fucking hell Keeves! You’re gonna give me a heart attack!” I said, gingerly cupping the explosive device in my hands.

Keeves just laughed again. I glared, waiting for him to stop slapping his knee.

“Don’t worry, I made sure it won’t explode unintentionally. The only way you can activate it is by punching in a combination on the keypad, which you’ll see is on the bottom of the thing. However, unlike an unmodified lodestone, once you activate this one, there’s no turning back.”

I flipped it over, indeed seeing the aforementioned keypad. At least he had the foresight to add in a safety feature.

“I assume you’re not going to tell me the combo?”

“Hell no. I mean, I trust you and all, but honestly even *I’m* too spooked by it’s destructive potential. I’d rather keep it to myself for security reasons. Plus, your dumbass would somehow put the combo in without thinking and blow us straight to the Rift.”

I frowned, “Thanks for looking out for me bud. By the way, what are you planning on doing with it? Make it a paper weight or something?”

“You should know by now I wouldn’t use something like this in such a mundane way. I’ll keep it on me, safely tucked away in my gear bag. Just in case.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Just in case...what?”

“Just in case I find myself in a particularly unfortunate position. Like oh I don’t know, say, staring into the maw of a daemon, seconds away from becoming human chewing gum. If that were

to happen, I'm going out in a blaze of glory and slam-dunking this little fucker straight down it's gullet."

I couldn't help but laugh, shaking my head in the grim absurdity of it.

"Let's hope that doesn't happen."

"You and me both, pal."

The sound of my radio keying up stole my attention away from Keeves, I watched as he cocked his head, waiting to see who was transmitting. I pulled the radio from its holster on my belt and held it up to my ear. Soon after, a familiar graveled voice came through.

"Cecil, meet me at my office in twenty-five. I think I've got something that might be of interest to you."

"Ten-Four" I said, then put the radio back into its holster.

"Something of interest to me? I don't know if I liked the sound of that."

"Hey, maybe ol' stone bones finally sees something in ya. He could be trying to set you up with that smoking hot daughter of his." Keeves jabbed.

"If anything, that would be arguably worse than whatever he actually wants."

"Well, I'll leave you to it. I'm going back to burning the clock today. Not like there's much to do anyway, everyone's already here hoggin all my work, oddly."

With that, Keeves turned his back and continued to rummage through the tool locker. Deciding it was a good time to try and get some work done, I left the office and returned to my workstation in the shop. Keeve's comment still lingered in my mind.

It was pretty unusual for the yard to be packed with personnel right after an operation. Something tells me our unit might be preparing for training mission of the sort. Not unheard of, but certainly poorly planned if that were the case. Well, I guess I'll know once I get in the big man's office.

III

I fidgeted in the chair outside of Jahn's office, thinking about whatever particular thing of interest he had for me. Normally, I'm never skittish around Jahn. I've known the guy for years now. I mean, he was the only Corps commander sensible enough to hire me after my ugly separation with the Department. Something that doesn't look too good on an evaluation report when trying a government job in this city.

For that, I thank him greatly. Though, there have been times where his abrasive, no-nonsense attitude rubbed me the wrong way. Maybe that's just due to my distaste with that kind of leadership, heaven knows I've experienced enough of that at the Department.

At least with Jahn, I know he'll always be honest. Thanks in part to that aforementioned zero tolerance of bullshit. He'll give it you straight, good or bad. Plus, I don't need to be constantly looking over my shoulder while working under him.

Unlike in the Department where every minute mistake was meticulously catalogued, then leveraged against you if you happened to be unfortunate enough to look at a superior the wrong way.

Regardless, this coming meeting has put my nerves on edge. I've learned over the years to trust this gut feeling. One needed while trying to maneuver around the vapid politics within the Department. It served me well, keeping my mind sharp and alert for whatever may come next.

I looked up toward the television mounted on the wall adjacent to Jahn's office. Department news was on as usual, and they seemed to be running another story about the last attack.

On screen was the Department Girl who killed the demon known as Haborym. She appeared to be in an interview with various journalists, each fighting over the other just to ask her a question.

"Lo-Leey! Lo-Leey! Can you tell us, what was going through your head when the beast first lunged at you?"

The magic girl, still flaunting her gaudy jewel studded outfit, flicked her hair and upturned her chin before responding.

“Whether or not I’d make it back in time for tea of course! Hehe!”

The high trill of her giggle cut through my skull like plasma lance. I already want to take Keeve’s unholy hand grenade and spike it into the wall closest to me.

“It was a simple matter really! no foul beast can match the glamorous prowess of yours truly! As is the truth for the fastest rising star in all of great Lutum!”

A flurry of further questions erupted from the journalists. Lo-Leey looked down her nose at each one. A haughty, smug expression crossed her face while she chose her next questioner.

She then pointed toward a journalist and plainly uttered “Speak”.

“Lo-Leey! The monthly rankings are in, it looks like you’re only five points behind Yuuko Amora for the number two spot! Do you think you’ll surpass her by next month’s rankings?”

Lo-Leey scoffed, oozing further an aura of superciliousness, if that was even possible.

“Certainly, undoubtedly! Everyone knows I’m the one and only master of the Luster Crown. Yuuko couldn’t handle its true power, as expected of a first generation divinator. I on the other hand, not only have the talent and genius to do so, but the stylish flair to pull it off!”

She smirked as another torrent of questions bombarded her. She inspected the laser-cut perfection of her manicure, then randomly pointed in the general direction of one of reporters.

The journalist she called on started right away, hammering her with unexpectedly tough questions.

“Lo-Leey! Are you aware of the mass casualties caused by the battle between you and Haborym? Can you explain why you didn’t lead the beast away from the housing district? Reports are saying the neighborhood won’t recover for at least another five ye—“

The reporter was abruptly cut off by Lo-Leey's fist slamming against the podium.

"I believe I've answered all of your wonderful questions, though I must take my leave now. I've got a training schedule to follow. If I'm not in top shape, then how could you expect me to save the great people of Lutum once again? Toodaloo!"

With that, a team of Department suits cordoned off the excited reporters. They ushered the magical girl off stage and out of view from the camera as the press went wild. The feed then cut to another program.

Well, that was interesting. It's been a while since any real questions were directed towards one of the magic girls. The Department usually has the press vetted and tightly locked down to avoid any unsanctioned inquiries. Maybe times are changing? People might be finally wising up to the idea that Department Girls aren't as effective as they've been portrayed.

I doubt it though. I'm willing to bet some unaffiliated reporter managed to sneak their way into the event. Regardless, the "victory" over Haborym was pure propaganda. Only serving to boast the Department's fresh new talent while shifting focus away from the collateral damage incurred during the fight.

Keeps the cash flowing to support to their program. Afterall, Lo-Leey dolls don't just sell themselves.

Suddenly Jahn's door opened and out peeked the short man, nearly startling me in the process.

"Come in, Cecil."

I got up quickly and entered the room, taking my seat across from his desk. Jahn's office was thick with the smoke of his cheap cigars. I still can't believe he's lived this long as Auxiliary Relief while smoking like a chimney. A testament to his heritage I thought while looking at the pictures of family members that hung on the wall. All of which had commanded this unit at one point in time.

"Like I said earlier, I've come upon something that you'll find an opportunity in, Cecil. Though I don't know if you're going to like what it entails."

I'd never put it past Jahn to give me every dirty detail of an assignment or task. Though the fact that he preemptively gave a warning, leads me to believe this thing of interest might be more trouble than it's worth.

"Alright boss, what's the catch? I'm sure it isn't something I can't handle. I see the shop's been busy today, so I assume you've got another double shift or training exercise in the works?"

Jahn shook his head, promptly handing over a clipboard filled to the brim with files. On the front page in big, bold letters read,

DEPARTMENT OF MALEDICTION TALENT REPORT NO. 676
(REVISED)

Uh oh.

"After the last operation, the Department made the unexpected decision to focus their efforts on Thaumaturgist disaster relief training. Something about public relations concerns spooked them, surprisingly. As such, they've been sequestering their non-ranked junior Thaumaturgists and embedding them within Auxiliary Relief Corps units across the city."

"Apparently, there seems to be a push to give the next generation of Thaumaturgists disaster relief and rescue experience by working alongside the Corps."

I looked back to the files and briefly flipped through them. Each page contained assessments, reports, and analyses on multiple non-ranked magical girls. Yet what unsettled me most was the majority of the files pertained to a single student.

One by the name of Ana Nakamura.

"I was contacted by a Department official and given this report directly. It seems that our unit was selected as one of the

lucky few who will be hosting a non-ranked.” Jahn said as he produced a cigar and trimmer, cutting then lighting it.

“You can’t be serious Jahn. A damn magic girl in our unit? That’s absurd! Having one of those living weapons tagging along in our operations would be disastrous!”

Jahn took a long draw off his cigar, then replied through a mouthful of smoke.

“I had feeling you’d say that. Hence what I’m about to explain. So, listen closely, if you know what’s good for you.”

I bit my tongue and waited as he puffed the cigar.

“After doing some of my own digging, I think I’ve figured out the reason why our unit was selected for this new program. And it specifically relates to you.”

“W-what? Why?” I stammered, taken aback by the statement.

“Think about it Cecil. You’re the only employee in our unit who’s previously worked with the Department, bad relations notwithstanding.”

“Furthermore, your experience as a collateral damage analyst place both you, and our unit, in a prime position for this program. Whether you like it or not, the mere fact that a Department suit personally handed me the files you are now reading, speaks volumes to where they think money is best spent.”

I gritted my teeth. What the hell does the Department want from me now? Especially after all these years?

I’ve severed every tie, burned every bridge I could with that rotten organization. All just to make sure they never entered my life again. Now here I am, Jahn telling me I have to not only participate in a Department run program but work *alongside* a fucking magic girl too?

“Jahn this utterly ludicrous. You saw what kind of damage those Department Girls inflicted on that neighborhood the last operation. They’re practically daemon magnets. How are we supposed to do our job if one of those weapons starts firing off laser beams every which way? If anything, its suicidal!”

Jahn closed his eyes and breathed deeply. A sign I've come to recognize that his patience was wearing thin.

"This a chance for you to advance in the Corps. While not an official promotion, your performance in the program has the potential of seeing you become squad-lead in the unit. Or even a deputy unit commander in the future, depending on how well you handle this.

"You're a motivated guy, Cecil. Do you really see yourself working as a street-hand for the rest of your career here? I don't think such would do you any justice."

I mulled over his words, those of which carried an unexpected but welcome boost.

I've been meaning to try and advance in the Corps ever since I got hired. However, if it meant associating with the Department again to do so, even if on paper, I don't think I could. Working with magic girls is a gross violation of the principles I've built upon since my severance with the Department.

This seems like some kind of ploy by them to smear one of their old employees. Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but I sure as shit don't want to risk my career at the Corps by supervising one of those loose cannons. A barely trained one at that.

Jahn seemed to pick up on my apprehension and spoke again.

"See it like this, you now have an opportunity to potentially fix the problems that the Department couldn't. Training, mentoring, and guiding young Thaumaturgists in way that fosters a real sense of civic duty in them. Not just a shallow need to accrue popularity and wealth by any means necessary, which is precisely what you hate about the Department and their Magicians."

I watched as he placed his cigar in its tray. Light wisps of smoke trailed between us in the silence as he awaited my response.

"I have a question."

"Shoot."

"Who is Ana Nakamura? And why does her file make up the majority of this report?"

Jahn sighed an acquiescent breath. He leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers together as he stared up at the ceiling, thinking about how to answer my question.

“Nakamura is...a problem child, to say the least. Her performance in the Department’s Divination Academy has been poor ever since she was enrolled. Frequent fights with her classmates, coupled with regular insubordination against her instructors has left the Academy looking for alternative solutions to her situation. All of which is on the file of course. As you can see, it’s quite a lengthy report.”

I thumbed through the papers again and randomly flipped to a page.

Regular D’s in every subject except auroral pathfinding, which she scored a low B in. Thirty-six incidents of physical violence against fellow classmates in one semester.

Twenty-nine recorded truancies, along with fourteen detentions in the following year. Multiple larceny reports, including the theft of a Tiamat Class magical weapon from the school’s very own armory.

Holy shit.

This kid is an utter delinquent.

“Don’t tell me she’s the one they chose for us.”

“...Well, she’s not the only one. But yes, she is the first non-rated to be joining the unit.” I leaned back in defeat, my hands reaching up to cradle my face as the reality of the situation set in. The Department sought out my unit because of me, and they’ve appeared to pin us with perhaps the worst candidate they could’ve drudged up from their pompous academy. What the hell is going on?

“Jahn, I don’t even know where to begin. I have no experience in teaching anyone, let alone high schoolers that can shoot lightning bolts. How the hell do you expect me to do this?”

Jahn chuckled and picked up his cigar again.

“I don’t. No one said you had to personally mentor these kids.”

“However, I thought that perhaps what you saw as an unfortunate situation, could be turned around and made to work for you. Rank advancement, coupled with the potentiality of teaching non-rated Thaumaturgists what it truly means to save lives. All while steering them away from clutches of Department thinking. I see nothing but boons here.”

He leaned in.

“I know how much you hate the Department, Cecil. I get it, I understand. However, life is short. And life in the Corps is even shorter. As such, the time you have here is invaluable, and this program is practically gold if handled correctly.”

He took another puff of his cigar, this time blowing an impressive smoke ring.

“They’re going to be in-house regardless of your decision. Just know that should you decide to tackle this head on, the fruits of your labor will not only benefit you, but this unit, the Corps as a whole, and most importantly, *Lutum itself*.”

With that, Jahn leaned back again and continued to smoke his now shortening cigar. I sat for a moment, analyzing both my new situation and his words of encouragement.

“I’m cutting you loose for the day, giving you some time to think it over. Whatever your decision is, I expect you to tell me by this time on Friday. A full week should be sufficient enough for that ever-spinning brain of yours to figure it out.”

He then swiveled in his chair, turning his back, and looking out the window. I took this as my cue to leave and placed the files on his desk. But not before he stopped me with a raised hand,

“Oh, and by the way, you’re going to need that. Even if you don’t accept, having at least some basic information about her will help avoid any problems during her stay. I suggest you get familiar with it quickly, since she’ll be here in two weeks. That’s my second order to you.”

I nodded, picking the files back up again and tucking them under my arm. Turning to the door I said my farewell, Jahn responding with a simple wave as I exited his office.

Once in the hallway, I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding in.

If what Jahn said was true, which I have no reason to believe he'd lie, then the Department has definitely not forgotten about me. I shuddered at the thought, considering the lengths I took to stay as far away from them as possible.

Whatever motivation they have for doing this, I'll just have to live with it. Knowing how the Department works, this could be the first move in some contrived game of chess they're playing. With them waiting patiently for me to make the first move.

Jahn's words of opportunity still clung in my mind. It did seem like a pretty lucrative, if not incredibly risky way of achieving my goals of moving up in the Corps. Along with the potential of cleaning away the rot the Department had infested this city with.

I'll have to think it over some more, but I can already see possible angles of attack beginning to show themselves. It could be done, though I won't know until I actually meet this 'Ana Nakamura'.

For now, I think it's time to get some lunch, and I know just the person to grab grub with.

I made my way down the stairs and toward the shop offices, files in hand.

IV

"Where are you going?" Keeves asked from underneath his workbench as I walked by. His hands focused on a rat's nest of wires hanging from above him.

"The pub, and I'm taking you with me." I said kicking his boots.

Keeves emerged from beneath the workbench and stood up, crossing his arms.

"The pub? I guess whatever Jahn told you calls for some al-

cohol. What's with all that paperwork? Did he actually decide to marry off his daughter to you?" He quipped, eyeing the files under my arm.

"Might as well have, but this is far worse than that. I'll tell you once we get some ale in us." I said, motioning for Keeves to follow me out of the shop.

We traversed our way around the yard, avoiding the activity of technicians and heavy equipment as we went. Reaching the front gate of the yard we took a left turn, then walked down the sidewalk and out of the industrial sector toward downtown Lutum.

The overhead canopy of winding pipes and electrical infrastructure gave way to bustling streets filled with an odd assortment of venders selling their wares. Customers milled about making their daily purchases, the sounds of haggling merchants filled the air as we walked. Trees lining the road replaced the jungle of pipework as we got closer to the heart of the shopping district.

The crowd thickened as we pushed past, our destination in sight.

The Wild Hog Inn.

A shabby little pub straddling the edge dividing the industrial and consumer districts of East Lutum. Sandwiched between two abandoned high-rises, the place was one of the lucky few businesses that survived an attack in this area about four years ago.

The tavern is a popular gathering place for our unit, with it being so close to the yard. Often times I'd find street-hands or even a sergeant or two sitting at the bar drinking the night away after a long operation.

Today however, the bar was quite empty. I guess that's to be expected since it was now past lunchtime. A little peace and quiet was definitely welcomed on my part, all things considered. We entered the establishment and waved to the bartender, Marcus, who gave a brief nod in response, preparing two tall mugs of roach-ale for us.

We took our seats at a booth near the back of the tavern. Keeves promptly helping himself to a small bowl of stale peanuts that sat between us. I placed the files on the table and slid them over to Keeves. Shells scattering all over as he grabbed it flicked through them.

“What am I looking at here Cecil?” He said through a mouthful of peanuts.

“Apparently after the last attack, the Department must’ve realized their magic girls were lacking in emergency rescue experience. So, they decided to attach junior non-ranks to select Corps units across Lutum. Unfortunately for us, we seem to be one of the units welcoming them into our ranks.”

Keeves furrowed his brow as he listened. His crunching slowed while the gears in his head turned.

“Hold on, you’re telling me we’re going to be working with one of these brats? Damn, what hell is Jahn thinking?”

“It’s not Jahn’s call. He told me a Department suit personally handed him these files. Our unit’s been selected into the program at the behest of the Department. What’s worse is the fact that they’re sending a serious troublemaker our way, as you can see.”

His eyes widened while looking through Nakamura’s files, wearing the same face of disbelief I gave Jahn.

“Good lord, you weren’t kidding. Are they really embedding these rascals with every unit in the city? I don’t see how this would help our operations in any way.”

“Sadly yes. Though, I don’t know if other units are getting similar undesirables. If that’s the case, then the Corps has a serious problem to deal with in the coming months. I wanted to show you this as a heads up, since Jahn told me our first non-ranked will be here in two weeks’ time.”

Keeves sighed, sliding the files back to me as he laid his head on the table.

“Great, just what we need while the city is hit by one of the worst incursions in years. I really don’t want to be wearing those heavy, hazard suits every fucking operation. Especially now that

we've got untrained and dangerous Department Girls tagging along with us."

Marcus soon appeared with two mugs of roach-ale, placing them on the table in front of us.

"Thanks Marcus." I said as he gave me a silent nod.

"If anything, Jahn told me there's a potential for rank advancement if the program goes smoothly. I figured you wanted in on that, hence why I brought you here. If we can somehow find a way to wrangle these delinquents effectively, then we've got a good pay raise coming our way. Though honestly, I don't know how I'm going to handle this. I suppose two heads are better than one."

"Cecil, do I look like a teacher to you? Also, I hate kids. I can't stand my nephews, annoying little gremlins always managed to break something at family gatherings." Keeves said, head still buried in his arms.

I chuckled, "That's what I told Jahn, but he seems insistent on the mentor thing. His push for it makes me think we'd get more funding, should the program at our unit be successful."

Keeves raised his head off the table and took a long swig from his mug. I grabbed my own and drank deeply, the sickly-sweet ale bringing a familiar burn to my palate as I did.

Since I've got the day off, might as well get a little buzz going. Bringing Keeves along to the pub would hopefully pay off in my quest to formulate a gameplan. He always seems to find the best, albeit unorthodox solutions to problems while drunk.

We continued to drink into the afternoon, the light of the day giving way to darkness as the tavern began filling up with street-hands from the yard. We spent a few more hours drinking, the boys getting rowdy once someone turned the jukebox on. Eventually, Marcus cut off Keeves after consuming nearly six mugs of ale. Which prompted Keeves to drunkenly hurl peanuts his way every so often.

"Heeeey Marcus, itz been like, three fuckin' hours. Get me anotha' mug will ya!" Keeves slurred, nailing Marcus on the forehead with a shelled projectile.

“You’re shit faced Keeves, anymore and you’ll either drink me dry or pass out again, like last time.”

“Fug you.” Keeves spat, preparing to toss another peanut his way.

I laughed, feeling the ale warm my head as I picked up a peanut and whipped it at Keeves. He responded in kind by launching his own, then grabbed my mug and quickly downed what was left.

I was about to protest when the alert chime of Department’s news stopped me before I could. I turned toward the TV above the bar and watched the cast play. I couldn’t hear it too well, so I stood up and shouted to Marcus.

“Hey Marc, turn up that up!”

Marcus pointed a remote toward the screen and turned up the volume. The news anchor’s voice now revibrated through the pub.

“Reports of large tremors are coming in from the oil wells south of the city. Well workers are preparing to evacuate as multiple drill sites are experiencing power failures and structural damage. City officials are warning citizens to prepare for a possible attack, emergency services will be on standby should daemon contact be made. We will be giving continual updates as this situation evolves.”

As if on cue, every street-hand’s radio sprang to life, emitting the familiar warning tone that played whenever Corps units were expecting to be activated. I do not look forward to answering a call while plastered like this.

I bet Keeves felt the same way, considering how hammered he was. In response to the radio call, some of the street-hands hurried out the door to their posts. Taking this as an indicator that we should probably leave for the night, Keeves and I left our tab on the table and followed suit.

Keeve’s inebriation was pretty clear by the time we got moving, stumbling every so often as he walked besides me. While I was far from his level of intoxication, I still felt numb and sluggish from the ale.

I could only hope that we weren't activated anytime soon. Showing up to an emergency muster drunk as a skunk probably won't look too good in Jahn's eyes. For now, we'd just have to sober up and prepare for the possibility of another operation.

After stopping by a convenience store for some sports drinks, Keeves and I walked back to my apartment and changed into new coveralls. Keeves passed out on my couch once he was geared up, hoping to get some shut eye in before the now likely deployment. The television showing more updates on the situation as I sat at my kitchen table, looking over the files once again.

My head spun from the combination of caffeine and roach-ale in my system, making the effort of reading the files a difficult one. Following Keeves, I slumped forward and rested my head between my arms, allowing my tiredness to drag me into sleep.

V

I awoke to the sound of our radios blaring an alarm, along with Keeves down the hall vomiting into my toilet. I shook the grogginess from my head and gathered my things. Keeves emerging from the bathroom looking queasy as he did the same.

We've been activated, the situation down by the oilwells must've turned into a legitimate emergency. I took a quick glance at the TV, the screen showing lines of vehicles evacuating the drill sites while Relief Corps transports headed in.

I looked at my watch, five-thirty-eight AM. We'd gotten some sleep in, but not nearly enough. I drank the rest of my energy drink and headed out the door with Keeves in tow.

We raced our way back to the shop. The entire city was bathed in an unnatural, hazy-red hue in the morning twilight. Off in the distance, great plumes of black smoke emanated from the oilwells just south of the city. This didn't look good at all, whatever was going down at the wells must've been bad.

We ran through the shop's gates at breakneck speed, Keeves

nearly stumbling over himself in the process. Our unit was already lining up for muster as we sprinted between them and the armor transports idling outside, ready to embark.

After looking around, I spotted Jahn talking with his sergeants, all of them wearing bulky hazard suits. He then noticed our presence and aggressively waved us over. We hurried to him, I could see he wasn't too happy that we were late.

"Where the fuck have you two been? We're rolling out in ten and you chuckle fucks don't even have your hazards on." He hissed.

"Don worry, we're here now bosh," said Keeves, slightly wobbling.

"Keeves are you fucking *drunk*?" Jahn spat, his expression growing dangerously dark. I quickly cut in.

"He's just tired, we're going to suit up right now."

Jahn's face hardened in response. After giving both of us a once over, he angrily pointed in the direction of the shop. We hastily nodded and ran towards our quarters to begin putting the hazard suits on.

I had to help Keeves into his while simultaneously strapping myself in. The task being quite difficult, with Keeves getting tangled in the many straps and hoses that hung from the suit. After plugging power-cells into the suits and checking our oxygen supply, we ran back to yard and toward the transports. Our heavy metal boots thudding against the gravel.

The vehicles were loading up with personnel when we climbed into the back of one. I slid my way into the cramped interior and belted myself in, my comrades doing the same as the transport roared to life.

Our convoy's sirens deafened by the thick steel of the compartment as we rode our way out of Lutum. I rubbed my eyes and took a sip of water from my canteen, my hangover announcing itself through a painful throb in my skull.

The ride to the wells was uneventful, if not a little bumpy once we passed the first few protective walls of the city. Looking through the small portholes of the transport, the morning

sun was rising over the great dunes that surrounded Lutum. It's light casting an orange hue as it climbed further into the smokey sky. The desert landscape passed by, stretching as far as the eye could see while the transport sped closer to our destination.

I noticed Keeves rustling about next to me. I watched as he produced a small bag of some dried substance. Of which, he opened up and offered to me.

"Want some jolt-wort?" He said, his words now clearer of the slurring from earlier.

"Stimulants? We're going on call dude. I don't want to be wired out of my mind while operating a plasma lance."

"Suit yourself." He pulled out two jolt-wort caps and downed them with a swig from his canteen. Keeves began handing them out to the others next to us, a few of which happily accepted. I paused for a moment, feeling the tiredness of my own hangover weighing me down as I watched them take the drug.

"Fuck it."

I reached over and grabbed the bag from him, tossing one into my mouth. The dry cap sputtering and popping once it hit the moisture of my tongue. Keeves chuckled as he watched me, stealing the bag back and putting it into one of the many pouches lining his suit.

"ETA two minutes, gentlemen" The driver announced through the static of the compartment's interior speaker.

We all double checked our gear, helping each other whenever we found a hastily attached hose or open zipper. I awkwardly turned to look out of the porthole, my movements encumbered by the suit's bulk. Small droplets of black liquid were splattering on the glass, leaving smeared trails in their wake.

"Holy fuck, the wells are spewing!" One of my crewmates said, looking out the window next to him.

The ground racing past us had darkened with the fluid. I felt the transport's wheels struggling in the oily mud as we got close. Soon the vehicle stopped, making us lurch forward as red disembarking lights illuminated the compartment.

At once, we all heaved the armored helmets onto our heads, snapping them into place upon the suit's shoulder and neck joints. The loud hiss of multiple suits sealing themselves from the exterior environment rang out while we unbuckled, preparing to exit the transport.

The doors flew open, our boots hitting the sand as we dismounted. I could see through the bi-reflective visor of my helmet what awaited us.

Vast, burning columns of fire erupted across the desert. Each being the source of the black smoke I had seen earlier. The world around us was painted in an orange haze. Smog consumed the surrounding air, heavily obscuring the sun's light like a foreboding storm.

The ground around us softened considerably from the spewing oil. My boots getting sucked into the muck as we made our way to the first line of firefighters attempting to contain the disaster.

Emergency personnel milled about while tracked vehicles carrying water cannons, blasted the burning wells into submission. Excavators worked close by, digging out contaminated sand near some of the extinguished pipework.

In the distance between tall mounds of blackened earth, stood the charred husks of multiple pump-houses. Most of which had been consumed by the fires. The group set off towards them, our main priority to find any survivors or bodies taken by the flames.

We trudged up the slickened dunes, equipment in hand as great blazes illuminated our backs, casting long shadows upon the ruined sand. After cresting the hill, I saw the true extent of the damage.

Refineries that dotted the landscape were utterly destroyed by a massive explosion. Buildings and pipework laid mangled, thrown about and embedding themselves in the surrounding area. Some buildings were flat-out leveled, the foundations the only remaining sign that a structure existed. Large chasms had

opened up here and there, swallowing up whatever sat above them.

We got to work, picking through the rubble while scanning for any survivors. Keeves and I worked as a team, him carrying the plasma lance as I waved around an elongated bio-scanner. Every so often, we'd come across the remains of a well-worker.

Keeves cut the bodies out of the debris with the lance, then helped me tag and load them into black bags. We worked our way around the destroyed facility, periodically reporting our findings over the radio. I could feel the jolt-wort's effects setting in, the twitchy alertness keeping me focused on the task before us.

"Hey Cecil, come take a look at this." I heard Keeves. His voice distorted in the helmet's communications.

I lumbered my way to his position, finding him crouched besides a deep hole in the ground.

Lying in front of the hole was a partially charred, severed leg. Blood still leaked from the amputated limb, trickling down into the hole below it.

"What the hell happened here?" I bent down to his level to study the limb.

"I don't know man, but I don't think that leg was blown off in the explosion. Look here, the flesh is torn clean, something had sliced right through it."

Keeves pointed to the limb. It had indeed been sliced clean through, something that an explosion couldn't have produced.

"Maybe some shrapnel took the poor bastard's foot, I don't know. Let's bag it."

Keeves reached for the leg, grabbing it as I prepared another disposal bag. After disturbing the limb, sand around the hole began to shift and give way. Keeves quickly got up and took a step back.

"What the hell..."

Suddenly, a leathery tentacle shot out from the hole. It wrapped itself around Keeve's arm and began tugging him towards the hole.

“FUCKING SHIT! WELL-WYRMS!” He screamed, scrambling for the utility knife on his thigh.

Thinking fast, I pulled out my own and slashed at the creature, cutting a wide gash that sprayed inky blood across our helmets. The tentacle recoiled and released its grip on him. I grabbed Keeves, pulling him away as we tumbled backwards onto our asses.

We scuttled back from the hole, watching as multiple tentacles arose from within and whipped about. The tendrils shuddered while searched for whatever had injured it.

I keyed up my radio.

“Boss! We’ve got well-wyrms near the pump-houses, alert the crews!”

“*What?! Get the hell out of there now!*” Jahn shouted.

He didn’t have to tell us twice. Keeves and I scrambled to our feet and took off running toward the rest of the team. The suit’s bulkiness making the task harder as I dumped all my energy into sprinting away.

I took a quick glance behind me, seeing multiple wyrms now pouring out the ditch. Their eyeless forms twitched erratically, sniffing the air for us. They gave chase, feeling our heavy boots pounding the sand as we ran.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Keeves yelled as we clambered up the slope.

After reaching the top, I turned back again and saw countless wyrms emerging from the ground, each aroused by the commotion we had caused. Keeves activated his plasma lance, heating up the device in preparation to defend ourselves.

“Keeves, we gotta get the fuck outta here! Don’t even think about fighting one of those things!” I said, tightening the grip on my knife.

“Shit! You’re right, there’s too many!” He heaved the glowing lance over his shoulder and turned with me.

We ran down the hill towards the crews still fighting the fires. Upon seeing us waving frantically, they paused and watched in confusion. Then, they too began running as the wyrms, now hot

on our trail came flooding over the dunes. Panic set in as every worker abandoned their tasks, making a break for the armored transports.

The wyrms were getting dangerously close. Some broke their chase and started attacking the remaining stragglers, those of which had yet to see the coming threat. Their bodies were torn apart by writhing masses of tentacles, others being dragged screaming under the sand as we raced by.

We came barreling towards the open doors of a transport, but not before those inside slammed it shut. We pounded on the metal, screaming for them to open back up.

Keeves fell with a yelp, his leg clutched by a lone wyrm that had emerged beneath us. I turned to help, watching as he cut through the offending creature with the plasma lance.

Behind us the wyrms kept coming, a pack of them now slithering in our direction. Keeves and I kicked away the growing mass of tentacles in a frantic effort to climb on top of the transport and away from the creatures.

After reaching the roof I looked down, seeing the vehicle becoming surrounded by them. The wyrms squealing as they tried to slither up. Keeves activated his lance once more and began firing at any that got too close.

“Jahn! Are you still there?!” I yelled into my radio again, hoping to hear a response.

“Yes! You guys alright? I’m in a van heading out of the facility, I’ve called command and they’re sending a Liquidation team to evacuate us. Get to a transport immediately!”

I was about to reply when the vehicle started moving, almost throwing both of us off balance in the process. We dropped to our stomachs and clutched the sides of the transport. Holding on for dear life as the armored van began charging away. The uneven ground beneath bounced the vehicle around, threatening our grip. Suddenly, the transport hit a mire of oily muck and teetered sideways then spun out.

The abrupt stop tossed Keeves and I off the roof, hurling us into the slick oil below. We landed in a splash as I watched in a

daze through my smeared visor the transport flipping over multiple times, then stopping in a heap some distance away. Its doors had opened and those inside were launched out.

The wyrms, drawn to the crash, began swarming the van. The sounds of panicked screams and multiple plasma lances firing echoed off the dunes while they poured in.

Keeves helped me to my feet and we started running once again. Our crude-drenched suits made the effort a slippery one. I tried wiping away the liquid from my visor but was unsuccessful. My gloves too were covered in the substance.

The frenzied screeches of the wyrms hissed behind us, getting closer.

This was it. The day I finally died during a call. I searched for my knife but couldn't find it, the blade must've dropped during the wreck. Keeves, noticing my panic, tossed me his own as he readied the lance.

They were almost upon us when the wyrms stopped dead in their tracks. The creature's excited movements slowed, with some burrowing back into the sand. We stood still, holding our breath in terror.

Moments later the ground began to shake. From a large sand dune to our front, arose the massive form of a wyrm.

Easily twenty feet in height, the creature's gaping serrated maw gushed a sickly yellow saliva that melted the sand below.

Its leathery head was covered in spiked, chitinous armor that shifted with its movements, peeling back to reveal row after row of jagged teeth. Noticing us, it let out a terrible roar and moved with a speed unthinkable for such a large creature.

"Oh fuck." Keeves squeaked, watching as the huge wyrm slithered toward us and crushing its brethren underneath.

Suddenly from our left, a thin streak of purple light slammed into the wyrm's side, causing it to tremble and turn towards the source.

I snapped my head in the direction of the beam as well, seeing a girl clad in a tangled skirt of foliage standing atop a dune. She aimed her glowing bow toward the creature, letting off an-

other shot which hit the wyrm square in the face. The beast bel-
lowed and changed course, charging the magical girl as more
bolts chipped its armor.

She performed an impressive somersault and rolled out of
the way. Sand kicked into the air as the dune she previously
stood upon exploded from the sheer mass of the creature.

The wyrm swiped at her with its clubbed tail as she evaded,
dodging the attacks and firing more bolts of energy. The beast
spewed boiling saliva in a rage, the girl dashing away with each
splash.

Not wanting to stick around, Keeves and I started running
again.

In our hasty escape, we passed a team of heavily armed Liq-
uidators charging the serpent. They opened fire with various
weaponry, their barks reverberating off the slopes in the assault.
One of them stopped and quickly ushered us into a dune buggy.

We jumped inside and immediately took off. The gunner on
the buggy firing a large, mounted machine gun at the creature
as we fled. The concussion of the weapon rattling my teeth, my
helmet's protection doing little to mitigate the blasts.

The chaos shrank in the distance, bolts of magic and gunfire
lighting up the desert around us, backdropped by the still burn-
ing oilwells beyond them.

I grabbed the latches of the helmet and unlocked it. Moisture
from my sweat soaked body hissed out as I heaved the thing off
my head. Fresh, though still smoggy air stung my throat as I took
a deep breath. Keeves did the same, coughing up a glob of spit in
the process.

"You boys alright?" Ask the liquidator seated next to us.

Keeves gave a thumbs up before slumping back into his seat.
The soldier nodded, returning to scanning the horizon ahead of
us.

I leaned my head back, resting it on the buggy's roll cage
while the sun's morning heat baked us in the open-topped vehi-
cle. The jolt-wort's effects were beginning to fade, I felt the crash

hitting me hard. I shut my eyes hoping to calm my nerves while the buggy sped towards Lutum.

VI

“Six.”

“Six of us killed.”

Jahn sat on a toolbox in front of us, our unit gathered around in the cramped shop facing him as he spoke. His features were stained by oil, sweat, and dust.

“Johan, Hegel, Martin, James, Kaylee and Frank. All Dead.”

He paused. None of us dared make a sound. I hung my head in grief, the unit hadn't lost this many people in a single operation. Ever. Even during some of our hairier deployments, we've been pretty safe. This, however, was unprecedented.

“Never in all my years in the Corps, have I seen casualties like this in our ranks. As you all know, this line of work is inherently dangerous. Each one of you knew this when signing your recruitment papers. Hence why we drill, and train, and drill again. Over and over.”

“However, even with all of the preparation in the world, surprises can still blindside us. Fortunately, the majority of you were wearing hazard suits, which I know saved a lot of lives today. That is exactly why we wear them.”

He sighed, running a grimy hand through his thinning hair.

“I want to make this very clear to you, what happened today was no one's fault. For those of you that think such, get it out of your head. We were sent in to assist fellow relief crews during an industrial accident. Not a single one of us could've foreseen what was coming.

“If you feel so inclined to blame someone or something, blame the drilling company. Which I had been told was careless enough to skimp out on a well-worm survey.”

That huge oversight, which Jahn explained to us at the start

of this meeting, was indeed the cause of the attack. The drilling company made the genius decision of not surveying the land they built upon on years ago.

Turned out there was a massive hive of well-wyrms deep beneath the facility. Of which, over the years, had been attracted to drilling activity and eventually ate through the pipelines in order to feed on extracted crude. The wyrms caused a leak, which then exploded and forced them towards the surface.

Well-wyrms are normally easy to deal with, that is if you find the hive beforehand. However, the drilling company had been greedy and didn't perform this critical survey, hoping to cut the cost of extermination. This led to the death of nearly half of their Wellers, along with six of our own and numerous firefighters.

Jahn was right, no one is to blame for this other than the company. This wasn't even a daemon incursion, which the company tried, and failed, to claim.

If it hadn't been for the Liquidation team and their Department Girl, we would've easily been wyrm food. For once, I am grateful for their appearance. Even I couldn't blame them for the deaths of our comrades since they had arrived sometime after the attack took place.

Coupled with the distance from the city and the speed at which we were assaulted, the very idea of blaming them put a bad taste in my mouth.

Jahn spoke again.

"The next few weeks will be difficult. Services for our fallen members will take place soon. Subsequently, our unit's operations will be halted for the time being. I don't expect any of you to come in tomorrow, or the following days for that matter. Take some time to be with your friends and loved ones."

"Consider yourself lucky, and let this be a reminder to always, *always* be on alert. Even during a standard, non-daemonic emergency. Doing so will keep you alive. You are dismissed."

The group began to break up, returning to their lockers to change and gather their personals. I got up and spotted Keeves

already out of his hazard suit. Sweat-drenched undergarments stuck to his body as he moved. I approached him.

“Hey Keeves, how’re ya holding up?” I gently asked, resting a hand on his shoulder.

He sighed then chuckled, “Thankful to be alive, of course. What kind of question is that?”

I chuckled with him at the stupidity of my inquiry.

“I guess that was kind of stupid, wasn’t it? You thinkin’ about going to the pub tonight?”

He quickly shook his head ‘no’.

“Normally I’d say yes, but I thought of spending some time with my brother. Heaven knows I haven’t seen him in a while, and probably wouldn’t have if things were worse.”

I nodded in understanding as we exchanged our farewells. I took a trip to the showers for a brief deep-clean, then headed out of the yard and back home.

Upon my arrival at the apartment, I sat on my couch, a bottle of roach-ale in hand, and watched the nightly news report.

“The fires at Sarha Crude’s southern drilling site were determined to be caused by a previously unknown hive of well-wyrms. Officials stated the wyrms were drawn to the company’s drilling, inflicting structural damage to underground pipelines which eventually burst.”

“The wyrms had attacked first responders, inflicting mass casualties in the process. Of which included multiple Lutum Fire Brigade personnel along with Auxiliary Relief Corps crews. The Department of Malediction responded to the attack shortly after.”

The screen then displayed a still picture of Yuuko Amora. I recognized that strange, tangled skirt of leaves and vines. In the picture, she wore a flower crown I hadn’t seen previously. Across her chest was the string of what I assumed to be her bow, hidden behind her back.

Her soft yellow eyes contrasted with an icy blue bob-cut. She was looking at the camera, which caught her in mid-wave. Her wrists adorned with more flowers of all sorts and colors.

The anchor continued, “Thaumaturgist Yuuko Amora arrived on scene and reportedly engaged the wyrms, allowing the remaining emergency services to safely evacuate the area. An interview with Yuuko will be held tomorrow at nine AM. At the top of the hour, we will be speaking with multiple emergency service officials who were present during the attack. Stay tuned for more.”

I took a deep swig from my bottle and turned off the television. The reality of what happened setting in.

The fact that Keeves and I survived is nothing short of a miracle. I was certain we were toast. Those wyrms were ridiculously fast and unforgiving.

The visages of my fellow relief crews being torn apart by the creatures still burned in my mind’s eye. If some of them were among our unit’s dead, then I couldn’t have known. Considering the hazard suits that obscured their faces, not that it mattered anyway.

Even though I didn’t know some of them personally, it was still pretty jarring. Reflecting on this, I suppose it wouldn’t kill me to socialize with my coworkers more often. The only one I really hung out with is Keeves.

Out of each, I believe I conversed with Kaylee on more than one occasion. She was a kind soul, quite young to be in the Corps. I remember the few times I spoke with her. She had yet to adopt the foul-mouthiness that pervades the unit’s crew.

I drank the rest of the ale-bottle and tossed it behind me, hearing it bounce then shattering on the floor. Without thinking twice, I got up to get another from the fridge. I’ll be drinking the rest of my supply tonight. Heaven knows I need it. I guess I’ll watch a movie or two while I’m at it, anything to get my mind away from today’s disaster.

* * *

I awoke on the floor. A small puddle of drool had dried next to me. I painfully pushed myself up, knocking aside multiple bottles of roach-ale with a clang in the process. The sun shining

through the shades told me it was mid-morning, it's light stinging my eyes as I winced in response.

I wobbled to my feet, making my way to the bathroom to expel the copious amounts of alcohol that I drank last night.

As I was relieving myself, I realized I had left my radio back at the shop. I must've forgotten it in my shellshocked state while stripping from the hazard suit. I really didn't want to go back to the yard, but I can't just walk around without my only form of communication with the unit.

I left the bathroom and traveled to the kitchen, intending to brew a cup of coffee. I didn't even bother turning on the TV, I don't want my pounding head to be assaulted further by the device's noise.

The coffee machine gurgled as I opened my cupboard, taking out a pain reliever, along with an energy bar to hold me over. I tore into the packaging and greedily consumed the treat, then popped one of the pills, using some left over ale to wash it down.

I check my watch, ten o'clock exactly.

If the shop was open, then now was my time to go. I poured my coffee into a thermos once it was finished brewing and headed out the door in search of my forgotten radio.

VII

Luckily, the door was unlocked, and I let myself in. I had absent-mindedly left my shop key on the counter before I left. I really ought to keep better track of my belongings.

Unsurprisingly, the shop was completely empty. It was pretty strange to experience such glaring silence in the normally busy yard. I made my way through the shop and into the back-offices, seeing my locker still tightly shut from the night before.

I shuffled in front of it, placing a hand on the cabinet to steady my woozy self while I searched for the correct key. Finally finding it, I opened the locker and spotted my radio nestled between

a bunched-up mess of work clothes and tools.

I was about to grab it and head out of the office when a loud clang rang out from behind me in the direction of the shop.

Quickly I pivoted on my feet and toward the noise. My hang-over fading as I stood still, listening intently. No one was in the shop when I entered, and I didn't hear the door open before that. I doubt anyone was still in here from last night, making me highly suspicious of whatever produced the sound.

Another loud bang came from the beyond the door.

I grabbed a shale-bar lying against my locker ran towards the sound, peaking my head out from the doorway in search of a possible intruder.

There, in the middle of the room holding a plasma lance, was a tiny girl. Her slim form, standing no more than four and half feet tall, effortlessly waved around the heavy lance. She wore skinny jeans and a studded leather jacket, along with some old worn-out sneakers. Her fiery red hair was done up in a ponytail, the locks of which draped alongside her face, swaying about as she played with the lance.

What the hell is this kid doing here? I guess I should've locked the door after I entered, but that still doesn't explain who she is, or why she's in here. I let go of the shale bar and strode into the shop, loudly clearing my throat to get her attention.

"Excuse me, but you're not supposed to be in here kid. Who are you?" I said, putting on the best authoritative tone I could.

She snapped her head at me in surprise, an expression which quickly turned into a sneer. She crossed her arms in defiance, plasma lance still in hand.

"Wouldn't you like to know, old man."

Old man? I'm not a day over twenty-seven! Who the hell does this kid think she is?

I walked over to her and snatched the lance out of her grasp. Her mean expression only growing nastier once I did.

"That's a dangerous piece of equipment, you could've seriously hurt yourself." I scolded her, watching as she turned her back on me, huffing in protest.

"I've handled wands that could've melted your eyeballs right outta your skull!"

She glanced back, looking me up and down.

"If anything, *your* gangly ass is the one needing a lesson on dangerous equipment."

She said, making air quotations, still facing away from me.

I paused, baffled at the rude response. Good lord, her parents must be living a nightmare. I bent down to her level and pointed a finger in her direction.

"Listen here missy, if you don't get out of here in the next five seconds, I'm calling the cops." I warned, hoping to scare her back home.

Instead, she simply turned around and blew a raspberry, then promptly kicked me in the shins with a surprising amount of force.

"Ah!"

I yelped, holding my injured leg up in pain as she scuttled past, letting out an evil giggle along the way.

Stumbling, I gave chase. There's no way in hell I'm going to let some troublemaker run amuck in the yard. If anything happens to her or the equipment, I'd certainly be the one to blame. Considering the fact that I'm the only one here, besides this little devil.

I ran into the office just in time to catch a glimpse of her ponytail rounding the corner towards the stairwell.

Not so fast kid.

Sprinting, I tried to catch up with her, only to see a single leg phasing through the wall above the staircase like a ghost.

What in the ever-living fuck?

Ignoring the strange sight, I charged up the stairs hoping to catch her in the hallway near the officer's quarters.

I did locate her, but I also nearly ran face-first into none other than Jahn, who was staring at me with an amused expression. The kid peeked out from behind him, sticking her tongue out at me.

“Ah Cecil. Didn’t expect to see you this morning. In some kind of a rush?”

I stared at the both of them, my mouth agape as I tried to find the words to reply. Jahn, ever being the one to explain, continued.

“I see you’ve met Ana. I was wondering what all that commotion was downstairs.” He placed a hand on her head, gesturing to me with his other.

“Ana, this is Cecil. Cecil, Ana.”

I narrowed my eyes, her doing the same.

Jahn, noticing the tension between us, chuckled again.

“Seems like you two didn’t get off on the right foot. I’ve got breakfast cooking in the rec-room, I’ll explain more over some eggs. Care to join us?”

I raised an eyebrow at him, then tentatively nodded in agreement. With that, he smiled and strolled down the stairs, Ana in tow.

“*Stinky*” she whispered while waking past, lacing her hands behind her head as she began to whistle.

I sneered at her as she did.

So, this is the infamous Ana Nakamura. She’s just as nasty as her files made her out to be. Why she’s here so early, I have no clue. I guess Jahn will tell me shortly. Following the duo, I angrily shoved my hands into my pockets, but not before taking a quick sniff of my pits.

She was right, I did stink.

I made a note to hit the showers before joining them for breakfast.

* * *

After my quick shower, I took a seat at the rec-room table across from Ana. She hummed while eating a PB&J sandwich, one that I assumed Jahn made for her. She occasionally shot quick glances my way when she thought I wasn’t looking. Trying to ignore her,

I turned to Jahn, who was standing in front of the stove scrambling some eggs.

He wore a ridiculous “kiss the cook” apron that I didn’t know he even had. I’d give him shit for it, if it weren’t for my attempt at saving face in front of them.

After a minute or two, he turned around and placed a big plate of eggs and bacon on the table, sitting down to join us while he did.

“So, Cecil, I guess you’re wondering why Ana is here two weeks early. Truth is, the Department dropped her off late last night while I was closing up. The suits told me it was necessary to do so, especially in light of the oilwell attack. Said something about an ‘emergency deployment’ of the sorts. The attack must’ve prompted their decision, a wise one on their part I figure.”

“Nothing is wise about those assholes, Jahnnny.” Ana perked up, referring to him with a pretty cutesy nickname.

“Language, young lady.” He said, not taking a single eye off his meal.

Ana quickly went silent and returned to her sandwich, not even throwing him the glare she gave me when I reprimanded her.

I raised an eyebrow to this. Jahn appeared to have some level of control over her. I guess that’s not surprising, he raised did three kids of his own after all.

“Well now that you’ve cleared things up, would you care to tell me where she’s staying? Preferably somewhere far away from the shop.”

As I said this, she looked straight at me while continuing to chew, hate positively oozing from her brilliant green eyes as she did.

“Where else would she stay, if not at the unit? After all, she *is* here to learn from us. I’ve got a free room near my office she’s been settled into. Don’t worry about it, she’s taken care of.”

I thought about that for a moment. This kid is undoubtedly hard to control, something I figured out quite quickly in the short

time meeting her.

I have no clue how Jahn's going to keep her in check, especially after seeing her playing around with a plasma lance. Though, it looks like he's got a pretty good handle on the brat, seeing as she as yet to disobey his words.

I picked up a fork and knife and began eating. We sat in relative silence as we downed our meals. Eventually, Ana got up, saying she was going to the toilet, and exited the rec-room.

Seeing as we were alone, I looked back at Jahn.

"Boss, she's just as bad as the file said. I don't know how this is going to work out, especially with some of the grumpier guys here. I can already see problems brewing on the horizon, are you sure about this?"

Jahn swallowed his food before replying,

"Cecil, it hasn't even been an hour since you two met, and you're already throwing in the towel. I expect a little more motivation on your part. I've been putting in the work, so should you.

"Besides, it's not like we're housing a dangerous criminal or anything. She's just a kid, give her a chance. In fact, she's quite pleasant to talk to once you get to know her."

I pointed an egg skewered fork in his direction,

"A dangerous kid I should remind you. How do you expect to keep an eye on her when she can phase through fucking *walls*, Jahn?"

He paused, "She can phase through walls? That's interesting. Thanks for letting me know."

Without skipping a beat, he moved onto his bacon and continued eating.

I threw up my hands in agitation. I don't understand how he can be so casual about this.

"I saw her playing around with a plasma lance earlier, doesn't that seem even the least bit disconcerting to you?"

Jahn paused once again. This time briefly stopping mid-chew and narrowed his eyes,

“I see what you mean. I’ll talk to her later about it. In the meantime, I’m going to let her shadow you for the rest of the day now that you’re here and all. I’ve got a meeting to attend in the coming hour, so I’m placing the responsibility on you.”

Ana then re-entered the room. Though instead of coming through the doorway, she walked straight through the wall and took her seat.

“Well, I’ll be damned, you were right.” Jahn said, eyeing the girl in disbelief.

He wiped his mouth with a napkin and got up, throwing the scraps of his meal into a nearby trash bin then turned to us, “Try not to burn the shop down while I’m gone you two. Ana, play nice with Cecil. He’ll tell me everything, good or bad, that you do today.”

With that, he took off his apron and walked out of the room. Leaving both of us in an awkward silence.

VIII

Ana rested her face in a hand, deliberately appearing to avoid my gaze.

Ignoring this, I got up and left Ana alone in the rec-room. Or so I thought, as she quickly appeared from the wall next to me.

“Where are you going?”

“Jeez kid, cut that out, it’s freaky as all hell.”

She rolled her eyes, following me.

“I asked a question and I expect an answer.”

“Work. And don’t touch anything while I do.” I responded through clenched teeth.

Thankfully she stayed quiet, sticking by my side as I started to work on the various tasks left unfinished from the day prior. Every so often, I’d tell her to stop touching shit, something that she continued to do regardless of what I said.

“How am I supposed to learn anything if you won’t let me help you?”

She sighed, watching me using a soldering iron to fix the damaged components of my hazard suit’s helmet.

She did have a point, but I didn’t trust her enough to start fiddling with tools just yet.

“All I ask of you is to watch and listen. You wanna learn? Then start taking notes.” I said, moving my face away from the leaded fumes wafting off the helmet.

This seemed to elicit further questions from her as she leaned in to get a better look at what I was working on.

“What is this thing? Why are you melting it with a stick? Why does it smell funny? Why do *you* smell funny?”

I put the iron down and rubbed my temples. If this was going to be the rest of my day, then I might as well go home. Though with Jahn pretty much expecting me to watch her today, that option was completely out the window. I’ll just have to deal with it while keeping her out of trouble.

“For one, I don’t smell funny, I just took a shower. And two, I’m fixing a broken circuit on this *thing*, my hazard suit, with this *stick*, a soldering iron. It’s used to mend connections between electrical components on circuit boards.”

I took a glance at Ana, her eyes glazing over as I spoke.

Sighing, I continued my work, with Ana periodically asking more questions about such. Finishing up, I unplugged the iron and put my suit back into its locker. Making sure to lock up the cabinet afterwards.

Now that I think about it, nothing’s stopping her from just reaching through the door and fiddling with it anyway. Whatever. I just hope she doesn’t think to do so later on when I’m not looking.

Following me out of the office and into the shop, she watched as I picked up the plasma lance she held earlier and put it back into the tool cupboard. But not before she spoke up again, “So, what is that thingy? It kinda looks like one of those shitty wands we get at the Academy”

Suppressing an urge to scold her language, I saw an opportunity to teach her something. I reached back into the tool cupboard and pulled out the lance, showing it off.

“This is a plasma lance. We use it to cut through metal or concrete in our way while on operations. It’s pretty powerful, which is why I told you not to touch it.”

She smirked, placing a hand on her hip.

“Pretty powerful huh? Why don’t you show me what it can do? I doubt it’s as strong as the wands I’ve used.”

Taking this a challenge, I heaved the lance’s fuel tank onto my back and motioned for her to follow me outside.

In the yard, I searched around for some scrap metal, which wasn’t too hard to find. I located a pretty hefty piece of wrought iron and pointed at it.

“Observe.” I said, turning on the lance’s fuel supply while it whined to life. Ana raised an eyebrow, but was nonetheless interested in what I was about to do.

A bright, blue flame erupted from the lance’s tip. I turned a valve to control its flow, watching the jet glow white hot as it let off a screaming hiss. After ensuring the magnetic containment field was equalized, I placed the jet on top the scrap metal and began cutting through it.

I could see Ana’s surprised expression through the sparks of the melting iron, seeing her eyes widen at the lance’s ability to easily slice the metal. A few seconds later, and I had cut clean across it. The two halves falling apart, their edges glowing with intense heat.

“Pretty cool huh?” I said, turning back to her while I killed the lance’s gas flow with a chirp.

“Eh, I’ve seen better.” She shrugged, quickly dissolving her previous look of amazement.

Man, this kid is difficult. Time to up the ante.

I walked around looking for more things to slice, eventually finding a reasonably thick support girder. I repeated the same process as before, though this time it took a little longer to cut. Her reaction stayed the same to my disappointment.

She followed me about as I searched further for cutting fodder. Towards the back of the yard, I spotted a pile of concrete we had yet to crush, then got an idea.

“Wanna make some lava?”

She cocked her head in thought.

“Sure, why not?” I heard a hint of rising excitement in her voice.

Bingo.

We made our way to the rubble heap. I turned the lance on and began melting the concrete, making sure to not actually cut it, but hovering the lance just above the rock.

This had the effect of creating molten slag, which flowed from the widening, glowing crater I was making. I noticed she had taken some steps toward me, intently watching as the ‘lava’ dripped and pooled beneath the lance’s jet. She was obviously interested, so I continued.

After making quite a fiery mess, I cut the gas, watching a smile slowly grow on her face. Taking this as my cue, I made a pretty risky proposition.

“Want to try it out?”

As expected, she immediately agreed. I brought her close and placed the lance in her hand.

“Before we start, I want to show you how this thing works. See this valve here?” I said, pointing to the limiter on the lance.

“Yeah?”

“That’s your control switch. Turning it towards you increases the gas’s flowing into the lance from its tanks. Turning it away from you, will slowly shut it off. The smaller lever below it controls the electromagnetic field that contains the jet.

“In order to keep a constant flame going, you need to balance the levels between gas flow and the field’s strength. It’s not too difficult once you get the hang of it. Though if you see the jet ‘running away’ from you, meaning the flame keeps getting bigger and brighter, all you gotta do is press this button here, which will shut the lance off completely. “Got that?”

She nodded, seeming to actually understand what I told her this time. I hope. If this thing starts running off, then it could be a serious problem. Runaway lances, while not common, have been an occasional mishap every now and then. Eh, I'm right here next to her. If anything goes wrong, I'll just shut it off.

I'm sure it'll be fine.

* * *

It wasn't fine.

She was doing good at first, managing to control the jet as she melted away the concrete. However, in her excitement, she pushed the lance a little too close to the rock, which sprayed molten concrete in our direction. Taken by surprise, she quickly pulled away and accidentally pushed the gas valve too far, causing the lance to flare up which in turn, rattled in her hand and scared her even more.

She dropped the lance in fright, not realizing the thing was still attached to me. The pressurized jet forcing the lance to flail wildly out of control. I was lucky enough to catch the thing before it cut straight through me. Though I did get singed pretty bad in the process.

My eyebrows were still smoking as I put the lance back into its home in the shop. Grumbling at the fact that she was *laughing* while I fought to control the thing.

"Looks like you really *do* need more lessons on dangerous equipment, Cecil."

With my back turned to her, I raised an eyebrow. That was the first time she addressed me by name. Previously, all she did was call me 'stinky', 'smelly' and 'old man'. This looked to be an improvement, though I still needed to drill some seriousness into her regarding things like this.

"Yeah well, you were the one handling the lance. The responsibility of use lies upon the operator, remember that well. Otherwise, I won't let you use it again."

She smiled mischievously, “Oh really? Now that you’ve taught me how to use it, how ya gonna stop me from doing so?”

I scowled, trying to think of a proper retort.

Again, she was right. I couldn’t prevent her from grabbing the lance if she really wanted to. Just as the thought entered my mind, another made its way in. I returned a devilish smile her way.

“If you do, I’ll make sure to let Jahn know.”

The mention of his name caused her to quickly drop the smirk. Realizing the foolishness of her comment.

“Whatever, I’m going to get some juice.” She frowned, turning around and presumably walking back to the rec-room.

Well, at least I found something she’d appeared to take interest in. Although, blasting through concrete with plasma lances isn’t the only thing we do around here. Plus, she’s yet to join us on an operation. Something I think she isn’t quite ready for just yet. Hypothetically, if we got activated tonight, there’s absolutely no way she’d be able to handle the chaos of a disaster scene.

Her reaction to the lance’s flareup was evidence of such. I doubt the girl could keep it together while we collected dead bodies, in addition to providing first aid to screaming, wounded survivors. Thinking back to yesterday, I began to fully realize just how much work I needed to do in order to prepare her. I guess that’s all a part of this training program.

Feeling parched as well, I made my way to the rec-room for some refreshing orange juice.

IX

The rest of the day was relatively uneventful. Jahn briefly stopped by after his meeting to check up on us. I gave him the rundown of what happened with the plasma lance. He commended me on handling the mishap, but warned to be careful

next time I decide to do something like that again.

The massive clock which hung on the rec-room's wall chimed, indicating another hour had passed by.

The sound woke me up from a power nap I had taken on the rec-room's recliner. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, and found myself face to face with none other than Ana, who was sitting atop the recliner's headrest above me. She was upside-down, her emerald eyes staring deeply into my own. I jumped up with a shout.

"What the hell Ana! What are you doing? You nearly scared the daylights out of me!"

She threw her head back in laughter, a toothy smile plastered across her face as she did.

"You should've seen your face! You looked like a scared pigeon!"

I rubbed my sore neck, the muscles strained from sleeping at an odd angle.

"Again, why were you watching me sleep?"

Ana regained control of her laughter, "You talk in your sleep, you know that?"

I froze, tilting my head inquisitively.

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, when I walked in to grab some cereal from the cupboard, I noticed you murmuring something while dozing away. I couldn't make out what you said, but I kept hearing you say the name 'Lily' over and over again. Were you having naughty dreams about your giiiiirlfrieend?"

She teased, making kissy noises as she did.

I felt the blood drain from my face, for a split second my movements ceased again. This sudden change in demeanor was instantly picked up by Ana, who stopped her taunting and raised a confused eyebrow. I snapped out of my freeze and waved a dismissive hand.

"No, nothing of the sort." I tried to deflect.

I took a look at my watch. Holy hell, it was nine at night! How long did I sleep for? Even more worrying, I let this kid presum-

ably wander about the shop while I slept like a log. I looked back to her, Ana still eyeing me up with curiosity.

“It’s pretty late now, and mostly likely past your bedtime. I’ve got to home anyway. Jahn should be back soon to close up.”

She narrowed her eyes, my attempt to change the subject not flying past her. A few tense moments went by before she lightened up,

“I’m thirteen, old enough to not have a bedtime. I’ll sleep whenever I so please.”

I looked at her curiously, “Thirteen? I thought you were supposed to be a junior in high school.”

She smirked and raised her chin skywards,

“I was put ahead in advanced classes when I enrolled in the Academy. My gigantic brain being too powerful for the lower classes to properly satiate. Though, that looks to be the same this past semester.”

Thirteen huh? I don’t know how I missed that basic piece of information when reading her files. Although, there was quite a lot to review. Still, I should’ve seen her age somewhere when I looked. Honestly, I don’t know how I didn’t see the discrepancy between her relatively young appearance, and what the files had said.

“You’ll break your wrist if you keep jerking yourself off that hard. Now get to bed, before Jahn chews me out after seeing you eat sugary cereal this late into the night.”

I turned and walked out of the rec-room before she could respond. Surprisingly, she didn’t follow me as I made my way down the stairs and out of the shop. The night’s cool air felt good on my face, I thought about what she heard me say in my sleep.

I never talked about Lily. Ever. Maybe I mentioned her once before to Jahn years ago, but I don’t really remember. As much as it pains me not to, its better that way. Should any of the Department’s prying ears overhear such, that could mean the end of me. Regardless, I apparently slept-talked.

I should probably be more careful about where I decided to doze off from now on. Especially around a magic girl who can

pass through walls at a whim. I'd rather not to let any more of my personal life slip from my drooling mouth again.

A chilly breeze blew by, causing me to shiver. The night was getting colder as the moon marched high into the sky. I better get home soon, before I'm awake until sunrise. That nap probably wasn't the greatest of ideas.

* * *

The next morning, I decided to come into work again. Even if operations were halted for the time being, I now have Jahn's expectations hanging over my head, so I might as well clock in. Entering the office, I found him sitting cross legged on the floor atop a pillow, an Auxiliary Relief Corps manual splayed out on his lap. Across from him was Ana, a booklet of her own in hand.

"Tell me again, what's the first thing a response squad must do when arriving at the scene of a disaster?"

Ana, now wearing track pants and an oversized Auxiliary Corps hoodie, let out an exasperated sigh,

"Uhhh, cordon off the area? I guess?"

"You guess, or you know?"

"Yeah, the last one."

Jahn nodded, accepting the answer before asking again,

"Now, why do we do this?"

Ana scratched her chin, the hamster wheel that powered her so-called "gigantic brain" was practically smoking trying to answer the question. Jahn waited patiently, allowing her to process her thoughts.

"So that...other people don't try and enter the dangerous area?"

"Good!" Jahn said, giving her a thumbs up. He then noticed my presence and acknowledged me.

"Cecil, good morning. I've left some assignments on your workbench, get to it."

"Thanks." I muttered while taking a sip of my coffee, walking towards the bench.

The two continued their lesson in the background as I flipped through the assignments Jahn laid out. Looking them over, I noticed a small note placed between the papers. I plucked it out and read,

My office, ten minutes.

I shoot a look over my shoulder to Jahn, who was still embroiled in the teaching session with Ana.

I'm not too sure what kind of message that was, other than a direct order, but its succinctness gave me an uneasy feeling. Pocketing the note, I grabbed the assignments and headed toward the rec-room to leave the pair in peace.

I filled out various paperwork, nervously checking my watch every so often as I did. The note, although short, never left my mind. Eventually, the anticipation became too great. I put down my pencil, standing up and walking towards Jahn's office ahead of the meeting time. I couldn't shake this foreboding feeling in my gut.

Jahn never leaves me notes. If anything, he'll tell me straight up what he wants whenever, wherever. The very fact that he decided to write one didn't sit well with me.

I opened the door to his office and took a seat in one of the chairs. I didn't have to wait long for him, the short man soon wordlessly entering the room.

I watched him sit down, expecting him to pull out another cigar. But he never did. I gulped, the feeling in my gut getting stronger as he loosened the pinstriped tie around his neck.

He paused for a moment, seeming to scrutinize every inch of his office as he did. He then started,

"Cecil, I don't want to alarm you, but I have reasons to believe we're being monitored."

I held back a flurry of questions brewing in my head.

"Well, that's to be expected. I suppose you're referring to Department evaluation reports and the check-ups on Ana."

Jahn shook his head.

"Not like that. Yesterday, after Ana went to bed and I closing up the shop, I noticed a black sedan tailing me on the drive home.

It was painfully obvious, as whoever driving it made no attempt to hide from my view.”

I said nothing, waiting for him to explain.

“The car parked outside of my house for a good hour or two. Eventually, two men, who were clearly Department suits, got out and stood by the car, watching my window for another hour and a half before getting back in and driving away.”

“We’re doing everything by the program’s book, following each directive to the letter. I can’t see why the Department would do such a thing, maybe this is some kind of standard procedure for them. Especially since we’re housing one of their, ahem, *assets*.”

I instantly understood what was happening. While Jahn might’ve not figured it all out, I could see it clearly.

“It’s a show of force.”

He raised an eyebrow, motioning for me to continue.

“A gang stalking tactic. A favorite one by the Department when they’ve got their eyes on you. The reason for its occurrence doesn’t really matter. What does matter is your reaction to it. Anything short of a lingering glance in their direction, basically gives them the greenlight to escalate their activities.

“I should know, they watched me for a few months after I left. I guess they’re scoping us out to protect their assets, ensuring it’s safe to let one be quite independent here. Though once they start, the suits probably won’t stop for a while.”

Jahn contemplated my answer, prompting him to pull out a cigar and light it.

“That’s pretty nefarious. Though if what you said is correct, then ignoring them should get rid of the problem, no?”

I let out an exhaustive sigh.

“Doing that worked in my case. But considering our situation, and I place heavy emphasis on *our*, then I only assume this is going to get worse over the next few weeks. Though, I doubt they’ll do anything seriously violent to you.

“As a you’ve said, you’re a unit commander overseeing the training and safety of one of their Thaumaturgists. It’d be noth-

ing short of pure stupidity should they try to attack you or something. However, I wouldn't put it passed the Department to make stupid decisions."

Jahn sat in thought, silently puffing his cigar again while leaning back. I could tell this bothered him greatly. He wasn't used to the idea of being under the Department's microscope. Not that most people were anyway.

His revelation to me brought further concerns to my mind, as my own involvement in the program could easily see me getting targeted again as well.

"In any case, I thought I'd bring it up to you. Knowing that you've got deeper knowledge on the Department and their inner workings than me. I'm sure I don't have to tell you to stay alert in light of this."

"That being said, keep your head on a swivel and watch what you say, especially to Keeves. I know you vent to him about the Department consistently, especially in public places like the Wild Hog."

Jahn was right. I often did regularly unload my misgivings about the Department to Keeves. Additionally, the mention of the pub brought uncovered a blind spot I had been carelessly neglecting over the years.

If it took me this long to escape the Department's clutches, only for them to suddenly ramp up their malicious actions, and toward my boss no less, then I ought to tread with caution from now on.

No more drunken Department rants at the Hog, I guess.

Jahn's voice brought me back from my thoughts yet again as he stood up, snuffing the cigar into its ashtray.

"I don't know if this means anything, but I'll be on appearing on televised press conference along with other Corps commanders this afternoon. This could be the reason for the sudden appearance of shady suits following me around recently."

"I'm heading back home to prepare for it, hold down the fort while I'm gone. I probably don't have to tell you to keep a close eye on Ana, but I will. Watch her like a hawk."

I nodded, following while he exited the office and locking the door behind him.

After reaching the bottom offices, we parted ways. I watched carefully through one of the office's large, shaded windows as he got into his car and drove away. I lingered for a moment, searching for any signs of the aforementioned black sedan.

X

No matter where I looked, I couldn't find Ana. Panic set in as I paced about, searching everywhere for a sign of the fiery haired girl. I checked every possible hiding spot a kid her size could fit. Tool lockers, cupboards, inside transports, even the fridge as I got desperate.

I saw her not even twenty minutes ago, when she was engaged in her book lesson with Jahn. Now she was nowhere to be found. I started placing my ear against the walls like a lunatic, listening for any indication that she was hiding there.

Finding nothing, I reached for my radio preparing to call Jahn back to join the search. It felt pretty embarrassing to do so, considering he had just left the shop.

Luckily, my investigation ended as Ana's ponytail popped out from the wall, slapping me in the face.

I shook my head, watching her slide out from the surface, cackling like ghoul.

"It's pretty funny watching you all flustered like that, I should start hiding more."

I crossed my arms in annoyance, "I thought I told you to stop doing that."

She shrugged, ignoring me as she plopped down on the rec-room's recliner. She took a sip from a juice box before pointing at me.

"Am I not allowed to have fun here? I thought you'd guys would be less stuck-up than the academy instructors."

“Your definition of ‘fun’ is skewed, young lady. I’m certainly *not* enjoying the small panic attacks every time you disappear and reappear at random.”

“That’s your problem.”

“You’re right, you *are* my problem.”

My comment seemed to peeve her. She sucked the rest of the juice box dry and tossed its empty husk toward me. Ducking under the drained projectile, I quickly changed topic to avoid any more objects flung my way.

“How do you do that anyway?”

“Do what?”

“You know, the whole phasing through walls thing. I thought magic girls could only do stuff like that with an artifact.”

She chuckled while passing a hand through the recliner’s arm, the chair’s mechanism turned as it leaned back.

“It’s called auroral pathfinding, and I’m the best pathfinder in the city.”

Ah, I remember reading that in her file. Though her claim of being ‘the best pathfinder in the city’ seemed pretty boisterous, considering she only scored low Bs in the subject. Finding myself wanting to learn more, I continued.

“Yeah but, how does it *work* exactly? Performing a feat like incorporeal shifting without the aid of an artifact is pretty high-level stuff. You’re not carrying one around, are you?”

“Psst. I don’t need an artifact. I’m a late generation divinator, my natural magical abilities are far beyond any current Department Girl’s.” She said getting up, making her way toward the fridge for another juice box.

“That still doesn’t answer my question. What is auroral pathfinding and how do you do it?”

Getting annoyed by my pestering, she huffed and spun around to face me.

“You wanna know? Then check this out.”

I watch her hand shoot toward my chest, the limb passing through my body. A chilly shiver jolted its way up my spine as

it did. I closed my eyes in surprise. When I opened them, my vision had been totally obscured by a dark haze.

Eventually, I could see the faint outlines of the objects around me. Small glowing cracks like those on a shattered window, webbed the inside of their forms. The wispy lines constantly shifted and changed orientation. It was disorientating, my senses were further assaulted as I looked at Ana.

In my new sight, she appeared as a vague outline of dancing lights. Bright bands of azure glowing ribbons mingled with sharp violet stripes.

It was mesmerizingly painful.

She was like a living blaze, flickering and waving in the darkness. What was most striking were her eyes, they burned into mine like the sun itself. The incredibly rich green orbs cut through my mind with a fierce intensity. It threatened to reduce my very self into a tiny, condensed point of pure awareness.

It was too much for me to handle and I jumped back from the sensory overload. My vision returning to normal once her hand exited my chest.

“What the hell was that?!” I yelled, feeling short of breath.

“That was how I ‘phase’ through walls, as you put it.”

“That didn’t teach me anything. Other than gaining an intimate knowledge of what my insides look like.” I shuddered.

“Eh, I don’t know how to explain it otherwise. I should’ve known a mundane couldn’t comprehend the power of thaumaturgy.” She retorted, finding her place back in the recliner, fresh juice box in hand.

Unsatisfied with her ‘explanation’, I gave up my further questioning. Taking a seat at the table, I took another once-over of my paperwork to pass the time.

Soon, another flying juice box sailed through the air. This time hitting the back of my head and bouncing to the floor.

“Quit it. I’m working.”

“You didn’t seem so focused on work just a second ago. Besides, all you’ve done is order me around and ask me questions. I think it’s time I do some questioning of my own.”

She was right, I did hit her with multiple questions from the moment we first met. Though I did think she was some kind of delinquent that broke into the shop. Which wasn't too far from the truth.

"First off, what's your favorite color?"

"Purple, next."

"What's your favorite food?"

"Chicken noodle soup with carrot slices, and hot chocolate. Next."

"What's your favorite animal?"

"I don't know, whichever tastes the best. Next."

"Ok, how old are you? I'm guessing you're like, I don't know, forty something?"

What the hell? Do I really look that old? No, it can't be. Kids are terrible at gauging age. Everyone is pretty much ancient to them.

"Rude, what makes you think that? I'm at the ripe young age of twenty-seven, thank you very much."

Her face morphed into a surprised expression,

"Really? I would've thought otherwise. Your stubble looks like someone threw a cup of salt and pepper on your face."

I reached up and rubbed my face, was I getting grey hairs? I haven't really noticed nor cared to look for them since I normally shave. Oh lord, did I have grey on my head as well? That's a sign of early onset hair loss or so I've heard.

With the amount of stress I've been under these past few years, I guess it wouldn't be too strange to see some silver peeking through. With the introduction of Ana into my daily life, my hair might as well be bleached white by the time this program is over.

"Enough about this. Ask a better question next time."

Ana pondered the request for a moment, before bringing a presumably tamer question to the table.

"How long have you been working here? And what did you do before this?"

Not so tame.

While I could answer the first part of her question, I was hesitant to fulfil the second part's request. Last thing I need is to sour what little progress I've made with her by blabbing about my time in the Department. I decided to play it as safe as I could, bending the truth a little to satisfy her.

"Six years, give or take. Before this job I worked as a consultant for another emergency service."

My answer didn't seem to have the desired effect as she pressed further.

"Which service? What made you leave, were you a firefighter or cop or something?"

I bit my lip, trying to figure out how to maneuver around the inquiry. Eventually, I just settled on flat-out lying.

"It doesn't exist anymore. It was small consultant job that had me sitting at a desk all day, wasting away. If you want my honest opinion, I found working at the Corps to be far more enjoyable than what I used to do."

I held my breath as she analyzed the answer. Thankfully, she nodded her head in satisfaction and continued on.

"Next one, *who's Lily?*"

I tightly gripped my pencil.

I wasn't expecting *that*. I had hoped she'd forget the name after I waved her off last night. Though it appears she's still dangerously curious about it. Most likely karma for my lies uttered just a breath ago. Deciding to balance out my soul-debt, I spoke honestly.

"I don't feel comfortable answering that."

"Why not?"

The speed of her response was astonishing, though it aggravated me further.

"I said I don't feel comfortable talking about it."

"Was she a girlfriend? Did you guys have a bad break up or something? Seeing your reaction, perhaps I hit a soft spo—"

I got up and out of my seat, promptly turning towards the rec-room's exit and leaving her mid-sentence. Hearing her yells of

protest from down the hall as I walked away. I'm having none of this.

Just as I thought I was out of earshot, she appeared before me, rising out of the floor.

"What's wrong with you? All I asked was who Lily is!"

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, trying to compose myself. When I opened them, my eyes quickly shot down towards her. In a sudden, jarring movement, I bent down and leveled my face with hers. The action, coupled with the barely contained look of rage on my face startled Ana, causing her to take a small step backwards.

"Listen close because I won't repeat myself again. Do not speak of Lily. Do not ask me about her, or anything related to her. If you disobey this, I won't tell Jahn to discipline you, but will do so myself."

I leaned in further.

"Something that you do *not* want to happen."

She was practically shaking now, eyes wide in a confused terror.

"Do I make myself clear?"

"Y-yes!" She whimpered.

"Good."

I straightened back out again, watching as she quickly sunk back into floor and out of my sight.

I held my face in my hands, groaning loudly. Realizing the potential mistake I made, along the possible smoking that Jahn will give me after inevitably hearing about what transpired.

This kid doesn't know when to stop. I suppose I shouldn't blame her. Like Jahn said, she *is* just a kid after all. I feel pretty stupid chewing her out now that I think about it.

I checked my watch, seeing it was only one in the afternoon. I've still got a long day ahead of me. One that will now be pretty quiet, considering I just scared off Ana. She'll be fine, I hope. I'll let her think about what she said, maybe some alone time will bring her to her senses.

Though the more I thought about it, the more I realized *I* was the one that needed to regain my senses. Seeing as I probably won't be able to find her again anytime soon, I grabbed my jacket and decided on taking a stroll to clear my head.

XI

My walk through the city started with no destination in mind, as I strolled down the sidewalk and away from the shop. I just needed some time to clear my head. I decided to avoid the shopping district, downtown's daily commotion seemed too invasive in its current state.

I thought about going to a local botanical park located not too far from the yard, but I settled on just wandering further into the industrial sector instead. It was quieter here anyway. The noise of people being replaced by humming infrastructure and distant construction work as I walked.

Lutum is a large city, the sprawling metropolis consisting of endless concrete, asphalt and metal that seemed to stretch on into the horizon.

Being one of the larger mega-cities on the continent, it could take you days to walk from one end of the city to the other. That is, if you didn't take any sort of transportation.

I've lived here my whole life, though I grew up on the opposite end of Lutum. Near downtown Lutum I could blend in. Getting lost among the hundreds of people is a lot easier there, useful when trying to avoid the Department's eye.

Though sometimes, the desolate feeling of this area calms me. Attracts me even.

The many refineries, substations and warehouses created a network of urban jungle. Before this place had been fully developed, our unit had been called out here many times. Often the poorly maintained refineries had fires, or even explosions. Now that the energy sector had gotten a large amount of fund-

ing, courtesy of the Department, this area had become a hotspot for electrical infrastructure.

My stroll took me further into the industrial sector. Pedestrians were becoming few and far between, store fronts being replaced by manufacturing facilities and the odd substation. Above loomed the forms of mass-transit lines snaking above the streets. Every so often, the thundering sound of metro-trains zoomed overhead on their daily routes

I thought back to Ana, she probably was born somewhere near my old stomping grounds. Which would make sense if she was attending the Academy.

How she managed to stay in for so long is beyond me, her attitude is more than a handful for me and presumably her teachers. Although, she did say she was advanced into the higher classes of the Academy.

So, I assume the school's education board must've saw some kind of promise in her. Whatever they could've have seen, I certainly didn't.

She's a rude little brat, more so than for someone her age. I guess that's why they decided to drop her into our lap, both as a quasi-punishment and a way to potentially straighten her out.

Her persistence to draw out an answer really pissed me off. I suppose I may've overreacted a tad bit. Especially considering she was just being curious, if a little pushy.

It's been a while since I've actually talked about Lily to anyone. Coincidentally, I noticed I was pretty close to her.

Seeing as I had some time to kill, I might as well pay an overdue visit. Taking a few more turns down empty streets and narrow alleyways, I came upon my destination.

Cemetery eight-four-one.

The fence surrounding the small graveyard bore the wear of time. Its spiked metal rusted and bent from years of neglect. The graveyard was just as quaintly shabby as I remembered. At least the groundskeeper had the sense to continue maintaining the greenery.

I stepped through the gates and made my way down the rows of headstones. A few new graves had been added, presumably those who lost their lives from the last daemon attack. Ignoring the recent additions to the cemetery, I walked further along the narrow cobblestone path between the rows of graves, nearing my destination.

Towards the very back of the cemetery, behind the large mausoleum that stood watch over her.

Or at least, the place where she would have rested. The small headstone was nestled between a patch of wildflowers and a tall, swaying willow tree.

Her stone was engraved with the simple sketch of a six-petal flower, with a half-moon straddled besides it.

I knelt down, thinking about the last time I had come here.

“Hey Lily, I know it’s been a while. I hope you’re not angry I haven’t visited often, but you know how it is with the Department and all. Things have been...quite different as of late. I met a girl.”

I waved my hand.

“Not like that, I assure you. Remember when I joined the Corps? Yeah well, since then, we got a new addition to the team. She’s a kid from the Department’s academy, sent to us for some kind of extra-curricular training. Heavens, where should I begin? She’s a handful alright. Insolent, rowdy, and foul-mouthed to a tee. Not that I have any right to say.”

I sat in silence for a few moments, feeling the wind as it passed through the willow’s draping leaves.

“Honestly, I don’t know what to do about it. Jahn, you remember him, right? Yeah well, he wants me to tutor this kid. You were always good with kids, I probably should’ve asked you for some pointers, huh?”

The wind picked up again. I zipped up my jacket further, then shoved my hands into the pockets

“Well, I thought I’d give you an update. I’m hanging in there. Don’t worry, I’m still eating healthy and all, trying to cut back on booze as well.”

“Alright, maybe not so much. I’m working on it. The stress hasn’t done me any good. I almost punched my lucky ticket last operation.”

I sighed, reaching my hand out to clear away the small amounts of moss that accumulated on the sides of the headstone.

“You’d wouldn’t be too happy seeing my ugly, oiled covered mug covered again, huh? I can imagine the earful you’d give me.

“I gotta go now, I promise I’ll stop by more often to chat. I love you.”

With that, I stood up again and paused for a short while. My mind wandered through fading memories of her as I rose to my feet.

From the corner of my eye, movement caught my attention. I snapped my head towards it.

A black car had pulled up an adjacent crosswalk near the cemetery’s entrance. Its windows were tinted, obscuring the occupants inside, those of which proceeded to shut off the engine.

Dread washed over me as I stared at the sedan. Quickly, I strode behind the large mausoleum to my left, attempting to conceal myself from the suspicious vehicle. I peered out, furthering observing what I assumed to be the same sedan that had before, stalked Jahn to his home. It stayed put for a few minutes, before starting up again and crawled down the street.

I maneuvered myself further out of view as it did. I was probably being watched from the moment I set foot in the cemetery. I guess sneaking around was a fruitless effort. Nonetheless, I continued to play this game of cat-and-mouse with the car while it slowly lapped around the graveyard.

Eventually the sedan took a left at the crosswalk, speeding down the street and out of sight. I stayed in my hiding spot for a few moments, ensuring that I was truly alone.

Scanning my surroundings, I looked into the dark windows of surrounding warehouses and the cramped spaces of nearby alleyways. The suits could still be watching me even after that conspicuous stunt.

Calmly but with haste, I made my way out of the cemetery and into the same alley I had come from. My next destination, Keeve's place.

* * *

I sped up the steps of Keeve's apartment complex. I had hurried here as unsuspectingly as a possible, taking my less traveled routes to Keeve's places. The trip had been somewhat costly, as I had hopped on multiple transit lines in an effort to evade possible tails.

Finding his floor, I spotted and knocked on his door. I decided on not telling him I was coming over the radio. As far as I know, those could be monitored too. As rude as it may seem, I'm sure he'll understand after I tell him what happened.

I knocked again getting somewhat impatient. Finally, footsteps from the door approached. I looked into the peephole and waved for Keeves to be quiet. There was a pause before the door opened, revealing Keeves waving me in.

I swiftly stepped inside as he locked the door.

"Hey man what's up? You didn't call me, I would've bought more ale if ya did. I might have some left, lemme check."

"Sorry Keeves, but I think we've got a problem." I said, watching him the turn from fridge.

"Uh, what do you mean?"

"I think the unit is being watched by the Department."

Keeves raised an eyebrow, handing me an ale.

"What? Why?" He asked, cracking his ale and leaning against the counter.

"Remember the Department Girl file I showed you? That girl is supposed to be here in two weeks. But she showed up not even two days ago, Jahn said they sent her early after the well attack."

"I guess that makes sense, did you see her at work? How is Jahn dealing with this?"

"Thankfully, Jahn is doing better with her than I am. When I first met her, she was waving around a plasma lance."

Keeves sipped his ale and smiled.

“Hell yeah, I don’t blame her. Cutting through shit is the best part of my job.”

“She kicked me in the shins after I told her not to touch it.”

“That’s pretty funny.” Keeves snorted.

“Yeah well, getting followed everywhere because of her isn’t funny. I had to take a few detours to make sure I wasn’t. Which reminds me, Jahn was followed to his home the other day.”

Keeves narrowed his eyes. He finished his ale then grabbed another.

“I see what you mean, didn’t think they’d be this aggressive. Going to have to hide that Ignus-stone better.” The sound of my radio screaming to life jolted the both of us. Down the hall, I could hear

Keeve’s own blaring in his bedroom.

“We’ve been activated, grab our shit and lets—“

Keeves was interrupted by a panicked voice from the radio.

“Unit 1313 personnel, headquarters has experienced a large explosion! Calling for medical and rescue assistance immediately!”

We looked at each other and without a word, ran out the door.

End Part I